STEPPING UP

How Are American Cities Delivering on the Promise of Public School Choice?

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Foreword by
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FOREWORD

There is probably no more controversial topic in public education today than school choice. The Trump administration's support for private school vouchers has set off a rhetorical war in Washington that is increasingly playing out in states and cities. Meanwhile, *public* school choices (magnet schools, innovation schools, charter schools, and the like), which have historically enjoyed strong bipartisan support, are increasingly implicated in partisan fights.

The Center on Reinventing Public Education (CRPE) has been studying the evolution of public school choice for more than two decades. We have always been optimistic about the promise of moving true decisionmaking authority to educators at the school level and creating more options for families in recognition of a truth that every parent understands: kids learn in different ways. Students should have a right, under a public education system, to rigorous academic preparation, but also the ability to find a good fit, whether that's a safer environment, strong supports for social and emotional development, or other qualities that are meaningful to families.

We have also believed, however, that choice is not magic. It creates new possibilities and new challenges. We have always been vigilant to problems in choice implementation and insistent that government is ultimately responsible for ensuring accountability and equitable access for public education.

As part of CRPE's ongoing efforts to study the issues involved in public school choice, our researchers examined the experiences of 18 "high-choice" cities. This report delivers both good and bad news on the ways that public school choice is playing out for families. The good news supports the view that public school choice is, despite the Washington rhetoric, a necessary and well-desired part of American urban education that is, for the most part, working well and resulting in new opportunities for families. In the 18 cities we studied, choices have expanded because families are eager to enroll. Those cities opening new schools of choice—both district and charter—are increasingly offering a wide variety of programs to respond to that demand.

In general, basic indicators of academic achievement are on the rise. In 36 percent of the cities, schools were making statistically significant proficiency rate gains in both reading and math. In a majority of the cities, low-scoring schools typically moved out of that status over the course of three or four consecutive years. But despite making some school-level improvements, these cities still have a long way to go to meet the needs of students and families. Access to educational opportunities is still not equitable, and in most cities strategies have not yet addressed the needs of low-income families.

Choice requires ongoing attention from both government oversight agencies and community education advocates to ensure that all families can access high-quality options. This is something too many public and private school choice advocates have underestimated. Our research also reinforces a critical issue others have consistently raised, that the low-income families who could benefit most from choice still face significant barriers to accessing new school options for their families. While this has been a common finding in past research, the lack of progress only increases the urgency for cities to find ways to eliminate barriers for all students.

Debate and skepticism over school choice is healthy, but not when it's out of touch with what is happening on the ground. Public school choice is the new normal in these 18 cities, and in many other cities around the country. In fact, when we talk about how high-choice systems work, we're increasingly talking about what today's urban school systems look like. That's because families want to find a better fit, because educators see value in schools having more flexibility to meet student needs, and because government agencies know that dramatically better results in our cities will not come without opening new pathways for innovation and improvement. The debate over "choice," in reality, masks the shift in the public education landscape that has already taken place in much of the country. Our hope is that this report will provide the grounding to help refocus attention and work on that reality.

Importantly, not all cities that have embraced public school choice are going about it in the same way. Many are providing innovative new approaches to help families navigate their options effectively and are working hard to ensure that all families benefit. But some have not yet fully stepped up. The specific examples of successful strategies and needed actions in this report, and in CRPE's accompanying Citywide Education Progress Reports, can help city and district leaders, nonprofits, community-based organizations, funders, and policymakers to deliver on the promise of public school choice.

Robin Lake
Director, CRPE

OVERVIEW

In America today, families in almost every urban community have some kind of public school choice.[1] This report focuses on "public school choice," under which families are able to choose from both an array of traditional public schools and public charter schools. Public school choice has grown rapidly in the past 20 years; new charter schools have emerged with support from state and federal policy and philanthropists, while district school choice has grown alongside or in competition with charter schools. Choice, in one form or another, is now woven deeply into today's urban education landscape.

Choice proponents and critics alike agree that special challenges arise in localities with both charter school and district school choice. Where two or more competing entities are providing public schools, who is responsible for making sure there is a school for every child or for protecting children from failing schools? Does the school system operate strategically and nimbly enough to address community demands or shifts in enrollment? Do parents and other citizens regard the school system as responsive and legitimate? Is the new choice-based system in accord with key community values?

Over the course of a year, researchers with the Center on Reinventing Public Education (CRPE) looked across 18 cities to answer three basic questions for urban locales with both charter and district-run schools of choice.

- **Is the education system continuously improving?**

- **Do all students have access to a high-quality education?**

- **Is the education strategy rooted in the community?[2]**

The 18 cities in this study are: Atlanta, Boston, Camden, Chicago, Cleveland, Denver, Houston, Indianapolis, Kansas City, Los Angeles, Memphis, New Orleans, New York City, Oakland, Philadelphia, San Antonio, Tulsa, and Washington, D.C. We chose these cities because they have some similar policies: All provide choice to families through district and charter schools and hold those schools accountable for meeting performance standards—resulting in intervention or possibly closure if they do not meet the standards set out for them. Most give at least a subset of district schools decisionmaking autonomy over staffing, curriculum, and/or budget. But the cities also offer a range of policy, governance, geographic, and demographic characteristics (see Appendix A for more detail). These are also cities that CRPE has studied in other research within the past five years, which provided additional context and background for our analysis.

To answer our three questions, we looked across traditional district schools, charter schools, and the organizations that support both. We developed five outcomes measures using publicly available state and federal data. This makes our results reproducible and transparent, but because of the time it takes for states to release data, the results do not reflect the most recent developments in any of the cities.

We also developed 23 system reform indicators, 12 of which we scored on a four-point rubric. Over the course of the 2016-2017 school year, CRPE researchers sought publicly available information about district and charter strategies and conducted 85 phone interviews with education and community leaders to better understand what cities were doing and how well it was working—in terms of immediate strategy and long-term sustainability. We also conducted surveys about parent experiences with choice in eight cities. See Appendix B for more detail about our interviews and parent survey.

As the next section of this report will show, school proficiency rates are on the rise in many places. In all of the cities, an array of organizations is engaged in and taking responsibility for the education strategy, bringing with them an infusion of ideas and solutions.

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1. This occurs through charter schools, district magnet schools, vouchers, intra-district choice on a space-availability basis, and/or inter-district choice with neighboring school systems. Choice is not equally available everywhere, nor is it necessarily of high quality.

2. CRPE's own research has found that the most effective reforms fail to have long-term impact without sufficient political and community support. See Paul T. Hill, Christine Campbell, and Betheny Gross, *Strife and Progress: Portfolio Strategies for Managing Urban Schools* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2013).

However, even with improvements, cities still have much work ahead. This is especially the case with meeting the needs of low-income families and ensuring that all students have access to a high-quality education. While these challenges are not new, their persistence points to an urgency to develop strategies that address student access, especially now that overall city performance is on the rise in many places.

The final section defines three challenges facing high-choice cities in greater detail and offers recommendations for how education leaders, civic leaders, nonprofits, and funders can address them:

1. Improving how families are informed, so they have real choices.

2. Being more strategic about the city's school portfolio, so models meet children's needs and family preferences for schools in their neighborhoods.

3. Involving community members, so they can be part of building a sustainable, responsive education strategy.

To address these challenges, city leaders in both sectors must build on their early successes and take collective responsibility for persistent, citywide issues. They also must move away from scattershot initiatives and pursue smarter, more targeted efforts that are coordinated, data-driven, and transparent. Along with ensuring greater access to—and community support for—public school choice, these efforts will help push public education to be more responsive to community needs.

We hope to inform decisionmaking in cities that are implementing public school choice strategies and showcase innovative practices that can support them. However, this report is just a starting point. The individual Citywide Education Progress Reports available on our Stepping Up website provide greater detail, which we hope will generate conversations among education and community leaders planning the path forward for their cities.

Spotlight: New Orleans

Few cities in our analysis can point to strong results across all three of our areas of inquiry: continuous improvement, equitable access, and strategies that are grounded in community support. But New Orleans stands out as having the most comprehensive results across these categories. In addition, schools in the city were making proficiency rate gains, city graduation rates were on par with the state's graduation rates, and low-income students in the city improved their performance in math and reading relative to their peers nationwide.[3]

New Orleans, with a nearly all-charter school system, has invested heavily in parent information, transportation, and enrollment strategies. Community tensions have been high over the course of the primarily state-run improvement strategy, but an imminent return to local school board oversight and increasing attention to quality options point toward a politically sustainable public school choice system. New Orleans still has far to go on many fronts, including ensuring enough high-quality middle and high school options and engaging with the community on issues related to the school system as a whole. But it provides something of a roadmap for solving the inevitable challenges in high-choice cities and continuing the search for better options.

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3. For another analysis of student and school outcomes, see Douglas N. Harris and Matthew Larsen, *The Effects of the New Orleans Post-Katrina School Reforms on Student Academic Outcomes* (New Orleans, LA: Education Research Alliance, 2016).

FINDINGS: OUTCOMES AND STRATEGIES ACROSS 18 CITIES

This section summarizes our findings across all cities. We find both promising progress and areas of challenge.

This study did not seek to conduct a causal analysis of how the growth of school choice has changed student learning in cities as a whole or in particular groups of schools. Other researchers are conducting major studies on these topics, and we await their results.[4] In this study, we asked only if school performance appears to be changing, but we cannot say definitively whether choice, demographic changes, or other factors are driving the results.

In general, basic indicators of academic achievement are on the rise. Moreover, most cities have new or expanding strategies in place that support school quality, ranging from strong charter authorizing and replication strategies to autonomy policies for district schools. In all the cities, an array of organizations is engaged in and taking responsibility for the education strategy, bringing with them an infusion of ideas and solutions. But cities still have far to go to catch up to state averages and address equitable access to educational opportunities. Choice supports are still needed in many cities, and every city struggles to site high-quality schools or expand the number of high-quality seats where they are most needed. Districts and education nonprofits are improving how families are involved in school portfolio decisions, but they still need to repair trust and improve responsiveness.

School system performance

- In a majority of the cities, low-scoring schools typically moved out of that status over the course of three or four consecutive years.

- Of cities for which we had data, 36 percent were making statistically significant improvement in school proficiency rates in math and reading. Only two cities showed statistically significant decline in math or reading proficiency rates. This is tentative, but good news considering the challenge most urban district face in overcoming the challenges of their student populations.

- The majority of cities gained ground on their states in high school graduation rates.

- However, in half of the cities, math proficiency rates were at least 10 percentage points below state averages, and in nearly every city graduation rates lagged behind the state's graduation rates.

- Most cities have new or expanding strategies in place that support school quality, ranging from strong charter authorizing and replication strategies to autonomy policies for district schools.

- In 40 percent of the cities, district schools were given greater flexibility over their budget using a student-based allocation model.

- Education leaders reported that teacher and leader vacancies typically were not a problem. Most of these cities have invested heavily in talent recruitment and development strategies. However, finding the right quality and fit were reported as challenges in both the district and charter sectors.

Student access to educational opportunities

- Low-income students in all of these cities perform similarly to their peers nationally.

- However, in only one-quarter of the cities were all racial and ethnic groups proportionally represented in advanced math coursework.

4. Education Research Alliance for New Orleans at Tulane University, Research Alliance for New York City Schools at NYU Steinhardt, Vanderbilt University, and the Center for Research on Education Outcomes (CREDO) at Stanford University all continue to analyze city schools data for impact. Prior research includes: Harris and Larsen, *The Effects of the New Orleans Post-Katrina School Reforms on Student Academic Outcomes*; Gary Henry, et al., *Evaluating The Impact Of Tennessee's Achievement School District: First Annual Report to the Walton Family Foundation* (Nashville, TN: Tennessee Education Research Alliance, 2015); James J. Kemple, *High School Closures in New York City: Impacts on Students' Academic Outcomes, Attendance, and Mobility* (New York, NY: Research Alliance for New York City Schools, 2015).

- Based on an eight-city survey of parents, information-related challenges rose to the top as key barriers for families during the choice process.[5]

- Many cities lack basic choice supports: 40 percent of the cities do not have a consolidated school guide, 56 percent do not have common applications within or across sectors, and 67 percent do not provide free public transportation to all schools of choice—district or charter.

- Despite choice being available, survey findings show that the majority of families send their children to the assigned school. This is especially true of low-income families.

- Most cities report that their school siting process is not strategic. Perceived and real barriers impede this process, including lack of data and access to facilities.

- Most cities have significant work to do to improve the quality and fit of their portfolio of schools. Failing to attend to the supply side of choice undermines family confidence in overall improvement efforts.

Community acceptance

- Almost every city has improved how it informs and engages with families during school consolidations and closures. Some cities have also started to involve families in selecting charter operators and new school models.

- Despite this effort, education leaders are often perceived as non-responsive by community members because leaders fail to communicate back to families how their input has been used.

- Districts provide multiple touch points (e.g., surveys, robocalls, school councils, and forums) but many have failed to differentiate their engagement strategy to help all families be involved, especially those who are less affluent and most impacted by poorly performing schools.

- Charter school families often lack points of contact to raise concerns about citywide education issues.

We provide more detail on each of these findings below.

School System Performance

A third of the cities showed statistically significant gains in math and reading proficiency rates and the majority of cities showed some improvement in state graduation rates. However, proficiency and graduation rates lagged behind state averages. Cities are using a number of strategies, but many lack teacher and principal candidates who have sufficient experience or are a good fit for what the city needs.

School Proficiency and Graduation Rates

In 6 out of 15 cities, at least a quarter of the lowest-scoring schools in the city remained among the lowest scoring for three to four consecutive years (see Table 1).[6]

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5. Our use of the word "parent" here is mainly for concision; the survey respondents included a range of familial caregivers, including parents, guardians, grandparents, aunts, uncles, etc.

6. We used statewide school-level standardized assessment results to identify schools that ranked in the bottom 5 percent of their state in terms of math proficiency (we did the same for reading) for all years of available data. Because we could only look at the percent of students meeting proficiency standards and were not able to measure the value-add of schools, we should be careful to not interpret these schools as the lowest performing. The lowest-scoring schools serve high concentrations of the state's most at-risk students. In cities where low-scoring schools do not remain among the bottom 5 percent of the state, the schools may have improved or closed, but moving out of the bottom 5 percent may also reflect changing student demographics or a decline in proficiency rates statewide. Despite these drawbacks, we believe the measure provides an indication of the dynamism in the school system as a whole. In cities where schools remain among the lowest scoring in the state for several consecutive years, it is safe to conclude that these schools really are stuck, and that the education system lacks appropriate levers for addressing them.

Table 1. The Share of Schools in 15 Cities That Consistently Fall Among the Lowest 5 Percent of Schools Statewide

Fewer than a quarter of the city's lowest-scoring schools in reading remained in the bottom 5% of the state for three to four consecutive years	A quarter or more of the city's lowest-scoring schools in reading remained in the bottom 5% of the state for three to four consecutive years
Boston	Atlanta
Cleveland	Camden
Chicago	Denver
Houston	Kansas City
Indianapolis	New York City
Philadelphia	Tulsa
New Orleans	
San Antonio	
Washington, D.C.	

Because of missing or unusable state data we used different years of data for some cities. Denver: 2011-12 to 2013-14; New York City and Philadelphia: 2012-13 to 2014-15; and Tulsa: 2014-15 to 2016-17. We used seven years of data for Kansas City: 2009-10 to 2015-16. No data were available for Los Angeles, Memphis, Oakland, and Washington, D.C. See our Methodology page on the Stepping Up website for more detail.

Data include all schools, district and charter, within a city's municipal boundary. Indianapolis, Houston, San Antonio, and Tulsa have multiple districts within the city.

As Table 2 shows, five cities showed statistically significant improvement[7] in math and reading proficiency rates, relative to their state.[8]

Table 2. Math and Reading Proficiency Rate Trends in 14 Cities, 2011-12 to 2014-15

Statistically significant improvement in math *and* reading proficiency	No statistically significant improvement in math *and* reading proficiency*	Statistically significant decline in math *or* reading proficiency
Atlanta	Boston	San Antonio
Chicago	Cleveland	Houston
Denver	Kansas City	
New Orleans	Indianapolis	
New York City	Philadelphia	
	Tulsa	

Because of missing or unusable state data we used different years of data for some cities. Denver: 2011-12 to 2013-14; New York City and Philadelphia: 2012-13 to 2014-15; and Tulsa: 2014-15 to 2016-17. We used seven years of data for Kansas City: 2009-10 to 2015-16. No data were available for Los Angeles, Memphis, Oakland, and Washington, D.C.

*Camden showed statistically significant improvement in reading proficiency rates but not math proficiency rates.

