

EDUCATION MATTERS

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What Parents Want: Education Preferences and Trade-Offs

A National Survey and Report of K-12 Parents from the Thomas B. Fordham Institute

By Dara Zeehandelaar, Ph.D. and Amber M. Winkler, Ph.D.

Traditionally, public education has taken a one-size-fits-all approach, providing communities with K-12 schools that cater to general preferences and values rather than to individual families. Indeed, the drive toward greater school choice was fueled by the conviction that no single model of education is right for every child. But while school choice has expanded dramatically over the last twenty years, even the most entrepreneurial school leaders have spent little time studying the unique needs, characteristics, and preferences of parents. Many

schools and programs of choice – district, private, or charter – often tout their bells and whistles rather than the educational nuts and bolts, because they believe that’s what parents are looking for.

Other industries strive to understand key segments of their consumers so they can better tailor or customize their products. But what about the parent market? Does it have segments? Most attempts to study parent preferences have treated them as a single undifferentiated group, or divided them across race or socioeconomic lines. Few provided insights into how groups of parents differ in their

school preferences or are useful in showing how schools and districts could more effectively deliver the kind of education that parents most want for their children.

The Thomas B. Fordham Institute set out to explore, via proven methods of market research, what such groups of parents would look like. Specifically, they wanted to determine whether U.S. parents could readily be “segmented” into distinguishable groups that share a common set of priorities, and to examine the characteristics that parents in each group have in common. In short, what do parents prioritize? And if they can’t have everything on their wish list, what trade-offs might they be willing to make?

Methodology

The core of this study’s methodology was an online nationwide survey of over 2,000 parents, seeking information about the educational goals and school attributes that were important to them. The survey included a diverse set of parents with school-age children: African American, white, Hispanic, and Asian, urban and rural, rich and poor, liberal and conservative, those who sent their children to traditional, charter, and private schools. We asked them about their children, about themselves, and about their priorities relative to both the characteristics of a school and the education goals they deemed most important.

Parents’ “must-haves” do not vary greatly.

We thought we might find distinct groups of parents with sharply different values and preferences about schools. Instead, we found that parents are more alike than they are different. A few key goals and school attributes rose to the top of almost all parents’ lists—features such as a strong core curriculum in reading and math; an emphasis on science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM); and the development of good study habits, strong critical thinking skills, and excellent verbal and written communication skills. These preferences persisted across parents of different races, household incomes, and political ideologies, and were consistently ranked highly by parents regardless of whether their students attended traditional public, public charter, or private schools.

Yet some revealing differences are also visible by race, income, and other demographic factors. For example:

- White parents are somewhat more focused on their children learning “good study habits and self-discipline” than are African-American or Hispanic parents. White parents, on the other hand, are less concerned

with their children being accepted at a top-tier college than are parents of other races.

- African-American parents put more importance on diversity (wanting their children to learn to work with people from diverse backgrounds and being part of a diverse student body) than do their white counterparts.
- Both African-American and Hispanic parents rank “preparation for taking state tests” and “has high test scores” significantly higher than white parents do. Low-income parents also rank preparing for state tests higher than more affluent parents do.
- The goal of developing “strong critical thinking skills” has a nearly direct relationship to increasing income—the higher the parents’ income, the higher a priority this is.
- The lowest income group (<\$35K) ranks the following two attributes more highly than do the higher income categories (\$75K+): “[Student] finishes high school with job skills that do not require further education” and “[School] offers vocational or job-related programs.”
- On the other hand, parents in the lowest income group also view “understands how important it is to go to college” as a more important educational goal than do those in higher income groups.
- Politically conservative parents place greater importance than do moderates and liberals on a school that “has a very traditional approach to learning” and “teaches a curriculum that is compatible with my personal beliefs.” Conservatives also place higher priority on their child’s school encouraging “a strong code of moral conduct” and “a love of country/patriotism.”
- Liberal parents, on the hand, are more likely than moderates or conservatives to favor a school that “has a diverse student body,” and “emphasizes arts and music instruction,” and in which their child “develops an appreciation for nature” and “develop fluency in a foreign language.”
- There are few differences in the preferences and priorities of parents based on their religious service attendance, but those who attend services most frequently place the highest emphasis on their children’s school curriculum reflecting their personal beliefs. We identified several market “niches” worth considering by those on the “supply side” of school choice.
 - While we did not find distinctive “segments” (parents did not fall into neat groups of shared values that differed substantially from other groups), we did identify parents who prioritized individual school attributes

or student goals that most other parents viewed as less important. From this, six market niches surfaced.

