

# **Mackinac Center for Public Policy**

## **Issues and Ideas Forum**

### **“What Can We Learn from Michigan Parents Using School Choice?”**

#### **Speakers:**

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Associate Professor, Michigan State University;  
Co-Editor, Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis;  
Member, Editorial Board, Education Finance and Policy;  
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**Ben DeGrow,  
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**Dan Quisenberry,  
President,  
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**Introduction and Moderator:  
Michael Van Beek,  
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MICHAEL VAN BEEK: Good afternoon, everybody. Thanks for joining us today. My name is Mike Van Beek. I'm the director of research at the Mackinac Center. Thank you for attending our Issues and Ideas Forum.

I also want to welcome the crowd of people who's watching the livestream of this event. Just so you're aware, we livestream all of these and then have them – a recording of them available on our website at Mackinac.org.

Before we start, I also want to thank Auto-Owners Insurance. They are a generous supporter of the Mackinac Center, and in particular support these Issues and Ideas Forums that we regularly host for you all. So thank you for their support.

A couple of things, additionally, before we get going. There is a publications table at the back of the room. Please feel free to peruse that at your leisure and take whatever you'd like, publications, from that.

And then, also, at the end of our presentations for today we'll do a short question-and-answer session. If you have a question, please jot it down on a card or a piece of paper there at your table, and one of my colleagues will come around and collect that from you, and then I'll ask the question from the podium here. We do that so the people viewing the livestream can hear the question and participate that way.

So on to our – on to our event for today: “What Can We Learn from Michigan Parents Using School Choice?” Earlier this year, the Mackinac Center commissioned a survey of more than 800 parents who exercised public-school choice. The survey sought to answer what motivates parents to select a different school, what helps them make the decision, and how satisfied they are with that experience. And the results of that survey are right here. There's several copies at each table, so you – feel free to take one of those.

As Lansing lawmakers consider how to give families greater access to suitable educational options, careful thought should be given to the recorded views of parents and how they fit into the larger body of research on school choice in Michigan. And for today, we have three experts to talk about – talk about this issue.

I will introduce them and then turn it over to our first presenter, who is Ben DeGrow. Ben is the Mackinac Center's director of education policy. He joined the Center in 2015 after a long stint at Colorado's Independence Institute, where he provided expert analysis on school choice, school finance, collective bargaining, and education employment policies. He's authored numerous studies, policy reports, and op-eds for various newspapers and other publications and regularly appears on radio and television and before legislative committees.

Our second panelist will be Joshua Cowen. He is an associate professor at Michigan State University, and his current research focuses on teacher quality, student and teacher mobility, program evaluation, and education policy. His work has been published in multiple scholarly journals and funded by a diverse array of philanthropies. He is currently co-editor of

Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis and a member of the Editorial Board at Education Finance and Policy. Cowen also is a founding co-director of the Education Policy Initiative (sic; Innovation) Collaborative at Michigan State.

And finally, our last panelist will be Dan Quisenberry. He is the president of the Michigan Association of Public School Academies. Dan is a veteran communicator with more than 20 years of experience in government affairs, policy development, and business management. As president, Quisenberry oversees all aspects of the association, that promotes, protects, and represents Michigan charters. He's a graduate of Michigan State University and began work in his career at the State Chamber of Michigan. He joined MAPSA in 1997, after six years as general manager and legal administrator for a leading Michigan law firm. MAPSA currently represents more than 90 percent of charter schools in Michigan and is recognized as the leading advocacy organization on behalf of charter schools in the state.

Welcome our panel and our first presenter, Ben DeGrow. (Applause.)

**BEN DEGROW:** All right. Welcome. Thank you for joining us today for this discussion. We hope really to add an important element to the debate and discussion about school choice in Michigan with some pieces of evidence that we haven't really seen injected into the debate before.

All right. So before we get into the nuts and bolts of what we found in the survey, just a little background so we're all up to speed. And be reminded, first of all, that of course school choice – or educational choice or parental choice, whatever we like to call it – exists because it's something we need to serve students and families. It exists because families are looking for some other alternative way to serve their children's needs – academic, socially, or otherwise. So there's a lot of talk in policy about why we have school choice, and how it should look, and who should have access; but we don't often hear directly in any systematic way from parents and how their experiences with school choice are affected.

So just quick background. Michigan was one of the first states in the nation to adopt public charter schools, which are independently governed public schools, and there are about 300 of them in the state today. We've had those since 1993. And then, in 1996, the state adopted Schools of Choice, which allows state funding to follow students to other traditional school districts, within limited parameters we'll see in just a moment.

The reason why this issue takes on such importance is a headline that appeared about a year ago. MLive, the news outlet, did a – did some research and found – and it's been validated – that nearly one in four of students enrolled in a public school in Michigan today is attending a school outside of their assigned district of residence. Whether that is through Schools of Choice, a charter school, cyber school, or whatever, we're now looking at nearly one in four. So there's a lot of and a growing rate of usage of school choice, so it raises the stakes to help us to understand why parents are using – taking advantage of these options.

As a quick – a quick reminder about what charter schools are and aren't, similarities between charter schools, a reminder that they are public schools.

We may need a little more reminder of what Schools of Choice is. And when I use the term Schools of Choice, there is actually in state law a program called Schools of Choice. That falls under one of these two parameters. One is – they're known by the sections they appear in statute, so 105 Choice is the opportunity for students to transfer to a district within their intermediate school district, but to another local school district that may be neighboring them. 105c Choice allows students to attend a district in a neighboring intermediate school district. So these are the primary ways families are taking advantage of choice in Michigan, along with charters.