Data include all schools, district and charter, within a city's municipal boundary. Indianapolis, Houston, San Antonio, and Tulsa have multiple districts within the city.

7. We define statistically significant as results having a p-value of less than 0.05. Of the cities listed as having "no improvement," Boston, Camden, Cleveland, Indianapolis, Kansas City, and Philadelphia demonstrated non-statistically significant improvement in math or reading proficiency rates. Tulsa showed non-statistically significant decline in both math and reading proficiency rates. San Antonio's decline in math is not statistically significant but the decline in reading is.

8. We used state performance data to calculate the average cohort change made in math and reading proficiency over a three- or four-year period, compared to state proficiency rates. This model estimates changes in the proficiency rate from one cohort of students to the next, controlling for student demographics and selected school characteristics. Cohorts will change from year to year as students enter and exit schools. While these measures reflect trends in the proficiency rate across schools in a city, we cannot attribute these trends to the actions of schools. Therefore, these measures do not indicate whether schools are "getting better" or "getting worse."

However, cities have a long way to go to catch up to statewide averages. As shown in Table 3, 57 percent of the cities for which we had data lagged 10 percentage points or more behind state averages in math proficiency rates.

Table 3. Gaps Between City and State Math Proficiency Rates in 14 Cities, 2014-15

Math proficiency rates on par with state (+/- 2 percentage points)	Math proficiency rates between 3 and 9 percentage points below the state	Math proficiency rates more than 10 percentage points below the state
New Orleans Tulsa	Chicago Houston New York City San Antonio	Atlanta Boston Camden Cleveland Denver Indianapolis Kansas City Philadelphia

Because of missing or unusable state data we used different years of data for some cities. See notes for Table 2.

As Figure 1 shows, the majority of cities were gaining ground on their states in graduation rates (cities in the two right quadrants). However, few were exceeding state averages (cities in the two upper quadrants).[9]

Figure 1. Cities Are Gaining Ground on Their State Graduation Rates But Are Still Far Below State Averages
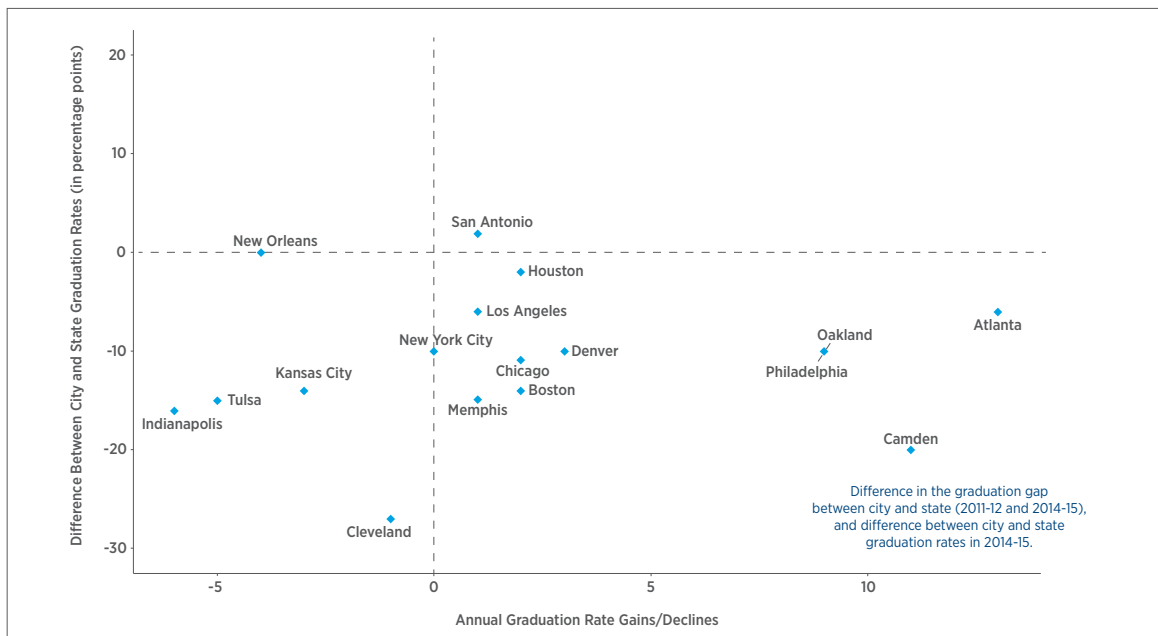
Because of missing or unusable data we used different years of data for some cities. Memphis: 2011-12, 2012-13, and 2014-15; New Orleans: 2011-12 to 2013-14; Tulsa: 2012-13 to 2014-15. Washington, D.C.'s improvement had no state reference so it was excluded from this chart. The city made a 10 percentage point gain between 2011-12 and 2014-15. We did not control for income or demographic differences between the city and state, so these gaps reflect, in part, differences in the types of students who enroll in the city versus demographics of the statewide student population. However, we feel that at a minimum cities should be expected to graduate all students. Therefore, this measure reflects a gap that will be important to close.
Data include all schools, district and charter, within a city's municipal boundary. Indianapolis, Houston, San Antonio, and Tulsa have multiple districts within the city.

9. To arrive at graduation rate differences, we used EDFacts four-year adjusted cohort graduation rates and subtracted the change in state rates from the change in city rates to produce a percentage point change. For example, in Camden, the citywide graduation rate for all district and charter schools in 2011-12 was 56 percent, while the state's rate was 87 percent. The difference between the two is 31 percentage points. In 2014-15, Camden's rate was 70 percent, while the state's rate was 90 percent, for a difference of 20 percentage points. We subtracted the percentage point difference of 20 (2014-15) from 31 (2011-12) to find an 11 percentage point improvement, relative to the state.

Strategies to Support School Quality

Document reviews and interviews across the 18 cities show new and expanding policies to monitor schools for success and provide assistance for school improvement. Every city has a policy in place to replicate or expand schools from high-quality charter operators. Most of the city's primary charter authorizers have strong authorizing practices, as defined by the National Association of Charter School Authorizers. Most districts have a mutual consent policy or allow school leadership to hire teachers from a pool of vetted applications, a strategy that has been found to improve teacher fit and retention.[10]

However, as shown in Table 4, fewer than half of the districts provided schools with flexibility over their budget.

Table 4. Eleven of Eighteen Districts Allocate Less Than 5 Percent of Their Budgets to District Schools Through a Student-Based Allocation Formula

District allocates more than 5% (≥5%) of its budget to schools using a student-based allocation formula	District allocates less than 5% (<5%) of its budget to schools using a student-based allocation formula	
Boston	Atlanta	Memphis
Chicago	Camden	Oakland
Cleveland	Indianapolis	San Antonio
Denver	Kansas City	Tulsa
Houston	Los Angeles	Washington, D.C.
New Orleans	Philadelphia	
New York City		

Source: The Edunomics Lab calculated the %SBA (student-based allocation) metric for district schools. Based on researcher analysis for the 2013-14 to 2016-17 fiscal years. See this Edunomics Lab report for more detail.

Note: Districts that allocate less than 5 percent of the overall budget using a student-based allocation formula may have no policy in place, a nascent policy, or a policy that allocates (<5%) of its budget.

School-Level Talent

Almost every city had or was actively pursuing a strategy to improve the recruitment and preparation of teachers and leaders.[11] While many cities relied on national sources like Relay Graduate School of Education, TNTP, or Teach for America, a number of cities had innovative, localized strategies. In general, district and charter sector leaders reported that teacher and school leader vacancies were not a problem.

However, system leaders and community partners across every city reported that either district or charter leaders struggled to find candidates perceived to be of sufficient quality or who were a good fit for school and student needs. Almost every city struggled to find teachers for high-need subject areas like special education, English language learning, or science. Some cities did not have talent for turnaround or autonomous school strategies, and some were failing to attract teachers and leaders of color.

In many cities, charter sector leaders reported greater difficulty recruiting and retaining talent. Interviewees in several cities said that charter school teachers did not have sufficient growth opportunities, so they left for higher-paying positions in district schools or tried to pursue principalships in charter schools before they were ready.

However, all the problems facing charter schools were anecdotal. No city had sectorwide data about talent challenges, even in cities where charter schools accounted for a large percentage of the city's schools. While districts did collect data, many said they did not have a nuanced measure for teacher quality or reported having no way to determine principal quality. The lack of data presents opportunity costs, as resources currently used for strategies to produce greater absolute numbers of teachers could be directed instead to the real issues facing a city, like retaining teachers in high-need schools or creating career ladders in schools.

10. Jessica Levin, Jennifer Mulhern, and Joan Schunck, *Unintended Consequences: The Case for Reforming the Staffing Rules in Urban Teachers Union Contracts* (Brooklyn, NY: TNTP, 2005).

11. Because we lacked teacher and principal data for both the district and charter sectors, we based our analysis on interviews with leaders from the district and charter sectors in each city, supplemented with researcher review of pipeline and preparation strategies. See Appendix B for more information about our interviewees.

Student Access to Educational Opportunity

Across all 18 cities, equitable access to high-quality education remains a concern. More targeted supports are needed to help low-income families choose schools, and education leaders need to be more strategic about managing their school portfolio so families have access to good-fit, high-quality options that are close to home.

Student Outcomes and Access

Education Cities' recently published Education Equality Index (EEI) measures how well low-income students were performing in math and reading between the school years 2010-11 and 2014-15. In only two of eleven cities, Philadelphia and Oakland, did low-income students perform much worse in math and reading than their peers nationally.[12] In Boston, Chicago, Houston, Indianapolis, New York City, and San Antonio, low-income students were performing better than their peers nationally. And a majority of cities, seven of the eleven, improved their Education Equality Index score between 2010-11 and 2014-15. Memphis improved the most—by 14 percent over five years.

But most cities still show unequal access to *advanced* educational opportunities across racial and ethnic subgroups within the city. In only four of the eighteen cities (Camden, Memphis, New Orleans, and Washington, D.C.) were all student subgroups enrolled in high school advanced math coursework at similar rates as the total high school population.[13] In cities without an Education Equality Index score (Camden, Cleveland, Denver, Kansas City, and Washington, D.C), we measured student access to top-scoring schools in each city. In all of these cities except Camden, white students enrolled in the city's top-scoring schools at higher rates than they enrolled in medium- or low-scoring schools.[14]

Families and Choice

To determine the extent to which school choice policies have mitigated or eliminated barriers to access, CRPE conducted a survey during the spring of 2017 in eight cities: Cleveland, Denver, Detroit, Indianapolis, Oakland, Memphis, New Orleans, and Washington, D.C. All the cities except Detroit were part of our 18-city study. The eight cities are relatively high choice and offer a range of school options, such as charter schools, district magnets, and inter-district choice. In each city, 400 families were randomly selected by telephone using a combination of landline and cell phone numbers and asked about their experiences with school choice. We report aggregated survey results in this cross-city analysis,[15] but provide city-specific results in Appendix C and in our individual Citywide Education Progress Reports on the Stepping Up website.

In one of the survey questions, families were asked about the difficulties they faced during the application process. Thirty-six percent of families across all cities reported no difficulties with seven of eight possible barriers identified in the survey.[16]

Across all barriers, surveyed families with a household income of less than $35,000 reported difficulty more often than families with higher household incomes.

12. See the Education Equality Index website for more information. We had EEI data for only 11 of 18 cities: Boston, Chicago, Houston, Indianapolis, Los Angeles, Memphis, New Orleans, New York City, Oakland, Philadelphia, and San Antonio.

13. We used 2013-14 data from the U.S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights, Civil Rights Data Collection. This is the most updated data available. "2013-2014 Civil Rights Data Collection: A First Look," U.S. Department of Education, 2016.

14. White students in Camden make up 1 percent of the total public school enrollment. We used 2014-15 performance data for Camden and Kansas City and 2013-14 performance data for Cleveland, Denver, and Washington, D.C. We defined a high-scoring school as one with proficiency rates in the top 20 percent of schools citywide. We compared each city's specific enrollment share in the top-scoring schools with the enrollment rates of different student subgroups, including free and reduced-price lunch and racial and ethnic minority subgroups. This tells us two things: (1) Whether student subgroups were enrolling in the highest-performing schools at similar rates to each other, and (2) Whether student subgroups were enrolling in the highest-performing schools at similar rates as they were enrolling in middle- or low-performing schools.

15. The findings we report are similar across the eight surveyed cities and consistent with the themes that emerged in community interviews. We report aggregated survey data because it is the simplest way to present our findings. However, this does mask some differences between the cities.

16. In survey question #15, families were asked about eight possible barriers. We excluded one from this report ("Finding the money to pay the tuition for the private school I most want my child to attend") because it focuses on private school choice. When reporting the results for question #15, we excluded families who said their child was enrolled in a private school.

Figure 2. Lower-Income Families Reported Having More Difficulty During the Application Process
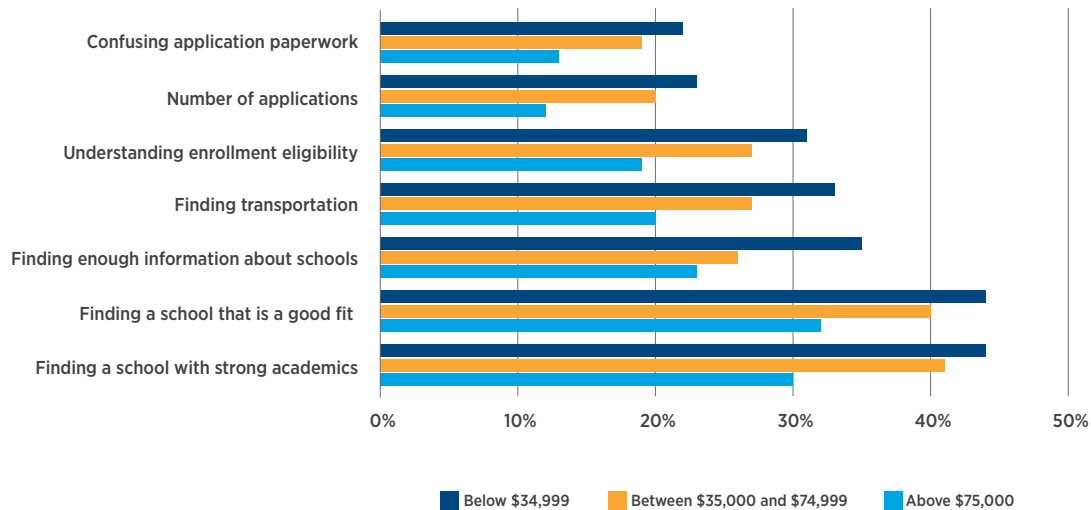
Note: Results are aggregated from a 3,200-parent survey across eight cities: Cleveland, Denver, Detroit, Indianapolis, Oakland, Memphis, New Orleans, and Washington, D.C. See Appendix C for city-by-city results. Respondents were asked, "Please tell me if each one [items in this list] was difficult or not when you were applying to schools for your child."

As Figure 2 shows, barriers related to finding the right school for their child or having enough information about schools to make good decisions topped the list: Finding a school with strong academics, finding a school that is a good fit, and finding enough information about schools. Barriers related to the enrollment process—navigating confusing application paperwork or completing numerous applications—were at the bottom of the list.

To help guide families' decisions, 11 of our 18 cities offer consolidated school guides, which provide information about all schools in a city. Five cities—Camden, Denver, Indianapolis, New Orleans, and Washington, D.C.—offer the guides as part of unified enrollment or lottery systems, which also provide information on citywide demand that education leaders can use to direct improvement strategies and new school placements. Another six cities—Philadelphia, Cleveland, Kansas City, Oakland, Chicago, and Memphis—offer consolidated school guides in the absence of these systems. However, the remaining seven cities lack a guide where a parent can easily read comparable information about every school.

Even where consolidated school guides do exist, these often omit key information, as shown in Table 5.

Table 5. Few Cities Have Consolidated Guides With Consistent Information Across All Schools About Academic Performance, School Programs, and Curriculum

		The consolidated guide includes		
	Consolidated Guide	School performance	School programs	School curriculum
Camden	**Camden Enrollment:** Nonprofit unified enrollment and lottery system	X	X	X
Philadelphia	**School Finder:** District-provided guide	X	X	X
Washington, D.C.	**My School DC:** Lottery system, staff employed by mayor's office	X	X	X
Denver	**SchoolChoice:** District-operated unified enrollment and lottery system	X	X	X
Indianapolis	**Enroll Indy:** Nonprofit unified enrollment and lottery system	X	X	X
New Orleans	**Enroll NOLA:** Unified enrollment and lottery system operated by Orleans Parish School Board and the Recovery School District	X	X	
Cleveland	**Cleveland Transformation Alliance:** Nonprofit organization with school guide and choice supports	X	X	
Kansas City	**Show Me KC Schools:** Parent-founded nonprofit with school guide	X	X	
Oakland	**Oakland School Finder:** District-provided guide		X	X
Chicago	**CPS Search Schools:** District-provided guide	X		
Memphis	**Memphis School Guide:** Parent-created school guide	X		
Atlanta	No guide			
Boston	No guide			
Houston	No guide			
Los Angeles	No guide			
New York City	No guide			
San Antonio	No guide			
Tulsa	No guide			

Source: Researcher review of city resources, October 2017.

