

# In Low-Income Schools, Parents Want Teachers Who Teach

In affluent  
schools,  
other things  
matter

**Recent government education policies** seem to assume that academic achievement as measured by test scores is the primary objective of public education. A prime example is the federal No Child Left Behind law, which requires schools to bring all of their students to “proficient” levels on math and reading tests by 2014. Many state accountability plans judge schools on the basis of these tests alone, and some states and school districts are considering tying teachers’ compensation to student test results. Yet education historically has served a variety of functions (e.g., socialization, civic training), and public support for music and art in school suggests that parents value things beyond high test scores.

Are test scores the educational outcomes that parents value most? We tackle this question by examining the types of teachers that parents request for their elementary school children. We find that, on average, parents strongly prefer teachers whom principals describe as best able to promote student satisfaction, though parents also value teacher ability to improve student academics. These aggregate effects, however, mask striking differences across schools. Parents in high-poverty schools strongly value a teacher’s ability to raise student achievement

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and appear indifferent to student satisfaction. In wealthier schools the results are reversed: parents most value a teacher's ability to keep students happy.

### Data

This study combines data on teacher requests (by parents) and teacher evaluations (by principals) from 12 elementary schools in a mid-sized school district that asked to remain anonymous, in the western United States. The students in the district are predominantly white (73 percent), but there is a reasonable degree of diversity in terms of ethnicity and socioeconomic status. Roughly 35 percent of the white students are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch. Latino students, 84 percent of whom are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch, comprise 21 percent of the student population. Achievement levels in the district nearly match the average of the nation (49th percentile on the Stanford Achievement Test).

There is no formal procedure for parents to request specific teachers in the district. Principals report that they assign students to classes with an eye toward balancing race, gender, and ability across classrooms within the same grade. Parents submit requests during the spring or summer, and principals make assignments over the summer. During our analysis period, roughly 22 percent of parents requested a teacher each year and

79 percent of teachers received at least one parental request. Parents are also able to request that their child *not* be placed with a particular teacher (a "negative request"). Only about 9 percent of teachers received any negative requests, and 92 percent of teachers with negative requests had at least one positive request as well. Principals report that they are generally able to honor almost all requests, giving parents an incentive to truthfully reveal their first preference.

Parents in the district appear to have strong and varied preferences for teachers. Among those teachers receiving at least one request, the average number of requests was 6.2. Whereas the teacher at the 25th percentile received only 2 requests, the teacher at the 75th percentile received 8 requests. Moreover, there are often large *differences* between the most-requested and least-requested teacher within the same school, grade, and year: The average difference is 7.4, and in 10 percent of grades, the difference is larger than 17.

Our data include information on requests made for the 2005–06 school year (the "request year") in the summer of 2005 for kindergarten through 6th-grade teachers in all 12 schools in our sample, as well as information from an earlier year for two of the schools. We exclude from our analysis those teachers parents could not have plausibly requested—mainly new teachers (unless parents specifically requested the "new" teacher), who comprised about 17 percent of those teaching in the request year. Note that we include teachers who did not receive any requests, as long as they taught in the same grade and school in the request year and the prior year. Our final sample consists of 256 individual teachers. Parents who made requests chose, on average, from among approximately three different teachers.

With the assistance of the district, we linked the parental request data to administrative data on teachers and students. Because the administrative files provide only a very coarse measure of family socioeconomic status—eligibility for the federal free or reduced-price lunch program—we constructed an additional proxy for family income by matching each student's residential address to U.S. Census data on the median household income in the student's neighborhood.

Finally, to supplement our information on teachers, we administered a survey to all elementary school principals in February 2003 and March 2006. In these surveys, we asked principals to evaluate their teachers along a variety of dimensions, including dedication and work ethic, organization, classroom management, parent satisfaction, positive relationship with administrators, student satisfaction, role model value for students, and ability to raise math and reading achievement. The average rating was roughly 8 on a scale of 1 to 10, indicating that principals were quite lenient in their assessments. On the basis of these survey results, we created three measures: (1) the principal's overall assessment of the teacher's effectiveness, which is a single item from the survey;

(2) the teacher's ability to improve student academic performance, which is a simple average of the organization, classroom management, reading achievement, and math achievement survey items; and (3) the teacher's ability to increase student satisfaction, which is a simple average of the role model and student satisfaction survey items. If a teacher was rated by the principal on both the 2003 and 2006 surveys, we use the average of the two ratings.

