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## Why Do Parents Choose to Send Their Children To Private Schools?

Ava M. Davis

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# WHY DO PARENTS CHOOSE TO SEND THEIR CHILDREN TO PRIVATE SCHOOLS?

by

AVA M. DAVIS

(Under the Direction of James E. Green)

## ABSTRACT

Private schools were the original educational entities in the United States and have continued playing a prominent role in educating America's youth. The number of private schools has increased over the last decade while the number of private school students has remained stable at approximately nine percent of school-aged children. The reasons for choosing a private school are just as varied as the types of private schools available. Thus, the purpose of this study was to examine the reasons parents give for choosing a private school education for their children. A basic interpretive qualitative study was used to discover and understand the perspectives of the participants. There were three participant groups: parents, students, and administrators representing religious and nonreligious private schools. The interviews were recorded and transcribed by the researcher. Further, the researcher conducted three levels of analysis of the data: first to determine patterns, second to derive broad themes from those patterns, and finally to form conclusions in response to the research questions. Several themes emerged from interviews with the participants: 1) perceived school characteristics; 2) quality of education; 3) physical environment; and 4) extracurricular activities.

INDEX WORDS: Parents, Private school, Religious schools, Nonreligious schools

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SCHOOLS?

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## DEDICATION

This study is dedicated to my loving family. To my husband Charles and our daughters, Khaliah and Rashida; thank you all very much for your unwavering faith in me. I truly appreciate the countless hours of assistance and the many words of encouragement. Your prayers and constant calls for updates kept me focused on my goal. I love you all dearly!

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## **CHAPTER I**

### **Introduction**

Private schools were the original educational entities in the United States (U.S. Department of Education, 2005) and they have played an important role in educating America's youth since the 1980's (Broughman, 2006). The number of private elementary and secondary schools in the United States has increased from 26,093 in the 1993-1994 school year to 28,384 schools in the fall of 2003, according to the National Center for Education Statistics (1996 and 2006). Whereas the total enrollment for private schools has increased from 1989 to 2005, the percentage of school-aged students in the United States has decreased from eleven to nine percent (Livington, 2008). Catholic schools maintain the largest number of private school students. Although enrollment in public elementary and secondary schools has increased since the fall of 1985, private school enrollment has grown more slowly (NCES, 2008). Currently, private school enrollment is approximately ten percent of the total elementary and secondary school-aged children (Broughman, 2006).

The use of school choice and voucher programs has enabled private school enrollments to remain stable over the past decade and a half. This is an indication that private education can be expected to remain a viable alternative to public schools. School choice is provided under Title One of the *No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001* (Bathon & Spradlin, 2007), affording students the opportunity to attend another public school in the district if their home school did not make adequate yearly progress (AYP) for two consecutive years. NCLB also provides benefits to private school students and teachers (U.S. Department of Education, 2007). These services are governed by the

Uniform Provisions in Title IX of the *Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA)*, and mandate equitable services to eligible private school students. These benefits, such as, targeted assistance for students who are having academic difficulty, financial assistance to improve the education for migrant students, and professional development for private school teachers, are considered services to students and teachers and not the private school entity (U.S. Department of Education, 2007). Hoxby (2003) has contended that school choice momentum increased after the federal *NCLB Act* instituted statewide testing to determine AYP. An example of a school choice initiative is the San Antonio School Choice Research Project (1997) in which a private program provided scholarships to low income parents to enroll their children in private schools. This program offered scholarships for other choices including a public multilingual program and funding for students already attending private schools. One of the reasons cited from this four-year study was parents' perception of the quality of public schools. Other major cities with similar voucher programs that provided limited funding for public school students to attend private schools of their choice include Milwaukee, Cleveland and Washington, D.C. (Lips, 2005). Each of these voucher programs uses a lottery system to select low income minority students. The purpose of voucher programs is to help lower income families receive the best education available. The programs are established based on assertions that education will be improved for all children when parents have the opportunity to choose their children's schools and when there is competition between public and private institutions (Hassett, 2001). According to the National Center for Education Statistics (1995), parents who chose their children's schools were more likely to be satisfied with the school. It was also noted that according to the National Household

Education Survey 1993, less than two percent of parents surveyed admitted that the assigned school was their school of choice (NCES, 1995).

Public schools have advantages that many private schools cannot match. Some of the advantages of public education include free books, competitive sports at multiple grade levels, state certified educators and administrators, free and reduced price lunches, and free transportation. Although many private schools receive public funds for transportation and special education services, some parents must provide transportation for their children (Cookson, 1997). According to the Office of Non-Public Education (2006), the average tuition at K-12 schools for the 2003-2004 school year ranged from \$5,049 for elementary schools to \$8,302 for combined schools. In metropolitan areas, like Baltimore where voucher programs exist, the average cost of private schools is within the amount of the vouchers (Lips, 2005). However, parents must pay tuition costs if their state does not have a voucher program.

There is research asserting that a private school education is superior to a public school education when relevant variables are controlled. Braun, Jenkins, and Grigg (2006) analyzed reading and mathematics scores between public and private schools. The researchers controlled for selected characteristics of students and schools, and determined that both reading and mathematics scores were higher for private school students. Neal's (2008) research revealed that the achievement of urban minorities improved while attending Catholic high schools. Additionally, the dropout rate was lower than the public school counterpart and more students attained a higher education. The National Assessment of Educational Progress (2006) reported that private school students continue to outperform public school students. This assessment noted that for the past thirty years



they have reported private schools have outperformed public schools. The San Antonio School Choice Research Project (1997), like most voucher programs, has asserted that choosers perform better and are more satisfied with their private school.

Georgia does not have a voucher program. However, under the mandates of No Child Left Behind (NCLB), exceptional education students are allowed to attend another school in the district if their home school does not meet adequate yearly progress. The relatively stable enrollment in private schools indicates that many parents continue to be willing to make financial sacrifices to send their children to private schools.

### **Background**

Private schools have become available to an expanding group of parents because of the increasing accessibility of private school vouchers that are targeted toward low-income households in economically disadvantaged and high minority school districts (Buddin, Cordes & Kirby, 1998). The trend toward private education, however, began as a means to preserve the religious values that were feared to be lost in public schools (Archer, 2000). Leading the movement was the Roman Catholic Church, which in November of 1884 decreed her members to seek a Catholic school education for their children (Archer, 2000). Thus, religion has been one of the constants in private education. With estimates of more than six million children attending private schools, the U.S. Department of Education (2008) has a division to represent these children through the Office of Non-Public Education.

The debate on whether the success of private schools stems from the characteristics of the school or from the characteristics of the enrolled students and their families continues (Martinez, Kemerer & Godwin, 1993). The reasons for choosing a private school are just

as varied as the types of private schools available. The motivation could be a specific location, a desire for an upscale environment, or military training. The student could be gifted, have a learning disability, be physically handicapped or have behavior problems (NPSAA, 2008). Some private schools enhance students' creativity in the arts, while others prepare the students for Ivy League college (Archer, 2000). A number of parents may choose a school where they attended (Ihejirika, 2004). Parents who are concerned about religion may choose a school that teaches religious lessons with the academic subjects to instill the beliefs and traditions of their faith (Archer, 2000).

Parents want the best education possible for their children and, in the case of private schools, that comes with a price. As family income and parents' levels of education rise, so does the inclination to choose a private school (Buddin, Cordes & Kirby, 1998). One of the most common reasons for choosing private schools is that parents believe their children get a superior education, according to Bauch and Goldring (1995) and Moe (2001). Parents are attracted to the smaller class size and educators acknowledge that smaller classes foster close working relationships between teachers and students, thereby enhancing learning (NCES, 2002).

Parent involvement is also a factor in choosing a private school (Goldring & Phillips, 2008). Some private schools require both student and parent to undergo a battery of interviews and tests. These schools embrace the idea that education is a partnership consisting of the parent, child and school (Kennedy, 2008). Additionally, researchers report that parents are more satisfied with their children's education, citing parents' beliefs that their involvement and communication are more easily facilitated and valued in the private school setting (Goldring & Phillips, 2008).

While some persons might apply an elitist stereotype to private school, many private school administrators and governing boards are making student diversity a priority. Private school administrators and boards of trustees have made diversity a major policy initiative (Archer, 2000). There are some schools that offer free tuition to qualified applicants or for students of families with incomes below a specified level to help ensure that the school has a diverse population. According to the U.S. Census Bureau report (2004), 23% of private school students are students of color and 28% are from families with annual incomes less than \$50,000.

There is considerable research on school choice as an alternative to public schools (Moe, 2001). There is also substantial research citing religious values as a reason for choosing a private school (Ihejirika, 2004; NCES, 1995), however, research on parents' motivations for the choice is limited. Past studies have described the characteristics of private schools and what makes them successful (NCES, 2002). Fewer studies have examined whether the characteristics of the student and family structure are related to choices to enroll in private schools.

Private school enrollment continues to be a stable market, 24 percent of elementary and secondary schools and 11 percent of the total schools enrollment (Office of Non-Public Education, 2006). The average school size is 174.4 students. Although the majority of the students who attend private schools continue to be White, non-Hispanic, (NCES, 2008), the minority population is increasing. Private school enrollments are 9.5% Black, 9.2% Hispanic, and 5.1% Asian/Pacific Islander. The 2005 graduation rate among private high schools was 98.3% with 57.6% of the graduates attending college.

The National Center for Education Statistics (2002), as well as several other researchers, has reported that students in private schools outperform their public school peers. Parents cite religious/moral reasons and a better academic environment for enrolling their children in private schools (NCES, 1995). The question that this research project addressed was, “Why do parents choose to send their children to private schools?”

### **Statement of the Problem**

Parents choose to send their children to private schools for a variety of reasons, including the quality of education anticipated and their children’s preparation for the future (CAPE, 2008). While several quantitative researchers have noted the parents’ desire for a well-rounded education, to include academics, sports and social life, what has not yet been investigated are the reasons given by parents in qualitative studies (Kennedy, 2008). Private schools are fulfilling this desire by making every effort to insure that their student population is racially, ethnically, and economically diverse (Kennedy, 2008). Although the financial requirements can be burdensome, private school parents make the commitment and sacrifices to provide the best possible education for their children. Researchers have noted that it was fairly common for families to make holiday and other luxury sacrifices to afford a private school education (Kennedy, 2008).

There are numerous studies that cited parent satisfaction for choosing a private school education (CAPE, 2008). However, the research is less clear on detailing how and why parents chose private schools. Research has shown that parents want the opportunity to choose the schools that their children attend (Moe, 2001). This investigation explained why parents chose private schools. The purpose of this study was to understand the reasons parents chose to send their children to private schools.

## **Research Questions**

The researcher considered the following overarching question in this study: What do parents perceive as the benefits of sending their children to private schools?

The following subquestions were used to answer the overarching question:

Subquestion 1: How do parents who send their children to private schools perceive conditions in public schools?

Subquestion 2: What reasons do parents give for choosing to send their children to private schools?

Subquestion 3: Do reasons given by parents for choosing private schools vary by the type of private school?

Subquestion 4: How do reasons given by students and administrators compare with the reasons given by parents for choosing private schools?

## **Significance of the Study**

The significance of this study, from a practical perspective, is that public school leaders will be afforded the opportunity to understand the motivation of parents for sending their children to private schools. This information may be used as a basis to improve parental involvement and satisfaction in public schools.

This study will contribute to the professional literature by helping to fill the void in the research on why parents choose private schools. Factors that motivate parents to send their children to private schools were examined and the decision-making process explained. In addition, the investigation provided a description of the demographic characteristics of parents who send their children to private schools. As a consequence, school administrators will be equipped with a better understanding of increased interest in

private schools as an option to public education. Thus, they will be better informed to respond to the expectations and needs of parents in their school communities.

This researcher would also like to use the conclusions from the investigation to develop strategies to raise the level of parent satisfaction in the researcher's school. The researcher envisions serving as the principal of a public school with a private school mentality in which the focus is on the success of each individual student. Having high expectations is the norm for private schools in their efforts to improve student achievement (Center for the Study of Education Reform, 1996). It is believed by some that private schools hold the answers to success for America's students. Yet, there are public schools that have bought into the private school mentality that students want to learn, want to do the right thing and are capable of making wise educational decisions.

## **Research Procedures**

### **Research Design**

The researcher used a basic interpretive qualitative design. This research design was used to fulfill the researcher's goal of understanding the motivation for parents to choose a private institution to educate their children. A basic interpretive qualitative study is ideal for discovering and understanding the perspectives of the participants (Merriam, et.al, 2002). The strategy was inductive and the outcome was descriptive.

### **Research Sample**

The purposive sample was a minimum of eight parents of students who attend private schools, eight students who were third grade or older, and four private school administrators. Purposeful sampling of this targeted group of individuals revealed their motivation in selecting private school and provided the reasons for the school choice.

This type of sample was chosen to provide first-hand descriptions of their decisions in choosing a private school education (Merriam, et.al, 2002). The use of three participant groups (i.e., parents, students, and administrators) provided for triangulation of data. Students were asked the reasons they believed their parents chose to send them to private school and the administrators were asked the reasons parents gave for choosing the private school. A short biography of each participant was given.

### **Data Collection**

The primary method of collecting data was through interviews of parents and students. Private school administrators were also interviewed to determine the reasons that parents gave them for choosing a private school education for their children. Parents were asked a set of specific demographic questions, as well as less structured questions, addressing reasons why they chose a private school education for their children. When possible, the interviews were conducted in preferred natural settings (Lichtman, 2006).

Parent participants were asked questions concerning demographic information, type of K-12 school attended, and religious affiliation. See Appendix D for parent demographic questionnaire. Parents were also asked additional questions about their children's previous school experiences. The researcher inquired about the student's discipline history. When there was a discipline history, the researcher inquired about the disposition of each infraction. Information about the assigned public school's safety record and Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) status were also asked. The student's grade history and standardized test scores were of interest to the researcher.

Parents also were asked to share their children's private school experiences. For example, whether the child was involved in extracurricular activities, sports or clubs were

of interest to the researcher. Other experiences that were of interest to the researcher were whether the child experienced a positive school environment and whether school safety, friends, academics and behavior improved. See Appendix A for parent questionnaire.

The meaning of the study was mediated through the researcher as instrument. The researcher used an interview protocol comprised of open-ended questions designed to prompt dialogue between the researcher and the participants in the study, allowing the researcher to probe for details on behavior, attitudes, and motivation. A tape recorder was used to aid in transcription of notes. Interviews with parents were conducted in person at times and places convenient to them. Student participants were also at times and places convenient for the parents. After an interview, the data was transcribed so as to be mindful that all details were included in the transcription. When at least two interviews were completed, the researcher analyzed the data to search for common themes or patterns.

Two types of private schools were chosen: two church-related schools and two schools that did not have any religious affiliation. An administrator from each school was interviewed. At least two parents and their children were interviewed from the respective schools.

### **Data Analysis**

The researcher transcribed information from the tape recordings verbatim. The researcher coded data identifying recurring patterns or common themes. A descriptive account of the findings was presented referencing the literature that framed the study. Themes and concepts were compared across interviews using the constant comparison



method (Anfara, Brown, & Mangione, 2002); meaning that data analysis starts as soon as it is collected.

