

**Buffalo Promise Neighborhood Parents and School Choice:
Who Stays, Who Leaves, and Why?**



Vanessa A. De Guia

Nathan T. Johnson

Vanderbilt University

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Executive Summary

Introduction

Buffalo Promise Neighborhood (BPN) is a neighborhood-based approach designed to fight poverty and create a pipeline of support for children and families from cradle to college and career. In April of 2009, President Obama honored his campaign to pledge to replicate the Harlem Children's Zone model by funding the creation of "Promise Neighborhoods" (PNs) in 20 communities across the country. He described PNs as "the first federal initiative to put education at the center of comprehensive efforts to fight poverty in urban and rural areas" (U.S. Department of Education, 2011).

While there is fairly widespread consensus concerning the disparities that exist for low-income children of color in regards to school quality and performance, the strategies put forward to address these inequalities remain a passionate source of debate. BPN provides the opportunity for community-based education reform as an approach to providing equitable educational opportunities and improving student and school performance in the historically underserved and under-resourced zip code 14215. As a new federal program, research on Promise Neighborhoods can

expand our understanding in which out-of-school factors such as intergenerational and concentrated neighborhood poverty, as well as efforts to mitigate the influence of such factors, may promote not only educational equity in distressed neighborhoods, but also improve student learning and achievement.

BPN's work is organized into four main components: early foundations, school transformation, college/career connections, and family/community engagement. The strategy is a framework for addressing the needs and problems through the delivery of services and a managed coalition of providers. Within the field of school transformation, BPN intends to turnaround three low performing schools in the neighborhood: Highgate Heights, Westminster Charter, and Bennett High School. BPN's plans to create a continuum of solutions include early learning through grade 12, college- and career-readiness, and family and community supports that aim to prepare all children in the neighborhood to attain an excellent education and successfully transition to college and career.

In September 2013, Buffalo Promise Neighborhood opened a Children's

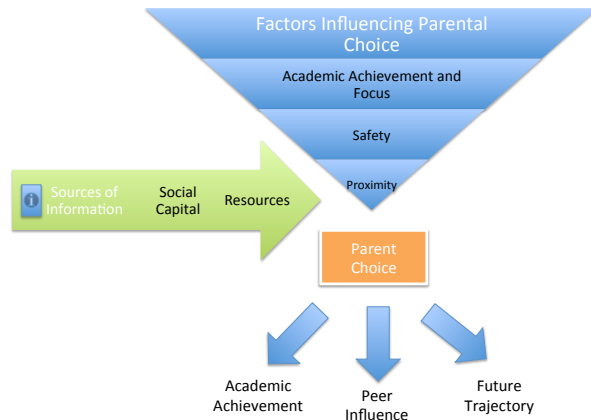
Academy that enrolls children ages 3 and 4 for high quality early learning, a safe nurturing environment, a literacy-enriched curriculum, and family and parent centered activities to support parent partnership and development to prepare children for kindergarten. If BPN children attend BPN Children’s Academy, go on to attend BPN K-8 Westminster Community Charter or Highgate Heights, and Bennett High School, they have the opportunity to access BPN resources from Pre-K through high school, which aims to provide a solid foundation for a successful academic career.

In order to address widespread issues of low academic performance across the city, Buffalo Public Schools district has implemented a school choice system. Buffalo residents are able to enter a lottery to potentially attend any public school in the district, theoretically providing many options for parents to choose.

Options leave parents with the need for knowledge that informs their decisions based on their priorities. Research is clear that parents most often value academics and safety in choosing a school (Teske, 2007; Smrekar, 2013). Parents must then navigate various sources of information, such as media, friends, and school visits to discern which schools provide for their priorities (Figure 1).

Buffalo Public Schools as a whole is under constant scrutiny as they face near ubiquitous concerns for low student achievement and safety. Their graduation

Figure 1: School Choice Conceptual Map



rate is 47% (NYSED, 2012). A rate under 50% implies that a child who grows up in Buffalo will more than likely not graduate from high school on time if at all. These pervasive challenges raise questions about the quality of school choices for parents. The long-term mitigation plan has been based on school choice. As Table 1 demonstrates, the vast majority of BPN residents are taking advantage of the school

Table 1: BPN Resident Enrollment in 2012

School Name	Total	Resident Students Enrolled	% Resident Students Enrolled	Non-Resident Students Enrolled	% Non-Resident Students Enrolled
Bennett	692	87	12.57%	605	87.43%
Highgate Heights	560	149	26.61%	411	73.39%
Westminster	548	198	36.13%	350	63.87%
Totals	1800	428	23.78%	1372	76.22%

Data Source: University of Buffalo, 2011

Figure 2: Map of Buffalo Promise Neighborhood



Data Source: BPN 2012

choice system and are leaving the neighborhood to attend school.

Based on the research literature on how parents choose and the concepts of school choice and social capital, we seek to gain a greater understanding of factors that influence BPN parent decision-making regarding school choice. Are parents choosing schools because they are proximally close, academically successful, and/or safe? What are reasons for their choices? What information are parents seeking to inform their choices? What are their sources of information and is the information accurate? Our study addresses these questions in order to better

understand why do parents choose BPN schools or opt out. The findings will help lay the groundwork for BPN to better understand how to enroll residents in BPN schools and increase their connections and subsequent impact on the community.

Summary of Findings

Who is Opting Out of BPN?

While over three-fourths of all students are leaving BPN to attend schools outside of the neighborhood, some students are leaving at a greater rate. We were able to analyze a data set of 2,749 entries of student

information that include the standardized test scores, race, gender and school for the 3rd- 8th grade students living in BPN from 2008-2013. The data showed that whites, hispanics, and asian students elect to not attend BPN schools more often than African-American students. Additionally, SPED students across 3rd to 8th grades leave more often.

We also collected 256 parent surveys across four elementary schools: one BPN public school (Highgate Heights), one BPN charter (Westminster), one non-BPN public (Gerald Jenkins), and one non-BPN charter (Excellence). The survey focused on factors that influence parent choice, sources of information, school satisfaction and awareness of BPN. According to the surveys, parents whose children attended the two non-BPN schools were significantly more likely to be “very satisfied” with their school. The survey results also revealed that “very satisfied” parents are more likely to recommend their school, which has direct implications for the project question; both the literature and the parent surveys show that word of mouth is the most prominent source that influences parental choice.

Social Networks

Parents rely on social networks comprised of peers, neighbors and coworkers to decide which schools to choose. When asked how they learned about their current school, parents nearly always mentioned “word of mouth.” These social networks prove most important when

considering the transition to high school. In order to better understand decision-making and parent choice, we interviewed 10 parents who chose BPN schools and 10 parents who opted out of BPN schools. All 10 interviewed parents who opted out of the BPN high school, Bennett, chose Westminster as their K-8 school and identified Tapestry or Hutchinson Tech as viable high school options because “that’s where Westminster kids go.” A sense of loyalty to BPN is absent, as well as an understanding that attending the BPN high school Bennett is a beneficial choice for students and their families.

Safety

All of the safety concerns voiced by parents relate to the transition from middle school to high school. Interviewed parents also opted out of Bennett due to the perception that Bennett is not a safe school. Overall, parents feel that the community and neighborhood is safe; however, all non-BPN high school parents referred to Bennett as “a school of last resort.” Eight parents who are also proud Bennett alumni shared their apprehension in sending their child to Bennett even though “it was once a great school. They have a long way to go, and right now it not an option for my child.”

Academic Quality

To determine the level of quality of the schools, parents rely on their social networks, the internet, and the general

reputation of the schools. Parents who opt out of BPN are aware of Westminster and Bennett's academic quality; however, nearly all parents were unaware of Highgate Heights. One parent said, "I haven't heard good or bad about Highgate, but since I don't hear anything, I don't think it's anything remarkable either." One BPN parent who will not choose Highgate Heights said, "A lot of the kids there don't take their education seriously. The kids have a low attention span, and there are distractions. They're not understanding that they have to fulfill a requirement to successfully pass." Parents are looking for high levels of personalization and academic rigor for their children. Academic quality and academic focus are clearly the most important factors for parents choosing a school. According to the survey, parents are generally satisfied with their choice: 57% of parents who said Academic Quality is the most important factor are very satisfied and 24% are somewhat satisfied with their school. Fifty-two percent of parents who said Academic Focus is the most important are very satisfied and 29% are somewhat satisfied with their school. In each school where 20 or more BPN residents attend, the mean achievement scores fail to meet proficiency benchmarks, which raises the question why are parents satisfied? Besides few exceptions, schools outside of BPN are not performing better than BPN schools, and neither are students who leave the neighborhood outperforming those who stay.

BPN Awareness

Parents who choose BPN schools and are not active community members in the BPN zip code do not consider BPN a factor in their school choice decision-making. Nearly all parents who opted out of BPN schools have never heard of BPN. BPN was not a factor in their non-BPN school choice. 5 parents acknowledged the billboard above the Children's Academy, but weren't sure what BPN's role was in the neighborhood. Only one out of 256 surveyed parents said that BPN was the main factor in choosing a school. However, 14 out of the 15 parents chose BPN schools when citing BPN as a source of information in the parent survey.

Who is choosing BPN?

During the interviews, no parents who live in BPN cited BPN as the reason why they chose Westminster, Highgate, or Bennett for their children, nor did they cite BPN as the reason why they opted out of Westminster, Highgate, or Bennett. Parents generally do not perceive Westminster, Highgate, or Bennett as "BPN schools"; instead, they either view them as schools with BPN services, or are unaware that they are BPN schools at all.

Interviewed parents from Highgate Heights and Westminster cited proximity to home, discipline at school, and uniform policy as the most important reasons why they picked BPN schools. It is interesting to note that the majority of parents who chose Highgate Heights were not aware that Highgate is a BPN school.

The survey data showed that parents with a college or postgraduate degree are more likely to send their child to Westminster than the other 3 schools in the parent survey. Additionally, the parents who prioritized the size of a school as a factor in their choice were more likely to select a BPN school. Also, parents who depended on BPN as an information source were more likely to choose a BPN school.

Social Networks

Parents who have chosen BPN schools, particularly Westminster, cite the school community as the reason why they continue to choose their school. 100% of Westminster parents we interviewed believe in the power of parent engagement to make Westminster a high-performing school again. In fact, one parent pulled her children from Westminster when the long-standing principal left, but decided to bring her children back after talking to her neighbor about Westminster's community. She said, "After pulling my kids from Westminster, my neighbor kept her kids in there all the way through, and she kept saying it changed. It got better- the things that they were doing. That's why I brought them back."

BPN Awareness

Parents who choose BPN schools and are active in BPN community activities believe in BPN's power to transform the 14215 zipcode, and want to be a positive contributor to the change. Sixty-two percent of parents who noted on the survey that they have benefitted from BPN programs say that BPN is a very important factor in school choice. A parent with a child in Children's Academy, another child at Highgate Heights, and is also participating in the Parent Achievement Zone (PAZ) said, "They are doing very excellent for its first year. Everyone is very welcoming. They know each and every child in their school. I do think that when it's time for my child to go to Bennett, it will be a great school." This parent is invested in BPN and trusts that BPN has the capacity to make Bennett a great school for her children.

Overall, parents are not aware of the extensive role Buffalo Promise Neighborhood plays in BPN schools. Parents who are not civically engaged in community work and have chosen non-BPN have very little understanding of BPN and are unaware of the benefits of choosing a BPN school. They are neither satisfied nor unsatisfied with BPN. When asked about

"After pulling my kids from [BPN School], my neighbor kept her kids in there all the way through, and she kept saying it changed. It got better- the things they were doing. That's why I brought them back." -BPN Parent

general BPN satisfaction, parents often say they don't know about BPN; in fact, when they talk BPN schools, they do not consider the schools BPN schools. Instead, they consider them neighborhood schools that happen to get extra funding from BPN. Aside from parents who have children in the Children's Academy, most parents do not consider Westminster and Highgate Heights pipelines to Bennett High School. Parents who are actively participating in BPN community activities know that a lot of money is invested in the BPN zipcode; however, most are not well-versed in BPN's value-add to 14215 and consequently unable to thoroughly explain to a friend or family member why enrolling at Westminster, Highgate, or Bennett is better choice than non-BPN schools because they are BPN schools.

“They are doing very excellent for its first year. Everyone is very welcoming. They know each and every child in their school. I do think that when it’s time for my child to go to [BPN High School], it will be a great school.” - BPN Parent

Recommendations

BPN remains focused on initiatives to improve student outcomes and redevelop the community. The following

recommendations may enhance their efforts in attaining said objectives:

Create a BPN Parent Ambassadors Program

- “Word of mouth” is the most influential informational source on parent choice. Therefore, BPN should identify and empower parent ambassadors to reach their social networks on behalf of the organization. BPN needs to identify parents who are “very satisfied” with the schools, then thoroughly train them on all of BPN’s programs, and then equip them to represent BPN in formal and informal settings. These parents should facilitate school tours since 40% of the surveyed parents identified school visits as a source of information in making their decision, and they also value the recommendations of people in their social networks more than information from school officials.

Boost the BPN Brand

- Since most residents are unfamiliar with the scope of BPN’s services, both public and personal strategies should be created to provide more information to all residents. Strategies to increase branding should focus on increasing BPN’s presence in BPN schools and increasing frequency of BPN-sponsored community events on Highgate Heights and Bennett campuses. The events should clearly focus on imparting the mission of BPN, cultivating the culture, and celebrating the

accomplishments- creating a brand based on the PreK-12 pipeline of BPN schools, where parents do not just enroll in a school, but enroll in BPN. Most of BPN's staff should attend these events, as well as the schools' leadership and faculties. Because symbolism is so important in developing a culture, there should be training provided on Bolman and Deal's four-frame approach (2013), where BPN staff, school leaders, and teachers couch structural initiatives within the context of caring for and empowering stakeholders, while cultivating and celebrating the culture and achievements across all four campuses.

Improve Parent Perception of Academic Quality and School Safety

- Ultimately, parents are looking for strong academic programs and curricular themes. BPN should intentionally address both parental perceptions as well as academic practices. Perceptions can be addressed through publicly promoting academic and safety success stories. The schools also need to continue to connect past alumni to the students through creating a hall of fame, and then mobilizing these parents as speakers and mentors at each of the four schools.

Principles should ensure their current academic initiatives align with Murphy's (2012) compilation of the 11 best practices

for closing the achievement gap. Such practices include regular professional development and evaluation on culturally responsive teaching, as well as intentionally limiting the size of classrooms and schools to increase personalization. Thirdly, Bennett needs to recalibrate their DNA on the Law magnet theme by establishing supports to empower and mobilize students through civic engagement and social justice issues throughout the BPN neighborhood and schools.

Definition of the Issue and Project Questions

The Buffalo Promise Neighborhood initiative seeks to leverage community strengths and tackle poverty with a "cradle-to-career" continuum of supports for schoolchildren, from quality early childhood education and academic reform to improved community health and effective parenting skills. Sponsored by a broad network of community partners including M&T Bank, the effort is part of the federal "Promise Neighborhoods" program modeled after the Harlem Children's Zone and its highly successful "pipeline of services" approach to combatting poverty. Their program theory requires that students living in the BPN footprint enroll at BPN schools so BPN families can benefit from BPN services. Through this pipeline of services, the neighborhood becomes more cohesive,

economically revitalized, and schools are high achieving.

A primary obstacle for BPN's plan to improve the quality of life for school age children living, however, is that 80% of students residing in BPN choose to attend schools outside of the neighborhood. If students do not attend BPN schools, then BPN's exposure and reach in to the community is substantially limited. If neighborhood parents would send their children to BPN schools, then more BPN families would benefit from BPN services. We aim to gain greater understanding of the factors that parents consider when choosing a school for their children.

We focused on several key questions regarding parents living in the BPN footprint and their process in choosing schools for their children:

- Why do parents choose or opt out of BPN Schools?
- What factors explain these patterns?
- What are the implications for BPN?

The information explored in this study provides BPN with the patterns and trends of those students who choose BPN and who opt out of BPN. The findings also provide BPN with the information needed to determine leverage points and implement strategies to support Westminster, Highgate Heights, and Bennett High School in enrolling and retaining neighborhood

children in their schools.

Background and Context

As we answer the question of why BPN parents choose or opt out of BPN schools, we begin by first examining the historical and greater Buffalo context to understand the dynamic of school choice and its relationship to demographics in terms of movement and academic achievement. We investigate the historical evolution of school choice in Buffalo, formed by both national and local policy as well as local reaction via media and migration. We then define the current status of demographics in Buffalo and the composition of public schools and then compare them with the BPN neighborhood and schools.

History of School Choice in Buffalo

In Buffalo in 1865, a former runaway slave from Virginia, Henry Moxley, organized the transfer for 18 African American children from an all black school to a white neighborhood school in Buffalo.

Despite encountering heavy resistance, he enrolled the children into an all white school. Shortly after admitting the students, each child was forcibly expelled from the school, including Moxley's two children. Efforts towards integration were quelled. In accordance with the 1896 Supreme Court ruling *Plessy v. Ferguson*,

Buffalo schools remained segregated. Even after the mandate for integration half a century later in the 1954 Supreme Court ruling, *Brown v. Board of Education Topeka, Kansas*, Buffalo proved recalcitrant to change. Buffalo refused to be integrated, and there remains resistance to the current day, although expressed differently than in 1865 when students were grabbed and forced out to the street, locking the doors behind them.