Now, there's something that I may also in shorthand refer to as Schools of Choice, but technically wouldn't be considered. A number of local ISDs in Michigan have their own internal local agreements. For example, Kent County, Ottawa County, within their ISDs they have a system where students can transfer from one district to another. It's not technically recognized as 105 Choice, but it is very similar functionally.

The important thing to note – and we'll get into this – is that the local districts have discretion over whether they participate in either or both of these forms of choice, 105 and 105c, and to what extent they're going to participate.

And so we did a little bit of research on that – in that area, as well. This is not something that's widely explored. There's no central database of school-district policies when it comes to Schools of Choice.

So we did – commissioned some research earlier this year in the spring, particularly around the time we would hope that families who are thinking about exercising the right to attend another school district might want to go on a website and find information about what options are available near them. We studied 168 districts in particular, which cover nine ISDs across Michigan – including the metro area of Detroit, Lansing, Grand Rapids, and a couple of smaller areas – for a sample, and wanted to see how many of them are accepting Schools of Choice students and how their policies are operating.

So, in short, you can see 75 percent of the districts, we found, are participating in 105 Choice, which allows students from a neighboring district within their ISD, and 63 percent are accepting students from a neighboring ISD. Out of the 168, seven districts are not participating at all; in other words, they had no interest in – no interest in receiving those students.

We went a little deeper, and we found among those 161 districts that most cap – have a stated cap of how many students they're going to accept through Schools of Choice. And the school boards will make this decision on a year-to-year basis. And so tracking down this information's not easy, and that's why you have a hard time – you have an easy time, excuse me, seeing why this information isn't widely available. Most will specify a certain number of students can come in per grade level. A few also stipulate only certain schools or programs within the district will receive students through Schools of Choice. Of the 161, 59 we found no stipulated limits, so theoretically at least they are going to take as many students as they can. And among these districts, there are actually seven or eight, I believe, where a majority of the

students enrolled in them come from outside their boundaries. So some districts are really embracing choice more than others.

To be a reminder, this is all about access and parents getting into the schools. So two areas and barriers that we want to make sure that are addressed that parents have to overcome are information, that they recognize is their student eligible, and if they are eligible what application procedures do I have to follow to get into Schools of Choice; and then transportation, can I – how do I – how do I get my student to school in a neighboring district.

And we found – top line here – of the 161 districts, at the time we surveyed them 45 had no application form online and 14 had no information about Schools of Choice whatsoever, which seems kind of self-defeating if you want to receive the funding that comes along with Schools of Choice. But some – clearly, some districts are doing better than others when it comes to information.

When it comes to transportation, we found policies online for 130 of the 161 districts, and the vast majority of them offer no real transportation options for families that are coming from another district. You know, in some areas of the state where families are more economically mobile this isn't an issue, but around urban centers where families need – may need more access to transportation this is a limited – a limiting factor for some families. And actually, it fits with some previous surveys of Detroit parents.

So what's missing from the debate? We have data on Schools of Choice and students and demographics and how they're using it, and we'll hear about some of that. And we have – we hear some of the academic results of school-choice research. But we don't hear often in a systematic way from parents.

So we commissioned a survey of 837 parents by telephone during May and June of this year. And these are parents who are either charter school – have students enrolled in a charter school or enrolled through Schools of Choice. I would tell you that there's a reason why nobody's done this before, and our friends from MRG helped us, and they're well-represented here today. A shout-out to you. They're very helpful in tracking down these families. It was not easy. But we thank them for their help in doing so. We weren't able to track down a perfectly representative sample of families who use school choice, but it a pretty strong – it was a pretty strong cross-section. We're talking about students in 106 different districts all across Michigan. About a quarter of those we talked to were African-American. About a quarter are below \$25,000 in annual income. So this is a pretty diverse sample we were talking to.

So, quickly, the five main results we came up, three are looking at parent satisfaction with their experience with school choice. The first is we asked parents to assign a grade to the school their child is attending through choice, and we found that 80 percent either assigned an "A" or a "B" to that – to that school. When you compare that to national surveys of parents generally, who may or may not be exercising choice, you get numbers anywhere between 60 to 70 percent who will assign their child's school an "A" or a "B." So there's not necessarily a cause and effect here to choice, because we can't – we didn't sample these parents before and after, but we do see a strong level of satisfaction based on how they're rating their new school.

Second, we asked parents to rate: Does your experience with public-school choice, has it increased your expectations of how well your child will do academically or succeed? And this really gets to the heart of what parents are interested in, right? And so we found that 65 percent of people who responded said that school choice and their experience has given them higher expectations of their children's success. And interestingly, along with that we got higher responses from lower-income and African-American parents, so – who tend to – who tend to be the users of choice, especially in the charter sector – higher expectations, 65 percent; only 7 percent said lower.

We also – finally, we asked: Would you – are you likely to recommend school choice to other parents based on your experience? And by a rate of 61 to 16 percent, parents said yes they are likely to make that recommendation.

So we asked two additional questions to go along, wanted to understand what's informing/motivating parent decisions. And this one here, we're looking at some of the factors or things that might inform a parent's decision. And I will make a note here that maybe in the Q&A time I'd be interested in getting your feedback and thoughts on future questions we could ask this group of parents or maybe things we missed in this initial round of surveys.

But we asked them, giving them six factors, what really helped inform your decision. And interestingly, maybe not surprisingly, nearly a third the top answer was conversations with other parents, and formal social networks are powerful.