In previous research using the 2003 principal survey data (see "When Principals Rate Teachers," *research*, Spring 2006), we found that principals in the district are usually able to identify the most and least effective teachers in their schools, as measured by their students' academic progress. However, principals appear to be less successful in differentiating between teachers near the middle of the distribution of teacher effectiveness.

### What kinds of parents make requests?

We begin by examining the characteristics of families who make requests. This is important for two reasons. First, our analysis of parent preferences will reflect only the views of those parents who actually made requests, so it is important to understand this group. Second, whether different types of families are more or less likely to make a request has important implications. If high-income parents are more likely to make a request, and such requests are for better teachers on average, then the availability of requests could exacerbate the achievement gap between students from low- and high-income families, even if all families equally value academic achievement.

In this district, families that are not eligible for the federal lunch program are about twice as likely to make a request as those that are eligible: 30 percent of families who are not eligible for free or reduced-price lunch make a request compared with only 13 percent of eligible families. Interestingly, these fractions are nearly identical across schools with very different poverty levels. Thus the socioeconomic makeup of the *school* does not appear to affect whether parents make a request, although the socioeconomic status of the *family* does.

We also conducted a more sophisticated analysis that measures the relationship between a family's demographic characteristics (such as eligibility for free- or reduced-price lunch, median household income of the student's residential neighborhood, race, and student prior achievement level), a school's poverty level, and the likelihood that the parent makes a request. These results confirm that, conditional on the characteristics of the family and student, parents in high- and low-poverty *schools* are about equally likely to make a request. However, parents of low-income *students* are about 6 percentage points less likely to make a request than parents of high-income students (9 percent vs. 15 percent). Additionally, parents from high-income neighborhoods are

about 4 percentage points more likely to make a request than parents from low-income neighborhoods (17 percent vs. 13 percent). Finally, Hispanic parents are significantly less likely to request a particular teacher for their child than are other families in the district.

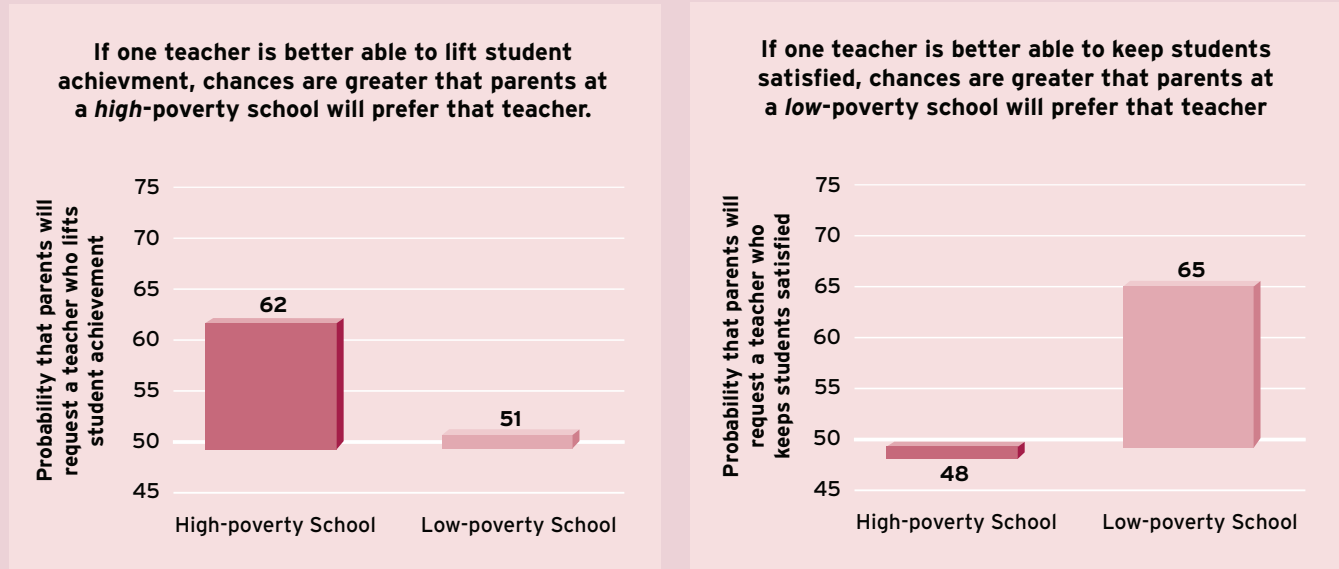
After taking into account differences in socioeconomic status, we found that parents of higher-achieving students are more likely to make a request, which perhaps reflects greater

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sophistication or interest on the part of these families. The parents of a student whose performance is 1 standard deviation above the mean are about 8 percentage points more likely to make a request than the parents of an otherwise similar student whose performance is 1 standard deviation below the mean (19 percent vs. 11 percent).