During the subsequent twenty years after *Brown v. Board of Education*, Buffalo public schools consistently disregarded organized efforts, threats, and rulings aimed at integration. In 1962, the NAACP unsuccessfully sued the Buffalo school board for failing to implement *Brown v. Board of Education*. In 1963, the New York state commissioner declared Buffalo as a highly segregated city and demanded a voluntary transfer plan based on space availability. In response, white schools ensured there were no student openings, making the ruling inert. In 1967, the US Civil Rights commission identified Buffalo as one of the top five most segregated cities in the north. In response, the state commissioner required a plan for total integration. Yet, Buffalo did not enact a plan. Dissatisfied with the national lethargy to integration, the 1968 Supreme Court case, *Green v. County School Board of New Kent County*, required integration along with equality of facilities, transportation and extra curricular activities. Where these "Green" factors had substantial impact in southern

schools and some northern cities, Buffalo remained intractable. Additionally, in 1972 the state legislature outlawed busing as an integration strategy.

Changes began in Buffalo Public Schools following a 1976 ruling by Federal Judge Curtin that required an immediate dissolution to intentional segregation. The school board focused on a three-phased, five year plan to close black schools, add magnets and implement vast busing initiatives of white and black students so that no school would have more than 65% and nor less than 30% minority students. The magnet solution created a system of controlled choice where parents were enfranchised with a voice on where to send their children, while also empowering the district to control placement in order to attain desired demographic ratios. The circuit court upheld the use of magnet schools to remedy segregation in *Morgan v. Kerrigan* 1975. The federal government also began to support magnet school initiatives in programs, initially through an amendment to the Emergency School Aid Act (ESAA) in 1976 and then in 1984 with the Magnet School Assistance Program (MSAP). Buffalo was able to acquire some of the federal government's largest grants to support their costly vision of using choice to support integration.

Within a decade, Buffalo's reputation transformed to a progressive model for all cities seeking successful integration. In 1985 the NY Times published the article, "School

Integration in Buffalo is Hailed as a Model for U.S.” The article cites the massive investment of local and federal funds concomitant with the mobilization of parent and community voices to create magnet schools that produced excellent choices while simultaneously integrating schools. According to the article, the average 3rd grade math test scores increased from 45 percentile to 69 percentile among NY schools in just five years after the court order. The article also praises the magnet system for preventing the white flight that occurred in many other northern cities when they enforced school integration. Buffalo’s model was based on the distributive theory where the involvement of parental freedom to choose creates a smoother transition to integrated schools, which is compared to the corrective theory which forces social justice without calculating parental reactions (Gewirtz, 1986). In 1998, educational researcher Steven Taylor praised Buffalo’s strategic integration as a “best case scenario” in comparison to Boston’s desegregation initiatives.

In the 1990’s two Supreme Court decisions, *Oklahoma City v. Dowell* (1990) and *Freeman v. Pitts* (1992), effectively reversed *Green v. County School Board of New Kent County* (1968) and set the stage to overturn Judge Curtin’s court order for integration. Districts were expected to claim unitary status, claiming that they have “in good faith” effectively integrated the schools, and any policies aimed at tailoring

demographic ratios must prove to be a compelling interest for the state without causing undo burden to schools (i.e. requiring underprivileged students to attend a wealthier school would create such a burden). In compliance with the new rulings and acknowledgement of successful integration, Federal Judge Curtin declared unitary status for Buffalo in 1995.

Despite declaring unitary status, Buffalo has continued a school choice system where all students are required to request school preferences by turning in a physical form to the district office. Students who do not register their request are placed according to space availabilities. To support the choice system, the district annually invests over \$50,000,000 in massive busing initiatives. Magnet schools, however suffered after unitary statuses. Federal funding for magnets waned, yet were recently reinitiated in 2010. Subsequently, since the declaration of unitary status, the percentage of white students to black students in Buffalo Public Schools decreased 14% between 1991 and 2003 (Orfield & Lee, 2006).

Demographic Depiction

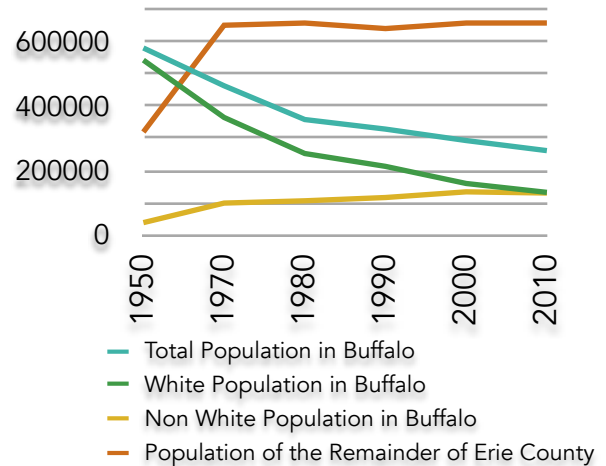
Although media and scholarly claims, as well as Judge Curtin’s declaration that Buffalo schools were successfully integrated while simultaneously improving achievement and avoiding white flight, time tells a different tale. While current demographics are partially impacted by the unitary status that revoked court-ordered desegregation,

the long-term trends indicate demographics began shifting after the commencement of integration.

Since 1950 the population of Buffalo has been cut in half (Figure 3). Similar to other Rust Belt cities, including Western New York cities Rochester and Syracuse, Buffalo has experienced an economic stagnation due to the loss of steel production to overseas manufacturers, stymieing in-migration, leaving an aging population and causing a net population loss (Figure 4). Buffalo is consistently one of the cities with the lowest in-migration (Kupczyk, 2010).

One theory assumes that people have migrated away from Buffalo mainly due to the steel industry closures. One local press release in 2007 explains that there has not been a brain drain of educated workers leaving Erie county, but the population decrease has been caused by the lack of in migration among the working class (Krawczyk & Williams, 2007). Statistics add more to the story. The population of Erie country has inversely risen as the Buffalo’s population has decreased. Erie’s population has grown from 319,106 residents in 1950 to 657,730 residents in 2010, whereas Buffalo has decreased from 580,132 in 1950 to 261,310 in 2010 (DiSalvo, 2003, Figure 2). Similarly, the decrease in Buffalo population is caused by the departure of whites, since the number of all other races has grown since 1950. According to the 1950 census, 542,432 of the 580,132 residents (93.5%) in Buffalo were white. The white population has decreased

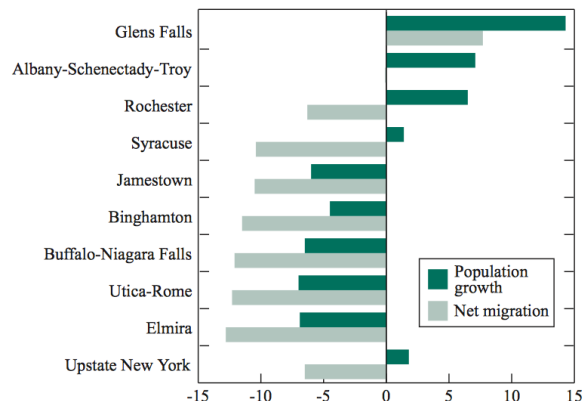
Figure 3: Buffalo Population Trends 1950-2010



Data Source: DiSalvo, 2003; U.S. Census Bureau, Decennial Census, 2010

by 410,732 residents, leaving only 131,700 white people in Buffalo. Based on these statistics, it becomes clear that white families have left the city for the surrounding suburbs in Erie County, which demonstrates that Buffalo indeed suffered the white flight phenomenon. The 2010 census reported that whites make up 90.4% of the population in Buffalo suburbs. Despite the praise of

Figure 4: Population Growth and Net Migration 1980-2010



Data Source: Deitz, 2005 (Federal Reserve Bank of New York)

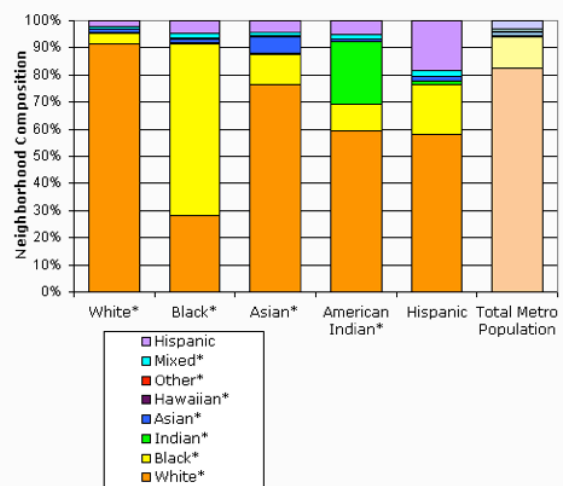
media and declaration by Judge Curtin that the schools were successfully integrated without undergoing white flight, the trends represented in Figure 3 show that white flight steadily occurred from 1950-1990 while mildly tapering off after the declaration of unitary status in the 1990's.

One report showed that in the 1960's 94.4% of non-whites lived in 12 of the 75 census tracts (Warshauer & Dentler, 1970). In 1967 Buffalo was reported as one of the top five most segregated cities in the nation. By employing the Exposure Indices for Race and Ethnic Groups (EIREG), which measures racial composition at the neighborhood levels, Buffalo is the 6th most segregated city in the nation according to the 2010 census data. The overall exposure index for Buffalo is 82.5% (Figure 5) , since the average white family lives in neighborhoods where over 90% households are white (Frey & Meyers, 2001). In short, the city has not effectively tackled segregation, and the tributes in the mid 1980's were not simply myopic, they were misinformed. The blame cannot be shifted to the unitary status decision, because the white flight has actually lessened since the 1990s.

The movement of whites outside of the city, resulting in residential segregation, has changed the demographics of the Buffalo Public Schools District. In the last decade from 2001 to 2011, BPS enrollment has dropped by almost one-third from 45,721 to 31,518 total enrollment (Thomas, 2012). By 2011 the white population in the

district had decreased to 22.0% (NYSED, 2012). In 1940 whites composed 96.3% of Buffalo Public schools. In 1950 whites made up 92.% of BPS enrollment and then it sharply shifted to 80.8% in 1960, and then 61% in 1970 (Dentler & Warshauer, 1967; Taylor, 1998). While 50% of the 261,310 residents in Buffalo are white, only 22% of BPS students are white. One explanation for this discrepancy is many white students are attending private schools; over 25,187 students in the greater Buffalo area attend private schools (NYSED, 2013). This white flight from schools is reflected in the larger extant literature soon after the initiation of integration measures. Rossel and Crain (1973) reported that white families began to leave schools at large rates when the school

Figure 5: Exposure Indices for Race and Ethnic Groups in Buffalo



Data Source: Frey & Meyers, 2001; Social Science Data Analysis Network. Created at www.censusscope.org.

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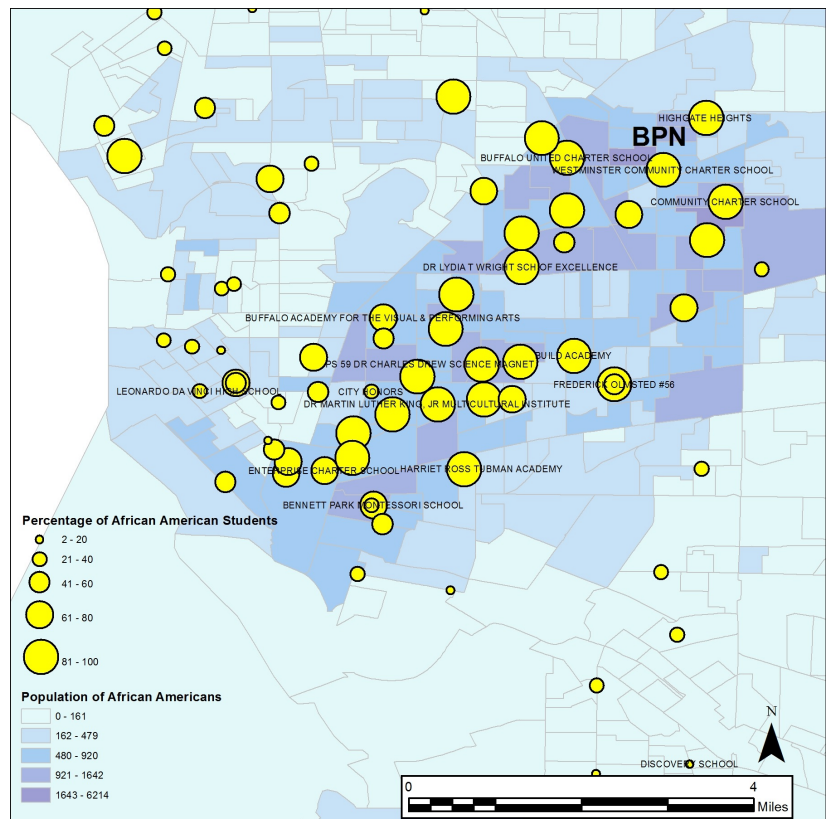
reached the tipping point of 40% minority student population.

Researchers have recently utilized GIS mapping for highlighting the intersection of demographic and housing trends in various education policy contexts (Siegel-Hawley, 2013), and for unpacking linkages and policy implications of transportation routes, demography, and economic development (Tate, 2008). The GIS map (Figure 6) demonstrates the concentration of the African American population within the city in contrast to the surrounding suburbs. The map also shows that the school demographics reflect the residential segregation in the urban/suburban divide with few exceptions for selective magnet schools (e.g. Frederick Olmstead #56, City Honors, and Leonardo Da Vinci).

There is an inverse relationship between black and white populations, and as the black population decreases in the suburbs, the white population increases. The following GIS map (Figure 7), captures the same geography but denotes socioeconomic status through median household income. The overlap of race and socioeconomic status in the two maps reflects the frequently occurring reality that there is a high correlation between minority races and poverty.

Figures 7 and 8 also demonstrate the consequent reality that high concentrations of minorities and poverty normally result in low student achievement (Coleman, 1988). The map identifies achievement according to the raw score conversions to whether the average 8th grader did not meet proficiency requirements, nearly meets the requirements, meets the requirements, and exceeds the requirements. In 8th grade ELA the raw score conversions were 100-282= does not meet, 284-316= nearly meets; 319-339= meets; 343-417= exceeds). In 8th grade Math the raw score conversions were

Figure 6: Percentage of African American Students in Buffalo



Data Source: U.S. Census Bureau, NCES

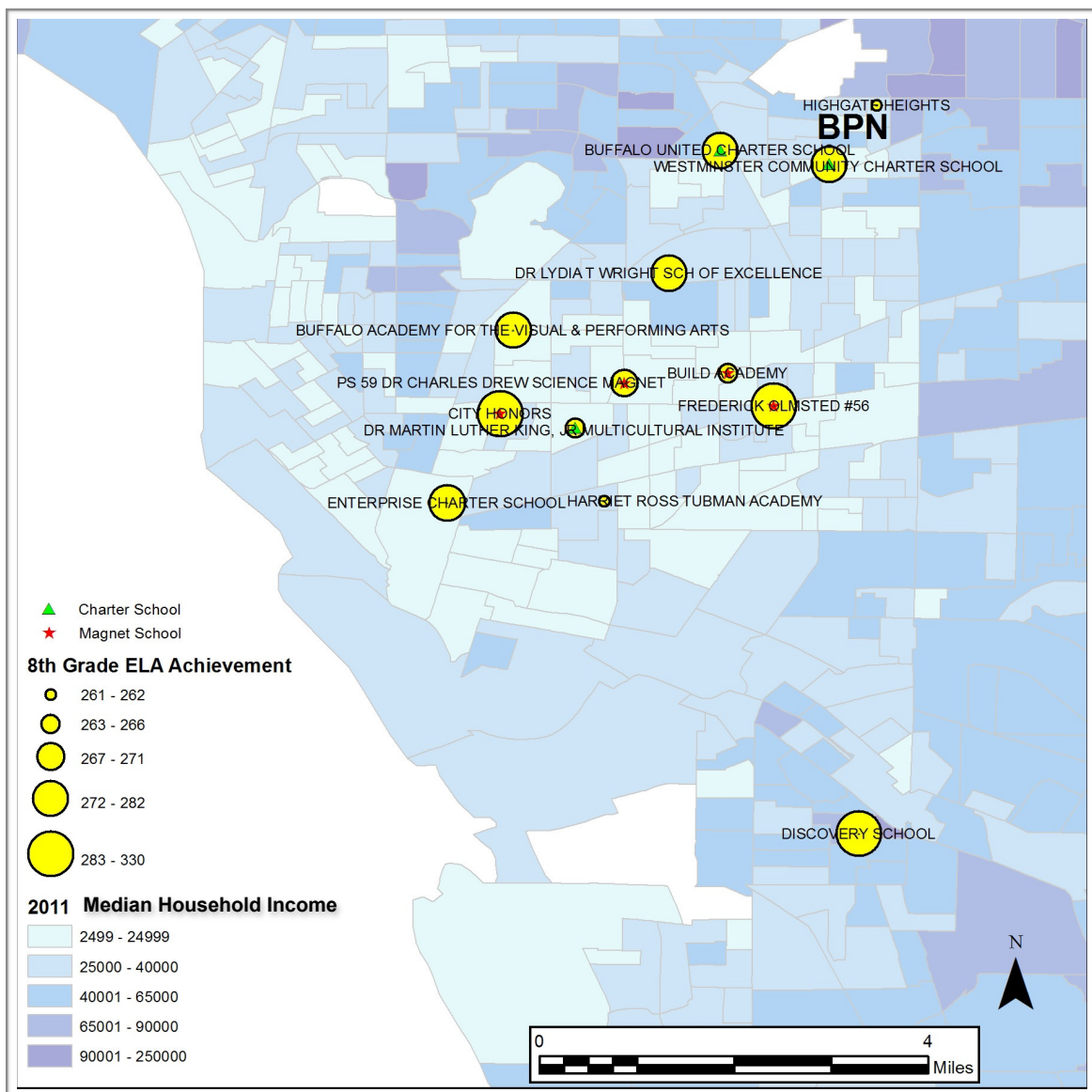
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119-284= does not meet; 287-320= nearly meets; 322-346= meets; 349-403= exceeds. The schools on the map reflect the most popular schools that BPN students attend plus two selective criteria magnets (City Honors and Frederick Olmstead #56). Understanding these conversions, it is clear that BPN students are attending schools that are in poorer, minority neighborhoods, where

students are underperforming. These maps demonstrate that unless a student is selected into a high performing magnet, they have no other options for higher performing schools in the district.

