Factors That Influence School Choice:

A Look at Parents' and School Leaders' Perceptions

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ABSTRACT

School choice is a growing movement, and public school districts are faced with the challenge of preventing declines in student enrollment. In response, school districts must work to retain enrolled students and at the same time, attract new students. This qualitative study focused on developing an understanding of the factors that influence parents' decisions to enroll their child(ren) in a chosen school, that is, a school which differs from that assigned to the student, also known as school choice. This case study examined data from the perspectives and experiences of parents and public school district leaders. Results suggest that school leaders need to ensure they build good relationships with parents and keep a positive school culture where customer service is valued and held to the highest standards. In essence, school leaders must maintain strong partnerships with their families to attract and retain student enrollment. The results from this study equip school leaders with valuable information for strategic planning to address declines in student enrollment.

KEYWORDS
School choice; enrollment; school district policy.

INTRODUCTION

The National Center for Education Statistics (2020) reported that in 2016, 31% of all students enrolled in the K-12 education system were either enrolled in a charter or private school, or homeschooled. Open enrollment, also known as school choice, is the practice of allowing students to transfer across district boundaries (Mikulecky, 2013). Declining enrollment has affected many public school districts in the last decade. The decline can be attributed to the increase in availability of public charter schools and open enrollment across many districts. School choice was once a privilege afforded to select families, but is now available to many in 47 states across the nation. According to Gross, Heyward & Jochim (2019), ten percent of all students enrolled in K-12 education attend charter schools rather than public schools. With school choice now more easily accessible to all, not just those with the right amount of resources and/or financial availability, inter-district transfers are also on the rise.

The resulting instability of student enrollment numbers in public schools has a great impact on any public school district. In Texas, the decrease in student enrollment means less government funding for the school district, which affects financial allocations to the district.

School choice practices in Texas have created competition in the school system. In Texas, where intra-district and inter-district open enrollment is voluntary, nearly one in two students open enroll in schools outside of their assigned neighborhoods (Powell & Laczko-Kerr, 2017).

Declining enrollment in public schools is cause for concern and leads to difficult decisions, including the possibility of consolidating schools and/or reductions in force as a result of financial impacts. As in the state of Texas, funding for public schools is determined on a per student basis, enrollment declines equate to a loss of revenue (Dunn, 2018).

This qualitative study aimed at identifying the factors that influence parents' decision to enroll their child(ren) in chosen school, rather than the school to which they are assigned. Data were collected and analyzed from parents, school principals, and district leaders at two public school districts which have experienced a decline in enrollment in South Texas. The results from this study provide valuable insight for school districts in recruiting and retaining students. The results also equip school leaders with information necessary to generate solutions to help combat the problem.

Conceptual Framework

Banning and Bryner (2001) discuss campus ecology as a framework focused on the dynamic relationship between students and the campus environment. The conceptual framework for this study focused on the approaches to school culture, instruction, and parents' and school leaders' perception of open enrollment. Strange and Banning (2015) introduced a model with key components that are included in all human environments. The model explores the following four components:

1.   The physical environment (design and layout)

2.   The aggregate component (collective characteristics of the people who are in the environment)

3.   The organizational environment (purpose and goals)

4.   The constructed environment (culture of the setting)

Research Questions

The following research questions served as a guide for this qualitative case study:

RQ1. What factors influence parents' decision to enroll their child(ren) in a particular public school or in a charter school outside their designated school boundaries?

1.1. How does the COVID-19 pandemic influence parents to practice their right to school choice?

RQ2. What factors do school leaders perceive to be the reasons parents/guardians open enroll in schools outside their assigned school district or designated school?

RQ3. What is the impact of school choice on public school districts?

RQ4. What can public school districts do to help retain and/or increase their student enrollment?

4.1. How will providing the instructional option of 100% remote learning and 100% face-to-face instruction to students affect district's enrollment?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Public education is a collective enterprise promising a better life for all citizens and instilling public and social values that benefit the community as a whole (Robertson & Riel, 2019). The growing popularity of the school choice movement demonstrates that successful education policy is measured by the success of the individual student (Robertson & Riel, 2019). Open enrollment empowers parents and improves traditional public schools through competition (Hoxby, 2003), creating equity among students of all socio-economic levels, providing lower income students access to high quality education (Harris and Larsen, 2015), and helps improve student and parent satisfaction by allowing families to find the schools that best fit the student's educational needs (Wolf & Egalite, 2016). Hence, local public schools and districts are feeling the pressure to retain and increase their enrollment.

While there are benefits to open enrollment, there are also negative aspects. Where proponents of school choice believe equity to be a result, Palmer and Witanapatirana (2020) contend that equitable learning is only achieved in equitable learning environments. School choice instead creates larger gaps. Harris and Larsen (2015) note that open enrollment affects low-income schools more so than other more affluent schools because it perpetuates racial and economic disparities that already exist. To that end Lavery and Carlson (2015) concluded educational background, race, and socioeconomic history, the very same *consequences* of school transfer, to be contributing factors to the transfer decision. Open enrollment has also been criticized for the financial impact on schools. When a student open enrolls outside of the

school district, the overall budget is impacted and therefore resulting in a loss of revenue for the district. Dunn (2018) suggested this results in fewer services or decreased quality of school programs and therefore a decline in student enrollment.

