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PUBLIC V. PRIVATE: PARENTAL CHOICE OF SCHOOLS AND THE REASONS

WHY

BY

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## ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Public v. Private: Parental Choice of Schools and the Reasons Why

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With the rise in alternatives to public schools over the past three decades, it is clear that families have a variety of options in addition to the local public school. These opportunities have created a competitive marketplace where all schools, public included, are now competing for families. Parents are increasingly viewed as consumers and, depending on their positions with regard to large scale educational goals and the specific educational needs of their families, many have a greater opportunity to make decisions about what suits their needs best (Cookson, 1994).

Parents who choose private schools are generally pursuing higher levels of, or looking to maintain, social advantages for the next generation of their family (Bourdieu & Passeron, 2000; Cookson, 1994). This pursuit of education by families can be explained as a conflict between social classes (Sadovnik et al., 2006). Educational credentials, as indicators of status, have become more important than actual levels of student achievement related to knowledge and skills. The rise in credentialism during the twentieth century has helped dominant groups to continue to locate greater advantages for their children as they relate to their place within the system of education as well as society (Collins, 1979).

At the micro-level there are a number of reasons that reflect why parents choose private schools over public schools. Research shows parental decisions to choose a

private school is often very complex and it is very unlikely that one particular reason is used for making a particular decision (Bosetti, 2004; Cookson, 1994). Three micro-level themes consistently identified by researchers pertaining to parents' decisions to choose private schools include academics, values, and school characteristics which includes themes related to smaller class size and a more personalized learning environment.

This case study explored the issue of student and family attrition from public schools when parents chose to remove their children from a suburban public school to enroll them in a private school. It also examined student and family attrition from private schools when parents chose to remove their children from private schools to enroll them in the local public school. Parents who opted to leave the public schools for private schools maintained reasons that consistently followed the research literature; doing so due to experiences, or the anticipation of such experiences in future grades, related to poor academic challenge, social climate issues, and a lack of personalization within the learning environment. Parents who opted to leave private school for public school did so primarily because the value was not there when comparing the cost of a private education with what was offered in the local public schools. In addition, these parents wanted a greater sense of social exposure, awareness, and understanding for their children which they felt would be more likely to be found in the local public school system.

Public school administrators need to be aware of such reasons to develop and implement effective instructional programs given the competitive marketplace that involves public and private education (Cookson, 1994). As parents have extensive options related to school choice, this awareness is critical to successfully obtaining and retaining students and their families as part of a student body and school community

(Coleman & Hoffer, 1987; Gutmann, 1987; Schneider et al., 2000). It is in developing this awareness that more public school administrators should be better able understand why and how they fail to meet student and family needs as well as what they need to do to reverse this trend.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

In decades prior to 1983's *A Nation at Risk*, public schools were seen as being as good, or perhaps better than, private schools and any issues related to educational inequality among these schools were dismissed by the public (Cookson, 1989). Many Americans believed that the economy was strong enough to allow opportunities for people, regardless of their educational background (Cookson 1989). By the late seventies however, critics of public education argued that educational efforts in public schools were mediocre at best, claiming students were being poorly prepared for life after school. Reform efforts called for greater emphasis on academic achievement and improved curriculum to combat high rates of adult illiteracy and declining achievement scores, as well as low scores on international comparison tests (Sadovnik, Cookson, & Semel, 2006).

While educational reform effort over the past decade has been dominated by "No Child Left Behind," the topic of school choice has also been incorporated into platforms and agendas of local, state, and national politics. Although, much of this discussion focuses on charter schools, the idea of school choice itself certainly involves private schools as an alternative to the public system. This discussion has also facilitated the debate regarding the role of private schools within the current educational system (Cookson, 1989).

With the rise in alternatives to public schools over the past three decades, it is clear that families have a variety of educational options in addition to the local public school. These opportunities have created a competitive marketplace where all schools, public included, are now vying for families. Parents are increasingly viewed as consumers and, depending on their positions with regard to large scale educational goals and the specific educational needs of their families, many have a greater opportunity to make decisions about what best suits their needs (Cookson, 1994).