### **Delimitations**

This study confined itself to interviewing parents of children enrolled in private K-12 schools, their children who were enrolled in private K-12 schools, and the administrators of those schools. Private pre-schools were not included in this study. The sample schools were delimited to K-12 schools. Additionally, the study was limited to the metropolitan area of a large city located in the southeastern region of the United States.

### **Limitations**

The potential weakness of the study was that the purposive sampling of parents of students who attend private K-12 schools would not allow transferability of the findings to similar populations.

### **Summary**

There were few studies (Bania, Eberts, & Stone, 1986; Lacireno-Paquet & Brantley, 2008) that revealed why parents choose private schools for their children. Bania, Eberts, and Stone (1986) examined the criteria for choosing a private school by focusing on the quality of public schools and value placed on education as reflected by the family's background and the characteristics of their communities. Catholic and non-Catholic private schools were considered in the study. The authors further noted that as the number of children increased, the less likely the family would choose to send their children to private school. Lacireno-Paquet and Brantley (2008) examined private school choice, as well as several other choice options. Schools chosen in this study were state accredited and those private schools that were perceived to be in competition with public

schools in the area. Other studies have compared the academic performance of students in private schools to students receiving a public education (Neal, 2008; Peterson & Llaudet, 2006; Figlio & Stone, 1997). These studies revealed that, overall, the students in public schools performed comparable to their privately educated peers. This has prompted the question, why do parents choose to send their children to private schools. Further research is needed to examine the motivation for parents to send their children to private schools when vouchers or other choice options are not available. A family that chooses private school incurs expenses in addition to their tax dollars that are used to help fund public schools. Other costs, such as transportation and books, may be incurred by parents who choose private schools.

This study was necessary to help public school districts and private schools understand the motivation for choosing a private school education while allowing public schools to improve parental satisfaction. The study was also necessary to assist public school administrators in their quest to model public schools with a private school mentality.

## **CHAPTER II**

### **REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

#### **Introduction**

Chapter II is comprised of a review of the literature on private education and the reasons parents choose private schools for their children. Primary sources were consulted to identify relevant research on the question, “Why do parents choose to send their children to private schools?” After a brief account of the search strategies used for this chapter, the history of private education was discussed and the characteristics of private schools were described. Other sections in Chapter II included the performance and variety of private schools. The chapter concluded with information on the public’s perception of private education and the reasons parents gave for choosing private education. The discussion and summary section identified the gap in the literature to clarify the basis for the research question.

#### **Search Strategies**

A basic search using Galileo Scholar, Google Scholar, the National Council of Education Statistics, and the Office of Non-public Schools was used to gather data. The generic use of “reasons for choosing private education” yielded over a million responses. Therefore, it was necessary to add descriptives such as, “in the United States” and “K-12” to get a more refined selection of articles.

The search in the government information system, National Center for Education Statistics, yielded numerous yearly reports by using, “parents who choose private schools.” The search in the Georgia Southern University Library produced literature by

using, “private school education,” “choosing private school,” and “private school choice.”

### **Characteristics of Private Schools**

Historians of American education agree that private schools have benefited the common good of American society (Davis, 1999). Without private schools, there would be a heavy financial burden on taxpayers to provide ample schools for all students (Davis, 1999). Additionally, it has been estimated that the government would have saved approximately \$115 billion in 1995 if all elementary and secondary students attended private schools (Davis, 1999). While no one expects private schools to replace our system of public education; however, we can observe several ways in which the nation’s public schools have been positively impacted by the enduring legacy of private education.

This impact of private education has contributed to the success of public schools in several ways. One example is the implementation of the first mandatory school attendance law in 1642 by the Massachusetts Bay Colony leaders. The law was created to assure parents that their children could read and understand the principles of their religion (Davis, 1999). After the Great Depression, many states raised the compulsory school attendance age from fourteen to sixteen (Olson, 2000). Public funding for schools began, according to Davis, when members of the Constitutional Convention imposed taxes that were distributed to religious organizations to establish and support elementary and secondary schools. As the nation’s population and territory expanded in the nineteenth century, it became difficult for the voluntary church agencies to provide educational services to the vast diversity of immigrants. According to Davis, the common school was

believed to be a threat to Catholic schools which ultimately led to the distinction of private and public schools.

The main difference between private schools and public schools is the way in which they are funded. Nonpublic schools are privately managed and financed (Kraushaar, 1972). These schools receive their funding from tuition payments, foundations, religious groups, alumni or private endowments and donations (Bielick & Chapman, 2003). They are owned and governed by independent entities without governmental ties (Alt & Peter, 2002). Usually, the governing boards are religious organizations or independent boards of trustees. In larger private schools, the business, public relations and fundraising jobs are typically filled by non-educators who are practitioners in their respective specializations (Kraushaar, 1972).

Some private schools are established for profit while the vast majority of them are non-profit (Davis, 1999). Additionally, approximately 85% of all private schools are affiliated with some religious organization (Davis, 1999). Religious private schools generally spend less per student than public schools (Figlio & Stone, 1997). Some researchers have observed that private school students outperform their public school counterparts at a lower cost, leading advocates to argue that private schools are more effective at the business of educating their pupils (Figlio & Stone; Kraushaar, 1972; Peterson & Llaudet, 2006).

People who are affiliated with private schools prefer to call their institutions independent schools as a means of distinguishing secular private schools and church-related private schools (Kraushaar, 1972). They may also be referred to as nonpublic schools. (These labels will be used interchangeably throughout the chapter). The gambit

of private or independent schools ranges from boarding to day schools. There are independent schools for a host of different purposes. For example, private schools may be single gender, military, topic specific, or college preparatory (Kraushaar, 1972).

Kraushaar has noted that the staff and clientele of private schools tend to be of like-minds who envision a harmonious school culture. Nonpublic school students whose parents are in a higher socioeconomic level and who are more likely to desire their children to attend college choose to send their children to private schools (NCES, 2003).

A defining characteristic of private schools is smaller average class sizes (NCES, 1997). Nonpublic schools are generally smaller than public schools, thus being in the position of establishing amiable relationships with parents and keeping them informed of their children's progress (Kraushaar, 1972). Although most private schools are small by choice, others are small because of the lack of financial backing or reputation (NCES, 1995).

The majority of private school students are likely to be White and most of the schools are coeducational (Alt & Peter, 2002; Bielick & Chapman, 2003; Goldring & Rowley, 2006; Lacireno-Paquet & Brantley, 2008; NCES, 1997). Private schools also have the benefit of choosing their students from a pool of applicants who are qualified by the school's admission policies. Some researchers consider this a dual selection process in that the institutions select students to attend their schools and the parents choose which school to send their children (Alt & Peter, 2002; Davis, 1999).

The characteristics of private schools are varied and depend, in a large degree, on the type of private school and its function. Parents have the fundamental right to select the

educational system that best suits their personal needs and faith. This right is embedded in the historical origin of American education and the citizenry of its people.

### **History of Private Schools in America**

#### **Colonial Era and the Late 18<sup>th</sup> Century**

At the beginning of America's education system, most elementary schools were private schools (Good, 1970). The schools were ungraded, meaning that all of the students of varying ages were in one classroom (Broughman, Swaim, & Keaton, 2009). Privately owned and operated schools represented the established form of education (Archer, 2000). The academies that charged students were often called public schools because they were viewed as a service for the good of the public (Good, 1970).

#### **Boston Grammar School**

The Boston Latin Grammar School, founded in 1638, conformed to the European education model, with the curriculum focused on the *trivium* (a set of three of seven liberal arts that formed the basis of medieval university study, consisting of grammar, rhetoric, and logic) and the *quadrivium* (considered to be more important than the other three liberal arts, consisting of arithmetic, geometry, music and astronomy). It was established to serve the children of scholars, gentlemen of leisure and the merchants and innkeepers who were involved in foreign trade (Sexson, 1938). The primary purpose was to prepare young boys for admission to the university, namely Harvard. This school and others like it that followed, were the forerunner of secondary education institutions in the American colonies. Although some things have changed, Boston Latin Schools continue to be one of the top public secondary schools in the country and includes admissions testing requirements.

## **Dame Schools**

Early in the nineteenth century, women began dominating the teaching in New England through two informal educational systems: dame schools and a system divided into two seasons, winter and summer sessions (Botticini & Eckstein, 2006). The dame schools were started by British settlers in which women taught very young children. It was rationalized that this practice began because women were considered caregivers by nature. The winter and summer sessions were gender-based in which men taught the older boys during the winter months and female teachers taught the younger children during the summer sessions (Botticini & Eckstein, 2006). These schools were privately supported and often organized for profit (Leinster-Mackay, 1976).

## **Early 19<sup>th</sup> Century**

In 1806, the Lancasterian schools, developed in England by Joseph Lancaster, were introduced into the United States (Good, 1970). They were private schools that garnered the public's patronage because of their affordable price and they provided a middle ground between ungraded private schools and graded public schools. Lancasterian schools were supported and promoted in New York City by the "Society for Establishing a Free School in the City of New York for the Education of Such Poor Children as do not Belong to or are not Provided for by any Religious Society" (Ravitch, 2000, 9). The organization was renamed the Free School Society (Ravitch, 2000). The purpose of the original title was to squelch opposition from church schools and to ensure that the private schools, such as Lancasterian schools, would not infringe on the territory already covered by church schools (Good, 1970).



The Free School Society later became known as the Public School Society, although it was a private organization servicing private schools (Good, 1970). The purpose of the society was to educate the poor. A portion of all of the teaching was done by students who were more advanced than their peers. This process was referred to as mutual instruction. Students who were appointed to help in ways other than teaching were called monitors. In 1826, tuition was charged to those who were able to pay which caused a drop in patronage. Six years later the concept of paying tuition was discarded. The society remained active until 1853 at which time it transferred its property to the Board of Education that had been formed in 1842. Thereafter, states began their involvement in education. During this same time there was debate about the disposition of federal lands (Tyack, James, & Benavot, 1987). Ultimately, the Lancasterian schools were responsible for the transition from private to public schools prior to the Civil War (Good, 1970).

Horace Mann, the 19<sup>th</sup> Century father of state-supported education, viewed moral instruction as an important aspect of the common school (Archer, 2000). The common school, as envisioned by Mann, was a form of nondenominational Christianity that he believed would be accepted by all Americans (Davis, 1999). However, the schools were clearly Protestant institutions which received opposition from Catholics and other religious sects (Archer, 2000).

### **Rise of Parochial Schools**

Catholic schools date back to the seventeenth century when missionaries established schools in Florida and Louisiana as a means of spreading the Roman Catholic faith (Hunt, Joseph, & Nuzzi, 2004). Since the Catholic population was small, the schools were created amidst Catholic discrimination. Catholic schools began to multiple by the

nineteenth century (Hunt, Joseph, & Nuzzi, 2004). Despite the poverty level of most Catholics, in 1845 there were 1,444 Catholic elementary schools. The leadership of the Catholic Church declared that every parish should have a school for its children and it urged all parents to send their children to Catholic schools (Hunt, Joseph, & Nuzzi, 2004; Archer, 2000). The Catholic population increased 300 percent from 1880 to 1920 and their school enrollment increased 400 percent. It was noted, however, that the decree for every child to receive a Catholic education fell well below the mandate (Hunt, Joseph, & Nuzzi, 2004).

### **Late 19<sup>th</sup> Century**

Unlike the Catholic Church, many Lutherans did not see the need for separate schools. However, the Germans who founded the Lutheran Church, were adamant that their children's faith and culture remain intact. Since their worship services were in German, speaking English and venturing into the American culture were thought to weaken the critical rudiments of their faith (Archer, 2000). The discrimination against foreign cultures led some states to mandate that core subjects were only taught in English in all schools (Archer, 2000). The Bennett Law, which predates World War I, defined a school as a place where all subjects were taught in English (Tyack, James, & Benavot, 1987). Members of the Catholic and Lutheran faiths fought to have the right to preserve their culture by using the language of their worship service during the school day. In doing so, these religious schools were labeled as un-American (Kraushaar, 1972).

### **Rise of Elitism**

After the Civil War, a new wave of private schools emerged. These schools preferred to be called independent schools rather than private. The majority of these schools were

located in the New England states with a strong concentration in Massachusetts and New York. These private schools had elaborate facilities, thus justifying the high price of their tuition (Good, 1970). They were originally church schools dating back to 1761. The schools were independent of state control but usually had close church connections (Good, 1970). Phillips Academy, also known as Andover Academy, after the Massachusetts town in which it is located, is one such school. The boarding school's mission is building character and preparing students for college (Archer, 2000). After graduating from the academy, the vast majority of their students attend Yale or Harvard universities. Other independent boarding schools in New England of similar status include Exeter, Groton, and Choate. The industrial boom of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century created wealth that enabled parents to send their children to the more affluent private academies.

In the years after World War I, with a decline in the rural economy and growth of the urban economy, conditions changed with parents demanding a higher quality education. The oppositions to legislators, state boards of education and the courts shaped the history of education governance (Brandt, 2000). Emphasis was placed on the professionalizing of Catholic schools (Hunt, Joseph, & Nuzzi, 2004). Issues such as teacher certification and school accreditation were entrenched in the movement for secondary schools which were experiencing tremendous growth. The next twenty years prompted the establishment of Catholic high schools, as well as private high schools (Hunt, Joseph, & Nuzzi, 2004).

## **20<sup>th</sup> Century**

An Oregon law, *Pierce v. Society of Sisters*, enacted in October 1922, that mandated all children between the ages of eight and sixteen to attend public schools, was declared unconstitutional in 1925 (Kandel, 1955). The law, strongly supported by the Ku Klux

Klan, was intended to suppress all private elementary schools (Good, 1970). The decision by the Supreme Court declared that parents have the right to choose the school their children attend. The decision further declared that the State has the right to regulate and examine all schools and teachers to ascertain that lessons taught were beneficial to the public welfare. Schools serving poor children, “charity” schools, and academies were impacted as a result of increasing public supervision of private schools (Tyack, James, & Benavot, 1987).

Public expenditures for public schools increased from 47 percent in 1850 to 79 percent in 1890 (Tyack, James, & Benavot, 1987). During the same time period, the percentage of elementary public school students in rural areas increased to ninety percent (Tyack, James, & Benavot, 1987). Inflation reduced the disposable income which made private schools less affordable for many families (Kraushaar, 1972). The ten percent of students who remained in private schools attended Catholic schools in large cities. Kraushaar noted that private schools faced severe financial crisis due to inflation, recession, higher teacher salaries and other costs which threatened their survival.

### **Revival of Church-related Schools**

After the Second World War, the number of students in nonpublic schools increased 118 percent (Hunt, Joseph, & Nuzzi, 2004). During the same period, from 1940 to 1959, the public school enrollment increased 36 percent. A measure by the Supreme Court in 1947, *Everson v. Board of Education*, determined that for the good of the student, public funds could be used to provide transportation to religious schools (Walsh, 2000). This boost to the Catholic school enrollment came at a time when financing was increasingly difficult to secure. The years that followed brought numerous cases before the Supreme

Court regarding assistance for religious schools. Catholics had high expectations of President John F. Kennedy who was the first of their faith to be elected to the presidency (Archer, 2000). However, it was President Lyndon B. Johnson who assembled leaders from both public and private schools in support of the Elementary and Secondary Schools Act of 1965 which guaranteed financial assistance for poor children despite the school attended (Walsh, 2000).

