Research

Going-to-School Shopping

Investigating family preferences in New Orleans

For more than a century, children in the United States have been enrolled in public schools based on where they live, and pressure to improve public education has been mainly channeled through school board elections, inter-district housing decisions, and test-based accountability. Over the past 30 years, however, charter schools, vouchers, and public-school choice programs have challenged this model. Rather than voting at the ballot box, market-based accountability allows families to vote with their feet and select the schools they prefer without moving households. In theory, this alternative also increases competition that promotes educational improvement systemwide.

How choice and competition affect the market for education depends on the characteristics of schools that families prefer. To the extent that families value school effectiveness with respect to academics, there

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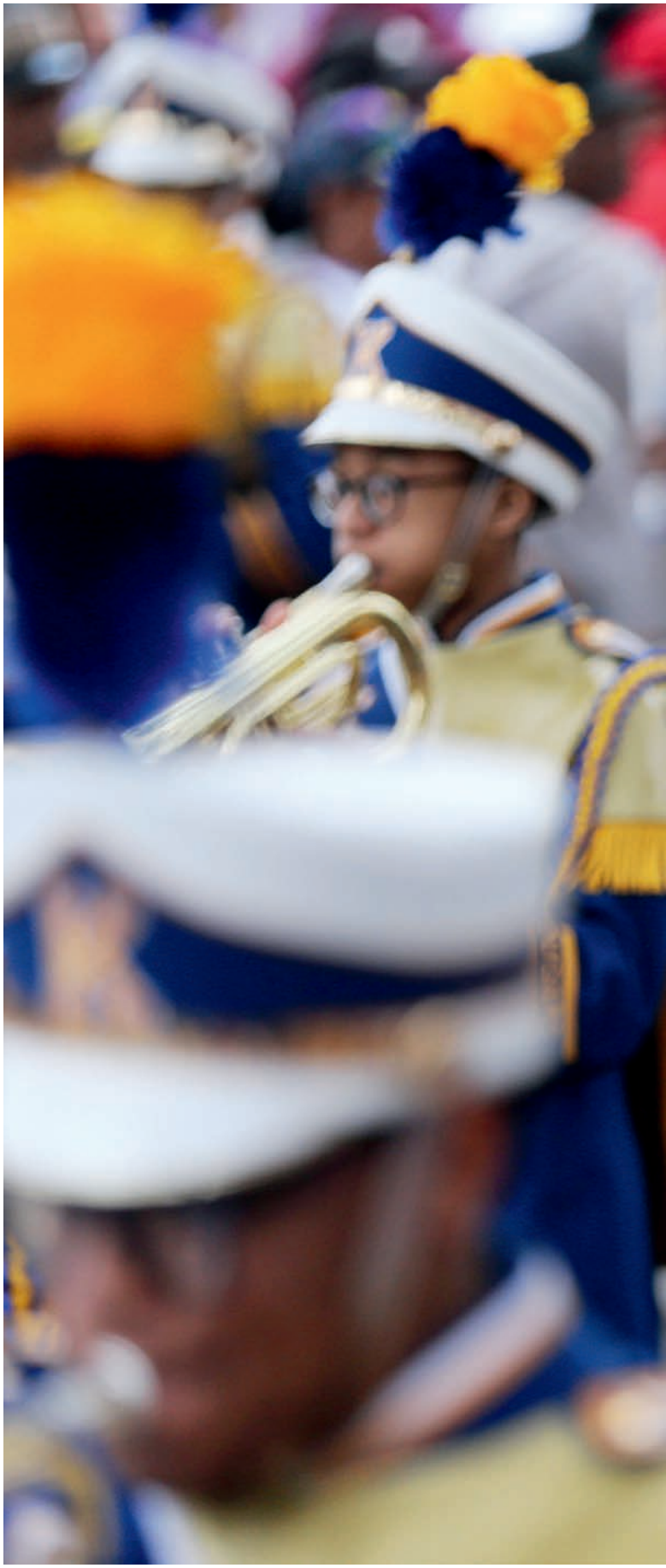

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Band students from John F. Kennedy Senior High School march on Mardi Gras Day in February 2020. For the parents of New Orleans high-school students, academic performance and the availability of a band program are major factors in their choice of a school.

is the potential for schooling choices and competition to lead to improved school quality along this dimension and better learning outcomes. However, if families prefer characteristics that are unrelated (or negatively related) to academic effectiveness, there is a possibility of reduced academic learning. Understanding family preferences is thus crucial in understanding the potential consequences of school-choice policies.