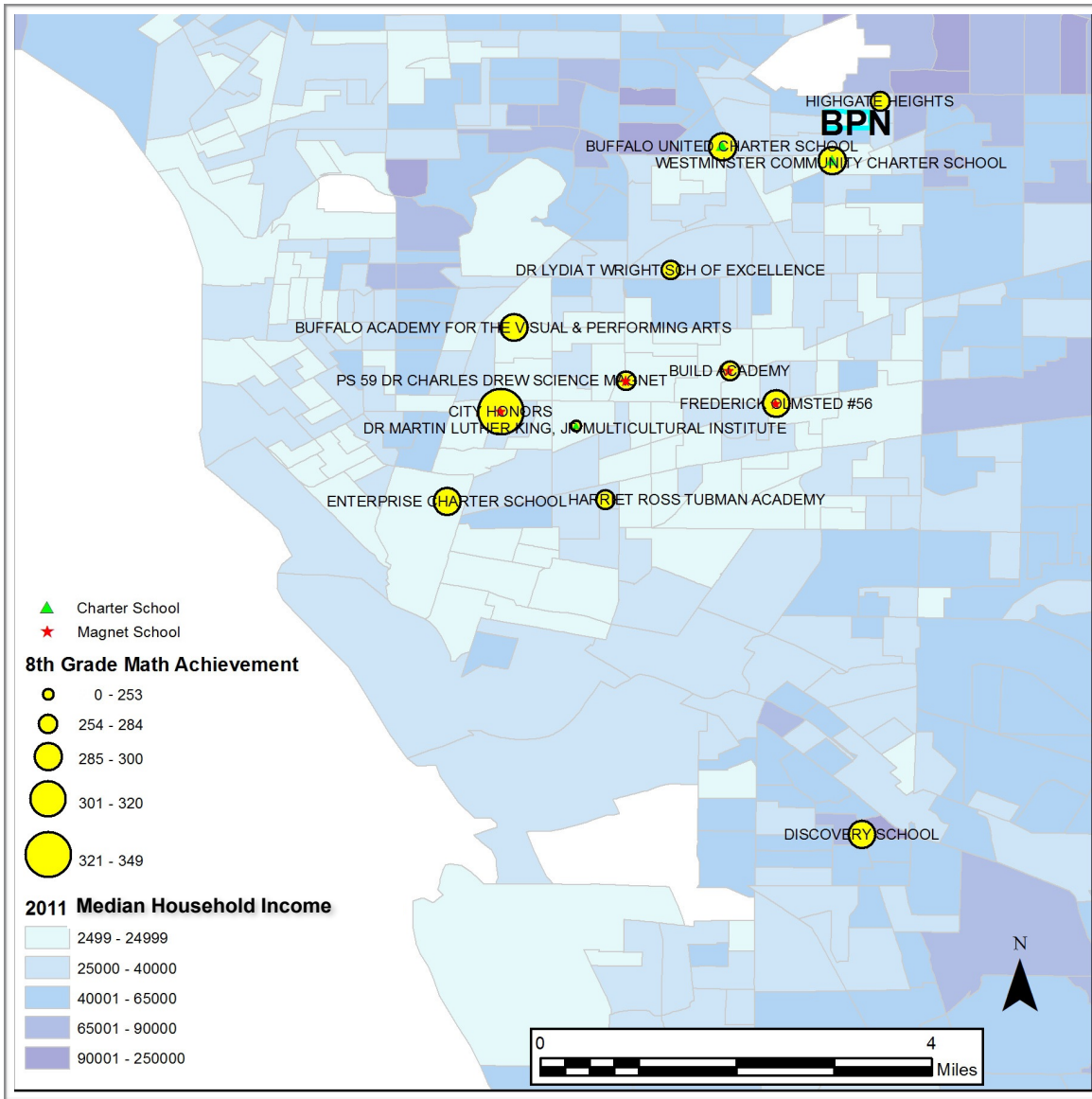
The growing disparities in wealth and race in Buffalo are exacerbated in the Buffalo Promise Neighborhood. The northeast border to the neighborhood is Main Street

Figure 7: 8th Grade School ELA Achievement and Median Household Income



Data Source: U.S. Census Bureau, NCES

Figure 8: 8th Grade School Math Achievement and Median Household Income



Data Source: U.S. Census Bureau, NCES

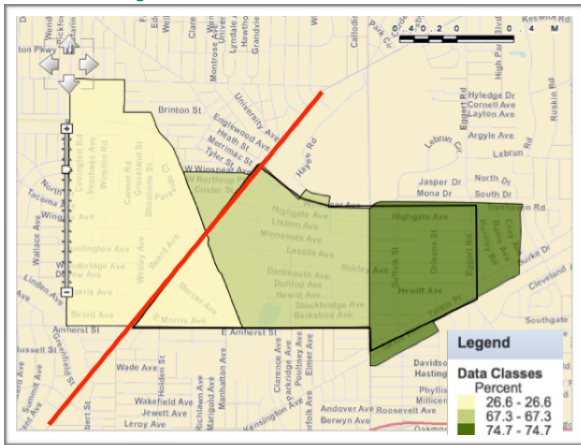
(depicted in red in Figure 9), which divides BPS from a suburban district.

Figure 10 demonstrates how the white flight phenomenon has directly impacted the BPN neighborhood. The shift in wealth is drastic. Figure 9 helps substantiate the previous assertion that white

Buffalo residents did not migrate away from the city in search of jobs to replace the steel industry, but instead they moved outside of BPS lines, in order to remove their children from BPS schools.

The high end residential real estate across Main Street is still in extremely close

Figure 9: Percentage of Population living in Poverty

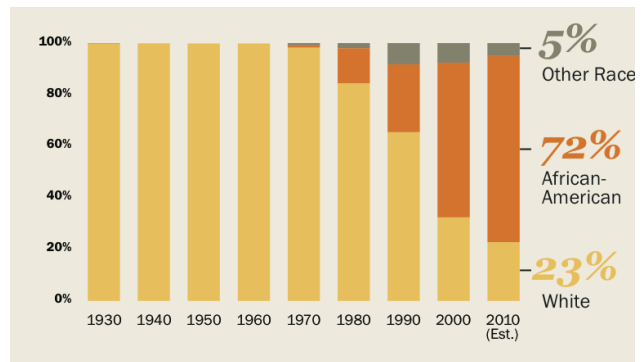


Data Source: 2007-2011 American Community Survey

proximity to the high poverty in the BPN neighborhood, yet the “incentive” to live on the east side of Main Street is the different school district. Research indicates that parents who have means are willing to pay over \$1,000 more for a home to attend a school with higher test scores and they will pay over \$7,000 for a school that has one standard deviation decrease in minority enrollment (Dougherty et. al, 2009)

While Supreme Court rulings such as *Brown v. Board of Education* and *Green v. County School Board of New Kent County* struck down de jure segregation within school districts, *Milliken V. Bradley I and II* (1974, 1976) prohibited the integration of schools and busing across district lines. The residing president in 1974, Nixon, summarized this approach as, “Save the cities, spare the suburbs.” Essentially, policy was refocused to move funds instead of people in order to address the variances of

Figure 10: Population Trends by Race in BPN



Data Source: University of Buffalo, 2011

demographics and their impact on education. As a result, people of higher economic status could afford to move across district lines to avoid the impact of desegregation.

In response to executive and judicial decisions to focus on funding, allocation models at the state and federal levels gradually shifted from horizontal to vertical equity strategies, increasing support for low income districts; as a result, funding has increased 25% nationally over the last four decades (Ryan, 2010). However, the focus of financial reform is still on the adequacy of inputs instead of the equality of outcomes, and even with this shift, funding disparities still exist across states, districts and schools (Ryan, 2010). In fact, high-income schools spend two times more per pupil (Barber, 1993). This economic divide is crucial, because research consistently reports a clear correlation between median income and academic achievement (Duncan & Murnane, 2011). Students who attend schools where the majority is composed of minority races

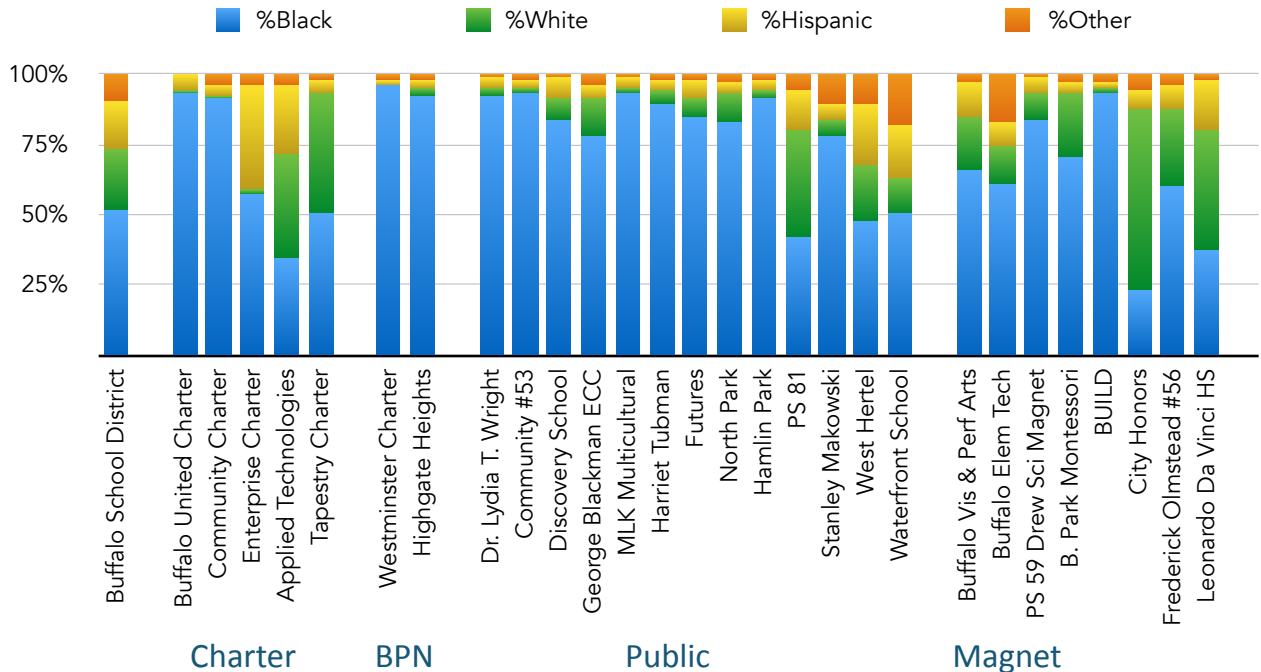
and who come from low-income homes are more likely to perform lower on achievement tests (Rothstein, 2004). The more time students live in impoverished neighborhoods, the less probability that they will graduate (Orfield & Lee, 2005). The ongoing achievement gap and high dropout rates among minorities nationwide perpetuate a lack of human capital and consequent financial disparities that are reproduced in the next generation.

Figures 11 and 12 reinforce these segregation realities across race and socioeconomic status in Buffalo public schools. BPS schools are almost ubiquitously composed of low-income minority students

who fail to meet proficiency levels in their achievement tests. The only school in graphs, where whites make up the majority of the school is City Honors, which is a highly selective magnet school. These two graphs include every school where 20 or more BPN residents attend, with the exception of City Honors, where only 13 BPN elementary students attend.

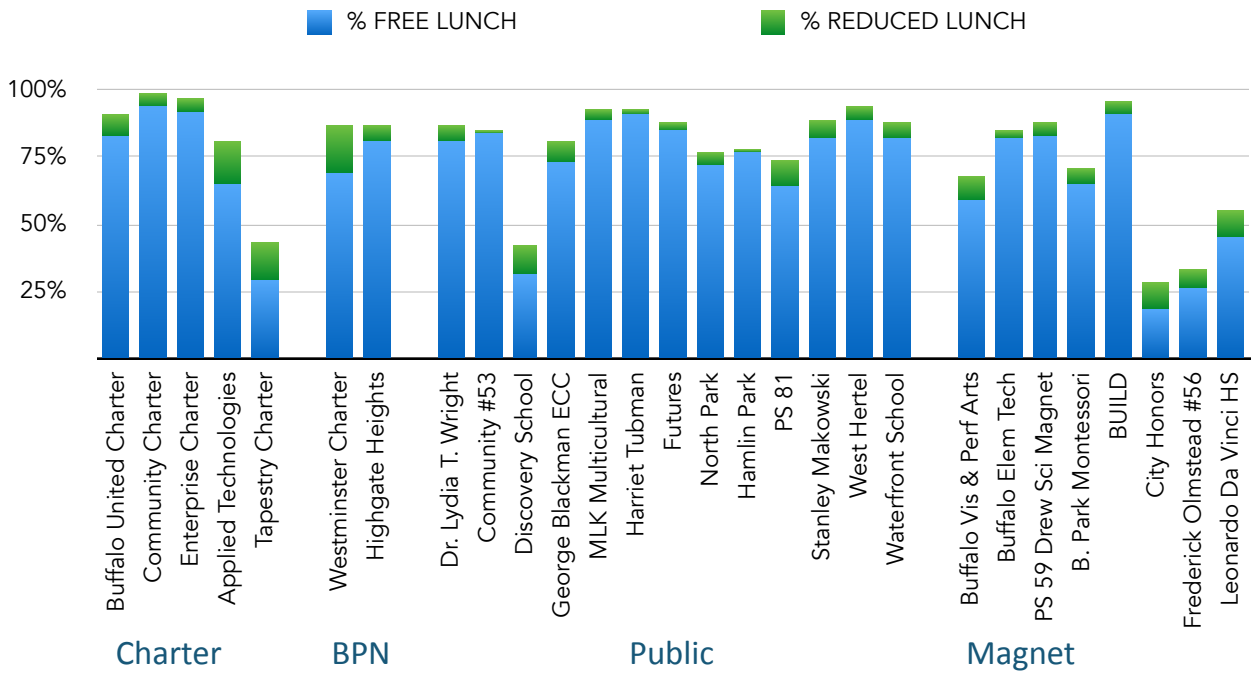
As expected, BPS' academic achievement (ELA and Math), drop out rate and graduation rates are similar to other large cities, but well below the NY state average (Figures 13, 14, 15). This aligns with the discussion at hand, since the rest of NY State public schools (not including the five

Figure 11: BPS Race Composition 2012



Data Source: NYSED 2012

Figure 12: BPS Free and Reduced Lunch Composition 2012



Data Source: NYSED 2012

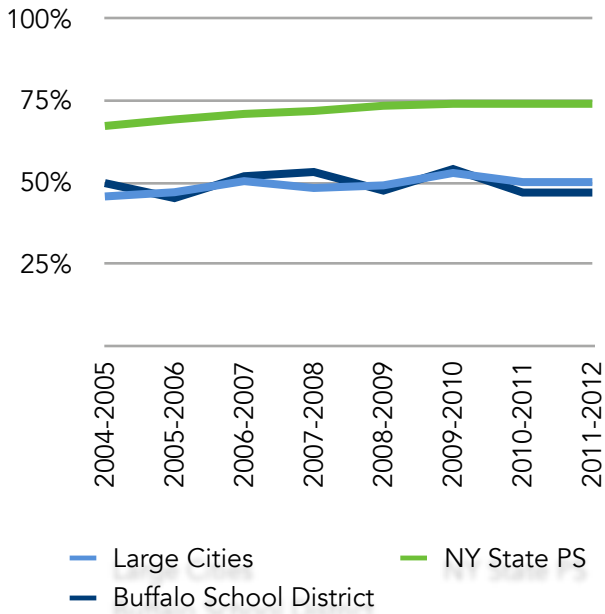
largest cities) are 74.5% white, where as BPS has 22% white students. Buffalo, like most other major cities has a greater concentration of poverty than suburban and rural areas. Over three-fourths of students attending BPS schools qualify for free or reduced lunch (NYSED, 2013). Parts of the BPN neighborhood have even higher concentrations of poverty than Buffalo. The poverty rate within the BPN has grown from 2% to 31% from 1970 to 2010, where around 1,200 children currently live in poverty (BPN, 2010). Based on statistical trends and current contexts, the academic achievement gap and consequent economic gaps will not only persist but will widen continuing a cyclical effect, unless intervention attempts prove effective (Meyer, 1977).

School Choice and Equity in Buffalo

If schools were integrated, research shows minority students would substantially improve without negatively impacting the achievement of white students (Kahlenberg, 2012). For example, poor African American students who attend middle class schools would be almost two years ahead academically, than if they were attending a low income school (Mayers & Jencks, 1989).