1. Pragmatists

(36 percent of K–12 parents). These parents ranked highly the school attribute “Offers vocational classes or job-related programs.” Compared to the total parent population, this niche contains a disproportionately high percentage of parents of boys and of families with lower household incomes than the total population. These parents are also less likely to have graduated from college. But they do not differ from the total parent population in race/ethnicity, the region where they live, political ideology, or religious preference/service attendance.

2. Jeffersonians

(24 percent of K–12 parents). These parents ranked highly a school that “Emphasizes instruction in citizenship, democracy, and leadership.” Yet they themselves

are no more likely than other parents to be active in their communities or schools. Aside from being slightly more likely to be Christian, overall, this group of parents is almost identical demographically to the total population of parents. Their children are no more or less likely to be academically gifted, to enjoy school, to need special education, or to put in more effort.

3. Test-Score Hawks

(23 percent of K–12 parents). These parents ranked highly the school attribute “Has high test scores.” Parents in this niche are more likely than others to have academically gifted children who put in a great deal of effort at school, so it is not too surprising that they are also more likely to favor schools with high test scores—presumably so their children can be surrounded and challenged by similar students. Achievement in general is important to this group, as they are more likely than others to say they set high expectations for their children and push them





to excel. They are more likely to expect their children to receive a graduate degree. They appear to hold high expectations for their schools (a disproportionately large percentage report that their children have changed schools because, as parents, they were dissatisfied with the school or teachers). Parents in this niche are, on average, a bit younger and more likely to be African American and Hispanic.

4. Multiculturalists

(22 percent of K–12 parents). These parents ranked highly the student goal “Learns how to work with people from diverse backgrounds.” They are more likely to be African American. It’s more likely that their child attends school in an urban area. Compared to the total parent population, these parents are also more likely to be identified as politically liberal. Parents in this niche are more apt to say that, compared to other students, their children performs “about average” in school versus above or below average, although these parents also report similar levels of effort by their children in school.

5. Expressionists

(15 percent of K–12 parents). These parents ranked highly: “Emphasizes arts and music instruction.” They are more likely to be parents of girls and to identify their political ideology as liberal. They’re also less likely to be Christian (in fact, they are three times more likely to be atheist). Parents in this niche are no more or less likely to send their children to a private school but, among those with children who currently attend public school, more send their child to a charter school compared to the total

population. Parents in this niche are more likely to report being extremely satisfied with the culture/ atmosphere at their children’s school, but less likely to report satisfaction with communications from school to home. They’re also more apt to describe their parenting style as letting their children develop at their own pace and less apt to describe their style as setting high expectations for their children.

6. Strivers

(12 percent of K–12 parents). These parents ranked highly the student goal “Is accepted at a top-tier college.” The parents in this niche are far more likely to be African American and Hispanic. They are also more likely to be Catholic. Interestingly, the parents themselves do not differ from the total population in terms of their own educational attainment. Not surprisingly, parents in this niche are more apt to expect that their children will earn a graduate or professional degree. They are also more likely to send their children to a charter school rather than a traditional public school. Compared to the total population, these parents are also more likely to have a children attending school in an urban area. But they are also less satisfied with their children’s current school; indeed, the proportion of those in this niche who are extremely dissatisfied with their children’s school is greater than in the total population. Unsurprisingly, they are also more likely to say that their children changed schools due to dissatisfaction with the school or teachers because their child were unhappy with the school, and/or because of safety concerns.

“Nearly all parents want a strong curriculum in the core subject areas, a focus on critical thinking skills, and for their children to learn good study habits.”