We study family preferences in one of the most competitive school markets ever developed in the United States: New Orleans, where virtually all district students attend a charter school. The vast majority provide transportation from anywhere in the city, and none can charge tuition. Admission is based on parental preferences expressed through a common application system. For many years, an advocacy group also published detailed school guides to inform families' choices. Not only do parents have more freedom to choose, but they have a ready source of information and a wide variety of options to choose from.

What are the school characteristics that drive family choices, and how do family resources influence these decisions? New Orleans presents a unique opportunity to answer this, with its combination of ranked-ordered preferences within an extensive choice system with detailed data about school characteristics and common enrollment forms. We look at school characteristics such as academic outcomes and extracurricular activities, as well as practical considerations such as the school's proximity, hours, and availability of after-school care. We report the influence of these factors in miles to illustrate the distance families would be willing to travel to enroll their child in a preferred school.

Our analysis finds that New Orleans families do indeed value academic performance, but they also value many other things at least as much. Improving a school's performance score by one letter grade is equivalent to reducing its distance by 0.8 miles for elementary schools and 2.1 miles for high-school families. An

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With the popularity of football in New Orleans, high schools that have such programs are strongly preferred by families. In contrast, the availability of other sports has a negligible effect on choice, but football is as appealing to families as living two miles closer to a school.

improvement of one standard deviation in a school's measure of value-added is equivalent to reducing distance by two miles for elementary schools and 6.4 miles for high schools.

But other factors are at least as important. Families prefer schools with more extracurricular activities, and the availability of a football or band program is especially influential in choosing high schools. Practical considerations also figure prominently. Families generally prefer schools that are close by, and we find some evidence that after-school care is important to elementary-school families. In looking at the preferences of low-income families, after-school care, distance, and extracurriculars seem especially important relative to academic factors, which has important implications for achievement gaps.

These findings confirm that New Orleans families of all income levels place substantial weight on academic quality when choosing schools, including measures of schools' value-added to student achievement that are not available in published guides. Yet families also value a broader range of school characteristics. And low-income families face constraints on their ability to choose schools based on academic considerations alone.

A District of Choice

Two major factors sparked the growth of charter schools in New Orleans. First, in the 1990s and early 2000s, Louisiana state lawmakers passed a series of laws allowing charter schools and creating the state Recovery School District to turn around low-performing schools. Then, in 2005, Hurricane Katrina devastated the city of New Orleans, with severe flooding that claimed 1,800 lives, caused more than $160 billion in damage, and displaced 250,000 people.

The state quickly took over almost all public schools. These schools were gradually turned over to charter-school organizations, while attendance zones were abolished. During the period of our study, New Orleans Public Schools comprised about 75 charter elementary, middle, and high schools, which were authorized and operated by a diverse group of charter-management organizations, nonprofits, and state and local agencies. More recently, governing authority has shifted back to the locally elected board under an unusual arrangement that has largely left the reforms in place.

Any student living in Orleans Parish is eligible to attend any of these schools under the district's all-charter, open-enrollment system. However, families are not guaranteed their first choice. Instead, since 2012, they have been required to fill out a common school-enrollment form and rank their chosen schools in order of preference.

In 2008, local advocates launched the *New Orleans Parents' Guide to Public Schools* in order to provide detailed information about this new landscape, as part of a larger effort to organize local parents in the pursuit of excellent public schools. The guide was available online and in print in schools, libraries, post offices, and other public locations throughout the city. It described schools' locations, offerings, hours, and characteristics based on what parents and community members expressed as most important to them. Over time, it grew to include more than 100 unique attributes for each school.

This detailed information forms the basis of our analysis, which aims to identify the academic and non-academic characteristics that families value when choosing schools. We narrowed the set of characteristics to consider based on discussions with local education stakeholders, survey evidence about New Orleans parent preferences from the Cowen Institute at Tulane University, and prior research about parental preferences. Our main characteristics of focus include school-performance scores, which are calculated by the Louisiana Department of Education based on student achievement and expressed as numbers or letter grades; estimates of each school's value-added to student achievement, which we calculate using standard methods (and are not published in *Parents' Guide*); the distance between each school and the family's home address; the availability of football, band, and other extracurricular activities; and whether a school offers extended school days, weekend classes, and after-school care.

