

**RESEARCH BRIEF – MARCH 2015**

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## **HOW DO HIGH STATUS PARENTS CHOOSE SCHOOLS?**

### ***EVIDENCE FROM A CHOICE DISTRICT***



One premise of school choice is that parents largely use academic quality indicators to choose schools. Exploratory data from twenty-one in-depth interviews of parents in affluent Houston neighborhoods suggest that other sources of information (such as stereotypes about race and class) are meaningful for high-status parents, who have the greatest ability to exercise school choice. This may have unintended consequences for school choice programs within a racially diverse district, which may undermine equality of opportunity goals. Interview data illuminate the ways in which choice works in favor of those with greater resources.

### **RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

1. How do high-status\* parents choose schools? (\*high-status defined as high socioeconomic status and located in affluent neighborhoods)
2. How do parents explain their choices retrospectively?

## KEY FINDINGS

- Parents value education, and this value is reflected in the ways they approach educational decision-making and the ways they talk about their educational choices. The value of education and its role in the future wellbeing of their children (especially for upward social mobility), are mentioned often in parents' narratives of school choice.
- Determining the best schooling option – public or private – requires a collective understanding of what makes a quality school. This understanding was most often shaped by larger cultural understandings of race and class, rather than by school academic quality indicators. High-status parents utilize this information to move to specific neighborhoods and avoid schools that are stigmatized.
- Although some respondents were concerned about neighborhood diversity, many wanted to give their children access to diverse school environments. Parents emphasized school diversity as a form of cultural capital that they could give their children as a way of preparing them for “the real world.”
- However, they also revealed that in the most diverse school environment, students are often separated within the school through more institutionalized forms of social division, such as course

tracking and even the flow of students through the school building.

## CONCLUSIONS

Poor minority students have come to represent a sort of collective code for failing, low-quality schools as well as impoverished and dangerous neighborhoods. Within this larger climate of racially-coded school and neighborhood disinvestment among those who can afford to go elsewhere, school choice is at risk of becoming an ineffective response to educational inequality. Even in schools with more racially diverse student bodies, students are programmatically separated by tracking systems and rarely, if ever, come into contact with others unlike themselves – either racially or socioeconomically. For large, diverse, urban school districts, school choice has the capacity to become an insidious tool for continued racial segregation and concentrated disadvantage, rather than the educational equity it was intended to achieve. Districts must evaluate where and in what forms tracking exists in their schools, and attempt to assess who benefits from the current regime of school choice. Leaders must have a critical eye toward equitable access to all schools, for all students, remaining attentive to the informal (and formal) processes by which this access is distributed.

The Houston Education Research Consortium (HERC)  
Kinder Institute for Urban Research  
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The Houston Education Research Consortium (HERC) is a research partnership between Rice University and the Houston Independent School District (HISD), the largest district in Texas and the seventh largest in the United States. HERC brings together education researchers and education decision makers to work to ensure that all children have access to a high quality education, regardless of their economic status or where they live. HERC's research agenda is informed by the needs of local education leaders, and the decisions of these leaders are informed by the research produced by HERC and its affiliates. HERC is a program of the Kinder Institute for Urban Research.

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