Research demonstrates that human beings are strongly influenced by their own environment (Strange & Banning, 2015). Parents choose schools for various reasons including safety measures, academic achievements, principal's leadership, school culture, extra-curricular opportunities, and/or the school district's history. Rollefson (2015) conducted a study that identified 14 influential parent considerations in their selection of schools: caring teachers, caring principals, competent teachers, competent principals, student safety, safety and security, student friendships, a friendly student body, quality of core curriculum, increased opportunities compared to neighboring districts, preparation for college, available technologies, low frequency of bullying, and quality of facilities. The parent considerations go hand in hand with Strange & Banning's (2015) Environmental Model. Their model explores four environments that play an important part in the influence of selecting a school. Strange & Banning's (2015) model (physical environment, aggregate environment, organizational environment, and socially constructed environment) can be applied to inter-district and intra-district transfers as they compete for student enrollment.

Based on Strange and Banning's (2015) model, the physical environment is the location in which learning takes place and plays a vital role in a school's ability to provide a sense of belonging for all students. Studies have shown that the physical environment such as the facility itself, the classroom setup, affects student performance (Uline & Tschannen-Moran, 2008; Bullock, 2007). Similarly, McGufffey's (1982) found that not only that there is a relationship between the physical condition of the school building and facilities and academic achievement, but also connected to attitude and behavior. Jankens, Store & Nothstine (2019) found that physical location and perceived safety of the school and/or district are also influential in student enrollment decisions.

The aggregate environment is based on the understanding that environments are passed on through the people and the characteristics of the people who inhabit the environment (Strange & Banning, 2015). Therefore, the relationships and experiences that families create within their school community are important deciding factors for parents when choosing the school for their child(ren). Parents seek schools where the composition of the students resembles the background of the student (Koedl, Betts, Rice, & Zau, 2009). The people who are part of the school-- the student body, the administrators, the instructional staff-- together give the school its identity (Epstein, 2010).

District size is a contributing factor to the organizational environment of a school (Strange & Banning, 2015). Harris & Larsen (2015) suggest that extracurricular activities are as important as academic quality to some parents. The school's efficiency and morale are also part of the school's organizational environment. Conversely, the socially constructed environment focuses on the collective views and experiences (Strange & Banning, 2015). Unlike the other

three environments, the socially constructed environment focuses on perception and individual experiences. Rollefson (2015) studied the factors that influenced enrollment decisions and found that parents sought caring teachers, student safety and security, caring principals, friendships, schools with less bullying cases, and an overall positive culture from their school. School culture plays a vital role in the students' ability to obtain higher levels of academic achievement (Fisher, Frey,& Pumpian, 2012).

METHODOLOGY

This study sought to develop an understanding of the factors that influence parents' decisions to enroll their child(ren) in a chosen school, that is, a school which differs from that assigned to the student, also known as school choice. The research used a qualitative research method. Qualitative researchers seek to understand participants in their natural environment, to understand the setting as a potential data source, and in understanding the meaning of why things happen; how people understand the world through their experiences. Case studies report a case description and case themes and conclude with the lessons learned from the case being studied (Creswell, 2014).

Population and Sample

For this case study, a purposive sampling method was used as it sought specific participants who assisted the researchers in answering the research questions. In a case study, strategically selecting participants with direct experience and knowledge of the situation is imperative (Creswell, 2014). Thus, for this study, purposive sampling was used. A total number of sixteen participants were included in this study. The multiple perspectives represented included eight parent participants, four principals, and four district leaders. Parents were selected based on the criteria of participating in open enrollment. The school principals selected for this study lead campuses in districts which have experienced either a steady decline in student enrollment or an increase in student enrollment over the last two years as a result of school choice. Additionally, two district-level administrators from each district were included. Holding true to purposive sampling, the 4 district-level administrator participants selected play a crucial role in the districts' decision making and enrollment procedures, and work closely with other district employees to increase student enrollment. These participants were chosen based on their knowledge of the public school system, their experiences with recruiting students, and experience in developing initiatives to reduce decline in student enrollment.

The research setting for this study was two neighboring public school districts in South Texas. There is little racial diversity with the population of both districts, with over 96% Hispanic population. Both districts service students in grades Pre-Kindergarten through 12th grade.

Data Collection and Analysis

The main tool in a qualitative research study is the researcher who engages in critical tasks such as making observations, note taking, and interviewing or taking to people/participants. For this

research study, the researchers used semi-structured interviews to collect data. The interviews were conducted utilizing open-ended questions and were audio recorded and transcribed. Researchers emailed district superintendents to request permission to conduct the research and make contact with district leaders. Upon approval from superintendent, participants were solicited and provided with a research letter outlining the study, and an informed consent letter. After consenting to participation, the researchers and participant established a date and time to conduct the interview.

The researchers recruited parent participants using social a media advertisement which announced the study and the criteria for participation. Parents who met the criteria and expressed interest in participating were provided with a research letter outlining the study and an informed consent letter. After consenting to participation, the researchers and participant established a date and time to conduct the interview. Parent participants were selected upon verification that they practice school choice and open enrollment for their child(ren).

Semi-structured interviews were conducted in single sessions of 30-60 minutes via Zoom video conference. The audio recordings were transcribed following each interview, the analyzed for emergent themes. The coding process assists the researcher sort ideas and data into categories to help to see patterns that eventually turn into themes or findings (Creswell, 2014). During the semi-structured interviews, parent participants described their reasons for selecting the school for their child(ren). School leader participants described what they perceived to be important for parents when making such decision. The descriptions from the participants were used to construct the research setting descriptions. All participants were assigned a participant type and number to protect their identity. Some descriptive data were renamed with District A and District B to further protect the identity of the participants and the districts selected.