> "Families want to know: [Is there a] strong school culture in general—how are parents greeted, how kids are treated, what kinds of activities are there beyond the academic program?"
>
> *– Community leader, New Orleans*

In all 18 cities, CRPE researchers conducted at least two interviews with local education nonprofits, parent advocates, or other community groups (see Appendix B for details about our interview process). Interviewees consistently said that families did not have the information they needed and struggled to use the information available to them, whether or not there was a consolidated guide.

Community organizations and parent advocates said that families in their cities want information beyond school performance, curriculum, and programs to find a school that is the right fit for their child. They said families wanted information about school culture, safety, family services, and services for students with additional needs, such as English language learners and those with disabilities. They also noted that families want to know how welcoming the school will be for adults.

As shown in Table 6, only seven of the eleven consolidated guides publish information about either school culture or family services. School culture measures are often from family, student, and/or staff satisfaction surveys but may also include student attendance or discipline rates. Other cities provide information about family services such as community partnerships, on-site family programs, and adult language supports.

Community groups and family advocates also reported that families lacked information about special education and English language learner services. One community leader noted that families in his city had no way of knowing whether special education services were a good fit until the student was enrolled. As illustrated in Table 6 below, consolidated guides in only three cities provided school-specific special education service information.

Table 6. Few Consolidated School Guides Provided Consistent, School-Specific Information[17]

Cities with consolidated guides	School culture information	Family services	Special education services	Student ELL services
Camden		X	X	X
Philadelphia	X	X		
Denver	X			X
Indianapolis		X	X	X
New Orleans		X	X	X
Cleveland				X
Oakland				X
Chicago	X			
Washington, D.C.	X			
Kansas City				
Memphis				

Source: Researcher review of city resources, October 2017.

17. Some districts report student service information for district schools only (e.g., Houston), and some cities have dashboards with school culture measures for district and charter schools (e.g., New York City). However, we only analyzed consolidated guides because we were interested in choice support resources that help families make sense of all public school options. We also did not "count" information in the guides that was inconsistently reported and/or provided for only some schools.

> **"**Despite having charter schools for 20 years in Oakland and the district having the Options Process for 10 years, the vast majority of parents living in non-affluent communities and communities of color still don't know they have a choice. They are not getting the information and have not been making that choice."
>
> *– Community organization, Oakland*

Community leaders across all cities reported that families, especially low-income families, struggled to use the information available to them to select a school. The choices and distinctions between school types and various enrollment processes have grown complicated. In many cities, interviewees said that the families they worked with did not understand the differences between choice schools, did not understand academic ratings systems, or did not understand how the application and lottery systems worked. Interviewees noted that without clear information, families defaulted to word-of-mouth or rumored reputations to guide their decisionmaking.

Other school choice supports were also lacking. Only 5 of the 18 cities (Camden, Denver, Indianapolis, New Orleans, and Washington, D.C.) had a common application for all schools in the city, while three more cities (Boston, Oakland, and New York City) had common applications for each sector. However, enrollment and application processes was ranked lowest among the seven possible difficulties in the eight-city survey and was not reported as a significant barrier in the community interviews across all 18 cities.

> **"**In our city, innovative schools of choice are opening where higher-income families live. How are families in poverty supposed to see that as a viable option?"
>
> *– City leader, San Antonio*

Only in Camden, Boston, New Orleans, New York City, and Washington, D.C., did all students attending choice schools (district and charter) have access to free transportation. In nearly every city, whether a strategy was in place or not, community leaders said that lack of transportation prevented low-income families from being able to access better school options.[18] Limited public transportation systems in Camden and Oakland make it very difficult for students to take a city bus to get to their high schools. In Atlanta and New Orleans, families reported safety concerns.

Programmatic Variety

All of the cities in our analysis provide an array of school options. Districts have magnet and open-enrollment schools, and some also have innovation or autonomous school models. Charter schools are a major part of every city's landscape, providing new types of programs and operating models.

Schools in most cities also had curricular and instructional variety. In three-quarters of the cities, at least 20 percent of schools that opened or expanded[19] between 2014-15 and 2016-17 had a nontraditional instructional model (e.g., a model that fundamentally altered how students learn, such as personalized learning, dual language, Montessori, or competency-based models). In almost every city, district and charter sector leaders perceived that there was a good deal of programmatic variety.

However, the degree of programmatic variety was often perceived differently by families. Survey responses suggest that low-income families identify less difference between school types—differences that are critical to finding a school that is a good fit. Four in ten (41 percent) of surveyed families from households making $34,999 or less per year said there was a great deal of variation across academic programs, versus 55 percent of families from households making more than $75,000.

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18. For more on how families weigh tradeoffs between school demographics, academic performance, and distance when choosing schools, see Steven Glazerman and Dallas Dotter, "Market Signals: Evidence on the Determinants and Consequences of School Choice from a Citywide Lottery," Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis 39, no. 4 (April 2017).

19. We defined new and expanded schools as any new K–12 charter school within the city boundaries or any new district school reported by the city's primary district. This also included an expanded level (but not grades) and transformation/restart/ turnaround schools as defined by the city, whether there is a change in operator, school building, school name, and/or school leader. New schools do not include expanded grades in an existing school model (e.g., middle school that expands from 5-7 to 5-8); Pre-K only programs; adult education programs (18+); or private schools, even those that are publicly funded.

We don't know what contributes to these differences—it could be because available information does not help clarify the differences, because some families are not aware of all options, or because some families more accurately perceive that the schools around them lack instructional variety.

Even when families did perceive variety between school programs, that didn't mean what was available was a good fit for their needs. In the eight-city survey, a third of families who perceived there was a great deal of variety between academic programs (as opposed to some or not much variety) said they still experienced difficulty finding a school that was a good fit.

We also do not know what contributes to this difference. Insofar as this may signal an information problem—that families simply do not understand enough about the options to know whether schools may be a good fit—our document review across cities revealed that information about school instructional models was often not stated clearly, consistently, or with definitions of terms. In community interviews, we learned that available options are sometimes not a good match for what families want. Community groups also said that families sometimes know about good school options for their children, but these schools are not accessible to them because of a lack of transportation, long wait lists, or family preference for a school close to home.

City Capacity to Identify Needs and Manage the School Portfolio

The greatest difficulties families faced in the application process was finding a school with strong academics, followed by finding a school that was a good fit—challenges that in some places have fostered skepticism about overall improvement efforts. Despite families' desires for a good school in their neighborhood, nearly a fifth of those surveyed said they had no trust or confidence in the public school system's ability to ensure that all neighborhoods in their city have a great school.

Community members we interviewed emphasized that although families want access to the choice process, they prefer those choices to be good schools close to home. In the eight cities where we conducted a parent survey, over half (59 percent) of families reported sending their child to the school assigned to them, despite other options being available to them. This is especially true of middle- and low-income families. There was a marked difference in survey responses based on income level: In households making $75,000 or more, 52 percent of families chose the school assigned to them. By contrast, among families making less than $74,000, 61 percent chose the school assigned to them.

Our analysis suggests that education leaders still have considerable work to do to improve the quality and fit of a city's portfolio of schools and to work with communities to do so.

Most cities report using enrollment and performance data to decide where to locate new schools. Based on our document reviews and interviews, all cities used current and projected enrollment data to guide school portfolio decisions, and most supplemented this with school performance data. Some cities also used nuanced school choice data or survey information about community needs to guide school portfolio decisions.

A handful of cities commissioned external reports by organizations like IFF to map where quality schools and seats are needed. In general, however, education leaders lacked up-to-date, transparent information to guide strategic decisionmaking. While some cities had used data to guide decisions one year, clear and consistent criteria were not in place in most cities.

As shown in Table 7, education leaders in only about a third of cities had developed a common definition of school quality across all types of city public schools that they could use to drive portfolio decisions citywide.[20] About a third of the cities had demand data for both district and charter sectors, including enrollment and choice patterns. But only five cities had up-to-date facility master plans that provided information about supply, and only four had regular supply analyses of where quality seats were needed across the city.

20. Common school performance frameworks (CSPFs) help serve as a basis for decisionmaking related to school siting, closures, and school improvement. These frameworks are built collaboratively by district and charter leaders in a city, with the goal of capturing what "success" means and defining agreed-upon metrics to measure success for all schools based on the values of that city. CSPFs provide an apples-to-apples baseline to support informed, fair decisionmaking for school supply decisions.

Table 7. Data, Analysis, and Plans That Support Strategic School Supply Decisions

	Citywide data to make school supply decisions			
	Citywide definition of school quality: common accountability framework	Publicly available demand data: enrollment & choice data	Regular supply analysis: regular master facility plans	Regular supply analysis: regular reports of where quality seats are needed
Washington, D.C.	X	X	X	
Oakland		X	X	X
New York City	X	X		
Denver	X	X		
Cleveland			X	X
New Orleans		X		
Indianapolis		X	X	X
Chicago	X			
Philadelphia	X			
Camden		X		
Boston			X	
Atlanta				X
Houston				
Los Angeles				
San Antonio				
Memphis				
Kansas City				

Source: Researcher review of district websites and interviews, October 2017.

City leaders cited a number of barriers that prevented them from strategically using the data available to them. As other studies have found, a lack of available facilities rose to the top, but the exact nature of the problem looked different in each city.[21] In Washington, D.C., buildings are at a premium because of a population boom. In Tulsa, Philadelphia, and Oakland, leaders claim that facilities are sparse because underenrolled district schools are not closing and being replaced at an urgent enough pace. In New Orleans, schools still need renovating from the levee breaches after Hurricane Katrina. In Los Angeles, tensions between the district and charter sectors have made it difficult to move forward on co-locations in underenrolled schools (i.e., placement of a district-run school and a charter school in the same facility). Because facility problems are embedded in each city's context, they will require problem solving on the part of district, charter, and community leaders.

> **If you can find a building in a location you want, then that is ideal. But there is a struggle to find any suitable facility, so charters will open wherever they can get permitting done."**
>
> *– Charter leader, Boston*

21. Frederick Hess and Chester E. Finn, Jr., "What Innovators Can, and Cannot, Do," *Education Next 7*, no. 2 (Spring 2007); Chester E. Finn, Jr., Bruno V. Manno, and Gregg Vanourek, *Charter Schools in Action: Renewing Public Education* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001); Susan Dynarski, et al., *Charter Schools: A Report on Rethinking the Federal Role in Education* (Washington, DC: Brown Center on Education Policy, Brookings Institution, 2010).

Access to facilities is only one of several barriers preventing charter schools from opening where they are most needed. While many charter schools want to serve students in low-income neighborhoods, they must also open where they will be able to attract students—if they don't maintain enrollment, they will be forced to close. In some cities, education leaders said that low state funding also prevents them from attracting the kinds of operators that can turn around low-performing schools.

Poorly managed consolidation, closure, or restart procedures can block or derail locating schools strategically. Every city in our analysis has policies on the books to turn around or close persistently underperforming schools. However, these policies aren't being used consistently. Some cities have a saturated market of underenrolled or persistently underperforming schools tying up buildings that could otherwise be used for citywide choice options or a turnaround model. In other cities, school closings and openings have not been well coordinated or communicated. New schools, often charters, have opened next to neighborhood schools that were closing because of underenrollment or just starting to rebound. This causes confusion and angers community members. In some cities, closures have happened too quickly, with little engagement or support for families who must switch schools. In these cities too, community bitterness and district leader fatigue have slowed down efforts to improve the city's portfolio of schools.

Many of the cities in our analysis are facing declining enrollment, either citywide or in some neighborhoods. A poorly planned turnaround or restart policy can force school programs to remain in neighborhoods where a declining school-age population may not present the greatest demand for schools.

Community Acceptance

All the cities in our analysis have addressed the need for strong grasstops support and alignment in education reform efforts, albeit with varying success. In every city, a variety of organizations are involved in school- and system-level improvement efforts, including local funders, civic leaders, faith-based communities, and local businesses.[22] In some cities, nonprofits are taking on key roles in family engagement and assessment and accountability.

Education leaders are starting to more effectively inform families about systemwide changes. New superintendents hold listening tours to develop their agendas, and many cities conduct extensive engagement prior to the launch of a strategic plan or large initiative, such as a new turnaround strategy. Almost every district has improved processes for school closures.

However, in our interviews we noticed a persistent disconnect: while district and education leaders are working hard to make connections to the community, families are not satisfied. We identified three key problem areas: education leaders are not differentiating outreach methods, are not communicating tradeoffs, and are not attending to the needs of charter school families.

More Than "One-Size-Fits-All" Communication

District officials typically devote considerable time and energy to engaging parents and community members, often through robocalls, forums, or surveys. However, these strategies work best with engaged, affluent parents who have a regular working phone number or will respond to a survey. In contrast, few cities are acknowledging the need for a differentiated engagement strategy for low-income families and those most impacted by underperforming schools. The price of failure is high. When only affluent families feel comfortable advocating for their needs, families who most need better schools are left out. Every city has district school parent associations, but these are often focused only on school-level issues.

> "Oakland is a city that worships at the altar of community engagement. Policymakers don't feel like they can do anything if they have not done community engagement. But the vast majority of the community is uninformed, unengaged, and busy. Whenever there are community engagement opportunities, the same 10 people show up."
>
> *– Community organization, Oakland*

22. Janelle Scott, et al., "Evidence Use and Advocacy Coalitions: Intermediary Organizations and Philanthropies in Denver, Colorado, *Education Policy Analysis Archives* 23, no. 124 (2015).

In our interviews, news reviews, and document reviews, we found that engagement is often focused most strongly on initiatives that education leaders are rolling out. Even then, it is not necessarily ongoing. In our interviews, parent and community leaders pointed to persistent concerns that are not directly related to academics but matter deeply to families, such as unsafe transportation or the poor quality of school lunches. System leaders often deprioritize these non-instructional issues, but community leaders say that addressing them is critical for rebuilding trust with families. Unfortunately, few cities have organizations that collect citizen input citywide on issues that families identified as being important to them.

Communicating Tradeoffs

In most cities, district and other leaders rarely tell communities how they use the input they collect from surveys or forums. Education leaders set themselves up for criticism when they don't close the feedback loop by telling families what they heard and help families understand inevitable tradeoffs.

> "We have surveyed communities and families to death, but we never get the data back or have an opportunity to hear how they feel about the data. I think if you aren't going to give the data back, people are not going to be motivated to answer the next time."
>
> *– Community leader, Atlanta*

Sometimes education leaders appear to ignore families because the issues they raise are difficult to resolve. In one city, families were upset about the number of long-term substitute teachers used to staff schools. District officials could only resolve this by making changes to the collective bargaining agreement. As an intermediary solution, the district hired library staff, which had been lacking because substitute teachers were not permitted to staff school libraries. Community leaders reported that families saw this as non-responsive to their concern. In another city, community members were upset that the district was not opening a comprehensive high school, but district leaders knew from enrollment data that the neighborhood could not support a large high school. In both cases, district leaders were not communicating why they took specific actions, leading families and community leaders to believe the district was not listening or did not care.

Hearing From Charter School Families

In a traditional school system, families know to go to the district or board meetings to raise concerns. Charter schools have their own avenues—individual school boards and the charter authorizer. In a number of cities, district and charter sector leaders admitted that charter schools do not always do a good job of explaining to families where they should go when they have a problem, whether a school board, authorizer, or ombudsman. We heard in interviews that charter families with grievances about their schools often ended up at district school board meetings even when the district was not the authorizer.

> "Charter schools have in place very specific systems and models of how they do things. They tell parents if they don't like the way they do things, then they can go somewhere else. There is no effort in making these schools for community members and their needs."
>
> *– City leader, San Antonio*

In every city, charter sector leaders said that charter school engagement practices varied widely from school to school depending on the operator. In the worst case scenarios, charter authorizers and charter school operators express little interest in helping to resolve families' issues, assuming that if families are not happy, they can vote with their feet and leave.[23] And beyond parents' experiences with their individual schools, few cities have opportunities for charter school families to become involved in education issues, except to engage them in choosing a school or provide avenues to support charter school advocacy.