Next up were websites with data on school performance, at 18 percent. And among this particular group, again, African-American parents especially were more likely to answer the websites. And we're not sure if that's because of the availability of these websites in areas like Detroit, that had – there were some that previously offered grades and information on schools, or what's driving that distinction, but this is some of the factors.

And then, finally, we asked parents: What are you looking for? What strongly influences your decision? What are you participating in school choice in the first place? And the two top answers are academic in nature, one being we want to boost my child's academic performance, and that came in at about 30 percent. Even higher, though, was this answer: a different educational philosophy or program or teaching method, at 38 percent. This would be maybe a Montessori school or a STEM program or arts focus or something different than they're getting in their neighborhood school. So, interestingly as well, again, when it comes to the academic performance piece, the low-income and African-American parents were more likely to mention that than the general population. Some of the other factors: class sizes, school safety. Interestingly, school safety and discipline, 10 percent of parents said that was the primary factor. And then extracurricular activities and sports as well.

All right. Three quick parent takeaways from our findings. One, parents tend to be largely satisfied with the choices they're making and the public-school options in Michigan. They tend to see academics as important in driving their decisions, but the narrow look at standardized tests and those scores are not necessarily driving all those decisions. And parents

pay attention a lot to other experiences – experiences of other parents, especially in their peer group. There’s an open question and an open thought about where do we go from here with providing information about schools, based on parents’ answers, as well.

So, with that, I’m going to hand it over to our other panelists and get their insights.  
(Applause.)

JOSHUA COWEN: Well, then I’m going to – I’m going to stay right here. Thank you, Ben. And thanks to the Mackinac Center for organizing this and for inviting me.

One of the – one of the reasons that I was enthusiastic about participating in this panel today is I – as something of a so-called expert in the analysis of school-choice programs nationally, I am always looking for the right next questions to ask. And, you know, these types of programs have been around for about 25 years or so, give or take, at least in the sense that we started to accrue evidence of how different types of choice systems were performing relative to a world in which fewer options for choice existed.

And for a long time, that research and the type of sort of analytic questions that both policymakers and pointy-headed academics like me were asking were largely performance-based. They were largely questions of the sort of – sort of, are charter schools better than traditional public schools? Do parents – do children in school-voucher programs perform at higher rates than those in traditional public-school programs? And so on and so forth, just really sort of comparative-type questions.

And as we’ve moved in the policy landscape really over the last decade to what I would call at-scale systems of school choice – so Ben quoted some numbers of the rates of participation in open enrollment in charter schools here, and those are – those are similar to rates in other high-choice states, and certainly in many urban environments the rates are even much higher.

And that brings with it a set of questions that have sort of, I think, moved beyond the question of comparative performance. We still need to ask about performance in these sectors, and we need to ask about how well choice systems are working for the parents that are – that are participating in them, and that’s going to be one theme of the rest of my comments today. But we need to – I think it’s important, as we understand sort of the way that these – as these programs have grown and more than a quarter of students here are making use of a nonresident option, that means that – that brings a whole set of new questions that I think it’s important to consider. And that may sound like an obvious point or it may sound like a somewhat mundane point. I don’t know. But it does get missed sometimes in kind of, I think, the back and forth about school choice.

And so what I think is helpful about this survey is it digs into what I would call a next-generation question. So school choice is here. It’s not going anywhere. We recognize this. And sort of from the – from the standpoint of how to make better policy, how to – how to ultimately help kids, I think it’s important to kind of move beyond that sort of, you know, horserace-type question and dig into the bones of what these choice systems actually are doing and what parents actually want from them, among other questions.

So just a set of reactions to this work and, you know, then I'm happy to participate. I'm really looking forward, actually, to hearing from you.

The first sort of observation, or I guess is a question, and that's does this make sense, right? So people like me, we try to call balls and strikes when we look at policy or when we look at research, and this is research. And then sort of the first question we ask in that approach is: Does this make sense? Does this – does this smell right? Does this – does this pass the face validity test? And it does. It does not only because I think it makes sense that some of these – some of these results, that parents want – parents want better schools, they're generally happy when they have a choice, that makes sense with both our expectations, I think, as individual parents – most of us – but also in our sense of how – you know, how school works.

It also makes sense, for what it's worth, in, you know, the work that's been done in other places. So I've spent a number of years now working in New Orleans, which has the – per capita has the highest rate of charter school choice in the country. Nearly all schools in New Orleans are charter schools, public schools anyway. And what's helpful about that environment, in addition to the fact that it is often on the national scene compared to Detroit, is that we can – we learn a lot about how parents are selecting between choice there. And we're able to – we're able to not only survey parents there, but we're able to kind of actually observe sort of how they sort between individual schools. And what we've learned is similar to what we've learned now from talking to parents, which is that parents really want good schools for their kids. And in other ways, they want schools that are closer to them, on average, than not. And they want other things too, but those are the two kind of big things that tend to drive sort of how parents are making sense of their options and how they're ultimately coming down on those options. So it makes sense to me, for whatever that's worth to you.

The other question, then, sort of becomes: So what do we do? So what do policymakers do in response to this kind of information, but also sort of when taking this kind of information and sort of surveying the landscape of both policy options and also just kind of trends, right, in parental choice?

