The process of parental choice in choosing a general elementary program or a district magnet program

Nila Jeannette Nielsen

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THE PROCESS OF PARENTAL CHOICE IN CHOOSING A GENERAL ELEMENTARY PROGRAM OR A DISTRICT MAGNET PROGRAM

by

Nila J. Nielsen

A DISSERTATION

Presented to the Faculty of

The Graduate College at the University of Nebraska

In Partial Fulfillment of Requirements

For the Degree of Doctor of Education

Major: Educational Administration

Under the Supervision of Dr. Martha Bruckner

Omaha, Nebraska

March, 2002
DISSERTATION TITLE

THE PROCESS OF PARENTAL CHOICE IN CHOOSING
A GENERAL ELEMENTARY PROGRAM OR A DISTRICT MAGNET

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Abstract

THE PROCESS OF PARENTAL CHOICE IN CHOOSING A GENERAL ELEMENTARY PROGRAM OR A DISTRICT MAGNET PROGRAM

Nila J. Nielsen, Ed. D.

University of Nebraska, 2002

Advisor: Dr. Martha Bruckner

The purpose of this study was to explore the process of parental choice when two educational programs were offered at one building site. This qualitative case study sought to determine if patterns exist in the parental choice process. Three main areas of (1) investigation, (2) decision-making and (3) verification were the focus of the study.

Initial data were gathered from parents of kindergarten, first, and second grade students through a survey. Interviews with 15 general program parents and 15 alternative program parents were conducted.

Though not necessarily generalizable to all sites having two educational programs of choice, this study generated emerging themes. The concept of parental choice is indeed complex as stated by Smrekar and Goldring (1999). Parents may choose opposite schools to meet the same need. The fact that parents can make a choice seems to be as important as the choice made. Parents who review options available to them through thorough investigative strategies as well as parents who choose not to investigate tend to be satisfied with their educational choice. The background experiences of parents and others close to them, whether positive or of negative concern is a strong motivating factor in the educational program selected for their child. Some evidence exists that parents
seeking programs other than general educational programs seek to consider their parental needs more than the social, emotional and learning style needs of their child.

This study verified that parental choice is important. The researcher recommends additional research to help support and expand the findings of this study.
Acknowledgements

The author would like to express her sincere appreciation to all the committee members for their time and efforts. Dr. John Hill and Dr. Larry Dlugosh for being inspirational mentors long before beginning this doctoral process. Dr. Laura Schulte for her statistical knowledge and continued encouragement. Finally, my gratitude to Dr. Martha Bruckner, my committee chair and friend, for her insight, belief, and persistent challenge to achieve.

Gratitude is extended to those in the Millard School District for their support during this work, providing both time and resources needed to pursue this goal. Special thanks to the parents who participated so willingly in the data gathering process. The continued support of the parents through their words of encouragement following the interviews was overwhelming and humbling.

Special acknowledgement to my staff and faculty for all the patience and encouragement they have provided during these past three years. They gave the support needed through their high level of professional excellence. Even more importantly, I now have an answer to their question, “Is it done yet?”.

Finally, a dedication: To my best friend and husband, Don, and my uniquely wonderful daughter, Kristin, who have been constant sources of encouragement and support as I’ve continued my search to figure out “what I want to be when I grow up”. They not only understood, but supported and celebrated my many moments of procrastination, all because of their willingness to believe I could fly. You are forever and always...my “wings”.
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Chapter 1

Introduction

Parents have indicated a desire for schools of choice (Gallup & Clark, 1987). A basis of this parental desire was described by Raywid (1989). She stated,

The premises underlying the case for parent choice of school...are: 1) there are many viable and desirable ways to educate children; 2) there is no one best program that can respond to the diverse educational preferences found in a pluralistic, democratic society; 3) it is desirable to offer diversity in school programs to meet family patterns and orientations (p.13).

Initial support for offering parental choice was highlighted in the early 1960s with court-ordered desegregation rules and policies (Brogan, 1991). In compliance, school districts began a movement to reassign children away from their neighborhood schools for purposes of desegregation. Parents sought alternative educational opportunities for their children. They wanted a choice.

The term magnet surfaced during the 1970s when school districts worked to follow the desegregation policies. Magnet schools were one way of providing desegregation opportunities in an appealing format for educators and students (Smrekar & Goldring, 1999). The provision of individual choice through the offering of alternative programs provides the viable educational option desired by parents.

The reform effort of the past 15 years has helped to include parents and community members as decision makers in school systems. In order to improve and
remain competitive, public schools have focused on providing appropriate services to meet the needs of children and to make schools an inviting place for parents (Snow, 1996). With these improvement efforts, neighborhood schools that offer an effective, comprehensive curriculum can viably compete with magnet schools that offer a specialized curriculum. Information of how and why parents purposefully choose one program over the other is critical to administrative understanding of parental choice and school improvement efforts.

Focus of the Study

Archbald (1988) and Coons and Sugarman (1978) researched the idea of rational choice theory. This theory states that when families choose an educational program for their children they do so rationally. Parents weigh the alternatives, keeping in mind their own values and preferences as well as those of their children. They consider the needs of their children and look for programs that match their perceived desires. Rationally considering the costs, benefits and handicaps, informed choices are made. Smrekar and Goldring (1999) conclude that “the context of parental decision making is more complex than a singular, individual rational act” (p. 27). How then, do parents decide the complex issue of choosing the best program for their child? The focus of this study was to explore the process of parental choice when two educational programs are offered at one site.

Purpose of the Study

Parents desire choice of educational program selection. Some school districts offer magnet schools as an alternative to the general, district-wide programs. Resident
parents are provided the opportunity to choose either the general or a magnet program.
The purpose of this study was to explore the process of parental choice when two educational programs were offered at one building site. This qualitative case study sought to determine if patterns exist in the parental choice process.

Research Questions

Parents desire choice in the selection of educational programs for their children, but the process of parental investigation, selection, and verification may vary. This study focused on the following questions:

A. How were parents informed of educational program choices?
   1. How did parents first learn of the choices available to their child?
   2. Did parents investigate both choices? If so, what did they do?
   3. Were initial perceptions changed after investigating both programs? If so, how?
   4. What, if any, did parents identify as the main differences between the two programs?
   5. If parents investigated the programs, what part of the parental investigation process was most helpful?
   6. Did parents look for specifics in an educational program? If so, what specifics did they look for?
   7. How did parents describe both programs of choice?

B. What was the process of choosing?
   1. Why did parents decide to enroll their child in his/her current
program?

2. What, if any, personal experiences played a part in the type of program parents sought for their child?

3. What, if any, past educational experiences of family members were considered in making educational program decisions?

4. Did family members or friends play a role in the decision making process? If so, how?

5. Who, if anyone, was especially instrumental in helping parents make the decision?

6. What, if any, consideration was given to match a child’s learning needs to the program?

7. What, if any, concerns did parents have when making an educational placement decision?

C. What experiences validated the choice?

1. What, if anything, occurred this past school year that validated the parental choice?

2. What, if anything, occurred this past school year that made parents question their choice?

3. Did the program meet the needs of the child? If so, how?

4. Did the program meet parental expectations? If so, how?

5. What, if anything, was known about the program after enrollment that would have been helpful to know before the parental choice was
made?

6. What, if anything, would have been helpful to know about the other program?

7. What, if any, recommendations would parents make to other families investigating school choice?

**Definition of Terms**

- Parental Choice: the process of purposefully selecting an educational program for a child.

- Magnet Schools: alternative educational programs which are not commonly available in traditional schools.

- General Education Program: a traditional elementary program offered to students residing in a large suburban district. The program provides curricula designed to meet the needs of all learners.

- Alternative Program: a specific education program offered to resident students through a lottery system. This magnet program provides a specific curricula that includes (1) Orton-based phonics (Spalding, 1991); an intensive phonics program that teaches 70 phonograms and their usage, (2) Saxon mathematics (Saxon, 1998); a program with daily review of previously taught mathematical concepts, and (3) the Core Knowledge Sequence; a program that promotes key educational concepts identified by E.D. Hirsch (1999) to be important for all American citizens.
Assumptions, Limitations, and Delimitations

- An assumption of the study was that participants would accurately reflect the process related to choosing educational programs. The act of recalling previous knowledge and thought processes has been accepted as accurate.

- A limitation was that parents were responding to questions regarding the process of educational choice following up to 3 years of their child’s attendance in such a program. Memories may have been distorted or limited through the passage of time.

- The findings have been limited to the sample studied at one building site.

- The researcher collected data at the site where she serves as principal. The limitations of this issue are addressed in Chapter 3.

- This study was delimited to parents of kindergarten, first and second grade students, who had children enrolled in either the general or alternative program offered at the research site.

Significance of the Study

This study adds to scholarly research/literature in the field as a case study of parental choice in a two-program school with findings specific to this limited setting, but not necessarily generalizable to others. It provides additional information to previous studies that have researched issues of school and parental choice, with particular focus on program choice (Archbald, 1988; Coons & Sugarman, 1978; Smrekar & Goldring, 1999; Snow, 1996).

Discovery of the process of program choice may provide important information
for district administrators as they design and implement magnet opportunities. Educators may use this study to improve effective school practice through gaining an understanding of parental desires in educational programming. Administrators can more effectively serve the community and students by providing programs that meet desired needs.

Information gathered in this study may provide legislators, educational policy makers, school administrators, the public, and other parents with important information about parental choice. This study may be helpful in determining future actions concerning public choice for children.
Chapter 2
Literature Review

This literature review provides an overview of existing research examining school choice. It examines (a) the history of school choice, (b) the related research regarding parental choice options, (c) the outcomes of providing alternative programming options in the form of magnet schools, and (d) a summary of related research.

The history of school choice establishes a framework for why school choice became a viable option for school districts and in turn, parents. The review captured the need for school reform and the push behind finding alternative educational programs. The sections on the related research regarding parental choice options and the outcomes of providing alternative programming in the form of magnet schools present research from studies examining the involvement of parents in issues of school choice.

History of School Choice

The court-ordered desegregation of the 1960s opened the door for restructuring neighborhood schools and residence attendance areas. Local authority was altered by Federal legislation demanding integration in public schools. Reform efforts were hurried in an attempt to follow the legislation requirements. Parental choice was not an option as districts mandated attendance at specific building sites to provide racial integration.

The nation was stunned by the publication of the report *A Nation at Risk* by the National Commission on Excellence in Education (1983). This document brought to light awareness that the quality of our nation's public school system needed improvement beyond the cultural integration mandated in the 1960s. The report suggested that students
were unprepared academically through a neglect of the basics, promotion of students who were illiterate, lowered standards, and a protection of incompetent school personnel. As a result of this document, schools across the nation began to evaluate common practice and start a movement toward reform.

Reform movements represented a fundamental shift in American educational norms and precedents. Home schools, private schools and parochial schools were accepted as alternatives to public education, though it was commonly believed public school experiences offered the best solution for society at large (Cremin, 1988; Nathan, 1989; Tyack, 1974). The Constitution's Tenth Amendment had given power to the states to govern educational systems. Using this Constitutional power, the states designated land boundaries that formed school districts. Districts mandated student attendance at specific school buildings as designated by student residence.

In the mid to late 1980s, the idea of decentralization or movement away from a top-down bureaucracy, led to a grass roots movement of increased parental involvement (Hess, 1991). This effort gained and sustained public favor as indicated in the Gallup Polls on public attitudes conducted during this decade of reform (Elam & Gallup, 1989, 1990; Elam, Rose, & Gallup, 1991, 1993; Gallup, 1986; Gallup & Clark, 1987). Results revealed that the American public felt their community schools had declined in quality. The polls also indicated a desire for parental choice in issues of education. This movement focused on educational excellence and a parent's right to choose programs for their children (Gutherie & Koppich, 1990).
History of Parental Choice

The history of parental choice can be traced back to the beginning of our nation (Brogan, 1991). Consumer Sovereignty was an idea recommended by Adam Smith, a British economist who, as reflected in his work A Wealth of Nations (1776), believed that giving parents a choice would make schools more competitive and responsive to the needs of students (as cited in Coons & Sugarman, 1978). Thomas Paine carried Smith's idea to America in 1792 suggesting that families with lower incomes should be provided schooling choice through a negative income tax (as cited in Coons & Sugarman, 1978). John Stuart Mills in his essay On Liberty (1859) indicated that the government should financially help parents who could not afford alternative educational choices (as cited in Coons & Sugarman, 1978). This early thought of governmental payment to families would later be known as educational vouchers.

The Supreme Court decision, Pierce v. Society of Sisters (1925), provided a ruling that supported the right of families to choose educational opportunities other than public education. The Court determined that the responsibility for the development of the child, including education, was that of the parents. It further held support for the Fourteenth Amendment Due Process clause that protected the right to choose a private educational setting as long as the school met reasonable state standards for quality.

In 1962, during the era of court ordered desegregation, Milton Friedman in his work Capitalism and Freedom strongly suggested that a competitive, free market system of education, was the best hope for improving schools. He proposed a voucher system as a way to equalize educational opportunities for all citizens, although it was not until the
late 1980s that legislation and programs appeared to support the idea of educational choice.

**Parental Choice Options**

Parental choice initiatives fought for the common goal of an educational system that accommodated increased parental control over the instructional program (Chubb & Moe, 1990; Friedman, 1962; Hirshman, 1970). A variety of parental choice options have been researched. External options outside the public school system included the use of vouchers, home schooling, and private/parochial education. Internal options within public educational systems included magnet centers, open-enrollment districts, controlled enrollment, charter schools, and alternative programs (Aman, 1989; Archbald, 1988; Blank, Dentler, Baltzell, & Chabotar, 1983; Chubb & Moe, 1990; Finn, 1986; Maddaus, 1988; Raywid, 1984; Rosenberg, 1989; Rossell, 1985).

Open enrollment between districts was made available to students in many states including Nebraska, the site of this study (Boyer, 1992). Nebraska Law 79-232-296 provided an enrollment option for parents to enroll their child in a district other than their resident district without paying tuition fees. The law states,

The legislature finds and declares that parents and legal guardians have the primary responsibility of ensuring that their children receive the best education possible. In recognition of this responsibility, the Legislature intends to provide educational options for parents and legal guardians, when deciding what public school or public school district is best for their children, by allowing them to consider the following factors, including,
but not limited to:

(a) The size of the schools and school districts in the area;

(b) The distance children have to travel and the ease and availability of transportation;

(c) The course offerings and extracurricular offerings of the schools and school districts in the area;

(d) The quantity and quality of the staff at such schools and school districts; and

(e) The performance of the school district on any indicators of performance established by the State Department of Education.

States that adopted the open enrollment option reported that school districts became competitive, and began to offer alternative program choices for parents within district boundaries to maintain enrollment and to entice enrollment from other districts. Magnet schools became a popular method to provide this choice.

Magnet Schools

Magnet schools have increased in number since the 1975 federal court ruling accepting magnets as an alternative method of desegregation (Yu & Taylor, 1997). By 1996, more than half of all magnet schools were located in elementary schools, supporting the concept that parents are typically more invested and involved in their children’s education when students are young (Blank, Levine, & Steel, 1996).

Magnet schools permitted parents to choose schools within a district system without the use of vouchers or option enrollment. Parents were free to choose the school
that offered programs best suited to the needs of their children. Rather than mandatory bussing or assigning students to certain schools, magnets offered a chance for parents to voluntarily enroll their children in the schools of their choice.

Positive benefits of magnet schools have been generalized to include five major areas: (a) reduced movement of families due to racial concerns, (b) improved attitudes of parents regarding mandatory desegregation, (c) satisfied the desire for parents to have educational choice options, (d) provided high quality, diverse approaches to education, and (e) increased parental and community involvement and satisfaction (Blank, 1984; Sauter, 1994).

Academic and sociological benefits have also been reported for students attending magnet schools. These benefits include lower dropout rates, better attendance, fewer suspensions, higher morale, greater racial understanding and integration, less violence and vandalism, and better student self-concepts (Aman, 1989; Blank et al; 1983).

Supporters of choice have identified key concepts in favor of parental choice that include: (a) reduction in drop out rates and significant improvements in student achievement, (b) integration of students with varying racial and economic backgrounds support learning from one another, (c) increased satisfaction, commitment and involvement by parents, (d) improved attitudes by students in areas of self, school, learning and toward educators, and (e) improved educator morale and attitude (Nathan, 1989).

Magnet schools have been found to have higher levels of involvement by community members and parents (Blank, 1984). Increased parental involvement in
educational decision making creates positive results in terms of increased enrollment, better attendance, and improved climate regarding school discipline (Berla, Garlington, & Henderson, 1993). When parental involvement is increased even slightly, significant positive effects are recognized in academic and climate factors (Fullan, 1991).

Summary

Research on the historical beginnings of school choice and on the history of magnet schools is plentiful as seen in the review of literature. However, research on the process of parental choice is limited. The following conclusions from identified studies relevant to this proposal, offer information that may be useful in analyzing data gathered during this research proposed project.

The conclusions reached by Archbald (1988) and that of Coons and Sugarman (1978) regarding rational choice suggested that parental choice is part of a social process. Parents rely on others in their social networks to provide information on the choices available. Gathering and interpreting the data, and making judgments about the choices, becomes a shared process rather than an individual or isolated one.

Data collected from parents in a study by Smrekar and Goldring (1999) identified the sources of information most helpful in the decision making process in two cities where alternative educational choices were offered. The ranked sources of information parents indicated as important included:

1. Talks with teachers
2. Talks with friends
3. Talks with fifth grade child
4. Other child's experience
5. Other family members
6. School newsletter
7. Informational meetings
8. Radio, T.V., Newspaper
9. Visit to schools
10. Informational center
11. Achievement test scores

Smrekar and Goldring (1999) also categorized data that summarized why parents choose alternative programs. The 21 items, ranked in order of importance, include:

1. Academic reputation
2. Teaching style
3. Transportation
4. Teachers
5. Near home
6. Racial/Ethnic mix
7. School shares values
8. Parent involvement
9. Discipline
10. Safety
11. Another child at school
12. Principal

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Research indicates that parents who are most dissatisfied with their community schools are most likely to choose magnet schools (Smrekar & Goldring, 1999). A related study by Lee, Croninger, and Smith (1994) found that "opinions about choice are driven by negative views of the quality of local schools" (p. 433).

Snow (1996) conducted a study that researched parental choice of two elementary reading programs offered within a child's resident school. Though this study focused on the process of parental choice, it was limited only to the selection of one curricula area, that of reading methodology. With this limitation in mind, the study does provide some information relevant to this study.

- The differences in reasons why a particular choice was made were shown to relate to fundamentally different expectations of child-rearing and an educational environment that each group perceived as effective to facilitate learning.
• Parents consider factors of location, safety, class size, physical facility and teacher quality.

• Parents of students in both programs indicated a satisfaction with their choice. This was evident by a lack of movement between the two programs. Snow (1996) refers to research by Raywid (1989) that supports the idea that with choice comes a relatively high perception of satisfaction.

The need for additional research is clear. After an extensive search of available resources, no further research was found that studied the process of purposeful parental choice when two educational programs were offered at one site.
Chapter 3

Research Methodology

The purpose of this study was to explore the process of parental choice when two educational programs are offered at one site. This chapter defines the research design methods that were used for this qualitative case study. It is divided into seven sections: (a) research design, (b) role of the researcher, (c) data collection procedures, (d) data recording, (e) data analysis, (f) verification of interpretation, and (g) report of outcomes.

Research Design

The research approach was a qualitative case study involving parents of kindergarten, first and second grade students in a mid-western, suburban elementary school that offers two educational programs at one building site. Writers define the paradigm of qualitative research by identifying specific characteristics in contrast to those of a quantitative paradigm (Creswell, 1994; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Those characteristics key to this research study included the paradigm assumptions that permitted the study to be informal, value-laden and biased, inductive, emergent, valid and trustworthy.

Qualitative research centers on participants' perceptions, experiences and the way they make sense of their lives (Fraenkel & Wallen, 1990; Locke, Sirdusa, & Silverman, 1987; Merriam, 1988). The researcher of qualitative studies attempts to understand not one, but multiple realities. Data are descriptive and the participants' words and meanings are recorded rather than the numerical records often associated with the quantitative methodologies. When researching how decisions by parents are made, it is the narrative
descriptions of reflective conversation that provide the particulars that become meaningful data. Qualitative methods are by nature value-laden and biased. Participant perceptions are based on a variety of background experiences that are unique to the individual.

Creswell (1994) states that “inductive logic is the strength of a qualitative study” (p. 7). Topics and categories emerge from the information gathered, allowing patterns or theories to surface in explanation of the phenomenon studied. Multiple realities emerge (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Attention is paid to particulars rather than generalities (Fraenkel & Wallen, 1990; Merriam, 1988).

In this study the emergent data were helpful to gain an understanding of how parents chose one program over another. The qualitative, case study design provided opportunities for written response through use of open-ended questions gathered in the initial survey and also permitted the comfort level desired for data collection through interviewed conversation (Yin, 1989).

While quantitative studies seek to measure verification through the traditions of validity and reliability, qualitative researchers seek believability and trustworthiness. This was achieved in this study through coherence, insight, instrumental design and verification of data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Believability and trustworthiness served as a guide in the qualitative processes of interviewing, document review and data analysis during the duration of this study.

**Role of the Researcher**

The role of the researcher in this qualitative design was that of the primary data
collection instrument. Personal values, assumptions, and biases of the researcher were identified and support the data collection process. I have a total of 30 years of educational experiences that helped shape my perceptions of public education. The last 13 years I have served as a public school administrator. I currently serve as the principal at the site of this study, a dual school composed of both a district general program and a district choice magnet (alternative) program. I have personal teaching experiences that replicate the uniqueness of both programs offered at the site. I believe in the strengths of each program. As principal, I am concerned with serving the community by offering programs that will match parental issues of choice. Decisions must be based on awareness, knowledge and sensitivity to participant realities.

It was my intent to remain objective as I participated in the role of researcher. However, the "Heisenberg effect" was a factor as predicted (LeCompte, 1987). This theory was based on the idea that it is virtually impossible for an investigator to not have an effect on what is being investigated. The interview process causes participants to think and respond to something that did not naturally occur to them.

Patton (1990) states, "The challenge is to combine participation and observation so as to become capable of understanding the program, [setting, participants] as an insider while describing the program for outsiders" (p. 128). The strength of being the researcher of the study that was limited to the elementary school where I am the principal, permitted the use of tacit knowledge to simultaneously acquire and process information. A delicate balance was needed. I was cautious throughout the study, that only participants' views were used, leaving aside my personal opinions.
Data Collection Procedures

Data were collected in three formats: (1) written survey, (2) semi-structured interviews, and (3) researcher fieldnotes. A matrix of rationale, data collection method and indicators was created to show the relationship of data (see Appendix A).

Participants. The participants for this study were selected from those parents of current kindergarten, first, and second grade students who purposefully chose one program over the other. Original study design was to include only parents of first grade students. A secondary design permitted expansion to the kindergarten and second grade levels if the sample was too limiting, which was evident from the initial survey responses. Total first grade enrollment in both programs equaled 80 children from a total of 78 families. In April, 2001, a survey was mailed to each of the 78 households having a child or children enrolled in the first grade at the research site. Upon return, surveys were coded to represent the program of enrollment. A cover letter requested that one adult in the household complete the survey and return it within 10 days. A stamped, self-addressed envelope was included. This initial survey outlined the purpose of the study, requested parents to identify if a purposeful choice was made, and ask for selected volunteers to be interviewed at a time to be arranged with each participant. Five open-ended questions were asked in the survey (see Appendix B):

1. How did you learn of the two programs (general and alternative) that are offered at this elementary school?

2. How did you investigate both programs to choose the right one for your child?
3. What factors contributed to your decision to enroll your child in his/her current program?

4. Now that your child has been enrolled in his/her current program, what, if anything, makes you realize that you made the right decision?

5. What, if anything, makes you wonder if you made the right decision?

University faculty members who were familiar with survey instrumentation reviewed the survey. They provided input on the design and format of the survey, based on past research experience. A review of the survey questions by two district magnet coordinators and a district general program representative ensured content validity.

A follow-up mailing to each non-respondent was sent. Remaining non-respondents were contacted to request completion of the survey. Responses returned from the original sample (first grade parents) was low (41) (52.6%), limiting the research data. The study was expanded to include parents of current kindergarten and second grade students. In this expanded study, a total of 191 surveys were sent with a total return rate of 154 (80.6%) (see Table 1).