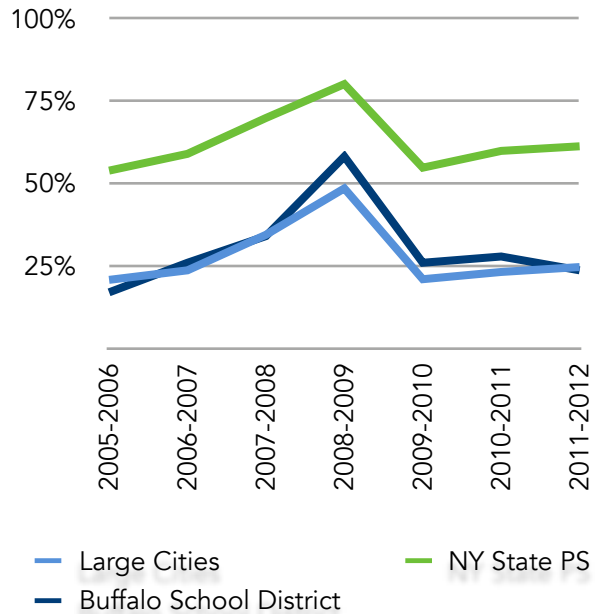
Understanding the implications of integration, Buffalo has selected a school choice policy to allow parents the freedom to choose the school their children attend. Ideally, parents would naturally sort themselves in schools so that each school was equally integrated, which combined with effective instruction would theoretically create parity in results. In order to

Figure 13: Graduation Rate Comparison



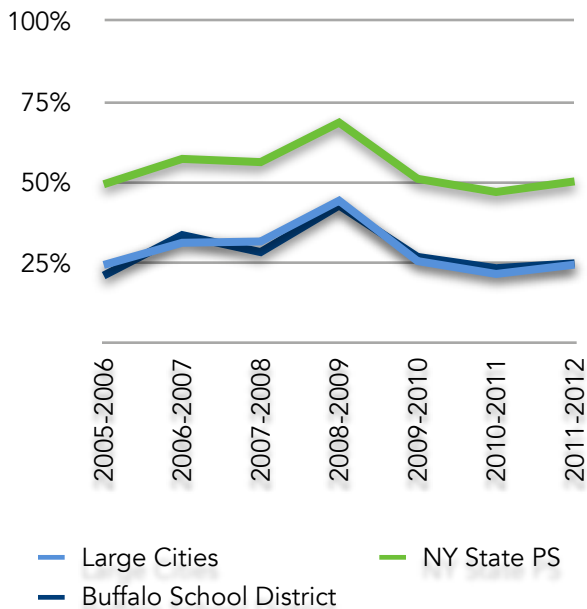
Data Source: NYSED 2012

Figure 15: 8th grade Math Passing Mean Score



Data Source: NYSED 2013

Figure 14: 8th grade ELA Passing Mean Score



Data Source: NYSED 2013

encourage parental decision making to these ends, Buffalo heavily invested in magnet schools, where many schools were built in poorer, urban neighborhoods, to encourage white movement to the city (Figures 7 and 8).

However, people do not naturally sort themselves according to sociological ideals. Both white and African American parents tend to choose schools where their race constitutes the majority (Henig, 1990, 1996; Kober & Usher, 2012; Bifulco & Ladd, 2007). Additionally, parents' perception of the area surrounding the school, based both on safety and affluence, weighs heavily on their decision (Bell, 2007). Two city magnet schools, Da Vinci and City Honors, have achieved more diversity and still maintain a large white enrollment, while concomitantly achieving almost 75% of their 8th grade

While Buffalo Public Schools provides a choice system, the reality is the choices afforded to parents are not of strong academic quality.

students passing both Math and ELA achievement tests. In fact City Honor's graduation rate is 53% higher than the BPS rate. Some scholars argue that such a system channels the highest performing students to attend the same schools; consequently, the remaining schools are left with academically weaker students and/or less informed parents, which impacts the student enrollment, peer base, and performance. Ensuring strong performance for just a few selective-criteria schools can come at the detriment of the rest of the schools within the district (Hanushek, Kain, & Rivkin, 2004; Bifulco & Ladd, 2007; Sohoni & Saporito 2009).

Pathway to High School

Outside of Da Vinci and City Honors, and the sole exception of Olmstead's 8th grade ELA average, no other magnet school achieves even a 25% passing rate in either 4th/8th grade Math or ELA. Da Vinci and City Honors are able to achieve higher scores because of their highly selective admissions criteria. As a result of their selectivity, only 0.7% BPN middle school students (24 out of 1735) attend City Honors and Da Vinci, making these schools unrealistic options for most BPN residents. Ironically, the one

charter school that has been moderately more successful in 4th grade math scores (45.3% passing rate) is in the BPN neighborhood- Buffalo United Charter. Yet, the school has gained the attention of local media for removing 20% of their low performing students, leading to speculation that their scores are artificially inflated (Tan 2013).

In summary, while Buffalo provides a choice system, the reality is the choices afforded to parents are not of strong academic quality. The odds are a child will attend a school where less than 20% of the students meet or exceed the standardized test benchmarks, which means that child will probably not pass either.

School Choice Options for Parents in Buffalo

Although the parents are not afforded good choices for their children, they still choose, and research shows parents are more satisfied when given the liberty to choose (Witte, Bailey, & Thorn, 1993; Duax, 1988; Lee et al., 1994). According to a local education activist group, EAG news, only 3% of eligible parents have requested transfers out of failing schools over the last 6 years (Tenbrink, 2012). Despite few petitions, in 2012-2013 only 165 out of 502 requests were granted. The president of Buffalo School District Parent Coordinating Council, Samuel Radford III, commented, "parents are discouraged because if they apply for a transfer the district will deny them" (Tenbrink, 2012). Tenbrink (2012) adds that 45 out of 50 public schools are failing in

Buffalo in the 2013-2014 school year, which theoretically means 27,000 out of the 32,000 students in the district could request a transfer. Ninety-seven percent of the BPS parents are not requesting waivers.

How are students enrolled? Buffalo residents are able to enter a lottery to potentially attend any public school in the district, theoretically providing many options for parents to choose. Parents who do not enter the lottery, are defaulted to a school with available space, without priority to the closest neighborhood schools. If a BPS parent requests a school within 1.5 miles proximity of their home, then they are provided preference based on space availability. As a result, the neighborhood school concept hardly exists in the Buffalo context, which is exemplified by 80% BPN's resident students leaving the neighborhood to attend school. At the same time 80% of the BPN school's enrollment is composed of students who do not live in the neighborhood. Beginning the 2013-2014 school year, however, the district provided residential preference for families living in BPN to attend Highgate Elementary.

For the parents who choose, the options create a need for knowledge that informs their decisions based on their priorities. In line with the research, the parental surveys and interview demonstrate that Buffalo parents most often value "academic quality" and "curricular themes", then safety and discipline, followed by proximity in choosing a school (Teske, 2007; Smrekar, 2013). The vast bussing initiative

mitigates proximity barriers to all BPS schools, but not to charter schools. Ultimately, parents want to know if the school is strong academically, if their race is the same as the school majority, and if the school is safe, and if those requirements are satisfied, they are willing to travel farther (Smrekar, 2012). The high rate of movement out to the neighborhood raises further questions, such as how does the transition away from neighborhood schools impact parent involvement? Also, are students who are dependent on school transportation able to participate in extracurricular activities?

Social Capital

Parents are expressing their right to choose a school; they are making their choices based on word of mouth; and in general they are satisfied with their decision, even if their child is in a failing school. This process highlights the influence social capital has on school choice, and directly impacts the project question at hand: understand why parents are opting in or out of BPN schools, and how to lead parents to choose BPN schools.

Both parents and students often act in accordance to their web of influential relationships, which Coleman (1988) defines as social capital. Social norms, formed and nurtured among relationships built upon trust and reciprocity, color the perceptions, volition, and decisions of each individual. Therefore, social capital impacts not just the parent's decision in choosing the school, but the peer base within the school will impact

the child's daily decisions as they attend the school.

Parents must then navigate various sources of information, such as media, friends, and school visits to discern what schools provide for their priorities- but not all sources are weighted equally. Research indicates that parents, regardless of income level, seek out various sources, from printed material and school visits, to talking to people outside of their family including friends, administrators and teachers (Teske, 2007). Smrekar (2012) identifies three groupings of sources: social-based (social capital network of friends and other parents), school-based (administration, teachers and distributed information), and formal sources (media and community centers). In general, the scuttlebutt from friends supersedes published information as a more trusted source. Ball (1998) describes the privileged information provided by other parents or students as "hot" knowledge, which is more accurate than formal information produced by the school. Teske (2007) affirms this conclusion, explaining that word of mouth is perceived as more honest. Schneider et. al (2000) add that this dependency on social capital creates an advantage for higher socioeconomic statuses, since in general this subgroup has access to more reliable information to help guide decision making.

The positive impact of strong social capital within a community highlights the need for BPN to expand its presence in the neighborhood, and earn the right to influence the decision-making process of

parents. However, parents perhaps are naturally inclined to perceive BPN's information as biased since BPN operates the schools. Beyond perceived bias, minority parents from low-income often lack the cultural capital to navigate school information, as well as have transportation or a flexible work schedule to visit the school (Lareau, 1989). These challenges will spillover to BPN as well. However, if BPN's various neighborhood initiatives can gain confidence among key community stakeholders, as well as bridging cultural understandings and assumptions, then BPN could position itself as a source of trusted social capital, able to color the perceptions of parents as they choose and become involved in schools.

Mobility

Putnam (1995) argues that this social trust is the key to civic virtue where groups of people work together for both their individual good as well as the collective good. There is a significant association between children from disrupted homes and their behavior, academic achievement, and likelihood of attending a four-year college (Magnuson & Berger, 2009, Lillard & Gerner, 2005). These trends are true in BPN as well, where 67% of children live in single-parent homes, which is 3% than the rate for Buffalo (BPN needs assessment). Single parent status in turn frequently impacts school mobility (Rumberger, 2003). Mobility in turn increases the social decapitalization of both parents and students as they change schools

and communities, which again heavily impacts BPN. Simultaneously, high mobility impacts the schools as they navigate the turnover of relationships (Hanashek, Kain, and Rivkin, 2004). Jointly, the three BPN schools experience a 16% mobility rate, however, Bennett specifically is challenged by a 35% rate (University of Buffalo, 2011).

Project Design & Methodology

Our study includes quantitative and qualitative analyses. We collected school wide and district data from New York State Educational Department, unidentified student data from 2008-2013 from the Buffalo Promise Neighborhood, and parental survey data based on 256 respondents from four elementary schools (2 BPN and 2 non-BPN). The BPN schools consists of traditional public school Highgate Elementary and Westminster Community Charter School, and non-BPN schools included traditional public Jenkins Elementary and Excellence Charter School.

The three sets of quantitative data incorporate three facets to a parent's decision: parental preferences, school characteristics, and student performance (Parent decision= school characteristics (school wide data) + student characteristics (BPN student data) + parental characteristics (parental survey data). The qualitative data were collected from individual interviews and focus groups with community leaders, school

administrators, and parents, focusing on the project question of *why parents opt in (or not)* BPN schools.

School-Wide Data

School-wide data is available online through the New York State department of education and Cornell University. The data collected allowed us to identify school characteristics in the following areas:

- ELA and Math achievement data (raw scores and scaled score conversions)
- Demographics
- Enrollment
- Graduation rates
- Drop out rates
- Free and Reduced Lunch rates

This data set included district data, as well as the data from the schools where 20 or more BPN residents attend. We also included data from City Honors, even though only 13 BPN residents attend, since it is an outlier due to its selective admissions criteria. We ran various comparisons of the means in order to create an accurate portrait of the similarities or differences between schools that BPN parents are choosing, in order to validate whether parents are afforded valid options, or if school performances are similar between BPN and non-BPN schools. The schools were also compared according to whether they were charter, public or public magnet. The chief limitation of this data set is the sample size (when comparing BPN

schools to non-BPN schools, BPN's population and sample only includes two schools). However, we intentionally used the smaller sample to pin point the schools that are the most viable options to BPN residents. The smaller sample yields less significant results, however analyzing various frequencies allows clear comparisons between schools as well as schools groups, informing the research by answering the question, what kinds of schools are parents choosing.

BPN Student Data

BPN provided a data set for all students residing in BPN from 2008-2013. The data was used to identify student characteristics. The five years of data with 2,749 units of analysis that included the following information:

- Birth year
- Race
- Gender
- Test achievement data
- School name

The data masked student identifiers so that we could track their attendance and achievement each year. We limited the study to K-8th grade since the annual tests only included ELA and Math. Students were classified as either attending BPN or non

BPN schools to create a binary, independent variable. After comparing the means of scores between BPN and non-BPN schools, we ran an Ordinary Least Squares regression, where the BPN status, race, gender, and birth year were the independent and control variables and the test data was the dependent variable. One limitation is the data set does not include scores for students who attended private schools and some charter schools. Both the T-Tests and the OLS regression, however, provided clear comparisons of student characteristics between students who attended BPN schools and those who did not.

Parent Survey Data

We conducted parent surveys at 4 elementary schools (K-8th grade). The sample included the two BPN elementary schools: Highgate Heights (public) and Westminster Community Charter. We also selected one non-BPN public and one non BPN charter school (we have used pseudonyms for the two non-BPN schools). We chose Jenkins Elementary School as the public school since more BPN residents attend there than any other non-BPN school (112 students in 2012). We chose Excellence as the non-BPN charter school for our sample. We requested permission to conduct the survey at the charter school in the BPN neighborhood that

Parent Choice = Parent Characteristics + Student Characteristics + School Characteristics

Parent Characteristics = Survey Responses (n= 256) + Interviews (n=20)

Student Characteristics = Student Achievement Data (n=2,749)

School Characteristics = NYSED data + Interviews (n=6)

is not affiliated with the BPN, Buffalo United Charter, since 99 BPN residents attend (2012). The organization's leadership refused to allow us to survey their parents. We selected Excellence as the non-BPN charter, even though only 19 BPN residents attend (2012), due to convenience since they were the only Charter that allowed us permission to collect data.

Parents were asked to fill out a five minute survey. The asked questions concerning the following topics:

- Source of information
- Factors on school choice
- School satisfaction
- BPN awareness
- Parent Education Level
- Race

The survey responses allowed us to identify what parents looked for in schools and how they go about finding and validating that information. The survey specifically identified their awareness of BPN and its influence on their choice. The questions on satisfaction and likelihood to recommend the school provided a comparison between BPN and non-BPN schools, especially since the literature elevates "word of mouth" recommendations as the most important influencer on school choice decisions.

Historically, BPN and BPS have received poor response rates to parental surveys. In order to improve participation, we collected surveys at open houses, school festivals, student drop off and pick up, and

The parent survey yielded substantially higher response rates than prior initiatives conducted by BPS.

via the principal at Jenkins. Our efforts improved the response rate (n=256). However, the various venues limit the generalizability of the results.. For example, many surveys at Jenkins were collected at traffic drop off and pick up areas, which indicates respondents provided their own transportation, and therefore did not include the parents who send their children to school on busses. Also, the principal at Jenkins collected surveys to improve the participation rate, which could impact the responses, if parents thought the principal might read their survey. Furthermore, while the response rate was much stronger than past surveys conducted by BPN and BPS, the sample does not adequately represent the school populations at large (256 parent responses representing a total enrollment of 2,259 students). We also received a much stronger response at Westminster than Highgate. In order to account for this discrepancy, however, we weighted the cases in the quantitative analysis to represent the enrollments of each school, allowing us to more accurately generalize the results that compare BPN to non BPN schools. Another possible limitation to the study is if respondents did not understand the difference between academic quality and

academic focus as factors influencing their decision.

The validity of the surveys is strengthened on various fronts, which helps corroborate the data, despite the low response rate.. The questions were adapted from a Center of Excellence in Leadership of Learning staff survey developed by Smrekar and Goldring (2007), bolstering the construct validity. The responses strongly correlated with both Teske's research (2007) and our interviews, substantiating both the criterion-reference validity and concurrent validity.

Interviews

To better understand why BPN parents chose a BPN school or opted out, we conducted interviews with a variety of stakeholders. We worked with BPN to schedule interviews with the three BPN principals. We also used a variety of strategies to arrange parent interviews at each of these schools, and conducted home visits and interviews at local cafés based on parent availability and snowball sampling. Along with BPN principal and parent interviews, we spoke with community members. (Appendix A includes both a list of interview participants by category and the interview protocols used for each.

Our interviews were balanced between parents with children attending BPN and non-BPN schools. In addition, we conducted interviews with the principals of BPN schools. The key elements of focus for

these interviews were similar to those for the parents. Finally, the interview protocol for community members probed perceptions of BPN and the impact of the quality of schools on housing and economic issues. Some of the questions in this protocol explored the ways in which the departure of students from BPN impacts the community. Specific questions address the impact on Buffalo if the reputation of BPN improved. We used the responses to these questions to inform our quantitative findings.

Data Analysis And Findings

Why do BPN parents choose or opt out of BPN schools?

An analysis of the survey administered to 256 parents who have either chosen a BPN school or a non-BPN school clearly establishes that academics are the main factor in choosing a school (Figures 16 and 17). Forty-eight percent of parents said perception of academic quality is the most important reason in their decision and another 21% stated academic/curricular focus (magnet theme) was the main factor. Regardless of school choice (BPN or non-BPN) parents are generally looking for the same factors. Almost identically, Teske (2007) found that academic achievement was the number one factor influencing school choice in a study of three cities that have school-

choice systems: Denver, Washington, and Milwaukee. In Teske’s study, 45% of parents stated academic quality was paramount and another 19% said a thematic or curricular focus was most important when considering a magnet school.