And for me, the first is to recognize that more choice per se isn't necessarily enough. That's not what parents are asking for, at least not in these data. What they want is better choice, right? They want a nearer choice. And so I think from a sort of a response element, we sort of have to ask: What can promote that? You know, what leads to better choices? And we have different sort of priorities, I think, for stakeholders in a democratic process for what we mean by better, but what these survey results tell us is what parents mean by better. And what they mean by better, for the most part, is schools that have higher performance, whether we're measuring them with test scores or whether we're measuring them in other sort of academic ways. Parents are – on average are trying to get their children into schools that are better than the options they had before, and that's really, really important to remember.

If anything's surprising, frankly, about this survey is that it – parents tend to actually say – to list more options than academic – than academic performance when they're surveyed, but then when they actually vote with their feet, so to speak, in choice systems where we can observe

how they actually go between schools, they always choose the better-performing school, or the nearest one next to that. So, in this instance, the survey actually fits with sort of administrative data we can see in other contexts.

The other – and I’ll run out of time quickly here, so I just want to kind of list a few more things. The other sort of corollary to that is it’s not clear that the ability to choose inherently means much to individual parents. They want – it’s a means to an end, right? I didn’t see – and you can correct me if I’m wrong, Ben, but I didn’t see sort of evidence here that sort of satisfaction itself is linked to just the ability to choose. And that’s important because that’s not always true in other contexts. Sometimes we have a preference because we’re able to have a preference, right? These are – these are – this is my favorite something because I’m able to kind of actually take ownership of it. I think when we – if we really dug down into that, we would see that, in fact, taking ownership of and not feeling sort of trapped by an arbitrary assignment based on district borders or something is important to parents.

But again, it’s really clear from these data that parents are just trying to get their kids into good schools. More than anything else, they’re trying to get their kids into good schools.

Sort of next reaction is just to reflect – and it’s not as evident sort of from these topline numbers, but I think we – digging into the data you’d see them – that one result of having school choice across a state like Michigan and other states that have similar demographics and geographic contexts is that choice has very different implications in different places, right? So this issue of number of opportunities, right, is obviously just a lot greater in an urban or suburban context than in a rural context. That’s just the way that is. This issue of transportation and distance means something very different, right?

I’m part of a large group of people studying transportation and school choice in a number of cities, including New Orleans and in New York City and Washington, D.C., and you’ve got a bunch of different infrastructures in place that can either promote or restrict access to high-quality schools depending on the context. It’s a different animal when your – when your teenager can take a subway to their school than in a place like northern Michigan, where if you’re trying to exercise school choice you might have to drive 30 miles in a snowstorm to get there. So I think it’s important now, especially if we’ve kind of moved to this next generation of systemwide school choice, just to reflect that when we have this debate, as we always do, about sort of the right role of school choice. That’s number – that’s number three.

Two more quick points here, and one from – I think that I see from the data and the other I don’t. And the one that I don’t – and since Ben asked about next steps – is I think it’s increasingly important to start asking about the role of teachers in Schools of Choice.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Amen.

MR. COWEN: And that’s – I think that sort of reflects what we know. We know that teachers are the single most important school-based input to student achievement, apart from everything else. What I mean by that is what we know schools can do, teachers reflect the

greatest percentage of sort of that effort, even if family background still kind of matters more, as it were. And so that's just sort of important in and of itself because that's what education is.

But it's really important, again, in this – in this context of what I'm calling systemwide school choice. So we have, what, 300-plus charter schools now. We have 100,000 kids in those, give or take, another 100,000 kids or so in open enrollment systems. You know, parents – or, excuse me, teachers sort and take jobs and leave jobs based in part on locations too. And we have all kinds of other sort of semi-unrelated questions about teacher shortages and things. Well, these have new implications when we're talking about school systems or systems of choice that have 100,000 kids involved. We're talking about whole labor markets devoted to school choice. We just aren't paying enough attention, I think, to that, and need to be moving forward. And part of that and how that relates here today is just digging into the role of sort of teacher quality, teacher experiences, teacher mentoring, and how parents make sense of their school-choice options.

And then the last point is just to sort of stress – it's not so much in these data you can infer from it, but parental experiences with schools are very different in individual schools, and that's true within a sector, for example. That's true within the traditional public system of resident-based assignment. There's a lot of school variability. There's a lot of different – different schools excel or are challenged by different phenomena. And that's, I think, true either within systems of school choice, within a charter sector, or in a larger network of school choice.

And I'm just mentioning that because – just to sort of tie it back to my very first point, which is when we're talking about performance – and performance still matters a lot – I think it's important to remember that for the most part parents tend to view schools through the – through the individual school lens. We know that certain parents seek out certain types of schools. We now in other states that, for example, the KIPP brand means something to parents, or in other urban context the idea of Catholic schooling still has a brand sort of parents associate as a heuristic for what their kid's going to get out of that school. But apart from those exceptions, for the most part parents are making choices on an individual school-by-school basis, and not necessarily sort of making this comparative, well, I am going to be dead-set on getting a charter school for my kid or I'm going to be dead-set on going into Schools of Choice. It comes back to this notion that parents are looking for for a fit for their kids.

And just I think I'd remind us all on that when we discuss just in this room, but more generally when we discuss school choice in general, what we're talking about systems of individual schools and individual parent-school matches. At the end of the day, that's more what we're talking about than when we make these kind of, I think, horserace comparisons between different types of school and different Schools of Choice.

So I'll stop yapping and hear what the others have to say.

DAN QUISENBERRY: Thanks, Josh and Ben.