According to Creswell and Creswell (2018), qualitative data analysis takes place in two layers: the basic first layer and the second more advanced layer which in a case study involves a detailed description of the setting or individuals, followed by the identification of themes. Although the researchers originally planned to engage in activities observation at each studied school district setting, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, observations at a district-wide community event were not possible. Neither district was conducting any public school-wide events, therefore, the researchers made observations of their social media communication with their communities. Document analysis was also used as a source of data following the transcription of the qualitative interviews. For this case study, public records and physical evidence such as policy manuals, social media postings, newspapers, flyers, and data from the semi-structured interviews were examined for triangulation. Triangulating enables the research to establish strong credibility (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

The COVID-19 pandemic provided the researchers with the unusual circumstance of a school year unlike any other. Both school districts began the school year offering their students a 100% remote learning environment. All students and teachers worked from home. Central

office administration also worked from home and only reported to the physical work environment on an as-needed basis.

Trustworthiness

When conducting any type of human research, trustworthiness is imperative (Mertens & Wilson, 2012), The researchers used audio recordings from the interviews, field notes, and observations. Triangulation was accomplished using member checks, a process which asks participants to validate the final data for accuracy (Creswell, 2014). All electronic data collected was secured on a password-protected computer and field notes were maintained in a secured file storage system. Further, confidentiality, anonymity, and the protection of all participants remained of utmost importance before, during and after conducting the study.

RESULTS

After a thorough and repeated analysis of the data, eight overarching themes emerged to address the central research questions. The eight themes were based on Strange and Banning's (2015) educational environments:

Physical Environment Themes:

Theme 1: Importance of safety including COVID-19 safety protocols

Theme 2: Importance of well-maintained building and facilities

Aggregate Environment Themes:

Theme 1: Importance of customer service

Theme 2: The school culture creates a sense of belonging

Organizational Environment Themes:

Theme1: Importance of providing opportunities and options for students

Theme 2: Importance of ensuring the accessibility of district leaders.

Constructed Environment Themes:

Theme 1: Recruiting and marketing of the schools/districts attracts open enrollment families.

Theme 2: Importance of word of mouth referrals for open enrollment.

RQ1. What Factors Influence Parents' Decision to Enroll Their Child(ren) in a Particular Public School or in a Charter School Outside Their Designated School Boundaries?

Physical Environment Themes

According to Strange & Banning (2015), the physical environment refers to the design and layout of the environment and the physical conditions of the environment. The participants shared that the safety and the condition of the buildings play a big influence on their decision. Some of the characteristics that seemed to be more appealing to the students and the families were the safety measures in place at the school, sports facilities, newly installed tracks in District A, how up-to-date the buildings are, and the conditions of the buildings.

Theme 1: Importance of Safety

All participants stated student safety as a top priority. Both parents and school leaders affirmed that the safety measures were influential in their decision to enroll in the particular school. School safety is an important issue for school leaders in District A and in District B. All school leader participants pride themselves on keeping their schools safe. They are aware of the importance safety is to parents, as District Leader 1 stated, "Parents will always be concerned about the safety of their children, and now with the pandemic even more so." Most parent participants listed safety as a key factor and were content with the safety protocols in place at their child's school. Some safety protocols stated by parents included door entry access and fencing. Parent 6 stated, "To me, it makes me feel safer sending her there to school, knowing that not anyone can just enter the building and they have cameras and they have to ring the doorbell before they walk in." Parent 5 stated, "Safety is my number one reason when it has to do with the actual physical environment." Parent 1 went on to say:

> I love the fact that, you know, they have the buzzers, you have to buzz them at the door and before they let you in, they see you and you have to have an ID or they document all your information. You can't just walk in there. So that is what I really like, the system that they have in place.

> School leaders listed they have recently improved their security measures due to school shooting incidents in the United States in the last few years. While they state all the schools they have their children enrolled in are fenced up and they are content with the physical layout of the school, they differ in their entry access. Some schools have a doorbell that they must ring prior to being allowed in and some schools have intercom systems that allows them to screen all visitors prior to entering building. Parent 3 stated, "When it comes to my children, I definitely opt to put them in a place where parents have to ring the doorbell and have to be asked a question before going into the building, and it's not just a random person trying to get in." Nonetheless, no parent mentioned any major concern at their schools with the safety of their child(ren) and stated their children felt safe at school and if concerns were to arise, they were immediately addressed.

> With the recent COVID-19 pandemic, parents are concerned with the safety protocols that schools will have in place upon returning to school for face-to-face instruction, however, all parent participants stated they felt comfortable and trust their child's school will be equipped with the proper PPE (personal protection equipment) and sanitary measures when the time comes. When interviews were conducted, both school districts were providing 100% remote learning for all students and offering face-to-face instruction for those who do not have internet connectivity at home. Research question 1.1 asks, does the COVID-19 pandemic influence parents to practice their right to school choice, and results indicated that it does not influence their decision to their choice of school because all districts in the surrounding areas are providing the same options to their students. As stated by Parent 7:

I would definitely look at the safety plan of the campus, see what measures and protocols there that are in place…there's stress as it is due to COVID and then moving them to a completely new environment where they have to make new friends is not something I'm considering. I think it'd be very difficult for them to just cope with all of that. But I would definitely make sure and want to know that there is a very strict safety plan that is being implemented.

Theme 2: Importance of Well-Maintained Building and Facilities

Another theme that parent participants indicated as appealing was having their building and district facilities well-maintained. Parent 2 stated, "It is important that the students are in a clean environment." Another parent participant stated she keeps her child in the district because "The district is known to have very nice and clean facilities." School Leader 2 stated:

Physical environment is very important because like the saying says 'we dress for success' same with the district. When you have all the buildings ready to go, they are dressed up, and it is very appealing. The parents can see that the district cares about the school, the students, and it gives them a warm welcome.