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23. The challenge for families is reminiscent of Albert O. Hirschman's 1970 classic book, *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty: Responses to Decline in Firms, Organizations, and States* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1970). In this case, if families are unhappy with their school or the school system, they can "exit" or they can "voice" unhappiness. In his work, Hirschman found that giving people greater opportunity for feedback and criticism may reduce the exit problem.

HOW CITIES CAN ADDRESS THREE KEY CHALLENGES

Cities with public school choice face three common challenges:

- Informing and supporting parents to help them find a school that fits their needs.

- Making sure the children most in need can get to schools that are a good match by being more strategic about improving school quality and fit.

- Using the education strategy to ensure the education system is responsive and legitimate.

In studying these 18 cities, we encountered promising approaches to solving each of these challenges. In this section, we offer recommendations that can be helpful to leaders in cities that are just starting to expand public school choice or are facing challenges in sustaining initiatives.

Addressing these issues is complex and challenging. All the areas needing attention will require investments of time and money. Our intention is to help guide the initiatives education leaders are poised to address so their investments can be more strategic and focused. For example, if education leaders are ready and have the resources to move forward on a unified enrollment system, we urge them to carefully plan the consolidated information guide that will accompany it. Other recommendations require capacity and time, but not necessarily money. Being more strategic about using data or having regular cross-sector meetings may require training and new staff. And some recommendations, especially those related to community engagement, are designed to inform efforts already in place or to guide new funder investments.

Informing and Supporting Parents

In every city we studied, families face a myriad of choices. But nowhere is the need for information demonstrated more dramatically than in Los Angeles.

Spotlight Los Angeles: Supporting Families' Need for Information

Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) provides a variety of choices. Families can use any one of 13 in-district choice programs to select from more than 1,000 district schools or 300 charter schools citywide. While most of the charters are authorized by the district, about 10 percent aren't—these are authorized by the county, the state, and other district authorizers. Where there are publicly available guides on any type of school option, these resources lack comparable measures of school quality. There is no consolidated, comprehensive school information guide.

Families who are more well-off purchase guides from private companies or hire enrollment consultants to coach them through the choice process. Those services make sense, as entrepreneurs seek to fill a real void for families, but they also advantage parents who can afford to pay for help.

> *"The strategy of school choice absolutely needs to be accompanied by a major investment in parents. Parents today are making school choice decisions based on word of mouth . . . That is how they are learning about what their options are. Today in Los Angeles, there is no common place where parents can go to compare data on schools, find schools, or enroll in schools."*
> *– Community advocate, Los Angeles*

Los Angeles has long had competition between its district and charter schools. In some ways, that competition has incentivized both sectors to improve school quality. But it has also led to resistance among school and system leaders to developing a shared information guide because that could too easily highlight which schools are—and are not—doing well.

This competition for enrollment is clear in LAUSD's plan to launch a new "school-finder tool." Through a school board vote, the district has explicitly opted to exclude information on non-district-authorized charter schools. For their part, the charter sector in Los Angeles has not taken steps to simplify the availability of school information for families. A coalition led by the Partnership for Equitable Access to Public Schools is pressing for improved information and access to high-quality schools. Parent Revolution, one of the groups in that coalition, piloted a choice support program in 2016 and helped hundreds of families identify and submit applications to high-quality schools. Los Angeles still needs a tool with comparable measures of school quality for all schools in the city—without it, the guide may serve more as a marketing tool, but will likely fall short of being a driver of quality and equity.

Promising Steps Forward

The practices in this section are based on findings from this report and research. Cleveland, Chicago, Denver, Philadelphia, New Orleans, and Washington, D.C., rose to the top in our analysis as cities with sound information strategies. Below we also highlight cities, like Camden and Indianapolis, that implemented new strategies in the 2017-18 school year.

1. Offering guides that provide the information families want.

Though nothing can take the place of the value families find in visiting a school to make choices, information guides are an important complement.[24] In addition to basic information about the school and its performance, families want *clearer information about school curriculum*. Our analysis and previous research have found that information about curriculum and instructional models can be hard to understand.[25] But some cities are getting it right: Indianapolis offers a good example: Enroll Indy provides clear, consistent curricular information about each school. The guide also gives families the opportunity to search by school model.

Families also want *information about how students and parents will feel at a school.*[26] The School District of Philadelphia provides robust school culture information, with safety and attendance ratings accompanied by parent programs and a narrative about each school's culture.

Families whose children have additional needs want *detailed information about the special education and English language learner services available at individual schools*.[27] See guides developed by New Orleans and Cleveland for good examples.

It can be hard to understand how enrollment works, and families become frustrated when they select a school but can't get in.[28] To improve transparency, a number of cities provide *useful information about the enrollment process*. Washington, D.C.'s My School DC gives information about lottery preferences and which grades are accepting students.

Camden Enrollment's guide stands out for its completeness across all these topics, providing information about school curriculum, school programs, student services, and family services. This is not an accident. After the first year the guide was published, Camden Enrollment conducted focus groups and surveys to find out what families liked and what they wanted to know more about, and then added that new information the next year.

Even in cities with robust guides, cities should survey families to better understand what families don't know about the choice process and provide better information. In addition to our recommendations above, this could include information about the difference between charter schools and district schools, school eligibility requirements, how lottery weights work, or what academic ratings mean.

There is continuing research on how to structure and present school information guides. While school performance can have a profound impact on helping families prioritizing academics in their search, guides should strive to strike a balance to be "accurate, accessible, and accommodating." One solution for online guides might be "progressive disclosure" where a family starts with basic information, like location, and then has more opportunity for detail as they move forward.[29]

24. Based on interview and survey data from this project and recent CRPE research: Christine Campbell, et al., *Unifying Enrollment in Camden: How Families Experienced the New Enrollment System*. See also Paul Teske, Jody Fitzpatrick, and Gabriel Kaplan, *Opening Doors: How Low-Income Parents Search for the Right School* (Seattle, WA: Center on Reinventing Public Education, 2007); Justine S. Hastings and Jeffrey M. Weinstein, "Information, School Choice, and Academic Achievement: Evidence from Two Experiments," *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 123, no. 4 (November 2008).

25. Betheny Gross, et al., *Are City Schools Becoming Monolithic? Analyzing Diversity of Options in Denver, New Orleans, and Washington, D.C.* (Seattle, WA: Center on Reinventing Public Education, 2017).

26. Betheny Gross, Michael DeArmond, and Patrick Denice, *Common Enrollment, Parents, and School Choice: Early Evidence from Denver and New Orleans* (Seattle, WA: Center on Reinventing Public Education, 2015).

27. Based on interview data from this project and a previous CRPE parent survey that found parents of children with special needs report more difficulty finding the information they need to make choices than parents of children in general education. See: Ashley Jochim, et al., *How Parents Experience Public School Choice* (Seattle, WA: Center on Reinventing Public Education, 2014).

28. Based on interview data from this project, and Gross, DeArmond, and Denice, *Common Enrollment, Parents, and School Choice*.

29. Jon Valant, *Better data, better decisions: Informing school choosers to improve education markets* (Washington, D.C.: American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research, 2014).

2. Providing targeted hands-on help for families.

Interviews with community leaders pointed to school guides as the bare minimum. They described families they work with as needing additional supports to navigate the school choice process. More affluent parents have an array of supports surrounding them, ranging from private education consultants to their own connected networks. Less affluent families need the same. In the 18 cities we studied, school districts and third-party-operated lottery systems provide support to families during the application process, as do some charter advocacy groups.

Although providing family support is potentially expensive, it is an urgent need in many cities. Because of the expense, this is an ideal place for districts or city leaders to partner with funders and local community-based organizations, and to make use of parent-to-parent volunteers.

For cities with funder support, there is a benefit to having a sector-neutral organization that can provide high-touch support. The Washington, D.C.-based nonprofit group DC School Reform Now connects families in the city's most underserved neighborhoods, where fewer high-quality schools are available, with parent advocates who guide them in learning about schools and completing applications.[30]

These types of groups have limited reach, however. To amplify impact, families may need information brought to them at churches, community gatherings, youth services organizations, and beyond.[31] Learning how families currently get information will help community organization partners build strategies. Community groups report that simple flyers about the choice process, printed in multiple languages, help families engage. The levy-funded nonprofit in Cleveland, the Transformation Alliance, uses social media, newspaper ads, and postcards to inform families. The Alliance also partners with local community groups that hold neighborhood-based forums.

3. Enlisting community intermediaries when politics get in the way.

In some cities, lack of capacity, political will, or coordination hampers the decision to create a cross-sector guide with all district and charter schools. In these settings, an intermediary organization—or even a motivated individual—can fill an important gap.[32]

In some cities, truly grassroots guides have emerged in the absence of any other option. In Memphis and Kansas City, families working out of their homes have spearheaded the creation of online school guides. While community- or nonprofit-developed guides may be the best or only path forward in some cities, they do come with their own set of challenges. Some are made vulnerable by unstable funding sources. Most rely on information submitted by schools, which may be inconsistent or incomplete. Local funders or nonprofits should support grassroots efforts by providing financial and technical assistance.

Being More Strategic About Improving School Quality and Fit

Some of the cities in our analysis did not have an explicit portfolio strategy, but they—and all districts—still must manage their citywide school portfolios. Some cities face falling enrollment, others rising enrollment. In every one of the cities in our analysis, new schools were opening as old schools were closing or changing.

School choice provides a valuable opportunity for families: In every city we studied, many families fight for the right to attend the schools they prefer, wherever those schools are located. But community leaders who work with families reported that what families want most is more quality schools in their neighborhood.[33]

"Quality" meant different things in different places. In Camden, it meant that some neighborhoods were home to highly regarded "growth" schools like Renaissance Schools (run by KIPP, Mastery, and Uncommon Schools). In Washington, D.C., some neighborhoods already had schools like KIPP, and what they wanted was more high-performing options like the performing arts high schools or dual-language schools that wealthier neighborhoods had. In both cases, families in less advantaged neighborhoods were sending their children on long commutes and wanted those quality options closer to home.

30. Recommendation based on interview data from this study. See also a recent CRPE report with more detail about the benefits and challenges of providing choice supports to hard-to-reach families: Ashley Jochim, Betheny Gross, and Colleen McCann, *Making School Choice Work for Families: DC School Reform Now's High Quality Schools Campaign* (Seattle, WA: Center on Reinventing Public Education, 2017).

31. In interviews for this project, community and education leaders told us about the importance of bringing information to where families are and providing it through trusted sources.

32. Based on interview data from this study.

33. Gross, DeArmond, and Denice, *Common Enrollment, Parents, and School Choice*; Douglas N. Harris and Matthew Larsen, *What Schools Do Families Want (and Why)* (New Orleans, LA: Education Research Alliance for New Orleans (2015); *Public School Parents On The Value Of Public Education. Findings from a National Survey of Public School Parents conducted for the AFT* (Washington, D.C.: Hart Research Associates, 2017).

> " Choice suggests the variety of Dunkin' Donuts, but here it's more like the local bakery at 6 p.m., where all there is, is what's left over. If you want to send your child to school for free in this town, you have limited options."
>
> *– Parent activist, Camden*

Spotlight Denver: New Good Schools, But Not Necessarily in the Right Places

In the last eight years, Denver Public Schools (DPS) has opened up dozens of new high-quality innovation and charter schools. However, like many cities, Denver has complex circumstances that have made distributing quality schools across the city a challenge. There are some things that the district can't change: It's a large city, with boundaries and bottlenecks created by highways and rivers, making for long trips from western neighborhoods to the center and east where the city's highest-rated schools are. It is also a segregated city, with geographic enclaves. It has population density challenges, where some neighborhoods have few children, but many of them live in poverty. All these issues present challenges for low-income families that want access to top-rated schools.

"One of the challenges in our city is that even if we closed the lowest-performing schools, the nearby schools are not necessarily much higher performing. This is one of the unfortunate realities of the housing patterns in our city, which can make it difficult to convince families to travel farther away to a school that may be higher performing. We are operating at scale and there are ingrained inequities."
– District leader, Denver

Denver is working to combat these challenges. DPS is trying to increase community input into decisions about where new schools are located. The district is also working with schools to better articulate their programs so that families can find schools that are a good fit for their children. And a new citywide community partnership, the "Strengthening Neighborhoods Initiative," was launched in spring 2017 to develop recommendations for increasing the racial and socioeconomic integration of schools.

The story of Denver is unique to Denver, but each city has similar challenges. The bigger question is whether districts and charters are doing all they can. Could the schools in low-density areas look different than other schools? Could high-performing charter schools commit to adding more classes and grades? Districts and charters need to be open to all solutions and work together to get students into good schools closer to home.

Promising Steps Forward

This section addresses the gaps and challenges that rose to the top in our findings. Below, we highlight promising practices in Atlanta, Camden, Cleveland, Indianapolis, New York City, Memphis, Oakland, Philadelphia, Tulsa, and Washington, D.C.

1. Using data and developing data capacity.

Many of the cities in this project don't collect school location and quality data for all schools in the city or, if they do, may not share it. Collecting and sharing data are key first steps toward developing a strategic school siting policy. In interviews, education leaders said the lack of common data was a barrier to charter schools and the district being able to work together to strategically site schools. Cities that seem to be the most intentional and strategic about their school portfolio decisions rely on data about facility availability and student demand.[34] It is important to note that having data and using them are two different things. Based on our analysis, even cities with the best data are not necessarily able to locate schools or add new seats where they are most needed. However, we still believe that having transparent data available to both sectors is an important first step.

In Atlanta, the district launched APS Insights with detailed maps that identify quality schools across the city. In Oakland, the district creates Strategic Regional Analyses with citywide choice, demographic, and school quality data.

34. In Chicago, Denver, Cleveland, Indianapolis, and Washington, D.C., the organization IFF has conducted city-specific analyses to help education leaders identify the geographic areas where new quality schools will make the most impact.

2. Collaborating to identify problems.

District-charter collaboration has been helpful for strategically addressing school siting barriers. Ideally, education leaders could make agreements with other city agencies within the city such as public transportation and housing.[35] In others, education and civic leaders may be able to work together to develop a real estate trust that can own buildings and lease them to schools, whether district-run or charter.[36]

In Washington, D.C., the mayor's Cross-Sector Collaboration Task Force brings together district and charter leaders, government agencies, and parents to talk about citywide education challenges like student mobility and at-risk students. The task force is now starting to take on data sharing and collaborative facilities planning to improve the city's distribution of high-quality schools.

3. Addressing facility challenges through innovative co-locations.

In cities where co-locations are a possibility, leaders may consider co-locating schools by sector. Co-locations have been tried as a practical solution to scarce facilities. There was also an early belief that co-locating charter schools in the same buildings as district schools would result in schools sharing best practices. Prior CRPE research shows that district and charter schools can, through considerable effort and resources, peacefully coexist. In reality, there has been less sharing than hoped for, and at times the cultures of district and charter schools have clashed under the same roof.[37]

While there is no research supporting this strategy, in our interviews we heard of instances where education leaders hoped that co-locating schools within a single sector could reduce facility pressure and lead to school innovation. In Tulsa, a statewide nonprofit is considering purchasing a building where multiple charters can operate, acting as an incubator for new schools. In New York City, where existing co-locations of charter and district schools in a single building are often contentious, community members want sector-specific co-locations. In addition to reducing tensions, there is a perception that schools with similar governance models and constraints have more opportunity to share best practices or band together to face common challenges.

4. Providing promising options with partnership schools.

To solve the challenge of providing higher-quality neighborhood schools, some cities are trying new governance arrangements, including Renaissance Schools in Philadelphia and Camden, Innovation Network Schools in Indianapolis, partnership schools in Tulsa, and contract schools in Atlanta.

In cities that use contract or partnership schools, the district identifies where high-quality schools are most needed and then opens requests for proposals. Charter schools or even nonprofit organizations partner with the district to open a new school or turn around existing, low-performing district schools. The arrangement is intended to bring high-quality schools to families who most need good options. It also provides a means for bringing high-quality charter schools into cities or neighborhoods that they would not otherwise be able to enter, either because of community pushback or lack of access to facilities.

35. Interview data from this project. See also: Robin Lake, et al., *Bridging the District-Charter Divide to Help More Students Succeed* (Seattle, WA: Center on Reinventing Public Education, 2017).

36. See for example, Michael DeArmond, "Getting Out of the Facilities Business," in *Making School Reform Work: New Partnerships for Real Change*, ed. Paul Hill and James Harvey (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2004).

37. Michael DeArmond, Elizabeth Cooley Nelson, and Angela Bruns, *The Best of Both Worlds: Can District-Charter Co-Location Be a Win-Win?* (Seattle, WA: Center on Reinventing Public Education, 2015); Sarah A. Cordes, "In Pursuit of the Common Good: The Spillover Effects of Charter Schools on Public School Students in New York City" (Cambridge, MA: Education Finance and Policy, MIT Press Journals, 2017).

