How Institutional Context Shapes the Accounts of School Choice and Boundary-Making Among Middle Class Parents in an Urban School District

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Abstract

This paper explores how urban middle-class parents with children at the elementary school level construct accounts about school choice in comparison to parents with children at the middle and high school levels. Previous studies have largely focused on the former. Data for this study come from in-depth interviews with 44 parents who enrolled their children in an urban school district. Findings suggest that parents' choices and narratives concerning schools are affected by the school district's institutional context. Parents with children at the elementary school level largely avoided their neighborhood-designated schools and secured spots in the city's more desirable magnet schools. The group distinctions created at this level were "bad schools" and "bad parents" versus "good schools" and "good parents." Parents with children in the middle and high school years similarly avoided the district's general programs and secured the desirable slots in those schools' academically segregated honors, AP, and IB programs. Distinctions created here were between "good students" and "bad students" and parents employed highly individualistic notions of educational success. The findings suggest that even parents with progressive social values rely on school and academic segregation to secure valued resources for their children. Districts that value integration therefore must develop robust programs to counter the self-segregation of middle-class families.

Keywords

urban public schools, school choice, families and schools, race and class, qualitative methods

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Acknowledgements

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This paper explores how urban middle-class parents with children at the elementary school level construct accounts about school choice in comparison to parents with children at the middle and high school levels. Previous studies have largely focused on the former. Data for this study come from in-depth interviews with 44 parents who enrolled their children in an urban school district. Findings suggest that parents' choices and narratives concerning schools are affected by the school district's institutional context. Parents with children at the elementary school level largely avoided their neighborhood-designated schools and secured spots in the city's more desirable magnet schools. The group distinctions created at this level were "bad schools" and "bad parents" versus "good schools" and "good parents." Parents with children in the middle and high school years similarly avoided the district's general programs and secured the desirable slots in those schools' academically segregated honors, AP, and IB programs. Distinctions created here were between "good students" and "bad students" and parents employed highly individualistic notions of educational success. The findings suggest that even parents with progressive social values rely on school and academic segregation to secure valued resources for their children. Districts that value integration therefore must develop robust programs to counter the self-segregation of middle-class families.

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A growing body of literature has focused on middle class parents who have chosen to live in central-cities and enroll their children in public schools. Unlike many of their peers, they have forgone a suburban lifestyle as well as private schools. These relatively recent trends have received the attention of mayors and urban economic development officials in so far as they see attracting and retaining this population as a strategy for promoting urban economic revitalization (Cucchiara, 2013b; Posey-Maddox, 2014; Stillman, 2012). City officials contend that highly educated, middle class families will improve the public schools and their cities' tax bases.

Research on such parents has documented certain factors that influence their decisions. They tend to have one or more of the following preferences: desire for diverse social environments for their children, a philosophical commitment to public education and a dislike of private schools, a left-leaning political stance, and a distaste for the parenting styles they allege occur more often among families in affluent suburbs (Billingham & Kimelberg, 2013; Cucchiara, 2013a; Cucchiara & Horvat, 2009, 2014; Kimelberg, 2014a; Kimelberg & Billingham, 2012; Kimelberg et al., 2014, Posey-Maddox, 2014).

Although school perceptions as well as the school experiences of children vary between the early and later years of education (Deschenes et al., 2010; Kimelberg, 2014a), most literature on the urban middle class and public schools has focused on families with children in elementary schools (Billingham & Kimelberg, 2013; Cucchiara, 2013b; Kimelberg, 2014b; Posey-Maddox, 2014; Posey-Maddox et al., 2014, 2016; Stillman, 2012). This study extends earlier empirical and theoretical analyses by investigating parental choices and experiences at the middle and high school stages in addition to those at the elementary school stage. Overall, this study asks the following questions. First, how do middle class parents who choose to remain in a central city think about public schools when their children are at the elementary stage versus the middle and high school stages? What factors are important to parents at the different levels of schooling in how they approach and define schools? Second, how do parents navigate an urban school district as their children advance through the system? Do parental strategies during the post-elementary school years differ from those at the elementary school level? Finally, how do parents understand their children's experiences in the later grades versus the early grades, and how do they construct claims and justifications surrounding their choices and their children's experiences?

To better understand these factors, this paper uses in-depth interviews with middle class parents who have children enrolled in the City School District of Albany in Albany, NY. Using the framework of institutional theory (Woessner & Kehler, 2018), I argue that similar parental strategies, plans, or judgements can appear different when undertaken in different institutional contexts. Varying institutional landscapes can mask similar underlying parental motivations at the different levels of schooling. In addition, varying institutional contexts shape how parents construct symbolic boundaries, or the formation in-groups and out-groups (Heizman, 2016) between the different levels of schooling, even if their underlying sentiments remain similar. Finally, regardless of whether or not parental claims are sincere, the findings reveal that parents increasingly rely on established social networks and employ merit-based accounts of educational success as students advance through school. This, too, however, is shaped by the institutional structure of public education.

Review of Literature

This study contributes to the broader discussion of "school choice," a paradigm that has rendered enormous implications on American society. Its basic assumptions attest that parents and their children are consumers of education, whereas the school is the product. As in a classical market, parents are allegedly free to choose schools that best meet their preferences. The paradigm is anchored within the concept of market fundamentalism or neoliberalism, an ideology that has been transcendent since the late 1970s (Stiglitz, 2009). What was once thought of as an essential public service delivered by government, education is increasingly understood as the responsibility of parents who must "shop" for educational "goods." In turn, schools now compete for the student customer. Advocates of school choice contend this model advances social justice by enabling parents to remove their children from "failing schools" (Fliegel, 1993). The paradigm, however, does not account for factors that constrain choice including racial and economic segregation, families' lack of transportation, segregated informational networks, and work and family-life constraints (Pattillo et al., 2014).

The literature suggests that parents with higher levels of education and income possess greater agency concerning school choice (Reay, 2005; Roda & Wells, 2013; Wells & Roda, 2009). In comparison to their less wealthy counterparts, these parents possess more information, including greater insight on school application deadlines, school lottery procedures, the number of seats available in specific schools, and who the best teachers are in a particular school. Their work schedules are also more likely to offer the flexibility for

attending school open houses. Moreover, they at times turn to colleagues, acquaintances, and even educational consultants who have extensive knowledge of and insight into the most desirable schools.

With more housing and transportation options, studies also suggest middle class families relocate to communities that have the highest-ranking schools (Butler et al., 2013; Holme, 2002). Middle class families' social networks assist in this process (Schneider et al., 2000; Weininger, 2014). In the majority of cases, families either seek neighborhoods, communities, or school districts where their friends and family members live, or places that demographically align with their own social and class background (Lareau, 2014).