Survey information was used in an attempt to validate a balanced case study sample from both programs. Equal numbers, fifteen parents from each of the two programs (30 total), were selected and agreed to participate in the interview process. Criteria for interview selection included parents that purposefully made a program choice and parents that had indicated experiences that would help gain an understanding of the parental decision making process (see Table 2).
Table 1

**Written Survey Response by Program Choice**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Program of Choice</th>
<th>Surveys Sent</th>
<th>Households Responding</th>
<th>Percent Responding</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>General Education Program</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>72.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alternative Education Program</td>
<td>108</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>87.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>191</td>
<td>154</td>
<td>80.6%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 2

Criteria for Selection of Interview Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Program:</th>
<th>General</th>
<th>Alternative</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total Number of Parents Interviewed</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Parental Experiences:

- Parents with a special needs child: 1 1
- Parents with a child of high ability: 1 1
- Parents who didn't know of the choices before registration: 2 0
- Parents who did not gain entrance in choice program: 1 0
- Parents who entered a child, then switched programs: 2 2
- Parents who had educated a child at home: 0 1
**Research environment.** This qualitative case study was based in one elementary building located in a large suburban district. The elementary site of the study, serves a total population of 418 students in 23 classrooms. Two programs are offered in the building: the magnet program, referred to as the 'alternative program' and the district’s general comprehensive education program, referred to as the 'general program'.

Residents of the district are free to choose either program. Enrollment in the magnet program is limited to 24 student spaces per each of the 12 classrooms, for a total of 48 per grade level or 288 for the total program.

Permission to conduct research as described in this proposal, was obtained from the appropriate district personnel and the Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects, University of Nebraska Medical Center (see Appendix C).

**Interviews.** The interview process was designed to be open-ended. It was designed based on information gathered from the review of literature, prior knowledge of both educational programs, and various experts in the field. This open-ended interview process generated a wide range of responses in which themes emerged. Lincoln and Guba (1985) referred to interviews as being a conversation with a defined purpose. This statement supported the use of interviews as an appropriate tool for conducting this qualitative study.

Three main questions designed to understand how and why parents decided to enroll their children in a specific program of choice were posed to the participants. Probes were used for further discussion and to encourage elaboration, find details and to clarify initial answers (Patton, 1990). A review of the interview questions by two district
magnet coordinators and a district general program representative contributed to content validity. Five pilot interviews completed with parents of third grade parents from both programs verified the questioning framework and reliability.

**Interview Questions**

**Sources of information.** (How were parents informed of educational program choices?) The first set of questions, A1 – A7, were based on prior information participants had about the two programs. Questions sought to assess the extent of program investigation and to determine if the choice was purposeful.

A1. How did you first learn of the choices available to your child?

A2. What did you do to investigate both choices?

A3. How were your initial perceptions changed after investigating both programs?

A4. What did you identify as the main differences between the two programs?

A5. What part of your investigation was most helpful?

A6. What specifics were you looking for in an educational program?

A7. Briefly describe both programs of choice, as you perceive them.

**Process of choosing.** (What was the process of choosing?) Questions B1 - B7 sought to assess experiences that played a role in the choice process, considerations made in selecting a program, and parental concerns while choosing a program.

B1. Why did you decide to enroll your child in his/her current program?

B2. What personal experiences played a part in the type of program you
were seeking for your child?

B3. What past educational experiences of family members were considered in making this decision?

B4. How did family members and friends play a role in the decision making process?

B5. Who, if anyone, was especially instrumental in helping you make the decision?

B6. What consideration was given to matching your child’s learning needs to the program?

B7. What concerns did you have when making your decision?

Validation of choice. (What experiences validated the choice?). Interview questions C1 – C7 identified the positive and negative experiences linked to the decision. Information was gathered that helped to assess parental perception of their educational program choice.

C1. What has occurred this school year that validates your choice?

C2. What has occurred this school year that makes you question your choice?

C3. How has the program met the needs of your child?

C4. How has the program met your expectations?

C5. What do you know now about the program that would have been helpful to know before you made your choice?

C6. What, if anything, would have been helpful to know about the other
program?

C7. What recommendations would you make to other families investigating school choice?

Clarity. Probes were used to help clarify answers or meaning as needed throughout the interview process. A variety of answers and emergent themes did not require subsequent interviews.

Confidentiality. Prior to the start of the data collection process, IRB approval was obtained. Participant identity was held in confidence throughout the research, and findings were written to protect their identity. Written permission, as proof of informed consent, was secured from each participant prior to participation. Each participant was provided a copy for review of the transcription of his/her interview to verify accuracy. Two participants responded with the request to add statements following their review of the transcripts. These statements were added to the researcher's fieldnotes. Participants were also invited to review the researcher's narrative description of the gathered data relevant to their experiences with no participants requesting this opportunity. This method of member checks assured an accurate reflection of meaning and content. Participants had the right to determine if the transcripted information they provided was included in the research findings. No exclusions were requested.

Data Recording

The model of in-depth interviews chosen for this study allowed for rich discussion of thoughts and feelings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Taylor & Bogdan, 1984). Interviews were held at the site of the study, in the conference room, at a time convenient to the
participant and not during the researcher's normal working hours. A time frame of approximately 90 minutes was set aside for each interview to allow for prolonged engagement of the interviewee. This process permitted the researcher to establish rapport and foster a climate of trust (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994). Interviews were audiotaped and transcribed. Abbreviated responses were recorded in the field notes along with observational comments that could not be discerned by audiotape.

**Data Analysis**

Survey data were summarized as part of the research data. It was used as a selection tool for identifying interview participants. Qualitative data were collected through use of open-ended questions during participant interviews. Interviews were audiotaped, transcribed and coded for common themes.

The constant comparative method (Glasser & Strauss, 1967) was used to analyze the data gathered through the interviews. This process combined inductive category coding and a continuous comparison of all units of meaning that were obtained. Each new unit of meaning was compared to all other units and then grouped or categorized and coded, with matching units of meaning. When there was no other similar unit of meaning that matched a new one, a new category was formed. The continuous refinement of this process permitted the initial categories to be changed, merged, or omitted. New relationships were formed during this active process (Goertz & LeCompte, 1981).

The first stage of data analysis in this study was the process of inductive category coding and simultaneous comparing of units of meaning across categories (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994). Open coding identified concepts, their properties and dimensions
(Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Utilized index cards and discovery sheets formed a visual picture using the big paper process (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This process helped identify provisional categories and contributed to the audit trail. Data were continuously analyzed and categories were compared and contrasted to ensure accuracy of identification.

The second stage included the refinement of categories or axial coding. The relationships within and between categories and sub-categories began to emerge. Selective coding explored the central category and its relationship to the other categories. Categories were named for ease of sorting information. Rules for inclusion were proposed during this stage of data analysis using the matrix of questions as a guide.

Data reduction, the process that allows for interpretation and selection of relevant data, was used to help develop categories that were central to the data. Categories, patterns and themes identified larger units of conceptual meaning in regard to how parental choice was determined. Exploration of relationships and patterns across categories was analyzed.

In this process of data analysis, the information was continuously contrasted and compared. As the study was bounded by time, the themes emerged throughout the study to make sense of the research (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994). The integration of data yielded an understanding of the participants and in turn, the issue of parental program choice.

Verification

Naturalistic inquiry demands that the standards of trustworthiness be upheld. Trustworthiness was verified by following good research practices, which added to the
integrity of this study. Lincoln and Guba (1985) delineate good practices as a) multiple methods of data collection; b) building on an audit trail; c) working with a research team; and d) member checks. Each of these recommended practices were utilized in this study.

1. Multiple methods of data collection - use of the initial written surveys, interviews, multiple informants, and researcher field notes offered multiple methods.

2. An audit trail – original surveys, tapes and transcriptions of all interviews, utilized index cards sorted and categorized on a big paper display, researcher field notes, and discovery coding sheets were made available for audit.

3. Research team – although this study was conducted individually, it was overseen by a committee of university faculty and an external auditor that reviewed the research procedures to ensure accuracy of the data collection and analysis process.

4. Member checks - interview participants reviewed transcriptions and were provided an opportunity to review the narrative reflections to ensure the accuracy of the information and validity of interpretation.

Internal validity is the fit between the report or findings and reality (Miles & Huberman, 1984). This study supported internal validity through the multiple methods of collection and member checks.

External validity was supported by accurate interpretation of events and following the necessary process of data collection and analysis (Merriam, 1988). The use of multiple methods of data collection allowed for cross-checking of findings. Organized
coding and a documented audit trail were established for purposes of accountability.

Transcriptions and audiotapes were available for review. Member checks followed each interview session to maintain validity. An external auditor reviewed the process of transforming the data into the narrative form. This maintained the integrity of the process.

**Report of Outcomes**

A rich, narrative report of findings identifies the process of parental choice when two educational programs are offered. This narrative report has been recorded in the form of this doctoral dissertation designed to answer the established research questions.
Chapter 4

Findings

The purpose of this study was to explore parental choice. The overall question guiding the study was: What is the process of school choice when two programs are offered? Three sub questions were used to provide focus while gathering data: (1) How are parents informed of educational program choices? (2) What is the process of choosing an educational program? (3) What experiences validate the parental choice?

Biographical Data

One hundred fifty-four families responded to the written parental survey. Sixty families responded from the general education program and 94 from the alternative program.

Thirty individual interviews provided data specific to participants' perceptions, experiences and the process of choosing an educational program. Biographical data of each interview participant provides a knowledge base to gain further understanding of each subject.

General Program Interview Participants

Josephine Blum. Josephine has been very pleased with the general program as she watched her oldest daughter go through the program. She knew she wanted her other children to have the same experiences.

Occupation: Secretary
Spouse: Furniture Salesman
Residence: Building Attendance Area
Family Members: Son – Kindergarten, General Program
Daughter - Second Grade, General Program
Daughter - Sixth Grade, General Middle School

Tammy Claussen. Tammy desires a strong reading, writing and spelling program for her children. Her daughter was accepted into the alternative half-day program, but two days before school, Tammy decided to place her child in the all-day general program.

Occupation: Fitness Trainer (part time)
Spouse: Construction Worker
Residence: Building Attendance Area
Family Members: Daughter – Kindergarten, General Program
Son - Preschool

Grace Davidson. Grace is very supportive of the general program. She and her husband based their educational placement decision on Grace’s experience as a graduate of the district.

Occupation: Insurance Claims
Spouse: Truck Driver
Residence: Building Attendance Area
Family Members: Son – Kindergarten, General Program

Patty Dunn. Patty’s oldest daughter has severe hearing loss. This disability has been a focus for Patty as she works with the school system. Attention to teaching and learning styles has been key to Patty’s appreciation of the general education program.

Occupation: Bank Executive
Spouse: Unemployed outside the home
Residence: Building Attendance Area
Family Members: Daughter - Second Grade, General Program
Daughter – Kindergarten, General Program
Daughter - Preschool

Paula Evans. Paula has just begun working after a long layoff. She worries about her first grade twins. She originally entered her twins in the alternative program, but after three weeks, switched them to the general program because of her son’s ADHD diagnosis and associated learning needs.

Occupation: Card Sales and Distribution
Spouse: (Divorced)
Residence: Building Attendance Area
Family Members: Son (twin) - First Grade, General Program
Daughter (twin) - First Grade, General Program
Son – 10th Grade, General High School

Penny Fraizer. Penny’s son has exhibited strong reasoning ability far beyond his preschool and now his grade-level peers. She wants this talent to be strengthened but also wants him to enjoy a creative, hands-on learning style.

Occupation: Manager (large rehabilitation service)
Spouse: Lawyer
Residence: Building Attendance Area
Family Members: Son - Kindergarten, General Program
Daughter - Preschool

**Lorraine Gonzolez.** Lorraine noticed creative talent in her son during his early developmental years. She wants to continue development through a sensory-rich educational program.

**Occupation:** Works in the home  
**Spouse:** Postal Services  
**Residence:** Building Attendance Area  
**Family Members:** Son - First Grade, General Program

**Annie Hawthorne.** Annie supports the concepts of family values and school neighborhoods. She has noticed a social program division of parents and students at the building site.

**Occupation:** Tax Preparation Services  
**Spouse:** Civil Engineer  
**Residence:** Building Attendance Area  
**Family Members:** Daughter - First Grade, General Program  
Daughter - Third Grade, General Program

**Glen and Virginia Hansen.** Glen and Virginia are immigrants to America. They came together to the interview to “make sure they said things right.” They desire a rigorous program for their son. They chose the alternative program but no space was available. Following a year in general program, they were satisfied that their son made significant progress both academically as well as socially.

**Occupation:** Mathematician

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Spouse: Medical Technician
Residence: Building Attendance Area
Family Members: Son – Kindergarten, General Program

Don Kraft. Don wants his daughter to enjoy school while preparing for a professional career. He takes an active role in parenting that includes volunteering on a regular basis.

Occupation: Executive Accountant
Spouse: Small Business Owner
Residence: Building Attendance Area
Family Members: Daughter - First Grade, General Program

Lucy McElroy. Lucy's daughter is young for her grade and extremely shy. Lucy wants her to enjoy school and have a developmentally appropriate learning experience, but also seeks a strong reading program for her child.

Occupation: Store Manager
Spouse: Sheriff
Residence: Building Attendance Area
Family Members: Daughter – Kindergarten, General Program

Cathy Paulsen. Cathy moved back into her childhood neighborhood so her children could attend the district’s general program just as she had. She works as a para-professional at the building site serving special needs children enrolled in both programs.

Occupation: School Para-Professional
Spouse: Factory Worker
Residence: Building Attendance Area

Family Members: Son – Kindergarten, General Program

Sara Schneider. Sara wants her daughter to learn in an atmosphere that is fun and creative. Sara and her husband desired an educational approach that would permit learning by doing and the social advantages of having students work cooperatively.

Occupation: Career Guidance

Spouse: Auto Mechanic

Residence: Building Attendance Area

Family Members: Daughter - First Grade, General Program

Son - Preschooler

Marva Shield. Marva wants her daughters to have a solid academic program that emphasizes basic skills in the primary grades. The general program was the choice of many of the lawyers’ children in the firm where Marva works so she selected it for her daughter based on their recommendations.

Occupation: Secretary (Law Firm)

Spouse: Policeman

Residence: Building Attendance Area

Family Members: Daughter - First Grade, General Program

Daughter - Preschooler

Julie Wilkensen. As a teacher, Julie believes in a developmentally appropriate educational approach to learning. She wanted her son to grow academically in a learning

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environment that promoted learning through play and experience.

**Occupation:** Teacher

**Spouse:** Sales Manager

**Residence:** Building Attendance Area

**Family Members:**
- Son - Kindergarten, General Program
- Son - Preschooler
- Daughter - Infant

**Alternative Program Interview Participants**

**Sheila Algood.** Sheila knew her son is very methodical and loves structure. After learning of the alternative program, she knew her son would excel academically in the program’s structured environment.

**Occupation:** Computer Programmer

**Spouse:** Computer Programmer

**Residence:** Subdivision - Outside Building Attendance Area

**Family Members:**
- Son - First Grade, Alternative Program

**Jane Amish.** Jane’s son is quiet and needs motivation to learn. As a general program teacher, Jane based her educational program choice on her son’s needs and specific learning style. The alternative program’s teacher-directed instruction fit this match.

**Occupation:** Teacher

**Spouse:** Internet Business

**Residence:** Subdivision - Outside Building Attendance Area
Family Members: Son - First Grade, Alternative Program
Daughter - Preschool

Jennifer Brown. Jennifer was not happy with the general program her oldest son had experienced while in the primary grades. Jennifer transferred him to the alternative program and found the program to meet her expectations. She enrolled her two middle children in the alternative when they were age-eligible to enter kindergarten. Her youngest son was placed in the general pre-school handicapped program. It is Jennifer’s hope that he will enter the alternative program at some point soon in his educational program.

Occupation: Works in the home
Spouse: Chiropractor
Residence: Subdivision – Outside Building Attendance Area
Family Members: Son – Kindergarten, General Handicapped Program
Daughter - First Grade, Alternative Program
Son - Second Grade, Alternative Program
Son - Sixth Grade, General Middle School

Linda Eversden. Linda and her husband had heard of the alternative program long before it was time to enroll their first child. Out of curiosity, they came to an informational parent night to learn about educational choices and knew, based on their own backgrounds that the alternative program would be their program of choice.

Occupation: Works in the Home
Spouse: Corporate Manager
Rory Howard. Rory and his wife home-schooled their oldest daughter until this year. They continue to home-school their youngest. Strong family values guided their choice to educate their child at home, but after looking at the social needs of their eldest daughter, they enrolled her in the alternative program, choosing it because they felt it had a solid “back-to-basics” approach to learning.

John Hamlet. John and his wife sought a “private” education that would be free. The alternative program provided a curriculum that John felt was equal to one you might pay for in a parochial school, yet free within this public school setting.
**Merideth Johnson.** Merideth wasn’t really looking for anything special for her son when he was ready to enroll, expecting to enter him in the general program. She learned through a friend that there was a “back-to-basics” program available and upon investigation, felt it offered more academically than the curriculum of the general program.

**Occupation:** Works in the Home  
**Spouse:** Warehouse Manager  
**Residence:** Subdivision – Outside Building Attendance Area  
**Family Members:** Son - Second Grade, Alternative Program  
Daughter - Preschool  
Daughter - Infant

**David Planteen.** David and his wife entered their children in the alternative program. Evident to David that both children had high intellectual talents, he sought a program in which these talents could be supported and enriched through an expanded curriculum.

**Occupation:** Unemployed (Disability)  
**Spouse:** Physical Trainer  
**Residence:** Subdivision - Outside Building Attendance Area  
**Family Members:** Daughter - First Grade, Alternative Program  
Son - Fourth Grade, Alternative Program

**Georgia Stone.** Georgia’s seventh grade daughter had attended the alternative program since it first opened in the district. She completed sixth grade at the local
middle school this year. Georgia made the decision to enter her youngest child in the alternative program based on her older daughter’s success.

Occupation: Small Family Business Owner
Spouse: Small Family Business Owner
Residence: Subdivision – Outside Building Attendance Area
Family Members: Son - First Grade, Alternative Program
Daughter - Seventh Grade, General Middle School

Andrea Schmidly. Andrea and her husband wanted a program that would provide an environment of respect, structure and discipline. They sought strong academics supported by family involvement.

Occupation: Works in the home
Spouse: Associate Pastor
Residence: Subdivision - Outside Building Attendance Area
Family Members: Daughter- First Grade, Alternative Program
Daughter - Preschool
Son - Infant

Mandy Stephenson. Mandy was trained as a general education teacher. She also received training in the same phonics program used in this study’s alternative program. When she and her husband moved to this state, they enrolled their second grade son in the district’s general program to continue his original program design but chose to enroll their kindergarten daughter in the alternative program.

Occupation: Interior Designer/ Substitute Teacher
Kelly Stuart. Kelly felt her oldest son needed structure in learning. After learning of the alternative program, she was excited that students were taught through teacher-led instruction and held accountable for homework. Kelly was glad her son would learn the discipline of responsibility early in his educational career.

Sally Sanders. Sally has two children in the program. Her husband’s son (age 19) did not experience academic success while attending a private school. She and her husband wanted a program that would help their two children gain a strong academic background. Sally has been a strong supporter of the program since first hearing of the program’s design. Her enthusiasm is evidenced through her promotion of the plan to other parents.
Charleen Vanna. Charleen’s daughter transferred to the alternative program following her kindergarten year. Difficulties with reading were diagnosed and so to support her daughter, Charleen enrolled her in a summer school program that taught the same phonetic methods used in the alternative program. Reading gains were recognized and so Charleen enrolled her daughter in the program.

Occupation: Works in the Home
Spouse: Corporate Manager
Residence: Subdivision - Outside Building Attendance Area
Family Members: Daughter - First Grade, Alternative Program
Son - Fifth Grade, General Program (neighborhood site)

Dani Wild. Dani’s middle son was having difficulty in school. Even though he was getting good grades in reading, Dani could tell her son’s comprehension skills were weak. She did not want him to be passed along without knowing how to read.

Occupation: Works in the Home
Spouse: Small Business Manager
Residence: Subdivision - Outside Building Attendance Area
Family Members: Son - First Grade, Alternative Program
Son - Sixth Grade, General Middle School Program
Son - Ninth Grade, Parochial High School Program
Identification and Investigation of Available Choices

The first substantive sub-question of this study was: How are parents informed of educational program choices? Existing school documentation, survey responses and interviews provided data in the areas of (a) how parents learn of educational choices, (b) how parents investigate educational choices, (c) what perceptions parents derived about each program offered, (d) what specifics parents sought in an educational program.

Learning of Educational Choices

Existing documentation showed two formal sources of information were offered by the district to help parents learn of their educational choices: written materials and informational sessions. When parents begin the registration process in the district, they are provided a brochure describing the general and alternative educational programs available. Informational session dates are also provided as an invitation to parents who seek additional information about the alternative programs offered. A third source of information, word of mouth, is an informal, but important process of information dissemination.

Written Material

The district disseminates information about programs offered in the district at new student registration and through district mailings to families with age eligible kindergartners based on census information. The information is limited to a sentence or two describing the program and provides the phone number of each alternative program site to contact for additional information. Each alternative program produces brochures and informational sheets detailing the programs and provides these sources of data upon
request. A paragraph describing district alternative programs is placed in each elementary newsletter shortly before kindergarten spring enrollment. Fliers are distributed by the alternative program coordinators and are requested to be displayed in area preschools. All written information contains website addresses to locate more information about the district programs, both general and alternative.

Of the 154 surveys returned from parents having children either in the general or the alternative programs, 17 (11%) indicated their first source of information was through written materials. Three general program parents of 60 first learned of the program choices through written materials while 14 of 94 alternative parents first heard of their choices through written materials (see Table 3).

**Informational Sessions**

Formal informational sessions are held in the spring prior to the start of kindergarten enrollment. Parents have opportunities to visit the school, attend informational sessions about the alternative and general education programs and to have a child attend a short introductory or ‘round-up’ session. Open houses to view both the general and the alternative classrooms help parents witness classroom instruction and management. Administrators or curriculum coordinators are available during these days for consultation. Private appointments are also arranged to tour program classrooms upon request.

In the 154 surveys returned, 27 (17.5%) parents identified attendance at an informational session as the first time they heard of the programs of choice offered in the district. General program parents indicated informational sessions as a first source in 20
Table 3

Parental Introduction to Programs - General and Alternative

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Survey Responses</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>General</th>
<th>Alternative</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>154</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>94</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Information Sources:

- Written Material: 17 (11.0%)
  - General: 3
  - Alternative: 14

- Informational Sessions: 27 (17.5%)
  - General: 20
  - Alternative: 7

- Word of Mouth: 77 (50.0%)
  - General: 13
  - Alternative: 64

Other Sources:

- Prior Knowledge: 20 (13.0%)
  - General: 11
  - Alternative: 9

- No Knowledge of Choices: 13 (8.5%)
  - General: 13
  - Alternative: 0

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of 60 responses while alternative parents responded that informational sessions were their first source of hearing about programs in 7 of 94 responses.

**Word of Mouth**

Word of mouth included hearing about the programs from many sources including friends, neighbors, church members, preschool teachers, educators, co-workers and other parents. Although not a formal informational source, this informal chain of communication exists as a method of ‘first hearing’ about parental choice.

Informal conversations were identified by 77 of 154 (50.0%) respondents to the survey as a contributing source of initial information about the choices available to parents. Thirteen of the 60 general program responses and 64 of the 94 alternative program parent responses indicated this informal source.

**Other Sources**

Data from the survey showed that 20 of 154 (13.0%) had prior knowledge of the programs. Four had already heard of the program choices by living in the area when the alternative program was first offered. Fourteen survey respondents had a child already enrolled in one of the programs. Two parents had gained knowledge of the programs through attendance at university education courses.

The survey also showed 13 of 154 (8.5%) parents, all who eventually entered their children in the general program, did not hear of the choices available until after the official enrollment period.

**Program Investigation by Parents**

Once parents became knowledgeable that alternative programs existed, they used
various strategies to gather more information. These investigations varied in format and intensity. The 154 parents completing the survey named 217 acts of investigation (average of 1.4). Thirty-eight of the 154 survey respondents stated that they had not investigated (24.7%) (see Table 4).