Both districts and charters need to enter into these relationships aware of the risks and tradeoffs. Charters can be wary of taking on turnaround schools or be concerned about the constraints that come from working on a contract basis with the district.[38] While early data for Camden Renaissance Schools and Indianapolis Innovation Network Schools are promising,[39] results for Renaissance Schools in Philadelphia have been mixed.[40] There are not yet any studies confirming the efficacy of these approaches.[41]

5. Working with communities to identify good-fit models and operators.
A growing number of cities are starting to involve families in school siting and restarts to make sure new schools serve neighborhood needs.[42] In New York City, local superintendents hold community meetings to ask what programs and models community members want. The Achievement School District (ASD) in Memphis had Neighborhood Advisory Councils that helped identify new operators for schools entering the ASD. In Denver, communities vote on charter operators that have been vetted by the district using a rigorous set of criteria. In Cleveland, the district informs school leaders of assets in their community that they can leverage, and then helps them craft a good-fit model (like opening an IT-focused school in a neighborhood with tech firms).

Spotlight Washington, D.C.: Families Take the Lead

A small group of parents in one of the city's most impoverished wards spearheaded a process to open the kind of school they wanted for their neighborhood. The group solicited input from the community, which it then used to set guidelines for school applications from both charter operators and the District of Columbia Public Schools. Available land on a military base provided a rare opportunity for such a deliberate process, but some groups hope that this kind of family involvement can become commonplace.

6. Using community input and high-touch support during school improvement and closure.
When school restarts, closures, and consolidations are not done well—for example, quickly or without sufficiently informing families—families don't have the time to adjust to schedule changes or enroll in new, quality school options. School closures, consolidations, and restarts are always traumatic experiences for communities. They can result in community pushback and backsliding on needed reform efforts, even if some student outcomes improve.[43] In response, cities are starting to use community processes to inform decisions related to improving, replacing, and closing certain schools.

> "The district has to have community meetings when they are doing closures. Usually, though, those have been somewhat last minute and not planned. They are not getting the feedback that is needed; they are holding the meetings after school closures have been announced."
>
> *– Community leader, Memphis*

38. Sean Gill and Christine Campbell, *Partnership Schools: New Governance Models for Creating Quality School Options in Districts* (Seattle, WA: Center on Reinventing Public Education, 2017); Nithin Iyengar, Kate Lewis-LaMonica, and Mike Perigo, *School District Innovation Zones: A New Wave of District-led Efforts to Improve Economic Mobility* (San Francisco, CA: Bridgespan, 2017).

39. Camden City School District, "District, Renaissance Schools Show Improvement," September 21, 2016; Dylan Peers McCoy, "Innovation schools saw some of the largest gains on ISTEP in Indianapolis Public Schools. Here are the schools that had big changes," *Chalkbeat Indiana*, September 7, 2017.

40. An early study about Philadelphia Renaissance Schools was positive: Eva Gold, et al., Philadelphia's Renaissance Schools Initiative: 18 Month Interim Report (Philadelphia, PA: Research for Action, 2012). But a later study showed mixed results: Kati Stratos, Tonya Wolford, and Adrienne Reitano, "*Philadelphia's Renaissance Schools Initiative After Four Years*," *PennGSE Perspectives on Urban Education* 12, no. 1 (Spring 2015). The School District of Philadelphia is currently completing an evaluation to determine the effectiveness of the city's Renaissance Schools.

41. A recent study identifies network effect sizes in math and reading. Mastery Charter Schools, which operate several partnership schools in Philadelphia and Camden, were found to have positive but not statistically significant gains in math and reading (results having a p-value of less than 0.05). See James L. Woodworth, et al., *Charter Management Organizations 2017* (Stanford, CA: Center for Research on Education Outcomes, 2017).

42. Interview data from this project. Also see *Roots of Engagement in Baton Rouge: How Community Is Shaping the Growth of New School Options* (Seattle, WA: Center on Reinventing Public Education, 2016).

43. Chunping Han, et al., *Lights Off: Practice and Impact of Closing Low-Performing Schools* (Stanford, CA: CREDO, 2017); Marisa de la Torre, et al., *School Closings in Chicago: Understanding Families' Choices and Constraints for New School Enrollment* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Consortium on Chicago School Research, 2015); James J. Kemple, *High School Closures in New York City: Impacts on Students' Academic Outcomes, Attendance, and Mobility* (New York, NY: The Research Alliance for New York City Schools, 2015).

Recent efforts might show the beginning of improvement in Memphis. Shelby County Schools is currently working on a "Greater Schools, Greater Community" initiative that involves communities in developing school improvement plans. Communities can submit plans with their recommendations for what the school needs, and SCS develops metrics to track performance.

In Tulsa, the district held focus groups and put out surveys with options for addressing a budget shortfall. The community decided it didn't want to increase class size or impact elementary schools, concluding that the best option was to consolidate several underenrolled schools.

In New York City, a lawsuit forced the district to develop a transparent improvement and closure process. Once a school has been identified for improvement, the district works with the school and community, providing increasing levels of support prior to closure. When a school does have to close, district staff conduct one-on-one meetings to help families find a new school and identify additional supports (such as summer programs) to ensure an easier transition. In Cleveland, the Transformation Alliance works with families when a school is likely to close due to falling enrollment or low performance. When schools do close, the organization's staff help families find a new school. Community and education leaders in Cleveland reported that the district's use of a third-party organization to support improvement efforts has helped the process remain neutral and transparent.

Ensuring the Education System Is Responsive and Legitimate

In many cities, education leaders have been improving outreach to grassroots community groups and grasstops leaders. However, there are still many missteps being made when it comes to family outreach and community relations. When the education strategy is not responsive to the communities it is intended to serve, education leaders miss out on key information that will ensure the strategy meets family and student needs. It can also result in communities interpreting district and charter motivations negatively and unnecessarily widening the chasm between school systems and the families they serve.

Spotlight Boston: Hard Lessons Even With Good Intentions

Engaging with the community is not a simple undertaking. Boston Public Schools (BPS) leaders learned hard lessons about building understanding and support for tough decisions. When a rushed school closure fell too closely on the heels of a failed community initiative, district leaders realized that they needed to do more grassroots engagement so they would be aware of each community's broader context.

BPS tested its new engagement strategy during a rezoning process—the district's Office of Engagement trained district staff to facilitate conversations and conducted training with community-based leaders so they could explain the proposed changes to families in the neighborhood.

> *"In our new process, we shared data and information so families understood why, and gave them the opportunity to ask questions . . . We shared online so all notes were available. We went back out and showed how people's input was incorporated. We engaged respected community leaders."*
> *– District leader, Boston*

These processes are not yet part of the district's standard operating procedure; BPS leaders are still piloting engagement strategies for different initiatives. A district leader said that high-touch approaches cannot be used for every initiative—they are time and resource intensive—but will be necessary for sensitive issues.

The solutions to developing better, more trusting relationships between school systems and the families they serve are not complicated, but they do require immense work and commitment. Some might question whether the time and money for this seemingly intractable challenge might be better spent on other education-related areas. But failing to engage families and community members results in fragile reform efforts. The reality is that school districts, charter organizations, funders, and education nonprofits are already investing in building relationships with the community, and in some cases are working to mitigate previous missteps that have fostered mistrust. If they can do it better by learning from others, it is worth sharing where there is progress.

Promising Steps Forward

Strategies in this section are based on community and education leader interviews. We also drew from research about public participation and stakeholder communication.[44] Below, we highlight promising practices in Atlanta, Boston, Camden, Chicago, Cleveland, Denver, Indianapolis, Memphis, Oakland, and New Orleans.

1. Improving communication: good news, tradeoffs, incorporating input, and listening.
In many cities, districts or other education leaders can better leverage the communication structures already in place to improve two-way communication. The suggestions below come from education and community leaders engaged in this work across our 18 cities.

Good news, and the bad. Sometimes districts simply need to better communicate what is working. Even if a city is just telling community members about early wins, partial evidence of success can help develop support and generate trust. However, when things have not gone well, education leaders must be transparent. Failing to communicate when an initiative is not working erodes trust, and education leaders miss the opportunity to involve families and community groups in developing a solution.

Tradeoffs. When education leaders cannot address issues community members have raised through forums, surveys, or nonprofit partners, they must explain the tradeoffs and why they chose the path they did.

Incorporating input. Education leaders also must close the feedback loop by reporting how community input was used. In Atlanta, a new superintendent built trust with the community by improving two-way communication about school mergers.

> "The superintendent brings the message herself. She listens . . . At every meeting, she captures the feedback and summarizes at the next meeting what she heard. She explains what concerns she can address."
>
> *– Community leader, Atlanta*

Listening to what matters. Education leaders can start to improve communication by listening to concrete issues families raise. Most cities already have mechanisms in place to collect family input through surveys and forums. However, there needs to be an opportunity for families to bring up issues not directly related to school choice, school models, or other initiatives education leaders are actively pursuing. The issues that families raise, like low-quality school lunches or unsafe bus transport, are important to families.

2. Building partnerships with trusted community leaders.
Finding and building relationships with trusted community groups allows school systems to develop connections with others already working to solve concrete issues. This may help districts develop the capacity to address community engagement needs and differentiate the engagement strategy to better reach low-income families and other affected groups not yet engaged in the education strategy.[45]

In Denver, a funder is giving out micro-grants to community-based organizations that have a plan to support education-related community engagement. In New Orleans, education leaders brought local nonprofits to the table to plan how Recovery School District schools would return to the Orleans Parish School Board. Local funders can identify trusted sources in communities most impacted by poor-performing schools and provide these groups with resources and connections to other groups active in other parts of a city.

44. For example: Tracie Potochnik and Angela N. Romans, *Collaborating for Equity: A Scan of the Los Angeles Educational Ecosystem* (Providence, RI: Annenberg Institute for School Reform, Brown University, 2015); *Sustainability Rubric: A Tool to Help State Agencies Assess Their Current Efforts to Sustain Reform Strategies to Meet Student Achievement Goals.* (Washington, D.C.: The Reform Support Network, U.S. Department of Education, 2015); Core Values Awards, Showcase 2015 (Louisville, CO: International Association for Public Participation, 2015); Melody Barnes and Paul Schmitz, "Community Engagement Matters (Now More Than Ever)," *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, Spring 2016); Catherine DiMartino, "Navigating Public-Private Partnerships: Introducing the Continuum of Control," *American Journal of Education* 120, no. 2 (February 2014): 257-282.

45. Based on interviews for this project with community and education leaders.

When positions open up, districts and charter schools can consider hiring people with deep community roots. Often they are active parents and dogged volunteers. In Indianapolis, Ashley Thomas pushed to turn her failing school into an "A" school and now works for Stand Indiana. She is a recognized leader in training parents how to advocate for their children's education. In Oakland, Ladora Lewis Hightower is a parent who volunteers in her local high school (even after her child graduated) every day after working two jobs. She is well informed, she holds the principal accountable by calling regularly, and she rallies to get parents from black, Hispanic, and Asian refugee communities to meetings.

3. Involving charter school families.
Charter systems present unique challenges to involving families,[46] although some cities are addressing these challenges with promising strategies. In every city, charter school families need a good point of contact to address grievances and engage with larger, systemwide initiatives. Depending on the city, this can be a nonprofit, district innovation office, charter authorizer, or mayor's office. In Camden, the role has been assumed by a local nonprofit.

Spotlight Camden: Working With All Public School Families

A local, parent-led and staffed nonprofit, Parents for Great Camden Schools (PGCS), does advocacy work with charter, district, and Renaissance School families. The group has a close working relationship with the district and the families it represents. PGCS' unique position allows it to be an intermediary between district and charter education leaders and family members. PGCS has supported some of the district's more controversial moves, such as demolishing and rebuilding Camden High School and urging opponents to support a better facility and program for students. PGCS also elevates concerns that are percolating in the community. A recently released Parent Platform focused on improving access and educational opportunities in Camden was based on conversations with thousands of parents. More boots on the ground are still needed, however, to do the one-on-one outreach necessary to help families understand available school options.

In cities with a large charter presence, an organization may need to take responsibility for collecting parent input to identify trends. In Cleveland, this is the nonprofit Transformation Alliance. A funder-backed coordinating organization like the Memphis Education Fund is working to set best practices for family engagement, especially for issues like school closures. Establishing quality practices to inform families about how to elevate a school-level grievance is also important in some cities, especially in places where the district is not the main authorizer.

46. Based on interview data from this project. See also Leigh Dingerson and Clayton Ross, *Whose Schools? An Examination of Charter School Governance in Massachusetts* (Providence, RI: Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University, 2016); Joanna Smith, et al., "Parent Involvement in Urban Charter Schools: New Strategies for Increasing Participation," *The School Community Journal 21*, no. 1 (2011).

CONCLUSION: MAKING PUBLIC SCHOOL CHOICE A REALITY FOR ALL

School choice alone has not and will not achieve the goals of meeting community needs or improving access to educational opportunity. Education leaders and community advocates are increasingly realizing that they must work together.

In cities with decentralized education systems, responsibility for education solutions falls on multiple actors: district, charter, nonprofit, and civic. Many of the cities in our analysis thrive in a decentralized system—having one sector make decisions for all schools would not work. Decentralization also has contributed to more nimble, distributed leadership in many cities, resulting in a broader range of stakeholders contributing to an infusion of ideas and a more dynamic mix of possible solutions. But decentralization can hide faults and obscure responsibility. Education leaders must make sure they continue to face their problems honestly and push for solutions.

Much work remains to be done to ensure that all families have equal access to high-quality schools that are good fits for their children. Collecting data and being transparent about challenges and successes are critical for all leaders to be able to identify problems and craft strategic solutions. Underlying the challenges highlighted in this report, we identified three areas where any city could make promising changes.

Coordinating multiple investments. In every city, a number of actors are engaged in education, but rarely is there a cross-city plan or vision. Regular meetings with representatives from engaged groups and organizations may help city leaders avoid isolated or duplicated efforts.

In Indianapolis, for example, Indianapolis Public Schools, the nonprofit education incubator the Mind Trust, the mayor's office, Stand for Children Indiana, Enroll Indy, and local funders meet regularly to talk about their initiatives, partner on new work, and better understand where they are trying to go. Denver has been particularly good at coordinating foundation investments—the entire unified enrollment process in Denver was first stimulated by a group of nonprofits and foundations.

Moving away from scattershot efforts toward a data-informed strategy. Every city we studied faces financial pressure. Cities must be more strategic about identifying their weaknesses, rather than pursuing scattershot efforts across a broad range of areas. But to do that, cities need better data. Whether it's a new strategy for siting schools in the city, addressing community dissatisfaction, or pursuing a more strategic approach to talent—all of these issues are begging for real information to guide decisions.

Pushing for continuous improvement by being transparent. Among the cities that are new to this work, we saw both tremendous energy and growth. At a certain point, however, education leaders will have addressed their low-hanging fruit. It may be two, five, or ten years, but eventually education leaders will bump up against their city's most persistent issues: continued gaps in opportunity across income groups, isolated neighborhoods with no good schools, or toxic mistrust between the public and education system.

Transparency goes a long way toward pushing education leaders when the work gets hardest. Cities like Washington, D.C., and Oakland have been at the work for a long time, but they are very transparent about what is still left to address. Washington, D.C., produces annual equity reports for every district and charter school in the city, which are available to all families through the school's online lottery system. Education leaders hold themselves accountable by being public about their work.

Final Thoughts

This project allowed us to invest in learning from the experiences of cities that have made inroads toward providing public school choice. With our detailed Citywide Education Progress Reports on what each of the 18 cities is doing, we have looked across their individual experiences to develop the more general observations and recommendations found in this report. In education, as in other fields, much decisionmaking occurs through bargaining among a few parties, without anyone fully understanding how the results will play out in the real world. But that doesn't have to be the case. In this report, evidence abounds about what happens when policies are implemented. Learning from other cities—how they have stumbled and how they have succeeded—can be incredibly useful to the cities coming behind them.

In our review of 18 cities that are actively pursuing the goal of providing public school choice to all families, we found substantial progress in multiple dimensions—academic performance and new ideas among them—as well as challenges that cities had not yet addressed successfully. We hope that this summary of our findings, coupled with the detailed information about specific cities on our Stepping Up website, will serve as a resource for cities to make public school choice a reality for all, not just a slogan.

APPENDIX A: ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK AND CITY SELECTION

Analytical Framework

The Center on Reinventing Public Education (CRPE) conducted this study in two phases. In fall 2016, we created a baseline for our analysis by asking education and community leaders across the country about the most important education issues they were facing.