All school leaders were in agreement that the physical appearance of their school was a representation of who they were as a whole. School Leader 2 went on to say that:

The physical environment of the school is very important to parents. When they see pictures of students' work or when they see school goals as they enter the building, I think it gives them a sense of ok, this is what the school is about.

Parents were all very pleased with their schools' efforts to keep up with the physical appearance including the inside of their buildings. To most parent participants, the inside of the schools was just as important as the outside. The cleanliness of the hallways, the classrooms, the front office, including the restrooms was very important. All female participants stated the displays on the walls were very appealing. The displays on the walls around the school portrayed a sense of pride for the participants in the study. One parent stated, "I love always walking through the hallways and seeing all the [student] work. It's really neat to walk in and see all the decorations and student work."   Student work displays were a feature of the physical environment that the researcher found to be appealing to parent participants.

Aggregate Environment Themes

The aggregate environment, as suggested by Strange & Banning (2015), refers to the role that human characteristics play in forming the environment. It addresses the people that make up the environment. Two themes emerged from the aggregate environment. The first theme was the importance of having great customer service at the school. The second was the importance of building relationships with the school personnel such as the teachers, principal, and staff. The final theme in the aggregate environment was the importance of the schools' culture and transmitting a sense of belonging.

Theme 1: Importance of Customer Service

Customer service was one of the highest influential factors for all parent participants. It refers to how well the school optimizes interactions between the parents and students and the school personnel. Customer service can 'make or break' the school and can influence the future growth of the school. It refers to anything that enhances the experience of the parents or any visitor at the school. It is the school's ability to make parents feel valued and the ability to solve problems when issues arise or preventing them before they happen. Customer service can be described as being genuine, being accountable, being empathetic, being innovative, being trustworthy, being patient, and taking responsibility. All parent participants stated the importance of customer service and the big role it plays in their decision to open enroll their child in a school. Parent 1 states "I'm very content with the people that work in the school, the front office is definitely the face of the school." School leaders understand the important role customer service plays in their schools because they know how critical it is to deliver great customer service. School Leader 1 states, "that's what's going to drive parents away or keep parents with us" when speaking about customer service. Additionally, School Leader 3 states "that's the main thing we have to focus on...customer service." One way parent participants stated they are content with their school's customer service is in the welcoming environment their child's school provides. The first impression is what matters the most to ensure families feel that the school their child is in is the place where they belong, where they are well taken care of. By providing a warm, welcoming environment, parents see and feel the school as a caring place for their child(ren) and look forward to not only enrolling their kids there but also keeping them there. School Leader 5 states, "The main thing is that when anyone walks in the building, it's very inviting and that's a very important part." Research has shown that when schools and communities provide warm and welcoming environments while keeping their students and families engaged, attendance increases. Parents are more likely to select a school where they feel the people in the school care for them and are attentive to their needs.

Theme 2: The School Culture and Creating a Sense of Belonging Are Important.

The second theme that arose in the aggregate environment was school culture and creating a sense of belonging is important to parents of both districts. School culture refers to the set of beliefs and values shared by the teachers and staff members that work at the school. When the school culture creates a sense of belonging, students and parents feel respected and appreciated. School leaders play a crucial role in not only developing the school culture, but also in enhancing it so that both parents and students feel a sense of belonging. District leaders in both districts work hard to ensure students and families feel connected to the people in the district. Parent 5 states, "Culture is the number one reason for moving my child. It's the personnel and the culture that is established at the school by the principal and the caliber of teachers that teach at that school." One way school leaders can enhance school culture is by creating relationships with their families. It is vital for school leaders and staff to get to know their students and their families. School Leader 2 states "Once parents have those relationships

with you, they know what you're all about. They know where they're sending their child and the focus of the school." Parent participants agreed on how much school culture influences their decision to enroll in the school of their choice. Not only does creating a positive school climate and culture attract students and their families, but it also helps to improve learning opportunities for students because it encourages engagement and in turn increases levels of student achievement and improved attendance. Parent 4 agrees that school culture plays a big role when determining what school to place her child in. "Culture is very different at every school," she states when asked about how it influences her. Some parent participants listed caring principals as an influential factor, such as Parent 5 who mentioned "They're (principal and assistant principal) always willing to go the extra mile for their school and their teachers." Caring principals not only demonstrate great communication skills with their staff, parents, and students, but also establish trust. When parents feel they can trust their child's school, they will stay.

Organizational Environment Themes

According to Strange & Banning (2105), the organizational environment refers to the structure by which an organization operates and achieves goals. Organizations, schools in this case, are rated by how effectively they meet their established objectives and goals. Three themes emerged from the data analysis under the organizational environment. The first theme is the importance of providing opportunities and options for students and the second theme is the importance of ensuring the accessibility of district leaders.

Theme 1: Importance of Providing Opportunities and Options for Students.

A multitude of opportunities are provided by both public school districts. From extra-curricular activities to specialty schools, academies, and early college high schools. District leadership highly encourages students to try the extra-curricular activities and to select from an array of options from elementary to secondary schools. As stated by School Leader 4, "Part of having a good reputation with extra-curricular activities is showcasing our students. We pride ourselves on having multiple opportunities outside the classrooms for students to thrive socially." All parent participants commented about the experiences many people from their districts share because they offer so many opportunities to participate in a variety of school activities, clubs, and schools. Extra-curricular activities mentioned by parent participants included sports, fine arts programs, band, and clubs such as robotics. Parent 7 stated, "Extra-curricular activities are very important because the students need to have an outlet." School Leader 4 mentioned her elementary school offered twelve clubs in total. She states, "Last year we added the twelfth club called Save The Earth Club at the request of a concerned student on what we were doing to save the earth." Parent 6 reflected on the opportunities to participate in clubs that allows her child to build a sense of belonging. "I do think it is important because it builds her (daughter) social skills and I think it provides them also a break from studying. It helps them build their social

skills outside classroom." Both districts pride themselves in the programs they offer to their students.