What are the school characteristics that drive family choices, and how do family resources influence these decisions?

Our analysis also includes several other characteristics that local parents and advocates indicated would be important to New Orleans families. We use the *Parents' Guide* to identify whether a school is "in flux," meaning that it has recently moved locations or would be moving soon. This is relevant for understanding the role of distance, as well as a general desire for certainty and stability. Relatedly, we also include an indicator for a "legacy" school, which denotes whether a school's name was in use prior to Katrina. Parents and grandparents may prefer to enroll a child in the school that they themselves attended so their child or grandchild could potentially play on the same sports team. While not part of the *Parents' Guide,* we worked with local officials to identify schools that would meet this criterion. We also created a variable to capture the relative quality of a school building. This can vary considerably, due to building ages, storm damage, and whether a building was part of a major school construction and renovation initiative following Katrina.

We include this large number of factors because the characteristics of schools are correlated with each other. Therefore, if an important factor were excluded, it would distort our estimates of parent preferences for the characteristics we

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included. We did, however, have to exclude two potentially important factors: data on school safety, which were not available; and student demographics, because the city's publicly funded schools have little variation on these measures. While the precise shares can vary from year to year, at least 80 percent of city students are Black, and a similar share are from low-income households.

Data and Method

We focus on the 2013–14 school year, which was the second year that the common school-enrollment form was in use. The form, then called OneApp, allowed families to rank up to eight schools in order of preference. Our sample includes roughly 31,000 students in 2013, which is about two-thirds of the district's total enrollment of about 45,000. The OneApp process that year excluded the 19 schools run directly by the Orleans Parish School Board, including the city's selective-admissions schools, which means that the average academic achievement of students in this analysis is below the city average.

We first look at the characteristics of the schools in our sample, which we separate into two groups: elementary schools, which serve some combination of grades K–8, and high schools, which serve the upper grades. Most of our school characteristics comes from the *Parents' Guide*.

The average New Orleans elementary school offers about three different sports and six extracurricular programs and has a school performance score of 78.7, which is below the state average of 93.9. Nearly 70 percent of elementary schools have an extended school day, 24 percent offer free aftercare, and 20 percent offer paid aftercare. The average high school has a school performance score of 80 and offers six sports and seven extracurriculars. Nearly 90 percent of high schools offer band and football, and only one school offers one without the other (band, but not football). Two-thirds of high schools are "legacy" schools, with names the same as or similar to schools that existed before Katrina.

These characteristics show considerable variation in program offerings between schools, which is key to our study. If all the schools had the same offerings, then parent rankings would tell us little about what they prefer. Also critical is that we have data on parents' rankings of schools. We therefore can combine these data and study the relationship between the rankings and each school characteristic, accounting for the other characteristics at the same time. This includes both the weight families place on academic and nonacademic factors and how practical considerations influence their choices.

We begin by reporting average preferences across all families choosing among elementary schools and among high schools, and then look for any differences in preferences based on family income. To quantify our findings, we take advantage of a consistent finding in research on school choice in New Orleans and elsewhere: all else being equal, families strongly prefer a school that is close to their home. We first measure the extent to which proximity to school influences the choices of families in our sample. We then express our findings for other school characteristics in terms of relative distance from home to school.

Results

New Orleans families have a clear preference for schools with stronger academic performance. For families choosing elementary schools, a one-letter-grade improvement in a school-performance score is equivalent to reducing distance to school by 0.8 miles (see Figure 1). Differences in school-performance scores among highly rated schools appear to matter more for family choices than similar differences among schools with low scores. That is, earning an A grade from the state rather than a B has more influence on how families rank a school than earning an D rather than a F.

Value-added to student achievement is also positively related to elementary-school rankings, even after controlling for the school-performance scores assigned by the state. For elementary schools, increasing school value-added by one standard deviation is equivalent to reducing distance by two miles. Apparently, families have access to and are influenced by information on schools' academic quality beyond what is published in the *Parents' Guide*.