What does this mean?

Examining these data, a case can be made for an education system built both on commonality and on differences. Nearly all parents want a strong curriculum in the core subject areas, a focus on critical thinking skills, and for their children to learn good study habits. This bodes well for policy initiatives such as the Common Core State Standards, which are designed to deliver much of that. Still, given how many parents assign a lower priority to schools having high test scores or preparing students to take state tests, the results also illustrate the chasm between parents and policymakers. It's a blunt fact that many parents are less obsessed with test scores than are those who design education policies.



Yet parents are far from identical. Once their “nonnegotiables” are satisfied, many start looking for something special. Some do indeed seek high test scores. Others want vocational training. Some want diversity. Others value art and music. Some want their children going to top-tier colleges. Others are satisfied with job skills. It would be hard, outside a system of school choice, for all of these parents to get what they want. In the end, it's not unlike people's view of cars. Pretty much everyone wants a vehicle that's reliable, safe, and affordable. However once those requisites are supplied, drivers and purchasers have dramatically different preferences as to roominess, sportiness, seating capacity, gas mileage, and, of course—pace Henry Ford—color and style. The auto industry has this figured out, the education industry still has a lot to learn.

A smart foundation of common, high academic

standards coupled with plenty of school choices is probably the best way to give parents what they want. That suggests plenty of work ahead for policymakers, school creators (and replicators), and educators alike, as well as doubling down by valuable information providers such as Great Schools to ensure that parents have easy access to the particulars of the schools they are considering for their daughters and sons.

School Characteristics

First, K–12 parents report the most critical factors in their children's school are 1) a strong core curriculum in reading and math and 2) an emphasis on STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math). These are the two things that parents prioritize above all else and appear to be nonnegotiable offerings. In addition to the “nonnegotiables”, parents also seem to have a firm list of “must-haves,” which include learning good study habits and self-discipline and developing critical thinking, life skills, and verbal and written communication skills. Below that we see a group of “desirables.” They include project-based learning, vocational classes, and schools that prepare students for college and encourage them to develop strong social skills or a love of learning.

On the flip side, there are certain things they would be more willing to give up. While not necessarily unimportant to parents, these attributes appear more “expendable.” They include small school enrollment, proximity to home, and updated building facilities. Parents also seem less concerned with their children's school emphasizing a love of country or fluency in a foreign language. Interestingly, diversity (both having a diverse student body and an emphasis on working with people from diverse backgrounds) is neither a “must-have” nor an “expendable.” This is not to say that parents as a whole do not at all value school demographics, location, or any of the other choices that are not “must-haves.” However, when forced to prioritize, parents prefer strong academics. ■

Written by Dara Zeelandelaar, Ph.D. and Amber M. Winkler, Ph.D., the full report “What Parents Want: Education Preferences and Trade-Offs” is available on the Thomas B. Fordham website, <http://www.edexcellence.net/publications/what-parents-want.html>.

Visual Literacy in Japanese (and American?) Classrooms

I was recently in Osaka, Japan, collaborating with colleagues and observing teachers working with preschool, elementary, and secondary students. Many teaching practices struck me as powerful; however, in this space I would like to share just one: an emphasis on students thinking deeply about visual imagery. I saw three wise-practice uses of images that others may benefit from contemplating.

A social studies teacher presented her grade five students (10 to 11 year olds) with a portrait depicting a Japanese community, as it likely existed in the thirteenth century Bushi Era. Students described evident aspects of daily life and related them to contemporary experiences. The teacher then asked *why* today's buildings, clothes, and landscapes are different from the way they were during the Bushi Era. What followed was discussion of why communities tend to function as they do—available resources, discovered technologies, material needs—with students offering plausible hypotheses about Bushi Era citizens. Finally, the teacher synthesized her students' answers into a series of tentative conclusions, mostly concerning issues of technology, pragmatic needs, and that which the community valued, to be tested over the next several class meetings.

