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Gut Instinct Guides Parents' Choices

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Word-of-mouth, small classes count more than test scores

Third of 7 parts

Markita Amaechi just wanted smaller classes for her son.

Anthony, a fourth-grader, has attention deficit disorder, and Amaechi worried he would have difficulty learning in a traditional public school. So she enrolled him last fall in Louis Tucker Academy, a private school in the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program.

Amaechi chose Louis Tucker after a school employee approached her with a brochure promising licensed teachers and smaller classes. "I thought smaller class settings would make it easier for him to learn," she said. "At Lancaster (Elementary School) there were 20-some kids in one class."

Like Amaechi, parents selecting choice schools for their children sometimes are not making selections based on extensive research. Their choices are based on gut feelings and word-of-mouth. Something clicks for them, and it can be as simple as a uniform requirement, a kind exchange with a school staff person, or the fact that their sister's kids, or the children of their neighbor's brother, attend the school.

Thousands of parents are seeking - and finding - schools they believe are safer, better environments for their kids. But the informal nature of the school search process also means parents are less likely to spot troubled schools, or pull their kids from them immediately. As a result, weaker schools in the choice program manage to survive - in some cases, even thrive.

Even the staunchest advocates of school choice admit today that the marketplace theory, which held that parents would pull their kids out of bad schools, or not choose them to begin with, did not pan out.

"The reality is that it hasn't worked like we thought it would in theory," said Howard Fuller, head of the Institute for the Transformation of Learning, at Marquette University. "I don't think anyone that is truthful can say that has occurred."

This winter Louis Tucker collapsed in dramatic fashion after state officials who oversee the choice program called on the district attorney to investigate the school for possible fraud.

Amaechi is trying to pick up the pieces. She and another mother are suing a teacher at the school and the woman who ran it, Bertha Collier, claiming the teacher assaulted their sons and the school did not respond adequately. Collier declared bankruptcy shortly after hearing of the lawsuit. Her bankruptcy lawyer did not return repeated calls seeking comment.

Little formal marketing

In 1989, then-Wisconsin Gov. Tommy G. Thompson told a White House policy conference that he wanted a law that would allow any low-income child in Milwaukee to attend any public or non-sectarian school in Milwaukee County.

"Competition breeds accountability," he said. "Under the concept of parental choice, schools would be held accountable for their students' performance. Schools providing a high-quality education would flourish. Schools failing to meet the needs of their students would not be able to compete and, in effect, would go out of business."

The theory was nifty. Reality has proved messier.

Dolores Cooper, whose daughter is a junior at Messmer High School, heard about the school from a friend. Marvia Auffant home-schooled her kids until the children's step-grandmother told her about Blyden Delany Academy. Anthony Sprewer, who sends two of his kids to Believers in Christ Christian Academy, chose the school where most of his nieces and nephews already went. "It's a family affair," he said.

Of the 106 schools visited for this Journal Sentinel series on the choice program, surprisingly few reported extensive marketing efforts. Instead, school administrators said they relied predominantly on more informal strategies. "The best thing is word-of-mouth," said Paul Hohl, the principal at St. Sebastian School at 1747 N. 54th St. "We used to have a one-day open house. But that seems to be a dying breed."

Parents of all income levels tend to rely on informal networks when picking schools, said Paul Teske, a professor in the graduate school of public affairs at the University of Colorado-Denver. They talk to relatives, friends, co-workers, and people at church.

"The reality of the school search process for most parents, of all income levels, involves a lot more shortcuts than I might have thought about when I started to research this," said Teske, co-author of the book "Choosing Schools."

But networks of high-income parents more often include people who are informed when it comes to school and education issues, Teske added. They are more likely to know and talk with teachers, PTA members, and those familiar with education policies.

In the end, nearly everyone feels safer at a school that comes recommended by someone they trust. "Partly, it's just psychological attachment issues," Teske said. "If you know a teacher or a person you like at a school, you get a feeling of social attachment."