**General Program Investigation**

Parents who investigated the program choices used the following strategies, often mentioning more than one, (a) visited programs and talked with educational personnel (22), (b) visited with parents/friends who knew of the options available (13) and (c) read information such as news articles, internet information, and brochures (10).

Thirty-two of 60 general program families who returned surveys indicated that they did not investigate. Twenty-four gave no reason for not investigating and three parents felt they already knew enough about the program and did not need to investigate further. Five families with older children who had or were currently enrolled in the district’s general program also chose not to investigate. Parents stated the experiences of the siblings were positive, and the parents sought the same educational program for the younger siblings. They expressed the desire to have a younger child attend the same school program as an older child.

Parents who have children enrolled in the general education program provided statements about their investigation strategies. Sara Schneider, a general program parent, stated,

> We chose the general program without exploring the alternative program because it [the alternative program] was selective in how many people got
Table 4

**Investigation Strategies by Parents Seeking Information**

(Each response tallied; some participants identified more than one strategy.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Total Survey Respondents</th>
<th>Total 154</th>
<th>General 60</th>
<th>Alternative 94</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Investigations Recorded</td>
<td>217</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>172</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Investigation Strategies Reported:**

- Visited program/personnel: 130 (59.9%) 22 108
- Visited with parents/friends: 46 (21.2%) 13 33
- Read informational materials: 41 (18.9%) 10 31

**No Investigation Strategies Reported:**

- 38 (24.7%) 32 6

  - No reason given: 24 (63.2%) 24 0
  - Prior knowledge: 3 (7.9%) 3 0
  - Older child enrolled: 11 (28.9%) 5 6

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in and some of the teaching methods used. We decided that the general education program would provide what we were looking for in education.

I would say, from what I did do, just in talking to the parents, you know, just [the] feelings they got and of course, I think there's a lot of stigma both ways about whether general’s better or the alternative program’s better and, you know, it depends on what [program] the parent you talk to obviously is [supporting]. But, I don’t think that had we done even a lot of investigation we would have even chose the alternative. So, I think that talking to the parents was helpful from hearing perspectives, but I think obviously the people who had chosen the alternative really want that for their children and the people who have chosen the general program seem to really want that for their children.

Another general education parent, wrote in his survey response that he chose not to investigate because he had an older child already enrolled. He said,

I had an older child in school already before the alternative program was brought in. I didn’t even look into it [for the sibling] because I wanted both of my kids in the same program.

Julie Wilkenson, mother of a general education program student, knew from her career as a teacher which program she wanted. She said,

I knew from prior knowledge I wanted my children in the general education program as opposed to the alternative program at our school.

Penny Fraizer investigated before enrolling her son in the general program. She
recalled the strategies she used. Penny said,

I read the information given to me. I had observed a general education classroom in a neighboring school district and a private classroom (church affiliation) and learned a bit about the choices, options, and differences in teaching styles and classroom set-ups.

Patty Dunn relied on knowledgeable professionals and others to help her learn of the available programs. Patty stated,

I talked to some school personnel regarding the fundamentals of each program and, based on that information, conferred further with family and friends.

**Alternative Program Investigation**

Ninety-four families who eventually selected the magnet alternative program at the site of this study, indicated in the survey responses that they investigated primarily in three ways, often naming more than one strategy per family: (a) through attendance at the informational sessions available to them (108), (b) by visiting with parents/friends who could relay information based on personal knowledge about the programs (33), and (c) reading and researching the program (31). Six alternative parents indicated they did not investigate the program due to prior knowledge gained from an older child in the program.

Examples of the process of investigation by those parents who selected the alternative program included a variety of strategies. One parent investigated both programs. In the survey she responded,
We began asking people who had children enrolled in the program about the [alternative] program. We called the district and requested information. We came in and observed the half-day kindergarten alternative class and attended a parent information meeting at the school. We observed a general education classroom and spoke to parents with children in the general program at another elementary in this district for their opinions.

Another alternative parent utilized a variety of strategies to investigate. She wrote,

While deciding where to send our children, I requested information on eleven schools and visited nine. I visited each of the schools, sat in classrooms, spoke with teachers, administrators and parents from each school, and researched the curriculum used at each school. After my extensive research, we chose this alternative program.

Andrea Schmidly described the steps taken by her and her husband during their investigation of both programs. She said,

We talked with several families about their experience with the alternative program. We also came and visited several classrooms, read all the material regarding the program, and came to meetings provided at the school.

**Most Helpful Investigative Strategies**

In an attempt to identify key investigative strategies, during the interview process
parents of both programs were asked to recall the strategies found to be the most helpful.

Participants stated that talking with other parents was the most helpful investigative
strategy (9). Visiting the classrooms (8), talking with educators (5), attending
information sessions (4) and other strategies (4) were also identified as helpful for parents
investigating educational programs (see Table 5).

Rory Howard, alternative parent, summarized these investigative strategies. He
said,

I don’t know that I’d narrow it down to one single thing. Very important
early on was the interviews or visiting with parents or people who were
involved with the alternative program. That was important because it gave
credibility to information we were reading. I don’t think I’d separate the
two because just the facts in and of themselves were important to acquire.
The information the school gave us on the program, gave us a lot of facts
and it gave us a feeling of what it was. That was important for us to have.
But then to couple that with actual people who had students in the
program was an important credibility factor. Lots of places are able to
market themselves or show their test scores in ways that are positive, but
to actually talk with people who are in it and how it has impacted their
students, is important.

**Parental Program Descriptors**

Key words or descriptors used by the participants to describe the specifics of the
two programs were identified in the written survey. A total of 11 words/descriptors were
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Most Helpful Parental Investigative Strategy</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total Parents Interviewed:</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(General and Alternative)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Helpful Investigative Strategies:</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Talking with Other Parents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visiting Classrooms</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Talking with Educators</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attending Informational Sessions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Strategies</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
used two or more times describing the general program while a total of 19 key words/descriptors were identified three or more times relating to the alternative program (see Table 6 and Table 7).

A comparison of these words/descriptors identified by the parents of each program was made (see Table 8). The five most frequently used key words or descriptors used by the 154 survey respondents to describe the general program included the following: open-concept (7), seated around tables (6), play (6), fun (4), and group work (3). Interview participants supported these key words/descriptors. Thirty parents named group work (9), centers/hands-on (7), child-directed (6), play (4), and fun (4).

The five key words or descriptors identified by survey respondents (154) when describing the alternative program were: structure (50), phonics (42), discipline (21), teacher-directed (21), and curriculum content (20). The thirty interview participants responded: seated at desks (13), structure (10), teacher-directed (10), regimented/rigid (7), and phonics (5).

Program Perceptions Derived from Parent Investigation

The interviews with parents from the general education program and the alternative program provided information on their perceptions of each program during the investigative phase of the parental choice process. Parents spoke of four main areas when they provided descriptions of the two program choices: (a) environment, (b) structure, (c) curriculum content, and (d) teaching/learning styles.

Environment. Of the thirty interview participants, items mentioned in the description of the classroom environment included the physical classroom spaces. In
Table 6

**Key Words/Descriptive Used to Describe the General Program**

(Used by 3.0% or more of the survey sample.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Descriptors as stated by</th>
<th>Descriptors as stated by</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>General Program Parents</td>
<td>Alternative Program Parents</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fun</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Open-Concept</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preschool Continuance</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tables</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Play</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Groupwork</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tables</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neighborhood</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parental Program Comfort</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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Table 7

**Key Words/Descriptors Used to Describe the Alternative Program**  
(Used by 3.0% or more of the survey sample.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Descriptors as stated by</th>
<th>Descriptors as stated by</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>General Program Parents</td>
<td>Alternative Program Parents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Structure (6)</td>
<td>Structure (44)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strict (3)</td>
<td>Phonics (42)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experimental (3)</td>
<td>Discipline (21)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pressure (2)</td>
<td>Teacher Directed (21)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rigid (2)</td>
<td>Curriculum Content (20)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Desks in Rows (2)</td>
<td>Back to Basics (17)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Parental Involvement (12)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Desks in Rows (10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Challenging (10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Expectations (8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Math (7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Accountability (6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Solid Foundation (4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Closed Classroom (4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Family Values (4)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 8

**Most Frequent Key Words/Descriptors**

**Used to Describe the General and Alternative Programs**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Survey Respondents</th>
<th>Interview Participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total:</td>
<td>154</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General Program Descriptors:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Open-Concept</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>Groupwork</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tables</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Centers/Hands-on</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Play</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Child-Directed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fun</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Play</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Groupwork</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Fun</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alternative Program Descriptors:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Structure</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>Desks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phonics</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>Structure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discipline</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Teacher-Directed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher-Directed</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Regimented/Rigid</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Curriculum Content</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Phonics</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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reference to the general program, participants spoke of the arrangement of the tables (9), learning center areas (6), and overall warmth of the environment (13). Descriptions of the alternative program focused on the desks arranged in rows (13), non-distracting room appearance (3), and overall rigid feeling of the environment (4) (see Table 9).

Parents expressed a difference between the two programs. Linda Eversden, alternative program parent, stated her perception of the programs. She said,

In the alternative, I imagine the teacher up front teaching them how...what they need to know and then they practice it, you know, and repeat back what they should know. I see it organized. I see it not so cluttered. I see them working to learn.

When I visualize the general program, I walk in and think, ‘Oh, how fun,’ because it does look fun. Because, when I come to open house, I think, ‘Oh, these rooms look really fun.’ But then a concern I had in the general kindergarten was, it was so open-structured that for a student that likes structure, I wondered if that caused a lot of discipline problems that could have been handled...well, if it were more of a structured type classroom, with direction...if that makes sense. I visualize all the children going around...which I understand that philosophy, but I question if all the kids have gotten to [accomplish] what they need to do at the end of the year. I think play.

Another alternative program parent, Sheila Algood, compared her perception of both programs. Sheila reported,
Table 9

Classroom Environment - Perceptions Derived
from Parental Investigation of the General and Alternative Programs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Total Perceptions Identified: 48</th>
<th>Perceptions Identified by General Program Participants</th>
<th>Perceptions Identified by Alternative Program Participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>28</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Environment:

- Arrangement of Tables: 9
- Learning Centers: 6
- Overall Warmth: 13
- Arrangement of Desks: 13
- Non-Distracting Room: 3
- Overall Rigid Feeling: 4
The alternative program's approach is very systematic. Not really rigid, but is very 'step 1, step 2, step 3'. And then the general program...I don't want to say softer, but there's a warm fuzzy that you get with the general that you may not get with the alternative. I think the general education is fine. I think it may be a little broader. I'm not explaining that very well.

When I walk into an alternative classroom...oh, I don't know. I guess I mean...children's personalities...they're gonna come out in their work. In their school work, their artwork...everything.

Sorry, some of my perceptions may not be based in reality.

General program parent, Patty Dunn, perceived environmental program differences. Patty stated,

The general program, of course, having walked into them...I would describe them as group tables with several students seated like at a circle or square and working in kind of a group environment or team environment when they had to work on their own type projects. The alternative I always just pictured like more of a high school or college setting where people were seated in rows and you listen to the teacher...and if necessary, broke out into groups.

Grace Davidson has only one child, a kindergartner, attending kindergarten in the general program. Mr. and Mrs. Davidson really enjoy the creative spirit of their son as is evident by Grace's description of the type of program she sought for their son. They were not seeking an advanced curriculum as much as an enjoyable start to their son's
academic years. Grace noted,

...my opinion was that I wanted to introduce my son to a very... Oh, I
didn’t want to pound school into him. I wanted him to enjoy it. To get
accustomed to it. To start, I guess... start off on an average pace verses
trying to have him accelerated. And I wanted him to like school.
(Laughs.) Point blank, that was my first trial, was to like school and we
would worry about where you’re at and your progress as it goes along.

I want him to get a good basis for which to start an educational
process. I didn’t think he had to exceed in the expectations. I didn’t feel it
was necessary for him to be reading at a second or third grade level in
kindergarten. I want him to be happy with school. I want him to want to
go to school and to want to go back. Let’s face it, as you go into high
school everyone hates school anyways.

Well, for one thing, I wanted him to be in a more relaxed
atmosphere than a hard-core study program and [one] that [the] long-term
benefits didn’t seem to weigh-out. I didn’t want him to have a negative
opinion of school this early on and then end up being at the same
progressive level as the rest of the kids.

Structure. Interview participants made reference to the amount of structure found
in the classrooms. The parents identified descriptors of the general program structure by
identifying: group interaction (14), open-concept (8) and child-centered (3). Descriptors
of the alternative program’s structure included: controlled discipline (17), teacher-
directed activities (10), and set expectations (3) (see Table 10).

The amount of structure was also a noted difference as parents spoke of the differences in the two programs. Examples of perceptions of those parents who chose the general program are stated. Annie Hawthorne, a parent who has two daughters in the general education program, spoke of her perceptions of program structure. She said,

My perception was that it was more structured in the alternative program. I think my children needed more getting up, moving around, [like] the floor activity that the kindergarten program [learning centers] had in the afternoon.

I’ll be honest with you, that [centers] vs sitting at a desk already in kindergarten appealed to me. And, learning that there was phonics in the district’s [general program], too... just a different type.

Marva Shield also referred to the differences in program structure in the two programs. She stated,

It seemed to me that the alternative program was more structured. You know, the kids were sitting in chairs all day long. And then the phonograms and the way they learned the reading. It seemed pretty repetitive to me and I think that might be good for a lot of kids, but you know, when I was talking to my girlfriend she said, ‘look, you’re from a family where... well, my mom had six kids. She had three valedictorians and all the rest of us were in the top ten of our class. So she says, you know, ‘I don’t think you need that much structure.’ She said, ‘To be
Table 10

Classroom Structure - Perceptions Derived

from Parental Investigation of the General and Alternative Programs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Perceptions Identified by General Program Participants</th>
<th>Perceptions Identified by Alternative Program Participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total Perceptions Identified: 55</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Structure:

- Group Interaction: 14, Controlled Discipline: 17
- Open-Concept: 8, Teacher-Directed: 10
- Child-Centered: 3, Set Expectations: 3
honest, your daughter’s going to be fine wherever you go.’ So, I decided not to sweat it so much, and just put her in regular school, because we were all in regular school and we all did really fine.

Perceptions included differences in classroom structure. Georgia Stone, a parent who entered her child in the alternative program, described this structure. She said.

The alternative classroom would have seats set up individually in rows – spaced. As far as the classroom, that would be that. In the general classroom that she [oldest child] was in, she was in pods of four, where the desks were hooked or put together. So when she or they were doing work, there was a lot of what I call ‘cheating’. People looking on. So, how could the child...how would you know if that child was really learning if he was looking at someone else’s paper and writing down the information. Also, in the general program, there was a lot more openness where the child could get up and walk out if they needed to use the restroom, where in the alternative, it’s more traditional...or it’s um...they had to ask to be excused. I saw that in the general program...lots of confusion...lots of noise. I thought it would be more quiet [in the alternative program].

Curriculum content. Curriculum content was perceived to vary in the two programs by the 30 interview participants. They described the general program curriculum using the following descriptors: center-based (6), a continuance of pre-school skills (4), investigative (2), and student-directed (2). The alternative program descriptors included: strong academic emphasis (5), frequent drill and repetition (5), phonics-based
(5), and intense/quick paced (2) (see Table 11).

The curricula used in each program are distinct as shown through a review of program curriculum guides available at the school. This review showed the general program curriculum as one that encourages an interdisciplinary approach covering key ideas at each grade level offering hands-on activities and student exploration. The alternative program curriculum is fact based, presenting an extensive listing of knowledge to be taught by the teacher and learned by each student.

Lucy McCoy, general program parent, investigated the curricula and expressed her perceptions. Lucy stated,

Similarities would be the basic bookwork. You know, the addition, the subtraction, that sort...type of thing. The actual academic portion. The difference is that it's structured to where the teachers would follow...in the alternative program they have to follow this, ‘This is what the kids have to know by the end of the year.’ In this one [alternative structured program], they should know it but not all of them may get it, and they just, you know...are they going to be passed on? Are they going to be worked with more? This [general] one to me is more of a tutored environment...as if you were with a private tutor, where this one [alternative program] is not.

David Planteen has an older son that entered the alternative program 3 years before his younger sister who is currently in first grade in the program. Mr. Planteen outlined some desired curriculum content needs identified by him and his wife based
Table 11

Curriculum Content - Perceptions Derived
from Parental Investigation of the General and Alternative Programs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Total Perceptions Identified: 31</th>
<th>Perceptions Identified by General Program Participants</th>
<th>Perceptions Identified by Alternative Program Participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>14</td>
<td>17</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Curriculum Content:

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<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Perceptions Identified</th>
<th>Perceptions Identified</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Center-Based</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Academic Emphasis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pre-School Skills</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Frequent Drills/Repetition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Investigative</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Phonics-Based</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student-Directed</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Intense/Quick-paced</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
primarily on their son's and recently, their first grade daughter's academic strengths.

David said,

**Probably the number one thing in my mind was getting the kids to read just as fast as possible. I think if there’s anything that they’re going to get out of the school systems, being able to be good readers is what’s going to carry them through life... Number one in my mind!**

My daughter who is now in first grade is reading easily at a fifth or sixth grade level. And the process of watching it happen where every word that she saw on a page, she broke down phonetically and went through the whole series of...if one particular phonogram had two sounds, she’d use both sounds...if it had four sounds, she’d use all four sounds until she’d unlock that word. That was magical to watch her do that. And she can read now with vocal inflections and what’s she’s reading...it blows me away.

Linda Eversden sent her son to the alternative program following 3 years of preschool and a year in the general education kindergarten. She explained her decision to switch to the alternative program for first grade, based on her son’s need. Linda reported,

For me was just reading because in my situation, I had a son starting at age six who had already had 3 years of just going to preschool and not that that was much, but it was his time away from home. And so, I kind of felt like he knew his letters and could learn his letters, but didn’t feel like it was matched up too well, or he was challenged enough where he was at.
And I questioned if I worked enough with him at home, could he be reading at the end of kindergarten. And then, I kind of felt like the same person who had done half-day kindergarten in the alternative program, got the phonograms and the reading booklets. And so, I sent my son to all day [kindergarten in the general program] plus I had to go send him to the phonics summer school to get what a half-day kindergartner would have got here [in the alternative program].

Linda was looking for structure and a more challenging curriculum. Knowing that her son did not do well in the general program she describes the needed changes. She said,

Our feelings were that we sent our son to all-day general education kindergarten and still did not receive the same education of a half-day alternative student.

We were looking for a more challenging curriculum and structured approach for our son and now our other sons who will be starting formal schooling. We were disappointed with the English/reading component in our general education kindergarten experience. One letter of the alphabet was taught each week. Therefore, twenty-six weeks went by that were not too challenging if your child was wanting to pull letters together to read.

As long as he [son] knows the day is going ‘A, B, C, D’ or the lesson is going ‘A, B, C, D’ he thrives on that, as opposed to an open environment...just go and do what you need to do. And I like the history
and geography because he was interested in the continents and presidents. He thrives on that. And math, but then again, I wanted him to be able to read more because he was interested in the books. Loved the phonograms because there was a card and there was a rule and he loves the underlining and stuff...structure like that.

**Teaching/learning style.** Teaching and learning styles in the general program were perceived by the 30 interview participants as: learning together (9), independent learning choices (4), and teacher-guided (2). The alternative program was described in terms of teaching and learning styles as: teacher-instructed (7) regimented (4), systematic (2) (see Table 12).

The way students are taught and the way in which they respond is varied in the two programs. In the general program, the teacher is a guide and the students learn through exploration at their individual level. In the alternative program, the teacher is the instructional leader presenting the information and teaching to the group as a whole. Parental preferences were reflected as they shared their views on these program differences.

Josephine Blum, a general program parent, described her perceptions of the teaching and learning styles. She reported,

Very disciplined [alternative program]. A very disciplined program with a lot of emphasis, to me, was put on the fact that they get grades from the time when they are in kindergarten, like letter grades. That it was just a different teaching style. Probably based more on the way we were taught
Table 12

Teaching/Learning Style - Perceptions Derived

from Parental Investigation of the General and Alternative Programs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Total Perceptions Identified: 28</th>
<th>Perceptions Identified by General Program Participants</th>
<th>Perceptions Identified by Alternative Program Participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>15</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Teaching/Learning Style:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Perceptions Identified by General Program Participants</th>
<th>Perceptions Identified by Alternative Program Participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Learning Together</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning Choices</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher-Guided</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
when we were growing up (laugh) which was more disciplined, I guess.

More structured I guess [alternative], 'cause every time I've even walked past their classrooms they're at their desks working. A teacher uses the overhead a lot to teach, which I haven't really seen in my daughter's class. Yeah, I guess it's more the teacher running the [alternative] classroom than the kids interacting together.

Josephine added,

I guess the biggest recommendation is to look at your child and to see...say, you have to know what kind of personality your child has. Uh, I think the alternative program has very good aspects to it. If you're looking for... I guess if you want to know how your child's doing their entire education, I guess those letter grades just tell you, well, they're not doing as well in English, math, whatever. Whereas, with the general program, you just get the 'satisfactory', 'needs improvement', so maybe you don't know exactly where they stand but you have a pretty good idea. (pause). And I guess if you're looking for very strong English and reading background then you should do the alternative,...but then if you're looking for more of an interactive classroom, maybe you should do the general program...Umm, just depends, just depends on the child’s personality a lot though, I would say.

Another general education parent, Patty Dunn, spoke of the success of the general program as evidenced by past experiences. Patty concluded,
I think the biggest piece that made a difference for me was maybe the classroom style. I think that was the key for me, and the fact that the general program was just that... general. I knew it had worked for many generations before my children.

Penny Fraizer and her husband were aware of their son's above average creativity and high-ability reasoning skills when he entered school. When looking at programs, they considered his learning style and the style of teaching/learning trying to match his needs. Penny said,

Everybody thinks that their child is absolutely number one and that is certainly true for me. I wanted a place where he would fit in. I wanted a place where he could learn. I wanted the very best for him. And so, in thinking that, I guess I wanted a good teacher. I wanted a good classroom. I wanted books on the library shelves. I wanted computers in the room. I was looking for somebody who had a plan. I mean, I think that there are many different styles of teaching and my understanding is that children can do well in probably four out of five. I mean, maybe one is not good for them [children]. But the other four are just fine. So, it wasn't a matter of one good...one bad, but do they have a plan.

My husband and I talked, and we decided that we have a kind of free spirit, creative, almost non-conventional sort of a kid. And, the decision was, do we want to try to...how could we use that to his best ability? Should we put him in a more structured classroom and have him
channel his energy, or should we put him in a general program and kind of enrich that creativity? And, we decided to go with his personality and allow him the opportunity to be in a classroom that may be a little more free-flowing that gave him more choices and allowed him to explore a greater variety of things.

Alternative parents also expressed their perceptions of the teaching/learning differences found in the programs. Jan Amish stated,

Okay, in my big opinion...from my perspective...I’ll make that clear. It seemed to me that the general program would have spent too much time on things I felt my son had already mastered...specifically socialization and following instructions.

And I felt my son had learned those things by around 3 or 4 years old and I didn’t want him to spend a whole year in kindergarten learning to...that the teacher was the boss. (Laughs) I know that sounds really opinionated and almost snobbish, but I... and I...probably that’s not what the general program teaches, but that’s just the mindset or the picture I got of the general classroom. And because all my neighbors talked about, ‘Oh, kindergarten is just suppose to be fun. They don’t have to learn anything.’ And that motivated me that I wanted my child to learn something.

Charleen Vanna has an older son who currently attends the general education in a neighborhood school in this district. He is enjoying the experience and Charleen states...
that he has been successful in that placement. However, after having her youngest child, a daughter, attend kindergarten and first grade at that same elementary school, Charleen noticed that her daughter was not making the progress in reading her son had. A learning disorder was diagnosed by a private psychologist, hired by the family. Soon after, Charleen began her search for a method that would help her child become a better reader.

Mrs. Vanna heard of the alternative program and enrolled her daughter to repeat the first grade year, hoping for a successful outcome. Charleen stated,

It gave us an opportunity to hold our daughter back a year and to get a fresh start. And we thought she would learn a lot with this program.

Her reading skills were once diagnosed as a disability and now they are considered one of her areas of strength. We also hoped that her attention difficulties would be less of a factor for her in the structured environment.