The element of choice, however, is not a new concept. While, in the early twentieth century, when some states attempted to make all children attend public schools, the U.S. Supreme Court, in *Pierce vs. Society of Sisters* (1925), upheld the right of parents to choose schools outside the public system, including religious schools. This case was to set the course for parents to exert control over the education of their own children, allowing choice to become and remain a fixed principle within the American educational system (Kraushaar, 1972).

This idea of control is a central issue within American education (Gutmann, 1987). Within “control,” questions exist pertaining to the rights and abilities of the state and parents in making such decisions about children’s education. Much of this can be determined by the ultimate goals of education (Labaree, 1997). Depending on how people develop, view, and support these goals, very different understandings exist about how, when, and where a child should be educated.

Private schools give parents the opportunity to pursue an alternative to what the local public schools can offer (Coleman & Hoffer, 1987). This is what allows them to continue to operate. If they offered nothing different from public schools, the likelihood that they would remain open seems very small. It is, however, this sense of choice that exists which gives parents the opportunity to educate their child in a manner that aligns itself to their own values and ideologies (Schneider, Teske, & Marschall, 2000).

Despite the fact that most parents are satisfied with their choice to attend private schools (Bosetti, 2004; National Center for Education Statistics, 2005) parents may decide to leave private school to attend public school. There could be any number of reasons why a parent would choose to attend public school instead. Perhaps the financial commitment may not be worth the experience. Given the potential for financial hardship in today's economy this would not be an overwhelming surprise. Ultimately, it may come down to what parents' value and what they feel is best for their child.

This study examines these reasons why parents opt to remove their children from a suburban public school and send them to a private school, as well as the reasons they opt to attend a public school after attending a private school. How such decisions are made by parents within a suburban public school district that is high performing and well-respected helps set this study apart from others of similar focus. In many cases studies related to parental choice of schools center on urban areas or under-performing schools (Cookson, 1994; Goldring & Phillips, 2008; Goldring & Shapira, 1993). It is the context of this study that makes for a very unique and interesting discussion. While these public schools exist in a reasonably affluent area, the presence of many independent and

parochial private schools looms very large. Their existence within this particular geographical area helps facilitate a very unique and worthwhile conversation with parents when discussing K-12 education for their children.

### Problem Statement

Laurel Township is a suburban school district in west central New Jersey. Many parents in the district are well-educated and have high expectations related to post-secondary education for their children. Traditionally, the public school system has been well-received as evidenced by school budgets usually passing with a great deal of parental support (The Laurel Ledger, May 5, 2011). Despite this positive perception of Laurel schools, there continues to be a number of families who opt for private education at some point during their child's K-12 educational experience. District data shows that approximately 15% of Laurel Township students between 1995 and 2008 were enrolled in private school (Laurel Township Public Schools, 2009). This is a consistently higher percentage of students who transfer to private schools when compared to national data trends.

Private school enrollment accounts for approximately 10% of all school children in the United States (Coleman, Hoffer, & Kilgore, 1982; Cookson, 1989; Kraushaar, 1972; National Center for Education Statistics, 2010; Walberg, 2007); almost 5 % less than Laurel Township's 15% as noted earlier. Since Laurel is a well-supported public school district, the fact that 15% of students are not attending public schools must draw our eye to some additional factor, be it internal or external. The fact that these students

are not attending the public system may have to do with something specific to the district or the schools themselves or perhaps the number of private school options that exist in Ivy Township which is just north of Laurel. These numbers may also stem from the social class, economic status, educational backgrounds, or educational history of parents who have opted for private education (Schneider et al., 2000).