Although other researchers find middle class parents use their privileges to secure top schools for their children either through strategic real estate purchases in affluent suburbs or through private school placements, a subset of middle-class parents decide to enroll their children in central-city public schools. Therefore, what influences these parents to remain in cities and enroll their children in public schools? Research suggests they possess social characteristics that distinguish them from the general population of parents with school-age children. Some identify as city people and prefer urban lifestyles (Billingham & Kimelberg, 2013; Cucchiara & Horvat, 2014). Many also desire racially and socioeconomically mixed classrooms (Cucchiara, 2013b; Cucchiara & Horvat, 2009, 2014; Posey, 2012; Stillman, 2012). Parents see diverse schools as exposing their children to the "real world," a place their children will have to navigate as adults (Butler & Robson, 2003; Reay et al., 2008; Roda & Wells, 2013). Others select urban public schools in part from political motivations or based on social justice commitments (Cucchiara & Horvat, 2009; Reay, 2007; Reay et al., 2011; Stillman, 2012). For other parents, private schools seem too elitist (Cucchiara, 2013b; Stillman, 2012).

The existing literature has provided insights into the motivations of middle-class parents and their school choices. Additional research, however, is necessary to better understand how parents make sense of and construct accounts of school choice and the educational experiences of their children in elementary schools in comparison to the post-elementary stages. Therefore, this study includes parents who have children in middle school and high school. Examining different academic levels is important given the qualitatively unique experiences students have in middle school and high school versus elementary school (Deschenes et al., 2010).

By the time most children reach adolescence, they have undergone developmental changes, becoming more self-conscious and self-aware, and thinking in more critical and abstract ways. Part of these changes include attempts to forge their own identities and sense of self. These psychological changes are coupled with broader social transitions. Children often become less motivated academically and less assured of their own abilities. In addition, peer pressure and competition tend to intensify by middle school (Alspaugh, 1998; Deschenes et al., 2010; Kaplan et al., 2005; McGee et al., 2003). Finally, academic tracking, though occurring to some degree in elementary schools, tends to accelerate by middle school (Oakes, 2005). Because middle and high schools can become more academically bifurcated at this point, parental experiences and claims at these levels are worth examining.

Parental anxiety tends to increase as they confront the substantial personal and social shifts occurring in their children (Pickhardt, 2013). Moreover, studies suggest parents in urban school districts tend to have greater concerns over school quality once their children reach middle and/or high school (Crozier et al., 2011). This occurs in part because parents feel these schools do not afford the kind of parental control that elementary schools allow. In turn, many parents contemplate exiting city public schools once their children complete elementary school (Billingham & Kimelberg, 2013; Kimelberg 2014b).

Situational Context of the Author

The issue of American education has long been both a personal and professional interest of mine. Ever since reading *Savage Inequalities* by Jonathon Kozol (1992) as an undergraduate in college, I have had a strong interest in school inequality. The US has the highest level of school inequality among all high-income countries (Ravitch, 2014). Unlike many countries, the US has "placed-based" public education, meaning the neighborhood in which one resides largely determines the public school one attends. Impoverished neighborhoods, therefore, tend to have public schools populated with impoverished students with fewer resources. The opposite is visible in middle class and high-income neighborhoods and communities whose schools have wealthier student bodies and more resources. One exception to this structural arrangement are magnet schools. Magnet schools are non-neighborhood or non-place-based schools set up by school districts. They are available in only some school districts, particularly those in larger cities. Parents usually apply for slots in a lottery-based system. Magnet schools provide an option for parents who dislike their designated school, but many districts do not offer them, and there is no guarantee that a magnet school will offer high quality instruction.

The stratification in the nation's educational system is reflected vividly in Albany, New York, the site of this study. Being a resident of Albany for roughly ten years prior to initiating this project, during each passing year, the stratification present in the city's public school system became increasingly apparent to me. Although I have no personal or professional connections to the City School District of Albany, I was well immersed in civic discussions over public education in Albany. I also witnessed many friends and neighbors who, though priding themselves as being "city people," abruptly left the city for Albany's suburbs and suburban school districts once their children completed kindergarten. Therefore, I desired to interview parents who, despite having the resources to leave the city and its schools, chose instead to remain. Furthermore, I have a strong interest in urban development and vitality, and the presence of high-quality public schools is a necessary ingredient for long term, sustainable economic development.

Case, Method and Sample

Albany, New York is a city of roughly 100,000 residents, with a metropolitan population approaching one million. Albany is approximately 55 percent white, 30 percent black/African American, and 15 percent "other" with Hispanics being the majority of that proportion (Bureau of U.S. Census, 2015). Students who identify as white comprised 21.2 percent of the public-school population in 2014, the start of my data collection. At 54.8 percent, African American students are the largest group. Hispanic and Asian students stand at 13.3 and 7.4 percent, respectively, and are the fastest growing groups. Students at or below the poverty line comprise 29.4 percent of the population, whereas those who qualify for free or reduced-priced meals stand at 67.3 percent of the student body. White students are far less likely than students from other groups to be living in poverty (City School District of Albany, 2014).

Substantial challenges face the district, and it ranks near the bottom in the region in standardized test scores and graduation rates (New York State Department of Education, 2016). Due to ongoing problems with academic performance, in 2015 the New York State Department of Education placed three public schools in Albany into receivership. Under receivership, the state appoints a receiver who, among other matters, can hire a new principal, make staffing and curricula changes, and extend the school day. The district's subpar reputation is also affected by racial bias and media portrayals that depict school disorder (Bump & Nelson, 2016).

The data for this study come from in-depth interviews with 44 participants from 42 families. The interviews occurred between September 2014 and October 2015. Mothers were

typically interviewed. Interviews with fathers alone constituted two participants, whereas both the mother and father were interviewed in two families. Mothers constituting most participants is common in qualitative research on education (Kimelberg, 2014b; Pattillo, 2015). Slightly less than half the sample consisted of parents who identified as white. Sixteen participants identified as African American, while six were Hispanic, and three biracial. The interviews were conducted by me, a white male, and three undergraduate students, including a black female, a multiracial male, and a white female. None of us has any children, nor any associations with the public schools in Albany. Ten participants were recruited at school board meetings and school open houses, five participants responded to fliers placed in various locations in Albany, six participants were drawn from my social networks, and twenty-one were reached through snowball sampling methods.

Pseudonyms are used throughout the study for all participants and schools discussed with the exception of Albany High School, which is the city's sole public high school. Participants had to have more than a high school diploma and incomes between $47,700 and $250,000 to qualify for the study. The first figure represented 200 percent of the poverty line for a family of four in 2014 (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2014). Table 1 below displays the demographic characteristics of the sample. The study examines middle class families in that they are more likely than low-income families to have the necessary resources to relocate to suburbs or to choose private schools (Lareau, 2014). The Institutional Review Board at the College of Saint Rose approved the collection and analysis of these data in 2014.