An influential factor common in parent participants when selecting their school of choice was the academic opportunities the district has to offer. Academic opportunities included the options the districts provide in elementary, middle and high school. District A provides families with the option of selecting numerous designated campuses such as a technology campus, STEM campus, STEAM campus, Fine Arts campus, Leadership campus, and a Bilingual campus. District B provides families with specialty campuses such as leadership and fine arts schools. District Leader 1 states the designations offer parents the option to send their child(ren) to the school that will best meet their needs. School Leader 4 goes on to say that specialty schools provide students with "opportunities to begin to understand about specific career paths and to find their talents at an early age." While academics were found to be an influential factor for parent participants, non-academic learning opportunities provided by the districts were equally as important to parents.

Also recorded to be as important in the secondary grades are the academies provided by both districts. Both districts offer early college high schools and academies such as the Academy for Health and Science, the Academy for Engineering, and the Academy for Health Services. School leader 3 mentions "the academies helps students prepare for college. They provide opportunities because in college the first two years are critical." Parent 3 stated, "The academies actually help them choose the right career path." Parents and school leaders all agree that what attracts parents to the district is the district's emphasis the whole child and on producing well-rounded individuals.

Theme 2: Importance of Ensuring the Accessibility of District Leaders

Having easy access to district leaders was found to be important to parents. Accessibility to district leaders includes being able to approach the principal, assistant principal, school counselor, central office administration, including the superintendent and the school board members. School leader participants understood the importance of being accessible to parents. Although not a big influential factor for the parent participants when choosing a school, they did feel it was important if they had a concern that they could go to them and get an answer. Parent 3 stated "It is important for me to have very easy access to our school and district leaders." Parent 7 mentioned, "Starting with the principal at the campus, she is always very accessible, especially when issues arise. So I think it's very important. I've never had to had to reach out to the superintendent or school board but I'm sure they would have been readily available as well." People understand the busy lives of a school leader, therefore, knowing that they will make time to meet with them and address their concern/question speaks volumes about the school and/or district.

Constructed Environment Themes

Strange and Banning's (2015) final environment, is the constructed environment, which refers to the collective perceptions and general impressions communicated through conversations, stories, and symbols observed in the environment. The first theme that emerged from the data analysis relative to this environment is the recruiting and marketing of the schools and how the districts attracts open enrollment families. The second theme is importance of word of mouth referrals for open enrollment.

Theme 1: Recruiting and Marketing of the Schools/Districts Attract Open Enrollment Families

Both public school districts made tremendous efforts to market their school district in order to attract new open enrolled families and to retain their students. Both school districts host numerous events in their perspective community to promote their schools. Advertising campaigns are specifically created to target and attract open enrollment families. They showcase student accomplishments, highlight special events, and promote all the district has to offer. Most parent and school leader participants listed social media as a means of influencing and attracting families. School leaders are working to promote and market their district and school. While each district has a Public Relations department, school leaders agree that it is a team effort to promote their district. All principals at each campus are responsible to promote their school through all avenues of social media. Aside from each district having their own website, each school has their own website as well. The websites keep parents and the entire community informed of current and upcoming events, promotes student and staff accomplishments and provides resources for parents. School Leader 3 stated, "Especially right now that everyone's at home with the pandemic, communication to promote the district is mostly done through our website, social media, Facebook, Instagram." Adding to the importance of marketing strategies is school leader 4 stated, "We have established a new Facebook because we wanted to stay connected to our families who are at home with the pandemic and at the same time promote our school by showcasing all the great things still happening." When parent participants were asked, they too agreed on how influential social media was to families who open enroll. Parent 8 stated, "I would constantly see the school showcasing their students on Facebook and I was excited to find out more about the school."

Theme 2: Importance of Word of Mouth Referrals for Open Enrollment

Many people who live and work in the two school districts selected play a big role in promoting the school and the district. Word of mouth marketing is very influential and plays a big part of social media. Word of mouth is very effective because it is a form of marketing spread usually between friends and/or family. Family and friends trust each other, therefore this form of marketing is more valuable to the individual. Most individuals trust recommendations from their friends and family over advertisements. Parents' testimonials are a powerful means of communication and advertising for the school district (Rollefson, 2015). Parent 8 stated that a large influence in her enrolling her son at his school is the references she had received from family and friends. Another parent participant stated, "It's very attractive when you hear people

that you know talking about the school." Parent 6 agreed on the importance of word of mouth advertising by stating, "Everyone kept mentioning the school and the great staff they had and how involved the teachers were with parents and communication." When people share their experiences, they are recommending or not recommending the school or district on their behalf. It is usually triggered by an event experienced by friends or family and can make a lasting impact.

  RQ2: What Factors Do School Leaders Perceive to be the Reasons Parents/Guardians Open Enroll in Schools Outside Their Assigned School District or Designated School?

  Most school leaders stated that families who left the district left for relocation purposes. Both public school districts service children in low income families with high rates of mobility. The economic instability of parents or guardians causes the increase in mobility and therefore the transferring of students from district to district. Changes in family relationships is also a reason why students transfer from districts. School Leader 1 stated, "Most families leave because they relocate, they move somewhere else." School leaders agree that when speaking to families who transfer, they are informed it is mostly due to relocation. School Leader 8 stated, "Sometimes in our area, parents have instability in their jobs and when they lose their job, they will move to wherever they find another job so they have to relocate." He goes on to say, "when they leave, they had to move due to being removed from their home, couldn't pay the rent, or they lived with relatives."