Parental Perception Changes as a Result of Program Investigation

Thirteen (43.3%) of the 30 general and alternative program parents interviewed stated their overall initial perceptions of the general program remained unchanged. The 17 (56.7%) parents who did have a change in program perception identified the following differences: realization of the amount of phonics taught in both programs (3), increase in the amount of structure first thought to be found in the alternative program (4), better understanding of the program(s) (3), and other differences (7). The other differences suggested the alternative program was less regimented than originally thought, the alternative program may be too difficult/demanding for the child, clearer understanding
that the alternative program required more homework and drills than perceived, undefined general program curriculum, less expensive than private, and a superior attitude of parents who chose the alternative (see Table 13).

Perceptual changes identified by general program parents. Penny Fraizer spoke of her perceptual changes. She said,

Initially I thought that the alternative program was very innovative. That is was certainly a different style of learning than the general program.

And that it was targeted toward a population of children that either...to excel beyond what the general program could or to assist those children whom, the general program wasn’t successful for. And I didn’t know which one it was, but that was my first impression. That it was just ‘different’.

I was thinking [after investigation] the alternative certainly looked a little more structured. Um, perhaps even rigid, but I don’t want to over use that word. But it looked as though it had more structure and it looked as though it provided a style of learning that perhaps may have gone back to more basics of reading and writing...of emphasizing more...perhaps of an academic approach.

Lorraine Gonzolez also told of some changes in initial perceptions after she investigated the educational choices available. Lorraine said,

Well, like I said, the alternative program seems a lot more regimented everyday. I guess one thing I noticed was in kindergarten they’re in desks
Table 13

Perceptual Changes Identified by Parents Following Program Investigation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Total Interviewed:</th>
<th>General and Alternative Programs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total Interviewed:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Parents experiencing no perceptual changes 13 (43.3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Parents experiencing perceptual changes 17 (56.7%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceptual changes noted:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increase in amount of structure found in alternative</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amount of phonics varied greatly in programs</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clearer understanding of programs</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alternative may be too difficult/demanding for child</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less regiment found in alternative</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More homework/drills in alternative</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Superior attitude of alternative parents recognized</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General program curriculum not clearly communicated</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public alternative program is similar, yet less costly than private</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
already and I kind of thought, 'Oh, kindergarten?' But of course I'm going from we had kindergarten half days and had naps to all day (laugh) so, I just thought, you know, I didn't know if my son would be good for that. He likes a little more relaxed atmosphere, I think. So, as far as the teaching aspect goes, the phonics in the alternative program they really stress that a little bit more. It's a different type of phonics. I remember her [friend] telling me, and I really...I thought the general education way of doing it was just fine.

They [perceptions] didn't really change as I got the information. The one thing, when we went to kindergarten round-up, my husband and I noticed, and we talked about it on the way home...we got this feeling from the...and I don't want to be mean to the kindergarten teachers of the alternative program...but they just seemed to have this 'air' about them to where they thought that their program was much superior to the general and that kind of put us both off a little bit. But then, as I researched it, I realized I don't know, that feeling problem changed. I just felt that it wasn't really what I wanted our son to be involved in.

Perceptual changes identified by alternative program parents. Sample perception changes made by parents whose children attended the alternative program were also reported. Rory Howard told of the following change he and his wife experienced. He said,

Our first impressions of the alternative program were vague. We knew it
was different than the general program. Adjectives that were used to
describe it were...disciplined, non-traditional, more context based vs. just
spit out memorized rules. And that...that immediately was appealing to us
because it showed us that people were thinking outside the box in terms of
how people learned. And as we visited with people, we saw, even though
they weren’t saying it, the students understood more of what they were
learning and not just reciting what they has memorized. And that was key
to us deciding to send our first daughter here and then later, our second
daughter.

Merideth Johnson said her initial perceptions didn’t change, but were expanded.

Merideth said,

Nothing really changed. I would say my knowledge was expanded. Pretty
much from her [girlfriend] description, I got a very good initial overview
of the alternative program and nothing was...everything was on target.
It’s just that I had no idea how extensive the phonics program was until we
really got involved in it. Just from reading the material, I just didn’t
comprehend what was involved. But there wasn’t anything that was
inaccurate or anything that changed. Everything was pretty much on
target, I think, in that respect.

Andrea Schmidly’s perceptions after investigation of the programs remained close
to her original perceptions. She stated,

They all seemed to be what I perceived them to be. I don’t know cause I
guess I had talked with other parents who were in all three [alternative, Montessori, and parochial programs] different situations and then, I did want to see for myself. So my perception was pretty ‘on’ and maybe that’s just cause I had, from their ages, they were one and two, kind of been talking with people over those years. Learned more and more about each one and they pretty much were what I thought they’d be. The more structured phonics program, Montessori- the more, you know, the more free...whatever, and Holy Church [parochial school] is more like the general program just in a Christian environment. So they pretty much were what I perceived. I think that’s just because I kind of investigated over a 2 or 3 year period. Obviously, that last year was the most intensive.

The perceptions held initially by Charleen Vanna were worrisome. Charleen said,

I think my initial perception was that it was a little too difficult for Sarah. That this was a real rigorous program and to put a child in that had these kinds of scores [low] might just be a recipe for disaster, you know? But then I had another friend that said, ‘Try to associate your children, your child, with children that are progressing and doing well. It's a good influence.’

Main Program Differences

In order to gain an understanding of what parents perceived as the main program differences, the 30 parents interviewed were asked to identify the main differences found
in the general and alternative programs (see Table 14).

Twelve of 15 general program parents (80.0%) identified the environment as the main difference. They spoke of the amount of structure found in the alternative and the relaxed environment of the general program. General program parents also stated that the intense phonics program found in the alternative was a key difference. The parents spoke specifically of the associated rigor, drill, and repetition of this phonics program.

Ten of 15 alternative program parents (66.7%) who were interviewed made reference to the strong academics found in the alternative program as the main difference. The structured environment and teacher-directed approach of the alternative program were also identified as significant differences in the two educational programs.

Specifics Sought in an Educational Program

To gain an understanding of what parents were looking for in an educational program, the 30 interview participants were asked what specifics they wanted in a program. The main educational specifics desired by the participants included: strong academics (14 alternative parents), a relaxed, hands-on learning environment (8 general program parents), well-rounded program (4 general program parents), solid phonics-based program (2 general program parents), basis to prepare for higher education (1 general program parent), and a well-defined, written curriculum (1 alternative program parent) (see Table 15).

General program specifics desired. Parents of children in the general program provided information supporting these specifics in the interview process. Josephine Blum wanted the "best education possible". She said,
Table 14

Parental Identification of the Main Difference in the General and Alternative Programs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>General Program</th>
<th>Alternative Program</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total Interviewed:</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Main Difference:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Environment</td>
<td>12 (80.0%)</td>
<td>10 (66.7%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phonics/Repetition &amp; Drill</td>
<td>3 (20.0%)</td>
<td>5 (33.3%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 15

Educational Program Specifics Sought by Parents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Total Interviewed:</th>
<th>General Program</th>
<th>15</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>General Program Specifics:</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relaxed, hands-on learning environment</td>
<td>8 (53.3%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Well rounded educational program</td>
<td>4 (26.7%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Solid phonics found in program curricula</td>
<td>2 (13.3%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foundation to support higher education</td>
<td>1 ( 6.7%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Interviewed:</td>
<td>Alternative Program</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Alternative Program Specifics:</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strong academic program</td>
<td>14 (93.3%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Well-defined written curriculum</td>
<td>1 ( 6.7%)</td>
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</tr>
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</table>
I wanted them to have the best possible education they could get. Good English and spelling; good math skills. And so, I guess I was...when we moved into our house, we had to decide what school district we wanted and part of that was looking at the different school districts and this one [district] had a very good reputation and so, I think I felt she [daughter] could get the best overall education if we moved into this district.

Lucy McElroy knew that her desired program must have a “fun environment”.

Lucy stated,

Well, I wanted to know that it’s a fun environment, not just hard work. But I want her to walk out of here knowing that she’s accomplished something. I want her to be able to read and write, but not only to read and to write, but to find the meanings within what she’s reading...what she’s writing.

Julie Wilkensen, an educator and parent of a general program child identified an environment stimulating to all senses. Julie said,

I feel that the general program sets an open and welcoming feel to the introduction of school. I feel that learning should be fun as well, and the general program seems to appeal to more of the senses and M.I’s [multiple intelligence].

I just knew I wanted some phonics. I knew I wanted some holistic reading in there. I knew I wanted hands-on, play time, music, P.E... I just wanted the whole broad spectrum of it. I just feel like it just...you know,
give him a little taste of everything and then he can draw [from it] and tell me what he likes and then we can go upon that (pause) to, you know, his interests, his needs, his likes, his dislikes.

Alternative program specifics desired. Fourteen of the 15 parents interviewed who had children enrolled in the alternative program identified the primary specific of ensuring a strong, academic-based program. This specific was supported by a secondary desire identified as promotion of high student expectations within a challenging curriculum (3). The environment desired was identified as structured and controlled (3). Alternative program parents described these desired specifics during the interview sessions.

Jane Amish was looking for a challenging program but not one that pushed too hard. Jane said,

I wanted something that would challenge him without pushing him. And not...the more we thought about what the general kindergarten would offer him, I felt like it would not challenge him. I felt that it would be...not a waste of his time, but not...I don’t know another way to say it other than that. You know, how...starting where he was ready to start and going from there.

Sally Sanders wanted high expectations for her child. Sally desired the responsibility of learning to be based on these expectations. She said,

And one thing I like about the alternative program, that it has high expectations.
I think that the schools today... If you have high expectations the kids are going to rise to them. If you have low expectations, they’re going to rise to the lower expectations. I really believe that. You know, it is expected when we go home, that we read and then we do the homework. Well, there’s no [question]...that’s what we do. That’s expected. There’s no arguing. There’s no ‘anything’ because that’s the expectation.

Process of Choosing

The second substantive question of this study was: What was the process of choosing an educational program? The actual process of deciding to enroll a child in either the general or alternative program, included many facets of input. Parents reviewed investigative information and compared program design to personally desired educational specifics. During this study, questions relating to three areas were researched: (a) What were the parental background experiences which played a role in the decision, (b) What were the factors and considerations that contributed to the parental choice, and (c) What were the concerns of the parents during the course of deciding.

Parental Background Experiences

In an effort to understand if the background experiences of parents influenced the decision making process of selecting an educational program for their children, parents were asked to identify experiences that may have played a role. Of the 30 interview participants, each one (100%) recalled an experience that influenced their decision. Personal, spousal and extended family experiences were shared that impacted the parental decision making process (see Table 16).
Table 16

**Parental Background Experiences**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Total Interviewed:</th>
<th>General and Alternative Programs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Parents who relayed an educational experience perceived by them as significant</td>
<td>30 (100.0%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Total Interviewed:</th>
<th>General Program</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Experiences:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive experience - Same desired for child</td>
<td>9 (60.0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative experience - Desired change for child</td>
<td>5 (33.3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Educated as a Teacher - General program desired</td>
<td>1 (6.7%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Total Interviewed:</th>
<th>Alternative Program</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Experiences:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative experience - Desired changes for child</td>
<td>9 (60.0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive experience - Same desired for child</td>
<td>3 (20.0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strong Family Values - Curriculum/Social issues</td>
<td>2 (13.3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Educated as a Teacher - Alternative program desired</td>
<td>1 (6.7%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Parental Background Factors - General Program

Interviews of the 15 parents who had children in the general program provided background information that identified two key ideas: (1) nine parents had gone through a similar educational program, indicating that they had received a satisfactory education and wanted the same for their child, and (2) five parents remember school through negative experiences, relaying memories of being too structured, bored, or experiencing a weakness in an academic subject and in turn, sought a different educational approach for their child. One general education parent had a teaching background and had developed strong opinions through her coursework studies about the type of program desired for her son.

Positive educational experiences of general program parents. General program parent, Josephine Blum, relayed an educational experience that influenced the placement decision for her children. Josephine stated,

The first time I walked into this building, it totally reminded me of my elementary school...which is amazing because I grew up in a very small town. And to walk in, you know, I didn’t know what to expect when you walk into...cause I wasn’t used to a city school (laugh). So, I thought it’s going to be really big, and I didn’t even know what to tell my kids, because my town, I mean, I had 20 kids in my class and that was the town. I mean it wasn’t just...you had one second grade class and that was it (laugh). And so, I guess I felt really at ease when I walked in the front door and it so reminded me of the elementary school I went to.
Cathy Paulsen wanted her children to have a positive educational experience similar to what she experienced. She stated,

I went to this district my whole life. So I knew the district... I knew the school...and then, I guess I didn’t. Because I didn’t know about this alternative program. I guess I just stuck with the general program.

It’s what I know. I’m familiar with the district. We ended up buying a house here and I live less than a mile and a half away from my Mom and Dad.

**Negative background experiences of general program parents.** Patty Dunn, general program parent, spoke of her educational background as an experience that she did not desire for her children. She said,

I remember... I know that I wanted my children to always be in an environment, like I mentioned before, that fostered continuous curiosity as opposed to... I guess mine. If I say this was a negative thing that happened to me, therefore I want to avoid this, that’s more what I look at.

And I think, well there were so many times I was so bored in school. Or, you know, the repetition was just, excruciating at times. And so, I was looking to avoid that type of thing and looking for some more creative learning styles. And... both programs probably offer that, but I perceived that in the group [general program] environment, I could just...in my little mind, I just pictured (laugh) kids working together on science projects and, you know, blowing things up (laugh).
I went back and talked to my folks and my husband's folks, both sets of grandparents, to say, 'Hey, these are my options,' and, 'What do you think?' and in all cases they said, 'Well, you know, the general program is the way to go. That's how we learned,' and so, I think that in that regard, they identified as it having worked for them.

Paula Evans remembered unpleasant past experiences with undesirable educational environments. She described,

I moved around a lot as a kid, so I was in many different kinds of programs. And I can remember a couple of classrooms where I'd gone from really easy classrooms that were oriented just to the child, to the cold and dank rooms with nothing on the walls and desks facing all in one direction and you never left those chairs! And I really don't feel I learned well in those programs. And they started a new math program in one of the schools and I never learned math until I went into training to become a teacher.

Julie Wilkensen shared her past experiences and the need to provide her son with more 'hands-on' learning experiences than she had encountered. Julie said,

You know, I'm very hands-on. I've been athletic and I knew that just through knowing my son, he's like that a little as well. I think he's a little more analytical than I was but... Through school, I guess a lot of my teachers were not enough hands-on. And I got... it was kinda boring to me. So, I knew I wanted, definitely from the get-go, I wanted my son to
have experiences with whole body experiences with learning. Not just, ‘You say it - I’ll say it. You write it - I’ll write it.’

Parental Background Factors - Alternative Program

Parents who enrolled their child in the alternative program referred to three key ideas as they reflected on past experiences and background educational experiences during the interview process. These key experiences included: (a) 3 of 15 parents relayed positive educational experiences and wanted a similar program for their child, (b) 9 of 15 parents made reference to a negative experience of academic weaknesses or environmental setting and wanted to avoid similar problems for their child, and (c) 2 of 15 parents spoke of a background that supported strong family values that influenced program selection. One of the 15 parents interviewed relied on her teaching background to help her select the appropriate program for her child.

Positive background experiences of alternative program parents. Parents desired similar programs when personal experiences were positive or thought to be appropriate for children. John Hamlet’s background included a reference to his mother’s teaching experience. John said,

Well, my mom started out teaching in a one room school house and I started telling her about this and she was all for it. She just thought it was...that’s the way they used to teach and she thought, yeah, if you can get him in there, go for it.

When thinking back on his parochial education background, David Planteen told of his experiences in a Catholic school. He stated,
My personal exposure to education was through 8 years of a Catholic school and then 4 years of a public. I learned a lot more during the first 8 years of my schooling than I did during the last 4. Although the last four taught me more about people than I could imagine. (Laugh) But, I just assumed everybody learned like I did when I was a kid. I assumed they’re still teaching phonograms in schools. The Catholic school system back then used phonograms not as extensively as the alternative program uses them. So, when I came to find out that wasn’t really the way they taught kids anymore, it was really eye opening. Because I didn’t have a whole lot of exposure to school systems. I started my family later in life and was off doing other things, but… so, when I realized that there was this difference in teaching styles, that was interesting to me. Although, I didn’t rule out one was better than the other.

Georgia Stone came from a traditional small town school and reflected in the interview her success in a program that resembled the structure and environment of the alternative program choice. Georgia said,

I came from a small town with a small school, but it was a very good educational system. It was extremely traditional…the seats in the rows, the homework, the math skills, the reading skills, the writing skills. And even though it was a small school, I walked away with a great education and was able to go on to the university and not have any problems.

Negative background experiences of alternative parents. Charleen Vanna spoke
of the educational difficulties of one of her husband's relatives. Charleen's daughter was diagnosed with learning disabilities. Charleen said,

Well, one thing we considered was my husband's brother-in-law has dyslexia. And, he's an adult. He's been able to find an occupation where it doesn't affect him, but, he grew up in a small town in another state and they didn't know a lot about reading disorders then. I guess he was held back several years in school and he has negative feelings about school. That was important...if we could help our daughter, not go through an experience like that.

Charleen continued,

I think we both grew up... we were in school during the sixties, in grade school, and I think school was maybe more traditional back then? So, this [alternative program] didn't look so different from what we had grown up with.

Andrea Schmidly went through a general education program in her elementary years. She found no fault with the general program, however felt she had some difficulties learning and wanted an improved style for her three children, the oldest, a daughter in the first grade. Andrea said,

...but I was also [in school] during that [time] where they switched from phonics to whole [language] and now they are kind of back to the phonics thing anyway. I think it's the whole thinking process...it's there because you told me it is and I trust you.
I struggled in math and I don’t want my girls to struggle in math.

I learned, ‘You spell it this way because you spell it this way!’ Okay, so I spelled it this way! I always did fine in school.

**Background experiences related to family values.** A family’s values, often with reference to moral and ethical behavior, were identified as a background experience important to parental choice. Rory Howard stated,

> I think some of the personal issues would be the religious background that we have and the religious lifestyle. And that dictates...we feel an obligation to make sure our children are learning morals and ethics. We don’t necessarily agree that those should be passed on to other people. But that needs to be part of their learning, their upbringing.

Merideth Johnson referred to the curriculum she had as a child and also to the parenting style they use that would support the alternative program. She stated,

> Well in looking at the curriculum...and I felt that the curriculum was similar to what I had had as a child. Although again, not as strong, but a phonics-based reading program and similar [to what] both my husband and I come from. You know he comes from a farming family. I come from a... both of my parents were probably blue-collar workers. We come from...oh, I think that had a lot to do with our decision in the way we were raised as to, you know, we didn’t have, either one of us, didn’t have a lot of money or a lot of extras. Things were...you were expected to go to school. You were expected to study. If you got in trouble at school,
you got in trouble more at home...you know, that type of an 1850’s kind of parenting approach, I think. We, as opposed to rebelling against that and said, ‘We’re not going to do that,’ we basically feel that that’s the way we’d like to raise our children also. And to support the school and support the teachers. And I felt like this program was more geared toward that, where the general program was a more modern, yuppie, warm, touchy-feely, self-esteem type of [program] ...that would not produce productive adults.

**Parental Factors and Considerations in the Decision Making Process**

In an attempt to identify the issues involved in parental choice, interview participants were asked what factors or considerations contributed to the decision making process. The factors identified by the 154 survey respondents included, (a) parental consideration of the child’s specific learning needs (8), (b) parental consideration of a strong academic-based program (45), (c) factors relating to the learning environment (41), and (d) factors related to the child’s social and personality needs (16). Of the 154 responses, 12 parents did not know of the programs before enrollment, and 11 already had older children in the programs. Parents considered other factors regarding issues of full vs. half-time kindergarten (1), parental educational background experiences (8), staff of the programs (2) and the sense of competition found between the two programs (1). Three parents did not respond to the question in the survey (see Table 17).

General program parents (60) considered the factor of a child’s social/personality needs (11) and the need for a relaxed learning environment (10). Academic program (3)
Table 17

Parental Factors and Considerations in the Decision Making Process as Identified by Survey Respondents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Considerations</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>General</th>
<th>Alternative</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Survey Responses</td>
<td>154</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Considerations:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child's specific learning needs</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strong academic-based program</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning environment</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social and personality issues</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Factors of Consideration:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Length of kindergarten day</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parental educational experience</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff working in programs</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sense of parental competition</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family values</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No knowledge of choices before enrollment</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Older child already attending program</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No response</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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and a specific learning need of a child (2) were also factors considered by general program parents. Finding a program similar to parental elementary experiences was an important factor (7) identified by the general program parents for consideration when choosing an educational program.

Alternative program parents (94) looked at the academic programs offered as an important factor to consider (42). A structured, disciplined environment was also indicated as important (31). Other parents indicated that considering a child's specific learning need (6) or the social, personality needs of the child (5) were also factors identified by alternative parents. Six of the alternative parents identified similar family values as an important factor for consideration.

**Areas of Parental Consideration**

Twenty of 30 interview participants (66.7%) tried to match the needs of the child when making their educational choice decision. Of these, two considered their child's specific learning difficulties, six considered their child's academic needs, 10 parents tried to match learning style to the environment, and two parents expressed a desire to match social/personality aspects when seeking an appropriate program for their child.

Ten of the 30 parents interviewed did not attempt to match the child's needs to a program when considering educational choice of program (33.3%). Two of these parents already had children in the program and wanted to continue with the same program for the younger children. Eight of the parents did not consider the needs of the child but rather considered their own desires to have their children exposed to a solid educational program (see Table 18).
Table 18

Parental Factors and Considerations of the Decision Making Process as Identified by Interview Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Considerations:</th>
<th>General and Alternative Programs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total Interviewed:</strong></td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Attempt to Match the Child's Needs to the Program</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Match the child's specific learning needs</td>
<td>2 (66.7%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Match the child's ability to a strong academic-based program</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Match the child's learning style to the learning environment</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Match the child's social/personality</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>No Attempt to Match the Child's Needs</strong></td>
<td>10 (33.3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Older child already attending program</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parental Decision - Did not consider the child</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Parental interviews supported the four areas of consideration identified in the survey that contributed to the decision making process.

Learning needs of the child. Patty Dunn has three children. The oldest, now in second grade, has a severe hearing loss that was discovered in her kindergarten year. Her teacher wears an auditory trainer to help amplify her instructional voice. Class size is very small in this second grade classroom serving only 14 general education students. A second child is currently enrolled in the general kindergarten program and a 2 year old brother stays at home with Mr. Dunn while Patty has a full time, traveling career. Patty’s background supports the general education program but her enthusiasm for continued support is reflected on its successful role in serving her hearing impaired child.

As I mentioned before, learning later that she was hearing impaired, I’m glad I made the choice I did, because I feel it’s [the general program] more appropriate to the special challenges she has.

I know that her classroom’s small. I think that... that probably makes no difference from one to the other program, but, in the general program, I know her classroom is small. And I think that helps her a lot... to have a small student-teacher ratio.

Paula Evans has twin first grade children. When the twins first enrolled in kindergarten, Paula chose the alternative program. Paula’s 15 year-old son had difficulty learning to read and Paula wanted to make sure her twins were enrolled in a strong phonetic program. Shortly after beginning in the alternative program, it became evident to Paula that her kindergarten son was experiencing difficulties. After 4 weeks, Paula
switched the twins from the alternative to the general program. Paula said,

My son was ADHD and he wasn't able to sit still long enough to do the work that was expected of them. And they are both behind in learning and so they weren't learning at the same pace as the other kids. And they didn't have the same knowledge basis as some of the other kids did.

The pace that the alternative program moves, that is... is quicker. And my perception might be off on this one, that the kids are expected to sit in their seats longer... for longer periods of time and more is expected of them than those kids that are in general program classrooms.

[Then] watching how far behind they were getting, my son more than my daughter. My mind is not catching the word I want to use (pause). In everything that the class was working on, I did not see my children keeping up in the learning curve.

And my son would come home and cry after school everyday. And my daughter started crying after a while, saying she didn't want to go to school. And the teacher... we were communicating back and forth and she'd send a note home on how the day went, and she was spending a lot of time standing next to my son, having to work with him.

It was a really hard decision for me, because I felt like I was going to go through the same thing I went through with my older son. And, that since they were twins, I couldn't leave one in there [alternative program] and have the other one stay [into the general program]. And the chances
of her [the daughter] being successful in that program were pretty slim.