## Different Strokes at Different Schools (Figure 1)

If the parents of the typical child were given the choice between two teachers who differ on only one measure...



Note: At a "high-poverty school" 80% of the students are eligible for free lunch; at a "low-poverty school" 20% of the students are eligible for free lunch. Teacher effectiveness at lifting achievement and keeping students satisfied was determined by principal ratings of the teachers. The "better" teachers received satisfaction or achievement ratings one standard deviation above the district average.

SOURCE: Authors' calculations

### What kinds of teachers do parents request?

In general, parents who make a request exhibit a strong preference for teachers who have received higher overall ratings by the school principal. However, recall that the principals' survey responses allowed us to construct separate measures of two distinct aspects of teacher quality: the ability to improve student achievement and the ability to provide an enjoyable classroom experience for students. While positively correlated, these two factors appear to reflect distinct characteristics that vary across teachers. Overall, we find that parents value the teacher's performance on both the student satisfaction and achievement measures, but give more weight to the satisfaction measure.

Even more interesting, however, we find stark differences across schools in the type of teachers that parents tend to request. We find that parents making requests in high-poverty schools place less value on student satisfaction than those in lower-poverty schools. Conversely, parents in high-poverty schools value a teacher's ability to improve student achievement considerably more than parents in lower-poverty schools.

On the other hand, within a school, a family's own socioeconomic status is uncorrelated with the type of teacher a parent requests. That is, both more- and less-advantaged parents in low-income schools tend to request

teachers that are rated highly in terms of their ability to improve student achievement. In contrast, parents from all backgrounds in higher-income schools tend to request teachers who are rated more highly in terms of their ability to improve student satisfaction. When we control for the socioeconomic status of both the student and school, our findings are the same: *student* characteristics are not related to the type of teachers that parents prefer, while *school* characteristics are strongly related to parental preferences for teachers.

To quantify these differences, we used our results to simulate parent choices (see Figure 1). For the sake of simplicity, we first consider a situation in which a parent can choose between two teachers: one teacher has an average rating for both achievement and satisfaction; the other teacher has an average rating for achievement, but a high rating on the satisfaction measure (i.e., a rating 1 standard deviation above the mean). We calculate the percentage of parents with average background characteristics who would choose the high-satisfaction teacher. Next, we change one characteristic of either the parent or school and calculate how this change would affect the percent of parents who would choose the high-satisfaction teacher.

In a school where 80 percent of the children are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch, the parents of the average child

would have a 48 percent chance of selecting the teacher with a high-satisfaction and average achievement rating over the teacher with average ratings on both satisfaction and achievement. In other words, these parents are no more likely to choose the high-satisfaction teacher than if they had randomly chosen which teacher to request. In contrast, if the child attends a school where only 20 percent of the students are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch, there would be a 65 percent probability that their parents would select the high-satisfaction teacher. The 17 percentage point difference is large and statistically significant.

We then consider the scenario where the choice is between two teachers who have the same satisfaction rating but different achievement ratings, and see the opposite result. Parents in the lower-poverty school are no more likely than they would be by chance to select the teacher with a high achievement rating (51 percent), whereas parents in the higher-poverty school would choose the teacher with a higher achievement rating 62 percent of the time. Again, the difference of 11 percentage points is statistically significant.

As one might expect, parents of kindergarten children appear to value satisfaction more and academics less than other parents, though this difference is small and bordering on statistical insignificance. Grade level is otherwise unrelated to preferences for teacher attributes.