Following feedback, we summarized what we heard into three guiding questions:

- **Is the education system continuously improving?**
- **Do all students have access to a high-quality education?**
- **Is the education strategy rooted in the community?**

These questions drove our data collection and analysis. For each question, we developed indicators of how cities are doing (outcomes), and what they are doing (system reforms). From there we created an analytical framework to guide our research.

Analytical Framework

The education system is continuously improving	
Student and School Outcomes	**System Reforms**
A1. School proficiency rates in math and reading are improving A2. Low-scoring schools do not remain low scoring for several consecutive years A3. Graduation rates are improving	A4. Schools have the kinds of teachers they need A5. Schools have the kinds of leaders they need A6. Funding equitably follows students

All students have access to a high-quality education	
Student and School Outcomes	**System Reforms**
B1a. Low-income students in the city are performing better than their peers nationally B1b. Student sub-groups are enrolling in the city's top-scoring schools at similar rates B2. Students are equitably enrolled in advanced coursework	B3. The school supply represents an array of models B4. The city is being strategic about opening and closing schools B5. Families have the information they need and know how to use it B6. The enrollment process is working for families B7. Transportation is working for families

The education strategy is rooted in the community	
Student and School Outcomes	**System Reforms**
	C1. The education system responds to community feedback C2. The city engages families in educational decisions that impact them C3. A variety of groups are engaged in education C4. A strong and deep coalition of support exists for the education strategy

Is the education system continuously improving?

The concepts of continuous improvement and access to high-quality schools are closely related. CRPE's previous work has emphasized the need for choice paired with a distribution of high-quality, good-fit schools. For this project, we focused on school-level improvement. Our outcomes measured city graduation rates and proficiency rate gains in reading and math. System reforms indicators focused on the resources, specifically school-level talent and budget flexibility, that were available to schools to make improvements.

Do all students have access to a high-quality education?

To understand student access to education opportunities, we used three possible outcome indicators. For every city, we measured student subgroup enrollment in high school advanced math coursework. For most cities, we used an index developed by Education Cities and GreatSchools that measures how well low-income students are performing in math and reading relative to their peers nationwide (the Education Equality Index). For other cities, we identified student enrollment patterns in top-scoring elementary and middle schools. System reform indicators measured how the choice process is working for families and how education leaders are managing the city's school portfolio.

Is the education strategy rooted in the community?

In many cities, education leaders are trying to improve how they involve communities in education reform efforts. We lacked comparable outcomes data, so this category used media review, document review, and interview questions to identify grasstops support for the education strategy and school system responsiveness to families and community members.

> This project builds on CRPE's previous work. In developing our indicators and criteria, we drew on the seven components of the Portfolio Strategy, as well as prior work on choice and school portfolio management. The outcomes measures are updated versions of indicators we used in our 2015 report, Measuring Up: Educational Improvement and Opportunity in 50 Cities. Our community engagement indicators are based on prior CRPE work as well as research about public participation and stakeholder communication from the International Association for Public Participation, the National Center for Statistics, and the Annenberg Institute of School Reform at Brown University.
>
> Our outcomes indicators present data from all charter and district schools within a city's municipal boundary. We collected data for our system reform indicators across both district and charter sectors, unless otherwise noted.

The 18 cities included in this report are Atlanta, Boston, Camden, Cleveland, Chicago, Denver, Houston, Indianapolis, Kansas City, Los Angeles, Memphis, New Orleans, New York City, Oakland, Philadelphia, San Antonio, Tulsa, and Washington, D.C.

We chose to study these cities because they are pursuing an improvement strategy that gives families choice among public school options, both district and charter. In all the cities, district and charter schools are held to high standards of accountability, resulting in intervention or possibly closure if they do not meet those standards. In most of the cities, at least a subset of district schools are also given some degree of decisionmaking autonomy over staffing, curriculum, and/or budget.

However, the cities differ in how long and to what extent they have been pursuing reform strategies. Boston, Cleveland, Chicago, Houston, Los Angeles, New York City, Oakland, Philadelphia, and Washington, D.C., were early adopters of charter schools in the mid-1990s. Throughout the 2000s, Denver, Indianapolis, and New Orleans launched comprehensive initiatives to improve school quality and family access to public school options. The two most recent cities to do so were Cleveland in 2012 and Camden in 2013. Atlanta, Kansas City, San Antonio, and Tulsa are in the midst of implementing strategies to improve school quality and the choice process.

The scale of the work varies as well. Some cities can wrap their arms around the challenge, like Camden, educating 10,500 students, while New York City educates over a million students. Each city has a different share of students enrolled in charter schools. New Orleans has the highest percentage of students enrolled in charter schools (92 percent), while Tulsa has the lowest (8 percent).

The cities in our analysis also represent a range of governance models. Some have state-controlled education systems (Camden, and Memphis), others are controlled by the mayor (Boston, Cleveland, Chicago, New York City, and Washington, D.C.), and one is controlled by both (Philadelphia). In most cities, a single district formulates and guides the education strategy (Atlanta, Denver, Kansas City, Los Angeles, Oakland, and Tulsa). In a couple of cities, the charter sector is organized as a single body that works alongside the district (New Orleans and Washington, D.C.), while in some, multiple districts exist within the same municipal boundary (Houston, Indianapolis, Memphis, and San Antonio). At CRPE, we are agnostic about what the best model is—we are simply interested in knowing whether the city has been successful in making sure its model works for students and families.

Figure 3. The 18 Cities in Our Cross-City Analysis

*Click on a city to see its individual education progress report.*

Table 8. City School System Characteristics

	District		Charter	
	Primary district(s) and oversight	Districts in city	Authorizers	Enrollment share†
Atlanta	APS: Elected board	1	District and state	16%
Boston	BPS: Mayoral appointed board	1	State	19%
Camden	Camden City School District: State control	1	State	34%
Cleveland	CMSD: Mayoral appointed board	1	District, state, higher education institutions, and nonprofits,	31%
Chicago	CPS: Mayoral appointed board	1	District and state	15%
Denver	DPS: Elected board	1	District	18%
Houston	HISD: Elected board	17	District and state	22%
Indianapolis	IPS: Elected board	11	Mayor, state, higher education institution, and independent chartering board	31%
Kansas City	KCPS: Elected board	1	District, state, and higher education institutions	40%
Los Angeles	LAUSD: Elected board	1	District and county	24%
Memphis	SCS: Elected board ASD: State control	2	District and state	11%*
New Orleans	OPSB: Elected board RSD: State control	2	District and state	92%
New York City	NYCDOE: Mayoral control	1	District, state, and higher education institution	9%
Oakland	OUSD: Elected board	1	District and county	28%
Philadelphia	SDP: Mayoral control and state appointed board	1	Mayoral and state appointed board	32%
San Antonio	SAISD: Elected board	14	District and state	30%
Tulsa	TPS: Elected board	11	District and higher education institution	8%††
Washington, D.C.	DCPS: Mayoral control	1	Independent chartering board	45%

† *A Growing Movement: America's Largest Charter Public School Communities and Their Impact on Student Outcomes*, 11th ed. (Washington, D.C.: National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, 2016).

* The data on enrollment in Memphis comes from the National Alliance, which only included Shelby County Schools and does not include the state-run Achievement School District.

Figure 4. The Composition of School Share in 18 Cities
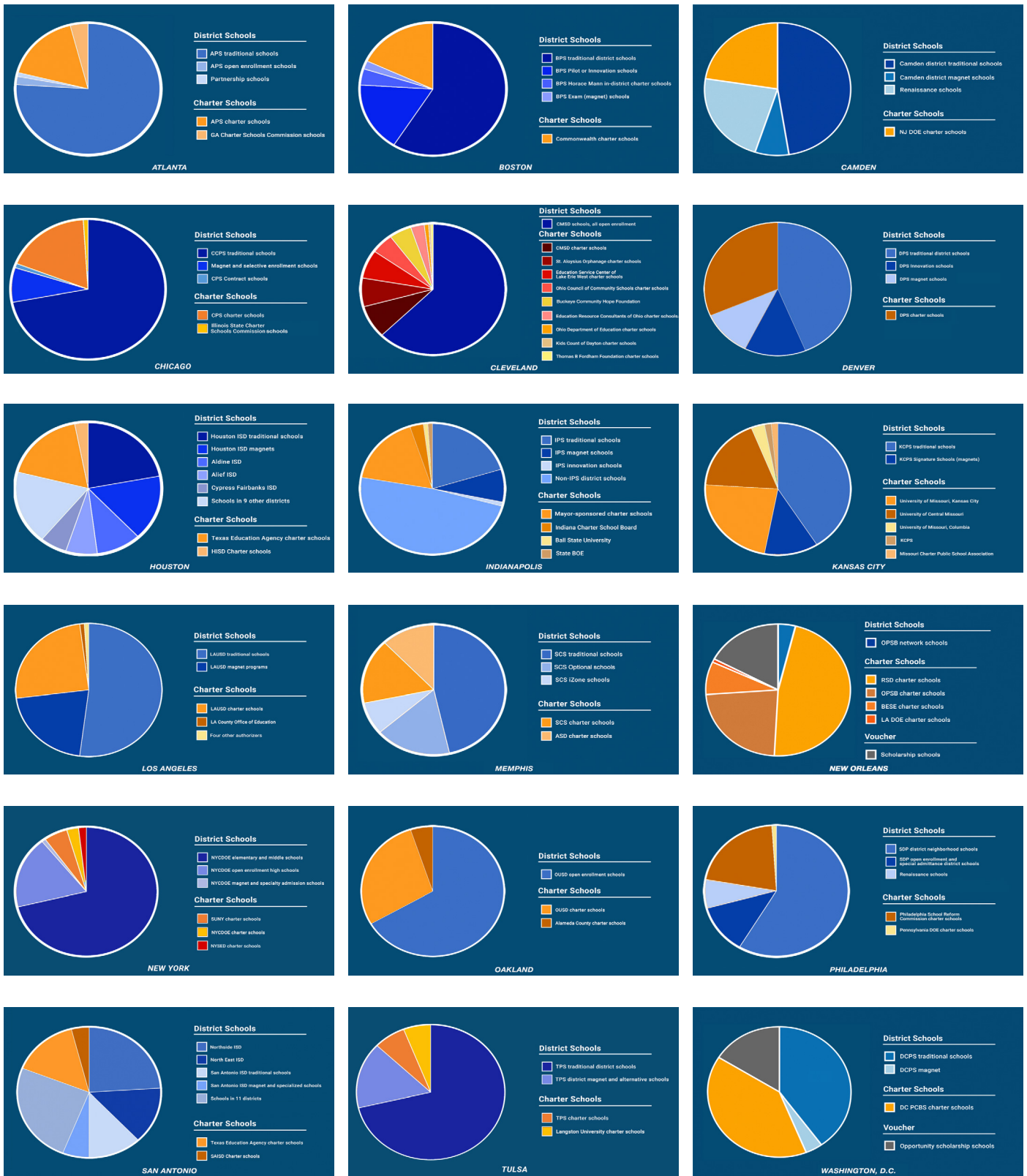
Source: School data from researcher analysis of public records, 2016-17.

APPENDIX B: INTERVIEWS AND PARENT SURVEY

Interviews

For each city, we conducted a 30- to 60-minute interview with representatives from the district and charter sectors. We also conducted two interviews with people who could speak about community and family experience with education in the city (Table 9).

Table 9. Types of Interviewees and Their Frequency

Sector represented	Type of interviewee	Number
District	Director of a district office in charge of school portfolio management or improving school quality†	15
	Director in Human Resources or Talent	9
	Other: Deputy Superintendent, Deputy Chief of Staff, Assistant to the Superintendent	4
	Director of Community Engagement	2
Charter	Director of a nonprofit organization that supports, oversees, or coordinates the charter sector, including regional offices of statewide charter school associations	7
	Director of an organization that improves the quality of schools citywide by making investments in talent, replicating quality schools, and/or coordinating efforts citywide	5
	Other: Director at an independent charter district, authorizing board, or research organization	4
	Director of a charter management organization	2
	Director in a District Charter Schools Office	2
Community	Director of an organization that helps families through the choice process	10
	Director at an education or parent advocacy organization	8
	Member of a regional community school board or a parent activist	8
	Director of a community-based organization that works with families, but education is only one part of its mission*	7
	Director of an organization that improves the quality of schools citywide by making investments in talent, replicating quality schools, and/or coordinating efforts citywide	2
		Total: 85

† *Examples include Portfolio Office, Office of Innovation and Improvement, Office of Planning, Office of Strategy and Performance Management, and Office of Improvement.*

* *This included organizations such as the Urban League, public library, community development organization, faith-based organization or coalition, and neighborhood planning unit.*

See our technical report, Scoring and Measures, available on our Stepping Up website, for more information and a copy of the interview protocol.

Parent Survey

The research firm Strategies 360 conducted a live telephone survey on behalf of the University of Washington Bothell's Center on Reinventing Public Education. A total of 3,208 interviews were conducted between March 4 and March 14, 2017, in eight cities (Cleveland, Denver, Detroit, Indianapolis, Memphis, New Orleans, Oakland, and Washington, D.C.). A minimum of 400 interviews were completed in each jurisdiction. This work builds on an earlier survey and study that CRPE conducted in 2014, *How Parents Experience Public School Choice*.

Respondents were randomly selected by telephone using a combination of landline and cell phone numbers. Landline respondents were randomly selected from a listed sample of adults in each city. Cell phone respondents were randomly selected from a random-digit dial sample of cell phones in each city. Spanish language translation was available in all cities. In order to participate, participants had to live in one of the eight selected cities and be either a parent or guardian of a student enrolled in a K-12 school.

The entire survey included background questions about the respondent and student (including information about the type of school the student attended), and 15 questions about each family's' experience with school choice and school quality. All survey results were weighted based on U. S. Census Bureau estimates for age, race, and educational attainment.

See our technical report, Scoring and Measures, available on our Stepping Up website, for more information about the parent survey and a copy of the protocol.

APPENDIX C: PARENT SURVEY RESULTS

The figures below are listed in the order they were asked of families, not in the order they were discussed in the report. For a full copy of the survey protocol and information about the survey respondents, see the technical report, Scoring and Measures, available on the Stepping Up website.

Figure 5. *Question 6: Does your child attend a school that she/he is assigned to based on your address?*

Percent of families whose children attend their assigned school
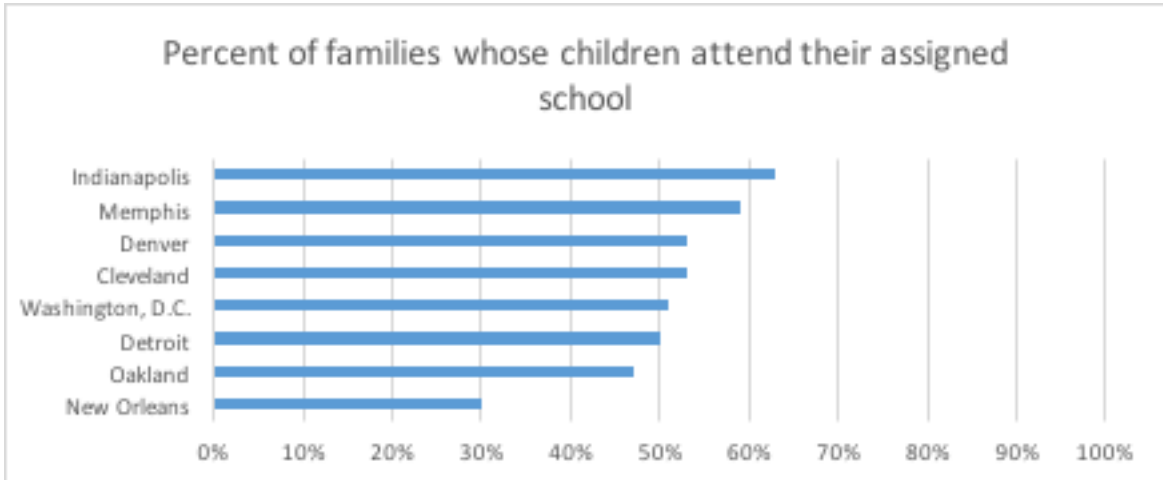
Notes: (1) Families answered yes or no (2). In this table, we included respondents who also sent children to a private school. Elsewhere in our analysis, we report the percent of public school families (those whose children are in a charter or district school) enrolling children in the assigned school.