A moral education teacher presented his grade nine students (14 to 15 year olds) with two photographs. The first depicted sand gardens from Kyoto's Ginkakuji-dera; the second depicted grounds from Louis XIV's Versailles palace. Once students had recognized obvious differences, the teacher asked *why* each was cultivated in its respective fashion. He asked for possible values espoused by the communities, their gardeners, and those from whom the gardens were constructed. The teacher helped his students analyze potential reasons underpinning the gardens' aesthetics (tenets of Buddhism and Absolutism,



natural resources) and he led them to discover associated value conflicts (asceticism v. opulence, utility v. decoration). The students' culminating task was to design, on paper, their own garden and to explain the values they want it to exemplify.

Another social studies teacher presented her grade six students (11 to 12 year olds) with three pictures of Tokyo's Shinjuku-eki public transportation station. The first, from 1945, portrayed crude wooden buildings, a few cars, and a small streetcar. The second, from 1962, depicted a few multi-story buildings, many cars, and one prominent business marquee. The third, from 2009, portrayed a dozen skyscrapers, scores of cars, and many businesses' signs. The teacher presented all three photos together and asked her students to think about them as a group with a single message. Students discussed the photos and offered "change over time" as an overall message, but the teacher pushed for deeper answers. She asked *why* citizens may have wanted or needed specific details. By lesson's end, students had discussed the set of photographs and their respective community's motivations and limitations for innovation.

I learned that "visual literacy" is not a curriculum standard that teachers in their prefecture or school district are required to cover with their classes. Still, when I asked the teachers about their lesson's goals, they each

“...the importance of helping students develop skills associated with understanding the various images inundating their daily lives.”

articulated the importance of helping students develop skills associated with understanding the various images inundating their daily lives.

Students living in America live in visually saturated communities—in both physical space (billboards, magazines, etc.) and online environments (Tumblr, Snapchat, Instagram, etc.). They often make sense of the world by interpreting images; thus it follows that as teachers design instruction, we might develop opportunities for our students to think deeply about visuals in ways similar to the examples shared above: thinking deeply about *why* images are created and *why* they may be presented to an audience. ■



Cory Callahan, an AAE member, taught secondary students in Georgia and Alabama for fourteen years. Cory recently received an Indiana University sponsored

Jacobs Educator Award for outstanding teachers who use technology to support innovative inquiry-based teaching and learning in their classrooms.

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Member Mention: Idaho Member Wins Award for STEM Teaching

Northwest Professional Educators Association, AAE's northwest chapter, member David Moon of North Idaho STEM Charter Academy in Rathdrum, Idaho, was one of three teachers recently honored by Governor Brad Little with a Governor's Industry Award for Notable Teaching in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (GIANTS Award). The award goes to teachers who have gone above and beyond in Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) education.



David is known for keeping the students discovering, experimenting, and continually achieving. Through rocketry he teaches the relevance of math—more specifically, trigonometry. He also uses T-bots, Minds-I, and First Lego League to help his students learn to build, program, test, and revise their product.

“Through the GIANTS Award program, the State of Idaho works with industry partners to recognize teachers who create unique opportunities for students

to not only experience the fun and excitement of science but also learn how to apply lessons in real-world settings,” Superintendent Luna said.

Mr. Moon is also known for having guest speakers in his class, including some from IBM, Discover Technology, Rathdrum Animal clinic, Architects West, Time Warner Cable, LCF Enterprises, the Lake Pend Orielle Acoustic Research Detachment, and NASA. David's constant connection of real-world application to his daily classrooms programs keeps his kids engaged and helps make their education relevant. David said:

“*It's easy to be motivated when you love what you do. I teach what I'm passionate about. I love trying new things and I'm always learning something new. My background is mostly in life science, physical science, and math, but I don't let that stop me from teaching the kids engineering, electronics, and computer programming. I'm not an expert in everything, and most of the time I'm doing my best to stay one step ahead of the students, but they love it, and they get so much out of it. It's such a great feeling when I introduce a student to something, and then they take it so much farther than I ever would have expected.*”

AAE congratulates David Moon for being an outstanding teacher! ■



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