  School leaders believe parents seek the qualities in the schools that were described by parent participants in research question one. School Leader 7 states, "In our district, our kids stay because we have a very loving community. You know, we have great teachers, great staff, and there's a lot of resources for our families because there's great need in our community." As per the parent interviews, school leaders also found all the qualities listed in the themes that emerged in research question one appealing to parents. School leaders perceived parents open enrolled in their schools because that is where they felt best met their child's educational needs. When speaking about why families choose their school, School Leader 6 stated, "Where they're (the family) comfortable, is where they will stay." School Leader 1 mentioned a recruitment plan that involved providing customer service training for all office staff. She stated, "We are working on a student recruitment plan and one of the recommendations in the plan is to better our customer service by including it in our trainings." School Leader 3 went on to say, "The first impression parents get when they walk in our schools is the lasting impression. I tell my colleagues and co-workers it's the small things that count, a smile, a simple 'hello' in the morning. It goes a long way. If parents are content, then they will stay."

  School leader 4 adds, "Everyone plays an important part in making our campus great. It's not just the teachers and the administrators, it's the students and the parents altogether, you know, everyone plays an important part." School leaders understand that providing a sense of belonging and offering great customer service, as stated by the parent participants in research question one, is crucial. "It all comes down to customer service, it's how we treat them and how we make them feel," School Leader 3 stated. "Our front office staff and our teachers are

aware that we provide customer service and our customers are our students and our parents. I give them the example, if you go to a place and you have excellent customer service, you're going to want to return, so we must provide the best customer service always" School Leader 2 added.

RQ 3: What is the Impact of School Choice on Public School Districts?

School choice opportunities improve public school districts by allowing parents to find the schools that best fit their child's educational needs. By having the ability to attend any school that caters to the child's needs and learning abilities, every child is given the opportunities to be successful. School Leader 5 stated:

> School choice helps because parents have the opportunity to select schools that focus on specific skills, such as the designated schools or academies. There's parents that already have a career in mind for their children and our district offers designated schools.

Moreover, school choice allows for innovation and improvement that may be missing from some schools since it creates a competition amongst neighboring school districts. School Leader 4 stated, "I think school choice has helped our public schools because we have had to live up to the challenge, you step up to the plate. We have to step it up and be the elite too because charter schools portray to be elite." With competition in full effect, public schools work harder to improve their performance, therefore, attempting to increase their enrollment and/or retain their students. School leader participants felt that school choice had more of a positive impact than that of a negative impact when it came to harming the public school system because it kept them abreast of their competition and continuing to strive for educational excellence.

> If parents are happy, they're going to continue to choose your school. The parents do have a choice and I can see where some schools might lose kids because the parents have a choice and they can go anywhere they want, but one of the things I tell my teachers is if parents are happy in your classroom, in our school, they're not going to go anywhere else because they love being in our school," as stated by School Leader 6.

School Leader 7 stated:

> School choice is good because parents have the option and our district gets a lot of transfers. Where it becomes unfair is when you compare public school vs charter school, then other factors come into play. Charter schools don't have to comply with the same accountability that we have to comply with, both in the instructional side and in the financial side. But we just have to promote all the opportunities we have to offer in our district and I believe we will be ok.

RQ4. What Can Public School Districts do to Help Retain and/or Increase Their Student Enrollment?

To help retain and/or increase student enrollment, school leaders felt the most important factor to consider is to provide the best customer service to all families, create a culture that exemplifies a sense of belonging and strive to provide the best educational opportunities for all children. When asked if providing the instructional option of 100% remote

learning and 100% face-to-face instruction to students would show a surge in district enrollment, all parents and school leaders agreed that offering parents the choice of either of the two is the best route because it will allow parents to decide which option is best for their family. School Leader 2 stated:

> It has been difficult for everybody from administration, the principals, the teachers, and the parents as well. We've always provided support to the students and to the parents and this year we are providing even more support due to the pandemic. Some parents are not ready for in-person classes so we need to continue to offer both or we will lose kids.

Parents felt the district should continue providing the option, especially if remote learning has worked well with their child(ren). Parent 3 stated:

> I can tell that the school has prepared their teachers well for remote learning versus other school districts. I would choose to continue with remote learning because I trust our district that they've been doing an excellent job in preparing their teachers for this transition of virtual learning. I see it with my kids every day.

In this time of uncertainty, with the starting of a school year like no other, school leaders understand the need to work together with all stakeholders to ensure students get the best instructional opportunities. "We are diving into a new form of learning. Our students are actually being engaged in a type of learning that most adults will never engage in," stated School Leader 4. Parent 1 stated feeling content with what the district had done so far, "I am glad the district is offering remote learning and I trust the district will make the best choice for the students and they're doing excellent but it has been difficult for parents. We have to take it one day at a time." Parent 7 went on to say:

> I don't think I would move my child. There's stress as it is due to COVID and then moving them to a completely new environment, another district would be very difficult to cope with. I would definitely make sure and want to know that there is a very strict safety plan that is being implemented not just on paper…making sure they are following all the protocols that should be in place before he physically goes back to school. For now, I think he is safer at home.

School Leader 4 recognizes the importance of keeping parents informed especially during the pandemic:

> We recently established a new Facebook because we felt we needed to stay connected to our parents and our school community. We know that a lot of families are going through a lot so we wanted to do a positive thing and showcase great things happening in our school even with the pandemic. We wanted to showcase our school with pride and keep our families happy and safe.