Since students need to meet admissions standards to enter private schools (MacLachlan, 1970; Coleman et al., 1982; Unger, 1993) there is a strong likelihood that these students will be high achieving children who are well-behaved, positive contributors to the overall school climate. This sense of “skimming” or “creaming” creates a potential loss of productive contributors to the public school environment and compromises the school’s reputation amongst future educational choosers (Gutmann, 1987).

During this era of intense accountability, as demands are placed on school districts by state and federal governments, the school district can ill-afford to lose these children and their families. The loss of academically strong students can leave public schools “with a student body that is disproportionately poor, economically and academically...The quality of public schooling will therefore decline even further” (Gutmann, 1987, p. 116). Although percentages of students leaving for private school in Laurel Township have remained consistent over the past fifteen years, NCLB expectations and any failure to meet these expectations over time may weaken the perception of education in the district and lead to more attrition. By combining this attrition of families, along with increased proficiency mandates from the federal No Child

Left Behind Act, one could soon see negative effects on this school district, not only in the loss of students themselves, but also in terms of family support of school budgets and other forms of financial revenue (Gutmann, 1987). Public schools will ultimately be under-supported, under-funded and therefore under-performing on the whole if they continue to lose families to private schools (Selakovich, 1984).

### Purpose Statement

The purpose of this case study is to explore the issue of student and family attrition from a public school system when parents choose to remove their children from a suburban public school to enroll them in a private school. It also examines family attrition from private schools when students opt to attend their local public school. This study will make contributions to current research related to parents' choice to attend private schools. In addition it will contribute to research, of which there is less of, pertaining to why parents leave private schools to attend public schools. By examining and unpacking these decisions, a greater and more complete understanding of how complex decision making can be with regard to school choice (Cookson, 1994) will take place.

This study also examines both of these issues to better meet the needs of current and future students and their families in the public school district in which I currently am employed. As an administrator who has worked in two suburban public school districts over the last decade I have witnessed the attrition of students from the districts which I have worked. This experience has piqued my interest in the topic to improve



programming in suburban public schools and retain families as part of the public education process. I believe a better understanding of why parents choose to leave the public school system, as well as why they choose to attend the public school rather than their private schools, will help improve programming in this district and may have broader implications for suburban public schools in general, helping to retain families within public school systems.

### Research Goals

This study attempts to address several issues. 1.) This study will attempt to understand why families leave a traditionally well-supported school district in favor of private schools. 2.) This study will attempt to understand why families choose public education after choosing private education. 3.) This study will attempt to understand the decision-making processes by families with regard to leaving a public school for a private school and also leaving a private school for a public school.

### Significance of the Study

The Ivy area boasts approximately twenty private schools for local children to attend. All but one of these private schools are day schools, where students come from and return to their homes each day. The exception is a residential school which draws students from across the United States. Surrounding public schools must compete with these private schools for students. Since twenty private schools are operating in the area, the potential number of students who would not attend public school is very high. The proximity of Laurel Township to so many private school options may play a role in the

decision-making process for parents. These options are an additional factor that makes Laurel a unique place to conduct a study of this nature.

Furthermore, it is the context of this study which makes for a very interesting discussion. While many studies (Cookson, 1996; Goldring & Phillips, 2008; Goldring & Shapira, 1993) that focus on parental choice of schools tend to take place in urban areas or within schools that are under-performing, this study does just the opposite. By examining a suburban, high performing school district a new perspective is presented within the school choice debate. The study is also significant because, in addition to contributing to existing literature about why students have left public schools, I will also investigate why students leave private schools to attend public schools. Although my research is qualitative and is not meant to be generalizable to other school districts, the issue of family attrition from suburban schools is not limited to Laurel Township; therefore findings may be transferrable (Marshall & Rossman, 2011).

### Research Questions

- 1.) Why do parents move their children from Laurel public schools to private schools?
- 2.) On what do parents base their decisions to leave public schools for private schools?
- 3.) Why do parents leave private schools to attend the Laurel public schools?
- 4.) On what do parents base their decisions to leave private schools for public schools?