Smaller classes

Selena Buchanan worried that her child would be seen and understood as a file rather than a real person in an urban school district like MPS. "I like calling a school where they recognize my voice, and know these are my children," she said. Her children attend Blyden Delany, a small school in the choice program.

Many parents with students at private schools in the choice program said they felt lost in the public school system. In many cases, they sought out small class sizes, close-knit school communities, and a values- or religious-based curriculum in Milwaukee's network of private schools.

Few parents interviewed for this article mentioned factors such as accreditation, teacher background or graduation rates as the basis for their choices.

Yet most low-income parents say they want information about teacher qualifications, student achievement and curriculum, according to a study by the Public Policy Forum, a local non-profit research organization. The problem, the study found, is that the parents did not actually request or receive that information before making their decision.

"Parents want to make choices based on measurable facets of school quality," said Anneliese Dickman, a senior researcher at the forum. "But they are not getting that information, and therefore make a choice based on something else. Unfortunately, what's troubling about that is you really don't know if your choice has been a good one or not until you have invested a lot of time in your child's life in a school."

In interviews, parents repeatedly mentioned the small class sizes and close-knit school communities available at some private schools.

"With MPS, a lot of the classes are real large," said Marie Jacqué, whose 15-year-old son attended Academic Solutions Center for Learning, a choice school that closed during the winter after experiencing a series of problems. Her son now attends Messmer High School, a Catholic school. "What I like about choice and private schools is the classes aren't as big. The teacher has a chance to get around to most of the kids."

Buchanan likes the close-knit community at Blyden Delany. The school is Afrocentric, meaning the curriculum is rooted in lessons about African and African-American art, culture and history.

"If something was to happen to my son or someone else's child, you are more concerned because you know that other mother," she said. "You have that in an alternative school. You have that village."

Rating performance

You also have an emotional attachment, which can lead to a blindness of sorts.

"Parents at all income levels, on average, tend to like their child's school, kind of unreasonably sometimes," Teske said. "The majority of parents don't know that their school is low performing, if that is the case."

It's even tougher to know with schools in the choice program, where information about demographics or test scores isn't a click away - as it is on the public school Web site - and sometimes isn't available at all.

Dickman recalled one phone call she received from a mother who had enrolled her son in a new school after someone knocked on her door and pitched the school by reporting that there was a pizza party going on there. "She had never set foot in the place or talked to anyone who worked there. . . . And, then, at the end of the school year, she was upset by her son's grades."

Dorothy Smith was one of a small number of parents interviewed for this article who chose a school in response to a formal advertisement. Twelve years ago, the mother, foster mother and grandmother of several children was driving when she heard a radio ad for a Milwaukee private school called Marva Collins.

Smith revered the famed educator, who earned a national reputation after starting a central-city Chicago school in 1975. As quickly as she could, Smith turned the car around and drove to the school. She later enrolled her kids.

Today, Smith still has children at the school - although it is now a charter school called Milwaukee College Preparatory - as well as at Messmer High School and LaBrew Troopers Military University School. She's done her best to pick schools suited for each of her kids. Her foster daughter at LaBrew, for instance, has some behavioral problems, and Smith chose the school for its tough-love approach and discipline. "Some kids need a little more umph than other kids," she says.

She is pleased with Milwaukee College Preparatory and Messmer but has some concerns about the academics at LaBrew - which she regularly shares with the principal, who knows all of her worries.

"If you see a problem, don't just sit there," Smith said.

Amaechi, whose son attended Louis Tucker, learned this the hard way.

She said her son had several different teachers in his year at Louis Tucker, and that not all of them were "licensed and certified" as the school had promised. When she visited the school, Amaechi said the staff would not let her visit classrooms.

Anthony is now a fourth-grader at Willowglen Academy, a private school, where Amaechi said he is finally making progress.

"They let you know each day about your children's activities," she said. "They send home a sheet which you have to sign and send back. That way you are aware what is going on."