Table 1
Social Characteristics of the Sample

Characteristic	No. of respondents and Percentage
Race/Ethnicity	
White	19 (43.2)
Black/African American	16 (36.4)
Hispanic/Latino	6 (13.6)
Biracial	3 (6.8)
Median Household Income (42 households)	$120,000
$45,000 to $74,999	9 (21.4)
$75,000 to $124,999	16 (38.1)
$125,000 to $174,999	10 (23.8)
$175,000 to $240,000	7 (16.6)
Education (highest degree earned)	
Graduate degree	27 (61.4)
Bachelor's degree	9 (20.5)
Associate's degree	8 (18.1)
Number of Families & Level of Children	
Elementary School Only	17 (40.5)
Middle School Only	1 (2.3)
High School Only	7 (16.7)
Elementary and Middle School	9 (21.4)
Elementary and High School	0
Middle and High School	4 (9.5)
Children at all levels	4 (9.5)

The qualitative method of in-depth, semi-structured interviews is an appropriate approach to the study's research focus, allowing participants to offer nuanced accounts of their personal experiences (Hatch, 2002). The interviews consisted of open-ended and subsequent follow up questions. After asking participants to provide basic demographic information about themselves on a standard questionnaire, we asked questions like: "What led you to live in Albany?" "How have your children's school experiences been?" "What are your overall impressions of the schools/district?" and "What were the important factors you considered when you selected schools?" We interviewed participants at different locations including their homes, in coffee shops, and at the researcher's campus office. The interviews ranged from 45 to 120 minutes and were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim.

This study uses an analytical approach informed by grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014; Glaser & Straus, 1967). In contrast to verifying and testing rooted in deduced assumptions, grounded theorists seek to understand the world from the viewpoints of the subjects, fashioning questions and concepts to fit with what they encounter throughout the duration of data collection. Conceptual themes that emerge from the data are compared with other groups and then either refined or amended to conform to the patterns that arise. Obtained from inductive reading of the interview transcripts, after uploading each transcript in Atlas Ti, I first engaged in line-by-line manual coding to immerse myself in the data. This produced numerous initial codes from the data fragments. These primary codes arose from key words in contexts, compelling or important moments that provided insight, and prevalent descriptions expressed by participants. I conducted initial coding after five transcribed interviews. After administering and transcribing every interview, I returned to the earlier transcripts to reanalyze the data to evaluate if the codes that arose in subsequent interviews were also apparent in the initial ones. After initial coding, I conducted more focused coding to construct a more refined analysis of the participants' accounts. From the analysis, I formulated more abstract, analytical categories. These categories included participants' cultural values, a focus on variability in school and academic program quality, parental involvement, children's academic abilities, meritocracy, risk mitigation, and the importance of social networks.

I present the findings using these analytical categories situated within the broader framework of institutional theory. The findings section begins by examining the parents' cultural values and then moves on to exploring how parents defined academic quality and how this related to their children's schools. This aspect begins at the elementary school level and then proceeds to the middle and high school levels. The section subsequently turns to how parents dealt with risk mitigation in an urban district and the construction of in-groups and out-groups. A school's level of parental involvement was central in framing "good" or "bad" schools at the elementary school stage. In turn, the individual academic talents and merits of the student, and whether he or she could excel in selective honors programs were seen as vital as it related to the suitability of the child's school at the middle and high school levels. Finally, parents heavily relied on long-standing social networks to mitigate risk as their children progressed through the district.

Conceptual Framework

From further abstraction of the analytical categories emerged the study's institutional theory conceptual framework. Institutional theory contends that institutional structures deeply influence the behavior of relevant actors (Woessner & Kehler, 2018). Institutional context shapes the opportunities parents and students have with regard to school choice as well as the constraints that are placed on them. Institutional context also shapes parental narratives of school choices and experiences. Four elements specifically structure the choices and opportunities parents have regarding public education in Albany, NY: neighborhood-based

elementary schools, magnet elementary schools, conventional classes at the middle and high school levels, and honors/advanced classes at the middle and high school levels. The four different institutional elements provide specific access points to public education in Albany.

The differing institutional contexts also affect boundary-making insofar as parents manage risk and define boundaries. Boundary-making is a key aspect of group identity construction and can be thought of in symbolic and social terms. Symbolic boundaries signify "individually-held group characteristics that separate people into groups" (Heizmann, 2016, p. 1792). An in-group or "us" is a social category to which an individual feels a strong attachment and feels accepted into. An out-group or "them" in contrast, is a social category to which one feels neither an attachment nor a sense of acceptance into. Social boundaries, in turn, connote social distinctions that are institutionalized with "unequal access to and unequal distribution of resources and social opportunities" (Heizmann, 2016, p. 1792). In this study, the institutional landscape of the school district affected how parents discussed their motivations regarding school choice as well as the symbolic boundaries they created between "good" and "bad" schools as well as between "good" and "bad" families and students.

Findings

Similar to the findings from previous studies of urban middle-class families (Billingham & Kimelberg, 2013; Cucchiara, 2013b; Cucchiara & Horvat, 2014), the participants in this study saw themselves as progressively minded city people who believed in public education. Of the 42 households, only three said they would consider moving to the suburbs. Similarly, although a few families had placed one of their children in a private school during specific grades, the vast majority of their children attended and had always attended city public schools. Two parental accounts illustrate these larger cultural patterns among parents. Cindy, a white mother of a son in elementary school, explains:

> When you send your kid to the Albany public schools you really confront head on issues of racism and classism that you can avoid if you live in the suburbs. Those issues still exist, but if you're sending your kids to a 95 percent white school where no one gets a free lunch, you can avoid the issues…Sending your kid to the Albany public schools, those issues are always there. You're always thinking about those issues. You can't escape them. It's a huge drawback when kids aren't getting exposed. That's something that has been a big added benefit to the city public schools, that [my son] really is a lot more socially aware.

Eleanor, a white mother of two children in elementary school, holds similar views as Cindy, but she couches it more as an urban commitment not merely a public-school commitment. She notes:

> I have a political commitment to living in the city where I contribute to the property taxes that support our public school system and our urban infrastructure. So, I would say that is a political decision… I think that it's, we want our kids to have an education that reflects our society and how we want them to live in the world. So, I understand. I have friends that live in the suburbs, and often grew up in the suburbs or maybe they grew up in the city, and they want their kids to have a suburban lifestyle. Maybe their kids will grow up and live in the suburbs, and that's the way they want their children to be. That's not how we want our children to be. We want our children to be

comfortable around all kinds of people. People who are not like them. People who don't look like them. People who are from a different economic background. You know?