## Summary

With control and choice existing in such a noticeable manner across the United States for so long, the study of parental views particular to both public and private schools makes for a worthwhile contribution to current research. As choice options allow parents to educate their children in the manner which they consider appropriate (Cookson, 1989), decisions to leave public school for private and vice versa, create an opportunity to break down and deeply analyze the value system of parents in the Laurel Township. The existence of so many private schools in the particular area being studied, as well as the school district's ability to maintain budgetary support from residents (Laurel Township Public Schools, 2009) creates a particular set of circumstances in which to analyze the concept of school choice. With these unique circumstances, findings from the study have the potential to contribute to choice-related research, discussion, and debate at an even deeper level.

While this research centers on contemporary thoughts and experiences of parents, related to public and private schools, the first step in looking forward, must be to look back. With such rich history pertaining to the development of public and private schools across the early years of this nation's history, a brief presentation of this topic is central to understanding the concept of school choice. With this, I will present a foundation as it relates to school choice and American education from a variety of philosophical and ideological perspectives since the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

## CHAPTER II

### LITERATURE REVIEW

To provide a better understanding of why parents opt for private education over public education I need to begin with a discussion pertaining to the literature across three areas. These areas include *Educational Goals, Orientations of Schooling, Families Who Choose to Leave Public Schools (within the context of social class and cultural capital and values) and Why They Choose to Leave Public Schools?* By examining these areas we can identify, at both the macro and micro-levels, a foundation that supports this study and the reasons parents in Laurel Township opt to leave the public schools to attend private schools and leave private schools to attend the public schools.

#### Goals of Education

Democratic equality, social efficiency and social mobility, historically, have been at the heart of the educational mission in American public schools. They have also been at odds, existing in a continuous state of conflict, each promoting a different agenda. A major reason behind these differences involves how education is viewed; as a public or private good (Labaree, 1997). Tension over who gets educated, where, with what resources and how, underlie these differences in viewing education as a means to promote the public good or as a means to promote individual advancement (Fuhrman & Lazerson, 2005). These three goals begin to set the stage as to why parents opt for private school. What goals one agrees with and whether or not they can find an

education that effectively aligns with these goals in public school begins the conversation related to pursuing other alternatives.

As democratic equality promotes education as a public good, it calls on schools to provide skills related to citizenship and equality. Common schools of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, promoted democracy and democratic equality as primary goals of education. Horace Mann proclaimed in his *Twelfth Annual Report* (1848) that the common school was to develop educated citizens with knowledge and skills to support a republic. In addition to developing citizens, a second goal of the common school was to protect society from class differences and self-interests that would threaten the existence of the republic. According to Cremin, Mann promoted universal education as the great equalizer, leveling the field between classes. If education were to exist for all, it would expand the cultivated class, doing more than anything else to eliminate divisions and distinctions within society (1974). While other educational goals have joined democratic equality over the years in the development of American education, this concept is still found in educational rhetoric, practice, and structure of schools today.

During the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, business, labor, and educational leaders pushed to align school curricula with the needs of society's workforce structure because of a fear that schools would become economically counterproductive. Eventually, these unprepared students would be leaving schools to enter the workforce regardless of their skill set and qualifications (Lazerson & Grubb, 1974).

Proponents of public education for social efficiency argue that schools are designed to prepare students for future economic roles, which will in turn support the

American economy. Rather than implementing a common academic curriculum for all students, social efficiency proponents claim that different students have different career needs and aspirations. Therefore, they should be exposed to different coursework and curricula following these needs and aspirations (Sadovnik et al., 2006). Supporters believe social efficiency allows students to adapt to the demands of an occupational marketplace and they maintain the rationale that education is a public good as everyone benefits from a prosperous economy as well as contributions to the economy made by fellow workers (Labaree, 1997).