It will be important for districts to continue to promote their districts and find new and innovative ways to continue to attract new families to the schools while keeping them safe. Parent participants felt content with the current protocols in place at their districts. Both

districts have made numerous efforts to market their schools and their district in order to attract new families through their social media outlets. In the past, both districts have hosted numerous district-wide events to showcase their schools and target all families, however due to the pandemic no events have taken place since March of this year. Every decision is crucial for district leaders in these days ahead and staying connected with families and understanding what's important to parents is imperative for future enrollment.

DISCUSSION

The goal of this study was to develop an understanding of the factors that influence parents' decisions to enroll their child(ren) in a chosen school, that is, a school which differs from that assigned to the student, also known as school choice. The decline in student enrollment is an educational problem rooted in inequity, thus understanding what factors contribute to the decision toward school choice is critical. Eight themes emerged through the analysis of the findings using Strange & Banning's (2015) Environment Model.

Physical Environment Themes

In support of previous literature, participants indicated that the physical characteristics of a school and its buildings are appealing to them and therefore, an influential factor when determining their school of choice. Studies have shown that the physical environment such as the facility itself, the classroom setup, affects student performance. According to participants, the physical environment is an important factor that influences parents and attracts them to a particular school. McGufffey (1982) found that a link between physical environment and student achievement exists. Participants in this study confirmed that the physical location of the school is important as convenience. Some parent participants stated the location of the school to be important as it is close to their work or on their way to their work. The proximity of the school to the home is important to some parents, in most cases due to transportation, it is also important to some because it portrays the composition of the students in the school. The geographical importance is not only tied to convenience, but is also tied to school's surroundings and transmitting a sense of confidence that children are safe. Safety was indicated as a top influential factor for parent participants in the research study. School safety is an important issue for many school leaders and parents. Both parent participants and school leader participants reported safety was highly important. Prior research tells that a safe environment is among parents' top reasons for choosing a school (Bedrick & Burke, 2018). This is futher confirmed by the findings of this study.

A most recent safety concern facing schools today is due to COVID-19. The pandemic has caused fear in many parents and a wave of uncertainty upon school leaders. Parent participants indicated their uneasiness and resistance towards face-to-face instruction, however, also indicated they would allow their children to return if and when their schools believed it was safe to do so. Trust was indicated to be a big part of parents' decision to keep

their child(ren) at the school they are enrolled in. Furthermore, school leaders are working diligently to ensure they are providing all the teachers and staff the necessary resources to provide the same standards of educational excellence to all students. Whether the students are at home receiving remote instruction or physically attending school, parents entrust the school with their child's education and well-being.

Aggregate Environment Themes

According to Strange & Banning (2015), the aggregate environment is based on the understanding that environments are passed on through the people and the characteristics of the people who inhabit the environment. The aggregate environment plays a crucial role on children's learning and the strongest influential factors as described by parents and school leaders, emerged from this environment. Hence, the relationships and experiences schools create with their students and their families is critical and highly influential. Epstein (2010) found there is great benefit for schools to build relationships with their families. Parents seek schools where they feel their children are loved and cared for. The results from this study correlated with Epstein's (2010) study which found that families seek a sense of belonging and seek schools that build partnerships with the families. All participants stated that a caring school community was critical. Parents are attracted to schools that value the child and the family, when families and schools work as partners in the education of their children, parents feel content.

Academics is also a highly influential factor for parents when deciding where to enroll their children. A study conducted by Harris & Larson (2015) found academics to be the top reason families choose to open enroll their children in the school of their choice. Parent participants all agreed but this study found that the overall school culture and ensuring a sense of belonging was more influential. When the school culture promotes a positive and caring climate that supports the learning, the academic standards go hand in hand. Parents are greatly influenced to open enroll in a school where they feel the people who they interact with genuinely care for their child. Caring principals and caring teachers as highly influential factors when considering open enrolling their child into a school district (Rollefson, 2015). Parent participants in this study confirmed this data, supporting the theme of building relationships and customer service.

Organizational Environment Themes

The organizational environment refers to the goals and the overall structure in which the district operates. All schools had set goals and mission statements. Factors that contribute to the organizational environment include the school and/or district size. No parent or district leader indicated size as an influential factor for determining enrollment. District A is significantly bigger than District B, however, parents from neither district indicated this to be a factor. The two themes that emerged under this environment were the opportunities and options that the district and the schools offer and having accessibility parents have to district leadership.

Parent participants were highly influenced by the multitude of opportunities the district of their choice had to offer. Opportunities included extra-curricular activities, designated or specialty schools, early college high schools, and academies. Parent participants stated that the educational opportunities their district of choice offers is highly influential and were very content with the options the district provides for their child(ren). Also noted was that parents felt students are offered multiple options to succeed. Rollefson (2015) suggests some parents choose schools based on the school's academic accomplishments. School leaders were in agreement and continue to look for innovative ways to provide more academic opportunities for their students. This study indicated parents place a high emphasis on the opportunities offered at the school/district.

Accessibility of parents to the school and district leaders also emerged as an influencing factor. School leader participants also felt the grandness of being accessible to students' parents. Parent participants also felt it was important to have access when a problem or concern should arise to be able to communicate with school leaders and/or district leaders. Communication was considered imperative to both parents and school leaders. Parents were content knowing the school leaders were always willing to take the time to listen and address any concern/problem they may have. Parents know district leaders such as the superintendent and board members were also supportive and were pleased with the level of access to them, although those are leaders they don't see or speak to frequently.