I begin with these accounts to provide background and context in explaining why parents chose to remain in the city and enroll the vast majority of their children in public schools. The initial contextualization assists in understanding some of the parents' accounts regarding school decisions later in the paper. In particular, some of the statements and explanations that parents make regarding schools challenge or contradict the purported values illustrated above.

Parents with children at the elementary grade level overwhelmingly discussed the high-quality aspects of the schools they selected and reasons for avoiding other schools. Even for parents who resided in the catchment area of the city's top-ranked neighborhood elementary school, most still opted for magnet schools. In contrast, later in the section, I detail how parents explained school choice at the post-elementary stages. Here the institutional context changes. Instead of having the option of magnets, parents pursued advanced programs housed within conventional middle schools and the city's high school. They began to make more individualistic and merit-based claims regarding their children's academic strengths or lack thereof. Although these claims could be mostly sincere, they could also operate as euphemisms to obscure other motivations while accentuating others. I begin, however, at the elementary school level.

Elementary School Claims

When explaining school selection and the experiences of their children at the elementary school level, parents focused largely on characteristics of particular schools, not on the attributes of their children. Most parents overwhelmingly viewed the district's elementary schools as either uniformly good or bad. As a result, most placed their children in one of the district's three magnet schools or the magnet-like "school within a school" that housed a popular language immersion program. Of the thirty families with children in elementary school, twenty-one had their children in these non-neighborhood-based schools. Furthermore, because of how school catchment zones are drawn, five families had their children attending Albany's highest performing non-magnet elementary school, which is located in one of Albany's wealthiest neighborhoods. Only four of thirty families had their children in lower-ranking elementary schools. Therefore, the institutional structure of Albany's schools at the elementary school level shaped both how parents made decisions and how they developed claims.

Eve and her husband are white and work in the non-profit sector and law, respectively. Although they live in Points Market, a middle-class downtown neighborhood, their children would have attended Alexander Elementary, a school located in a bordering low-income area. In light of this, they attempted to gain admission into Hillgrove Cooperative Magnet School through a lottery. The school employs sibling priority, and therefore once their first child obtained a slot, their two younger children entered.

I: So, what are some of your impressions of Hillgrove? Was that your first choice?

E: It was…We were aware of the issues surrounding public schools in Albany. And we lived in the catchment area for Alexander. And we went into the lottery for our daughter to enter Hillgrove, and at the time we considered

private school if she had not gotten into Hillgrove, or one of the magnet schools that we had researched. So, we would rather live in the city and send our kids - and we are privileged enough to have this choice - to private school than to live in the suburbs.

I: What were some of the concerns about Alexander?

E: Well... It's a population that skews very, very heavily to a low-income demographic with a lot of family challenges. If the families that lived in [our neighborhood] all sent their kids to Alexander, I think it would be a very different school.

Shelly is African American with one child in the public schools. She works in healthcare. Her situation is similar to Eve's. Despite living in a downtown middle-class neighborhood, her catchment zone places her daughter in Alexander.

Alexander just doesn't seem to be up to the standard that any school should be. The school itself, my daughter took singing lessons there…and the school itself is in disarray, the kids seem to be. I feel like it focuses a lot more on discipline than actual learning. So, no, I wouldn't have sent my kids there.

Because of Shelly's skepticism of Alexander, she attempted through the lottery to enroll her daughter at Mapleridge Elementary which houses a Spanish language immersion program. The pre-kindergarten through grade five program comprises one-third of the student body.

I'm completely satisfied…When it comes to Spanish, they're extremely thorough. They give ample homework which challenges them, and it's brought about a really focused and well-developed child, which [my daughter] is.

Kari and her husband, an African American couple, have three children, own a small business, and live in Pinewood, one of Albany' wealthiest neighborhoods. Their assigned school, Providence, is the top-ranked non-magnet elementary school in Albany as measured by state exam scores. The family, however, worked to enroll all their children in Mapleridge's language immersion program. The family's oldest child is now in middle school, but their two younger children currently attend Mapleridge.

I stood in line in the rain for that program when they first announced it [laughing]…But the program is excellent because my daughter is thirteen, but she's fluent in Spanish, in reading and writing. So, as she was already in the program, my eight-year-old was able to get in through the sibling priority. And then my six-year-old – he started Pre-K.

Kari, however, unlike Eve and Shelley, acknowledged that she and her husband would have been content to have their children in their neighborhood school: "Providence has a strong family foundation there. The parents really are involved and make a lot of things happen there. So, I think my kids would have done well there." A registered nurse, Alison is a divorced mother of two children and had similar feelings as Kari. An African American parent, Alison's children would have attended the same school as Kari's: "Providence is fine, but it's just any

public school. I feel like Mapleridge has a particular culture, environment there. It's unique, and the language program was just better."

The choices of the parents in this group reflect existing research suggesting middle class parents seek magnet schools or "schools within schools" that offer specialized pedagogies (Stillman, 2012). African American middle-class families, in particular, select magnet schools to avoid public schools that house high percentages of impoverished students (Henig, 1996; Smrekar, 2009). Black parents in this study, however, overwhelmingly selected magnets even when their neighborhood school was deemed to be adequate. Their distinctive curricula attracted these parents. Overall, at the elementary level, parents' accounts focused on qualities of the schools themselves, not on the child. Schools were either deemed high quality or fair-to-poor.

Middle and High School Claims

By the middle and high school years parental accounts of schools shift. Explanations become centered more on the individual student, not merely on the schools. In general, the student became "strong" or "weak" rather than the school. Parents thought that the city's middle schools and high school offered a good-to-above-average education so long as the child was academically talented. Of the twenty-five parents with children in middle and/or high school, fifteen claimed the factor of "student academic talent" affected their school decisions.

Although these claims could be sincere, they are also structured by the institutional context of public education in Albany. In the elementary years, the district has neighborhood-based and magnet schools. The wealthier neighborhoods in Albany also house higher performing elementary schools as measured by state exam scores. As noted in Table 2, magnets, despite in theory being open to all through a lottery, in practice have lower percentages of impoverished students, higher state exam scores, and higher percentages of white children. Conversely, at the middle and high school years, the district does not offer magnets. The district's three middle schools are also far less neighborhood-based, and there is only one public high school with a total of 2,500 students. What the district offers are honors classes, Advanced Placement (AP), and International Bachelorette (IB) classes at the middle and high school levels, respectively.