The history of private schools in the United States tends to correlate with societal changes. Religion, according to Archer (2000), has been one of the stable elements in private education. In the first half of the twentieth century, the enrollment in Catholic schools was more than five million students (Archer, 2000). However, the baby boom after World War II and massive Catholic population growth prompted questions about the need of a parochial education. Catholics believed they were more main stream especially after the election of President John F. Kennedy (Archer, 2000). Just as Catholic schools' enrollment was declining, Christian schools were on the increase. This boost to Christian schools' enrollment came in the 1960s when prayer was taken out of public schools. By the late 1970s, the student body of nonpublic schools was becoming more diverse and less affluent partly because of parents' perceptions that the academic performance of public schools was declining. Shortly thereafter, public schools received horrific academic assessments in the 1983 report, *A Nation at Risk*, which added to the list of reasons parents sought alternatives to public school education.

### **Performance of Private Schools**

When comparing the performance of private schools to public schools, it is important to note that there are a number of variables that may contribute to the outcome of

students' performance. Student characteristics, such as the family's socioeconomic status, prior achievement and support for learning from parents, and motivation level, may have an impact on students' performance (Alt & Peter, 2002). Additionally, characteristics of the school, such as enrollment, the composition of the student body and the community, may affect students' performance. The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP, 2006) reported that admission policies and parental involvement can also be contributing factors for private school students' success.

NAEP compares private school students' performance on national assessments to their public school counterpart (Perie, Vanneman, & Goldstein, 2005). It has focused on the three groups of private schools with the highest enrollment: Catholic, Lutheran and Conservative Christian schools. According to NAEP, for the past thirty years, private school students have outperformed public school students. The average scores were higher in fourth grade reading, mathematics and science. The scores were also higher in eighth and twelfth grades mathematics and science. Higher performance scores, however, do not mean that private schools are better than public schools because they often serve dissimilar students (NAEP). Moreover, students in Catholic and Lutheran schools outperformed their Conservative Christian school counterparts.

Students in large cities, according to Neal (2008), benefit academically from attendance in private schools. Figlio and Stone (1997) reported that parents of students who attend Catholic schools were 14% more likely to use the public libraries and 37% more likely to visit art museums. Catholic schools were also noted as raising achievement in urban minority students and decreasing dropout rates among the minority secondary youth (Figlio & Stone, 1997).

The National Assessment of Educational Progress (2006) found that in 2002 fourth and eighth grade private school students had higher average writing scores than students in the same grades in public schools. Moreover, private school students from all ethnic groups had higher average scores than their public school peers (NAEP). White and Hispanic students who attended Catholic schools in large cities performed better than their public school peers (Neal, 2008). Black students in Catholic schools had higher averages than Black students in public schools in all areas except in fourth grade mathematics and writing (Perie, Vanneman, & Goldstein, 2005). The study by Figlio and Stone (1997) found that minority students in urban areas benefit from attending religious schools. The study also found a positive effect for Black and Hispanic students in grades eight through twelve to make academic gains.

Albeit small, the difference in graduation requirements for private high schools during the 1999-2000 school year were more than those required in public schools for mathematics, foreign language, and science (Alt & Peter, 2002). Private high school graduates were also more likely to have completed advanced coursework in mathematics and science than public high school graduates (Alt & Peter, 2002). Private schools were, in addition, more likely than public schools to require their students to complete some community service before graduation (NCES, 1997). Catholic schools surpassed both groups in the area of community service (NCES).

Ninety-eight percent of twelfth graders enrolled in private schools in October 2006 graduated in 2007 (Broughman, Swaim, & Keaton, 2009). During this same period, however, the average freshman graduation rate was 73.2% for public school students (Cataldi, Laird, & KewalRamani, 2009). According to Neal (2008), however, there is

little evidence that students attending Catholic schools in suburban areas have higher graduation rates than students of any race. The study does show, however, that students who attend Catholic high schools in cities outperform their public school peers.

A positive correlation exists between parents' expectations and students' attendance in postsecondary education (NCES, 2003). Research by the National Center for Education Statistics has shown that private school students were more likely than their public school peers to enroll in college a year after graduating from high school. Additionally, students in religious schools were expected by their parents to graduate from a four-year college (Bielick & Chapman, 2003).

Private school educators express a higher degree of satisfaction for their job (McLaughlin, O'Donnell, & Ries, 1995). Moreover, both teachers and principals rate the climate of their private school as being better than public schools (Alt & Peter, 2002). These factors are recorded despite the higher salaries in public schools. On average, public school teachers earn sixty four percent higher wages than their private school counterparts (McLaughlin, O'Donnell, & Ries, 1995). The salaries for public school principals are twice as much as private school administrators (NCES, 1997). Of course, many speculate that the reason that private school teachers have a greater turnover rate than public schools is attributed to the salary differential (McLaughlin, O'Donnell, & Ries, 1995).

Other factors that seem to contradict the performance of private schools have to do with the caliber of teachers and administrators. Public school teachers are fifty percent more likely than private school teachers to be certified (McLaughlin, O'Donnell, & Ries, 1995). Public school teachers tend to be more experienced and are 33% more likely to



have taught for ten or more years. Public educators were 55% more likely to have advanced degrees. Likewise, public school administrators were fifty percent more likely than their private school colleagues to have advanced degrees.

### **Variety in Private Schools**

There are three major categories of private schools: Catholic, other religious or nonsectarian (Broughman, Swaim, & Keaton, 2009). There are also three types of Catholic schools: parochial, diocesan and private (Broughman, Swaim, & Keaton, 2009). Catholic schools tend to be larger and have a more diverse population than any other private schools (Alt & Peter, 2002). Ninety-six percent of Catholic and nonsectarian schools enroll minority students (Alt & Peter, 2002). According to Kraushaar (1972), it seems as if private schools show more interest in poor students than do their public school counterparts. Although the elite nonpublic schools compose only a fraction of private schools, they provide scholarships to diversify their student population (Archer, 2000).

Generally, it is not mandatory for private schools to adhere to state and federal regulations regarding their admission policies and curricula (Bielick & Chapman, 2003). In 1998 the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) listed thirty five different religious denominations and seventeen religious school associations. There is not a system of private schools because of the variety of schools' organizations and the autonomy that most private schools possess (Davis, 1999). However, the majority of private schools is nonprofit and is affiliated with a religious organization (Alt & Peter, 2002; Davis, 1999).

According to the National Center of Education Statistics, private schools are assigned to one of four regions (Broughman, Swaim, & Keaton, 2009). These geographic locations include the Northeast, Midwest, South and West. Private schools are evenly distributed within the four geographic regions with the South having the largest number of schools and students (Alt & Peter, 2002). During the 1999-2000 school year, the majority of private schools were located in central cities and large towns (Alt & Peter, 2002). There are three classifications of private schools. They may be elementary, secondary or combined schools. Some students may attend schools that are ungraded (Broughman, Swaim, & Keaton, 2009). The staff may be full-time or part-time. For example, private schools were less likely to have a full time librarian (McLaughlin, O'Donnell, & Ries, 1995).

Private school students were more likely to be in a racially diverse classroom than public school students (Kane & Orsini, 1999). However, fourteen percent of private schools did not have any minority students in 1999-2000 compared to only four percent of public schools that did not have any minority students (Alt & Peter, 2002). According to statistics from the National Association of Independent Schools, nine percent of independent schools' teaching personnel were educators of color (Kane & Orsini, 1999). This figure is an increase from the four percent of minority teachers in 1987 (Kane & Orsini, 1999). Twenty percent of enrolled students, according to the same data, were recorded as being students of color (Kane & Orsini, 1999).

### **Current Status of Private Education**

Private schools have maintained a relatively stable market throughout the twentieth century (Archer, 2000). However, near the end of the nineteenth century, private schools

held a prominent standing among secondary schools (Kraushaar, 1972). In 1879, private academies, in conjunction with the preparatory departments of private colleges, enrolled 73% of secondary school students (Kraushaar, 1972). Ten years later, this enrollment dropped to thirty two percent. After the First World War, private school enrollment, in both elementary and secondary, dropped to seven percent (Kraushaar, 1972).

During the Great Depression, private elementary school enrollment increased to ten percent whereas the secondary school enrollment decreased to six percent of the total student enrollment (Kraushaar, 1972). During the forties and after World War II, private school enrollment rose to almost fourteen percent (Kraushaar, 1972). Since the end of World War II and throughout the sixties, the growth of nonpublic schools exceeded that of public schools. The overall percentage of students in private schools, however, has remained relatively stable from 12.4 percent in 1985 to 11 percent in 2007 (NCES, 2008). The enrollment has not risen above fifteen percent and has not been lower than seven percent (Archer, 2000).

There were 26,093 private elementary and secondary schools in the 1993-1994 school year with 330,839 full-time teachers (NCES, 1997). Private schools accounted for 24.4 percent of all schools in the United States. There were 4.9 million private school students which was 10.7 percent of all students (NCES, 1997). Less than five percent of the private schools were boarding schools, thus the majority of private schools were servicing students in local communities (NCES, 1997).

During the 1999-2000 school year, there were approximately 27,000 private schools with 404,000 teachers and an enrollment of 5.3 million students (Alt & Peter, 2002). These figures accounted for 24 percent of all schools and ten percent of all students.

Seventy-nine percent of all private schools had religious affiliations with thirty percent of private school students attending a school associated with the Roman Catholic Church (Alt & Peter, 2002).

The number of private school elementary and secondary teachers increased twenty three percent during the period of 1991 to 2004 (Hussar & Bailey, 2007). The Middle Alternative Projections forecasted an additional twenty percent increase during the period 2004 through 2016 (Hussar & Bailey, 2007). Enrollment in elementary and secondary private schools increased eight percent between 1991 and 2004 and is projected to increase an additional six percent between 2004 and 2016 (Hussar & Bailey, 2007).

In 2003, there were 28,384 private schools with 467,400 teachers educating over 5 million students (Broughman & Swaim, 2006). The average tuition cost in 2003 for elementary students was \$5,049, the cost for secondary school students was \$8,412 and the combined private school tuition was \$8,302. Ninety five percent of private schools were coeducational with eighty one percent emphasizing a regular elementary or secondary program (Broughman & Swaim, 2006). The majority of all private schools educate elementary aged students (Alt & Peter, 2002; Bielick & Chapman, 2003). On average, private school class size is smaller than public schools with 25 percent having fewer than fifteen students in a class (NCES, 1997). During the 2007-2008 school year, the average number of students per teacher was eleven (Broughman, Swaim & Keaton, 2009). Some researchers found that students and teachers form a better relationship when there are small classes (Alt & Peter, 2002; NCES, 2003). It is noted that this relationship can enhance academic performance (Alt & Peter, 2002). The disadvantages to small

schools however, may include the lack of accelerated classes and qualified personnel (Alt & Peter, 2002).

Students whose families qualified for free or reduced-price lunch and students who were English Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) were less likely to attend private schools (Alt & Peter, 2002; NAEP, 2006). In the 1999-2000 school year, thirteen percent of private schools enrolled ESOL students versus fifty four percent of public schools (NAEP, 2006). Almost all public schools had students who were eligible for subsidized lunch, whereas twenty five percent of private schools did not know if their students qualified for the program (NAEP, 2006). Catholic schools were more likely to have students who were eligible for subsidized lunch assistance than were other nonpublic schools (Alt & Peter, 2002). However, nonsectarian private schools had a higher participation rate in the Federal Lunch Program (NAEP, 2006).

Private schools have maintained approximately ten to eleven percent of total student enrollment over the last decades (Alt & Peter, 2002). Catholic schools continue to be the largest group of independent schools and enroll nearly fifty percent of all private school students (Alt & Peter, 2002). Private schools, according to Goldring and Rowley (2006), are available to a broader group of parents because of the growing availability of private school vouchers earmarked for students in high minority districts with low-income households.

### **School Choice and Private Schools**

The reasons parents give for choosing nonpublic schools are mostly based on research about school choice programs. These types of school choice programs provide assistance by using vouchers to allow parents to select a private school of their choice (Bielick &

Chapman, 2003). There are six such school voucher programs in the United States: Colorado, Florida, Maine, Vermont, Milwaukee, Wisconsin and Cleveland, Ohio. These programs provide assistance by offering either government or private vouchers.

The research on why parents choose to send their children to private schools is gathered mostly from the perspective of private schools supported by vouchers. Minority and low-income families are targeted for school choice, according to Goldring and Hausman (1999), to achieve racial diversity and to provide additional educational opportunities that are not offered in public schools. The characteristics of parents who exercise their school choice options are comparable to the parents of private school students. However, on average, the parents who exercise their choice options are better educated and have higher incomes than the parents who do not take advantage of the school choice options (Goldring & Hausman, 1999).

Private schools have an unmatched advantage over public schools stemming from the parents' desire to choose a private education for their children (Alt & Peter, 2002). According to Alt and Peter (2002), when parents require students to perform to high academic standards and when they express clear and consistent expectations of teachers and maintain a climate for learning, school climate is positively affected regardless of whether the school is public or private.

### **Public Perception of Private Education**

Parents who send their children to private schools and the general public think that private schools are academically superior (Kraushaar, 1972; Peterson & Llaudet, 2006; Neal, 2008). Research supports this claim indirectly by finding that low-income and minority students are more likely to benefit from private school enrollment (Alt & Peter,

2002). The benefits cited include higher academic achievement, reduced dropout rates, and improved critical thinking skills. However, higher performance scores in private schools do not mean that private schools are better than public schools (NAEP, 2006).

The private label has caused some to think that private schools are elitist, which places a distance between private and public schools from the common purpose of educating the nation's youths. Public schools, on the other hand, were recognized as being the American way. Davis (1999) asserted that it is unfortunate that society has chosen to label schools by their organizational structure.

Another perception of the public's view of private schools is that they lack diversity (Kane & Orsini, 1999). Research indicated that nonpublic schools were more likely to be diverse than their public school counterparts (Alt & Peter, 2002). Private schools actively seek diversity by drawing students from many communities. Overall, private school parents are more likely to have a positive perception of and satisfaction with their schools (NCES, 1995). This information is based on responses provided from research and case studies on school choice (Hoxby, 2003).

Research by Peterson and Llaudet (2006) question the perception that private schools perform better than public schools. As Perie, Vanneman and Goldstein (2005) noted, higher performance scores in private schools do not imply that private schools are better than public schools. Demographics, according to Peterson and Llaudet (2006) and Goldring and Rowley (2006), are the most important factor in student achievement and not which type of school attended by the students. There are families that choose private schools because of the programs offered, knowing that they are sacrificing education quality to fit their preference of attending a private school, even though the school may

be academically inferior (Neal, 2008; Figlio & Stone, 1997). These perceptions are embedded in the reasons parents state for choosing to send their children to private schools.

### **Reasons Parents Give for Choosing Private Schools**

Parents choose private schools, according to Kraushaar (1972), because they believe these schools offer a superior or distinct kind of education that provides more services for their children. One of the main reasons for the existence of private schools is to offer a better education than public schools (Kane & Orsini, 1999). Better, however, means different things to different parents. It could mean the value perspective of the parent as evidenced by choosing a religious educational experience. It could also mean better preparing students for college.