And so, I just felt a let down that I wasn’t able to keep them in that
program and ah...cried many hours.

Parental academic desires. Dani Wild had been satisfied with the general
program for her two oldest boys until her third grade son began experiencing difficulties
in reading comprehension. She investigated the alternative program and enrolled him in
the alternative program at the beginning of his fourth grade year. She did not want her
kindergarten son to enter school and experience the same difficulties with reading. Dani
said,

I didn’t [investigate the alternative] at first. I didn’t until it was up and
running for years did I really investigate because my kid, well yeah. I had
two in elementary school at the time and they were happy. And I thought
everything was fine. And when I heard about it [the alternative] I thought
‘well that’s nice’ but not something I’d look into.

All the way through the fall when he started [third grade in]
school, I was leery about... and he was getting an A in reading and that
was what got me is that he was having low scores on his standardized
testing that came back. Like from a one, on a scale, from 1 to 10 on what
he read and I thought, ‘oh my gosh!’ And I asked... requested a remedial
reading program there at the school. And they said he really didn’t qualify
because he got 50% right and stuff. But it was not good enough for me.
So this girl who used to teach at a private school, she knows this [phonics]
method very well and I would just take him over to her house and she taught him all of that. All through the summer, the whole bit, so that he was ready. And I felt he was ready to start something brand new and different to him at that point.

I wanted a strong reader. I wanted my third grader at the time... I thought it was just very important for him to comprehend. For him to be good at that. And to know what he was reading. And at the time it really upset him that I was looking in on it [his difficulty with reading] and that I spent more time in his classroom and stuff. Because he cried one day and said, ‘Mom I don’t need to change schools! I’m getting an A in reading!’ And I was like, ‘Gaaa!’ But slowly we did it. We did not... I didn’t pull him out as my girlfriend had encouraged me to do that year and move him during the year. But, there happened to be an opening in fourth grade so it was perfect. It just all worked out.

Dani felt positive about her fourth grade son’s success in the alternative program and enrolled her youngest son in the kindergarten alternative program when he was age eligible. She continued,

Once I had my middle son go through [the alternative program] and I got even a better picture. Of course, as time goes on, I decided that my son ready to start kindergarten would be perfect. And he also went through preschool like the other kids did. He has a September birthday, so that put him a little older and he had gone through, you know, one of these pre-
kindergartens. So... and he can be a stinker. He's a third boy and I thought this is what he needs because he needs to know how it works in school, and that kind of thing. And he's had plenty of preschool experiences. And now its time to, for him to... and he, you know, absolutely is a sponge. Like I have never seen. He loves learning.

John Hamlet enrolled his two sons in the alternative program, one currently in first grade and one in the kindergarten program. Although not an active father within the building, he was definitive as to the specifics desired for his sons' education. An older stepson had attended a parochial school that factored into the choice process. He had considered a private education but when learning of the alternative program from a co-worker, investigated and felt it was appropriate for his son entering kindergarten. John said,

I talked to my friends and then I did a little research on the Internet. Kind of found out and then came to the seminar on the alternative program here. And what I found out, I liked.

I kind of wanted, you know... we were debating on whether to go to a parochial [school], but after we sent our stepson there, we just we didn't get... The money we spent we didn’t feel we got any reward for it. And this just sounded like something... When I found out why the guy, the person who started the alternative [curriculum design] and why he did it, you know, it made sense to me. That's what I wanted for my children, to get an education that more affluent people get.
Ah, I liked the emphasis on the reading, writing and arithmetic that the alternative program does verses the general. I read the editorials. I just see where the general kind of like say... Some kids they scare 'em half to death about the environment and everything. I didn't want that, I want my kids to learn...learn my values and learn how to get a good foundation in their education.

A good foundation, you know, good. A good foundation from the very beginning. Like I remember my grade schools and what I've seen them doing so far [in the alternative]. I know I didn't have that kind of teaching.

I think with the alternative program you're gonna see kids, you know, they're going to emphasize the reading, the mathematics and the language. And they are not going to be playing games, where I think in the general program, you are gonna be seeing kids playing more games rather than learning. That's the way I feel.

Well, there were a lot of people that don't send their kids to a general school. They send them to a private school and the curriculum writer for the alternative program looked at what kind of education these people, these kids get. And that's the kind of education I wanted for my children. You know, a private school education where I can afford it (laughs).

Social and personality issues. Annie Hawthorne has two girls, one in first grade
and an older daughter currently in third grade of the general program. Annie wanted to
find a match between the family values predominately in the neighborhood that surrounds
the school and the children her daughters would have as classmates. This strong need for
connecting with community and neighborhood was clearly evident in Mr. and Mrs.
Hawthorne's choice of the general education program. Annie said,

The general [education] side, everybody seemed to like it. Most
comments from the parents weren't so much with the program, just feeling
invaded by the other program into their school. So they really didn't
concentrate more on the program... more the feeling the school had lost
part of its identity.

A lot of it was parent attitude, getting to know the parents. I guess,
I kinda meshed a little more with some of the parents of general with as
far as outlooks, philosophies. The other factor is the children's education
played a part, too, but we were probably leaning toward the general
anyway. And then, the parent's outlooks, philosophies and family values
kinda fell in, too. The kids are... in our neighborhood, get to different
cliques. So for us, I think, the kids that they have bonded with are from
the general side.

Kelly Stuart also believed strongly in matching the identified educational values of
their family with an educational program. She and her husband have three children, one
who is currently in a private, religious high school and two children currently enrolled in
the alternative program, a son in second grade and a daughter in first. Kelly stated,
What we were specifically looking for with our first child, was a strong academic program. A personal preference for us was to stay in the public school system. We just felt that was a value of ours was to stay within the public school system, and I don’t know how to define that for you, but that was just a value of ours. So it was our preference not to go private. Then the other thing that we were looking for was a structured environment. And one of the things that we had kind of a fear about, that caused us to think about private school was a perception, and I guess this perception did change, was a perception that within a public school system there was a little bit of a lack of structure. And I don’t know where we got that perception, but we had just perceived that that’s just the way it was. And as we began looking at the alternative program, the thing that kept hitting us is that it was very structured and we knew that that was something we wanted…that was a second value of ours, was that we wanted a very structured program. Not just for knowing that our first child needed that, but also, that was a value for us, wanting our kids in general to be in structured programs where their time was structured for them as opposed to letting them structure their own time. So…those were some of the things that weighed ‘x’-ing out one program and really choosing the alternative program.

We liked the value, and I keep using that word a lot, but we liked the value that the alternative program represented. The strong academics,
and not necessarily geared for the quote, "smart children". I know that's something that's a perception that's out there, but we really feel like that's not the case. But we feel like it's strong academically with the whole phonics base. Teaching kids to read and write and studying the grammar...and just that value of a well-rounded academic education. We love that value. We're seeing it play out in our kids in just seeing how well they're doing. We like the value of a structured environment. We're all for that. We think that that is wonderful. And we really appreciate, and maybe this is true in the general program environment, but we really have appreciated the value of just the whole respectful environment. And again, maybe that's there in the general classrooms, but it seems like when we went to the round-up there was just a sense in our home [neighborhood] school [that] the kids kind of make their own environment. And the kindergarten teacher there was very 'loose' in that...and we have seen with the teachers in the alternative program, that they're very, 'This is the way it's going to be!' Even the kindergarten teacher, [alternative program] who in my mind is the consummate kindergarten teacher, loves the kids like crazy yet, she is very much, 'I love you to death, but this is the way we're going to do it.' And so, that is what we were looking for, the loving but structured environment.

Rory Howard and his wife had home schooled their two daughters, currently at the kindergarten and second grade levels. Mr. Howard explained why they initially
decided to home school. He said,

We started investigating home schooling 2 years before we had children.

My wife and I were married for 8 years before we had children and about 6 years in, we knew we’d be starting a family soon. We started investigating, ‘why do some people home school’ and ‘why do some send to a general program’. And we found some who were very adamant both directions.

I think we started out seeking information, thinking we would probably home school and that was confirmed with our research. And then we always kept our options open to looking at what public schools were [doing] in the area where we were living and did some checking to see how they were doing... The way they were teaching... what the test scores were... to see which way is better. Again, one of the foundations was, we would be able to make better use of our students’, or our children’s time and teach more in the amount of time that the public school would, and so that kept us going back to the home school model.

After considering many options, they selected the alternative program. There was an opening for their oldest, second grade daughter, and so the Howards took steps to option enroll out of a neighboring district, into this one. They chose to continue to home school their current kindergarten child. Rory continued,

We felt like she [second grade daughter] needed a change. We viewed our daughter as having some skills that needed enhancement that my wife was
uncomfortable providing [in their home school] and in my schedule, was not able to provide that. And in looking at the alternative program, it seemed to meet her [daughter’s] learning style and provide opportunities for specialization that we couldn’t provide.

Tammy Claussen worried about her daughter being too outgoing and social as observed during her preschool years. She was concerned that this behavior would prevent her daughter from concentrating in school and thus desired the alternative program. However, due to limited space in the alternative program, Tammy was not able to enter her daughter in the program. Tammy stated,

She’s kind of a free spirit. And I was...at that point...ah... was not too terribly far into looking at.... I was definitely favoring the alternative program. I liked the little bit more structure, hoping that it would...not force her, cause I don’t want her not to have her own mind and be a free spirit, but kind of give her a little more structure in her education just because she wouldn’t learn as much as I know she’s capable of. Whereas, given the more open environment of the general [program], I was afraid she’d ... she’d chit-chat a little too much and tend to get away from her work. And it’s not because she’s not able... so, um... I liked that for her.

**Parental Concerns During the Act of Decision Making**

In an attempt to understand concerns parents had when choosing an educational program, the 30 parents interviewed were asked to comment on their concerns. **Parental concerns expressed - general program.** Six of the 15 responses by
general program parents indicated no concerns while deciding the placement of their child in their program of choice (40%). Six parents had no concern with the curriculum but expressed concerns of parental competitiveness (2), child’s ability to adjust to kindergarten (1), location of school too far from parental workplace (1), lack of information about the programs (1), and did not wish to participate in a lottery for space (1). Three of the 15 parents spoke of curriculum concerns, specifically that the child might struggle with the phonics program (2) or the demanding homework (1) (see Table 19).

Josephine Blum had thought she would enter her younger children in the general program due to the success of her sixth grader who had been through the program. She expressed the following concern, however, during the decision making process. Josephine said,

After some [alternative] parents were saying, ‘how much they learn with their sounds’ and ‘how they can write so well’, I thought maybe I should have...you know.

Patty Dunn also heard comment from alternative parents about their excitement for their program. Patty said,

Comments that are made like, ‘My child’s in the alternative program,’ and like this was, to me, like some major accomplishment type thing. So, that’s when I...and I was still new to the community, so I thought, “Wow, maybe we should have looked at this.” But as time went on, I didn’t even consider...had no more concerns about that.
Table 19

**Concerns of General Program Parents During the Act of Decision Making**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Total Interviewed:</th>
<th>General Program</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Concerns Expressed</th>
<th>No Concerns Expressed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>6 (40.0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>9 (60.0%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Areas of Concern:**

- Child might struggle with intensive phonics in alternative: 2
- Parental competitiveness: 2
- Child might struggle with demands of homework in alternative: 1
- Ability of child to adjust to kindergarten: 1
- School too far from parental workplace: 1
- Lottery system of entry to kindergarten was undesirable: 1
- Parental worry that program information was not complete: 1

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Glen Hansen spoke of the social adjustment to school. Since his son was new to America, he worried about the transition. Glen stated,

Well, the worries were not so much about the program, the worry was about if he will be able in time to adjust to what he was suppose to adjust.

And we knew this...that he would be able to. So the question was whether he will become [adjusted]...in say December 1st or January 1st...or it be at the end of the school year. That was the question.

Lucy McElroy entered her child after the spaces for the alternative program were filled. As she discovered more about the alternative program and thought about her daughter’s upcoming first grade program, she spoke of concerns. Lucy said,

I liked the idea that there was a smaller environment, smaller classrooms.

Because I knew that [if] she had problems that they would work with her.

But when I found out about the alternative program, I was very torn. I felt, ‘What am I missing here? Am I doing the right thing for her?’ I struggled the whole school year. I struggled with which is better. Which is it? It’s where [is] one that’s better than the other?

Sara Schneider was not concerned by the differences in program, but did express the concern of needing to go through the lottery process for an alternative space if that was the program they chose. Sara explained,

The one thing that I did think about is that if we did even think about the alternative program, I didn’t want to have to go through a drawing process to determine whether she was gonna get into school or not.
Parental concerns expressed - alternative program. Fifteen of the 15 parents interviewed (100%) indicated at least one concern. Six respondents were concerned about the social aspects of choosing the alternative program, identifying possible negative peer influence (2), and a difficult social adjustment not attending with neighborhood friends (4). Three parents questioned their child’s readiness for school and one was concerned about the large class sizes found in the alternative program. One of the 15 parents worried about the lack of computer education in the curriculum while another indicated she was concerned she did not understand the program in which to help her child if needed. One parent felt overwhelmed with the decision process and another parent worried about the risk of entering her child in an unconventional program. Concern was expressed by one parent who worried "how her friends would react" to her decision to enroll her child in the alternative program (see Table 20).

Jane Amish and her husband had selected as their first choice of programs a Christian school. However, room was not available for their son in the school. When Jane and her husband enrolled him in this study’s alternative school, they worried about the possible negative social implications of the decision. Jane stated,

Well, before we enrolled him in the alternative program, we tried to get him enrolled in a Christian school. And because obviously, we wanted him to be in a private Christian school so that was our first, you know...would have been our first choice if that would have happened. And so, the peer influence was our concern then.

Merideth Johnson also worried about social adjustments when she was choosing
Table 20

Concerns of Alternative Program Parents During the Act of Decision Making

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Total Interviewed:</th>
<th>Alternative Program</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

No Concerns Expressed 0 (0.0%)

Concerns Expressed 15 (100.0%)

Areas of Concern:
- Attending with non-neighborhood friends 4
- Child's readiness for kindergarten and challenging program 3
- Negative peer influence 2
- Low amount of computer usage in alternative program 1
- Parental lack of alternative curriculum-ability to help child 1
- Large class size 1
- Overwhelmed with decision making process 1
- Unknowns of a non-traditional program 1
- Opinions/Acceptance of parental friends 1
the alternative program. Merideth said,

Well, that it wasn’t a neighborhood school. That he would not be going to school with the children that he plays with.

I just initially thought that, you know, all of his friends would be going to different schools and he wouldn’t have close relationships with the students he went to school with and he wouldn’t know anybody, necessarily. And that was...I feel that was a silly concern now when I look back on that. And when I was giving thought to that and I looked at my neighborhood and we have children who go to two different parochial schools and we have children that go to three different grade schools in our neighborhood due to the growth of the district. So, no one goes to the same school. Maybe one friend might have gone to where he went. So that, I quickly dismissed that concern.

Georgia Stone made her decision, but had some doubts and worried as the time came to enter her daughter. Georgia spoke of three concerns. She said,

I went over it and over it in my head that first year thinking, ‘Did I make the right decision?’ Then about 3 months into the program, I knew that I’d...that it was fine.

Georgia also worried about the social adjustments when entering a magnet program. She said,

My only concern then was that the other school children accept my child as not being considered an ‘odd-ball’ since they were in a different
program.

Another concern was the comments made by her attendance area elementary school principal. Georgia said,

And there was at the very first, my daughter’s home school…that principal thought that I was crazy for doing it. She did not believe in the program.

So, you know, that makes you kind of stop and think and wonder, ‘Am I doing the right thing?’

Kelly Stuart had concerns that her daughter was smart enough to be successful in the alternative program. Kelly said,

Yeah, we were concerned because we… our perception initially was that the alternative program was for the smarter kids. And I think that’s kind of the thought that’s out there in the district.

And with our daughter, she’s a lot like me. She’s very average in her learning. So we were concerned. Would she be able to do it? Would she be able to make it? And so our initial thought was…we were convinced this was right for our son…maybe we would put her in private school where it would be a little bit lesser in terms of the academics for her. But once we got our son in the program, we were so impressed with the program, we thought, we really want her to be in here.

Other concerns Kelly expressed were with what her friends thought and of her children’s safety in a public school. Kelly said,

Honestly, one [concern] was obviously what our friends thought because
we were making the decision [private Christian or public] that every other friend we had, wasn’t making. Then just the fear of, you know, the whole big public school thing. Of course, Columbine hadn’t happened yet, but the whole scenario, you know, of public school and the horror stories you hear about that kind of thing. Although, I know that those kinds of things happen at private schools, too. We’ve heard it from friends. Kids showing up with guns and you just don’t hear about that stuff on the news. They keep it pretty under cover. So, I guess that was probably the biggest fear...is just feeling like you’re sending your child off to the big public school system. But, it’s been wonderful.

Charleen Vanna was concerned about her daughter making new friends in the switch from her home school kindergarten to the alternative program in another district elementary. She also worried about the adjustment to the new curriculum. Charleen said,

I was really nervous even right before we started her because she is shy. Nervous about making this change. New friends, new building. But actually, I talked with her psychologist about a week before [school started]. I was getting cold feet and she said I should give it a try. A whole big transition. And for a kid that’s been having trouble with school, you worry about that. And then, would she be able to keep up with the rigorousness of the program and the homework?
Personnel Instrumental to Decision

Seventeen of 30 interview participants indicated themselves as the key decision-maker in deciding the program of choice for their child. Seven of these 17 parents confirmed their decision through discussions with a spouse. Seven of the 30 participants stated a friend was instrumental in guiding their decision, indicating that five of these friends had educational backgrounds. Four of the 30 participants indicated their parents [child's grandparents] had been instrumental in making the decision. One parent relied on the advice of a teacher at the school site, while one parent sought assistance from God (see Table 21).

Key Decision Factors

In order to seek understanding of the main factors that contributed to the choice decision, interview participants were asked, “Why did you decide to enroll your child in his/her current program?”

Decision factors – general program. Five of the 15 general program parents responded that they wanted their children to attend the general program based on what they knew as a “good” educational program. Five parents chose the general program because of the “fun” and “creative” environment. Three parents responded that they were not aware of their choices at the time, although two of the three stated they would have picked the general program even if they had known of their choices. Two of the general parents had originally chosen the alternative program: one switched her children after they experienced learning difficulties, and the other did not receive a space as decided through the alternative lottery system.
### Table 21

**Personnel Instrumental to Parental Decision Making Process**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>General and Alternative Programs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total Interviewed:</strong></td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Parents:</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self and Spouse</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Others:</strong></td>
<td>13 (43.3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friend with education background</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child's grandparent(s)</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friend</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>God</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Decision factors – alternative program.** Seven of the 15 alternative program parents who were asked why they selected the alternative program for their child stated the “curriculum” and “structure” of the program were the determining factors. Three parents sought a “challenging” program for their child and two parents sought the alternative program for remedial help in reading. One parent thought the program best fit her child’s personality needs while another parent chose the alternative program on a one-year trial basis to determine appropriateness for her child. One parent stated that either program, the alternative or the general would have been acceptable. She entered the lottery and left it up to God to place her daughter.

**Validation of the Parental Choice**

Parents were asked in the written survey and in the interview process to recall experiences over the past school year that validated parental program choice. They were also asked to identify experiences that made them wonder if their choice was validated.

**Program Validation**

Four areas of positive validation data were noted by the 154 parents who completed the written survey. Each validation experience stated by survey respondents was noted (363) in the areas of, (a) academic progress shown (197), (b) indication of satisfactory learning environment (30), (c) experiences that the needs of the child were met (78), and (d) acknowledgement that parental expectations were met (38). Seven of 154 parents surveyed gave no examples of positive validation experiences (see Table 22).

**Positive validation – general program.** General program parents that completed the survey (60) shared experiences that positively validated the program choice. Parents
Table 22

Positive Parental Validation Experiences Identified

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Total Survey Respondents</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>General</th>
<th>Alternative</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>154</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>94</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Total Validations Reported</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>General</th>
<th>Alternative</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>363</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>275</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Area of Validation:

- Academic Progress: 197, General: 30, Alternative: 167
- Satisfaction of Learning Environment: 30, General: 7, Alternative: 23
- Parental Expectations Met: 68, General: 7, Alternative: 31

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No Validation Example Provided</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>General</th>
<th>Alternative</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
noted 88 experiences that suggested validation through, (a) academic progress shown (30), (b) indication of satisfactory learning environment (7), (c) experiences that the needs of the child were met (44), and (d) acknowledgement that parental expectations were met (7). Six of the 60 general program parents did not provide validation experiences.

Parents of children attending the general program affirmed the validation of their choice by relaying specific observations and experiences. Interview participants shared the following positive validations.

Tammy Claussen spoke of academic progress shown by her daughter in the general program. She said,

The fact that they have done so much. This...I mean, she still doesn't know all the spelling rules, or whatever that the alternative program kids do, but she has learned so much and has had so many experiences, in the field trips and the centers and stuff in her classrooms. And the teachers that she has that have done so much, I think, to make... I mean she comes home and she's just spewing all this information about things and so she has obviously learned a lot of things. So what if it isn't maybe all the spelling rules, and, you know, like I said, she's the kind of person that enjoys a well-rounded experience, so she's definitely getting that. And so, for that and all of the experiences that she's not missing out on because she's in the full day program, I think, has made me realize it was as good of decision [general program] as the other [alternative] in the end for her.
Grace Davidson spoke of the differences from her kindergarten experiences to her son's. Grace stated,

He actually can read and I am so pleased with that. My impression of kindergarten, I mean, from many moons ago, was that it was, 'A, B, C's,...1, 2, 3's, tie your shoes, and recess.' And to know that they are doing addition and subtraction... somewhat fractions... money... I think that he's doing incredibly well and I would, couldn't expect anything more.

Penny Fraizer indicated a positive validation of her son's kindergarten experience in the general program. She said,

Everything: great teacher, great classroom. He comes home excited about learning. He knows more about stuff than I do at this point.

We had this thing where we didn’t know if he was gifted or not, and it turns out he didn’t get into that category. And all I can say is that he must have some terrific teaching going on because he has really retained significant amounts of information. Far exceeding my expectations!

Sara Schneider was thrilled with the general program. She validated her opinion with experiences that supported her choice. Sara said,

I think, you know, in terms of where my daughter’s at in learning skill, I think I am very happy with the choice I made in the general program. You know one of the big things, obviously from my opinion anyway, from
what people have said about the alternative program is that kids that do the alternative obviously because of the phonics method, hopefully read and write better and things like that. Well just from my experience as to how she is reading and writing, I am completely satisfied as to where she is at. And I don't think that she would have excelled any more doing that particular method compared to where she's at in her program. I mean, she's well above her reading level and writes really well, and spells well and I think that she has that talent or that gift to be able to do that. So, I don't think that she would have excelled any more learning the phonics way in the alternative program or doing that in terms of how she has learned. And, I truly have liked the teachers and the interaction. So I'm not disappointed, you know, that way. I definitely think the transition from kindergarten to first grade has been different in terms of how they are required to do a lot more [in the alternative program]. It probably wouldn't have been as drastic, if she was in alternative kindergarten.

It was just a lot more relaxed kind of when you're in kindergarten in the general program and can do things [more relaxed style] as compared to first grade sitting in desks and things like that. But I think, over all I'm really happy with that [general program] cause I think she has excelled just as well there.

Julie Wilkensen felt her choice was validated through the mix of activities her daughter was exposed to in the general program. Julie said,
Oh, jeez, right from the get-go what has validated my choice was... I just think that he has a wonderful teacher that... She not only, how can I put this, she just... really, uh...(pause)...She just has such a good mix of, you know... She reads to them, so you get that in there [general program]. She does the phonics and she does, you know, a little bit of the...you know, the wagon...'w-a-gon' (sounded out phonetically). It helps them break it down. Oh, jeez, and they went on a squirrel 'nut hunt', you know, that type of a thing. She just really is the whole spectrum of everything that I believe in and really tries to...tries to meet all of the needs. Doesn’t just teach to one learning style whereas, I think that is so important.

Positive validation – alternative program. Alternative parents validated the experiences of their child in their program of choice by stating 275 positive validation examples in the written survey. Parents gave examples of, (a) academic progress shown (167), (b) indication of satisfactory learning environment (23), (c) experiences that the needs of the child were met (54), and (d) acknowledgement that parental expectations were met (31). One of 94 alternative program parents did not provide an example of a positive validation experiences.