Table 2
Social Characteristics of Albany Public Schools

School	Social Characteristic and Percentage				
	Black	White	Hispanic	Asian	Free/Reduced Lunch
Albany High School	57	22	12	8	50
Middle Schools					
Bogart	53	20	16	10	86
Fordham	64	18	10	6	75
Northridge	76	3	14	2	51
Elementary/Magnets					
Hillgrove	33	44	11	11	37
Clayton	51	25	14	8	56
Lincoln	60	10	15	13	79
Elementary/Neighborhood					

Orchard	30	44	12	8	48
Providence	28	51	10	8	40
Brookline	55	19	14	9	56
Mapleridge	43	17	30	8	76
Alexander	61	9	16	10	96
Ten Broeck	78	6	12	1	87
Prospect	70	9	13	6	98

Note. Albany City School District, 2014

Parents' children generally remained in the district only if they were successfully enrolled in the honors-level, AP, and IB programs. These students were largely separated from the most unfavorable social and academic settings in any given school. Should parents find, however, that the advanced programs were not suitable for their child, they opted for a private school. Therefore, whether at the elementary or post-elementary school stages, parents ultimately desired to separate their children from the poorest and most academically challenged students. The varying institutional contexts merely made the decision-making process appear different. This section highlights the experiences of three parents whose accounts are representative of a larger group of fifteen parents.

Aubrey is a white parent with four children, two of whom are stepchildren. Initially all of Aubrey's children had been in the district, but she recently pulled one of her sons out. Her two stepchildren remain, where they have been excelling. Her younger son, David, is at Hillgrove Cooperative Magnet. Cody, her older son, had been at Bogart Middle School. Although Cody was earning relatively good grades, Aubrey noticed that he was becoming disengaged in school. She compares her younger son, David, and her stepdaughter Tabitha, to Cody whom she has determined is not the type of student who excels in the district. She therefore decided to enroll him in the private Woodbury School.

> [Cody] is in Woodbury now and loves it. I had no idea he needed that kind of individualized attention. I had always been a public-school parent until now. No idea. He is a different child… Now David, I don't feel like he's the same kind of kid as Cody. He's more competitive… [Cody] is the kid that's not quite as smart to be on everyone's radar, whereas Tabitha is, like she's super accomplished… She's taking IB Chinese, IB World History, all of that. But Bogart is tough. My belief is that some kids actually do really well there. I wanted my son to do well there. Tabitha is different. She'll be the kid the teachers know is great, and some of my friends who have their kids there, they say that's what happens in the city. The smart kids get noticed and do well. IB is separate too. They even go to a different cafeteria than the non-honors students.

Edith's account is similar to Aubrey's. She and her husband are white and both work in public policy. Their older daughter and has done very well in public school, but their younger daughter has struggled, "I have two daughters who are very different. And our [younger] daughter is at Bogart Middle School, and she struggles much more. I need to help her intensely."

Edith does not plan to send her younger daughter to Albany High: "So, we are thinking that the high school is going to be too big for her… We need smaller class sizes. We're looking

at thirty kids in a class [at Albany High], and that's not acceptable." Yet for their older daughter, Albany High was their first choice after visiting several private schools:

> E: She just finished her freshman year… She did phenomenal. She took chemistry, honors English, geometry. She took Spanish 3, AP World History. All top tier honors classes.
>
> I: And do you think the quality is just as good [as private school]?
>
> E: Phenomenal, but I have to say that the quality is not phenomenal at all levels of learning… I have two very different learners... If you have a certain type of student, Albany High cannot be beat, a child that is really smart, really motivated, strong, a leader.

Victoria is an African American parent with two sons and a daughter. She works as an attorney. One of her sons is in middle school and the other is in high school. Her daughter will be in middle school next year. She, however, pulled her oldest son from the district after middle school because she felt the learning environment would not be suitable for his academic needs:

> My older son is at [the private] Pebble Hill Academy. He works a lot harder to still not do as well as my younger son, who does no work and is just naturally very academically gifted. So, the difference is, I knew it would be a struggle for my older son to not get distracted. It's very different for my little son – he's [enrolled for next fall] in all AP. He has his Albany High schedule… My interns last week showed me a video of this brawl in the hallway at Albany High, where the students kept the hall monitors back, so they could fight. This is insane… At one point she said, "don't send your son here." But then she was like, "well, if he's doing that well, then he'll be fine, because he'll be separated."

Although parental motivations appear to be different at the middle and high school levels – focusing on the academic attributes of their children – than at the elementary level, the varying institutional contexts within the district obscure what is actually a very similar strategy. Parents at both the elementary and the middle and high school levels want to send their child to a city public school provided they can be assured that their child will receive a high-quality education.

What changes is not the parents' motivations but a function of the changing context in which the decision-making occurs. At the elementary level parents can select the best public schools based either on living in the "right" neighborhood or by opting for magnet schools.

The context, however, changes by middle school. Lacking stark neighborhood catchment boundaries or magnet schools, parents at these stages rely on honors, AP, and IB programs to provide their children with what they consider to be high quality instruction. Parents, in effect, now have less control, and if they find that the academically segregated honors/advanced tracks are not attainable for a particular child, they often place this child in a private school. For these parents, the findings can be compared with research by Crozier et al. (2011) which found that parents thought highly of many of their children, calling them "bright," "able," and "clever." Notions that their children were academically strong eased concerns about them attending economically mixed, public schools. In this study, however, parents noted they had different types of children who therefore needed different types of schools.

How Institutional Context Shapes Boundary-Making at Elementary School Level

The institutional context of Albany's public schools shaped how parents constructed symbolic boundaries between in-groups and out-groups (Heizmann, 2016). At the elementary school level, symbolic boundaries were largely constructed at the "school-level" or between different schools. The parents largely identified with the district's magnet schools and the other parents who sent their children to them. In their minds, the other parents who enrolled their children at the magnet schools were much like them: involved, active, and concerned with their children's education. In contrast, many white parents disliked and had a difficult time identifying with neighborhood schools that were disproportionately non-white or low-income. For African American parents, social class was salient. But both groups felt these schools either would not fulfill or did not end up fulfilling their children's needs. They also felt that parents at low-income, neighborhood-based schools were less involved and less concerned with their children's education. This is what the subsequent data will be exploring.

Lynn, an administrative assistant and her husband Larry, a retail manager, live in the working-class neighborhood of Charleston. The family identifies as white and has two children, one of whom is in school. Because Lynn deemed their assigned school, Prospect Elementary, deficient, she decided to place her daughter in Orchard Elementary. Orchard is not a magnet school, but because it is situated in an aging, white, middle class ethnic neighborhood with declining numbers of children, enrollment has been weak there. The district, therefore, allows parents to apply for a number of available seats:

> L: My oldest was going to kindergarten at Orchard, and you would think that the farthest west [school] would be good, but everybody is bussed over. So, there were violent kids there… The principal didn't put her foot down about stuff, for the kids that made trouble.
>
> I: So, at Orchard it was the discipline issue that drove you out, or were there other things?
>
> L: The discipline coupled with the principal who just had her people speak, and you know, she never listened. She wasn't responsive; people had to tell her to respond to issues, email. There were all sorts of issues. They didn't care about our daughter.