Kraushaar (1972) reported that parents give different reasons for their choice depending on the type of private school attended by their children. It was further noted by Kraushaar that a growing majority of private school parents do so because they want their children to be with others who have similar characteristics. Figlio and Stone (1997) confirmed Kraushaar's findings by stating parents might desire their children to interact with a certain group of peers.

Research by Goldring and Hausman (1999) surmised that most parents believe they should have the right to choose where their children will attend school. These researchers' data showed that magnet schools were the most common choice of schools. Goldring and Hausman also cited data from an Associated Press poll in which 68% of those completing the survey believed parents should be allowed to choose the school their children attend. Martinez, Thomas and Kemerer (1994) examined the characteristics



of families that chose private schools and the rationale for choosing them. The recurring message was families want the best quality education available for their children.

Most of the literature on the reasons parents give for choosing private schools was embedded in school choice research. According to Bielick and Chapman (2003), prior to the late 1980s, school choice was almost synonymous with a private school education. The primary motivation for parents to engage in school choice, according to Lacierno-Paquet and Brantley (2008), varied by states and districts. Parents were influenced by race and class of the school's population with White parents having the tendency to avoid schools with a high minority enrollment. Minority parents had the tendency to avoid schools with a high percentage of low-income students (Lacierno-Paquet & Brantley, 2008). Thus, school choice programs have the likelihood of greater ethnic and racial segregation. This research however, contradicted data from NCES (1997) which stated private schools are more diverse.

The growing trend of offering school choice has been instrumental in providing some families the option of a private school education. The major cities with voucher programs are geared toward soliciting minority students from low income households to attend private schools. The Baltimore City Program, for example, noted that voucher programs in Milwaukee, Cleveland and Washington, D.C. have been successful with increased test scores and parental satisfaction (Lips, 2005). Lips stated that competition between private and public schools will lead to a more efficient and effective education system.

Parents choose a private school education because of a more disciplined environment, a religious education or a higher opportunity to participate in extracurricular sports (Figlio & Stone, 1997). Parents may still choose a private school education for their

children even if there are not any academic advantages (Figlio & Stone, 1997). Further, one of the key questions raised in the study by Figlio and Stone examined the reasons parents choose to send their children to private schools in spite of comparable academic performances by public schools. The reason revealed by Figlio and Stone is parents consider more than academic achievement when choosing a school. The study revealed that private schools, both religious and nonreligious, offer a more disciplined learning environment. These policies reinforce the parents' sense of security for their children. Another advantage highlighted in this research is the opportunity for participation in extracurricular activities. This research concluded that private schools have more advantages over public schools that enhance character development. Religious training, college ambitions and higher socioeconomic peers were also found to be deciding factors for parents. The research by Figlio and Stone was gathered from surveys from parents and students from public and private schools and acknowledged by the Department of Education. The full sample size was more than 5,100 individuals.

There is limited research on private school parents who choose a nonpublic education. Most of the available research is entrenched in data gathered from parents who exercised school choice through a voucher program (Goldring & Rowley, 2006; Hoxby, 2003; Merrifield, 2000; NCES, 2003). In these cases, parents were more likely to state academic superiority and school safety as reasons for choosing a private school education for their children (Goldring & Rowley, 2006).

### **Discussion and Summary**

The increasing concern about alternatives to public education has resulted in greater need for data on private education. Nonpublic schools in the United States have

supported the overall growth and prosperity of the nation (Davis, 1999), impacting every socioeconomic and ethnic group in America. Thus, greater understanding of the reasons behind the continuing presence of nonpublic schools is needed.

Private schools are maintaining a stable market as alternatives to public schools. Even though there is substantial research that refutes the academic advantages, some parents are choosing to send their children to private schools anyway (Figlio & Stone, 1997). Some parents expressed the desire to send their children to schools where the other students are of the same ethnicity and socioeconomic status. Researchers have reported that private schools have a more diverse population, yet White parents are more likely to choose a private education for their children (Lacireno-Paquet & Brantley, 2008; Perie, Vanneman, & Goldstein, 2005). The majority of Blacks and Hispanic parents choose private schools mostly as a result of voucher programs. This type of segregation is also seen in the religious private education sector. There are three types of private schools and the majority of students enrolled in them attend Catholic parochial schools. While the student population may be more diverse than public schools, the diversity of private school educators is far less than teachers in public education. In addition, it is noteworthy to mention that parents who choose to send their children to private school were also more likely to have attended private school (Lacireno-Paquet & Brantley, 2008).

The parents of private school students, and some in the general public, believe that private schools provide a better education than public schools. Yet, researchers have reported that private school teachers are less educated and may not be certified by their respective state departments of education. Private school educators have less experience and tend to leave the profession earlier than their public school colleagues. Another

defining characteristic of private schools is their size. Most private schools are smaller than public schools and therefore have fewer students in the class. However, with smaller schools come less advanced classes and fewer qualified educators. Other services that may be affected by smaller schools are the lack of transportation and a lunch program.

Most parents believe they should have a choice in the school their children attend. The freedom to choose is exercised by parents who send their children to private school. School voucher programs have been the means by which minority and low-income parents are afforded the opportunity to send their children to private schools. Goldring (2008, 2006, 2000, 1999) and Hoxby (2003, 2000, 1998) have completed sufficient research supporting school choice and use of vouchers. However, there is limited research on parents' choice of a private education that is not funded with vouchers.

Parents listed greater satisfaction, more involvement in school activities and the expectation of college graduation as a result of their children attending private school (Bielick & Chapman, 2003). Yet, the reasons for choosing a private education were unclear. Figlio and Stone (1997) have suggested that parents choose private schools because they might desire a religious education, a more disciplined atmosphere, or a better chance for their children to participate in extracurricular activities. Goldring and Hausman (1999) have stated that the evidence for choosing private schools was mixed. According to Neal (2008), who collected data from parents of students who attended suburban National Association of Independent Schools, revealed it is "unclear" why parents choose a private education for their children. It was this uncertainty that the research question, "Why do parents choose to send their children to private schools?" was examined.

## **CHAPTER III**

### **METHODS**

#### **Introduction**

The purpose of this study was to examine the reasons parents chose to send their children to private schools. This chapter will include a description of the research design, participants, and the instrumentation that was used in the study. Data collection, analysis, and reporting by the researcher were based on the overarching question: What do parents perceive as the benefits of sending their children to private schools?

The following subquestions were used to answer the overarching question:

1. How do parents who send their children to private schools perceive conditions in public schools?
2. What reasons do parents give for choosing to send their children to private schools?
3. Do reasons given by parents for choosing private schools vary by the type of private school?
4. How do reasons given by students and administrators compare with the reasons given by parents for choosing private schools?

#### **Research Methods**

##### **Research Design**

A basic interpretive qualitative design was used to explore reasons why parents choose to send their children to private schools. According to Lichtman (2006),

qualitative research methods are used to describe, understand and interpret a situation in its entirety. This research design was an account of perceptions of the participants from four different private schools; two religious schools and two nonreligious schools. It was important to use a design that explored perspectives of participants (Merriam, et.al, 2002). Lichtman (2006) has suggested a preferred characteristic of qualitative research involves talking with participants in their natural setting. To examine the reasons parents choose a private education, the researcher relied on interviews exploring how parents made the decision to send their children to private schools. Additionally, private school administrators were asked to explain the reasons parents give for sending their children to private institutions and students were interviewed to give their perspective of the reasons they believed their parents chose a private education for them.

The specific research design was a basic interpretive qualitative design. Researchers tend to ask “why” questions and are interested in meaning and interpretation (Lichtman, 2006). This type of research enables the researcher to be interactive and humanistic, yet flexible enough to ask probing questions that may lead to more details about the parents’ decision to choose a private education (Creswell, 2003; Merriam, 2009).

This basic interpretive qualitative design included gathering data from the participants by interviewing them from a set a questions. A basic interpretive qualitative study was used to discover and understand the perspectives of the participants (Merriam, et.al, 2002). The strategy was inductive and the outcome was descriptive.

### **The Researcher**

The researcher-interviewer was a Black woman with a specialist’s degree in educational leadership. Her experience included sixteen years in public education: nine

years as a middle school mathematics teacher and seven years as an assistant principal on the middle school level. There was possible bias that could have affected the validity of the findings. As a parent of former private school children, this researcher realized that parents choose a private education for a variety of reasons. At the time the choice was made for the researcher's family, the goal was to be assured that the two elementary-aged daughters were taught phonics which was not a part of the public school curriculum at the time.

The researcher-interviewer guarded against potential bias by selecting private institutions and participants that were unknown to the researcher. Further, the researcher analyzed the interviews' data that was audio taped and transcribed, being mindful of not making any personal interpretations.

### **Participants**

The researcher identified purposefully selected sites and individuals for the study (Creswell, 2003). The procedures used to select the private schools were based on the telephone directory's listings of schools in the metropolitan area of a large city located in the southeastern region of the United States. It was preferable that all schools selected were accredited by one of the State's accrediting agencies.

The use of three participant groups provided for triangulation of data by gaining different perspectives. Bias was reduced or eliminated during the research by using triangulation (Lichtman, 2006). The use of multiple sources led to more credibility of the investigation. This study emphasized data triangulation in which the parents of children who attended private schools were interviewed, as well as the students and the schools' administrators. Each of the schools and all of the participants were purposively selected.

According to Nardi (2006), one of the reasons purposive or judgmental sampling is chosen is because the participants share a common trait. School administrators had at least one or more years experience in their current position or similar position. Parents who had a child in private school for at least one year were selected. Likewise, students were selected who had attended the private school for at least one year. It was desired that all participants had previous public school experience.

In this research, the parents were interviewed to gain insight into the reasons they chose to send their children to private schools. Students were interviewed to explore reasons they think their parents chose to send them to private schools. Administrators were asked to infer the reasons parents chose private school for their children. This type of sample was chosen to provide first-hand descriptions of the participants' decisions in choosing a private school education (Merriam, et.al, 2002). A short description of each participant is provided in Chapter IV.

Parents, students and administrators from two types of private schools were chosen. There were two church-related schools and two schools that did not have any religious affiliation. At least two parents and their children were interviewed from the respective schools using an interview protocol (see Appendices A through C). The administrators of each school were also interviewed using a similar set of questions. However, the administrators were asked to address their perception of the reasons parents send their children to private K-12 schools based on their conversations with the parents and students.

In total, 20 participants were interviewed. For confidentiality purposes, the names of the schools and all participants in the study were identified by using pseudonyms. The



research was conducted from December 2010 to April 2011 and participants were chosen who had attended the school at least one year prior to the research.

### **Data Collection Procedures**

The school administrators were asked for parent and student referrals. It was hoped that parents would identify other parents who might be willing to participate in this study. Once the participants were identified, written informed consent for participation was obtained. The researcher completed the interview process for one school before selecting and moving on to another institution.

The researcher interviewed the parents of children attending the school, the students and a school's administrator. Parents were interviewed in face-to-face interviews or using the written interview protocol at a time and location convenient for them. School administrators were interviewed during the school day. Students were interviewed at school with the parents or the school administrators nearby or by completing the written interview protocol. It was preferable that the parents and children were interviewed independent of each other, thereby gaining a true perspective of the reasons each gave for choosing a private school education. The children interviewed were in third grade or older.

The researcher used an interview protocol comprised of open-ended questions designed to prompt dialogue between the researcher and the participants in the study, allowing the researcher to probe for details on behavior, attitudes, and motivation. The instrument varied in format to address the roles or positions of the different participants. See Appendix A, B, and C for the different questionnaires. The interview protocols for

each of the participant groups were designed to answer the overarching question of the reasons parents choose to send their children to private schools.

To test the validity of the interview questions, the researcher conducted a pilot study. The pilot study was conducted with a private school student, parent and private school administrator. The pilot study was used to ensure that the interview protocols were feasible and would produce data to allow the researcher to understand the reasons parents choose to send their children to private schools.

All interviews were audio taped or written interview protocols completed. The audio tapes were transcribed verbatim by the researcher. Transcripts were analyzed and common themes highlighted when at least two sets of interviews were completed. (A set consisted of two parents, two students and a school administrator). Themes and concepts were compared across interviews using the constant comparison method. Table 3.1 below depicts the alignment of interview questions with the research questions.

Table 3.1

*Research Questions in Relation to Interview Questions*

1. What perceived conditions in public schools influence parents to send their children to private schools?	P1, P2, P5, P8, S1, S5, A1, A2, A3
2. What reasons do parents give for choosing to send their children to private schools?	P2, P3, P5, P6, P7, P8, S2, S3, S4, A1, A2, A3
3. How do reasons given by parents for choosing private schools vary by the type of private school?	P4, P5, P7, S2, S3, A4
4. How do reasons given by students and administrators compare with the reasons given by parents for choosing private schools?	S4, S5, A1, A2, A3, A4

## **Data Analysis**

Data analysis began after two of the schools were chosen and its participants had been interviewed. After reading the entire transcript, common themes were identified, labeled and numbered. Data were transcribed and modifications made as needed. Even though the participants were asked a series of predetermined questions, there were multiple themes within each answer. The questioning, in some cases, led to subsequent questions and insight; thus, allowing for clarifications or deeper understanding of the answers given by the participants. The data were revisited after each school's participants had been interviewed. This process aided in the final analysis of the project. The data were reported in narrative form with the use of tables to display the demographics of the participants and their schools. Also, tables displaying the several iterations of coding of data were included.

The data were analyzed inductively. The researcher analyzed the transcripts to identify commonalities. The findings included quotes from the interviews. Recurring patterns or common themes were identified. A descriptive account of the findings was presented referencing the literature that framed the study. Themes and concepts were compared across interviews using the constant comparison method.

The interview grids (see Tables 3.2, 3.3, and 3.4) below illustrate which interview questions were used to answer the research questions. The interview grids also aligned the research questions and interview questions with the literature.