Following a social efficiency guided education, students would be tracked in classes and programs based on academic performance and ability. In many cases, particular educational tracks would lead to programs that offered students specific training for skilled industrial and commercial jobs. Proponents of public education for social efficiency believe this to be appropriate as students with specific education are likely to have a more focused learning experience. In doing so, they will have gained more human capital for themselves, allowing them to become more skillful components of the workforce (Collins, 1979).

Critics of the social efficiency argument claim that it limits opportunities and possibilities for students related to political equality and social mobility. By directing students into a track where they are taught specific preparation for a particular job, the possibility of any other outcome becomes limited. Because lower class students will tend to leave education earlier than upper class students (Labaree, 1997) society then, reproduces itself socially in the same manner in which it currently exists.

While democratic equality focuses on preserving the American republic and social efficiency focuses on the needs of the social system as a whole, social mobility focuses more on the needs of the individual as a consumer of education. Proponents of social mobility believe that schools should be responsible for providing students with the appropriate credentials that will allow them to improve upon, or at least maintain, their current status within the structure of society (Collins, 1979). Through social mobility, education exists as a form of exchange value whereby education gains value in an extrinsic manner. Education is exchanged for a variety of things over the course of a lifetime such as a career, financial security, prestige, and power to name a few (Labaree, 1997).

Social mobility has, at times, aligned with democratic equality, supporting progressive education. At other times, it has aligned with social efficiency, supporting a more conservative agenda. For example, social mobility aligns with democratic equality along the lines of educational opportunity and individual achievement. This progressive ideology calls for optimism and expansion. Social efficiency, in this sense, is restrictive as it conservatively reproduces the current social structure. Yet social mobility also separates itself from democratic equality, and aligns itself with social efficiency, when examining the notion of stratification and the needs of the market (Labaree, 1997).

During the early to mid 20<sup>th</sup> century, education became more of a private good than it had been in the past. Public schools began to emphasize offering students the credentials necessary to improve their social status. Differences based on distinctive and reputational features of schools themselves helped facilitate educational pursuits by

parents and students (Labaree, 1997). Public education took on more of a meritocratic focus, with the point of education being about exchanging that education for career opportunities that relate to social and cultural capital (Collins, 1979).

Proponents of social mobility argue that it allows anyone from any level of social class to rise as a member of society, supporting equality of opportunity based on individual merit. School achievement and the amount of time one spends pursuing education will significantly impact one's chances for upward mobility within society (Selakovich, 1984). Critics of social mobility claim it is unrealistic and socially inefficient to promote this goal as it relates to education and social reproduction. Conservatives argue that schools should take a more realistic approach in terms of understanding and considering the human capital needs of the economy (Labaree, 1997). We will need more than just high level white collar professionals to keep the economy moving forward and it is unrealistic to approach education with the idea that everyone should become a doctor or a lawyer. Clerical workers, for example, are in greater demand than doctors or lawyers (Labaree, 1997).

These similarities and differences among all three goals have created a system often filled with confusion and contradiction that has made it difficult for any of these three goals to be effectively achieved.

We systematically sort and select students according to individual merit and then undermine this through homogenizing practices such as grade inflation, social promotion and whole-class instruction... We offer everyone access to higher education, while assuring that the social benefits of this access are sharply



stratified. We focus on using education to prepare people for work but then devote most of our effort to providing a thoroughly general education that leaves most graduates unprepared to carry out work responsibilities without extensive on-the-job training (Labaree, 1997, p.71).

The optimal educational system is one that successfully promotes the development of good citizens and good workers, while providing the opportunity for mobility and social opportunity. It is a challenging task, to develop and prepare students to successfully enter the world (working and otherwise) as young adults. At the same time, it is reasonable to believe that without an effective balance among all three goals being struck, to find satisfaction in what the school has to offer, parents would seek out alternative options to public education.