Even though Orchard was a school of choice for Lynn, after a disappointing experience, she went into the lottery for Hillgrove. Her experiences there have been completely different:

> The community aspect within the school and all the events, and how everyone kind of works together there, it's very good but intense. There are so many talented kids and parents. There are a lot of known people from Albany whose kids go there. It's an impressive school. If I am having an issue with teachers, we all meet together and try for a solution… Orchard wasn't like that. I would say there was reverse discrimination at Orchard; there were more African American families than white.

Randi and her husband have two daughters in elementary school. Randi works for a university, and her husband works in state government. They identify as white. Similar to Lynn, she felt her children were being ignored, but their school had been Brookline Elementary.

Although Brookline is situated near the wealthiest neighborhood in Albany, its student body is relatively economically disadvantaged:

> The issue I had with Brookline was it wasn't diverse… There were too many low-income families if you look at school lunch [statistics]…Parents there were just too desperate to be involved. I also felt like the principal wasn't all that supportive because she would say, "Well, we have students here who don't know how to use a fork," and I think she was assuming that where I lived, because we live on [an upscale street], that she kept saying, "your kids are fine." "You're white; you'll be fine." "You don't need as much help." It was hard for me to get attention… So, we went to Hillgrove. That's a lottery… The only thing is that it's self-selected, so the parents who choose Hillgrove are well aware of their rights, and they're very involved… The district stopped Pre-K bussing, so poor families from downtown can't really get here, you know, and if they're cut off at Pre-K, they miss the boat because of sibling priority.

Roberta is an accountant whose daughter attends Hillgrove. She and her daughter identify as white. When asked what drew her to the school, she emphasized the specialized curricula but also the involvement of the other parents. She contends that schools like Hillgrove – and the families that send their children to them – strengthen the city. Her daughter had begun at the neighborhood school, Providence, but the family left:

> She was an only child, and what I read about the cooperative philosophy, it's the type of teaching geared toward her personality… And the parents – I'll be politically incorrect – I find them highly educated, solid background. Upper middle class I would say. I don't feel poverty in the school. Many parents – which means there's a mom and dad involved – they're there, they're present… The health of the city is really with the magnet schools. That's what is keeping the middle class in Albany. You can't have good schools with only poor families... My understanding of the stress in poverty is that school's the least of their problems, you know. Those parents aren't involved.

The institutional context of Albany's schools shaped symbolic boundary-making through a process of neighborhood-assigned schools and magnet schools. Neighborhood schools were deemed to be subpar if they had substantial numbers of low-income students and a lack of parental involvement. The main out-group, however, were "un-involved parents." In contrast, good schools, like the magnets, and the magnet-like programs, possessed high levels of parental involvement and a staff that would be responsive to middle class parents. Parents like Randi and Lynn felt more comfortable at Hillgrove in which there was a close-knit community of likeminded parents who had students like their own. In general, educational quality seemed either secondary to class-segregation, or one presupposed the other. Because of sibling priority, once one child obtained a spot in a desirable magnet school, it was common for all the family's children to attend. In addition, the lack of Pre-K bussing erected enrollment barriers for low-income families from outside the neighborhood.

Parents expected the district to cater to their children, and absent this, they found a school that would. In fact, Lynn even described her challenges at Orchard Elementary as having involved "reverse discrimination." She felt her daughter's needs were being ignored, a result of the administration, in her view, prioritizing other people's children. Overall, these city-dwelling families with children at the elementary level behaved similarly to middle class

suburban families who sought the best public schools outside of the urban core (Lareau, 2014). In this study, however, the "best" schools were ones that focused on the needs of the children of middle-class families.

Institutional Context and Boundary-Making at the Middle and High School Level

The institutional context of the city's public schools shifted how parents constructed symbolic boundaries at the middle and high school levels in comparison to the elementary level. Symbolic boundaries shifted as there are no magnets after the elementary school years. In defining boundaries, parents with children at the middle and high school levels differentiated children who enrolled in the conventional classes (the out-group) and children, like their own, who were largely enrolled in the honors, AP, and IB programs (the in-group). Parents with children at this stage were more likely to frame problematic and disinterested students as the out-group and not uninvolved parents as those with children at the elementary level did. The out-group shifted from adults (low-income, uninvolved parents), to children (unmotivated students). They also did not de-identify with entire schools, but rather with the different academic tracks within the schools. The tracks align closely with social class and race, but parents, once again, spoke in very individualistic and meritocratic ways about academic success when discussing students at the post-elementary levels. Furthermore, and importantly, many parents developed strong and enduring social networks with other parents who were like them. They often worked to make sure their children would be with the same friends and groups of families as they advanced through school. These students and families were clustered in the favorable elementary magnet schools and then went on to honors and advanced-track programs at the higher grade levels.

Candace and her husband have two children in the public schools. They are both engineers and the family identifies as white. Their daughter attends Fordham Middle School and their son attends Hillgrove as their daughter did before she entered Fordham:

> I: What are your impressions of Fordham?
>
> C: Good. It's middle school. It does seem...like kind of an us versus them as far as two groups of kids. There are the kids that do well and the kids that don't, and they know it. It's almost like they know, "I'm one of *these* kids," or "I'm one of *those* kids," and it's very strange. But it's not really the teachers' faults. I think they're fantastic; they're trying; they really try to encourage them. The school itself, they're really all for the kids, really wonderful demeanor with them. The kids who want to be there are challenged and excited to go to school. The kids who don't do the work are failing.
>
> I: Is there tracking at Fordham?
>
> C: Yes, not in every class, but in reading, English, and math. And then I think [my daughter] has a couple classes where she's like "Oh, I had to switch classes, and now I'm with all the bad kids. My science teacher he knows that this class is not a good class." So, she hates it. And then she came home today and said that fifteen kids in her grade over the past two weeks have been suspended. So, that's sixth grade. So, I said, "Why?" and she's like, "fights." And she knows, "Well, it's not any of *my* friends. It's not any of the fifty kids that came from Hillgrove."

Ellen, a professor who identifies as white, has two children. She had taken her older son, Kevin, out of the district for middle school, but is planning to enroll him in Albany High's smaller AP and IB programs. Here he can be with higher-performing students:

> His private school ends in eighth grade, and we'll come to Albany High unless he says, "Mom, I really want to try private school." And he finds a scholarship… He's worried about peer pressure. But "I say to him" the kids who are getting into trouble and are messing around are in gangs. They are not the kids you are going to end up hanging around with, because you're a white kid! It sounds terrible, but it's true. The kids in AP and IB are all white, but if you work, kids do well at Albany High.

Similarly, in discussing Albany High, Edith explains how she frames the school divide. Edith and her family, introduced in a previous section, identify as white.