According to the survey data in our study, parents who prioritize academics are likely to be satisfied with their school experience. Over half of the parents who said either academic focus or quality was the main factor in their decision are “very satisfied” with their school, while another quarter of the parents are “somewhat satisfied” with their school choice. Safety, discipline and location were less popular yet still substantial reasons identified in the survey. Patterns of parental choices that are identified in the extant literature point to similar factors. Smrekar (2009) identified academics, discipline, safety, location, and transportation and values as the main influences on school decisions. Teske (2007) points out, however, that academics do trump proximity, since parents are generally willing to send their children farther if it means acquiring a better education. Since the district provides bussing to all public schools throughout the district, the parents’ burden of transportation is relieved unless they choose a charter or private school. There was no significance, however, in the survey results between charter and non-charter parents in prioritizing proximity. Further studies should investigate the impact of distance between home and school on

Figure 16: Most Important Reason for School

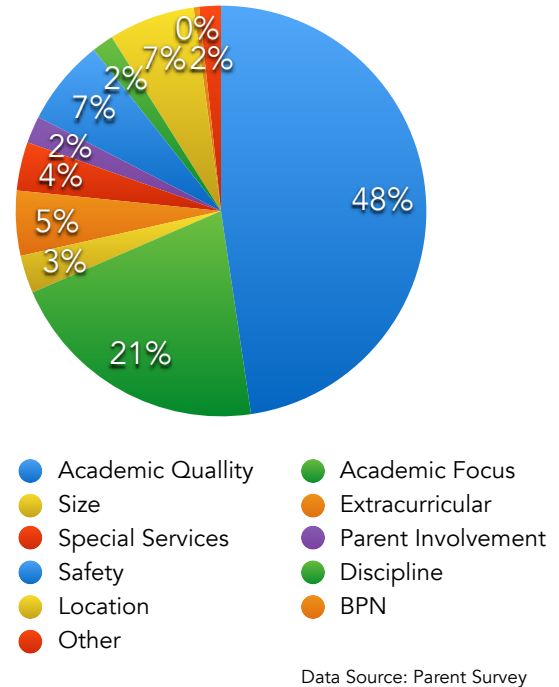
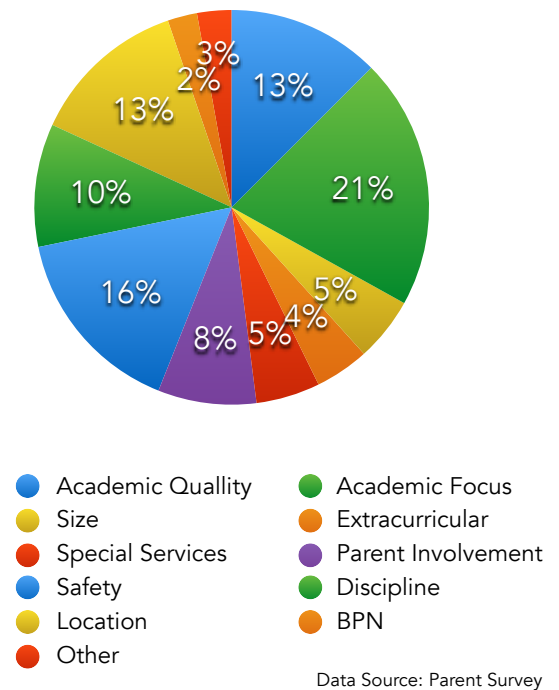


Figure 17: 2nd Most Important Reason for School Choice



parent involvement at the school and student involvement in extracurricular activities. If bussing is not provided for students who stay after school, then students who are dependent on transportation will not be able to participate in extracurricular activities. Similarly, parents who live and work at farther distances from the school could be less likely to participate in the school (Bauch & Goldring, 1995). The survey results reported that 10% of parents prioritize involvement in schools as one of the top two reasons for choosing a school, and 9% of parents said extracurricular involvement was one of the top two reasons. Since the majority of parents prioritize other factors over their involvement and their child's participation in extracurricular activities, perhaps these two key factors are sacrificed when they choose a school that is a substantial distance from their residence, especially if their child is dependent on school bussing and there are not other options for transportation after the extracurricular activities finish.

Why Are They Leaving?

In order to better understand some of the reasons why BPN families decide to opt out of BPN schools, we also interviewed current BPN principals and BPN families who choose BPN schools and choose to opt-out of BPN schools. The following are the key themes that emerged from these interviews and surveys.

What are primary sources of information that parents rely on?

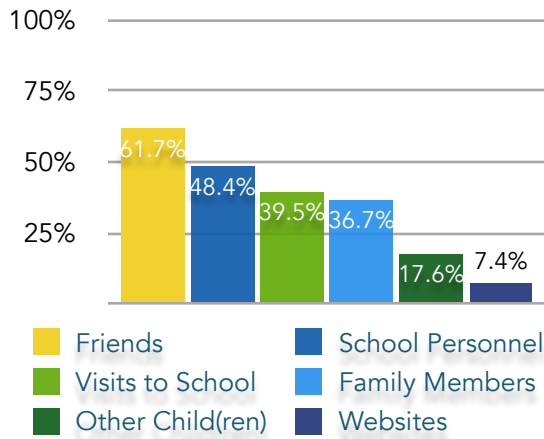
As parents decide what school characteristics impact their decision, they also have to discern which sources of information to seek, sieve, and trust. Research indicates that parents, regardless of income level, seek out various sources, from printed material and school visits, to talking to people outside of their family including friends, administrators and teachers (Teske, 2007). In general, the scuttlebutt from friends supersedes published information as a more trusted source. Ball (1998) describes the privileged information provided by other parents or students as "hot" knowledge, which is more accurate than formal information produced by the school. Teske (2007) affirms this conclusion, explaining that word of mouth is perceived as more honest. In concordance, the survey results demonstrated that parents rely most often on friends for their information source, but also visit the schools, speak with administrators and teachers (Figure 18).

Thirty-four percent of respondents cite people outside of the school as the most important source of information, while another 28.5% of the respondents prioritized conversations with school employees.

The Parent Perception Gap and Achievement

As mentioned, parents generally view word of mouth as less biased than published

Figure 18: Sources that Inform School Choice



Data Source: Parent Survey

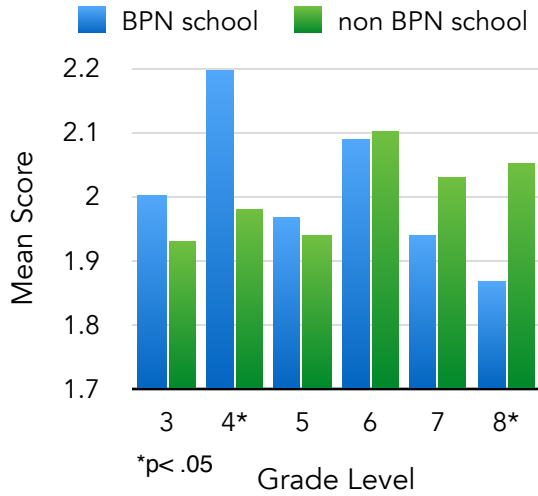
data (Teske, 2007). Since perceptions of academic quality is the number one factor in parental choice, this discrepancy is noteworthy. Even if school A has higher achievement results than school B, the perception of a trusted source can convince a parent that school B is stronger academically than school A. Secondly, school quality is more important than proximity, which immediately impacts the question at hand. A parent who resides in BPN would likely send his child to a non-BPN school that is farther away, if he has been told that the other school is better academically. The interviews continually highlighted the impact of social networks to create a perceived reality. All 10 interviewed parents who chose BPN elementary Westminster opted out of the BPN high school Bennett and identified Tapestry or Hutch Tech as viable high school options because “that’s where Westminster kids go.”

BPN vs. non-BPN: Academic Achievement

An analysis of achievement data from almost 3,000 students shows that students attending a non-BPN school are generally not more likely to attain higher results. Over 75% of children residing in BPN are leaving the neighborhood to attend school, and besides a few exceptions, these students do not achieve higher than students who attend BPN schools (Figures 19 and 20). Between 3rd to 8th grades in both ELA and Math, the only significant differences in achievement are the following: students in BPN schools score higher in 4th grade ELA, and students in non BPN schools score higher in 8th grade ELA and 6th grade Math. As we will demonstrate later, even these differences are minimized when controlled for race and gender, indicating that the schools are not the cause for differences in test scores. As Figures 19 and 20 demonstrate, mean scaled scores are around 2, which fails to meet New York proficiency benchmarks (1= does not meet; 2= nearly meets; 3= meets; 4= exceeds).

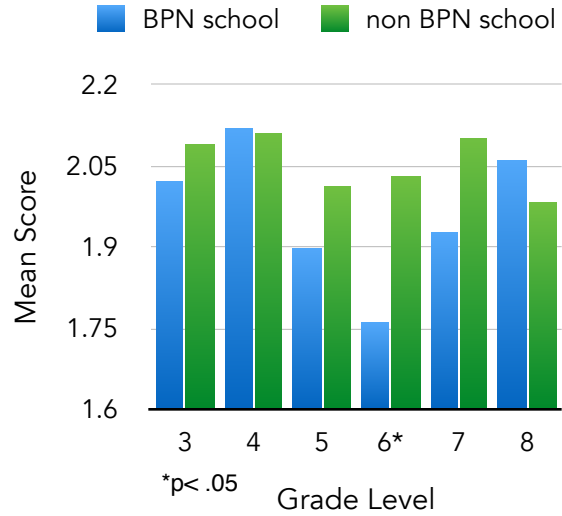
Similarly, according to the New York State Department of Education report cards, the schools where 20 or more BPN students attend do not significantly differ from each other in ELA and Math achievement scores in 4th and 8th grades (Figures 21, 22, 23, and 24). Besides the selective criteria magnet schools (City Honors, Da Vinci, and Olmstead), there are few exceptions to the rule that more than 75% of students Buffalo

Figure 19: Means Comparisons of BPN Residents for ELA Achievement from 2008-2013



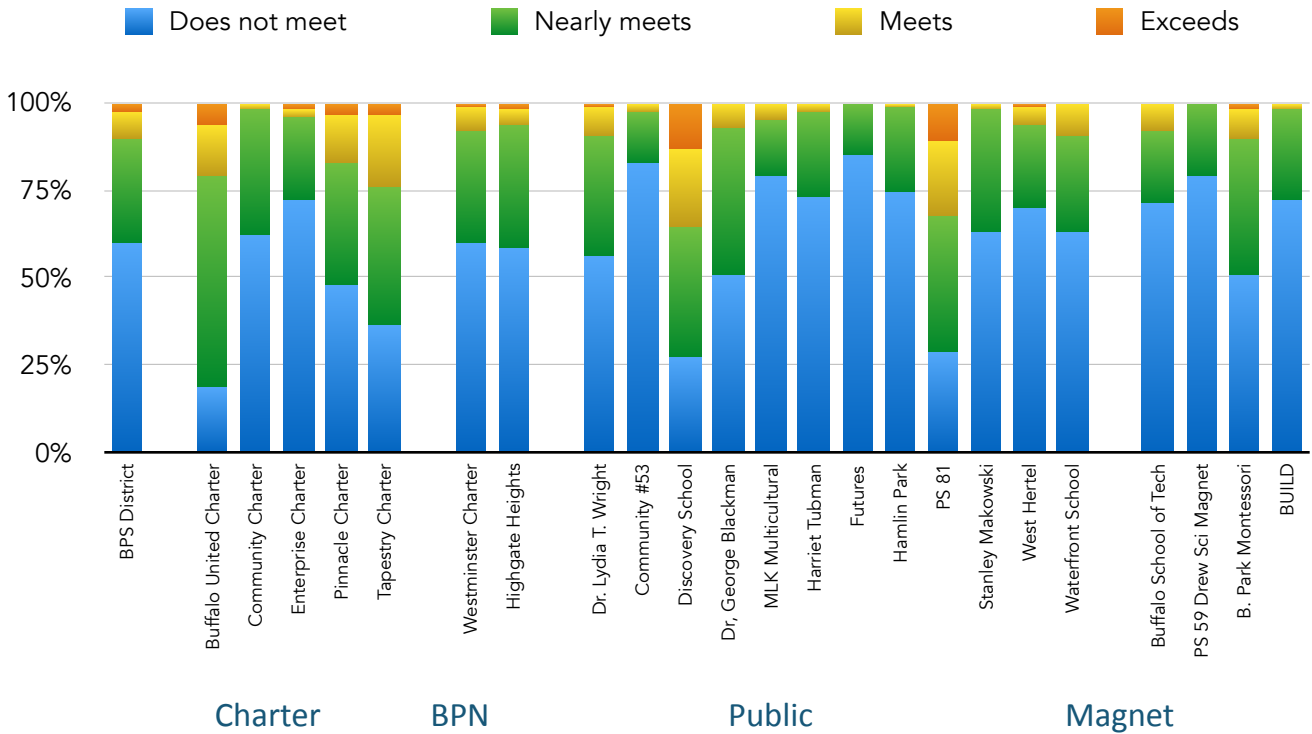
Data Source: BPN Student Data

Figure 20: Means Comparisons of BPN Residents for Math Achievement from 2008-2013



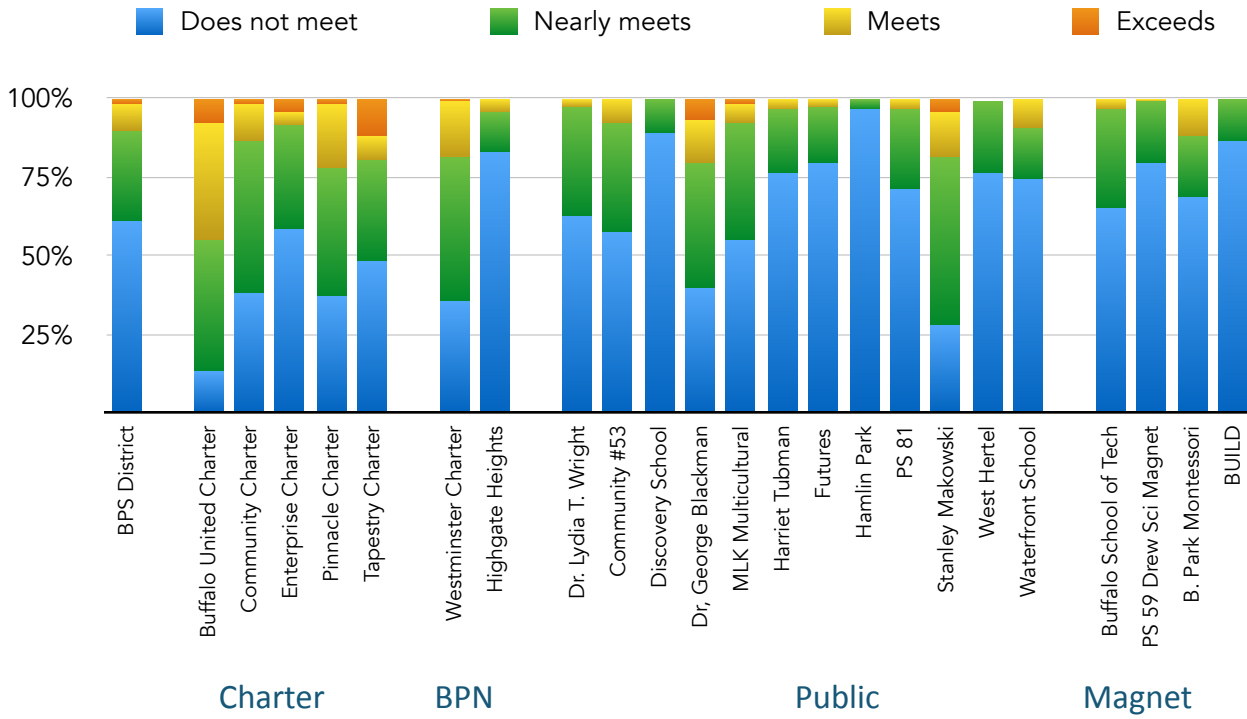
Data Source: BPN Student Data

Figure 21: Scaled Score Distribution 4th Grade ELA 2013 For Schools Where 20+ BPN Residents Attend



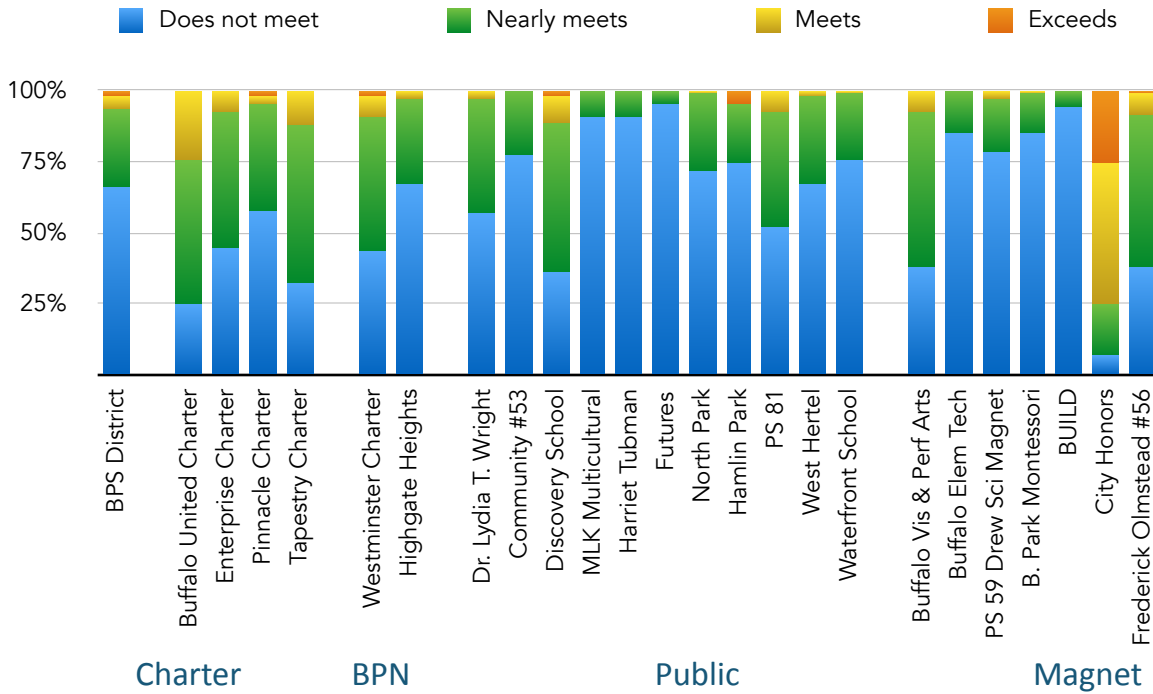
Data Source: NYSED 2013

Figure 22: Scaled Score Distribution 4th Grade Math 2013 For Schools Where 20+ BPN Residents Attend