Table 3.2

*Item Analysis: Administrator Interview Grid*

<b>Research Question</b>	<b>Administrator Interview Questions</b>	<b>Research Literature</b>
2	1. What do parents tell you they are looking for when choosing a private school?	Hunt, Joseph, & Nuzzi, 2004; Kane & Orsini, 1999;
1	2. How does the AYP status of public schools in your area influence your parents' decision to attend this school?	Alt & Peter, 2002; Bielick & Chapman, 2003; McLaughlin, O'Donnell, & Ries, 1995;
1	3. What public school conditions influenced your parents' choice to attend this school?	Kraushaar, 1972; Lacireno-Paquet, & Brantley, 2008;
3, 4	4. Why do you believe parents' chose your school?	Archer, 2000; Figlio & Stone, 1997; Kraushaar, 1972; Peterson & Llaudet, 2006;

Table 3.3

*Item Analysis: Parent Interview Grid*

<b>Research Question</b>	<b>Parent Interview Questions</b>	<b>Research Literature</b>
1	1. Describe the conditions of your previous public school? Did any of those conditions influence your decision to choose a private education?	Cataldi, Laird, & KewalRamani, 2009; NCES, 2002;
1, 2	2. Tell how your child's public school experience influenced you to choose this school?	Alt & Peter, 2002; Broughman, Swaim, & Keaton, 2009; Figlio & Stone, 1997; NAEP, 2006; Perie, Vanneman, & Goldstein, 2005;
4	3. How did your child participate in the decision-making process when deciding whether or not to go to private school?	Goldring & Phillips, 2008; Kennedy, 2008
3	4. How did you decide the type of private school for your child/ren to attend?	Alt & Peter, 2002; Archer, 2000; Bielick & Chapman, 2003; Broughman, Swaim, & Keaton, 2009; Goldring & Hausman, 1999; Kane & Orsini, 1999;
2	5. What specific needs of your child did you consider when choosing this school; i.e. gifted education, special education, etc.?	Figlio & Stone, 1997; Kennedy, 2008; Neal, 2008;
2, 3	6. Were school values a factor in your decisions? If yes, what values were important?	Alt & Peter, 2002; NCES, 1997;
2	7. What do you like most/least about your current private school?	Hoxby, 2003; McLaughlin, O'Donnell, & Ries, 1995; NCES, 1995;
1	8. What made you choose your child's private school over the public school in your area?	Kane & Orsini, 1999; Martinez, Kemerer, & Godwin, 1993; Moe, 2001; NCES, 2003;

Table 3.4

*Item Analysis: Student Interview Grid*

<b>Research Question</b>	<b>Student Interview Questions</b>	<b>Research Literature</b>
4	1. What did you want your private school to offer?	Figlio & Stone, 1997; Kane & Orsini, 1999; Neal, 2008
2, 3	2. Tell me what you like about this school.	Figlio & Stone, 1997; NCES, 1997; Neal, 2008;
2, 3	3. Tell me what you dislike about this school.	Alt & Peter, 2002; Figlio & Stone, 1997;
3	4. Why do you think your parent(s) wanted you to go to private school?	NAEP, 2006; NCES, 1997;
1	5. What was it about the public school that made your parent(s) choose a private school education for you?	Alt & Peter, 2002; Kraushaar, 1972; Martinez, Kemer, & Godwin, 1993; Neal, 2008; NCES, 1997; Peterson & Llaudet, 2006

**Summary**

The qualitative methodology that was used was a basic interpretive qualitative study. The qualitative study used multiple sources of evidence: parents of children who attend the private institution, private school students, and private school administrators. This triangulation of data allowed for more credibility to the study. The research design allowed the researcher to interview parents, students and school administrators in the metropolitan area of a large city located in the southeastern region of the United States. The research questions served as the instrument of the study and the data were collected from the responses from the interviews. Responses to the interview questions were tape recorded or written protocols completed and the findings reported based on the patterns or themes discovered for the reasons parents chose to send their children to private

school. Ultimately, the goal of the research was to determine the reasons parents, students and administrators said that a private school education was chosen.

**CHAPTER IV**  
**REPORT OF DATA AND DATA ANYALYSIS**

**Introduction**

The purpose of this study was to examine the reasons parents choose to send their children to private school. The private schools that participated in the study were in the metropolitan area of a large city located in the southeastern region of the United States. These private schools followed the same practices or policies as any other schools as required by law for accreditation purposes. Interviews were conducted and the findings were analyzed with two sets of religious school participants and two sets of non-religious school participants. (A set of interviews consisted of two parents, two students and one administrator.) There were several participants who chose to complete the interview protocol in written form. This chapter describes the research findings of the study which includes the general description of the sample followed by results of the data relating to the overarching question, “What do parents perceive as the benefits of sending their children to private school?”

To explore the research question, the researcher considered the following sub-questions in this study.

Subquestion 1: How do parents who send their children to private schools perceive conditions in public schools?

Subquestion 2: What reasons do parents give for choosing to send their children to private schools?

Subquestion 3: Do reasons given by parents for choosing private schools vary by the type of private school?



Subquestion 4: How do reasons given by students and administrators compare with the reasons given by parents for choosing private schools?

Face validity for the interview protocol was established through a pilot interview with a focus group of three participants consisting of a parent, middle school student and private school administrator. The responses from the pilot interview focus group were not included in the final data set.

All interviews were completed over a five-month time period, from December 2010 to April 2011. The interviews occurred at the private schools and lasted approximately thirty minutes to an hour. The administrators that preferred to complete the interview protocol in written form returned their responses after approximately two weeks. All questions were asked and answered by each participant to ensure validity and reliability. The researcher collected and analyzed data using transcriptions of the interviews for this qualitative study. The names of the schools and each participant were given pseudonyms for confidentiality purposes.

### **Participant Profiles**

The study included four administrators from four private schools in the metropolitan area of a large city located in the southeastern region of the United States. In addition, two pupils from each of the four schools were interviewed. Table 4.1 indicates the pseudonyms for each of the four schools, along with pseudonyms for each of the participants, and Table 4.2 depicts background information for each of the four schools. Demographic information was collected and is presented in Table 4.3.

Table 4.1

*Pseudonyms of Selected Private Schools, Administrators, Parents, and Students Represented in the Study*

<b>Private Schools</b>	<b>Administrators</b>	<b>Parents</b>	<b>Students</b>	<b>Students' Grade</b>
Best Academy *	Boaz	Betty	Barry	12
		Beulah	Brittany	11
Excellence Academy *	Esther	Ethel	Eddie	8
		Eva	Emily	3
Superb Academy **	Steven	Susan	Sam	8
		Sarah	Stephanie	8
Terrific Academy **	Thelma	Tara	Tiffany	5
		Tina	Travis	7

\*religious private school

\*\*nonreligious private school

Two of the private schools have a religious affiliation. The two schools that were not affiliated with a church listed non-denominational and Christian concept in their general information. The two larger schools have over 1,000 students and administrators with both having a master's degree. One of the smaller schools has an administrator who does not have a college degree. The second smaller school's administrator is in graduate school and is also a teacher at the school. The Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS) is the accrediting agency for three of the schools, with one of the schools preparing to begin the State's accrediting process. Three of the schools' administrators have worked in their position for over seven years while one administrator has only been in her position for over a year. Three of the schools use the ABeka curriculum which is a program designed to give students Christian viewpoints in all subjects (Horton and Horton, 2011). The curriculum is noted for being highly structured and detailed oriented.

Table 4.2

*General Information - Private Schools*

	<b>Best Academy</b>	<b>Excellent Academy</b>	<b>Superb Academy</b>	<b>Terrific Academy</b>
<b>Grades Served</b>	Pre K - 12	Infant - 8	Toddlers-12	Pre K - 12
<b>Enrollment</b>	1,100	95	150	2,800
<b>Average Class Size</b>	18 – 20	8 – 10	12 – 15	15
<b>Number of Teachers</b>	100	14	20	300
<b>Religious Affiliation</b>	Baptist	Christian	N/A***	Non-denominational
<b>Mandatory Entrance Exam</b>	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
<b>Curricula</b>	Abeka * Curriculum	Abeka Curriculum	Abeka Curriculum	College Prep
<b>Accrediting Association</b>	SACS	**	SACS	SAIS, SACS
<b>Mandatory Parent Participation</b>	No	No	Yes	No
<b>Tuition</b>	<u>3<sup>rd</sup> - 5<sup>th</sup></u> \$7,464  <u>6<sup>th</sup> - 12<sup>th</sup></u> \$9,415	\$5,500, plus cost of books	<u>PK - 8<sup>th</sup></u> \$8,280****  <u>9<sup>th</sup> - 12<sup>th</sup></u> \$9,300****	<u>1<sup>st</sup> - 6<sup>th</sup></u> \$18,130  <u>7<sup>th</sup> - 12<sup>th</sup></u> \$21,300
<b>Transportation Provided</b>	No	No	Yes @ fee	Yes @ fee
<b>Meals Provided</b>	Yes	Yes \$3 daily	Yes	Yes

\* other curricula (BJU, Haccourt, Glencoe, IPO) also used

\*\* beginning a state accrediting process

\*\*\* Christian concept

\*\*\*\* includes enrollment/testing/books fees

**Best Academy’s Administrator Boaz**

Boaz is the assistant head of school with twelve years of service at this school. He stated that parents are looking for a range of factors when choosing a private school.

Some of the features include academics, athletics, fine arts, and a covenant environment. According to Boaz, a small percentage of parents cite Christian education and an evangelistic orientation as factors in selecting private school. Boaz stated,

The answer is across the board. A lot of them are coming to us because of academics. A lot of them come to us because of athletics or fine arts. Many of them come to us for environment. Their concern is they feel as though some public schools do not offer them the environment that they want for their child. And then there is a small percentage that come to us for why we exist which is because we want to offer them a Christian education.

The public schools' Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) status was not a huge factor in choosing Best Academy. Boaz stated that, based on what he heard, some public schools have a reputation of doing well and some were doing poorly. He continued by saying that "everybody's story is different." The choice to attend Best Academy, according to Boaz, is a toss-up between environment and academics of the local public school. When asked why parents chose Best Academy, Boaz responded with, "Why do I believe in Christian education?" The point that he emphasized, using his life as an example, was it is a personal preference. Boaz stated that he only attended one quarter in public school during his entire life when he went to college. In response to the current economy and the loss of accreditation by a neighboring school district, Boaz noted that three or four years ago the school's population was 1,400 and tuition was cheaper. Currently, the school has over 1,100 students enrolled and the tuition is about the same as other private schools in the area.

Best Academy has state accreditation which allows its students to receive state scholarships and grants. They have a host of sports, fine arts activities, foreign languages, and Advanced Placement (AP) classes. Eighty-five percent of the previous graduation class attended a four year college and fourteen percent continued at a two-year college. Boaz was very passionate about his “calling” as the assistant head of the school and eagerly shared his philosophy which aligns with the school’s mission.

### **Excellent Academy’s Administrator Esther**

Esther has been the assistant director at Excellent Academy for one and a half years. She attended college for a brief time but did not earn a degree. Excellent Academy is a fairly new private school with fewer than 100 students. It is beginning the accreditation process through a state accrediting commission. Similar to most private schools, Excellent Academy uses the Abeka curriculum. Esther noted that parents tell her they chose Excellent Academy for a number of reasons. Safety was the number one reason cited by Esther. In addition, some parents wanted their children to attend a Christian school because they valued a rounded education which included spirituality. Smaller class sizes, loving environment, and curriculum were also stated as reasons for choosing Excellent Academy. Esther also noted that some parents mentioned furlough days and parents/grandparents involvement in the school as additional reasons for choosing a private school. AYP status was not mentioned as an influence in choosing Excellent Academy, although Esther noted that most of their students are above grade level. Esther stated, “With our small class size, if a student is falling behind in a subject, we are able to give them one on one attention.” The number one public school condition that influenced parents to choose private school, according to Esther, was the large class size. Esther

stated that the curriculum is not always factual and public school's hands-off attitude is also an influencing factor. Esther intimated that NCLB forces children to be passed along, "even though they are not ready." She further stated that parents choose her school because they "teach the Bible."

### **Superb Academy's Administrator Steven**

Steven has worked at Superb Academy for more than seven years and is currently in graduate school. He operates in the dual role as teacher and assistant principal. Steven asserted that parents tell him they are looking for structure, discipline, and communication with parents when they choose a private school. According to Steven, the neighboring school district's AYP status influenced parents to choose Superb Academy because of its "reputation of high academic standards." The public school conditions that influenced parents to select Superb Academy also include, "student/teacher ratio, lack of structure, discipline, academic focus, and poor communication." Steven stated that parents choose his school, "primarily for academics and discipline. We love children and want them to be successful." When asked about the effect of the neighboring school district's loss of accreditation, Steven responded that initially it was an issue; however, "with the economy declining, such influence has somewhat decreased."

Superb Academy was established in 1986 and has students from toddlers to twelfth grade. It has several sports teams and lists on its website debate, foreign language, and the student government association among their extracurricular activities. Superb Academy is accredited by SACS and several other state agencies. The mandatory parent participation events, according to the academy's website, include the Parent Teacher Association (PTA) and volunteerism. The school uses the Abeka curriculum and several

other programs and textbook publishers. Although Superb Academy lists non-sectarian on the website, they emphasize that the school has a Christian concept as part of its mission.

### **Terrific Academy's Administrator Thelma**

Thelma has worked at Terrific Academy for eleven years. She has a master's degree and currently serves as the middle school assistant principal. Thelma stated that "Parents are seeking a school environment where their child can achieve his/her greatest potential as a learner." Thelma added, "They want their child to be a part of a caring and nurturing learning environment where their child is given many opportunities for growth beyond the classroom." In response to the effect of AYP status of public schools that influence parents' decision to attend Terrific Academy, Thelma noted that the student population is from over 23 counties across the metropolitan area. Therefore, Thelma stated, "The neighborhood schools of our families are very diverse. Parents were concerned with national rankings of the state's public schools" rather than an individual county's AYP status. The conditions of public schools that influence parents' decisions to send their children to Terrific Academy are many and varied. The factors include, "student/teacher ratio, safety, extracurricular activities, advanced placement opportunities, and classroom resources including technology." Thelma stated that parents choose Terrific Academy because of "our high academic standards and our diverse community." She further stated that they believe "Our school will provide an outstanding education in preparation for college, as well as, embrace and develop the unique talents of each student."

Thelma asserted that 100% of the school's 300 teachers are certified. The school has accreditation by SACS and the Southern Association of Independent Schools (SAIS). The

school's extracurricular activities include eighteen sports teams, numerous clubs, and a variety of performing and visual arts. Terrific Academy was founded in 1900 as a military boarding school for boys. In 1964 the academy became co-educational and in 1966 the military concept was dropped and the name was changed to its current name. The boarding program discontinued in 1993. Currently, there are two campuses; one on the north side of the large metropolitan area and the main campus in the metropolitan area. The campuses spread across 35 and 75 acres respectively. One hundred percent of the previous year's graduating class was accepted into colleges and universities in and outside of the United States.

### **Parents and Students**

The background information on the parents is presented in Table 4.3 below followed by a narrative of each parent's and student's responses to the interview questions. The majority of the parents of the private school students attended public schools; three parents attended private schools. All parents, except one, are 42 years old or older. Three parents stated that they are currently unemployed. Half of the parents have incomes that range between \$12,000 and \$29,000. The remaining half of the parents has incomes greater than \$50,000. Four of the parents listed Baptist as their religious affiliation.



Table 4.3

*General Information – Parents*

	Ethnicity		Age			Marital Status			Education	Income	Type School Attended	
	Black	White	26-41	42-49	50+	S	M	D			Private	Public
<b>Betty</b>	X			X		X			Master's	\$12,000-29,000		X
<b>Beulah</b>		X			X		X		Bachelor's	100,000+	X	
<b>Ethel</b>		X		X		X			High School	\$12,000-29,000		X
<b>Eva</b>		X	X					X	High School	\$12,000-29,000		X
<b>Susan</b>	X			X			X		Other	\$50,000-69,000	X	
<b>Sarah</b>	X							X	High School	\$12,000-29,000		X
<b>Tara</b>		X	X				X		Bachelor's	100,000+		X
<b>Tina</b>	X		X					X	Master's	\$50,000-69,000	X	

**Betty and Barry.** Betty is a temporarily unemployed consultant who stated that there were not any bad conditions that led her family to choose a private school education for her son Barry. She stated that Barry performed well in his previous public school. The family moved and, after an “open discussion,” decided to take advantage of the great opportunity for Barry to attend a Christian school. Betty asserted that there was “no decision in regards of types of private schools to attend.” The specific needs that Betty listed, when considering the private school, included the family’s “spiritual relationship with God, family and community.” She further asserted, “Yes, the religious factor that the school presented to our family to be supported in our beliefs as Christians was very important.” Betty reiterated the blessings that allowed Barry to attend the private school.