> There are a lot of private school families that come back for Albany High. There's a huge Jewish population and they come back for IB… They're great kids. You know, we have to lobby the state lawmakers to keep those programs. The district uses up immense resources on troubled students, but we need resources too, and Albany High's IB is phenomenal. On the other side, we have friends who are African American and middle class who don't send their kids [to Albany High]…There's a pressure to like join gangs, or there's certain assumptions built into being black. If you're smart and you're a minority, "Oh, you're trying to be white…" I can't believe these kids are undercutting their own opportunity.

Aubrey's and Edith's perception of the racial composition of students in AP and IB is not quite accurate, but white students are *four* times more likely than black students, and *fourteen* times more likely than Hispanic students to be enrolled in AP and IB at Albany High (Karlin, 2018). However, nearly all the African American parents interviewed for this study have their children enrolled in honors, AP, or IB. Nonetheless, the pattern at Albany High is similar to national trends in which white and Asian students are over-represented in AP and IB programs (Theokas & Saaris, 2013).

Parents constructed symbolic boundaries in stark terms. Edith and Ellen distinguished their children, who are taking or will be enrolled in AP and IB programs, from problematic students – those who are part of or will be pressured to join gangs and struggle even in the conventional classes. Edith compares the children of Jewish families – the "good kids" – to non-middle class African American children, who purportedly do not value education. Candace discussed the divide in very meritocratic ways, praising the schools while being critical of students who make trouble. Those children are not the students in her daughter's honors classes. Candace also noted that her daughter's core group of friends in middle school followed her from Hillgrove, the school with the lowest proportion of students living below the poverty line of any public school in the city. These were the in-group.

The experience of Candace's daughter was illustrated with other parents in the study whose children all grew up together and moved together from school to school in the district. The close-knit social connections between the families were important in mitigating any risks and anxieties parents held towards certain schools. Maureen, a mother who has had four children go through the public schools since kindergarten noted that she knew nearly all her children's friends as well as their parents. Maureen and her family identify as white. She notes:

I knew a lot of them fairly well, because my kids were in the honors classes; so many of the parents were like me. So, like one of the things was that in September you would go for open house, and in the high school you would go around to all the classes, and it was the same parents. So, we got to know them, or they were in concerts or played on teams together. So, there was a strong community of parents at Albany High, and all the schools [my children] have been in… Those parents made that decision to stay in Albany Schools, so there was a certain commitment that everyone shared. I wasn't worried that [her children] would fall into the bad crowd because they all had a strong group of friends from the beginning.

Suzanne and her children had a similar experience as Maureen. She felt a strong sense of community in the public schools because of the families who had decided to keep their children in the district. Suzanne, who is black, has two children, one in middle school and one in high school. She explains:

At any event, you see all the same people all the time. You know the people in your class. They have regular parent-teacher conferences, regular open houses, regular different events where you come together as a class, so you see a lot of the parents, because they're always the same. And a lot of the kids, they follow each other from the beginning. So, I find that my daughter's been in the same class with a lot of her friends for the last five years. So, like they moved together from Clayton [a magnet] to the honors programs at Bogart.

Overall, parents with children at the middle and high school stage overwhelmingly were able to place their children in the advanced honors programs and classes. Furthermore, many developed relationships with a large clique or group of likeminded families, and this eased concerns over the risks involved in sending a child into an urban school. Beyond symbolic boundary work (Nast & Blokland, 2014), the individualistic educational frames parents employ allow them to claim that the city's middle schools and high school operate largely as a meritocracy despite glaring inequalities in the community. Middle class parents may see themselves as the responsible or deserving families, entitled to the district's resources and high-quality programs. The merit-based accounts of many of the parents in this study also align with previous research documenting an ethos of individualism and privatism among the professional middle class (Orrange, 2003). However, merit-based claims do not emerge until the middle and high school levels in this study.

Discussion

In explaining and justifying their choices, parental accounts of elementary schools vary in comparison to accounts of middle and high schools. At the elementary level parents' accounts focus to a greater extent on the school itself and whether it is of high quality. At the middle and high school stages, parents deploy an explanation that focuses more on the academic characteristics of their and other people's children. Nonetheless, while their accounts and decisions may appear different on the surface, parents are deploying a very similar strategy in both cases: to send their child to an urban public school provided they can be assured the school will be a good environment for them. The surface-level difference in justifications appears to be a function of the contrasting institutional contexts in which the decision making occurs, rather than different underlying motivations. At the elementary level, parents are primarily responsible for making the choice. In contrast, during the upper grades, they have far

less control over where their child ends up; thus, necessitating them to frame their motivations to fit the outcome. Overall, a similar parental strategy can appear quite different when undertaken in different institutional contexts. At the elementary school level "good" schools offered unique programming, a close-knit community of like-minded parents who were heavily involved in the school, teachers who would cater to middle class children, and for many, fewer impoverished students. Parents also constructed symbolic boundaries at the school-level and between parents/adults. Uninvolved parents at the poor-quality schools were the out-group, whereas involved parents at the magnet schools were the in-group.

Parents in this study behaved similarly to the suburban, upper middle class African American parents Lacy (2007) examined as well as the demographically similar Chicago families studied by Pattillo-McCoy (1997). Parents in these studies shielded their children from lower-income black families who lived in adjacent subdivisions, towns, or in Pattillo's study, adjacent, low-income city neighborhoods. They sought private academies or magnet schools if they deemed their neighborhood school to be subpar. The city families in Albany had, by and large, avoided private schools for their children, but like Lacy's and Pattillo's analyses, avoided their assigned schools if they contained a large low-income student population.

Nonetheless and unlike the parents in these previous studies, the Albany parents all placed their children in Albany High and most placed their children in the city's middle schools granted they could get into honors, AP and IB classes. They contemplated the negative influences at the middle schools and Albany High but were not deterred like many parents who exit the city once their children reach school age. They arrived at this conclusion because their children would be separated into advanced classes and because they had developed tight-knit groups with like-minded parents and families who had progressed through the system together. These parents' children all knew each other and advanced as a cohort from the more advantaged magnet elementary schools into the honors programs at the middle and high school levels.

The experiences of the middle-class urban families examined by Posey-Maddox (2014) and Cucchiara (2013a) were similar to those of the families in this study. Parents had anxieties surrounding some of the high needs students who attended their children's urban public schools, and they dealt with this by becoming very active in parent-teacher-student groups, fundraising, and for some, volunteering in their children's classrooms. Although many teachers welcomed the resources these active parents brought into the schools, their involvement was highly concentrated among their own children's classrooms and programs. In fact, their involvement in some ways came at the expense of resources directed towards low-income students.