Constructed Environment Themes

Strange & Banning (2015) emphasize the socially constructed environment as equally imperative. General impressions communicated through conversations (word of mouth), shared stories by people within the environment, and social media form the socially constructed environment. Parents were attracted to the environment based on he/she perceived it. One way to ensure parents and the community are kept informed of what the district is doing and what they have to offer students is through social media outlets. Both parent and school leader participants agreed social media played a big role in informing them of the great things that the district had to offer. Communication through social media has become a very powerful marketing tool. It has been used as a platform to help market their schools in an attempt to increase and retain student enrollment. With competition getting tougher with the addition of

charter schools, school leaders all agreed they have to 'sell' their schools and district to the parents and social media was the perfect outlet. Both school districts are very active in their websites including having each school with their own site. Additionally, both districts have active Facebook, Twitter, Snapchat, and Instagram accounts.

Communication through word of mouth was stated to also be highly influential for parents in this study. Families are greatly influenced by friends, neighbors and family members when choosing schools for their children. Whether negative or positive, testimonies of experiences of family and friends are a crucial factor. Positive press is a great influential factor for parents when choosing where to enroll their child. Parents' testimonials are a powerful means of communication and advertising for the school district (Rollefson, 2015). Some parents stated they were influenced by family and/or friends to enroll their children in the school. All district leaders agreed that parents play a crucial role when promoting their schools. Although they agree social media plays a key role, they all are aware of the importance of word of mouth and the implications it has on increasing and retaining their student enrollment.

Limitations

It is important to note that the data collected from this study only included information from parents who were practicing school choice. The study did not include the information from parents who enrolled their children in the district/school to which they are appropriately assigned. Information from those parents who were aware of open enrollment but decided to keep their children in the school they are zoned to was not collected or examined. Additionally, the participants in this study were all represented by Hispanic females and males, therefore, the experiences of other ethnicities were not represented.

Implications

Although there are studies on declining enrollment in public schools, this qualitative case study adds to the literature on the factors that influence parents' decision to enroll into a school as a means of handling the current situation districts are experiencing with declining enrollment. By looking at data collected from two neighboring public school districts, this study allows school leaders to understand what is important to parents from their own personal perspective. School leaders are facing declining enrollment and they need to find ways to combat this. Their perspective on what parents feel was important is critical to begin to find ways to address the declining enrollment issue. Information gained from this study could assist school leaders by helping district administration recruit students by focusing on the factors that influence parents to choose a school. This data would be very valuable to all districts who are experiencing a decline in their enrollment and districts could use the data to address their schools' needs.

Strange & Banning (2015) consider educational environments as most effective when they provide students and families with a sense of inclusion and safety, with opportunities of engagement and a sense of belonging. School districts who are able to understand the importance of having these as essential conditions in their learning environment will be better

equipped to increase their student enrollment and retaining it. Through this study we affirm the importance of the physical environment of a school district and the influential role it has on factors that parents consider when selecting the school for their child(ren). Addressing issues such as how safe the buildings are, keeping the buildings well-maintained, and ensuring that both the outside and the inside of the buildings are inviting is imperative.

The study also exemplifies the importance of the aggregate environment of a school district and should be one of the highest priorities when considering ways to attract and retain students into a school/district. Schools/districts must find ways to ensure they meet the needs of all their students through building relationships between students and the school personnel and between the parents and school personnel. The data collected from this study indicated the most influential factor for parents is factors that fall under the aggregate environment, therefore we can see that parents value school culture and having a sense of belonging. It is crucial for school districts to ensure families are able to form relationships with the schools' staff to ensure students feel connected. In doing so, the parents are content with their choice of school and continue to stay though the years.

School districts can also ensure parents and students feel a sense of belonging through the multitude of options and opportunities they provide such as extra-curricular activities, designated campuses, specialty schools, academies, and the numerous academic and non-academic activities and events. Themes that emerged in the organizational environment should also be considered by districts needing to increase enrollment. By addressing the academic development of their students, districts are addressing the organizational environment of their schools as this could also help districts increase and retain their enrollment. Parents were attracted to alternative types of learning such as specialized academies, early college high schools, vocational targeted schools, and designated elementary campuses. Districts who provide these types of opportunities should capitalize on it, especially if neighboring school districts do not offer them.

It is also important to recognize the socially constructed environment if the district is looking for ways to increase enrollment. School districts need to work together with their communities to market their schools and all that the district has to offer. Well-planned marketing strategies can help in the recruitment efforts. Having recruitment plans and hiring staff to work diligently with the community will also assist in the recruitment efforts. Districts who struggle with decreasing enrollment could focus on their recruitment and marketing efforts. It is the responsibility of all district and school leaders to advocate for their districts and ensure the community is aware of all they have to offer. District B mentioned having recently hired seven recruitment strategists. All in all, the school districts must make all efforts necessary to promote their districts to parents and the community.

CONCLUSION

In this era of school choice, open enrollment, and competition between school districts to increase student enrollment, it is imperative that school district leaders maintain a clear understanding of what exactly parents are looking for when deciding which school district best meets their child's needs. This case study examined the perceptions of parents and school leaders and sought to understand their experiences through the lens of Strange & Banning's Environmental Model. School administrators will continue to work hard to keep their students and parents content by understanding what parents are looking for when selecting their school and by continuing to look for innovative ways to retain their students while attracting new ones. Although this school year presented unprecedented conditions with the COVID-19 pandemic, the overall, results from the study concluded parents who have established positive relationships with the school they have open enrolled in, trust the school is making the most informed educational decisions for their child(ren) while keeping them safe.

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