Barry stated that he wanted his private school to offer, “A great education.” He also stated that it is, “A place to get to know the Lord better” and “grow socially.” Barry’s favorite subject is math and he enjoys football. He likes the small classes, great lunches, and supportive administrative staff. In contrast, Barry disliked lunch time and the school uniforms. Generally speaking, Barry likes everything about his private school.

**Beulah and Brittany.** Beulah is a married, college graduate who owns a business. She is over fifty years old and earns over \$100,000 per year. She stated that Brittany’s previous public school “had a dramatic culture change during the past few years.” The leadership and administration were not consistent. However, Beulah stated that her daughter’s public school experience did not influence the decision. Beulah asserted that Brittany was given the opportunity to make the decision, on her own, to attend private school. The family did, however, want, “a Christian based school that provided a college prep accredited degree.” School values were important to Beulah and her family. They wanted, “to make sure the school offered extracurricular activities, such as educational trips, sports, and chapel.” Beulah stated that what she likes most about her daughter’s school is the academic excellence with a Christian perspective. Her least favorite thing about the private school is the cost.

Brittany also wanted her private school to “offer extracurricular activities, as well as other opportunities to grow closer to God.” Her favorite subject is English and she enjoys being a cheerleader, running track, and playing basketball. She really likes “the sports, as well as chapel, and the special days set aside for us to learn about ways to help others and take action in our community.” She believes her parents “wanted me in a private school because they want me to have the best education available along with a better

environment.” Brittany confirmed what her mother stated that “My parents didn’t make the decision for me to go to a private school. I was in the best public school in my county. I just felt like it was the best decision for myself at the time.” Her least favorite thing about her private school is the uniforms.

**Ethel and Eddie.** Ethel is a single parent in her forties who works in the cafeteria at the private school that her son Eddie attends. She is a high school graduate who earns between \$12,000 and \$29,000 yearly. Ethel is a product of the public school system that her son previously attended. She asserted that Eddie’s public school did not teach and “didn’t focus on” Eddie. Ethel further stated that the public school seemed more focused on the *No Child Left Behind Act* instead of teaching. Ethel stated that her children did participate in the decision to attend private school. Her daughter liked the idea of attending private school, but Eddie did not. Ethel learned about the school from her sister. The school was new and Eddie needed extra help because he was “just behind” in his classes. Ethel stated that the specific needs for her son when choosing this school would be, “more one-on-one with” Eddie. She loves the people at the school, “all of them,” and stated again that she “did not like” the previous public school system.

Eddie is a fifteen year old eighth grader whose favorite subject is math. He was quiet and very well mannered during the interview. Eddie wanted his private school to create a football or basketball team. Those are his favorite hobbies. He stated that he is one of the oldest kids in the school which only goes to the eighth grade. He started attending the school in the sixth grade. Eddie likes the school and stated that there are “a lot of great people.” He has “tons of friends” and asserted that “all the people are nice.” Eddie does not dislike anything about his school. He stated in a quiet, low voice, “Honestly, there is

nothing much I do dislike.” When asked why he thought his mother wanted him to go to private school, Eddie stated, “She knew I wouldn’t last in public school. I went for three years; didn’t turn out too well.” The reason Eddie stated that his mother chose private school for him was because of his public school teachers, “one that was racist” and “wouldn’t do the one-on-one” teaching with him. He stated that this private school has grown. The school started with a few kids.

**Eva and Emily.** Eva is a thirty year old divorcee who is currently unemployed. She is a high school graduate who volunteers at the school where her two children attend and her mother is an administrator. Eva asserted that her private school is a “God send” that she prayed for mainly because of her young autistic son. She chose the school because most of the other private institutions in the area would not enroll her son. She stated that “they look down on” students with special needs. She also stated that her daughter, Emily, was influential in the decision to attend the school. The family “looked for anything with God in it. He led us here.” Eva searched for a school that would further the growth of her children with a “better education.” Class size and the teachers’ attentiveness to the needs of her special needs son were also factors that were considered. The values that Eva stated to be important were that the school is, “behavior oriented, very structured, God oriented.” According to Eva, the school does not, “let anything slide” and the teachers, “make sure they get a good education.” Eva stated the school is, “strict” on education. She is most pleased with the “closeness of everybody.” The family-like atmosphere was mentioned, as well as, the “love felt in the school.” Eva’s ultimate decision to choose this school was based on the fact that “Mom works here.”

Emily is a precocious eight year old who is in the third grade. She said her favorite subject is Bible. There are nine students in her class. When asked what she wanted her private school to offer, Emily stated, “A place my brother could be.” She continued, “I can’t be away from my brother; we’re close.” Emily likes the principal and, “really like the teachers. This school is a place where most anybody could enjoy being.” She stated that she knows, “Christian schools are where most people should go to tell everybody about Jesus; to tell people how it works.” Emily asserted that her mother chose the school because, “She knew that I needed to know about Jesus. I needed to know more about the *Bible*.” Emily said her mother knows she “did not like dishonest things. I won’t listen to any of that junk. That’s what I call a bunch of junk.” Emily’s favorite *Bible* verse is John 3:16. She stated that she does not hate anything about this school and she is learning “stuff I used not to know about.” She is learning how to read music and she enjoys the library stating “All books have a special meaning. This is the only place I want to be.”

**Susan and Sam.** Susan is over forty years old and is a laid off computer technician who attended private K-12 schools. She is married with a family income between \$50,000 and \$69,000 a year. She stated that smaller class size was a definite factor in choosing to send Sam to a private school. She explained that at her son’s public school that, “There was extreme overcrowding in the classrooms along with stressed teachers.” She stated that they were told Sam was a special needs child and, “He was extremely anxious about going to public school. The private school was recommended by a family friend whose child attended with great results.” Sam participated in the decision-making process, Susan explained, when he was young by completing the tour with his family. She explained that “He had the biggest smile on his face” when the decision was

made for him to attend. Susan said they decided on a private school that was Christian based. The family's initial goal was the special education classes that the school offered. She stated Sam "has surpassed anyone's expectation of being an honor roll student." Susan further shared that "Any person who spent the majority of our child's time needed to believe in the power of prayer." She also said that, "overcrowding, issues with quality, caring teachers and accreditation concerns" were factors in choosing to send Sam to a private school.

Sam is a thirteen year old 8<sup>th</sup> grader whose favorite subject is math. He enjoys basketball, football, and drawing. There are seven students in his class. Sam wants his school to offer more extracurricular activities. Sam stated that he attends a great school with "wonderful teachers who are always willing to help you through thick and thin." He noted the students are, "very friendly and the school believes in second chances." He does not like that, "we only have a minute student body" and they do not have many extracurricular activities. Sam stated that the reason he was placed in private school, "is because public schools are wilder, you're exposed to more, and because I went to private school all my life." Sam concluded with, "My mom went to public school and she was exposed to more. She probably wanted a higher and more advanced education for me, and a safer environment."

**Sarah and Stephanie.** Sarah is over fifty years old and divorced. She is a high school graduate who works as a secretary. She stated that her daughter, Stephanie, is a "unique individual" and the public high school that she would attend "would break her unique spirit." Sarah also stated that, "because she is intelligent and pretty, many insecure girls wanted to fight her." Sarah said that Stephanie "didn't experience that in private

school.” Stephanie participated in deciding whether to attend private school, according to Sarah, because “She wanted a positive high school experience.” They decided on the school because it had a great reputation. Stephanie’s specific need is that she is a gifted child. Sarah felt “a private school would enhance her” gifted abilities. The school value of importance to Sarah is that it “doesn’t promote a student unless that student has learned the required skills needed.” The individual attention each child receives is what Sarah likes most about the school. She stated that “The public school had a metal detector, due to students bringing knives and guns to school. I did not want my child to be a part of that.”

Stephanie is fourteen and in the 8<sup>th</sup> grade. She enjoys singing, dancing, and cheerleading. Her favorite subject is spelling. She wanted her private school to offer “a better education” and a better learning environment. Stephanie stated that her social skills have improved because the school is small enough to develop closer friendships. She also stated that teachers have more time with the students. The only thing that she dislikes is that there are “not a lot of young ladies that attend here.” Stephanie cited more one-on-one time with the teacher and the quality of education as reasons she believed a private school education was chosen for her. Additionally, Stephanie stated her mother wanted her “to experience something new and different.” She concluded by stating that she is attending private school because her siblings “were already here.”

**Tara and Tiffany.** Tara is a married interior designer in her mid-forties. The rezoning, due to overcrowded conditions, of her daughter’s school district influenced the decision to send Tiffany to private school. The new school did not have systems or staff in place. Thus, Tara stated, “There was disorganization and a lack of structure.” Both

parents were products of public education. “We believe in traditional teaching methods and strong character values.” The lack of stability was influential in Tara choosing private school. She stated that they discussed, “the issues faced by our children at length before we ever discussed private school. We listened to their concerns and asked them to visit private schools and keep an open mind.” Tara has boy/girl twins who are very different and needed a school that offered both children something, “with their varied interests.” The specific needs for Tara’s twins were clear. “For our daughter, we needed options, lots of varied activities from student government to theater. For our son, we needed structure, a place that stressed organization and personal responsibility.” Tara stated the school values that are important to her are, “honesty, accountability, individuality, empathy, humanitarianism, honor, loyalty, persistence, and perseverance.” In the private school attended by her children, Tara dislikes the competitiveness within the student body and the lack of appreciation for diversity. When asked about the reason for choosing private school, Tara stated “There is no comparison in my opinion. The level of education our children receive at private school far outweighs what we would ever receive at the public school in our area. The emphasis on personal responsibility has been wonderful for our children. It has made them grow.”

Tiffany is an eleven year old fifth grade student who enjoys playing the guitar, singing, acting, and swimming. She has eighteen students in her class. Tiffany wanted her private school to, “have more time for the arts.” She stated that she was not interested or involved in school activities the previous year. She also stated the school has better teachers. Her explanation was, “I think it’s because when you have one teacher for one subject, they can grasp it better.” The one thing that Tiffany does not like about her



private school is, “There are so many students in this school, so there are groups. The cheerleading group, the chorus group, the athletes, and so on. It’s easy to forget where exactly you belong.” Tiffany stated that the reason her parents wanted her to go to private school is because her, “old school was new. Last year being new in a brand new school was just too confusing and the educational programs just were not good enough.” In comparing her previous public school to the private school, Tiffany noted the difference in the learning abilities of the students and rigor of the work. In her words, “There were some kids who didn’t learn as fast as others. Sometimes there wasn’t enough challenging work. In private school everybody has about the same pace.”

**Tina and Travis.** Tina is in her mid-forties, divorced, and a school teacher/coach in a middle school. She has her master’s degree and attended a private independent K-12 school. The conditions of Tina’s son’s previous public school that influenced her decision to choose a private education included the large class size. According to Tina, “The school environment, teacher pool, media/technical resources, and facilities met my expectations.” She noted the key factor in pursuing a private school education for her children was the overall “fit” for them. “As my son’s learning disabilities surfaced, the school system did not know how to fully meet his needs. My son was considered a grey-area student, whose fit was ambiguous. A regular educational class did not meet his needs while at the same time he did not qualify for special education services.” Both of Tina’s children participated in the decision-making process to attend a private school. She stated Travis was eager to find a place where he could, “learn in an academic setting where the teachers understood his learning style.” Tina stated that her daughter’s zeal for learning quickly faded in public school and she was “happy to attend a college preparatory school,

wear a uniform, and learn with a diverse student body.” Tina was specific in the reasons that led her to the private school. She cited, “student diversity, academic curriculum, class size, student-teacher mentoring, social environment, proximity to my home, and tuition” as key factors influencing her decision. In addition to the factors stated for choosing a private school education, Tina cited academic placement, fine arts, athletic programs, and school communication as specific needs for her children when she considered a private school education. The school values that were influential in Tina’s decision were, “community, communication, character, excellence, fairness, opportunity, and respect for tradition and structure.” Tina’s favorite characteristics of the school are “the school’s tradition, diverse student body, academic rigor, resources, behavioral expectations, and faculty.” Her least favorite characteristic is the “distance that students live from each other; making it hard to spend time with friends.” The decision to choose a private school over a public school education included “student diversity, commitment to student’s success, academic curriculum, behavioral expectations, school communication, and social environment.”

Travis is twelve years old and in the seventh grade. He enjoys art, music, writing, and physical fitness. His classes range in size from 14 to 18 students. Travis “desired his private school to offer a quality education, a variety of activities, a diverse group of students, caring teachers, safe environment, and wonderful opportunities to make friends and grow into the nice, successful young adult who I dream to be.” He likes the fine arts classes, patient teachers, and safe learning environment. Travis reiterated the potential to make friends. The only thing that he dislikes is the lunch which is not “tasty.” Travis stated that his parents wanted him to attend private school because he was unhappy in his

public school. Furthermore, he stated that he did not think he belonged there citing some students as not being nice and some teachers as being impatient. When comparing public school to private school, Travis noted that public school students are not as well-behaved. He stated, “It’s almost like there aren’t any limits. In a private school, you learn what is expected and what you cannot do; whereas in a public school, someone is always testing the limits of what not to do.”

### **Findings**

The purpose of this study was to examine the reasons parents choose to send their children to private school. The identification of the reasons stated by parents, students, and private school administrators will serve to discover and understand the perspectives of the participants in selecting a private school education. The participants’ responses were guided by the over-arching question: What do parents perceive as the benefits of sending their children to private schools?

After the interview tapes were transcribed, the initial coding was completed by listing the responses to each question from each set of interviewees and looking for patterns. The patterns were then categorized into broad themes. The themes were then used to form conclusions that aligned with the research questions.

### **Major Themes**

There were seven recurring themes identified inductively by the three participant groups. The frequency of the seven themes is presented in Table 4.4 and disaggregated by participant group. The themes are as follows: 1) perceived school characteristics; 2) quality of education provided by the private school; 3) physical environment that the

school provides; 4) extracurricular activities offered by the school; 5) qualifications of the teachers; 6) Christian environment; and 7) class size.

Table 4.4

*Frequency Distribution of Major Themes*

Major Themes	Frequency of Occurrences	Disaggregate Count by Participant Groups		
		Parents	Students	Administrators
Perceived School Characteristics	34	25	8	1
Quality of Education	26	11	7	8
Environment	18	6	6	6
Extracurricular Activities	13	6	5	2
Quality of Teachers	11	4	7	0
Christian Education	11	5	3	3
Class Size	10	5	1	4

Overall, the parents’ perception of a private school education was based on the perceived school characteristics and the quality of education their children would receive in the school. The elements contained in perceived school characteristics are diverse. Some of the elements mentioned by participants included individualized education, respect for tradition, character development, student diversity, and friendly atmosphere. The students’ perception aligned with parents by also choosing quality of education and the perceived school characteristics as the top two factors. Administrators noted that the quality of their private school education and the environment were monumental factors.

The major themes and the patterns within those themes are discussed in greater detail in the following sections.