Educational goals exist as a foundation upon which everything else in schools can be built. If the foundation of any home is not built well, the house itself cannot stand strong for years to come. Whether or not the foundation of education in any community, i.e. its goals, is built well, is often a matter of parental perception; however, it is exactly these perceptions that open the door to parents, in many cases, making decisions as to where they want to send their child to school. This notion asks us to consider what people truly value in their schools. What are they willing to concede, and ultimately, who has the right to make the decisions related to education in each community within the United States? At this point, the discussion takes on two major orientations to education as it relates to decision making and control...the state and the family.

## Orientations to Education

Before discussing these two orientations that set the stage for the differences between public and private schools, it would be beneficial to gain an understanding of early education in the United States. One can identify the existence of philosophical tension between perspectives within the context of a developing nation and American education in general. I also should provide actual definitions of specific terms related to public schools and private schools in order to provide a more specific understanding as to what actually constitutes a public and/or private school in this country. For the purposes of this study, I will define these terms related to private and public schools in the following manner.

Public School: A school in which children attend based on residence. This school is supported by the local taxes and controlled by a local school board.

Private School: A school in which students must apply to and meet particular criteria in order to be admitted. Attendance is not based on geographic location. Private schools may be secular or religious in nature.

Independent School: A private school which is secular or religious in nature and does not maintain a direct affiliation with a religious body.

Parochial School: A private school which is religious in nature and maintains a direct affiliation with a religious body. Parochial schools maintain a direct connection to a diocese, parish, or religious order.

Boarding School: A private school where students live on campus and to which meals are also provided.

Day School: A private school where students attend class each day. Day schools do not maintain boarding facilities.

During the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, private schools dominated the educational landscape in the United States. These schools were funded by tuition, religious subsidies if the school was denominationally related, and in some cases, small subsidies from local governments (Wells, 1993). By the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century, local governments began regulating private schools and reduced the aid these schools received. At the same time, schools owned and operated by local governments were being built and funded with local government monies. Such advocates for these schools in the northeast included Horace Mann of Massachusetts, and Henry Barnard of Connecticut, both of whom supported tuition-free, government-run schooling for all children (Wells, 1993).

### Common Schools

As the country approached the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century, social tensions had widened to the point where riots and other public displays reflecting that tension between classes became common, especially in cities (Reese, 2005). Mann believed that mass public education could create social harmony and restore relationships among groups of people, regardless of heritage or class (Wells, 1993). In an effort to do so, common schools intended to provide a substantial educational experience which exposed children, from

the same geographic area, to the same content and subject matter within the same classroom with the same teacher (Reese, 2005).

At that time, the idea of social improvement through education began to take hold and support for the common school began to expand. Numerous reformers in different states such as Thaddeus Stevens, Catherine Beecher, and Caleb Mills began to support and speak on behalf of a class-inclusive school system, where it was believed “that individual welfare and social progress depended upon an extensive network of public schools” (Reese, 2005, p. 13).

By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, public education and compulsory attendance laws were common, with the majority of children in the United States attending at a minimum, elementary school. Nearly a quarter million public schoolhouses were in existence across the United States and many Americans believed the common school was one of the great achievements of the young country’s history (Wells, 1993).

### Parochial Schools

Although Christian values were prominent in common schools, large numbers of Catholics who had recently emigrated from Germany and Ireland felt there was too much emphasis on Protestant understandings of Christianity (Reese, 2005). This caused much debate and occasional violence (i.e. The Philadelphia Bible Riots) between Protestants and Catholics, leading Catholics to demand both the elimination of what they considered to be non-sectarian practices in common schools and financial support from the government in the establishment of Catholic schools themselves. Over the hundred year period from the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century to the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, support for Catholic schools

was evident. During this time, over 90% of all private school children attended Catholic schools (Bryk, Lee, & Holland, 1993).

While the debate regarding religion in schools continues even today, the 1963 Supreme Court ruling in *Abington School District vs. Schempp*, prohibited the mandatory reading of the Bible in public schools. The year before, in *Engle vs. Vitale* (1962), the Supreme Court banned state-sponsored school prayer. Consequently, “the unsolvable issue of religion in the public schools became an added incentive for Protestants, Catholics, and, later, for Jews to build their own schools in which the true faith could be transmitted” (Kraushaar, 1972, p. 21).