My opportunity here is to speak to the – between the lines. I'm not the data guy. So I appreciate the fact – well, one, I agree with the data. We've seen lots of other reports over 20

years that say similar things – parents do support choice. What I appreciate about this is we're starting to ask the next generation questions that I think both Ben and Josh mentioned. And I think that's really important to do. My opportunity is, having worked for 20 years with now the 300 charter schools we have in Michigan – it's actually 155,000 families that have chosen charter schools, does it pass that smell test Josh is talking about and what starts to drive us deeper? Why do parents do this? What are some of the real-life stories that seem to help us interpret this data and what does it mean?

So let me start tonight – I struggled, not because we don't have lots of experience with this, right? I have lots of experience. But you'll hear charter schools, but I think this can be applied to why anybody chooses a school – any type of school. But I can tell you about charter schools. But the hardest thing I had today was trying to boil this down and organize it in some way, right? Because there's 300 schools. I've often said that the data we're seeing here is kind of like ice cream. It's cold and it's sweet, but that's not what people care about. They care about the flavors. They care about the why for them. They care about their kids.

I'm actually going to use the same word Josh just used. There's two things I would put – two big buckets I would put these in for parents. One is about fit. Does this education – does this kid fit my kid? The other would be frustration. So you heard in the data that they like close, like they like quality. Yes, that's true. But if the fit isn't in that building that's close or the quality isn't there, you're going to start to see parents breaking out and using chose.

So, what's fit, Dan? Every parent wants a great education for their kid. But our kids are dramatically different. I had two adult – I have now two adult daughters. They're very different. Same house. Same environment. They learn very differently, right? So schools need to be different. And we can do that today. So fit falls into things like culture. There are some charter schools here in Michigan that serve refugee children.

Guess what? Kids coming from Syria today, where they've experienced extreme traumatic violence, are going to need a different experience than a child growing up in Bloomfield Hills. Schools can do that, right? We can address that. And parents are smart enough, I need to realize I need to send my kid here because the language, the transition, that is going to be important. And it's the same thing if you're sitting in the Upper Peninsula, where there's three Native American schools. They want culture. They want roots. They want history. They want language. So culture is a big thing that breaks them out of that fit.

Small. That sounds kind of easy, but we've seen some of our most successful charter schools being in places that were experiencing rapid growth. Great local school districts, but the growth was a problem. Parents were like, eh, I want intimacy. I want small. I don't want that explosion. I'm going to send my kid to this charter a little bit further away, but also quality, and I'm going to have a different experience there.

Theme. And again, that's kind of a bigger bucket I'm trying to use, but it would fall into things like Montessori. There an aviation high school where kids are just geeked about learning about everything about aviation. It might be a flexible schedule. My kid's in gymnastics on almost like a professional basis, I need a really – time is the variable. I want a schedule that's

mine not what the school chooses. STEM, sciences, performing arts, I've got an agriculture-themed school down by Benton Harbor, middle colleges. This is where you can see some of the most innovative kinds of strategies in schools. But again, it's about fit. When you go to those schools, that's where I see kids most engaged. They are jazzed about their school because it fits, right? So I'm giving you a taste of some of that.

Let me go quickly to the other thing, because I know we want to go into Q&A. Frustration. It's not what we want to think about with choice, because somebody mentioned – I think it was Josh – those of us that believe in choice want to believe there's inherent nature that parents will drive for this. Sometimes it's driven by nothing other than I'm frustrated. My local schools aren't working – period. In fact, I saw a quote recently I'm going to use – and this was a real-live mom – it's a journey full of struggles and broken promises that no parent should have to endure. We, many times in Michigan, don't understand what some of our colleague parents, residents, citizens are experiencing, and just the absolute failure that they've had to experience.

Yes, it tends to be in our urban environments, but there's other types of frustrations. I can tell you a story of a student – well, let me – let me just tell the story. Alexis, she grew up in St. Helen, Michigan. Do you know where St. Helen is? Most people don't. It's north of Saginaw in the middle of nowhere. And the local traditional school district decided they could no longer operate the school building in St. Helen. The next option was 14-plus miles away. Well, there's an economic issue along with that too. You shut that building down, all of a sudden there's an economy that goes away in that small town.

Those families in that small town revolted. You will not shut this down. Well, they did anyways. So they opened a charter school because access was their frustration. And they – it's actually gone beyond the previous enrollment. They're successful. They've almost tripled the enrollment that the traditional school district had there, because there's some ownership involved in it. It was a frustration – a reaction to frustration.

And Alexis, by the way, was very engaged at her school. I went to the graduation this year. They had their first-ever graduation. It was the only graduation I've ever been to they had fireworks. That was pretty cool. And where she was bored and disengaged because the whole town was frustrated, she has decided not only to – she was the valedictorian and has a scholarship to go to Northern Michigan University, wants to be a teacher. Bored student to wanting to be involved in education because that community got frustrated with what wasn't available to them.

I want to try to bucket some other things too. Again, these are all somewhat anecdotal, but I think it is about digging deeper. And so some things we've learned from parents, we can say parents – let's just be honest, most of the time it's mom's making these decisions or someone playing that role, whether it's aunt, grandmother, somebody like that. They probably shop too late. These look for these choices too late – May to August. Doesn't give you a lot of time really do something sometimes. It may be too late.

If you're going to Detroit, the biggest argument you're going to hear right now is there's actually choices being made after September, we would call it churn, where parents have

enrolled in multiple schools and they're sampling for the first six to eight weeks. Yeah, that doesn't do real well for the education environment for the kids. But that's what they're trying to do, they're so distrustful of what's been happening in their experience that they try some things for a while. They do relate to other parents. That – when you talk to any parent, how'd you find out about this school? Oh, my neighbor, my friend, my whatever.