**Perceived School Characteristics.** Parents overwhelmingly stated perceived school characteristics as the number one factor in choosing a private school education for their children. Among the responses that were categorized as characteristics were student diversity, honesty, personal responsibility, reputation, strong character values, and structure, to name a few.

The school's diversity was the most mentioned attribute by parents. Beulah noted that her daughter's public school had a dramatic culture change which led to the family's search for an alternative educational setting. They wanted a school that was personal and valued their child's individuality. Character, fairness, honesty, and empathy were divulged as contributing features in the selection process. Beulah added "We wanted a Christian-based school that provided a college prep accredited degree" as the deciding factor for choosing a private school. Eva and Sarah mentioned the desire for a structured, traditional environment that strongly considered their children's unique personalities. Tina stated "Student diversity, academic curriculum, class size, student-teacher mentoring, social environment, proximity to my home, and tuition were key factors influencing my decision" for selecting a private school for her children.

The students who mentioned the school's perceived characteristics overwhelmingly listed the people that made their private school education noteworthy. Eddie responded that he had made, "tons of friends." He continued by saying "all the people are nice." Sam noted "I like the students here because they are very friendly." Stephanie found it noteworthy to mention that her "social skills have improved." Although Tiffany

mentioned that there were so many more students in her private school, she stated she was going to get more “involved” this year. She also stated that “Private school was much more put together.” Travis was more to the point when he shared that his school provided “wonderful opportunities to make friends.” When asked what they wanted their private school to offer, Travis’ response was the “desire to grow into the nice, successful young adult who I dream to be.” The other responses were aligned with the themes extracted from the overall data.

The only administrator to mention the perceived school characteristics as a major factor in parents’ choice was Steven who noted the “overall successful reputation of the academy” was an influential factor in parents’ decisions to choose a private education for their children. Thelma stated “Our students come from over 23 counties; therefore the neighborhood schools of our families are very diverse. Parents seem concerned with national rankings of public schools.”

**Quality of Education.** The responses from all participants preferred the quality of education as the second popular reason for choosing a private education. The most responses were from parents with the students and administrators almost tied in the frequency of their responses. The specific declarations were that parents wanted an accredited program, academic rigor, strict academic standards, and a college preparation program. Beulah stated that she most liked the “academic excellence in a Christian perspective.” Eva verbalized that her children’s private school ensures “they get a good education.” Susan’s focus was on “quality/caring teachers.” Sarah spotlighted what she did not want for her daughter when she shared that she did not want Stephanie to be harassed because of her good looks. Sarah also surmised that her daughter’s assigned

public school had metal detectors because students bring “knives and guns to school.” Tara stated there is no comparison of the two types of schools. In her opinion, “The level of education our children receive at private school far outweighs what we would ever receive at the public school in our area.” Tina was definitive in her answer regarding the quality of education at her children’s private school. She stated, “respect for tradition and structure” guided her decision for a private education.”

All of the students’ responses were similarly stated. They wanted an excellent education, better education programs, more advanced education, and challenging work. Barry stated that he wanted “a great education, a place to get to know the Lord better.” Brittany, like Emily, Eddie, and Sam, did not have a personal opinion about the quality of education. Brittany’s reason for not focusing on a quality education, however, was because “I was in the best public school in my county.” Stephanie espoused a higher educational level specifically stating the opportunities for one-on-one teacher instruction when needed. Tina’s quest for a quality education included the desire for a better social studies class whereas Travis desired caring teachers.

The administrators listed the quality of education as the number one factor parents choose to send their children to private schools. They stated high academic standards, outstanding education in preparation for college, and advanced placement opportunities. All of the administrators stated that their school offered the academic standards that parents wanted for their children.

**The Environment.** All three participant groups listed environment the same number of times throughout the interviews. The responses that were categorized as the environment included behavior expectations, culture change of public school, organized,

structured and social environment. Although there were few specific examples of the type of environment preferred, one of the main factors was safety. All participants intimated that an unsafe atmosphere existed in some public schools. Administrator Boaz stated, “Many of them come to us for environment. Their concern is they feel as though some public schools do not offer them the environment that they want for their child.” Esther specifically stated safety as a factor and added “Loving environment” as a factor for choosing the Excellent Academy. “Parents are seeking a school environment where their child can achieve his/her greatest potential as a learner,” stated Thelma. She added, “They [parents] want their child to be a part of a caring and nurturing learning environment where their child is given many opportunities for growth beyond the classroom.” Thus, administrators said parents cited safe, caring, loving, and nurturing as factors in the school’s environment that aided in their decisions to choose a private education.

Parents stated a range of environmental factors that they considered when choosing a private school. Beulah stated that her daughter’s public school “has had dramatic culture changes during the past few years.” Beulah said that they looked for a Christian-based school that provided extracurricular activities and offered a college preparatory curriculum. Both Eva and Susan wanted a school that accepted their special needs children. Eva stated Excellent Academy was “the only school to take my son.” Other schools, according to Eva, “look down on Special Education students.” Susan added “Special Education was our initial goal. However, he [Sam] has surpassed anyone’s expectations of being an honor student.” Tara’s daughter was rezoned to “a brand new school in which systems/staff were not in place. There was disorganization and a lack of



structure.” Her family searched for a private school that aligned with their belief “in traditional teaching methods and strong character values.” Similarly, Tina stated “Respect for tradition and structure represent the values guiding my decision.” She looked for a private school that offered student diversity and a social environment.

The students’ opinions about environment mirrored those of their parents. Brittany, for example, stated, “I was in the best public school in my county.” However, she believed her parents “wanted me in a private school because they want me to have the best education available along with a better environment.” Sam and Travis had similar opinions about the behavior of public school students. Sam stated that “Public schools are more wilder.” He surmised that his mother wanted “a safer environment” for him. Travis stated, “It’s almost like there aren’t any limits.” Like the majority of the students interviewed, Travis stated that the diverse student population and safe environment were factors that drove the decision to attend a private school.

**Extracurricular Activities.** The larger schools in this study, one religious and one non-religious, offer a plethora of extracurricular activities. Yet, overall, the administrators did not view sports, clubs, and other activities as key concerns in the selection process. In contrast, all of the students listed at least one sport in their general information that they enjoy playing as a team member or as recreation. Five of the students and three of the parents stated they wanted their school to offer extracurricular activities. Brittany stated, “I wanted my private school to offer extracurricular activities as well as other opportunities to grow closer to God.” Terrific Academy student Tiffany stated, “I wanted my private school to have more time for the arts.” The students interviewed mentioned sports, the arts, and clubs as the extracurricular activities that they

wanted their schools to offer. Generally, parents shared that they wanted their children to have a well-rounded education which included their participation in some type of extracurricular activity. Brittany's mother, Beulah, stated, "Other than a college prep education being provided, we wanted to make sure the school offered extracurricular activities, such as educational trips, sports, chapels." Sam's mother Susan disliked that their private school did not offer any athletics. Both Terrific Academy parents, Tara and Tina, listed extracurricular activities as specific needs of their children when they chose the private school.

### **Conclusions**

The parents who send their children to private schools articulated varying perceptions of the conditions of public schools. Betty, however, was the only parent to share a positive experience. She stated "There were no bad conditions, social or education-wise, to distract from his [Barry's] setting at his previous public school." She added that the school was a "Silver Award Public School and he functioned well there." Beulah and Sara's perceptions were similar. Beulah stated that the school had undergone dramatic cultural changes and the school administration and leadership were not very consistent. She stated "We did not see these two conditions changing anytime in the future, if ever." Sara's concern was the public school "would break her [Stephanie's] unique spirit. Susan and Tina cited overcrowding, whereas the remaining parents listed more personal concerns.

The reasons parents gave for choosing to send their children to private school, which is subquestion two and subquestion three will be addressed together. Subquestion three asked if reasons given by parents for choosing private schools varied by the type of

private school. Betty and Eva made the decision based on having the opportunity to choose their private schools. Betty intimated that there were financial rewards for Barry to attend Best Academy. Eva stated that she chose the school because her mother worked there. Both Betty and Eva chose a religious school education for their children. Almost half of the parents, Beulah, Tara, and Tina, chose their schools because of the quality of education. Specifically, Beulah said, “We chose private school because of the strict academic standards in a Christian perspective.” Tara stated “The level of education our children receive at private school far outweighs what we would ever receive at the public school in our area.” Tina responded, “Student diversity, commitment to student’s success, academic curriculum, behavioral expectations, school communication, and social environment directly influenced this decision.” Of the three parents discussed above, only Beulah’s daughter attended a religious school. Ethel, whose son attended a religious school, stated she did not like the public school system. Sarah did not like that the school had metal detectors and Susan cited accreditation concerns as one of the reasons for choosing a private education for Sam. Sarah and Susan are non-religious school parents. Thus, reasons stated by parents did not vary by the type of private school chosen. Two of the three parents who stated academic standards were non-religious school parents. Likewise, two of the three parents who stated school conditions as a factor were also parents of students who attended a non-religious school.

Subquestion four addressed how the reasons given by students and administrators compared with those given by parents. Refer to table 4.4. Three of the factors that were consistent with all three interviewees were as follows: quality of education, environment, and Christian-based school. Parents and students were almost identical in their responses

about the school environment and extracurricular activities. They also valued teacher qualities in similar fashion. Administrators and parents agreed that class size was a factor in choosing a private school education. Fifty percent of the parents and students participated in a shared decision-making process. Betty stated “Like most all decisions concerning our family, we had an open discussion with him [Barry] about the pros and cons of this decision and the outcome moving towards his future.” Tina, Ethel, and Eva stated that they asked their children about the idea of attending a private school. The responses were affirmative. Susan and Tara asked their children to remain open-minded. These parents and students toured their private schools together before the decision was made. Beulah was the only parent who stated, “We put the option out there for our children to make on their own and she [Brittany] decided on her own.” Thus, 87.5% of the parents and students made a joint decision to attend a private school.

### **Chapter Summary**

The researcher conducted interviews or had a written interview protocol completed by twenty individuals. There were eight parents of private school students, eight private school students and four private school administrators. Two of the administrators were more comfortable with completing the interview protocol in written form and returning it to the researcher. The purpose of the study was to gain insight into the reasons parents choose to send their children to private schools. The interviews were audio taped and then transcribed. After all interviews were completed and all audio tapes transcribed, recurring patterns and themes were identified and coded.

The researcher identified four major themes that the three participant groups stated were the determining factors for attending a private school. The parents, students, and

administrators were equally concerned about the quality of education that could be received at a private institution. Parents overwhelmingly stated the perceived school characteristics as their number one factor in choosing a private education. Administrators believed that the quality of the education their school could provide and the school's environment would be the major factors for parents. The seven major themes in order of priority by the three participants' groups were perceived school characteristics, quality of education, environment, extracurricular activities, quality of teachers, Christian concept, and class size were noted as important factors in determining whether parents choose to send their children to private school. Almost every parent and student had a personal reason, other than the major themes shared here. However, those reasons did not recur and were not considered for discussion in this study.

## **CHAPTER V**

### **SUMMARY, CONCLUSION, AND IMPLICATIONS**

#### **Introduction**

This chapter summarizes the study on the reasons parents choose a private school education for their children including a discussion of the research findings and their implications. The chapter also includes recommendations for future research on the topic of private school choice.

#### **Summary**

The researcher considered the following overarching question in this study: What do parents perceive as the benefits of sending their children to private schools? The following subquestions will be used to answer the overarching question:

Subquestion 1: How do parents who send their children to private schools perceive conditions in public schools?

Subquestion 2: What reasons do parents give for choosing to send their children to private schools?

Subquestion 3: Do reasons given by parents for choosing private schools vary by the type of private school?

Subquestion 4: How do reasons given by students and administrators compare with the reasons given by parents for choosing private schools?

The researcher examined the experiences of twenty individuals: eight parents, eight private school students and four private school administrators,. The four private schools were all located in the metropolitan area of a large southeastern city. All interviews and written interview protocols were completed over a five-month time period; from

December 2010 to April 2011. The interviews occurred at the private schools and lasted approximately thirty minutes to an hour. Two of the four administrators preferred to complete the written interview protocol; and they returned them after approximately two weeks. Confidentiality was maintained by assigning a pseudonym to each participant, including school names. The researcher conducted three levels of analysis of the data -- first to determine patterns, second to derive broad themes from those patterns, and finally to form conclusions in response to the research questions. The data was analyzed using transcriptions of the interviews.

### **Analysis of Research Findings**

The researcher identified seven themes that the participant groups listed as reasons for choosing private school. The top four themes in order of greatest frequency of occurrence were the following: 1) perceived school characteristics; 2) quality of education; 3) physical environment; and 4) extracurricular activities. The remaining three themes that were mentioned by the participants include the quality of teachers, the Christian-based education, and the class size.

### **Discussion of Research Findings**

The researcher was able to identify perceived school characteristics, quality of education, physical environment, and extracurricular activities from interviews of the participants. These findings allowed the researcher to answer the overarching research question: What do parents perceive as the benefits of sending their children to private schools? The discussion of the findings is guided by the review of literature and research sub-questions which support the overarching question.

### **Sub-question 1**

The focus of sub-question one was parents' perception of public school education. Parents were asked to describe the conditions of their children's previous public school and how their children's experience influenced their decision to choose private schooling. The participants' responses were used to identify recurring patterns from which were derived the major themes. The school's diversity was the most mentioned attribute by parents. Research by Alt and Peter (2002), Kane and Orsini (1999), and NCES (1997) have agreed that private school students were more likely to be in a racially diverse classroom than their public school counterparts. Archer (2000) also noted that private school administrators and boards of trustees have made diversity a major policy initiative. Kennedy (2008) has confirmed these findings by noting that private schools are making every effort to insure that their student population is racially, ethnically, and economically diverse. Character, fairness, honesty, and empathy were divulged as contributing features in the selection process. According to Alt and Peter, both teachers and principals rate the climate of their private school as being better than public schools. Further, research by Figlio and Stone (1997) concluded that private schools have more advantages over public schools that enhance character development. The students who mentioned the school's characteristics overwhelmingly listed the people that made their private school experience noteworthy. Some researchers found that students and teachers form a better relationship when there are small classes (Alt & Peter, 2002; NCES, 2003), which was also confirmed by the students in this study. The only administrator to mention the perceived school characteristics as major factors in parents' choice noted that



the “overall successful reputation of the academy” was an influential factor in parents’ decisions to choose a private education for their children.

Overall, the parents’ perception of a private school education was based on the quality of education their children would receive and the perceived school characteristics. Research by the National Center for Education Statistics (2003) has shown that private school students were more likely than their public school peers to enroll in college a year after graduating from high school. Further, a positive correlation exists between parents’ expectations and students’ attendance in postsecondary education (NCES, 2003). The students’ perception aligned with parents by also choosing the perceived school characteristics as one of the top two factors. Thus, as noted by researchers Martinez, Kemerer, and Godwin (1993), the debate, on whether the success of private schools centers on the question of whether it is the characteristics of the school or the characteristics of the enrolled students and their families, is the source of differences.