### Parent requests and classroom effectiveness

It is important to emphasize that the results presented above reflect both what parents observe and what they value. To the extent that parents have less information on a particular teacher characteristic, our findings may underestimate parent preferences for this characteristic. In particular, one might be concerned that parents do not have accurate information on teachers' ability to raise student achievement. For this reason, we focus primarily on information from the principal survey, which likely reflects teacher behaviors or qualities that parents might learn from observing the teacher's classroom or speaking with friends and neighbors who have had experience with the teacher in the past.

To test the sensitivity of our results to this methodological decision, we constructed a value-added indicator that measures a teacher's contribution to student achievement (accounting for a wide variety of student and classroom characteristics that could affect achievement independent of the teacher's ability). We find that teachers who perform better on our value-added measure also receive more parent requests, even after controlling for the student satisfaction measure from the principal surveys. However, when we also control for the principal-reported academic measure, this relationship is no longer significant, although the relationships between parent requests and both principal-reported

measures remain positive and significant. These results suggest either that the academic considerations parents value are better captured by principal ratings or that parents have difficulty observing how much value a teacher adds to reading and math test scores.

### An explanation?

The results presented above suggest that parents in low-income schools strongly value student achievement and are essentially indifferent to a teacher's ability to promote student

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satisfaction. The results are reversed for families in higher-income schools. At the same time, we find that parent preferences *within* schools are identical across several measures of family socioeconomic status. How should we interpret these results?

One possible explanation emphasizes the role of school context in the educational process, particularly the interaction between parents, schools, and students. In this view, high- and low-income parents have similar preferences for student outcomes, but face constraints that are correlated with school demographics. Because academic resources are

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relatively scarce in higher-poverty schools (e.g., there are more disruptive peers, lower academic expectations, fewer financial resources, and less-competent teachers), parents in these schools seek teachers skilled at improving achievement even if this comes at the cost of student satisfaction.

If this explanation were true, we would expect to find a positive association between school-level income and school-level academic inputs, and a negative association between school-level income and the differences in the value-added by teachers within the same school. The second prediction is simply a consequence of diminishing returns to academic inputs. More specifically, if the average quality of teachers in a school is already high, being assigned to one of the better teachers will have only a limited effect on student achievement.

To what extent are these predictions borne out in the data? A comparison of observable teacher characteristics across schools provides some support for the first prediction. As in most other school districts, the teachers in higher-poverty schools in our sample have fewer years of experience than their counterparts in lower-poverty schools (11.8 years vs. 14.0 years). In comparison to their counterparts, teachers in higher-poverty schools are less likely to have credits beyond a bachelor's degree (66 percent vs. 78 percent) and are less likely to have attended the most prestigious local university (75 percent vs. 80 percent) for their undergraduate degree. In addition, the variance of our value-added measure is significantly higher within higher-poverty schools than in

lower-poverty schools, even after we control for the experience level and other observable characteristics of teachers within each school, which supports the second prediction. Hence, while certainly not conclusive, the available evidence is consistent with the explanation offered above.

### **Conclusions**

Our findings suggest that what parents want from school depends on the educational context in which they find themselves. In particular, in low-income schools where academic resources are scarce, motivated parents are more likely to choose teachers based on their perceived ability to improve academic achievement. On the other hand, in higher-income schools these parents seem to respond to the relative abundance of academic resources by seeking out teachers who also increase student satisfaction. This may reflect a parental preference for their children to enjoy school, or it might reflect parental preferences for teachers who emphasize academic facets that increase student satisfaction but are not captured by standardized test scores, such as critical thinking or curiosity.

In considering the policy implications of this research, it is important to recognize that our analysis reflects parent decisions *conditional* on school choice. In principle, students in this district can attend any school, although in practice the vast majority of students simply attend their neighborhood school. Because the school choice decision is quite different from the teacher choice decision, our findings do not map directly onto the school choice debate. However, the results represented here do inform other policy issues. For example, they suggest that the parents of low-income, minority, and low-achieving children are much less likely to take advantage of informal opportunities to exercise choice from among teachers. This highlights the potential adverse impacts of honoring parental requests on the equitable distribution of education resources. Our results also suggest that different socioeconomic groups are likely to react quite differently to accountability policies, such as those embodied in No Child Left Behind. In more affluent schools, parents are likely to oppose measures that increase the focus on standardized test scores at the cost of student satisfaction. More generally, programs that increase the focus on basic skills or classroom management at the expense of student enjoyment or other academic facets not measured on standardized tests are likely to be unpopular in more affluent schools.

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