Obstacles to learning about it certainly include information. And so we have to understand what happens to parents who may have literacy or educational failure in their own background. It's an intimidating thing if you're not really understanding what the school is trying to tell you, or you don't trust them in what they're telling you. Language, I mentioned the assimilation of different cultures. Sometimes if you're Hispanic or Arab-American or name anything – any other culture, just to even getting something in your language is going to be a problem. Transportation or access, and the time involved in trying to do some of that – that shopping, if you want to call it that. Those are all obstacles to parents really utilizing the choices they have and don't help us.

So we look at some of this – we're starting to do this – I try not to say this to parents because I'm not sure they like it this way – but if you're thinking about choices as a market, economists would call this we need to establish market enablers, things that support consumers, people who are making choices. And that is about quality. They all want a good education for their kids. That hope and desire is there in all of them. I haven't met a parent yet, and I don't care what they're like, that didn't want the best – and that applies to aunts or grandmothers or neighbors. They want good information that they can make decisions about. And they want – I would call it access. It bears out what Ben is saying about transportation or other kinds of things, but it is access. So, yes, an ideal school that's right down the street is perfect. But if it's not the school they want, they'll go – I'm amazed at how far and what parents will do to access some other type of school if that's what's necessary. So anyways, I – again, I could also go on.

Let me just finish with one more story, because I think stories matter, is an immigrant mother in Grand Rapids. Hispanic, single-parent. Had a middle school son. She was worried. And she started to do what the data says, which is to look around, talk to other parents. Saw kids getting off a bus and said, oh, what's that school. So she started to investigate. Was pleased that the principal at the school happened to speak full Spanish, because she couldn't speak any English. They started having a great conversation. Got her son enrolled. Three years later, even though he required a lot of individual attention and has some learning challenges besides his language barriers, the school was able to meet those needs and he graduated, he got a full-ride scholarship. He's going to become a nurse.

That mom's tickled if you talk to her, right? But that was out of concern out of quality and some frustration, finding something that fit that family because they could – they could bridge the barriers of language and culture and still offer quality, still accessible and meet those needs.

But, anyways, I'll stop there. Interested too in the conversation that'll happen out of this.

MR. VAN BEEK: All right. Thank you all. Just a reminder, for the Q&A, if you have a question jot it down on a piece of paper at your table there, and my colleague, Sandra, at the back there will collect them and bring them up to me here and I'll ask them from the podium. I have – I have a couple queued up.

So I think everyone kind of touched on the information problem, if we want to call it a problem, but just the opportunity for better information for parents. So what do we do about that? Go, whoever. (Laughs.)

MR. COWEN: Again, I'll just kind of take the policy analyst perspective. And that's a – it's one of the most difficult questions, when you think about sort of building school choice policy moving forward. And I think I'll sort of say two things. One, this sort of – this – a broader way to ask that question is what does that – what does any of this information imply about sort of state or district roles in designing school choice policies? And does it mean that this is an important role for a state, for example, to do, is to sort of systematize and distribute information about all its public schools – whether charter or others? Or does it – or does it imply sort of a local or community-based role for that type of information?

And I think, sort of, as far as the data are concerned in other contexts, we don't know necessarily what the level – what the right level, whether it's a public agency or whether it's a community-based organization, is necessarily appropriate. But what we do know is that that information has to be clear. It has to be directly linked to outcomes, meaningful things about the schools that the parents actually want to know about. So in this instance, we're just piggybacking off the survey results, they need to reflect accurate information and timely information about school quality. They need to reflect accurate information about the proximity of a school to a parent.

And I think also sort of – and this is a harder one – the options actually available to a parent. In other contexts, if we – when you talk to parents, like, in focus groups, they'll sort of say, I didn't know this was available to me. Or, I thought I had this school or this school to choose from. And actually, in these complicated environments that we're now entering, there are often many options. I don't know what the right sort of approach there is, except to sort of say it tends to be the case in other sectors that when we have an information delivery problem in any sort of market, that suggests an active role for sort of a supervising authority. In this case it would be the state.

MR. QUISENBERRY: I would add too, and I would agree with some of those things, the mistake we would make here is to say we can't do this. That's a mistake. We're pushing – we're certainly pushing on some of the policy things Josh mentioned, but I'm also pushing our schools. This is a new environment for schools. They are not always used to this. What do you mean by that, Dan? If parents are getting information from other parents, then feed the parent network. Give them the information that they want – you want about your school and what's unique about it or what's different or why they should attend, or what things maybe you don't have. Don't come here, we don't have a football team. If you want football, you may need to go someplace else.

That does work. Feed the barbershops, the beauty salons where parents congregate. Get the information that you want parents have out there. That's a school's – they can do that. And they don't always think about it. Just look at a school's website and see if they're really thinking about informing anyone beyond – I don't know, sometimes they're not very good about information. But that's not a role they've had to play before. But it's doable. It's possible. And we have to start thinking that way.

MR. DEGROW: I agree that helping parents understand what their parents are actually eligible to attend is the first hurdle to cross. And I also agree that there's a role. Charter schools by nature are dependent on enrollments. And a lot of districts are coming to realize that they're – we're in an overall declining population state. And they should become more aware that their financial health is dependent on schools of choice. So there should be an incentive there for them to provide that information.