Figure 6. *Question 10: Overall, how satisfied or dissatisfied are you with each of the following? You can say very satisfied, somewhat satisfied, somewhat dissatisfied, or very dissatisfied.*

Percent of families who reported being "very satisfied" with the school child attends
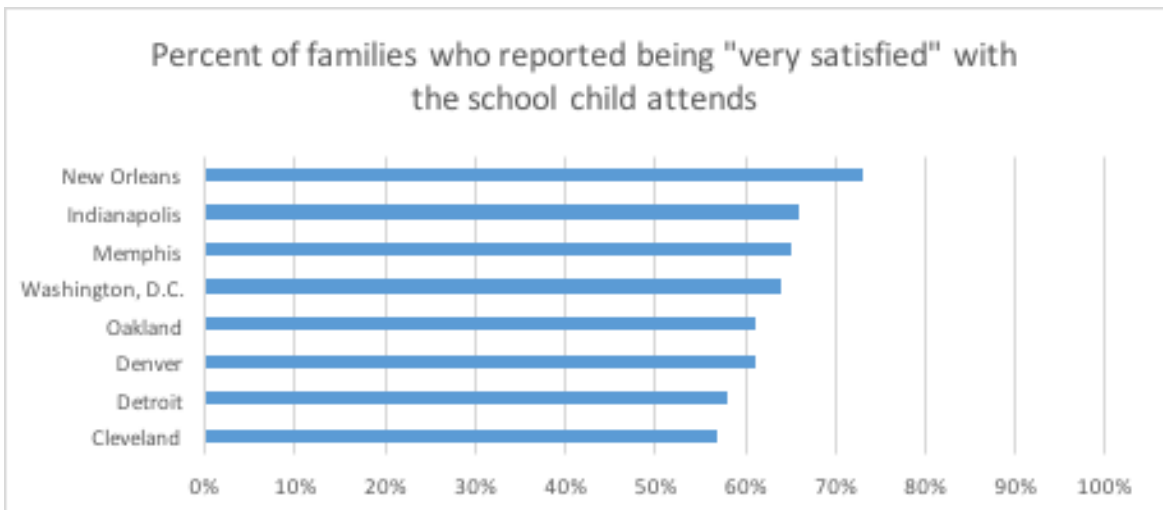
Figure 7. *Question 11: If your child couldn't attend his or her current school, is there another public school currently available to you that you'd be just as happy to send him or her to?*

Percent of families who say there is another public school currently available to them that they would be just as happy to send their child to

City	Percent
Denver	~50%
Memphis	~49%
Washington, D.C.	~46%
New Orleans	~44%
Indianapolis	~41%
Oakland	~39%
Detroit	~39%
Cleveland	~33%
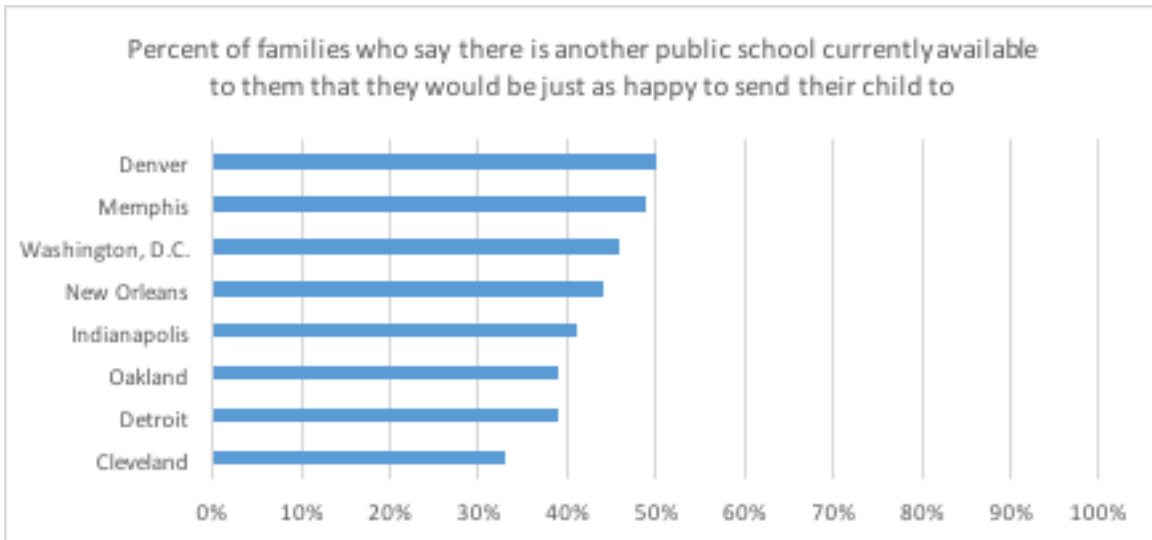
Note: Families answered yes or no.

Figure 8. *Question 13: How much do academic programs vary between schools in [CITY]? Do they vary a great deal, a fair amount, or some but not much?*

Percent of families who report there being a great deal of academic variety between schools

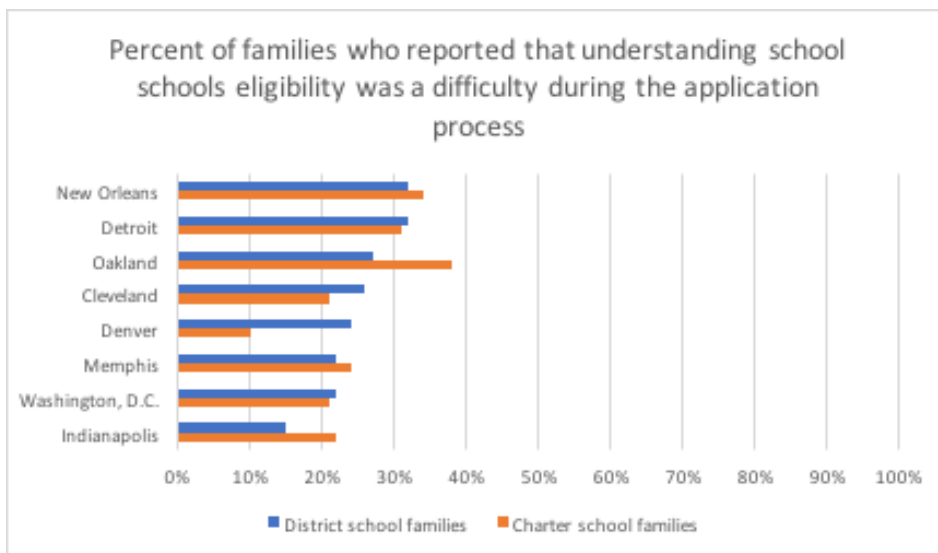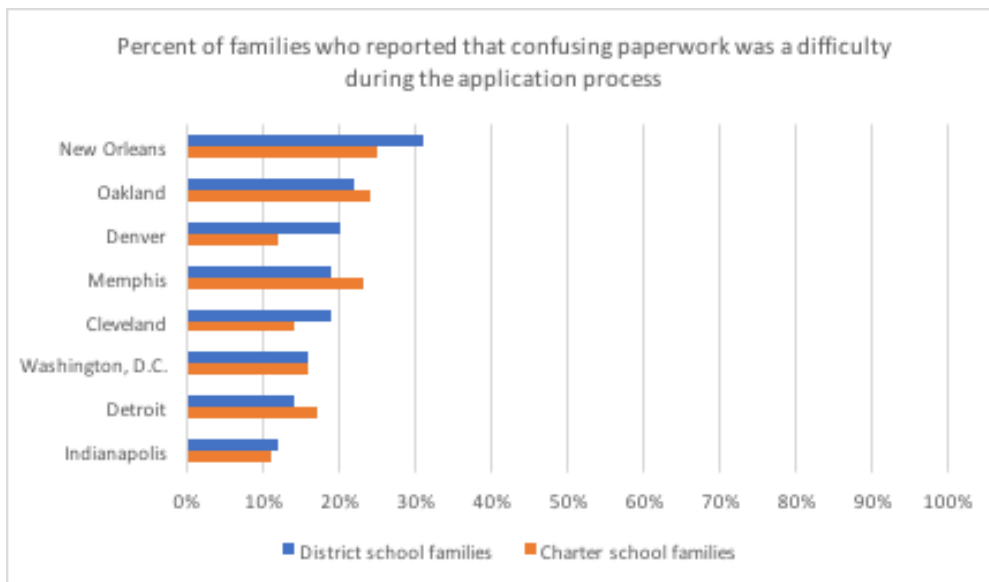| City	Percent
New Orleans	~63%
Memphis	~54%
Washington, D.C.	~50%
Oakland	~49%
Denver	~46%
Indianapolis	~45%
Cleveland	~44%
Detroit	~43%
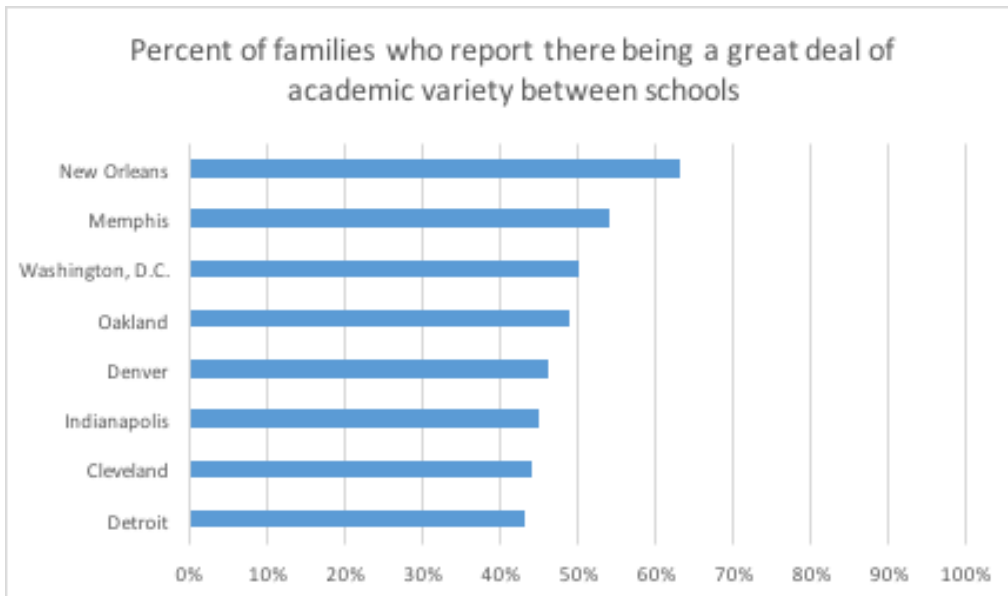
Figure 9. *Question 15: I'm going to read a list of things some parents find difficult about applying to schools. Please tell me if each one was difficult or not when you were applying to schools for your child. You can just say yes or no as I read them.*

Percent of families who reported difficulties during the application process
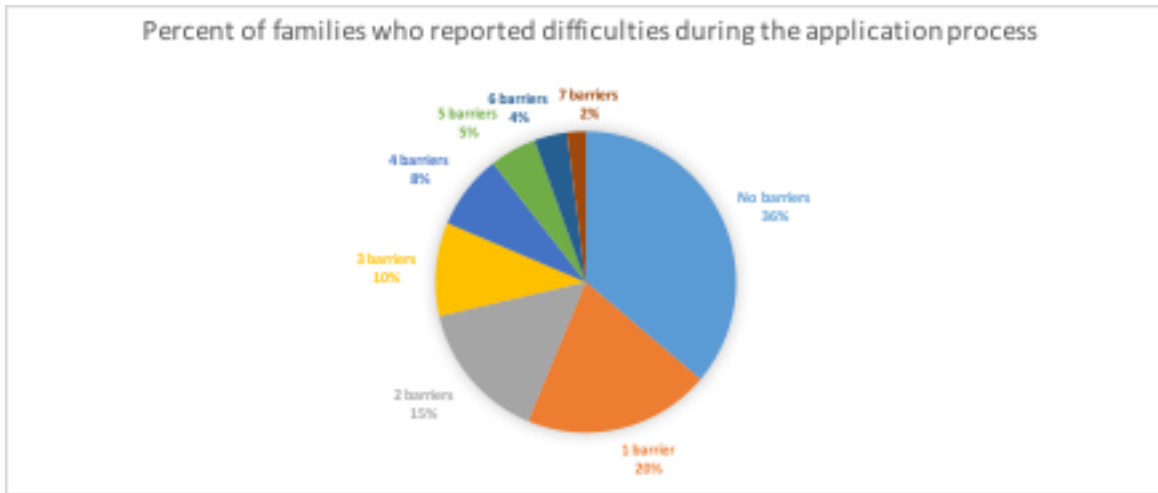
Note: This data only reflects public school family respondents (families with a student in a charter or district school)

Figures 10 through 16 report the barriers from question 15 by type of school that the families' child attends.
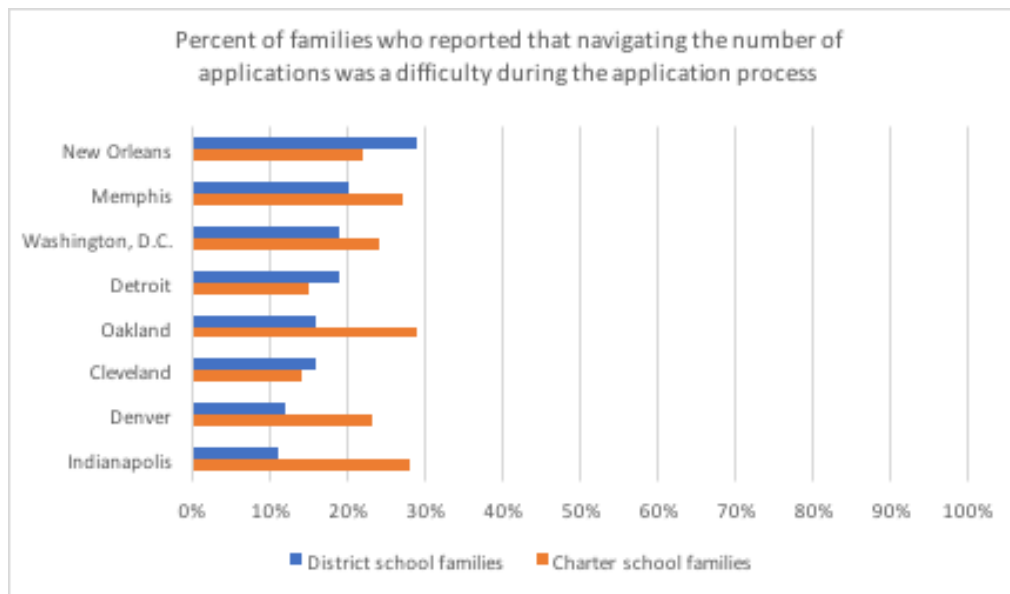
Figure 10. *Question 15: I'm going to read a list of things some parents find difficult about applying to schools. Please tell me if each one was difficult or not when you were applying to schools for your child. You can just say yes or no as I read them: Understanding which public schools your child was eligible to attend.*

Percent of families who reported that understanding school schools eligibility was a difficulty during the application process
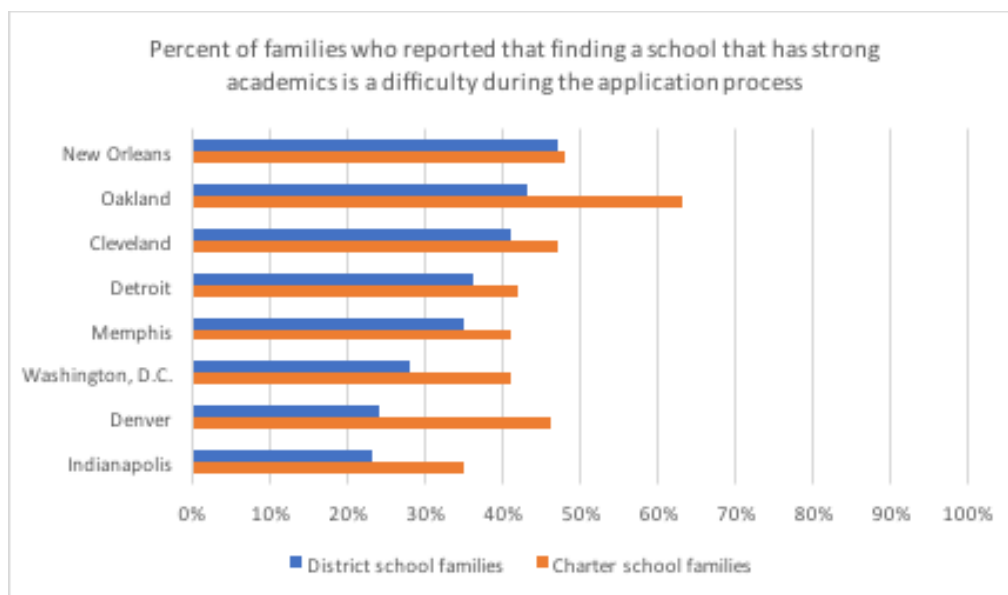
Figure 11. *Question 15: I'm going to read a list of things some parents find difficult about applying to schools. Please tell me if each one was difficult or not when you were applying to schools for your child. You can just say yes or no as I read them: Finding enough information about schools.*