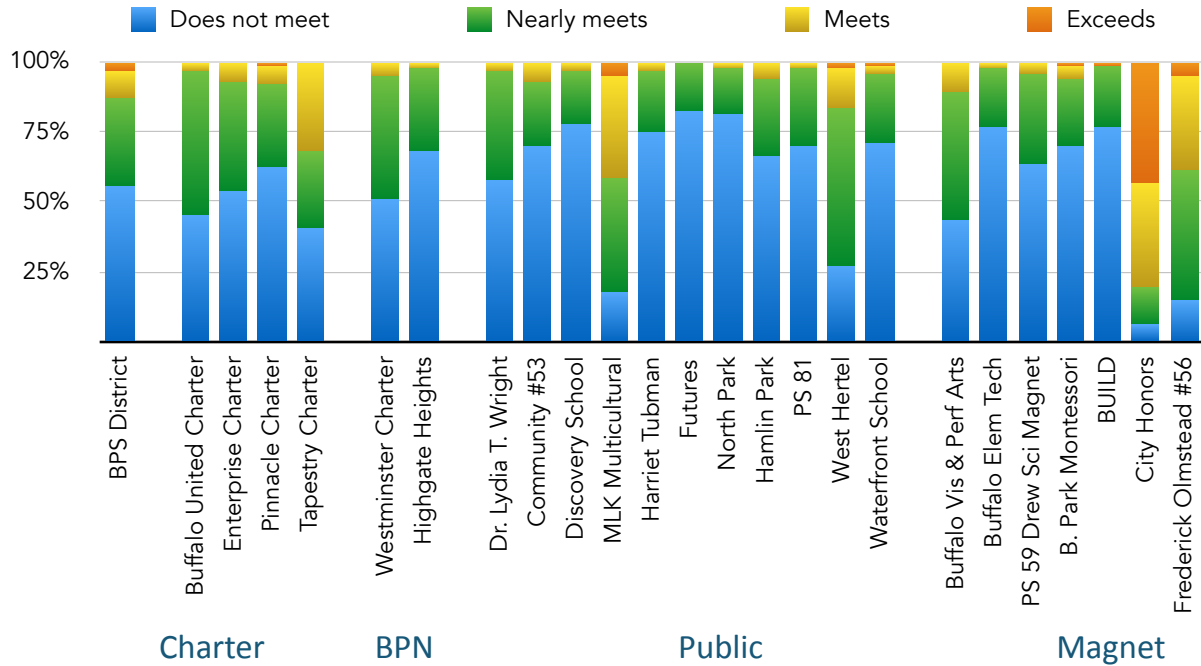
Data Source: NYSED 2013

Figure 23: Scaled Score Distribution 8th Grade ELA 2013 For Schools Where 20+ BPN Residents Attend



Data Source: NYSED 2013

Figure 24: Scaled Score Distribution 8th Grade Math 2013 For Schools Where 20+ BPN Residents Attend



Data Source: NYSED 2013

Public Schools are not proficient in ELA or Math. Tapestry Charter is the only other school in the data set where almost 25% of students meet proficiency standards in 4th and 8th grade ELA and Math tests. In various comparisons, schools are stronger than BPN schools in one subject and then weaker in another subject (e.g. Discovery is stronger than the BPN schools in 4th grade ELA, but weaker in 4th grade Math). The distinctions between elementary schools where 20 or more BPN residents is not significant or substantial, and therefore questions why parents would send their child outside of the BPN neighborhood to another school that is not academically stronger.

Patterns of failure in elementary schools leads to prevalent drop out rates and

low graduation rates as reflected in Figure 25. While there are several schools that are as academically weak as Bennett, there are a number of schools with higher graduation rates. Although our student and school wide data sets did not compare the mean scores across high schools, the graduation rates indicate there are more distinctions between high schools than elementary schools. However, the question remains, why are parents, who prioritize academics, sending their children to other schools that are also failing? Are the word of mouth sources providing misinformation? Is there a gap between what parents perceive as academic strength and the reality of data? What we do know is parents are choosing and most of them are satisfied with their choice.

What choices are available?

School choice is based on the rational choice theory (Elster, 1986). Parents are able to vote with their feet, forcing underachieving schools to improve or close. This system assumes that parents can pull their child out of a failing school and matriculate them into a successful school. The school-wide data for achievement scores

and graduation rates, however, shows that low-income parents in Buffalo have limited options, and often none of the options are satisfactory (Figures 21, 22, 23, 24, and 25). The black dropout rate for the 2006 cohort who graduated in four years was 38.6% in Buffalo Public Schools (NYSESED, 2013). In 2012, the black drop out rate for the 2008 cohort was 39.6% at Bennett High School, while only 32.8% of Bennett students graduated on time (NYSESED, 2013). Students at Bennett are more likely to drop out than graduate on time. Four of the area high schools had worse rates than Bennett. Six of the 19 Buffalo public high schools had higher drop rates than graduation rates. In comparison, City Honors had a 100% graduate rate among the same 2008 cohort (NYSESED, 2013). Additionally, the Schott

Foundation reported that only 25% of black males in Buffalo graduate on time. Various interviews acknowledged a tiered-choice system, where a few public schools boast

excellent achievement like City Honors. Yet, these few successful magnets have limited space. Their students are chosen based on selective criteria, which essentially means the officials have the choice of who attends, not

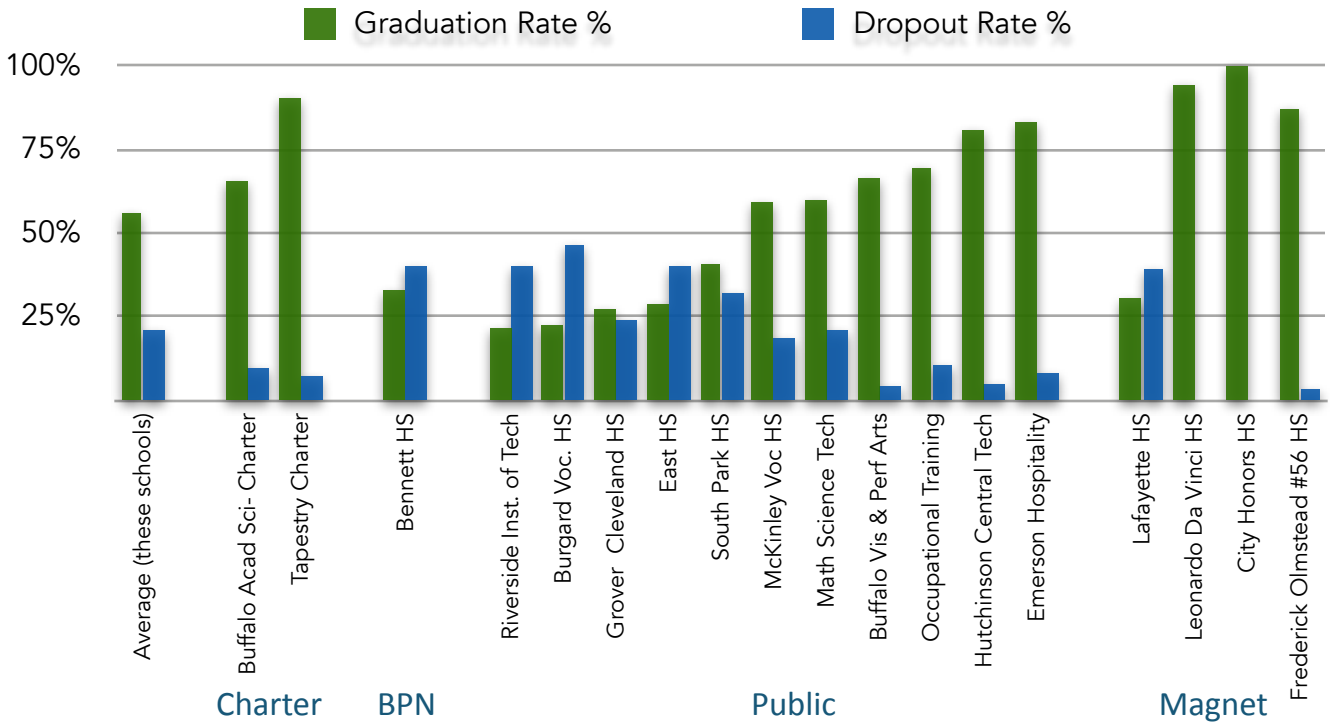
the parent. Nelson (2012) claims such tiered systems are based on administrative-choice, not parent-choice.

No Child Left Behind Act, however, requires public school districts to honor requests to transfer out of failing schools. Due to mounting pressure, Superintendent Brown declared a new plan in December 2013 to close three high schools, hiring new administration and replacing 50% of the faculty. By doing so, the failing status of these schools will be removed, allowing transfer requests to “non failing” schools, despite not having evidence the new school is effective. One of these three schools is Bennett (Tan, 2013b).

Perception Gap

68% of parents prioritize either academic quality or curricular focus as the main factor influencing their choice in schools. Of those parents, 52.6% are very satisfied with their school and another 26.3% are somewhat satisfied with their schools. Yet, the mean achievement scores of BPN students from 3rd- 8th grade from 2008-2013 are failing. Additionally, each school where 20 or more BPN residents attend also fails to meet proficiency across all grades.

Figure 25: Buffalo Public High Schools Four Year Graduation and Drop out Rates for Black Students in the 2008 Cohort



Data Source: NYSED 2013

Who is opting out of BPN schools?

While around 80% of all students are leaving BPN to attend schools outside of the neighborhood, some students are leaving at a greater rate. According to the BPN student data set from years 2008-2013, non African American students and SPED students across 3rd to 8th grades leave more often (Table 2 and Figure 26). Although students that need special services leave at a faster rate, parents with SPED students at BPN schools indicated on the survey that are generally satisfied with their school experience. As for the race disparity, it

should be noted that the students leaving the neighborhood score significantly higher in both ELA and Math tests at every grade level, when set up as a binary variable of black and non black students, which includes white, Hispanic, and Asian students (Figures 27 and 28). Even after controlling for gender and school, non black students significantly outperformed African Americans (Table 3 and 4). The loss of white, Hispanic, and Asian students negatively impacts the achievement and diverse peer base of the BPN neighborhood.

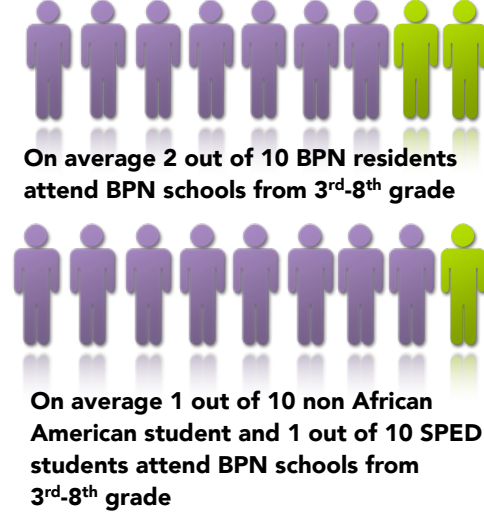
According to Smrekar (2012), white families, especially, demonstrate “out group

Table 2: Where BPN Residents Attend School 2008-2013

Grade	Attends BPN school (%)	Attends non BPN (%)	Non black attends non BPN (%)	SPED attends non Bpn (%)
3rd	15.8	84.2	95.0%	89.4%
4th	18.8	81.2	92.5%	92.2%
5th	19.8	80.2	94.2%	91.4%
6th	21.0	79.0	87.8%	87.0%
7th	20.1	79.9	86.3%	86.3%
8th	18.4	81.6	86.3%	84.9%

Data Source: BPN Student Data

Figure 26 Average Departure of BPN Residents to non-BPN Schools



avoidance” where they elect to not attend neighborhood schools if the majority of student are minorities. This loss impacts both the diversity and academic peer bases of the BPN schools. Homogenous classrooms exacerbate the achievement gap. Along with teacher quality, the performance of a student’s peer group are the greatest in-school factors on student achievement (Rothstein, 2004). Understanding that academic performance is so influenced by peer characteristics, it is paramount to integrate students at the school and classroom levels, creating new student relationships (Jencks & Phillips, 1998; Ryan, 2010). In addition, segregation at the school level reproduces the proclivity among children to associate in, and be influenced by, homogenous groupings, undermining the democratic ideals of education.

A further distinction between parent characteristics is the parents at the two non-

BPN schools were significantly more likely to be “very satisfied” with their school, whereas BPN parents were more likely to be “somewhat satisfied” (Figure 29). Subsequently, the survey results also revealed that “very satisfied” parents are more likely to recommend their school than “somewhat satisfied” parents. This salient finding is especially pertinent to the project question, because there is a high correlation (.837) between satisfaction and likelihood of recommending the school.

Ninety-seven percent of “very satisfied” parents are “very/extremely likely” to recommend their school, whereas 60.5% of “somewhat satisfied parents” are “very/extremely likely” to recommend their school. However, 62.5% of non-BPN parents are “very satisfied” compared to 49.3% of BPN parents. Therefore, there is a greater chance that “very satisfied” parents will recommend their non-BPN school to BPN parents. If

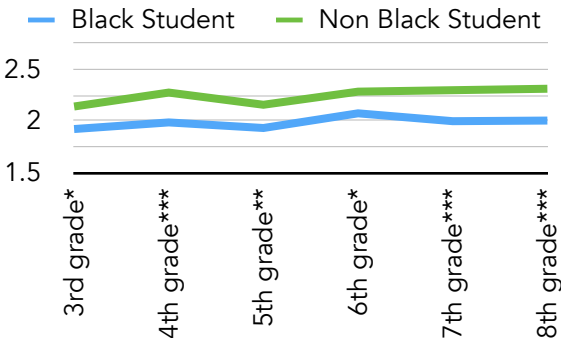
Table 3: Results of OLS Regression, Dependent Variable ELA Scores

	4th Grade	8th Grade
Male	-.21**	-.172**
Black	-.302**	-.307**
BPN	.189*	-.183*
Intercept	2.37**	2.41**
R ²	0.19	0.034
N	666	701

*p< 0.05 **p< 0.01

Data Source: BPN Student Data

Figure 27: ELA Mean Score difference for Student Data according to Race



Data Source: BPN Student Data

there is increased satisfaction of BPN schools, then positive word of mouth will also increase. Since parents are more satisfied in non-BPN schools, more non-BPN parents will recommend their schools.

Based on these results, parents who are opting out of BPN schools are more likely to not be African American or have a special needs child, and are more likely to be more satisfied and inclined to recommend their school than BPN parents. Conversely,

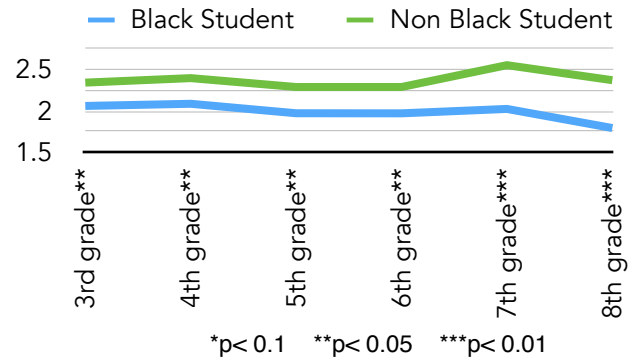
Table 4: Results of OLS Regression, Dependent Variable Math Scores

	4	8th Grade
Male	-0.072	-0.110
Black	-.312*	-.434*
BPN	0.004	0.10
Intercept	2.43*	2.42*
R ²	.013	0.03
N	668	713

*p< 0.01

Data Source: BPN Student Data

Figure 28: Math Mean Score difference for Student Data according to Race



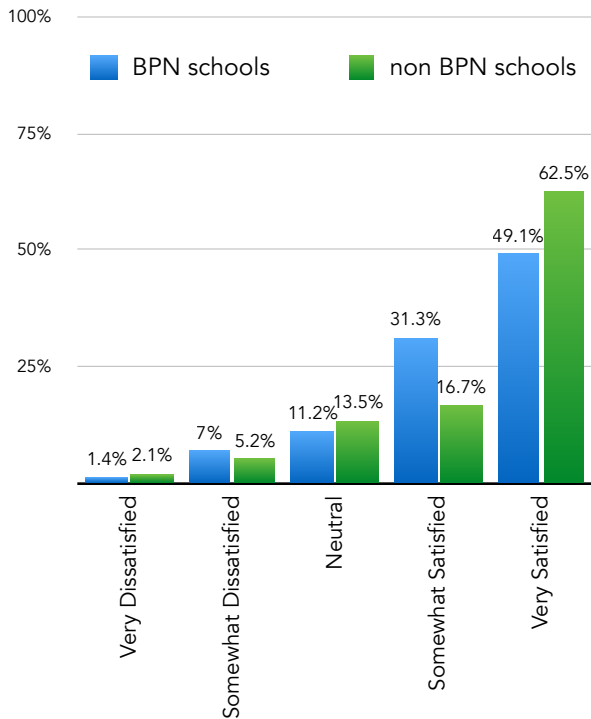
Data Source: BPN Student Data

according to the survey data, parents who said size of the school was a first or second most important factor were more likely to choose BPN schools (p<.01). Furthermore, parents with a college or post graduate degree are significantly more likely to send their child to Westminster than the other 3 schools surveyed (p<.01).