Parents of children in the alternative program shared examples of their observations and children’s experiences during the interview process. Their comments demonstrate this positive validation of their program choice.

Jane Amish stated her son has grown academically and in his love for school. She said,
He’s learning really well. And he loves...he loved... You know, he’s only in first grade, but he’s loved both of his teachers and he really responds to the authority.

Merideth Johnson gave an example of program validation witnessed by her husband. Merideth recalled,

Just recently, on Memorial weekend, our son was pronouncing the names of the... on the cemetery markers and my husband remarked about how well child pronounces names. And he looked at me and he said, ‘Is that because of the phonics?’ and I said, ‘You bet it is!’

Merideth continued with other examples of positive validation. She said,

And we have remarked on several occasions about his ability to read and his ability to pronounce words correctly and his ability to spell. ...That we feel he’s getting a private education. How well he prints. He does his own thank you cards and he’s always getting compliments. That’s one of the things that we weren’t aware of, but, you know, the nice things that come along with the phonics program is how they really look at neatness of writing. And our son has really nice handwriting and he’s doing extremely well in cursive. That’s come very easy for him. He is a more athletic type of little boy that would prefer to be outside playing ball or shooting hoops or watching some kind of sports on TV. I have seen this year, a real interest in reading, especially in school and it’s overflowed a little bit at home. I think that because of the program, he’s a really good
reader. Now, maybe he would have done this in a general program, I
don’t know, but we have a little friend who’s the same type of personality
in the general program and he’s struggling with reading. And, again, you
know, you can’t compare two different children, but I feel that our son is
reading well and has an interest in reading. That’s why we’re grateful for
the program.

Andrea Schmidly gave examples of her daughter’s learning experiences.
Validation of Andrea’s program choice is seen through these examples. She said,
Just the leaps and bounds she’s made and the spelling and reading. She’s
really into that. Now, we’re getting all the little chapter books, and
she’s... oh and she’s excited about it. She’s excited about writing, the
creative... I mean writing her own little stories, and writing little notes to
her teacher or to grandma or whatever. She’s just really made a huge leap.
I mean, obviously, she learned a lot last year. She learned the basics and
they started that a little bit. This year she’s made leaps and bounds as far
as reading. Whatever she... she’s figuring out signs, menus, books. I
mean, just really. I’d say huge which is probably a very typical thing in
the first grade, but we’ve really seen that. I was hoping she would be
reading at the end of last year and she was a little, but it really was really
so slow it didn’t seem to be an enjoyment for her. And now she’s
finally... it’s clicked. And now she’s been wanting to read the stories and
write the stories. So that’s been the biggest jump I see.
Kelly Stuart provided an emotional testimony as she recalled her children's experiences that helped to validate parental choice of the alternative program. Kelly said, Boy... just pretty much everything. It's been wonderful. I mean, we just feel like he...oh, I'll probably cry... (begins to cry). We just... we feel like he's just... I'm in awe of what he's learned (tears). Um... just as a parent, seeing your child read... and... um... seeing them learn and remember things... and writing. This year writing a report on crickets, of all things (tears). Having to write this seven paragraph report this year. And... uh... working and researching that... and um... just doing that and succeeding. That's just that type of thing has been wonderful. And seeing him do that and having... Actually a friend of ours whose fiancée was living with us for a while looked at his report and said, 'This writing is better than a couple of the high school kids reports that I had just read last week. And grammatically, it's correct. And, you know, I've read high school reports and they're not writing grammatically correct like that.' So, um... That type of thing (tears). I'm such a sentimental...

Validation Concerns

In an effort to discover the concerns following entrance to an educational program of choice, parents were asked, "What, if anything, makes you wonder if you made the right decision?" Seventy-eight survey respondents reported that nothing had occurred that made them wonder about their program choice after making the placement decision. Fifteen parents did not respond to the question. Sixty-one parents had unanswered
questions/comments about their choice (see Table 23).

**Validation questions/comments – general program.** Thirty-seven of 60 general program parents responded to the written survey that nothing had occurred to make them wonder about their educational choice for their child. Nine parents left the question blank providing no concerns. Eighteen questions/comments were recorded from general program parents about their program choice (see Table 24).

Just as parents in the general program provided evidence that validated their choice, they also shared experiences that caused them to wonder if their program choice was validated. These experiences indicated a variety of questions/concerns as seen in statements provided by the interview participants.

Josephine Blum felt her son had a great start in the general program. She wonders if he would have been more advanced if she had chosen the alternative program. Josephine said,

I don’t think anything really has [made her wonder about her decision].
I’ve been so happy with both the teachers. I didn’t know if my son [would] had been more advanced if he had started with the alternative program? You know, in his sounds and his letters and stuff. But he had a pretty good grasp of those when he started kindergarten. So, I guess that would be the only thing I question. Always question myself on… was the phonics part of it. Would he had gotten more from that part of it? And I always thought, you know, if they would get that much more…then the district would use it in all of their schools (laugh). You’d hope.
Table 23

Program Experiences That Made Parents Wonder About Their Choice Decision

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<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>General</th>
<th>Alternative</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total Survey Responses:</td>
<td>154</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents Reporting Questions/Comments (Cause to Wonder) About Their Decision</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Experiences Reported</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Response to Question</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 24

**General Program – Questions/Concerns That Made Parents Wonder About Their Choice Decision**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Questions/Comments Reported That Caused Parents to Wonder About Their Choice Decision</th>
<th>General Program</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total Survey Responses:</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Questions/Comments:

- How much phonics is really in the general program? (3)
- Alternative program parents believe strongly in their program - Is it better? (3)
- Child struggled - Is phonics tutor needed? (2)
- Would my kids have scored higher in alternative program? (2)
- I still want to know more about the alternative program. (2)
- The kids in the alternative seem academically advanced. (1)
- Are the alternative students more advanced in reading? (1)
- I battle with which is "best" and if I should switch my child. (1)
- How long is the waiting list in the alternative program. (1)
- I wonder if my child is challenged enough. (1)
- Will the alternative eventually have a negative impact on the general program? (1)
Tammy Claussen’s daughter is very sociable. Tammy felt the general program’s classroom environment might need more structure. She said,

Yeah…and she’s done well. I said, like the thing that I was worried most about, in the general, is that she has a little more opportunity to be sociable. And she is… Not that that’s always a bad thing, but it has on occasion interfered with and it’s been mentioned to us that it’s interfering with her getting her work done. Not that she hasn’t the ability or the time given to her, as she’s claimed (laugh), but that it’s, ah… it’s more her use of time. And I was… The more structured teaching environment [of the alternative program]… I was kind of hoping that would kind of cross [help] that a little bit for her [if she had entered the alternative program].

Patty Dunn remembered her daughter struggling with new concepts. Patty wondered if the alternative program might have offered her daughter more repetition than the general program. Patty stated,

I know that my oldest was struggling a little bit with math early in the school year, as it was some new stuff. And I remember thinking, ‘Gosh, if she just was in it [the alternative program]’… you know? ‘If we could just have a little bit more repetition and, and drill… then maybe this wouldn’t be so difficult.’ Um… and then again, at that point, I was kind of like, ‘Well, I wonder if the alternative program had offered more than that [what the general offered]? But then again… it’s just a little bump in the road that we got over.
Paula Evans switched her twins after the first few months. She told of her desires to have more intensive phonics instruction in the general program. Paula states,

I still wish we had more phonics taught in the classroom and more one on one. Especially with my son who's ADD [attention deficit disorder]. Having somebody there in the [alternative] classroom to keep him focused. And if we could keep him focused, he could do much better [in the alternative] than he's doing in the general program. But, now seeing the progress that they've made the past year or two, it validated the fact that I did take them out of... and put them in the general program... That the alternative program was not for them. I still wish I could bring them 

(laugh).

I haven't seen much progress in my son. Just in the last month, I've seen a jump in progress. It's been really slow for my daughter, but I've seen a real jump in the progress this past month. She sat down and read a book that I didn't know she could read. And she's still way behind everybody else.

After visiting with parents who have children attending the alternative program and reading more about the program, Lucy McElroy has decided that her daughter has not shown the academic progress that she would have made had she chosen the alternative program. Lucy said,

...just what other parents have said, because I probably wouldn't have questioned it otherwise. And I've heard negative, too, about the
alternative program, so it's been a struggle. Until, I looked up on the
Internet and I went and got these books that I bought. It's been very hard.

I've battled with this the whole school year as I began to learn
more about alternative methods of teaching. Although I'm very pleased
with general kindergarten. I have, incidentally, placed my daughter on the
'waiting list' for first grade alternative. Although I have registered my son
for kindergarten (general). If she [my daughter] gets into the alternative
first grade and does well, and we decide we like the program more, I will
continue her in the alternative program and place my son in the same, in
first grade.

Validation questions/comments – alternative program. Forty-one of 154
alternative parent survey respondents stated that nothing made them wonder about their
program choice. Six parents gave no response to the question, and 66 parental
questions/comments were recorded that made parents wonder about their
program choice (see Table 25).

Parents who chose the alternative program reported during the interview process
experiences that made them wonder about their educational program choice.

Jane Amish worried during the decision making process about her son attending a
public school rather than a private Christian school. Jane spoke of her disappointment
with the social aspects of attending the alternative program in the public school setting.
When asked what did not validate her decision she said,

Oh, not much! The only thing that I would change is some of the peer
Table 25

**Alternative Program – Questions/Concerns That Made Parents Wonder About Their Choice Decision**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Questions/Comments Reported That Caused Parents to Wonder About Their Choice Decision</th>
<th>Alternative Program</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total Survey Responses:</td>
<td>94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Questions/Comments:</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- Child complains of too much homework. (10)
- Social issues-not attending with neighborhood friends. (7)
- What will transition to middle school be like? (6)
- Child struggles with teacher's attention to detail on work. (6)
- Disappointment with the "pressure" of the program. (6)
- Parental stress involved in ensuring child's success. (5)
- Math program has some weak areas. (4)
- Kindergarten day is not "fun" for children. (2)
- Late entrance of child into alternative was difficult. (2)
- Not enough room (due to lottery space) for all that want program. (2)
- Daily transportation to the program is difficult. (2)
- Lack of challenge once the child has learned the basic skills. (1)
Alternative Program – Questions/Concerns That Made Parents Wonder About Their Choice Decision

Additional technology and keyboarding is needed to build skills. (1)
Upper grades have smaller class sizes due to family job transfers. (1)
Structure may be too much for my child. (1)
The curriculum differs from our family beliefs. (1)
My child is having trouble reading. (1)
Are letter grades necessary in kindergarten? (1)
Kids need a chance to work in groups to gain cooperative skills. (1)
My oldest child slipped through the cracks because of a substitute. (1)
The program is not for everyone. (1)
Is the kindergarten half-day program going to continue to be an option? (1)
Parental involvement has decreased. (1)
How much homework does the general program complete? (1)
Parental segregation is obvious between the two programs. (1)
influence. And, you know that’s going to be anywhere.

Well, I don’t know just some of the... He just comes home with some... some words I’d rather him not say. And they’re not bad, you know, by some people’s standards. They’re not really bad words. But I would like to think that if he were at a Christian school he might not hear them, but he probably would.

I think the thing is, if he were at a private Christian school, I would know that the teacher’s would deal with it. And I don’t know that they would deal with it here. That they do... I’m sure they would, but at a Christian school it’s almost a guarantee that they would. Do you know what I’m saying?

And you know what I’m talking about is the word ‘butt’. We don’t say that word at our house! Well it’s not really that big of a deal, I just don’t want my child to say that. And so, you know, that kind of thing.

Jane also spoke of her son’s dislike of the homework required in the alternative program. She said,

He hates the amount of homework and asks why he has so much and the neighborhood children don’t have any.

Jennifer Brown spoke of the “bumpy road” her child experienced when trying to get adjusted to the structure of the alternative program. Jennifer said,

Yeah, we’ve had a bumpy road here, you know. I have a first grader, a daughter who… she tends to I guess, be lumped into that more of a
creative person. And so she has kind of a hard time following the step-by-step classroom. Because she tends to just kind of wander. Her mind wanders a lot. And so, we've had to be a little creative with the teacher and the teacher has been wonderful with keeping her on task. Keeping her focused in on what's going on in the certain time she needs to be focused in. And you know, this started in kindergarten too. So she just has been...

I just think it's... For her it's just day to day, week to week type of this, as to what kind of a mood she's in... being as her learning style.

Jennifer mentioned other issues of concern with her program choice; none she considered serious enough to "switch back" to the general program. Jennifer said,

My kids are realizing that they have it a little tougher than neighbor kids, and they wonder why they can't go to school with their neighbor friends. Sometimes we have tears over homework. The carpooling gets old. The strength of the program keeps me going. I would never switch back unless my child was struggling to the point of failure.

Rory Howard spoke of social issues that were not desired but unavoidable once he and his wife discontinued home-schooling their daughter. Rory said,

I don't think there's anything. We're really 100% that we made the right choice. There haven't been any situations that have caused us to question. Not that everything she experiences would be desirable, but we're not ostriches with our heads in the sand in thinking that she's not going to be exposed to things. And I think, exposure to other views, other cultures,
other perspectives help reinforce or help them forge out their own belief system. So, even those experiences, we feel, have been positive for her.

Merideth Johnson spoke of her son’s struggles as he entered the alternative program. Merideth said,

He struggled at the very beginning of school with learning the phonograms and that had a lot to do with, I think, that I didn’t understand. And then we struggled at the beginning of spelling. And we had a real difficult time with his attitude on sitting down and doing homework. And I can remember almost being in tears over Christmas break thinking maybe we had made the wrong decision because he was struggling. And then, in both situations, within several weeks or months light bulbs go off for our son. So, I think that maybe he struggles with new things. You know, I don’t want to place a label on him at all, but... umm... light bulbs went off and he did excellent. And, you know, I feel better prepared as a parent bringing my second child into the program. But that was the only time that we ever really questioned, because he struggled at the beginning of phonograms and at the beginning of spelling.

David Planteen felt the program should be challenging to his children. Initially, he worried about the level of difficulty that would challenge his son. David stated, The only thing that would make me question my choice was, ah.... Earlier in the year, I didn’t think the kid might... my fourth grade son, not so
much my first grade girl cause she was new to the curriculum in the first grade. But, I wasn’t sure he was going to be challenged by what was going on because he had mastered the phonograms long before. Well, the fourth grader had. And then program’s lack of a challenge program was a concern. As the school year went on and they broke the classroom into more the level of learners, and had them working with both teachers, I think that that helped a lot. You know, it’s one thing to get the information that your children are advanced learners or accelerated learners or whatever that mailing might be... and then really not see any follow-up on it. Makes me wonder if this kid is going to get bored with this whole process. Because I talked to other people in general programs that said they had great challenge programs for the kids. Now whether they do or don’t, I don’t know but I wondered about that. And with my first grade daughter, she’s still... she’s mastered a lot of things and I’m... now I know she’s going to go into second grade and it’s going to be a lot of redundancy. And I’m... I just don’t want her to be bored. She really... She likes learning and so I just want her to have that enthusiasm a while.

Mandy Stephenson shared information on the stress of the alternative program experienced by her daughter. Mandy said,

She has been complaining about her stomach hurting... or, ‘Mom, I’ve got a lump in my throat.’ ‘Well, when did you...’ ‘Well, it was right before my test.’ Or it was right before this. So that’s something that I’m really
watching because I do tend to be an anxious person and I know that that is passed on. It’s hereditary. And I don’t want to give her any… I just don’t want her to get so keyed up. I mean, she’s a little girl and she just needs to enjoy. So, that would be my… that’s just something that I’m watching.

Half-day kindergarten was difficult. It was stressful. I felt it was too much of the same day-in and day-out. No deviation like gym, music, library, etc. She [daughter] got so she didn’t want to go to school. I was sad about that because kindergarten is one’s introduction to school. She learned a lot and her good foundation was started, but there was a cost there, too.

Charleen Vanna stated that her daughter was adjusting to the program, but Charleen worries about the difficulty level still to come for her daughter with reading difficulties. She said,

Oh, I guess I only wonder, year to year, how difficult the program will get.
The phonograms are, and the markings, are quite difficult. But, my daughter has modifications through her Special Education status. So, she only underlines two-letter phonograms at this point. And I don’t know, you know, how much she’ll be able to do.

Validation of Meeting the Needs of the Child

Thirty of the 30 parents interviewed responded that they were satisfied that their program of choice was meeting the needs of their child (100%) (see Table 26).

Validation that child’s needs were met - general program. In the general program,
Table 26

Parental Validation of Meeting the Needs of the Child

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>General Program</th>
<th>Alternative Program</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Interview Responses:</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parental Verification:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child's Needs Were Met</td>
<td>30 (100.0%)</td>
<td>15 (100.0%)</td>
<td>15 (100.0%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
parents verified their satisfaction that the program was meeting their child’s educational needs through the following examples.

Tammy Claussen stated that her child needed a “fun” educational environment. Tammy said,

Yes, I think it has. Like I said, I think just having all of the experiences and the different ways that she’s been taught the things she’s been taught. And just having gone to the zoo and they talked about the animals before and they talked about them after. And she just tells me all this stuff... and you know, that’s what’s making learning fun for her. Is that kind of stuff, you know. She would... I don’t know (laugh)... if doing homework every night was going to be for her. She likes, like I said, she likes learning things that way, too. So, I don’t know. And I don’t know all that’s in the alternative program. Like I said, I didn’t get to sit in on all-day class, so I don’t know what other activities they had besides the drilling and that approach to it. But she’s... she’s definitely learned.

Grace Davidson was looking for and found a solid foundation for her son. She said,

I think he’s got a very sound basis for which to proceed forward with his schooling. So, I think the standard [general] curriculum has provided him what he’s needed.

Penny Fraizer knew her son needed an environment that promoted a love of learning. She described her son’s attitude toward learning that reinforced the validation
of her program choice. Penny stated,

He's just excited about things. You know, he'll come home... Last night before he went to bed he had to explain to me how the lives of Abraham Lincoln and Martin Luther King made a difference for people with darker colored skin. I mean, he went on for 20 minutes about this. And it probably was just an avoidance technique of trying not to go to bed, but I mean, he was, he had... He was excited and had to share! And that's just super. I like to see that.

Validation that the child's needs were met - alternative program. Like the general program parents, the alternative parents also provided examples that validated the program match to the needs of the child.

Sheila Algood validated the match for her son by recalling his past lack of focus and behavior difficulties. Enrollment in the alternative program has improved both issues for her son. When asked about program match, Sheila stated,

I think so... yes. He understands the presentation of the material... the approach. And... um, the structure. And maybe all the classrooms are the same, maybe they aren't, but the structure is very good. He will not stay focused if he doesn't have to and his mind goes very rapidly. And he daydreams and... and now he seems to stay focused. We don't have bad reports, you know... red slips and whatever very often... so... he would be in a lot more trouble if he wasn't challenged.

Jennifer Brown also spoke of focus or attention to task when she shared
experiences of her daughter's learning needs. Improvement has been seen indicating for Jennifer, a match in child's needs and program. Jennifer said,

Definitely. Like my husband says, 'She needs to be taught to sit still and focus in! She can't be just mind wandering constantly!' I mean, can you imagine if she was in this other classroom where she was allowed to do whatever? 'Okay, here's your day. You need to achieve these goals. You know, if you have a question you may ask me.' She would be out there! I mean she needed a directive, you know, and I just worry that yeah... if we would have gone the other [general program] route, it would have been a disaster (laughs).

Rory Howard and his wife wanted a match between program and their daughter's academic needs. He commented on the responsibility of the family to provide needs as well as validated that an academic match had been successful. Rory said,

I probably have to define... we don't expect the school, or alternative program, to meet all of her needs. The needs we expect to be met are most of her academic needs. We don't expect them to meet her ethical, moral education needs. We don't expect the school to meet her religious needs as we see them. Even all the social, economic needs... we don't think the school is there to meet them. The needs we do perceive, are the academics of learning... um... real life knowledge... um... we feel have been met here and are being met in a sequential pattern.

Dani Wild's son needed structure and progression beyond what he already had
obtained academically. Dani said,

Well, for my first grader now, the same kind of thing. He needed structure. He was ready... more than ready and willing and able to learn. And being a little older, and um... I felt that was very important. I didn't want him to be in kindergarten [or] first grade doing perhaps what his brothers had done in kindergarten and first grade [general program] which is much slower paced at this point.

That worked out better than I thought. He wishes... he got used to turning in nice work. Worked on his handwriting and it was probably the only thing he needed to work on after a few months. But he started right in with the spelling list and did fine. And went through the spelling test that they do every... whatever those are called. And he also picked up the pace. As the bar was highered a little bit, he was able to go right there. And at first he was behind as they tested him... a couple grade levels. Then steadily he made progress. During each conference I could see exactly... I do like that. I like to see and know where my kids are. Just in case... after speaking... just in case something like that... in third grade where there was the testing had I not looked too hard, or thought too much about it, it would have just probably leveled out. He would have been an okay student and that's fine, but this way I think he's a good student... better, you know.
Validation of Desired Parental Expectations

Parent interview participants identified specific program expectations desired in an educational program. Responses showed 30 of 30 parents (100%) felt their expectations were met (see Table 27).

Validation of parental expectations – general program. Fifteen of the 15 general program parents responded their expectations were met (100%). Two general parents indicated that even though their expectations had been met, they remain curious about the alternative program.

The validation of these expectations was confirmed as demonstrated through the following examples by parents with children attending the general program.

Tammy Claussen desired strong phonics for her daughter. Her choice not to put her in the alternative program did not alleviate this desire. Tammy still seeks a stronger form of this reading skill than is found in the general program. Tammy stated,

Like I said... I’ve kind of gotten past that, too [not being in the alternative program for strong spelling skills]. I have talked to...with the alternative program coordinator about the possibility of first or second grade and there aren’t any positions in first grade open. Well... maybe I won’t worry about it, you know. I’ve gotten resolved to the fact that I guess that she’s gonna learn everything that she’s gonna need. She’s not going to not know how to spell in fourth grade and so in the end, it’s all going to get to her.

Paula Evans felt her twins are receiving an adequate education but would select home schooling as an option if possible to meet her own desires. Paula said,
Table 27

Validation of Meeting Parental Expectations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interview Responses:</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>General Program</th>
<th>Alternative Program</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>30</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Verification:

Parental Expectations Were Met 30 (100.0%) 15 (100.0%) 15 (100.0%)
For a lack of any other choices, I'd say this is where we need to be now.

If my children learned well for me, I would be home schooling, (laugh).

Julie Wilkensen recalled her student teaching experience and compared it to how she felt about her son’s teacher. Julie’s desire for a caring educational environment was verified through her appreciation of his teacher. Julie said,

And it’s funny, too. Because when I student taught, you know, and you’re with the kids for a long time you get to know the parents. And I’m just subbing now, so I don’t have that, you know, relationship with the parents I had before. And (laugh) you know… a lot of the parents would (laugh), you know. hug me, and when I was leaving one woman was in tears…and a couple of them were in tears (laugh) and…”

I’m thinking, ‘My gosh, I’m just a person, you know. I’m not like this goddess (laugh).’ And I think, well... I think that of my child’s teacher. You know... I’m...gosh! I just... Oh, I just love her!

Validation of parental expectations - alternative program. During interviews with 15 alternative program parents, 15 stated that their parental program expectations had been met (100%). Examples of validation of parental expectations are shared through the comments of alternative parents during the interview process.

Dani Wild struggled with her desire to make the program work for her son and the stress of learning the program so he could be successful. Dani’s hard work and ability to seek help satisfied her desires through her son’s successful start in the program. When asked about this successful struggle, Dani said,
Yes. Now my... I felt like last year in first grade when I started out with the phonogram cards and that kind of thing, I felt it was a lot of work for me. I came to the training and whatnot. So anyone I do tell about the program I say, ‘You have to understand that there’s... it’s like your homework too. Because you’re going to sit down with your child and have this time and what-not’. But, on the other hand, and my older kids sometimes have way less homework than this second grader, but I talk it up. Like homework is a good thing, and we might have a bowl of skittles that we munch on when we go though this and that. And we do a couple letters at a time and... and oh, last year there were like four phonograms that my son could just not get. He just kept mixing them up. They were just really hard, and I asked the teacher if she had the name of somebody... if she had any idea of how somehow I could get them through. And she said, ‘Just keep him after school. I’ll work with him.’