The actions of the parents in these studies reflect how many Albany parents heavily populated the lotteries for the city's best magnet schools. This combined with sibling preference essentially led to these families almost monopolizing the district's magnet schools. The tendency for families with more information and resources to acquire the best slots and academic programs for their children reflects the concept of "opportunity hoarding" (Sattin-Bajaj & Roda, 2018) that often occurs when upper middle class and highly educated parents compete for slots with less advantaged and well connected, poor and working-class families. It is not really a fair fight.

In addition, the families studied by Posey-Maddox (2014) and Cucchiara (2013a) developed close relationships with demographically similar parents to alleviate their anxieties about placing their child in an urban public school. These studies, however, only explored schools at the elementary level and examined parents who were overwhelmingly white. This study on Albany families reveals that certain tight-knit groups of likeminded parents form fairly enduring social networks and friendship bonds that extend from elementary into the middle and high school years, with their children advancing in a social clique as they age and go from level to level. Furthermore, this study includes African American parents who behaved largely

similar to their white counterparts. Their children too, got into honors, AP, and IB programs at the higher grade levels despite the strong tendency of teachers and school officials to stereotype black students, regardless of social class, as inferior learners who are subsequently often placed in lower track courses and programs (Oakes, 2005).

Due to the limitations of this study's research method, it is not possible to completely discern parents' actual motivations regarding school choice versus their stated motivations. Parental accounts that shifted from seeking out the best school to their discernment of their children's academic ability might be sincere, or they may act as euphemisms that obscure genuine motivations. For the former, the shifts in how parents discuss education may be a reflection of the developmental changes children undergo in adolescence (Deschenes et al., 2010). It is not surprising, perhaps, that parents may have to change how they make decisions regarding their children's education once they get older. As for the latter, these accounts could instead be euphemisms.

In fact, the parental claim of academic ability might be an expeditious or more tactful response as to why they left the district when they realized their child would be not suited for the honors and advanced programs. In such a scenario their child would instead be seated in conventional classes populated with high-needs students. In effect, parents' option A was to rely on internal segregation, but they were willing to choose option B – leaving the public schools – if this could not be attained. To be sure, I am unable to infer too much beyond the words articulated by the parents but based on their actions and the casual way in which they discussed swapping programs and schools, and whether they had sent or were considering sending their children to private schools reflects a great deal of privilege. Parents also made largely unsupported claims of how special their children were, and in turn, how they deserved to be placed in the top programs. This social dynamic reveals important boundary work. Indeed, one parent, Jocelyn, whose two children attend the language immersion program at Mapleridge, acknowledged that siblings occupied eight of the nine English-language slots in the Pre-K program, whereas more than thirty people applied.

Because the data used in this study are cross-sectional, future research ought to employ longitudinal designs that would assist in measuring any discrepancies in parental claims regarding school choice and parents' actual actions. Initial interviews with parents prior to their children entering middle school, for example, could be followed up with interviews one or two years later. In addition, for this study, I interviewed only parents, but future studies ought to collect data from the children themselves, particularly students at the high school level. Student interviews would help in gaining insight into the importance of their peer and friendship networks in advancing from desirable magnet schools to honors programs at the higher grades. Students' understandings of in-groups and out-groups may also differ from their parents' interpretations of such dynamics. Interviews could also be conducted with teachers to understand how they interpret these processes, particularly the various ways parents and students segregate themselves into particular groups.

In this study, I do not claim the parents I examined are representative of all parents with children in public schools. The parents I interviewed, however, probably share a lot of characteristics with middle and upper middle class urban professionals who have school-age children. Many of their responses concerning why they remained in a central city and enrolled their children in public schools aligned with previous studies. They viewed themselves as progressive or liberal city people (Stillman, 2012). They wanted their children to know diversity (Posey-Maddox, 2014) and to experience the "real world," instead of growing up in a so-called suburban bubble (Cucchiara, 2013b). This was evident among both the African American and white parents in the study. Therefore, given their similarities with parents from previous studies, they appear to represent a slice of the population of highly educated urban professionals that have become a key constituency for the Democratic Party (Florida, 2018).

Yet these findings reveal some important implications. Even though these parents overwhelmingly held progressive political values, in general their priority was the quality of their children's education. At the elementary-school level this meant avoiding impoverished schools that had largely non-white student bodies. At the middle and high school level, parents similarly worked to segregate their children in the honors and AP and IB classes, away from the larger student bodies of these schools that were again, disproportionately low-income, and non-white. Therefore, even self-proclaimed progressive parents, if not exactly liking classroom segregation, benefitted from it. Furthermore, by the middle and especially high school levels, most parents voiced very individualistic narratives regarding school and student success. Indeed, many parents claimed that the teachers and schools were just fine, if not excellent, and that school failure was largely the fault of the individual students who did not care or work hard enough. These findings are important because if even self-proclaimed progressives largely ignored the structural reasons for educational failure, the future of racial and economic integration of public schools looks precarious if public officials and school administrators leave the matter solely up to individual-parent and student choice.

Indeed, the largely customer-based approach most parents employed is a product of the neoliberal model of education that has been shown to heighten economic and racial segregation (Bifulco et al., 2009; Saporito & Deenesh, 2007). Based on this research, policy changes should be pursued if officials want to achieve robust racial and economic integration. School officials might work to administer inclusionary mechanisms that guard against the monopolization of magnet schools and honors, AP, and IB programs by middle class families. Mandatory trainings for school counselors that identify micro-aggressions and unconscious biases are also vital in that these social processes handicap low-income students and students of color in their pursuit of advanced academic programs.

The emergence of in-groups and out-groups and the stereotypes the parents in this study held towards other families who largely came from less privileged backgrounds is a serious threat to integration. City and school district leaders should design programs that address and mitigate these dynamics. Officials ought to establish both formal and informal programs, meetings, focus groups, and other social events that are explicitly designed so that parents from different social, economic, and racial backgrounds would have meaningful interactions, and in which over time new relationships could be forged. Although there has never been a time in which people from different racial and ethnic backgrounds were more integrated socially, the decline of civic, religious, and cross-class social clubs (Lions, Elks, bowling leagues) has led to more economic segregation among social ties (Putnam, 2015).

The decline in cross-class social ties has led to a heightening of overall economic inequality. Low-income and working-class households are increasingly cut off from the information sharing resources of the middle and upper classes, including job and internship leads, and information on and access to scholarships, health programs, funding opportunities, and other social goods (Putnam, 2015). Intensifying social segregation and inequality necessitate bold steps and programs if school districts, communities, and the country at large purport to believe in equal opportunity. If high quality education is only available to the upper middle and the upper classes, not only does this engender multiple challenges to long term economic sustainability in our society, but it also raises important moral questions regarding the worth of human beings and resources and rights children are entitled to in a representative democracy.

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