What factors explain these patterns?

According to the parental survey analysis, of the 15 respondents who listed BPN as an information source used to select a school, 14 attend BPN schools. Similarly, of the 7 parents who said BPN was the 1st or

Figure 28: Parent Satisfaction



Data Source: Parent Survey

2nd most important reason for attending a school, 6 attended BPN schools. While the numbers are low, the results are consistent with other data that BPN awareness is low. In fact, only 1 out of 256 respondents said BPN was the most important factor in choosing a school. Yet, parents who are more aware of BPN might be more likely to attend BPN schools ($p < .24$). Additionally, 62% of parents who benefited from BPN

programs listed BPN as a very important factor in choosing a school. It can be concluded, BPN gains substantial social capital among parents who are aware of BPN, and even more when they have benefited from their programs. Yet, currently just under half of the parents surveyed have little to no awareness of BPN, with another quarter of the parents admit they are only somewhat aware of BPN’s programs. The challenge, therefore, is for BPN to raise both awareness and increase the number of parents who benefit from their programs. Subsequently, they will have the clout to influence parent school decisions. However, a negative cycle occurs, because BPN is hoping more BPN families would attend BPN schools so that the organization can use the schools to raise awareness.

If in general parents are looking for the same thing (academic quality) and they are seeking out the same sources (social capital), and schools are generally not very different, and the BPN schools are closer to home, then why are 80% of children leaving the neighborhood to attend schools? Although most schools they are attending are failing, BPN residents hear more negative information about BPN schools since its close proximity lends itself to more news. And since the school is failing, like most other schools, the news is often bad news. As parents hear disproportionate bad news concerning BPN schools, they hope another school with less news is not as bad. This hope for a better school creates the notion

that the grass is greener on the other side of the fence, creating a gap between perception and reality. Parents know that their neighborhood school is failing, but assume other schools farther away are better. Taking this consideration one step further, the concept of cognitive dissonance suggests that if students and parents have to expend more effort to travel farther, then they will convince themselves that they are attaining a better education than if they stay in a BPN school (Festinger, 1962).

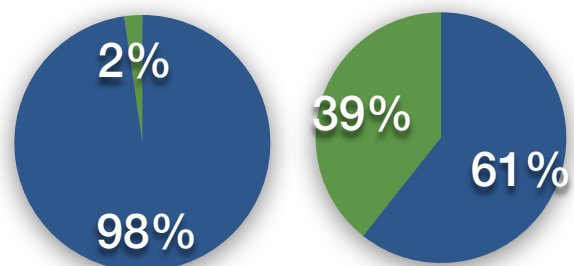
Consistent with our survey results and Coleman’s (1990) conceptualization of rational choice theory, the findings from the qualitative studies indicate that parents’ social networks play a central and fundamental role in the source and type of information utilized in the context of school choice, particularly at Westminster and the BPN Children’s Academy. These networks indicate the importance of information gathering and exchange when parents participate in deciding which school to choose. These pervasive patterns of information exchange at Westminster, BPN Children’s Academy, and BPN parents at non-BPN schools however, are sharply contrasted with independent, isolated action in the context of decision making at Highgate Heights and Bennett.

During extensive interviews with parents who live in the BPN zipcode, there was a divide in school choice decisions. In interviews with BPN parents at Westminster, BPN Children’s Academy, and non-BPN

schools, there were repeated references to relatives, colleagues, co-workers, and in some cases “the woman down the street” as sources of information regarding the school program. The “word of mouth” network was highlighted and distinguished from more deliberate district and BPN-level information-dissemination activities, such as mailing, meetings, and media outreach. One BPN parent said, “I know BPN sends flyers and they have that billboard, but I don’t really know who they are or what they do.” Although most parents reported that they are aware of district- and school-level policies designed to provide accurate and accessible information to parents regarding school choice, these sources are not as influential as the social and professional networks of parents.

As this and other studies indicate, the nature of parent’s primary social networks is

Figure 29: Satisfaction and Recommendation Likelihood



Data Source: Parent Survey

98% of parents of “very satisfied” parents are “very likely” to recommend their school, whereas 61% of “somewhat satisfied” parents are “very likely” to recommend their school

directly related to social class (Lareau, 1989). The development and utilization of parents' social networks are linked to issues of occupation/employment statuses, neighborhood stability and isolation, and membership in recreation and community organizations (Cochran, 1990). For example, several parents noted that information regarding BPN was more easily collected due to their own status in BPN. Gloria, an employee at Wal-Mart with a daughter enrolled at Westminster, noted:

"I think less than 1% of BPN parents are taking advantage of what BPN has to offer. The only reason why I know is because I've been here since before BPN arrived, I've joined BPN as an active community member, and I see the difference. And I'm a concerned parent. More parents need to be involved in BPN."

Gloria's network includes principals, counselors, and neighborhood parents with children both in BPN and non-BPN schools. She described the benefit of this kind of social network:

"I only know what I hear and what people say. That holds a lot of weight for me. Because I'm involved, I get the chance to interact with people who care about the community and who care about education and who have a better idea of which schools are working and which schools aren't. I try to pass it on to the parents who can't participate in the same way."

Many of the parents who live in the BPN zipcode leverage information resources

related to their workplace and kin. Although these parents are aware of the district website and have read articles about schools in Buffalo Public Schools, they sought the advice of colleagues and kin to make their final decision, especially when it concerned Westminster, BPN Children's Academy, and non-BPN schools. The information gathered and shared among social network members is richly detailed, reliable, and relevant.

John Heath, an educator and community activist with a son who attended Westminster but then selected the non-BPN high school Tapestry over their neighborhood high school, Bennett, noted:

"We did the research and talked to people and knew that in choosing the best high school for my son, Tapestry was the best choice. I believe Bennett will become a great choice, especially with BPN involved, but at this time, Tapestry was where all the best Westminster students were going."

Several young parents at BPN Children's Academy noted the convenient positive interaction with other young parents in the neighborhood. One 19-year-old parent, Pamela, participating in BPN's Parent Achievement Zone, explained:

"I'm learning how to budget. I'm learning a lot. I learn from other parents. This one parent always takes from her kids. I say yes to my kids for everything so now they're spoiled, and I have to get them out of that while they're still young."

As a consequence of the relationship between social-class structure (employment,

education, income) and social networks, the pool of resources from which lower-income parents can draw to make decisions regarding school-choice programs may be somewhat smaller than the one available to middle-class parents (Smrekar, 1996). This constraint is particularly evident for parents who are not employed, never finished high school or attended college, and also live in Buffalo neighborhoods that are unstable, transient, unsafe, and isolated. These parents are far less likely to have friends or family members who work in the school system. In the absence of the type of social networks that can deliver relevant and valuable information regarding school BPN school options, applications, and deadlines, lower-income parents tend to participate by default into Buffalo Public School's school choice system.

Several parents with lower-income were uninformed and unclear about school options and the academic within their child's schools. The prevailing response is that BPN parents do not choose their neighborhood high school, Bennett, but are placed there by default because, as 14 out of 20 parents explain, "it is a school of last resort."

What are the implications for BPN Schools?

FINDING 1

Word of Mouth Matters

Parents rely on their peers, neighbors, and social networks to navigate the educational decisions facing their children. When asked how they chose their children's schools, parents nearly always mentioned "word of mouth." Many parents talked about a neighbor helping them either make their decision or help them through the process of applying for a school. One parent said, "Even me, working in a school, I didn't know the deadlines. Not every parent has a computer or access to Internet service at all. I wouldn't have found out about applying if it weren't for my neighbor."

Positive commendations are sourced by satisfied parents. Ninety-seven percent of "very satisfied" parents are "very/extremely likely" to recommend their school, whereas 60.5% of "somewhat satisfied parents" are "very/extremely likely" to recommend their school. However, 62.5% of non-BPN parents are "very satisfied" compared to 49.3% of BPN parents. Therefore, there is a greater chance that "very satisfied" parents will recommend their non-BPN school to BPN parents. If there is increased satisfaction of BPN schools, then positive word of mouth will also increase.

FINDING 2

Safety and the High School Transition

When determining whether or not to stay in the BPN zipcode for high school, the issue of safety was mentioned consistently. “Academics is certainly important, but if behavior is out of line, the academics is going to be a lot lower. If teachers are not holding students accountable for their actions, it’s not really a place I want to put my kids.” Another parent stated, “I’m looking for a non-bullying school, and if they need the police there, my child doesn’t belong there.”

FINDING 3

The Power of Community

The concept of school as a community portrays adults and students as linked to one another by a common mission and by a network of supportive personal relations that strengthen their commitment to the organization (Bryk & Driscoll, 1988). One parent who has had 6 children attend Westminster said, “Having teachers who are dedicated and committed to children and instill a sense of pride in the school.” Another parent, who was young and had moved here from Virginia, stated, “When I first moved here, my kids weren’t school age, but my cousins had kids here at the the time and I was hearing so many positive things: test scores, and especially the loyalty

between staff and parents. I felt safe leaving my kids there.” Community is so strong, that even when a parent became disappointed in a BPN school’s academic progress, she said, “I have considered putting all my children out of BPN, but the community here is so great. They don’t want to leave. We are staying.”

FINDING 4

Academic Quality Matters

Academic quality was referenced often in our interviews with both parents and community members. One principal even stated that the “academics are not where they need to be.” When determining the quality of schools, parents relied on their social networks. Few parents relied on consulting state scores, relying on general perception instead. One parent listed a series of questions she would consider when determining which school to choose. “How are the teachers with the kids? What curriculum do they teach and how do they teach it? How do they adapt to students with disabilities? Do they care about the kids?” However, when I asked her where she found her answers, she said it was through word of mouth.

Several parents didn’t choose Bennett for their children because of the low graduation rate. “Bennett? My goddaughter, she graduated from there. She said 100 kids didn’t graduate with her. A lot of fighting, bullying, some guys getting

jumped.” When we asked parents about their perception of Highgate Heights, most replied by saying they hadn’t heard anything. One parent who did hear of Highgate Heights, meekly said, “Highgate Heights- I don’t think too many people would recommend it. It looks like an alternative school.”

FINDING 5

BPN Awareness

All parents who chose non-BPN elementary schools had never heard of BPN. Even several parents who have chosen Westminster cited that it was because of academic quality, and was unaware that it was a BPN school. A parent of two children at Highgate Heights said, “I haven’t heard of any of the BPN schools. I haven’t heard anything about BPN.”

However, parents who had chosen Westminster for elementary, but opted out of neighborhood and chose a high school other than Bennett had suggestions on how to get more families interested in BPN schools. One parent said, “There should be parent seminars, morning meetings, flyers, teachers should be talking to parents being boisterous during dismissal to remind kids about the great events BPN is hosting. The principal should make the parents know they are serious about these events.” Another parent stated, “BPN might can go out and meet the parents of a lot of the kids. Home visits, block clubs, have a luncheon or a night

bingo to involve families. I’d love to see a job training program in the neighborhood too.”

Parents suggested publicity in the form of community engagement and branding around the neighborhood too. A parent who is an avid supporter of BPN stated, “BPN needs to provide more positive publicity for Bennett and Highgate Heights if they want parents to go there.”

BPN families will be more likely to choose a BPN school even if it is low-performing if they were aware of the cradle-to-career services that BPN offers.

Discussion and Interpretation

As revealed in our analysis, the students who choose BPN schools have a similar profile to the students who opt out of BPN schools.

Who is choosing BPN?

Interviews with BPN principals, BPN parents, and BPN community members reveal that parents of elementary school students are committed to Westminster because it is perceived as a high quality school. BPN is not a major factor in BPN parents deciding to attend Westminster. BPN parents with children who attend Highgate Heights attend because of

perceptions of safety and academic quality, and not because it is a BPN school.

Who opts out of BPN?

BPN parents who chose Westminster for elementary opted out of Bennett, the BPN high school, because of concerns of safety, academic quality, and community perception of the school. The parents who knew that BPN was a partner with Bennett valued their child's safety and academic achievement over access to BPN resources. The greatest number of students opt out for high school.

What are the implications for BPN?

More than 80% of BPN high school students attend a school where 55% or fewer students graduate in four years. This puts all but the most academically proficient and determined students at risk and suggests a dropout culture that includes negative peer pressure and outside influences. BPN students at risk for not graduating on time are significantly more likely to attend schools with low graduation rates. In order for BPN to succeed in creating high-achieving schools for students, BPN must invest in improving all three schools regardless of the percentage of neighborhood students attending. In terms of BPN performance, the data reveal dangerously low levels of academic proficiency, and this is pervasive throughout Buffalo Public Schools. The difference is the pipeline of services BPN offers to students of BPN schools, and

neighborhood families will be more likely to choose a BPN school even if it is low-performing due to the cradle-to-career services that BPN offers. However, the relative resource accounts of social networks are directly related to members' social structural position (Cochran, 1990; Cochran & Brassard, 1979; Lareau, 1989). BPN elementary school parents who are not choosing BPN schools are not even aware that BPN services exist and are linked to only three schools in the zip code. Choices tend to be far more constrained for low-income families; higher-income families are more likely to be members of social networks that provide information on school processes and practices (Lareau, 1989; Smrekar, 1993)

Increase Academic Rigor and Personalization of Learning

BPN's overarching goal is to equip every student to attain academic proficiency and position themselves for college and career. As a recruiting tool, parents prioritize academics first when choosing a school. Interview data showed that some parents opted out of BPN schools because of poor academic performance. There is marginal to no difference in academic quality between BPN schools and the non-BPN schools where 20+ BPN residents attend. The mean scores of each of these schools do not meet proficiency standards. Although parents seek academically strong schools, they are forced to navigate murky information since there are not academically strong options (with the

exceptions of selective criteria magnets where very few BPN students attend).

Convincing Westminster and Highgate Heights parents to attend Bennett High School is a challenge, particularly due to concerns of safety and academic quality. However, in order for BPN to provide cradle-to-career services to BPN residents, it is critical that BPN elementary students choose Bennett as their high school.

Redefine Leadership Roles

The redefinition of leadership roles and authority relationships enable multiple leaders throughout the school to impact teaching and learning at Bennett. When schools are true learning communities, the leader is the facilitator; the community guides the adult behavior (Murphy, 1995). Distributed leadership rests on a base of expertise rather than hierarchical authority.

Bennett's principal using this approach will help focus on structural elements within the organization as well as strategy, implementation, and adaptation. Turning this school around will be successful when goals are clear, cause-and-effect relationships are understood, and there is little conflict, uncertainty, or ambiguity about the mission. The principal of Bennett should adopt collaborative forms of leadership, which involve parents, teachers, students, and other stakeholders in the process (Murphy, 2002). In order for school improvement to occur, academic press and a

personalized learning community must be established at Bennett.

Viewing Bennett through a political frame reveals underlying tensions around power, the scarce resource of time, differences in values and interests, and competing coalitions. The principal must shift away from the antiquated factory school model to a community-anchored school that is highly individualized around culture (Murphy, 2001). The principal should leverage Bennett's strong community support, strong athletic teams, and its identity as a neighborhood school to establish a culture of achievement in the community.

Focus on Building a Personalized Learning Community

From a symbolic framework, the shift from an impersonal and detached bureaucratic school to a personalized, vision-aligned community can reflect a culture of success and excellence. Students need to feel they belong in the school community (Osterman, 2000), for perceived support is correlated to high motivation (Wentzel, 1997). Leadership should diagnose the strength of the existing culture and reinforce and celebrate the culture's strengths while connecting it to the history of Bennett.

Due to the structure put into place that enables both students and teachers to be valued and respected, protected and cared for, the press for excellence becomes the culture and definition of what it means to

be a member of the Bennett family. Consequently, this affiliation increases the competency as well as the commitment of both teachers and students, which increases overall academic engagement. Teachers are happier and more productive because they have more control, and students can be better matched to curriculum and learning environments that best suit their individual needs. (Leithwood and Prestine, 2000). Belonging to a school is crucial for success (Resnick, 1997).

Focus on Building a Professional Culture

When reframing Bennett as a high-performing school, applying the political frame is critical to winning teacher support. Present morale is low, and the school leader must be comfortable having difficult conversations that address conflicting interpersonal issues at Bennett. The leader must use his/her power to influence others to commit to addressing the core issue of underachievement (Bolman and Deal, 1989).

Bennett High School's assets are its long history of support in the community, a strong alumni association with pride in academic success, and a renewed commitment to being a neighborhood school. With strong leadership implementation of better instruction, stronger culture, lower class size, more personalization, and greater curricular rigor and a focus on the structural, human resource, political, and symbolic frames at Bennett High School, BPN parents will be

Parents rely heavily on social networks even in an environment in which the PIC program is well organized and well-known (Petronio, 1996).

more likely to choose Bennett. With strong leadership and a focus on the professionalism of teachers and creating a personalized learning community, all students in this school can participate in a high-functioning school with student academic learning and social learning as successful outcomes.