The academic school characteristics also play a large role in shaping family preferences about high schools, with measures of academic performance again playing a leading role. A one-letter-grade improvement in school-performance score is equivalent to reducing distance to school by 2.1 miles, and improving value-added by one standard deviation is equivalent to a school being 6.4 miles closer to home (see Figure 2).

In addition to a general preference for schools that are close by, we find that families are more likely to assign a high ranking to the specific elementary or high school that is nearest to their home. This suggests that some families view the nearest school as the default choice, even when there is a viable option only slightly farther away.

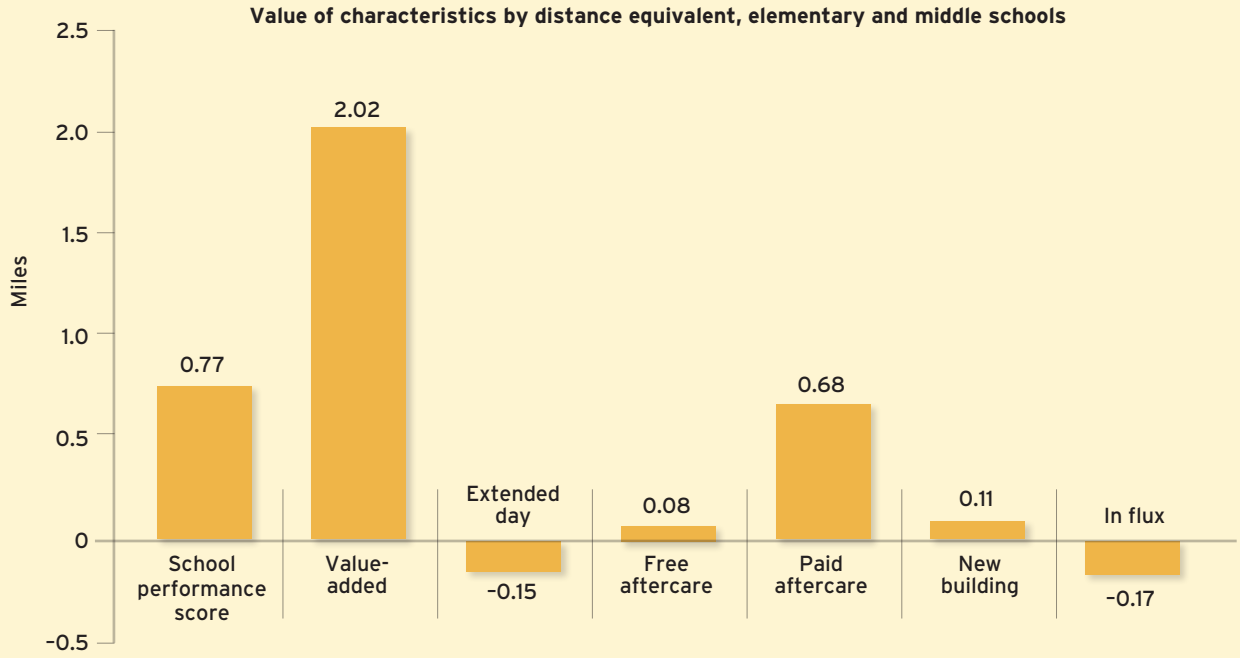
After-school care is another practical consideration that is important to elementary school families. The availability of a free after-school program is equivalent to reducing distance by about 0.8 miles, and a paid program is equivalent to a 0.7-mile reduction. In addition, we find that extended school days and weekend sessions have slightly negative effects on rankings. The seeming conflict between these results may be because after-school care is specifically designed to help parents work; extended school days are not.

The role of extracurriculars has also received relatively little attention in prior research. Football and band, for example, are particularly popular in New Orleans, so it is not surprising that families prefer high schools with these programs. Having either band or football is equivalent to reducing distance by two miles. However, the total number of sports and other extracurricular programs have negligible effects, and the presence of other music programs in addition to band are associated with a school's being 2.5 miles *further* away. Families seem to pay little attention to extracurricular programs outside of football and band in high school.