But there's also – and I'll speak now from my experience in Colorado – there's a role for third-party groups. You know, the state can provide some information. And I'm – you know, an A to F report card, for example, gives one dimension of school quality that the state – presuming the state has the right information underlying it, that can have value. But in Colorado, I know of two websites. One that was just focused on taking the state data and presenting it to parents in a way they could understand and then make it easy for parents to find. And the second website had no information on school performance, but was focused more on different philosophies and programs and didn't mention the word "charter school". It just presented options to parents.

And both of those sites are were immensely popular to both English and Spanish-speaking parents. I served on the Charter School Board in Colorado. And half the parents who came in enquiring about the school were happy to know that we got a "B+" or an "A-" on this website. So there's an – there's an appetite out there for that information for parents. And it would be great to see somebody step in and fill it.

MR. VAN BEEK: This question is mainly for Ben, but Dan or Josh you could jump in too.

Ben, does the survey that we just published – does that have – look at location issues? It's something that Josh mentioned and Dan – both mentioned as something that parents came about in making decisions. Did you look at that at all? And are there plans to do that in the future?

MR. DEGROW: When you say location, are you talking about geographic or the distance from the school?

MR. VAN BEEK: I think distance from the school, yeah.

MR. DEGROW: Yeah. No, we did not explore that. In this we – given the complications and challenges of putting together this survey, we had to think in a – and the constraints of the budget, to pick which questions we wanted to do. But a question like that would be near the top of my list for round two, because parents are looking almost in concentric

circles around, you know, the areas where they live and where they work when they're thinking about making those choices. So that's a very important piece of the puzzle.

MR. VAN BEEK: Here's a question on one specific circumstance that has happened in Michigan, in Albion, where the – where the local school district basically dissolved because so many parents were choosing to enroll their kids in nearby districts rather than in the local community school districts. So how do we – how do we deal with that from a policy perspective, maybe where you offer opportunities to parents, but it comes at the expense of some organization or a district or some other school? How do we balance that?

MR. QUISENBERRY: I'll start in, at least, playing a role of provocateur, I guess. At some point – because these are not – that's not a new question. It's a good question. It's an essential question because I think the way we default on that is are we going to prioritize parents and students or institutions? Well, Dan, we don't want either to suffer. OK, that's nice, but at some point – the point you're making, or that question was making, Michael – comes to play. And we will default, parents, I believe, will default – regardless what this data says, we see them making choices that prioritizes the outcome of their kid. And they know – they're smart – that it's having an impact on an institution.

MR. COWEN: Yeah. I mean, I think one element to this – it gets a little bit back to the impact on community that Dan mentioned. We do tend to think about sort of the impact on individual kids. But we forget sometimes that sort of these kids and these families actually live in the communities to. And so I think sort of just that general point, that if we've got a local community where everybody's leaving it in search of better options, I don't know that – and, again, unless we sort of say that choice itself is the outcome we're aiming for, rather than sort of access to high-quality schools – then that's not necessarily a desirable outcome.

I mean, what's happening there – and I don't know the Albion context specifically so I'm just reacting only entirely to your description of it, I don't know – I mean, this gets to the larger question of sort of support for the nearby neighborhood schools, and what states and what their districts can do to kind of do that. And I think we don't know what the right balance is anywhere – I don't think here or elsewhere. But I think one interesting sort of thought experiment would be, you know, if the – you could ask the question of sort of well, students wouldn't be leaving those schools if they weren't dissatisfied with those schools. And that's probably sort of the frustration element that Dan mentioned.

My hunch is those parents, even if they're satisfied with the schools, would probably not prefer to choose a school 20 miles outside of their home, or however long they are from the next district over, just give the data, right? I mean, my hunch is that if they could elect a school, even their residently assigned school of a – of a – in a way that fit their needs, then they wouldn't have left. So one reaction to that comment, if people sort of agree with the general premise, would be, well, you know, that's on a school. That's on the institution to have met those needs. Well, the other, it could be – I mean, asking parents what they would have preferred in an alternative world, right? It's sort of – on balance I'm going to go to the school that fits my kid's need best. Fine.

The next corollary to that question would be, you know, all else equal, would you prefer that such a school was the one that you could walk to, or the school that was, you know, just a short school bus ride away? Does it have to be a charter school, or does it just have to be the right fit for your school regardless of what type of organizational structure. And my guess is, again, on balance, parents would have said: I would have preferred to stay in that school system. And so if that's true – and, again, we don't know – but if that's true, then I think the question is: Well, what can we do to support the local school systems as well, while we're providing choice as an alternative for parents who need it? It doesn't strike me that sort of a complete sort of fire-sale type approach to school district organization is a realistic sort of policy when we're talking about, you know, 1.5 million children.

MR. QUISENBERRY: Michael, I agree. Let me throw something else out there, because I think this is really a pretty cool question you've asked. And you've used the question that was around Albion. And through a different example, this is the huge debate in Detroit. And I think even around the state, we have deserts where there just aren't schools that are quality or maybe not even a school that's accessible. Some data I've seen – I can't remember – I don't think it was in this – but parents in Detroit are willing to travel something like three miles.

They aren't willing to travel. They can't travel more than three miles. There is no public transportation in the city. It's a huge geographic city with relatively low population. So my answer there isn't to be – in fact, to embrace those families and those neighborhoods, we should open more schools that are accessible. And their needs are going to be basic, unfortunately, right. I want it to be a good academic experience. Fit will come later. (Laughs.) That's absolutely right. And that's what you hear moms and dads saying. That's not fair, Dan. I can't deal with this. I need it.

