

School choice: what do parents want?

Do different types of parents have different preferences about the type of school they want their children to attend? *Deborah Wilson* and colleagues explore what parents say they want – and which schools they actually choose.

The merits of different schools, and strategies for getting children a place at the most desirable ones, are famously the focus of countless dinner parties. But what are parents actually looking for in a school? This question matters not only for understanding the process by which children are assigned to schools, but also for evaluating the impact of school choice on educational outcomes.

The theory is that if families care most about academic standards, then competition between schools will focus on this and encourage schools to raise standards overall. But if parents value other characteristics in a school, such as its social or ethnic composition, the result of school choice may be increased social stratification. Parents' preferences for different types of schools with different characteristics fundamentally affect the outcome of any choice-based assignment mechanism.

A joint project by CMPO and the Institute of Education has been investigating what parents want from schools. Specifically, we examine whether different types of parents have different preferences about the type of school they want their children to attend.

A key question is whether more socially advantaged parents place greater emphasis on academic standards. If so, school choice would tend to increase social segregation across schools, with advantaged pupils concentrated in schools with the highest academic standards.

Our focus is on primary school choice, and we use the Millennium Cohort Study (MCS), a nationally representative dataset that is tracking nearly 19,000 children born in Britain around the turn of the century. The third wave of this survey, carried out in 2006 after the children had started school, includes detailed questions on the school choice process, including the reasons parents state were important in their choice, whether they achieved their first choice and whether they acted strategically in trying to do so.

The survey data also include details of up to three schools nominated by parents on their local authority school application form, as well as detailed information about the background of the family and the child.

We are therefore able to examine both what parents say they want from a school (their 'stated preference') and what they actually revealed they wanted from a school as indicated by the characteristics of the school they put first on their local authority form (their 'revealed preference'). In practice, when filling in the form, parents are choosing between a range of 'local' schools.

By combining the MCS with two national administrative school datasets (the Pupil Level Annual Schools Census/National Pupil Database and Edubase), we are able to work out which schools are available for each child and compare the parents' first choice

school with others in the local area. This gives us an idea of what types of schools parents prefer from the options available to them.

Obviously, some schools have small and restrictive catchment areas, and therefore we cannot simply look at pupils' nearest schools. Rather, we use a method that enables us to determine which schools were likely to be really available to them.

Our analysis of what parents stated were their preferences for schools is in line with previous research. We find that parents who are more educated and of higher socio-economic status are more likely to say that they value academic standards above other factors. Parents who are less educated and of lower socio-economic status are more likely to cite the school's proximity to their home as the key factor.

But stated preferences may not tell the whole story. Parents may only give socially desirable responses or they may forget some of their initial considerations. It is also hard to understand the trade-offs that families face between different characteristics of schools just by using data on what parents say are their preferences.

That is why we also look at the schools that parents actually choose, relative to the other schools available to them. We think such revealed preferences are more informative about what parents are really looking for from schools.

In doing this, we need to take account of the fact that within a given area, a family may not be able to gain admission to a particular school, even if it is quite close to their home. It may be that while a pupil lives within a given distance of five or six schools, their address will influence which of these schools they can actually get into. For example, poorer parents are likely to live much closer to schools with higher proportions of children eligible for free school meals.

When we take account of this restricted choice, we confirm that all families do indeed choose schools on the basis of their academic performance, as measured by the percentage of pupils exceeding the expected level at key stage 2. Parents also value particular peer groups, preferring schools with low proportions of poor children.

All parents value proximity, and they trade this off against their preferences for academic performance and peer group. We find that on average a family will be willing to travel another 400 metres or so to reach a school with higher attainment of 11 percentage points.

We also find that richer and poorer families actually have similar preferences across school characteristics. So allowing for the fact that poorer families tend only to be able to access relatively lower-performing schools with higher proportions of poor children, we find that within this limited group of schools, richer and poorer parents make similar choices. It is differences in location rather than preferences that drive differential pupil assignment across schools.

What of the annual statistics published on the numbers of parents who do not achieve their first choice school? Actually, in our data, 94% of families gain a place at their first choice, and this is true for advantaged and disadvantaged families.

We do find, however, that this high proportion is partly explained because less advantaged parents make more 'realistic', less ambitious choices of schools. In other words, although the high proportion of parents getting their first choice of school makes it seem as though school choice is working effectively, in fact many parents, particularly disadvantaged ones, recognise that they are unlikely to get into some schools and therefore make less ambitious choices in the first place.

Looking forward, it may be that as parents get more used to the new school admissions rules or as other 'tie-breaker' schemes (such as ballots) are introduced, more parents will not achieve their first choice. This in turn may put more pressure on the system to expand the supply of places in high-performing schools.

So what are the implications of our findings for educational inequality and for policies on school choice? On educational inequality, we show big differences in the choices available to different families. We show less important differences in their preferences.

The big driver of differential access to higher-performing schools is the quality of schools near to where families live. This is because the main factor in determining whether a child can get into an oversubscribed school is their geographical proximity to that school. This research therefore relates immediately to practical issues about the operation of the current system in England, particular school admission procedures.

The broader implications of our results for choice in education are mixed. Almost universally in our data, parents have a strong preference for schools with high academic attainment. This supports the idea that competition to meet those preferences should help to raise standards.

But the huge differences in the types of schools that rich and poor families can access are an illustration of the problems involved in reducing inequalities of access. And the importance of preferences for peer groups means that there is also pressure for socio-economic 'sorting'. The challenge for education policy is to address the former while minimising the potential for the latter.

This article summarises 'What Parents Want: School Preferences and School Choice' by Simon Burgess, Ellen Greaves, Anna Vignoles and Deborah Wilson, CMPO Working Paper No. 09/222 (<http://www.bris.ac.uk/cmppo/publications/papers/2009/wp222.pdf>).

Callouts:

All parents have a strong preference for schools with high academic attainment

Differences in location rather than parents' preferences drive differential access to higher-performing schools across socio-economic groups

The huge differences in the types of schools that rich and poor families can access illustrate the difficulty of reducing educational inequality