Families also appear to value high schools with a long tradition or "legacy" in the city, dating to the pre-Katrina years, which is equivalent to a reduction in distance of 4.8 miles. This could be because families want to continue traditions, sending children to the schools that parents or other family members attended. Alternatively, this could reflect established reputations; although the schools now have new operators in the post-Katrina period, families may perceive that having the same name means that it has programs and qualities similar to prior years. The fact that legacy status seems especially important in

Influential Factors in Public Elementary and Middle School Choice *(Figure 1)*

In ranking up to eight choices of elementary and middle schools, families are most influenced by measures of academic performance and supportive services like aftercare. Improving school value-added by one standard deviation is equivalent to reducing the distance between home and school by two miles, while a school being in a new building is equivalent only to it being one-tenth of a mile closer to home.



NOTE: All relationships are statistically significant at the 99 percent confidence level. Results show the effects of an improvement of one letter grade for School Performance Score and of one standard deviation for value-added.

SOURCE: Authors' calculations

high school might be because adults in New Orleans tend to identify themselves by the high school they attended.

Fewer families choose elementary schools that are "in flux," although the role of this factor, equivalent to 0.2 additional travel miles, seems small in comparison to other school characteristics. While attending school in a newer building would seem appealing, the estimates of the role of new and refurbished school buildings are erratic for both elementary and high schools, perhaps because many "in flux" schools also are in new buildings.

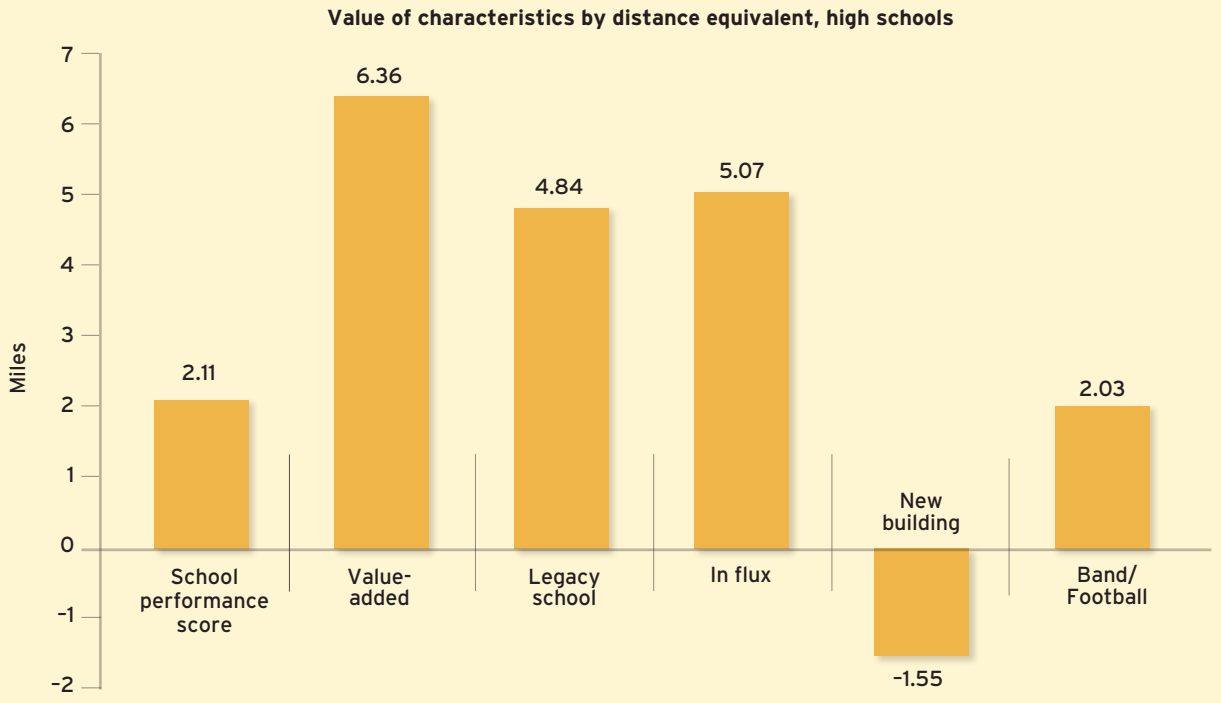
Differences by Family Income

Prior research has suggested that low-income families often place relatively little emphasis on academic quality in their schooling choices, and several theories take a deficit perspective on the topic. Some studies have focused on a lack of information among low-income groups, while others even suggest that groups with lower test scores might prefer schools where other students' academic performance is similarly low.