Parent Awareness of BPN School Support

The quality of information available to parents regarding school options is relevant to school choice (Office of Educational Research and Improvement, 1992). Research indicates that Parent Information Centers (PICs) have been instrumental in providing information that is reliable, accurate, and accessible to disadvantaged and minority parents (Glenn et al., 1993). "Parent information centers are community resources that bring schools and families together and act as benign brokers of education choice. Without investments in these centers, the process of school choice becomes chaotic, uninformed, and potentially destructive to children" (Cookson, 1994 p.136). Parents rely heavily on social networks even in an environment in which the PIC program is well organized and well-known (Petronio, 1996). While there are Parent information centers at

all three BPN schools, the centers are not highly leveraged to create a sense of community or instill a culture of highly active parent engagement.

Many of the responses of the parents, administrators, and community members align with the research findings on school choice, indicating that there may be some connection between the literature on schools choice and why families choose to remain in a school. Factors such as social capital, cultural capital, academic programs, and safety matters. Under conditions in which parents choose schools based on particular values and expectations, a sense of membership in a value community is established (Coleman & Hoffer, 1987). Parents from Westminster often referred to the school as a family, and despite the recent changes in leadership, overall parents are invested in making Westminster a great school. Parents appreciated the fact that there was a strong level of personalization at Westminster and that academic rigor was a priority. On the other hand, parents from Highgate Heights prioritized safety and proximity to home as the major reasons for their school choice.

In the effort to create true neighborhood schools within the BPN zipcode, school choice policy is an obstacle to BPN's mission. School choice may work to further the fragmentation of communities already splintered through disinvestment and forced busing strategies (Smrekar, 1996). Interviewed parents commented on the lack

of community within the 14215 zip code and were comfortable with busing because "all you have to do is put them on a bus. You don't need to own a car."

In order to increase enrollment at BPN schools, especially at Highgate Heights and Bennett where enrollment is a challenge, some research has indicated that schools of choice, especially Catholic schools, and public magnet schools with a clear, focused, mission, have higher levels of parent involvement (Bauch & Goldring, 1995; Coleman & Hoffer, 1987). While Bennett benefits from having a criminal justice/law program, there is no clear mission or specialization for Highgate Heights, and is consequently not a highly regarded school in the community.

Another question to consider is 14215 zip code cohesiveness as a community. Contemporary concepts of community (Coleman & Hoffer, 1987; Newmann & Oliver, 1968; Steinberg, 1989) distinguish between a concept associated with physical or geographical boundaries and a concept of community grounded in social structures and social relations. The sense of solidarity, membership, and mutual support that results from community is thought to impact the individual in terms of personal development and integration, and the larger society in terms of social cohesion and stability (Raywid, 1988). Functional communities are characterized by structural consistency between generations in which social norms and sanctions arise out of the

social structure itself, and both reinforce and perpetuate that structure (Coleman & Hoffer, 1987). BPN is positioned to powerfully impact and revitalize the 14215 zipcode. Parents, who benefit from BPN's services, become proponents of the organization. When parents depend on BPN as a source of information on schools, they are more likely to choose BPN schools. Students who attend BPN schools benefit from the extra resources, which should increase their college and career readiness. The challenge is most parents are unaware of BPN's programs.

Branding initiatives should be both public and personal. The billboard and the Children's academy catch the public's attention. Community events, such as the back to school fair, position BPN to interact with the community. Both the literature and the parent surveys, however, show that information that is disseminated at the grass roots level through trusted social networks are the most credible (Teske, 2007).

Branding is dependent on parents reporting BPN success to their friends. However, interviews indicate gaps that must be overcome before they will vouch for BPN. Specifically, several parents said they lacked information on BPN purpose and achievements, and have not built relationships with BPN and school leadership. Connections with leadership are pivotal for parents to trust the school and in turn recommend the school to their social networks. Furthermore, interview data

demonstrated perceptions that Bennett is an unsafe school. Media reports and hearsay have colored these perceptions.

Recommendations

With 80% of neighborhood students attending schools outside of the BPN footprint, it is quite a challenge to enact a theory of action that requires the majority of students living in BPN to attend BPN schools in order to succeed and create a solid cradle-to-career pipeline of support for BPN families. These are our recommendations based on the findings of this report.

Boost the BPN Brand

- Conduct entry, exit, and parent satisfaction interviews/surveys to identify factors why parents come, stay, and leave BPN schools. Utilize key events to conduct satisfaction surveys in order to improve response rates.
- Create task forces composed of stakeholders at every level to analyze the results and create strategic plans (task force should connect BPN leadership, school administrators, faculty, parents, students, and community leaders)
- Create a clear plan to disseminate information on BPN programs and schools to all residents
- Reemphasize Bennett as a Law Magnet school through strategic marketing to create broad buy-in, since thematic focus is the second most common factor that

influences parental choice; establish supports to empower and mobilize students through civic engagement and social justice issues throughout the BPN neighborhood and schools.

- Publish data that demonstrates an increase in safety at Bennett

Establish BPN Parent Ambassador Program: Team BPN

Team BPN is a unique network of more than 300 BPS parents, alumni, educators, community partners, and others who volunteer to serve as goodwill ambassadors for the Buffalo Promise Neighborhood. They celebrate and enhance engagement in our schools, raise the positive profile of BPN, and foster a sense of pride amongst the educators and families who work and learn in the BPN footprint.

What are the benefits of being a part of the Team BPN network?

- The opportunity to give feedback to BPN leadership;
- Resource- and information-exchanging with active BPN supporters;
- Be in the know about current community efforts to improve BPN
- Participation in learning opportunities that interest you; and

- Access to the latest district news.

Ambassadors are strengthening Buffalo Promise Neighborhood, BPN schools, and the success of our BPN students by:

- Sharing best practices, resources, and recommendations;
- Sharing experiences in schools with prospective BPS parents;
- Supporting BPN community-wide and school events; and
- Contributing to the public profile of BPN through media.

BPN Parent Ambassadors can partner with the district in a number of ways:

- Generating proposals for BPS leadership
- Gathering for a panel discussion and networking session on the path to college graduations
- Providing feedback about educational policies
- Participating in civic engagement efforts in the community and supporting Parent Achievement Zone
- Hosting registration information sessions in their workplace; and
- Blogging with friends and neighbors about BPN schools.

Buffalo Promise Neighborhoods: Who Stays, Who Leaves, and Why

- Increase branding in the neighborhood with clear, focused, mission to revitalize the 14215 zip code through increased presence in BPN schools and increase frequency of BPN-sponsored community events on Highgate Heights and Bennett campuses.

- Activate existing social capital. Identify the “very satisfied” parents that attend the BPN schools and project their voice to the community, including facilitation of school tours. Forty percent of the surveyed parents identified school visits as a source of information in making their decision. BPN information dissemination plan should include outreach to families who, due to economic circumstances, are among the most socially and residentially isolated.

- Expand the channels of communication and information exchange in an environment that parents consider trustworthy and reliable.

- Increase visibility and community engagement.

Leverage School Leaders in the Branding and Parent Investment of BPN

- Expect school leaders to have understanding and deep engagement of BPN's mission and the ability to relate to parents.

- School leaders invest in creating parent opportunities to engage in school activities

- Continue systemic measures to improve the academic focus and quality in schools.

- Enhance student advocacy, by ensuring every student has at least one adult advocacy relationship (including AmeriCorps members). Effective relationships is a key engine to school reform (Murphy, 2002)

- Create strategic marketing and broad buy-in to Bennett's focus as a Law Magnet.

Further Research

- Systematically conduct exit interviews or surveys to identify reasons why parents are leaving, and where they are heading.

- Conduct parent surveys at events to encourage high return rates to identify sources of parent satisfaction or dissatisfaction.

- Establish a team consisting of all levels of stakeholders to analyze the results of both surveys and create an action plan that both promotes positive results and addresses adverse perceptions.

- Pursue further studies on the impact of school choice on the Buffalo context. If drop out rates have increased and achievement scores have decreased since school choice implementation, while diversity is steadily decreasing, then further studies should identify if there is a correlation of these results to school choice and consider other district wide strategies. Further study should also focus on the impact of neighborhood schools, and

consider the positive or negative results that occur when most students leave their neighborhood to attend school. Since farther distances and dependency on school transportation can create obstacles to school involvement, the study should include an examination of the impact of school choice on parental involvement in the school and student involvement in extracurricular activities.

Conclusion

This report has explored the reasons why BPN parents either choose or opt out of BPN schools. Our findings show that low-enrollment of BPN students in BPN schools works against BPN's efforts to create cradle-to-career support for families who live in BPN. While many parents are pleased overall with Westminster, many are not aware of Highgate Heights as a BPN-supported school, and most are concerned about the quality of education at Bennett High School. While not all families choose to opt out of BPN, most do. Addressing these concerns can improve enrollment at BPN schools, and will certainly improve the perceived and actual value of education in a BPN school by making sure that neighborhood schools will be the first choice for BPN families.

S.D.G.

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Appendix A: Interview Participants and Protocols

Interview Participants

BPN Parents Who Choose Only BPN Schools	9
BPN Parents Who Choose Only Non-BPN Schools	7
BPN Parents Who Choose Both BPN and Non-BPN Schools	4
Subtotal	20
BPN Principals	3
BPN Community Members	3
Total Interviewees	26

Interview Protocol: BPN Parents

GENERAL BACKGROUND INFORMATION

1. Tell us your story...how did you get here?
2. How many school-aged children do you have?
3. Where do/have they attend(ed) school?
4. When did you come here?
5. What led you to choose this particular school?
6. What type of job do you currently have or have you had in the past?

HOW PARENTS GATHER INFORMATION

7. What is the process to enroll your child in a school in Buffalo?
8. How did you decide on the school for your children?
9. What kinds of information were you interested in? What was most valuable?
10. Have you talked with anyone about this school or previous schools your children have attended? Who? What information did you gain from those conversations?

REASONS FOR LEAVING/STAYING

11. Do you know people who have left this school? Do you know why they left? Where they went? Is it common for families at this school to leave?
12. Have you ever considered trying another school? If yes, why?
13. What type of school? (charter, private, other county, etc.)
14. Why have you decided to stay?
15. What factors will influence whether you decide to stay or leave?

GENERAL BPN SATISFACTION

16. In your opinion, what does the average person think about BPN schools?
17. How do you think BPN schools are doing in general?
18. How do you get your information concerning BPN schools?
19. What do you think BPN needs to do to improve?

Interview Protocol: BPN Administrators

GENERAL BACKGROUND INFORMATION

1. What is your position?
2. How long have you worked at this school? In BPN schools?

REASONS FOR LEAVING/STAYING

3. When students enroll at your school from outside the district (private or other public), why do they choose BPN and your school?
4. Do parents tour the school or speak with someone at the school before making the decision to enroll at your school? Do they consider private schools or moving to another district as well?
5. Do you have a sense of the percentage of students who attend your school and then leave the district every year? Attend another BPN school and then leave the district? Does the leaving of families impact your school? In what ways?
6. If families leave this school to enroll in a private school or another district, do you know why they left? Where they went? At what age they left? Are there patterns in who's leaving?
7. If a family does leave your school, when during the school year does this happen, e.g., during summer, during the school year?
8. What do you do to keep students in BPN? What does BPN do?
9. How can the schools or BPN do a better job holding onto students?
10. Does a staff member gather any information about parents who leave the school or the district? How are exit codes determined?

HOW PARENTS GATHER INFORMATION

11. How do you think parents decide the school their children will attend?

GENERAL BPN SATISFACTION

12. In your opinion, what do you think typical parents at your school think about BPN schools?
13. In your opinion, are parents satisfied with your school?

Interview Protocol: Community Members

GENERAL BACKGROUND INFORMATION

1. What are some of your key responsibilities in your role?
How long have you been in this position?
2. Do you have partnerships with other community organizations? Who are those organizations? What kind of work do you do together?
3. In what ways are you involved with BPN schools?
4. How do you communicate with district representatives?

PERCEPTION

5. What is the process for parents to choose a BPN school?
6. Are BPN schools high quality schools? Why or why not? What information do you consider when making this determination? What are key areas of improvement?
7. How does the level of quality of schools impact your work? Your interactions with other community members?
8. Do your children (if relevant) attend BPN Schools? Why or why not?
9. What does the typical Buffalo resident think about BPN schools?

IMPACT

10. In what ways does the reputation of BPN schools impact the local economy?
Housing market?
11. What are those factors that seem to most influence families' home buying decisions?
12. If schools are a factor, what are people considering? What are those things that are most important to them?
13. How has immigration impacted BPN schools?
14. Are the schools in BPN of equal quality? Why or why not? Are there particular areas of the city where there are differences? What is the cause of those differences?
15. What changes would you like to see made to the school system?
16. If the reputation of the schools improved, what might the impact be on Buffalo? Are there particular areas that would be impacted more than others?

Appendix B: Data Analysis

Parent Survey Data

Respondents

Non-weighted- Number of respondents according to school

School name	Frequency	Percent	Percent of 2013 Enrollment
Westminster	123	48.0	22.2
Highgate	33	12.9	6.2
Enterprise	45	17.6	11.3
Lydia Wright	55	21.5	7.1
Total	256	100.0	

Weighted- Number of respondents according to school

School name	Frequency	Percent
Westminster	77	29.3
Highgate	83	31.4
Enterprise	37	14.1
Lydia Wright	66	25.1
Total	263	100.0

BPN Awareness

Awareness level of BPN services (not-weighted)

	Frequency	Percent
Not aware	62	24.2
Have heard of BPN but not sure what they provide	46	18.0
Somewhat aware of their programs	62	24.2
Very aware of their programs but have not participated	26	10.2
Have benefited from their programs	46	18.0
Total	243	94.9

Is the BPN the most important reason in choosing a school (not-weighted)

	Frequency	Percent
2nd most important source	6	2.3
1st most important source	1	.4
Total	7	2.7

Was BPN an informational source (not-weighted)

	Frequency	Percent
No	237	92.6
Yes	15	5.9
Total	252	98.4

Crosstabulation of School and using BPN as an informational source (not-weighted)

School name * Info source- Buffalo Promise Neighborhoods
Crosstabulation

Count		Info source- Buffalo Promise Neighborhoods		Total
		No	Yes	
School name	Westminster	110	11	121
	Highgates	30	3	33
	Enterprise	42	1	43
	Lydia Wright	55	0	55
Total		237	15	252

Factors Influencing School Choice

The most important factor in choosing a school (not-weighted)

	Frequency	Percent (based on response)
Academic Quality	112	47.7
Academic Focus	49	20.8
Size	7	3.0
Extracurricular	12	5.1
Special Services	9	3.8
Parent Involvement	5	2.1
Safety	16	6.8
Discipline	4	1.7
Location	16	6.8
BPN	1	.4
Other	4	1.7

The second most important factor in choosing a school

	Frequency	Percent (based on response)
Academic Quality	31	13.0
Academic Focus	51	20.1
Size	13	5.2
Extracurricular	11	4.4
Special Services	13	5.2
Parent Involvement	20	8.0
Safety	39	15.7
Discipline	25	10.0
Location	32	12.9
BPN	6	2.4
Other	7	2.8

Cross Tabulations Based on School Satisfaction

Overall satisfaction with the school * Likelihood of recommending the school to friends and colleagues Crosstabulation

Count

		Likelihood of recommending the school to friends and colleagues					Total
		Not at all likely	Not very likely	Somewhat likely	Very likely	Extremely likely	
Overall satisfaction with the school	Very Dissatisfied	3	0	0	0	0	3
	Somewhat Dissatisfied	2	11	5	0	0	18
	Neutral	0	2	24	2	0	28
	Somewhat Satisfied	0	0	24	32	5	61
	Very Satisfied	0	1	2	40	89	132
Total		5	14	55	74	94	242

School name * Overall satisfaction with the school Crosstabulation

Count

		Overall satisfaction with the school					Total
		Very Dissatisfied	Somewhat Dissatisfied	Neutral	Somewhat Satisfied	Very Satisfied	
School name	Westminster	0	8	8	21	36	73
	Highgates	3	3	10	28	40	84
	Enterprise	2	1	3	4	24	34
	Lydia Wright	0	5	11	13	37	66
Total		5	17	32	66	137	257

Is academic quality the most important reason * Overall satisfaction with the school Crosstabulation

Count

		Overall satisfaction with the school					Total
		Very Dissatisfied	Somewhat Dissatisfied	Neutral	Somewhat Satisfied	Very Satisfied	
Is academic quality the most important reason	2nd most important source	0	2	3	7	17	29
	1st most important source	3	7	14	24	53	101
Total		3	9	17	31	70	130

Buffalo Promise Neighborhoods: Who Stays, Who Leaves, and Why

Is academic focus the most important reason * Overall satisfaction with the school Crosstabulation

Count		Overall satisfaction with the school					Total
		Very Dissatisfied	Somewhat Dissatisfied	Neutral	Somewhat Satisfied	Very Satisfied	
Is academic focus the most important reason	2nd most important source	1	2	6	14	25	48
	1st most important source	0	1	7	16	27	51
Total		1	3	13	30	52	99

Student Data

4th grade ELA Achievement

	Frequency	Percent
Does not meet	180	6.5
nearly meets	310	11.3
meets	167	6.1
exceeds	9	.3
Total	666	24.2

4th Grade Math Achievement

	Frequency	Valid Percent
Does not meet	170	27.0
nearly meets	288	46.5
meets	175	25.1
exceeds	35	1.4
Total	668	100.0

8th Grade ELA Achievement

	Frequency	Valid Percent
Does not meet	172	24.5
nearly meets	350	49.9
meets	167	23.8
exceeds	13	1.9
Total	702	100.0

8th Grade Math Achievement

	Frequency	Valid Percent
Does not meet	217	30.4
nearly meets	307	43.1
meets	170	23.8
exceeds	19	2.7
Total	713	100.0