So here we'll have to break down our ideas of what school is. Why doesn't there – why isn't there a facility that exists? And the people who operate that school come and go. If they're not doing it well, the building exists. The parents can access it. It keeps the neighborhood alive. But the people who operate it, if they're not performing, go away. And they're replaced with people who can operate a good school.

MR. DEGROW: The only thing I want to add to that – and these are great points – is in some ways I feel like these challenges are exacerbated because of Michigan's overall population situation. Like, if you look at the broader research on school choice, and the high-altitude level people, you know, researchers will ask the question: How does choice – you know, if you look at how does choice impact the student using the choice, but how does it impact the system? Most of the research generally, whether it's private school choice or charter system, shows a positive impact from choice programs, and often are neutral. But I think Michigan poses some special challenges to think about, these gentlemen have addressed.

MR. VAN BEEK: So I think this will – maybe first start with Josh. You talked about – a little bit about parents wanting to have not necessarily just more options, but better options. So this question is asking, you know, what does that mean? How do we determine what a better option is? And then especially considering, I think, from the survey showing that parents care

about academic performance a lot, but not necessarily about standardized test scores. So what do we – what measures do we use to determine quality?

MR. COWEN: Yeah. I mean, that – so we're – before you sort of put that caveat on I was going to say, well, I mean, the survey tells us parents think of better first and foremost as sort of with respect to academic quality. And, yes, that's not just test scores. And I don't think anybody sort of seriously looking at policy design or policy outcomes would sort of limit themselves to test scores. Although, I will say, I use that word limit deliberately. It has to be part of the equation, right?

There's a big argument right now in sort of the school choice research community about whether test scores – sort of the weak relationship between test scores and future performance, sort of implies that sort of, for example, in states that have sort of a high degree of government oversight over school choice programs. But that implies that schools should be shut down simply on the basis of, say, aggregate test score performance. I don't want to comment on that today, except to say it has to be part of the puzzle, because it does correlate with a lot of things that do matter at the individual level and at the school level. It just doesn't have – it doesn't fully predict anything, but nothing does. So that's one thing. So test scores have to be part of it.

Then there are other things too, right, like graduate rates, college attendance. I think some measure of sort of just general, you know, parental satisfaction of the academic outcomes reaching their children has to be considered in the bucket of academic – of academic outcomes the schools – the schools are – the performance is sort of distributed on. I think sort of with complete recognition and I think overall agreement with sort of some of Dan's points about fit, you know, one thing you said was, well, students still want kind of their best option, generally speaking. I guess I keep beating that drum, because I think sort of both in the policy community and also in the research community, and just among sort of advocacy organizations, we tend to think of choosers sometimes as growing in number, but it's somehow different from – somehow different from any other parent who sends their kid somewhere.

And in fact, they're really not. I mean, parents with means make school choices too, they just do so by buying houses in neighborhoods that are residentially – that residentially assign them to good schools. They sometimes elect to go travel to private schools, or to Catholic schools, or to whatever they are. And they all sort of say the same thing, it's just that – it's just that they want the best fit for their kid and academic outcomes do matter.

One thing I wanted to say, just tying previous conversation to this and then I'll stop, is I do think we have to remember as part of this sort of next generation looking forward, that school choice is dynamic. And what I mean by that is you don't just make one choice. We tend to kind of look at survey results, whether here or everything else, and sort of say: You know, why did you put your kid in a charter school? Why did you buy a house in this neighborhood? Why did you – as if that's it. And every piece of data I've ever examined or that I'm aware has been examined is parents have to make a continual process. It's like sort of the adage they make about marriage, right? You have to continue to stay in it. It's not just one thing you do on your wedding day way back when.

And that's the way it works for school choice. In urban environments and kids with low-income families in particular, the average duration of a child – I don't know what this looks like in Michigan but I bet it's fairly similar – the average duration of a child in a school is two and a half years – whether it's charter, whether it's TPS. There's a lot of mobility. And it relates to this performance question because there's a feedback loop. And performance is iterative. And some of it is what the experience – or, what the performance information, what the academic quality is you're getting before you enter the building, before you sign your kid up, or what you use to sign your kid up. And then there's kind of the feedback mechanism you're using to keep your kid there, if you have the choice to keep your kid there in the first place.

And it's important because the link between academic outcomes and future success is long, right? So we know that a kid's third-grade test scores is actually predictive of something. But a parent may be – there may be a year before a parent realizes there is a problem, or two years before a parent realizes a problem. We don't have a very good connection between kind of real-time information. If you buy a car and the car's not working for you within a month, you know it's a lemon, right? It could take two or three years to figure that out for a school that your kid is in. And that's a real information problem that we have to remember.

MR. DEGROW: I would just add, I think maybe this is another good place for survey 2.0, in that, you know, why did you give your school an A, a B, C, D, and F? Thinking about what factors underlie that for parents, knowing that the information on the things that state lawmakers and policymakers care about are so delayed and lagged. I think this also may be an argument for an inherent value to choices itself, even though choice is a means to an end. The active participation in choice means the parents are engaging in the education process. It means, at least to some degree, the school that's letting them in is – has some degree or more interest of listening to the parent. So as the parent feels listened to and feels welcomed, I think that goes a long way.

MR. VAN BEEK: Unfortunately we are – we are out of time. So join me in thanking our panel. (Applause.)

And thank you all for coming today. Again, this will be available, recorded on our website, Mackinac.org. And thanks, again, for your attendance. Please take a peek at the publications we have at the back there and we hope to see you again soon. Thanks a lot.

(END)