We explore an alternative explanation for why researchers may see lower-income families choosing schools of lower academic quality. Even among families with the same schooling preferences, there are reasons to expect lower-income families to place less emphasis on academics in their choices due to resource constraints. Any financial expenditures involved in schooling choices (e.g., childcare and transportation) yield proportionately greater losses in personal well-being for low-income families. Compounding this effect, some of the family resources that are necessary for education are

Influential Factors in Public High-School Choice *(Figure 2)*

When choosing a high school, families are influenced by academic performance and whether a school offers football and band. An improvement of one standard deviation in value-added is equivalent to a school being 6.4 miles closer to home. Families also rank schools higher if they have a long history and are "in flux," meaning they recently moved locations or were reopened



NOTE: All relationships are statistically significant at the 99 percent confidence level except for Band/Football, which is significant at the 90 percent level, and New building, which is not significant. Results show the effects of an improvement of one letter grade for School Performance Score and of one standard deviation for value-added.

SOURCE: Authors' calculations

also important for other household purposes. In particular, lower-income families are less likely to own automobiles that are used for many purposes, and the absence of a car increases the marginal cost to families of sending their children to schools further away.

To better understand how these income-related constraints play out in practice, we divide families into three groups based on the median income in their immediate neighborhood. Our data do not include families' household incomes, so these are based on Census median block group incomes from the 2007–2011 American Community Survey. The simple average of these median incomes is $16,174 in the lowest group, $28,461 in the middle group, $48,337 in the highest.

In the case of elementary schools, we find that the lowest-income families express somewhat weaker demand than the highest-income families for both school performance scores and value-added. School characteristics related to income constraints also seem to affect their choices more: Low-income families rank schools with free after-school care, extended days, and weekend classes higher than higher-income families. The lowest-income families also have weaker preferences than higher-income groups for paid after-school care, presumably because they cannot afford to pay for it.

The patterns differ somewhat in high school. Compared to the highest-income families, families in the two lower-income groups actually place greater importance on school value-added. Estimates of the influence of school-performance scores are similar across all three groups. Football and band are more important to lower-income families, as is the availability of other sports programs, but at the high school level this preference does not lead them to place less emphasis on academic quality.

In short, our results for elementary schools generally align with those of prior studies that have found weaker preferences for academic quality among lower-income families. However, our analysis points to a different explanation—one that is related to income itself and the way in which schooling choices intersect with household budgets. This role for cost factors reinforces the importance of considering a wide range of school characteristics when studying family preferences.

A Question of Competition

Identifying how families view and rank school characteristics is a difficult task. We rarely have data on how families rank schools in real choice settings, and even when we do, we see little variation about the schools they are choosing among and little information about those options. New Orleans's school-choice market and efforts to help parents make informed choices enable us to provide unique insights into what school characteristics drive parental choices and how family income influences family preferences. We show that, in addition to academic factors, practical considerations such as the availability of after-school care are also important to families—especially those from low-income neighborhoods. And while academic performance is important to families across grade levels and income groups, extracurriculars and especially football and band programs are highly valued overall and are particularly important considerations for the lowest-income families. This, too, could be related to cost, as wealthier families may be able to afford these experiences through other paid organizations if they are not offered by their school.

For elementary schools, increasing value-added by one standard deviation is equivalent to reducing distance by two miles. For high schools, it is equivalent to a school being 6.4 miles closer to home.

Our findings have important implications for school-choice policies, whose ultimate effects on educational quality will depend on what families value in schools. Even when schools do compete, it is not based solely on academics. When parents choose a school, they consider a wide range of characteristics as well as logistical factors related to their household budgets. To attract families—and particularly lower-income families—school leaders may have to reallocate resources away from academics to pay for after-school care and other nonacademic services, for example. This could help explain why studies of school-choice programs to date find only modest effects of competition on student test scores.

The share of U.S. families with access to school-choice programs has expanded rapidly in recent years, with about 7.5 percent of students nationwide attending charter schools and nearly 311,000 using publicly funded vouchers to attend a private school. More than a dozen states introduced legislation to enact or expand school-choice programs in the last year. While the ultimate impact of these efforts on educational quality is not yet clear, our findings indicate that the context of family choices is complex and includes more than just academic quality. Policymakers seeking to harness the power of competition to drive improvements in academic achievement would do well to keep this complexity in mind.

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