So, like two days [a week] she worked with him and I picked him up and we went out for an ice cream, and he ‘had’ it. So, that was really nice, because I was asking her for somebody else, not, definitely not, for her to spend her time helping him with this. So they went over some that were tough and he still has them.

John Hamlet wanted his sons to learn the basics. He wanted them to have a good foundation of skills. John’s desires were met through his parental educational program choice. He said,
Just from the fact that, like they say they are doing things that I know even as an adult now...wow, I gotta think before I try to help them. And just my kids come home [and] they're not... they are learning, they are not getting scared about our environment or ya know, learning about other things I don't want them to learn. They are learning... learning the basics of education and that's what I wanted.

**Information Not Known During the Decision Making Process**

In an attempt to understand what pieces of information, if any, were missing during the decision making process, parent interview participants were asked, “What would have been helpful to know about the programs that was not known at the time of the decision making process?” Sixteen of 30 parents made reference to a lack of comparative information, explaining the specific differences in the two programs with 5 of these 16 suggesting the alternative curriculum was clearly defined but the general curriculum was vague. Five of the 30 parents interviewed thought additional information about the phonics methods used in each program should be more clearly defined. Three of 15 general program parents stated that they did not know prior to their choice of the learning centers used in the general program. Four of the 15 alternative parents felt additional informational sessions would be helpful during the decision making process. Four of the 30 parents interviewed from both programs felt they had adequate information at the time of their decision (see Table 28).

Examples of information desired by parents that would have been helpful during the decision making process are provided through the following interview data.

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Table 28

Additional Program Information Needed During the Decision Making Process

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>General and Alternative Programs</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total Interviews:</td>
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<tr>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Additional Information Needed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No additional Information Needed</td>
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<tr>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Requested Information Unknown but Desired (all suggestions given were recorded):

- Lack of written materials outlining the differences in programs. (16)
- Lack of written materials defining the general program's curricula. (5)
- Lack of information comparing the methods of teaching phonics in both programs. (5)
- Lack of information describing center-based instruction. (3)
- Need of additional information sessions for parents to ask questions. (4)
Jennifer Brown didn't know specific differences in the programs' curricula.

Jennifer explained,

I didn't know anything about… I didn’t even know that there were different curriculums. You know, when we started in the general program. I just said, you know, this school is four doors from my house so that’s where we will go. And it took me a couple years to realize, yes, there are differences. You know, here’s the way you can teach this… this way and that way. And, I really hadn’t even heard of the fact that whole language verses phonics, you know. I was just totally oblivious to it. Of course if this is your first child, you just go in blindly. I always say he was our experimental child because everything we’ve done with him is like, ‘Oh! You mean you have this over here?’ So, I wish I would have known that. I just wish I would have been more informed about the curriculum. And the way that things were taught. And um… and just kind of the background of why this is being used in this setting [alternative program] as opposed to why they [general program] chose their math program, as opposed to something else. You know, where that all came from. Why are they teaching whole language as opposed to phonics? And, I just… it was an awakening when I finally figured it out.

Annie Hawthorne stated that not enough information was provided that explained that choices were offered in the district. Annie said,

I guess we didn’t get to make a choice with our first child...so maybe it
ended up being the right choice. I’ll be honest with you, they very well could have said at registration that there were two programs, so I don’t know... You know, especially when I come from... you come outside. The system... always assuming there’s always one choice, so I can’t say that there was... I mean, there could have been [choices] offered, but maybe not the emphasis to realize that there were two programs.

Linda Eversden spoke of her son that had completed his kindergarten year in the general program and her lack of specifics shared about that curriculum and the way skills were taught. She compared her lack of knowledge in that program with the details shared in the alternative program that were helpful in assisting her child. Linda said,

It all goes back to the [alternative program curriculum] handout...that this is exactly what my son will learn by the end of the year...just the detail.

And I had no idea, I just felt that the kindergarten year was a repeat of the last preschool year. But a little bit more...you know, they learned a letter each day and you know that wasn't 26 weeks by the time you get to "z".

The last quarter, the last quarter of kindergarten was fine, but I wished I would have seen that earlier. They were starting to write sentences, but they would have to guess the sounds as opposed to someone saying, ‘this is the sound, now let’s practice writing and using it.’

Patty Dunn wanted to know more about the differences in the programs. Remembering her own general program education, she wished she had known how the current general program had changed and how it differed from the alternative program.
Patty said,

I guess I would have liked... I guess I should have known how it differed from my experiences. Because the school’s changed so much and we automatically perceive it’s going to be the same way it was for us... and it’s not. Um... the differences...mostly in advances that...that the schools have made... is wonderful. So I wished I’d have known, ‘This is what you can expect from the general program, other than what you probably already know.’ Um... same thing with the alternative program. I think I would have liked to have known... You know. I still to this day don’t know if my perceptions of the program are correct...(laugh) so it would have been... I guess it would have been neat to see a side by side comparison. This is what the general program looks... does vs. in the same circumstance, this is what the alternative does.

... it’d be neat to see it [the curricula] side by side so a parent could look at each and think, you know, I’m checking more that I agree on... on this side than on this side.

Merideth Johnson felt like she did not investigate the general program enough, being so taken with what she had heard about the alternative program. Merideth stated,

You know, when...when your survey came out, I was kind of rather embarrassed. I did not visit a general classroom... other than in the parent meeting. And... I feel very fortunate, because I don’t feel that I did as much research as I should have done for such an important decision for
my son. I really relied on this other parent’s input and then, the reading materials she provided, and then the parent meeting here. I did not, investigate the general program as much as I...um...should have. So I don’t know, I mean, everything that I based my opinion on is what somebody else told me on the general program. And, I don’t talk to a lot of parents about the general program because, parents who know a little bit about the alternative program are very defensive about the general program. Because I think they feel like.... I might be saying that their child might not be getting... and I feel in this district we get an excellent education in the general or alternative programs...and I think it’s wonderful that we’re given these options. So it’s very difficult to talk to another parent about the general program if that’s the route they’ve chosen because you don’t want to step on their toes and say, ‘Well, I’m in a better program.’ My... and I talked to a first grade teacher and I guess this whole language issue was a concern... that the district kind of got into that. So, I understand from her they were bringing more phonics back. So, again, I wasn’t in the classroom. I didn’t look at their curriculum, so, I feel like I didn’t do as I... I feel very lucky that we made as good as a decision... although I probably should have researched the general program a little bit more.

Kelly Stuart didn’t know before her daughter entered if “anybody” could do the alternative program. She wished she would have known more about the success of all
children in the program. Kelly explained,

I suppose the only thing, where my daughter is concerned, is just to know that it’s...that anybody can do it. You know, I feel like if she can do it, anybody can do it. And I don’t mean that in a critical way of her.

...but I think there is a perception there that it’s the smart kids that should be in this program [alternative]. And I believed that initially, but I don’t believe that after you have one of your kids in here. You don’t believe that any more.

Charleen Vanna would have investigated the specific differences in the way phonics were taught in the general program and compared it to the alternative. Charleen said,

Oh, I didn’t know as much about phonics. I thought we were learning phonics in the general program. I think we were learning some phonics. But maybe we could have done something a little bit more at home. More phonics type work. That seemed to be what was the key to unlocking reading for my daughter.

Grace Davidson desired to know more about the long term effects of the alternative program. Grace stated,

Long term benefits. If, if this intense study actually provides these kids with a greater basis for which to be. But, the flip side of that coin... Even if your kid does end up at a faster progression, how is it going to benefit them in the long run?
If they did a study of the kids who do that [the alternative program], where are they at now vs. the general curriculum?

Penny Fraizer spoke of not knowing how the alternative’s phonics program taught students to read. As she discovered the methodology used, she was grateful for her decision to place her son in the general program. Penny said,

I guess something that I found out later that I’m glad I didn’t pick it [the alternative] because of it, is something I heard through something else... is that they use the phonetic sounding out of the letters rather than letters themselves. And I’m kind of glad we dodged that. I’ve seen other children who have gone through and had that kind of learning for reading and I think it puts those children at a degree of disadvantage because they don’t spell the same way as other children. It’s just an opinion though.

Paula Evans spoke of the rigid structure and high expectations of the alternative program. She wished she would have known of this structure before she entered her twins in the program. Knowing this may have prevented her second decision to switch them into the general program. Paula said,

How rigid it was at the kindergarten level for the children just coming in and for children that hadn’t had any preschool training. They [my children] had pre-kindergarten which was just to help them learn their letters and numbers and try to be at the same level because of being pre-mature twins. And, not having yet diagnosing a learning disability but knowing that one existed because of my background...
Alternative's rigid level... and, and the expectations on the kindergartners at such a young age...without, you know, without gradually building it.

**Parental Recommendations to Families Investigating Educational Choice**

In an attempt to gain an understanding of the parental choice process and how that process evolves, the question was asked to interview participants, “What recommendations would you make to families investigating school choice?” Twenty of 30 parents mentioned the need to know your child indicating that it is a personal choice based on each child and family: Fifteen parents of the 30 interviewed mentioned the need to thoroughly research, investigating both programs to make an informed decision. Ten parents of 30 suggested that both programs should be visited and information sessions attended. One parent suggested that summer school may be a way to test the alternative before selection while another parent suggested that the program philosophies are helpful in the decision making process. One alternative parent boldly stated, “If you want the best academically for your child, you will choose the alternative program.” (see Table 29).

**Parental choice recommendations - general program parents.** General Program parents offered many recommendations during the interview process that might be helpful to families making parental choice decisions. Fourteen statements were made recommending families strongly consider the child’s personality and learning needs while only seven references were made to investigative strategies dealing with researching the program choices.
Table 29

**Parental Recommendations to Families Investigating Educational Choice**

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<th>Recommendation</th>
<th>Count</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total Recommendations:</strong></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Personal Decision—Base the choice on the child</strong></td>
<td>20</td>
<td>41.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Research Program Choices Thoroughly</strong></td>
<td>15</td>
<td>31.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Visit Programs and Attend Informational Sessions</strong></td>
<td>10</td>
<td>20.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Other:</strong></td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6.3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- Attend summer school (alternative) to see if it works for your child. (1)
- Review parent philosophies and values to find a match. (1)
- If you want the best program, choose the alternative. (1)
Tammy Claussen suggested to parents some of the investigative strategies that would help discover how a program might be matched to a child's personality and needs. Tammy said,

I guess… sitting in on the classes and maybe doing… visiting each one of the classes, and it’s too late now, almost, the school year is almost over…(laugh) for this year, but sitting in on each one of the programs. Like I said, morning and afternoons, giving each one of them a fair amount of time. And then, yea… looking at your child, I guess… and what… what’s going to fit them the best. I’m not sure I’d recommend one over the other. I don’t think anybody… you know, could do that because like I said I’ve got a niece whose personality… I know the alternative program wouldn’t work for somebody like her. So, I… that has to be personal. But … I think, like I said, just evaluating their child’s personalities and needs.

Grace Davidson suggested to others that choosing a program is a “personal thing”. She said,

Gosh, that’s such a personal thing. Whether they want to do the alternative curriculum or the general curriculum. My main concern was I wanted my son to get a good basis from which to start his education process to enjoy school. I didn’t want him to feel pressured with his learning. I wanted him to feel comfortable with it. If there were problems, you address them as they come, but I don’t know… I’m very
content with the general curriculum. I’ve got no complaints from him.

He’s looking forward to first grade.

Penny Fraizer recommended that parents do a thorough investigation and to really consider the needs of the child. She stated,

I tell people that I’ve been very pleased with general. If people are considering an alternative I tell them to just investigate real thoroughly. Because like I say, there’s a reason that general has been general. You know, if the alternative program was the ‘end all’, then the district would all be doing [only] the alternative and they’re not! So make sure that you do a thorough investigation and match it to what your child needs.

Lorraine Gonzolez would not offer advice as to the program that is the best one, only that it’s a personal choice. She said,

I think it’s a lot of your personal decision and what you think and of course how you...your kids...how they are going to react to the regimen vs. more of the open...well, not open but not quite as st-uctured. And you know, it’s kind of up to them. I wouldn’t tell them to go one way or the other. It’s like friends of mine are happy with it [alternative], and you know, I’m happy with the general program.

Annie Hawthorne also recommended to others that educational choice is a personal decision. She urged parents to think about family. Annie said,

I think you need to look at your own personal opinions. I think both programs are good just depending on your outlook on the education...the
family values, because I think other programs do have different outlooks
on different things. So, you have to. Besides the education part, I think
you have to look at the family.

Julie Wilkensen recommended that parents study their kids. The process should
center on them. Julie said,

I guess I would say you have to study your kids. You have to know how
they learn. How they...are they able to sit there? How do they take in
things...information?

Parental choice recommendations - alternative program parents. Alternative
program parents recommended thoroughly researching the programs before deciding.
Eighteen suggestions came from the 15 parents recommending this step to other families,
while only six suggestions centered on matching the program to the student’s needs or
personality. Alternative parents shared some comments during the interview process.

Jennifer Brown loves the alternative program. She has not been shy in letting
others know that the alternative program is one to investigate. Jennifer said,

Well, I’ve been making recommendations ever since we started here. But
you know, people always ask me especially since I live four doors from
this other school, ‘Why are you driving your children five miles from your
door?’ And I just say, ‘You have to research everything because in this
district there are choices.’ Most people don’t even know that they have
these choices so whenever anybody asks me, I say, ‘You know, you’ve got
the alternative program. You’ve got other choices. You’ve gotta look at
the general program. You gotta just dig into the curriculum.' And these people, they’re, you know, intelligent people. They want what’s best for their kids. And most of the time they say, ‘Oh yeah. Okay, I’m gonna look into that,’ you know, and that type of thing. I don’t really ever say ones better than the other...that type of thing, because you know, that’s not fair at all. We have... I have many friends who are very successful in the other programs, so you know, I don’t want to do anything that way. But my main recommendation is to say, ‘Here is what you have. Look into all of it because you’ve got a lot of choices for your child and that’s basically it.’

Rory Howard recommends that parents take the time to research the options and match them to educational desires. Rory said,

I’d encourage parents to take the time to do the research of what the school...not only what they are teaching, but how they are teaching it, and see if that matches with your student’s and your family’s values and their needs. Ah, it’s too easy to put that off just because you live in a certain neighborhood, you send them to their neighborhood school and assume that the needs are a good match...ah, the teaching style. And I think it’s important for the child’s well being and their development that it’s a good match. So, I would encourage them to not just accept where they live and the reputation of the school, but to do the research and check it out for themselves.
David Planteen urged parents seeking an educational placement for their child to visit and see what the programs offer. David stated,

I would always recommend that they would sit through different classroom environments. Knowing going in that there's five to six different ways that people learn, I wouldn't tell somebody that this is the only way and the best way because... I... In the general program, I've seen some people excel and do quite well. So I wouldn't... I'm not an absolutist on this... that this is the only way to go about it. But... do your homework and sit in a classroom and see what the teachers are about and what the classrooms are about.

Mandy Stephenson recommended that parents understand the specifics needed to be successful in a program. Mandy said,

I would just say if you have a child that has a good attention span, that has good motor skills, that is able to sit and listen to you read, has a desire to pick up books... they would probably.... and a child that does well with structure... they would probably be a good candidate for the program.

And I don't think this program is for everyone... I don't.

Kelly Stuart tries to convince her friends to enroll their children in the alternative program. She talks to them about the academic strengths of the program. She states,

I can't recommend this program highly enough. I am constantly trying to convince my friends to put their kids in the program. Matter of fact, I finally convinced one of my friends to pull her child out of ... part way
through the quarter, to pull her kid out of the general school and put him into the alternative... and he loved it. I just... I feel like it is a program... I feel like it’s the best of both worlds. It’s the structure and then maybe the purity of the academics is what I’m seeing. I keep using the word academics and what I’m not wanting to say is the high level in terms of the greater degree of academics... but the purity of the academics. The reading and the science. The unit studies that they do are so phenomenal. The kids love those. And they’re just... it’s just so great!

Sally Sanders recommended that before a decision is made, parents go and visit the programs. She also advised that parents need to “be open” when researching programs for their child’s educational placement. Sally said,

I highly recommend them to come and view the class... I say go to the alternative kindergarten class. I say call the school and ask if you can go and sit. And you go to that classroom and you go to the general program. And sure, there are kids that probably do flourish the best in the general rather than the alternative... maybe. You know, it’s like I can’t fathom that... I really can’t... I truly can’t... because it [the alternative] hits on all those senses. You know I’m thinking of the phonograms and learning all of that. And so I just always encourage, ‘You should go,’ and you know, ‘Go to the meeting but go and view the classroom.’ I’ve asked the kindergarten teacher about that years ago, and she’s said, ‘Oh, yeah. the door is open. You just have to call.’ And so, that’s where I’ve always
encouraged… And I always say, I mean I said it yesterday, and the gal has… she’s a speech pathologist over at another elementary and her daughter’s 1 year old… and I said, ‘You need to check into the alternative program for your daughter in a couple of years.’ You need to keep your ears open. And then I also say, ‘You need to be open. You need to be open to all of this.’

Dani Wild reminds parents that they have educational choices and to “look around”. Dani said.

I encourage women that I run into that talk about that, ‘Go ahead and look into it. It may not be for your child; it may.’ And just tell them the little things that I had found out and where I had come from. I don’t, um… there’s a bias thing there between the general and alternative programs and it’s still there a little bit so you have to be careful. I don’t want to ever sound like I’m selling it to someone. I just say, ‘yes it’s a choice. Look into it if you think it might be something for you, but it has to be the right time, the right child… blah, blah, blah. And then you’ll know.’ And usually when people are complaining about the school they’re at, you know, that it might… it feels better to look around. You have choices. You’re not stuck anywhere at all.

Summary of Findings

Qualitative studies center on participants’ perceptions, experiences and the way they make sense of their lives. They are based on a variety of background experiences
that are unique to the individual (Fraenkel & Wallen, 1990; Locke, et. al., 1987; Merriam, 1988). The parents who responded to the written survey and participated in the interview sessions of this study were eager to share information regarding the parental choice process. Each of the interview participants provided important details regarding the investigative, decision making and validation processes. These findings provide a basis for the conclusions found in Chapter 5 and in turn, a greater understanding of the process of school choice.
Chapter 5

Discussion

"Parental decision making is more complex than a singular, individual rational act" (Smrekar & Goldring, 1999, p. 27). When parents are given a choice of two education programs, the process of choosing is also complex. Chapter 5 reviews the purpose, methodology, and results of this study. Interpretation of the results and discussion of their implications for research and practice are the main focus.

Problem Statement

The purpose of this study was to explore parental choice. The overall question guiding the study was: What is the process of school choice when two programs are offered? Three sub questions were used to provide focus while gathering data: (1) How are parents informed of educational program choices? (2) What is the process of choosing an educational program? (3) What experiences validate the parental choice? These questions guided the process in order to gain understanding of the complex process of parental school choice.

Methodology Review

Qualitative Research

This study investigated the process of parental school choice by utilizing a qualitative case study research approach. Qualitative research was selected because it focused on the participants’ perceptions, experiences and the way they make sense of their lives (Fraenkel & Wallen, 1990; Locke, et.al., 1987; Merriam, 1988). This research process permitted participants’ educational preferences and experiences to surface while
studying the process of parental choice.

**Data Collection**

One hundred ninety-one written surveys were sent to gather open-ended responses regarding the process of school choice. One hundred fifty-four were completed and returned (80.6%).

Individual interviews were held with 30 parents of kindergarten, first, and second grade students enrolled in one of two programs offered at the study site. Fifteen parents interviewed had enrolled their child in the general education program, and 15 of the parents interviewed had enrolled their child in the alternative, mini-magnet program. Interviews were audiotaped, transcribed and reviewed by participants for accuracy. Two participants asked that additional comments be added following their transcript review. Abbreviated responses were recorded in field notes along with observational comments.

**Data Analysis**

A constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) including category coding, comparison, and data reduction methods of data analysis helped to gain an understanding of the choice process.

**Ethical Considerations**

Interview participants were informed of the purpose of the study and procedures of confidentiality. An agreement to participate was secured. Participant anonymity was upheld throughout the data gathering process.

Permission to conduct this research was obtained from the school district and from the Institutional Review Board (see Appendix C).
Research audiotapes, transcriptions, field notes and analysis discovery sheets were secured and provided for audit. Dr. Mary Smith reviewed and verified a valid methodology of data collection and analysis. An audit report analysis is included in Appendix D.

Validation

Data were validated through use of multiple methods of data collection, an audit trail, a research team comprised of university faculty and an external auditor, and member checks by interview participants.

Results Summary

This narrative report of findings provides descriptions of participants' perceptions and experiences as well as my own perceptions developed through review, analysis, and reflection of the data. Results will provide additional information to previous studies that have researched issues of school and parental choice (Archbald, 1988; Coons & Sugarman, 1978; Smrekar & Goldring, 1999; Snow, 1996). It will assist educators to improve effective school practice through a greater understanding of parental desires in educational programming. This study will be helpful in determining future actions concerning public school choice.

Discussion of Findings

Five stages were distinctly noted in the process of parental school choice: 1) hearing of the choices and subsequent investigation, 2) identifying desired program specifics, 3) recalling past educational experiences, 4) choosing a program, and 5) verifying the parental choice.
Program Introduction and Investigation

The first sub-question of this study was: How are parents informed of educational program choices? Results showed that program introduction was most often completed through word of mouth strategies. Investigation of the programs was completed most often through visitation of the programs.

Program Introduction

Smrekar and Goldring’s study (1999) stated that the primary source of information, informing parents of educational choices available, occurred through word of mouth. Their findings were confirmed by 50% of the parents surveyed in this study that stated they first heard of their educational choices from friends, neighbors, and others through word of mouth.

Other parents were introduced to the choices available through the more formalized sources that included informational sessions (17.5%) and written materials (11.0%). Thirteen percent of the parents suggested prior knowledge of the district’s alternative programs, not indicating a primary source.

A few of the parents (8.5%) reported having no knowledge of the educational alternative program offered at the site of this study, only an awareness of the district’s general program. These parents indicated first learning of the program as they received student registration packets that contained forms for enrolling their child in the district’s general program and a district brochure detailing the general program and briefly mentioning the district’s alternative programs. General program parent, Annie Hawthorne, provided a summary of this lack of knowledge,
I guess we didn’t get to make a choice with our first child [enrolled while living in a district with only one educational choice], so maybe it ended up being the right choice. I’ll be honest with you; they very well could have said at registration that there were two programs, so I don’t know, you know, especially when you come from...from outside the system. [You] always assume there’s always one choice, so I can’t say that there was...I mean, there could have been offered, but maybe not the emphasis to realize that there was two programs.

**Program Investigation**

Findings revealed that parents seeking an alternative program investigated programs to a greater extent (79.3%) than those who chose the general program (20.7%). Many survey respondents who enrolled their children in the general program did not investigate (84.2%). A general assumption evident through the interviews conducted with the general program parents indicated knowledge that the district as a whole was recognized as offering a quality educational program; there was no perceived need to investigate alternative programs.

Of those parents who did investigate, the primary method of investigation was through visitation of the program including conversations with program personnel.

Parents who chose to investigate and parents who did not choose to investigate the programs available were consistent in describing the characteristics of both programs in terms of learning environment, academic curriculum and expectations, classroom structure and teaching styles. This indicated a basic understanding of program
similarities and differences. I can vouch that their descriptions were depicted accurately. The commonality of their descriptions provides validation that the amount of investigation does not automatically promote a greater understanding of programs offered, but provides reassurance to the choice process.

**Process of Choosing**

The second sub-question was: What is the process of choosing an educational program? The study showed that parents evaluated program specifics as influenced by personal desires, past educational experiences and sometimes in relationship to family values and the needs of the child.

**Identification of Desired Program Specifics**

Classroom environment, academic rigor and teaching style, school and family values, and student learning needs were found to be important factors to parents seeking an appropriate educational program.

**Classroom environment.** General program parents identified two program components desired for their children. Parents sought a classroom structure that was relaxed with opportunities for hands-on learning. They also desired an educational program that would provide a well-rounded education. Julie Wilkensen described these results through her description of the overall desires of the general program parents when she stated,

I feel that the general program sets an open and welcoming feel to the introduction of school. I feel that learning should be fun as well, and the general program seems to appeal to more of the senses and M.I.’s
I just knew I wanted some phonics. I knew I wanted some holistic reading in there. I knew I wanted hands-on, play time, music, P.E. I just wanted the whole broad spectrum of it. I just feel like it just...you know, give him a little taste of everything and then he can draw [from it] and tell me what he likes and then we can go upon that, (pause) too. You know, his interests, his needs, his likes, his dislikes.