Percent of families who reported that finding enough information was a difficulty during the application process
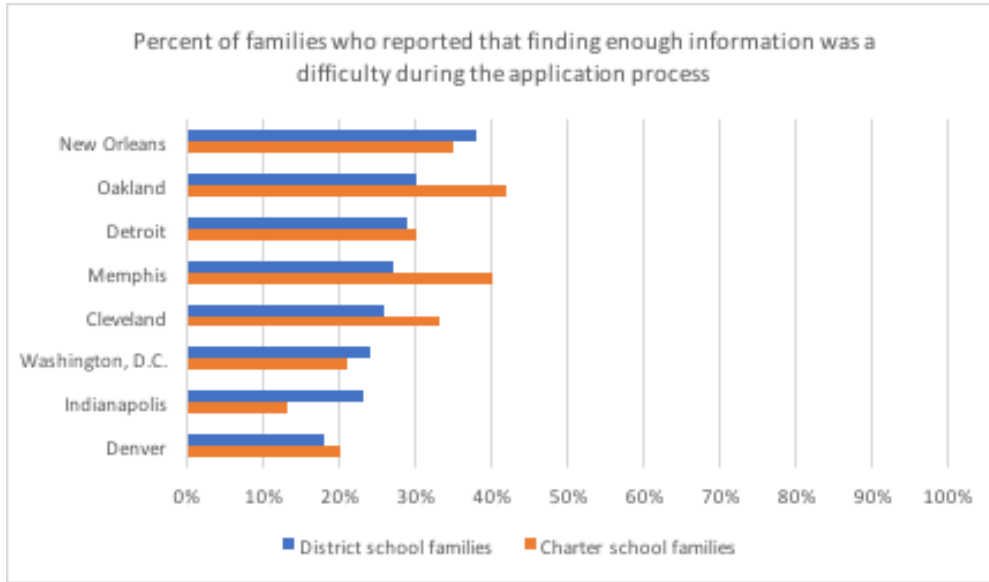
Figure 12. *Question 15: I'm going to read a list of things some parents find difficult about applying to schools. Please tell me if each one was difficult or not when you were applying to schools for your child. You can just say yes or no as I read them: The paperwork to complete applications was difficult or confusing.*

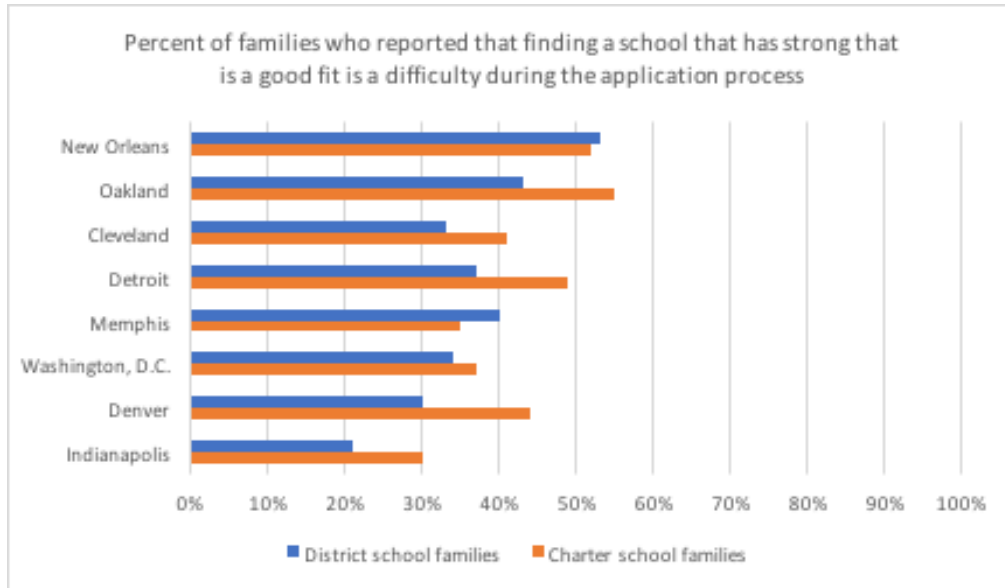Percent of families who reported that confusing paperwork was a difficulty during the application process

Figure 13. *Question 15: I'm going to read a list of things some parents find difficult about applying to schools. Please tell me if each one was difficult or not when you were applying to schools for your child. You can just say yes or no as I read them: Navigating the number of applications you had to complete.*

Figure 14. *Question 15: I'm going to read a list of things some parents find difficult about applying to schools. Please tell me if each one was difficult or not when you were applying to schools for your child. You can just say yes or no as I read them: Difficulty finding a school that has strong academics.*

Figure 15. *Question 15: I'm going to read a list of things some parents find difficult about applying to schools. Please tell me if each one was difficult or not when you were applying to schools for your child. You can just say yes or no as I read them: Difficulty finding a school that is a good fit for the child.*

Percent of families who reported that finding a school that has strong that is a good fit is a difficulty during the application process

Figure 16. *Question 15: I'm going to read a list of things some parents find difficult about applying to schools. Please tell me if each one was difficult or not when you were applying to schools for your child. You can just say yes or no as I read them: Difficulty finding transportation for your child to get to and from school.*

Percent of families who reported that finding transportation a difficulty during the application process
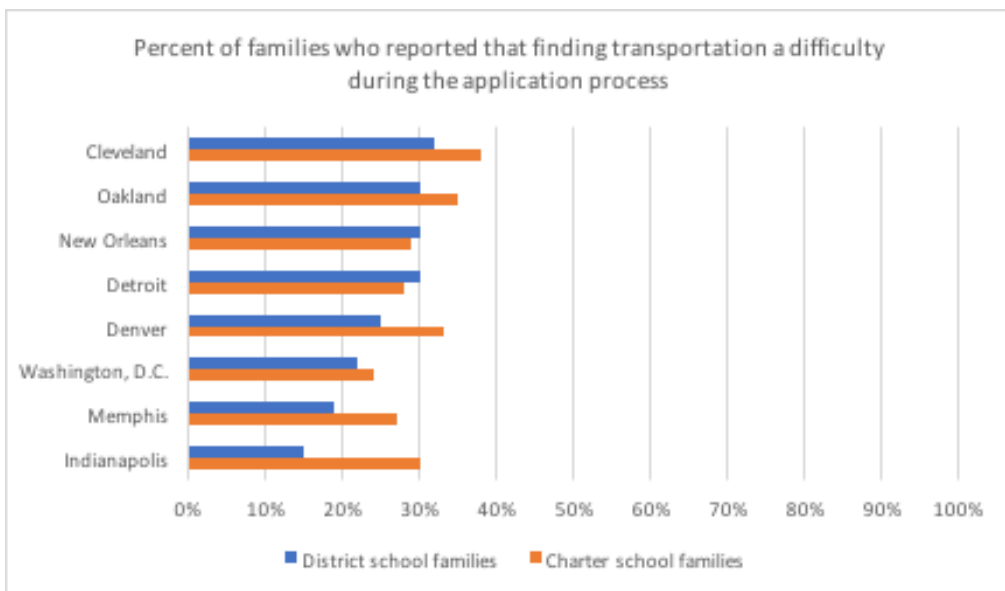
Figure 17. *Cross-tabs results of questions 13 and 15.*

Percent of families who say there is a great deal of variety in academic programs and who say they can't find a school that is a good fit
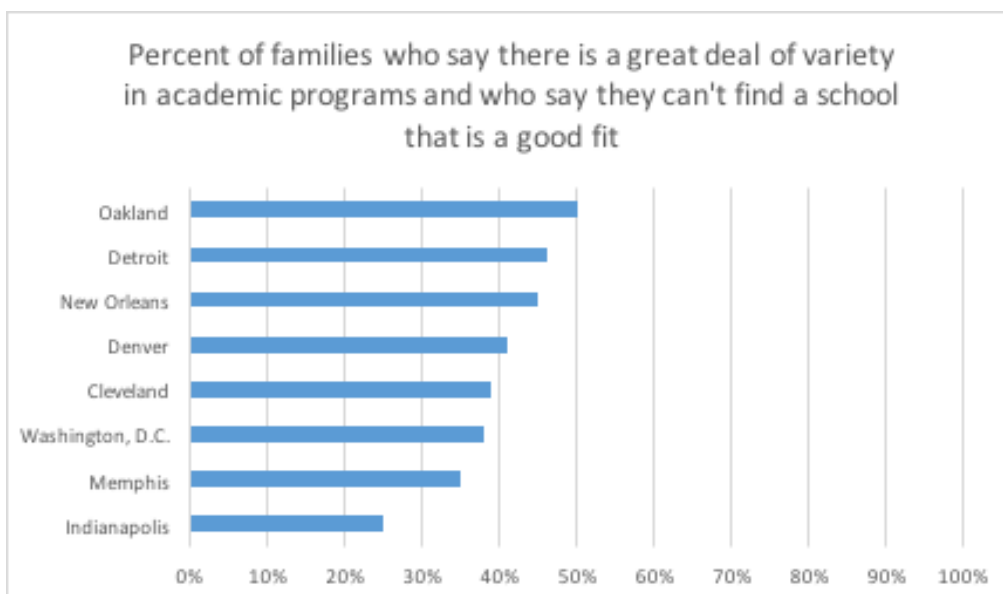
Figure 18. *Question 22: Which statement comes closest to your own view (rotate): Parents like me can do very little to make positive changes in my child's school/ Parents like me can do a lot to make positive changes in my child's school.*
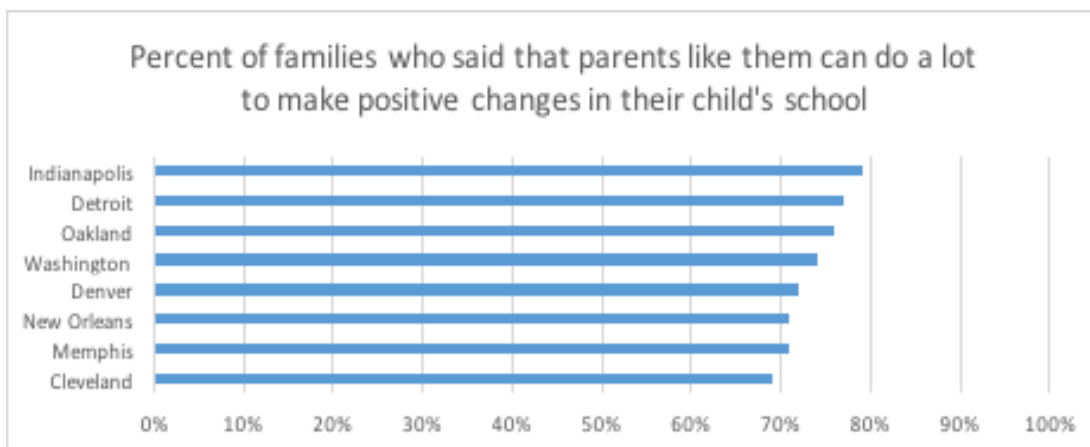

Percent of families who said that parents like them can do a lot to make positive changes in their child's school

Figure 19. *Question 23: Overall, would you say that public schools in [CITY] are getting better, getting worse, or staying the same?*

Percent of families who said that the public schools in the city are getting better
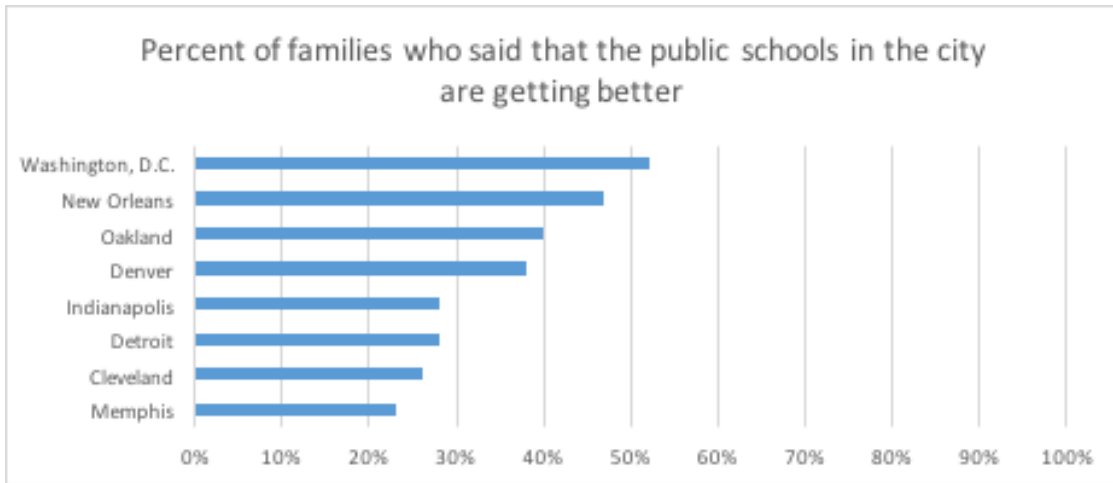
Figure 20. *Question 24: How much trust and confidence do you have in the city's public school system to make sure all neighborhoods have great schools? A great deal, fair amount, not very much, none at all, no opinion.*

Percent of families reporting they have a "great deal" of trust and confidence in the city's public school system to make sure all neighborhoods have great schools
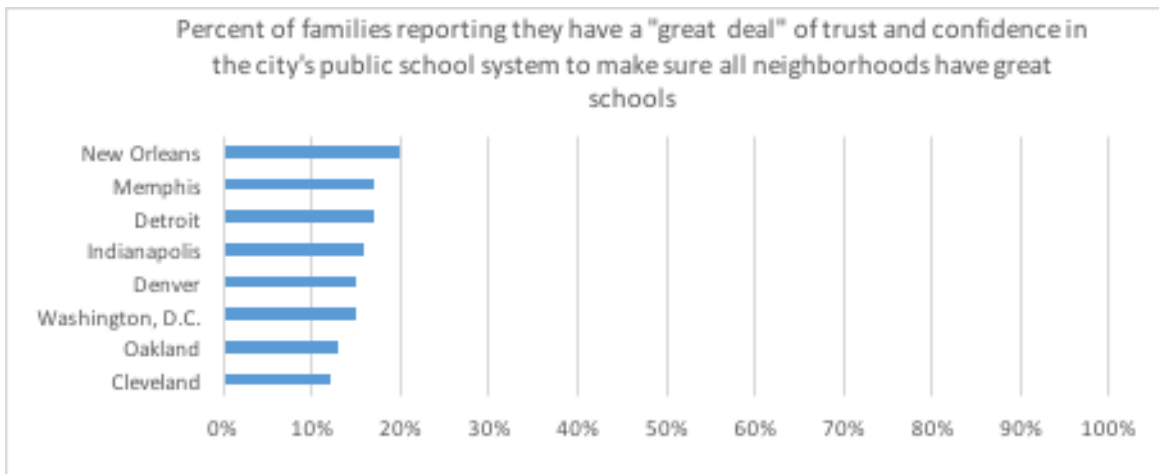
ABOUT THIS REPORT

Acknowledgments

About the Center on Reinventing Public Education

Through research and policy analysis, CRPE seeks ways to make public education more effective, especially for America's disadvantaged students. We help redesign governance, oversight, and dynamic education delivery systems to make it possible for great educators to do their best work with students and to create a wide range of high-quality public school options for families. Our work emphasizes evidence over posture and confronts hard truths. We search outside the traditional boundaries of public education to find pragmatic, equitable, and promising approaches to address the complex challenges facing public education. Our goal is to create new possibilities for the parents, educators, and public officials who strive to improve America's schools. CRPE is a nonpartisan, self-sustaining organization affiliated with the University of Washington Bothell. Our work is funded through philanthropy, federal grants, and contracts.

CRPE Quality Assurance Process

Independent peer review is an integral part of all CRPE research projects. Prior to publication, this document was subjected to a quality assurance process to ensure that: the problem is well formulated; the research approach is well designed and well executed; the data and assumptions are sound; the findings are useful and advance knowledge; the implications and recommendations follow logically from the findings and are explained thoroughly; the documentation is accurate, understandable, cogent, and balanced in tone; the research demonstrates understanding of related previous studies; and the research is relevant, objective, and independent. Peer review was conducted by research or policy professionals who were not members of the project team.