### **Sub-question 2**

The focus of sub-question two was to address the reasons parents give for choosing to send their children to private school. Parents were asked what made them choose private school over the public school in their area and what specific needs were considered when choosing the private school. The participants’ responses were used to identify recurring patterns, from which were derived the major themes. The responses from all participants referenced the quality of education as the second most prevalent reason for choosing a private education. Researchers note that parents who send their children to private schools, and the general public, think that private schools are academically superior (Kraushaar, 1972; Neal, 2008; Peterson & Llaudet, 2006). Bruaun, Jenkins, and Grigg

(2006) concurred with the findings of the previous research adding that the education in private schools is superior when relevant variables are controlled. In this investigation, parents reported that they wanted an accredited school with a college preparatory curriculum and strict academic standards. In brief, this investigation revealed that students and parents alike affirmed previous research that one of the main reasons for the existence of private schools is to offer a better education than public schools (Bauch & Goldring, 1995; Kane & Orsini, 1999; Moe, 2001). Students wanted an excellent education, better education programs, more advanced education, and challenging work. The recurring message, according to Martinez, Thomas, & Kemerer (1994) is families want the best quality education available.

The administrators listed the quality of education as the number one factor parents shared for choosing to send their children to private schools. The administrators also stated high academic standards, outstanding education in preparation for college, and advanced placement opportunities as reasons they believe parents choose a private education. All of the administrators stated that their school offered the academic standards that parents wanted for their children.

### **Sub-question 3**

The focus of sub-question three was whether the type of private school, religious or non-religious, determined the parents' reasons for choosing a private school. Archer (2000) noted that the trend toward private education began as a means to preserve the religious values that were feared to be lost in public schools. Further, Archer noted that religion has been one of the constants in private education. Parents were asked how they decided the type of private school their children should attend. Research by Kraushaar

(1972) reported that parents give different reasons for their choice depending on the type of private school attended by their children. The reasons for choosing a private school are just as varied as the types of private schools available (NPSAA, 2008).

All three participant groups gave “physical and social environment” as a prominent reason for choosing private schools. Physical environment referred to school safety whereas social environment referred to the opportunity for social growth and involvement. Parents cited religious or moral reasons and a better academic environment for enrolling their children in private schools (NCES, 1995). Although there were few specific examples of the type of environment preferred, the number one factor was safety. The study by Figlio and Stone (1997) revealed that private schools, both religious and nonreligious, offer a more disciplined learning environment. All participants intimated that an unsafe atmosphere existed in public schools. Several participants stated that attending a Christian school was a great opportunity for the family. The research of Kraushaar (1972) noted that a growing majority of parents send their children to private school because they want their children to be with others who have similar characteristics. This conclusion was corroborated by two sets of parents and students who are currently attending a religious school. Other participants noted that they wanted a God-oriented, Christian based education. Thus, reasons stated by parents in this study did not vary by the type of private school chosen.

#### **Sub-question 4**

The focus of this research question was how the reasons for attending private schools given by students, administrators, and parents compare with one another. The larger schools in this study, one religious and one non-religious, offer a plethora of

extracurricular activities. Yet, overall, the administrators did not view sports, clubs, and other activities as key concerns in the selection process. In contrast, all of the students listed at least one sport in their general information that they enjoy playing as a team member or as recreation. Research confirms that there are families that choose private schools because of the extracurricular programs offered, knowing that they are sacrificing education quality (Figlio & Stone, 1997; Neal, 2008). In this study, five of the students and three of the parents stated they wanted their school to offer extracurricular activities.

Generally, parents shared that they wanted their children to have a well-rounded education which included their participation in some type of extracurricular activity. The motivation for choosing a private school education, as concluded by this study and other research (Archer, 2000; Buddin, Cordes, & Kirby, 1998; Iherjirika, 2004; NPSAA, 2008), could be a specific location, a desire to enhance students' creativity in the arts, or educational amenities for a student who could be gifted, have a learning disability or have behavior problems. Figlio and Stone (1997) asserted that parents choose a private school education because of a more disciplined environment, a religious education or a higher opportunity to participate in extracurricular sports. Ultimately, as noted by Kraushaar (1972), the staff and clientele of private schools tend to be of like-minds. Thus, according to this research, reasons given by students and administrators are consistent with the reasons given by parents for choosing private schools.

### **Conclusion**

The researcher identified four major themes that the three participant groups stated were the determining factors for attending a private school. The parents, students, and administrators were equally concerned about the quality of education that could be

received at a private institution. Parents overwhelmingly listed the perceived school characteristics as their number one factor in choosing a private education. Administrators believed that the quality of the education their school could provide and the school's environment would be the major factors for parents. The students' responses were fairly equal in frequency among the themes identified by the group of participants. The seven major themes in order of priority by the three participants' groups were the following: 1) perceived school characteristics, 2) quality of education, 3) environment, 4) extracurricular activities, 5) quality of teachers, 6) Christian concept, and 7) class size. Also, almost every parent and student had a personal reason other than the major themes shared here. However, those reasons did not recur and were not considered for discussion in this study.

### **Implications**

The findings from this investigation have several important implications for administrators of both private and public schools. For private school administrators, the findings can help guide strategic planning, resulting in priorities that are consistent with the needs and expectations of parents and students. For public school administrators, the findings, likewise, can inform the strategic planning process so that public schools provide the same opportunities that parents are willing to fund privately for their children. In brief, the parents interviewed for this investigation wanted their children to have the best educational experience available; and they were willing to pay the price.

The findings also provide insight concerning private school expectations from parents and students versus those of private school administrators. The experiences shared by the three participant groups were not specific to the type of private school. As evidenced by

this study, students want to attend the type of school that their parents prefer. The expectations are high and students perform accordingly, regardless of the type of private school the students attend. A positive correlation exists between parents' expectations and students' attendance in postsecondary education (NCES, 2003). For example, two of the private schools in this study reported that at least 97% of their graduates went to college. Research by the National Center for Education Statistics (2003) has shown that private school students were more likely than their public school peers to enroll in college a year after graduating high school. Thus, the findings suggest that public school administrators would benefit their students by emphasizing postsecondary educational opportunities and sharing these expectations throughout the students' school years.

Further, these findings suggest that public school leaders should use the results of this investigation to guide the planning and decisions in their schools. There were seven themes extracted from this investigation. The top four will be reiterated here. First, the number one factor for choosing a private school was the perceived school characteristics. The school's diversity was the most mentioned attribute by parents. Although public schools may not be as diverse as private schools, the emphasis was on preparing students for a global society. There are programs that assist public schools in achieving diversity awareness. Character, fairness, honesty, and empathy were divulged as contributing features in the selection process. These qualities are not limited to private schools and can be achieved in the public school setting. The students who mentioned the perceived school characteristics as a factor, overwhelmingly listed the people that made their private school education noteworthy. Building relationships with peers and teachers is a skill that must be taught. This is more easily achieved in private schools because of the

smaller class size. Some researchers found that students and teachers form a better relationship when there are small classes (Alt & Peter, 2002; NCES, 2003). The research also noted that this relationship can enhance academic performance (Alt & Peter, 2002). Public schools administrators can benefit from this finding, when feasible, by utilizing teacher assignments to minimize the class sizes.

The second theme, quality of education, is a constant source of debate for public schools. Participants expressed explicitly that they wanted an accredited program, academic rigor, strict academic standards, and a college preparation program. Academic rigor is a challenge for all students. Although there are programs designed to enhance academic achievement, college preparatory curriculum is not the norm for all students and schools. All of the students' responses were similar. They wanted an excellent education, better education programs, more advanced education, and challenging work. Public school leaders are bombarded with new programs yearly, barely allowing time for any one program to become effective. Those who make decisions about public schools appear to be obsessed with AYP data and not focused on the individual pupil. For example, NCLB requires that 100% of students are achieving at or above grade level by 2014 which is an impossible feat given the current achievement trends (NCES, 2008). The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP, 2006) reported that private school students have outperformed their public school peers. However, higher performance scores do not mean that private schools are better than public schools because they often serve dissimilar students (NAEP).

Environment was the third and most dubious theme. Although there were few specific examples of the type of environment preferred, one of the recurring factors was safety.

All participants intimated that an unsafe atmosphere existed in public schools. Private school administrators also said parents cited safe, caring, loving, and nurturing as factors in the school's environment that aided in their decisions to choose a private education. Public school leaders are charged with the task of making sure all students have a safe learning environment. Parents, however, are the deciding factors for school safety. According to Alt and Peter (2002), when parents require students to perform to high academic standards and when they express clear and consistent expectations of teachers and maintain a climate for learning, the school climate is positively affected regardless of whether the school is public or private.

The fourth theme, and perhaps the one that needs the least attention by public school leaders, is the opportunity to be involved in extracurricular activities. The private school students interviewed mentioned sports, the arts, and clubs as the extracurricular activities that they wanted their schools to offer. Generally, parents shared that they wanted their children to have a well-rounded education which included their participation in some type of extracurricular activity. Although, public schools offer an abundant number of extracurricular activities, participation is limited. Public schools are usually larger than private schools and therefore have more students who may be interested in the extracurricular activities. Thus, public school leaders should accentuate the variety and abundance of activities when parents are making the decision to choose between public and private school.



## **Recommendations for Future Research**

This investigation found that parents chose religious and nonreligious private schools for the same reasons. Further research is needed to discover if parents choose private schools based on specific educational reasons or for personal, family preferences. Although there is research that asserts private school attendance as status-oriented, no evidence existed in this study.

Also, additional research is needed to determine if the size of the private school and the services provided have an influence on parents' decisions. In this study, half of the schools had a student population of over one thousand while the other two schools had populations under two hundred students. Naturally, the larger schools had more advanced placement classes and a wider variety of extracurricular activities. All schools offered some type of extracurricular activity which was one of the major factors, especially for students, in selecting a private school.

Several parents in the study stated proximity to their home was also a deciding factor in selecting their private school. The two nonreligious schools in the study offered transportation, at an additional cost to the parents. This investigation did not pursue information on after-school programs and if there were additional costs associated with said programs. The results revealed that parents want what is best for their children. The perceived school characteristics, quality of education, learning environment, and extracurricular activities are all factors that any parent would like for their child. There are public schools that provide these services and are doing well. Further research is needed to determine what public school parents expect from their schools. More specifically, do public school parents want their schools to mirror private schools?

## **Dissemination**

This dissertation will be made available electronically via the electronic thesis/dissertation database of Henderson Library at Georgia Southern University. The outcomes of this study will be shared with private and public school personnel as they seek to improve parental satisfaction. Ultimately, this scholarship will be published and shared in academic journals that promote educational and administrative leadership. These findings will further be presented at various leadership conferences and other educational research events when the opportunity presents itself.

## **Concluding Thoughts**

In conclusion, the purpose of this research was to understand the reasons parents choose to send their children to private schools. The findings revealed that many parents are searching for a better academic environment that considers their children's individual needs. The findings of this study further conclude that religious and nonreligious educational settings are chosen for the same reasons. Parents and students in smaller schools mentioned one-on-one teacher assistance; whereas, students who attended larger schools did not find this a priority. The outcome of this study affirms that academic excellence outweighs learning environment and extracurricular activities. Overall, the perceived school characteristics exceeded all other reasons for attending private institutions. It was unclear, however, if the status of attending private school was an influencing factor for parents or students.

The increasing concern about alternatives to public education has resulted in greater need for data on private education. The overall percentage of students in private schools has remained relatively stable from 12.4 percent in 1985 to 11 percent in 2007 (NCES,

2008). According to Archer (2000), the history of private schools in the United States tends to correlate with societal changes. Archer further observed that a boost was given to Christian schools' enrollment in the 1960s when prayer was taken out of public schools. Public schools received critical academic assessments in the 1983 report, *A Nation at Risk*, which added to the list of reasons parents sought alternatives to public school education. The new educational initiative is not fully implemented; however, the requirements mirror those of the *No Child Left Behind Act* (U.S. DOE, 2007 & 2005). Alt and Peter (2002) have argued that private schools have an unmatched advantage over public schools stemming from the parents' desire to choose a private education for their children. Thus, greater understanding of the reasons behind the choosing of nonpublic schools is needed. Perhaps, in the end, it is not what private schools have to offer, but what public schools do not offer.

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## Appendices

### Appendix A

#### Interview Questions: Parents

1. Describe the conditions of your previous public school? Did any of those conditions influence your decision to chose a private education?
2. Tell how your child's public school experience influenced you to choose this school?
3. How did your child participate in the decision-making process when deciding whether or not to go to private school?
4. How did you decide the type of private school for your child/ren to attend?
5. What specific needs of your child did you consider when choosing this school; i.e. gifted education, special education, etc?
6. Were school values a factor in your decisions? If yes, what values were important?
7. What do you like most/least about your current private school?
8. What made you choose your child's private school over the public school in your area?

## Appendix B

### Interview Questions: Students

1. What did you want your private school to offer?
2. Tell me what you like about this school.
3. Tell me what you dislike about this school.
4. Why do you think your parent(s) wanted you to go to private school?
5. What was it about the public school that made your parent(s) choose a private school education for you?

## Appendix C

### Interview Questions: Administrators

1. What do parents tell you they are looking for when choosing a private school?
2. How does the AYP status of public schools in your area influence your parents' decision to attend this school?
3. What public school conditions influenced your parents' choice to attend this school?
4. Why do you believe parents' chose your school?

Appendix D

General Information: Parents

First name, last initial: \_\_\_\_\_

Race: \_\_\_\_\_

Age: \_\_\_ 18 - 25

\_\_\_ 26 - 33

\_\_\_ 34 - 41

\_\_\_ 42 - 49

\_\_\_ 50 and older

Marital Status: \_\_\_\_\_

Highest educational level completed: \_\_\_ High School

\_\_\_ College Graduate

\_\_\_ Master's Degree

\_\_\_ Doctorate

\_\_\_ Other: \_\_\_\_\_

Yearly household income: \_\_\_ \$12,000 - \$29,000

\_\_\_ \$30,000 - \$49,000

\_\_\_ \$50,000 - \$69,000

\_\_\_ \$70,000 - \$99,000

\_\_\_ over \$100,000

Type of K-12 school attended: \_\_\_\_\_

Occupation: \_\_\_\_\_

Religious Affiliation: \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix E

### General Information: Students

First name, last initial: \_\_\_\_\_

Race: \_\_\_\_\_

Age: \_\_\_\_\_

Grade: \_\_\_\_\_

Favorite subject: \_\_\_\_\_

Hobbies / Sports: \_\_\_\_\_

How many students are in your class? \_\_\_\_\_

What do you like most about your school? \_\_\_\_\_

What do you like least about your school? \_\_\_\_\_



## Appendix F

### General Information: Administrators

First name, last initial: \_\_\_\_\_

Official title: \_\_\_\_\_

Years of service at this school: \_\_\_\_\_

Highest educational level completed:

Type of K-12 school: \_\_\_\_\_

Grades serviced: \_\_\_\_\_

Total school enrollment: \_\_\_\_\_

Average class size: \_\_\_\_\_

Number of teachers: \_\_\_\_\_

Number of certified teachers: \_\_\_\_\_

Religious Affiliation: \_\_\_\_\_

Is transportation provided? \_\_\_\_\_

Are meals provided? \_\_\_\_\_

Are students required to take an entrance exam? \_\_\_\_\_

What extracurricular activities are offered to your students? \_\_\_\_\_

What curricula do you provide? \_\_\_\_\_

Which association licenses your school? \_\_\_\_\_

Are there mandatory participation hours/events for your parents? \_\_\_\_\_