The idea of a well rounded education that included supporting the academic, social, physical, and emotional needs of children was strongly desired by those parents choosing the general program. Statements prevalent throughout the study by general program parents expressed their concern with the structure of the alternative program. These statements were reflective of their desire to have their children enjoy school.

Grace Davidson explained this concept during her interview. Grace said,

...my opinion was... that I wanted to introduce my son to a very… Oh, I didn’t want to pound school into him. I wanted him to enjoy it. To get accustomed to it. To start, I guess… start off on an average pace verses trying to have him accelerated. And I wanted him to like school. (Laughs.) Point blank, that was my first trial, was to like school and we would worry about where you’re at and your progress as it goes along.

I want him to get a good basis for which to start an educational process. I didn’t think he had to exceed in the expectations. I didn’t feel it was necessary for him to be reading at a second or third grade level in
kindergarten. I want him to be happy with school. I want him to want to
go to school and to want to go back. Let’s face it, as you go into high
school everyone hates school anyways.

Well, for one thing, I wanted him to be in a more relaxed
atmosphere than a hard-core study program and [one] that [the] long-term
benefits didn’t seem to weigh-out. I didn’t want him to have a negative
opinion of school this early on and then end up being at the same
progressive level as the rest of the kids.

Grace’s description accurately represents similar statements made through survey
responses and interviews of those parents who chose the general program.

Academic Rigor and Teaching Style. Smrekar and Goldring’s study (1999)
identified the areas of academic rigor and teaching style as the main two reasons why
parents choose alternative programs. This study supported their finding. Parents who
chose the alternative program identified strong academics, supported by a highly
structured teaching style, as the top priority desired in their school of choice. Kelly
Stuart and David Planteen supported their alternative program choice through the
following statements. Kelly stated,

We were drawn to the academic challenge and purity, meaning its
traditional [back to basics] approach, of the alternative curriculum. We
very much liked the structure the alternative program offered and
academically we felt it drew...pressed our kids to a higher level of
learning.
David said,

Probably the number one thing in my mind was getting the kids to read just as fast as possible. I think if there’s anything that they’re going to get out of the school systems, being able to be good readers is what’s going to carry them through life... Number one in my mind!

My daughter who is now in first grade is reading easily at a fifth or sixth grade level. And the process of watching it happen where every word that she saw on a page, she broke down phonetically and went through the whole series of... if one particular phonogram had two sounds, she’d use both sounds... if it had four sounds, she’d use all four sounds until she’d unlock that word. That was magical to watch her do that. And she can read now with vocal inflections and what’s she’s reading... it blows me away.

Mandy Stephenson summarized the academic rigor expectation found to be a common program desire of alternative parents by stating,

Go on the premise that children will not disappoint those who have expectations reasonably set for them. Expect great things from students and you will get great things from them.

Parents who chose the alternative program depicted the general program as one that did not promote the high academic standards desired. Alternative parent Jan Amish summarized this attitude when she stated,

Okay, in my big opinion, from my perspective, I’ll make that clear, it
seemed to me that the general program would have spent too much time on things I felt my son had already mastered...specifically socialization and following instructions.

And I felt my son had learned those things by around 3 or 4 years old and I didn’t want him to spend a whole year in kindergarten learning to...that the teacher was the boss. (Laughs) I know that sounds really opinionated and almost snobbish, but I... and I...probably that’s not what the general program teaches, but that’s just the mindset or the picture I got of the general classroom. And because all my neighbors talked about, ‘Oh, kindergarten is just suppose to be fun. They don’t have to learn anything.’ And that motivated me that I wanted my child to learn something.

School and Family Values

An interesting comparison of the Smrekar and Goldring (1999) study and the findings of this study were the references made to school and family values. This characteristic ranked seventh of 21 as a significant factor for parents seeking an alternative program in the Smrekar and Goldring study. Although not ranked as a part of this study, this characteristic was referenced during the interview process by 6 of the 15 alternative parents as an influential factor in the decision making process. An example of this factor was identified in a statement made by alternative parent, Rory Howard. Rory stated,

I think some of the personal issues would be the religious background that
we have and the religious lifestyle. And that dictates, we feel, an obligation to make sure our children are learning morals and ethics. We don’t necessarily agree that those should be passed on to other people. But that needs to be part of their learning, their upbringing.

**Different Program Selection Based on Similar Student Needs**

It was interesting to find that through the choice program, parents selected opposite programs while seeking similar educational need for their child. An example of this phenomenon was identified by Charleen Vanna and Patty Dunn. Both have daughters with verified learning disabilities but selected different programs. Another example was confirmed by Penny Fraizer and David Planteen who both have children considered to be high ability learners. Yet, Penny and David specifically selected different programs because of the opportunities for advanced learning found within each program. This phenomenon of choosing different programs although similar student needs are evident, indicates the parental placement decision is complex. Placement is not solely based on the needs of the child, but also relies on parental perception of how to best meet those needs.

**Influence of Past Educational Experiences**

Lee, et.al., (1994) discovered that opinions about choice are driven by negative views of local schools. Smrekar and Goldring (1999) found that those parents most dissatisfied with community schools are most likely to choose magnet schools. Results of this study confirm their previous research. Each of the 30 interview participants shared at least one educational experience of their own or of someone influential to them,
that seemed to affect the educational decision making process.

Interestingly, nine parents of alternative program children recalled background experiences considered to be non-desirable and sought a change for their child, supporting the studies of Lee, et.al., (1994) and Smrekar and Goldring (1999).

When interviewed, nine of the 15 general program parents shared positive educational experiences and expressed the desire to extend similar experiences to their child. Five of the general program parents who recalled a non-desirable educational experience and who sought a change for their child, did so based on memories of experiencing a rigid classroom structure, lacking opportunities to express creativity.

These results verify that the background experiences of parents or persons influential to them, have a significant impact on the educational program characteristics desired for their child. It can be summarized that positive educational experiences result in the desire for a similar program design while negative educational experiences result in the desire for a change in program design.

Choosing a Program

Shared Process

Archbald (1988) and Coons and Sugarman (1978) identified the process of parental choice as being a shared process rather than an individual one. This fact was confirmed in this study. Interview participants identified self and spouse as the primary decision-makers although they relied on input from others (relatives, educational personnel, friends, neighbors, and God) to help guide them in their final decision.
Rationale for Choice

Of survey respondents who chose the alternative program, parents based their final placement decision on what they perceived to be the strongest academic program and the more structured learning environment. They identified the rigorous curriculum and structured setting as matching their parental desires to set high expectations for their child's educational experience.

Rationale for choosing the general program was based on meeting the social and personality needs of the child and providing a caring, hands-on learning environment that would stimulate a desire to learn.

Although none of the parental rationale responses represents a majority of the respondents, the findings suggest that parents who chose the alternative program did so using a parental preference of securing a strong academic foundation. General parents, on the other hand, tended to choose a program based on the social/emotional needs of the child. Although the evidence is not conclusive, it raises an interesting question. Do alternative parents select a program based on their parental desires without considering the specific learning needs of the child?

A comment made by alternative program parent, Merideth Johnson, is an example of this concept. Merideth stated,

I've heard people say, especially when people maybe were more critical of the [alternative] program, that, you know, this program might be right for some personalities vs. another. My sister has mentioned that several times, I think wanting me to give thought to our children and their
personalities and what would work. And frankly, we have not given that any thought. I think our feelings are that this program would be a good program for [our children]...unless we had a child with special needs.

A second question might also be asked: Do general program parents disregard the academic importance while trying to provide enjoyable educational experiences?

Tammy Claussen, general program parent, suggested that though academics are very important, placement decisions are sometimes based more on the social and emotional. Tammy stated,

...in the end [decision making process], it was really thinking of her and not so much of what she's going to learn in a year, but how much she's going to enjoy the year.

Penny Fraizer, general program parent, provided additional thought regarding this finding as she summarized her feelings by stating,

...everybody thinks that his child is absolutely number one and that is certainly true for me. I wanted a place where he would fit in. I wanted a place where he could learn. I wanted the very best for him. And so, in thinking that, I guess I wanted a good teacher. I wanted a good classroom, um... I wanted books on the library shelves. I wanted computers in the room. Um...I guess my...I was looking for somebody that had a plan. I mean, I think that there are many different styles of teaching and my understanding is that children can do well in probably four out of five. I mean maybe one is not good for them, but the other four are just fine. So,
it wasn’t a matter of one good-one bad, but do they have a plan.

**Concerns During Placement Decision**

Of the interview participants who chose the general program, nine of 15 stated they held concerns during the final act of deciding the educational placement for their child while each of the 15 parents who chose the alternative program for their child, expressed that they held at least one concern. The strong evidence of concerns indicates that both the general and alternative program parents experienced uncertainty during this critical decision making stage.

When reviewing the process of educational choice and the concerns expressed by parents during the decision making process, the concept of rational choice must be considered. Rational choice theory as summarized by Green and Shapiro (1994) states that when making a decision the decision makers continually examine their surroundings for useful information or facts. They decide whether to gather more information or discontinue their search. Based on the information they have gathered, they rationally judge that information and in turn, act on it. This is assuming that even though the information may be imperfect, the decision maker still acts rationally when making the decision based on available information.

The process of decision-making is complex (Smrekar & Goldring, 1999). The rational accounts of information gathering, decision making, and then completing the action or choice only begins to define this complex behavior. As people begin to sort through the information gathered and try to make sense of what they have discovered, they are mentally set to make a rational choice. However, as seen through this study,
concerns in the final stages of decision-making were still present, making the final parental program choice a decision with uncertainties. Results of this study suggest that given the number of parents indicating concerns (general, 60.0%; alternative, 100%) their decisions may have been non-rational responses. Humanistic or emotional factors may have filtered the rational decision making process.

Parental Validation of Choice

The third sub-question was: What experiences validate the parental choice? The educational program choices made by parents were validated both in terms of parental expectations and in the parental perception that the needs of their child were met.

Validation of Parental Expectations

Raywid (1989) found that with choice comes a relatively high perception of satisfaction. This was evident in this study. When asked if parental expectations were met, each of the 15 parents interviewed who chose the general program agreed that their expectations were met, as did each of the 15 parents who chose the alternative program.

Validation of Meeting the Child’s Needs

Validation that the needs of the child were met through the parental placement decision was confirmed by each of the 15 general program parents. This desire to match the child’s learning and environmental needs was identified as one of the program specifics desired by the general program parents prior to the final placement decision.

Validation of program choice by each of the 15 alternative program parents interviewed was based on the successful academic progress of the child. This validation confirmed the pre-placement desire by alternative parents to have their child enter a
program that supported a strong academic curriculum, reflecting the idea that high expectations produce greater academic success.

Additional Findings

Three additional findings emerged during this research study: (1) The issue of competition among parents of the two programs and the perception of competition among the teaching staff of the programs perceived by some parents, (2) A strong sense of parental satisfaction with their program choice, and (3) The agreement of parents of both programs that educational choice is a "personal choice".

Competition

An indication of competition among parents from the different programs was an unanticipated finding. References made to the social issue of parents hosting a superior attitude and bragging about the alternative program were expressed as a negative influence by general program parents. These parental perceptions may create an invisible barrier that could be potentially damaging to the climate of the building. Merideth Johnson, alternative parent, explained this barrier.

I don't talk to a lot of parents about the general program because, parents who know a little bit about the alternative program are very defensive about the general program. Because I think they feel like.... I might be saying that their child might not be getting... and I feel in this district we get an excellent education in the general or alternative programs...and I think it's wonderful that we're given these options. So it's very difficult to talk to another parent about the general program if that's the route
they’ve chosen because you don’t want to step on their toes and say, ‘Well, I’m in a better program.’

Sara Schneider, general program parent, also confirmed this barrier through her description of the problem.

I unfortunately sometimes feel like the individuals with children in the alternative program think they are getting a better education than the general program students and therefore, their children are better. I believe there are just two styles of learning, one program fitting better for one child and one program a better fit for the other. I feel that if a child puts effort into learning, he will learn in any environment that challenges them.

Further analysis identified that competition exists not only within parental circles, but is also perceived by parents to be found among the teachers of the two programs. Lorainne Gonzolez and Jan Walker, general program parents, both spoke of this perception. Lorainne stated,

When we went to Kindergarten Round-up, both my husband and I got the feeling of competition between the teachers (general and alternative). And the alternative teachers made you feel that their program was “superior”. We did not care for that feeling.

Jan spoke of the competition as healthy, saying,

I do think it’s very good to have both programs. Even good teachers need healthy competition to keep skills and creativity sharp. I hope both [programs] are always available.
The competition factor that surfaced in this study is not recognized as a theme prevalent to the parental choice decision making process, but rather as a point of understanding and consideration when studying schools of choice.

Interestingly, in my role as building administrator, I strive to serve both program populations without bias. Until conducting this survey, my selective perception had viewed this sense of “competition” as “pride in program” not recognizing it as a potential negative influence.

Satisfaction of Choice

Throughout the study, I was impressed by the number of references made to parental satisfaction with their child’s educational program. Parents expressed genuine appreciation for the teachers, classroom experiences, child’s love of school, and academic progress. Parents volunteered comments in reference to the fact that they would “not switch” to another program, that there was “nothing” that made them wonder if they had made the right choice offering, and that they “knew they had made the right choice.” This affirmation of choice also verified Raywid’s study (1989) that with choice comes a relatively high perception of satisfaction.

Personal Issue of Choice

In response to the interview question asking for recommendations that might be shared with other parents reviewing the option of parental choice, parents of both programs were unified in suggesting that educational choice is a “personal choice”. Encouragement to “investigate thoroughly”, “keep an open mind”, and “consider the child’s personality and needs” were all recommendations. It was surprising to find that
parents would hesitate to “tell” someone what program to choose, but would “encourage”
them to understand that they have educational choices and then base their choice on
personal issues.

Recommendations for Practice

Administrators and school district officials should consider the following
recommendations as they work to improve schools and offer diverse opportunities for
their patrons.

Offer Educational Choices to Parents

The fact that parents can make a choice seems to be as important as the choice
made. Permitting parents to choose a program for their child creates a sense of parental
satisfaction. Educational institutions desiring to promote positive experiences for parents
and diverse educational opportunities for students should provide alternative
programming options. Mrs. Evans perhaps stated this concept best when she said.
“We’re glad for the choice. Parents need choices.”

Provide Opportunities for Pre-Enrollment Communication

When offered a choice, parents choose educational programs for many reasons.
Educators must open the lines of communication to foster a greater understanding of
what these reasons are and how schools might meet the needs of students and the
expectations of parents. Following investigation of the two programs at my school,
parents will often ask my opinion. Parents are anxious to share information regarding
their child’s perceived learning style, social needs, or their parental desires for the child’s
academic growth. Sharing more information in a variety of formats could serve to help
match child to program and in turn promote positive parental placement decisions.

**Recommendations for Research**

This study verified that parental choice is important. Additional research would help support and expand the findings discovered. It is suggested that the following research may be helpful to study the issue of parental decision making in educational choice:

1. A longitudinal study tracking the movement of students in and out of the two programs would determine continuing verification issues of parental placement decisions.

2. This study should be replicated in communities offering two magnet schools at one site to see if similar findings surface.

3. Additional research to investigate the impact of competition when more than one educational choice is offered and its effect on parental choice should be explored.

4. Research comparing school satisfaction perceptions in schools that have choice to those without school choice would extend this study’s findings.

5. A study researching the success of students who were placed in a choice program for academic reasons compared to those placed for social reasons would add to this educational research.

6. Research to study if the amount of investigation by parents affects the amount of parental satisfaction or the amount of student success should be explored.
Summary

Though not necessarily generalizable to all sites having two educational programs of choice, this study generated emerging themes. The concept of parental choice is indeed complex as stated by Smrekar and Goldring (1999). Parents may choose opposite schools to meet the same need. The fact that parents can make a choice seems to be as important as the choice made. Parents who review options available to them through thorough investigative strategies as well as parents who choose not to investigate tend to be satisfied with their educational choice. The background experiences of parents and others close to them, whether positive or of negative concern, is a strong motivating factor in the educational program selected for their child. Some evidence exists that parents seeking programs other than general educational programs seek to consider their parental needs more than the social, emotional and learning style needs of their child.

Although the process of parental choice may have similar strands among parents, the rationale in choosing a program differs significantly. Perhaps Raywid (1989) stated it best when she provided the following three conclusions:

1. There are many viable and desirable ways to educate children;
2. There is no one best program that can respond to the diverse educational preferences found in a pluralistic, democratic society; and
3. It is desirable to offer diversity in school programs to meet family value patterns and orientations (p.13).
References


*Educational Considerations.* pp. 3-11.


Office.


Pierce vs. Society of Sisters, Supreme Court Decision (1925).


Appendix A
## Matrix of Data Collection

### WHAT IS THE PROCESS OF PARENTAL CHOICE WHEN TWO EDUCATIONAL PROGRAMS ARE OFFERED?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What do I need to know?</th>
<th>Why do I need to know?</th>
<th>How will the information be gathered?</th>
<th>What are the indicators?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sub-Questions</td>
<td>Rationale</td>
<td>Data Collection Method</td>
<td>Indicators</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A. How are parents informed of educational program choices?</td>
<td>Seek to assess the extent of program investigation.</td>
<td>Survey</td>
<td>Response to question S1: How did you learn of the two programs (general and alternative) that are offered at this elementary?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Interview</td>
<td>Response to question A1: How did you first learn of the choices available?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Survey</td>
<td>Response to question S2: Did you investigate both programs? If so, how?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Interview</td>
<td>Response to question A2: What did you do to investigate both choices?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Interview</td>
<td>Response to question A3: How were your initial perceptions changed after investigating both programs?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Interview</td>
<td>Response to question A4: What did you identify as the main differences between the two programs?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Interview Response to Question A5:

What part of your investigation was most helpful?

Seek to discover if the choice was purposeful.

### Interview Response to Question A6:

What specifics were you looking for in an educational program?

### Interview Response to Question A7:

Briefly describe both programs of choice, as you perceive them?

---

### B. What is the process of choosing an educational program?

Seek to assess experiences that play a role in the choice process.

### Interview Response to Question B1:

Why did you decide to enroll your child in his/her current program?

### Interview Response to Question B2:

What personal experiences played a part in the type of program you were seeking for your child?

### Interview Response to Question B3:

What past educational experiences of family members were considered in making this decision?

### Interview Response to Question B4:

How did family members or friends play a role in the decision making process?

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Interview</strong></th>
<th><strong>Response to question B5:</strong> Who, if anyone, was especially instrumental in helping you make the decision?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Seek to assess considerations made in selecting a program.</td>
<td><strong>Survey</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Interview</strong></td>
<td><strong>Response to question B6:</strong> What consideration was given to matching your child's learning needs to the program?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seek to examine parental concerns while choosing a program.</td>
<td><strong>Interview</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>C. What experiences validate the parental choice?</strong></th>
<th><strong>Seek to assess the positive experiences linked to the decision.</strong></th>
<th><strong>Survey</strong></th>
<th><strong>Response to question S4:</strong> Now that your child has been enrolled in his/her current program, what, if anything, makes you realize that you made the right decision?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Interview</strong></td>
<td><strong>Response to question C1:</strong> What has occurred this school year that validates your choice?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Seek to assess the negative experiences linked to the decision.</strong></td>
<td><strong>Survey</strong></td>
<td><strong>Response to question S5:</strong> What, if anything, makes you wonder if you made the right decision?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question C2:</td>
<td>Response to question C2: What has occurred this school year that makes you question your choice?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>-------------</td>
<td>--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interview</td>
<td>Seek to assess parental perception of their educational program choice.</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Interview</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Response to question C3: How has the program met the needs of your child?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Interview</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Response to question C4: How has the program met your expectations or not met your expectations?</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Interview</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Response to question C5: What do you know now about the program that would have been helpful to know before you made your choice?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Interview</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Response to question C6: What, if anything, would have been helpful to know about the other program?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Interview</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Response to question C7: What recommendations would you make to other families investigating school choice?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Parental Choice Survey

Name of parent/guardian completing this survey ____________________________

Daytime phone ____________________________

Address ____________________________

Housing subdivision ____________________________

PART I – Survey Questions

Please answer the following questions:

1. How did you learn of the two programs (traditional and core) that are offered at Cather Elementary?

2. How did you investigate both programs to choose the right one for your child?

3. What factors contributed to your decision to enroll your child in his/her current program?
4. Now that your child has been enrolled in his/her current program, what, if anything, makes you realize that you made the right decision?

5. What, if anything, makes you wonder if you made the right decision?

PART II - Parental Choice
Please think back when you first enrolled your child in this district's public school system and select the one description that best describes your choice.

_____ I purposefully chose the district's general education program rather than the alternative education program.

_____ I purposefully chose the alternative education program rather than the district's general education program.

_____ I did not know of these choices at the time of my child's enrollment.

_____ I did not purposefully select my child's program.

PART III - Consent to Participate
As further information is needed for this research study, volunteers will be needed to participate in interviews. Those selected will be asked to participate in an interview lasting approximately one hour in length held at Cather Elementary School. Not all who volunteer will be selected, but your willingness to participate is very much appreciated. All information from the interviews and from this survey will be held confidential. Participants will be asked to verify information gathered during the interview process.

Please sign below if you would be willing to participate if selected for the interview process:

Consent to volunteer: ________________________________

Thank you for completing and returning this survey.
Appendix C
March 30, 2001

Nila Nielsen
3823 So. 163 Circle
Omaha, NE 68130

Dear Mrs. Nielsen,

This letter is in response to your request to carry out research in the Millard Public Schools. The district is granting you approval to conduct your survey and interviews at Cather Elementary School. Permission has been granted to collect data for the spring 2001 semester only. Please remember to submit the results of the study to this office, once the project has concluded.

Sincerely,

John Crawford Ph.D.
Planning & Evaluation
April 12, 2001

Nila Nielsen
3823 So 163rd Circle
Omaha, NE 68130

IRB#: 166-01-EX

TITLE OF PROTOCOL: Parental Choice: Choosing a Traditional Elementary Program or a District Magnet Program

Dear Ms Nielsen:

The IRB has reviewed your Exemption Form for the above-titled research project. According to the information provided, this project is exempt under 45 CFR 46.101b. category 2. You are therefore authorized to begin the research.

It is understood this project will be conducted in full accordance with all applicable sections of the IRB Guidelines. It is also understood that the IRB will be immediately notified of any proposed changes that may affect the exempt status of your research project.

Please be advised that the IRB has a maximum protocol approval period of three years from the original date of approval and release. If this study continues beyond the three year approval period, the project must be resubmitted in order to maintain an active approval status.

Sincerely,

Ernest D. Prentice, Ph.D.
Co-Chair, IRB

gdk
Appendix D
Letter of Attestation for Research Done by Nila J. Nielsen

Nila Nielsen requested that I conduct an educational audit of her qualitative dissertation entitled: The process of parental choice in choosing a general elementary program or a district magnet program. The audit began in February, 2002, with initial review of materials, and was concluded in February, 2002. The purpose of the audit was to ascertain the extent to which the results of the study are trustworthy.

The researcher maintained an exemplary audit trail, organizing the materials in a detailed and clear manner. The auditor was provided with a final draft copy of the dissertation, a list of participants with proof of informed consent, 30 audio tapes, transcriptions of all the tapes, all field notes, and an audit notebook outlining the steps taken by the researcher. Extensive evidence for the categorization and reduction of data was given in the form of a chart, topical tally sheets, and a matrix of rationale. Materials were color coded and cross-referenced for ease of review and categorization.

The task of the auditor was to determine whether it was possible to follow the researcher's trail from conception, through implementation, to conclusions; and whether those conclusions were warranted by that process.

Initial credibility was established by the adequacy of the study design. It was well done and consistent.

Reliability was established by determining that confirmable strategies were used such that the coding was grounded in the data, the patterns were grounded in the coding, and that the themes were grounded in the patterns. This confirms that the conclusions bear close relationship to the data; and establish design and procedural evidence of credibility.

I conclude that the focus of the study and the research methods described in the dissertation are definitely in evidence through the analysis of the data provided. Trustworthiness of the study can be established; findings are grounded in the extensive and triangulated data.

Auditor:
Mary K. Smith, Ed.D.
Westside Community Schools

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