#### Private/Boarding Schools

Many private schools have religious associations which guide school visions as well as instructional programs. This is evident in perusing many private or boarding school catalogs or brochures. Private schools tend to promote particular values that are, in many cases, specific to that school. It is these values that help set them apart, providing parents with an uncommon experience that cannot be found in public schools (Wells, 1993).

Private academies date back to the late 18<sup>th</sup> century with Phillips Andover in Massachusetts (1780) and Phillips Exeter in New Hampshire (1783) whose goals were to prepare students from wealthy families for college (MacLachlan, 1970). As public schools expanded during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the existence of private academies was threatened, so much so that many of these schools were transformed into public schools, or they simply ceased to exist. Several did, however, reinvent themselves as boarding

schools to adapt to a changing American society and a changing American educational system.

City populations increased dramatically during the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century and in an effort to avoid exposure to the increasingly diverse population, elite families sent their children away to schools. A sense of isolation for these students allowed the schools to counter the corruptions and temptations of the urban society. At these boarding schools, positive impulses could be developed within a nurturing, family atmosphere (McLachlan, 1970). Elite schools existed as a major vehicle in separating the upper classes from the rest of America during the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. They became a training ground for upper class children and provided them with an experience unlike public schools could provide (Mills, 1959).

While public education has been consolidating to a degree since the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, private schools have shown a sizeable amount of growth over that time (Sadovnik et al., 2006). However, most private schools are still located on the east and west coasts of the United States, just as they were a century ago. Private schools of today and yesterday share a number of structural and philosophical conditions that are staples of their programming. For example, private schools emphasize academic achievement, high levels of morality, and discipline. A heavy emphasis on co-curricular activities is also found in private schools (Cookson, 1994). The emphasis on co-curricular activities is observable when comparing private and public schools. According to Cookson (1989), 57% of private school students versus 37% of public school students were found to be involved in extracurricular activities.

The intent of private schools is to provide students with an uncommon educational experience, one that is different from what can be found in public schools (Powell, 1996). If they were unable to do this, there would be little need for them to stay in existence. The fact that they have stayed in existence leads to an understanding that they do provide something unique that public schools do not or cannot provide students. Over the past century and a half private schools have secured a place within the American educational system (Powell, 1996) and have demonstrated extensive growth over the past fifty years when compared to public schools (Sadovnik et. al, 2006). Although they educate only a small percentage of all students who attend school, at ten percent, this amounts to a large number of actual children across America who are affected by private school education, philosophy, and practice.

Cremin defines education as “the deliberate, systematic, and sustained effort to transmit or evoke knowledge, attitudes, values, skills, and sensibilities” (1974, p. 1). The question then becomes: What knowledge, attitudes, values, skills and sensibilities are to be transmitted? And who should have the right to make these decisions about what things are transmitted to students? Over the course of American history, there has been much debate regarding the answers to these questions. Throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century these questions continued to speak to the fundamental differences between private and public schools (Gutmann, 1987).

As public schools are an agent of a larger society, private schools are an agent of the individual family (Coleman & Hoffer, 1987). Theoretically, these two orientations are harmonious. If individual families make up a larger homogeneous society, their

values should be reflected in those of the larger society. This, in turn, would allow public schools to serve the needs of the individual family, as it would be represented in society as a whole. The key in all of this, however, is the idea of a larger homogeneous society, which the United States is not. While the majority of people living in the United States are white alone, there are millions of people from numerous races who make up society (US Census Bureau, 2009). When society becomes heterogeneous, ideas, opinions, and values become different, creating a greater challenge for the individual to be represented within the position of the larger society (Cremin, 1976).

When education functions as an agent of the state, it maintains an obligation to educate future citizens of society (Gutmann, 1987). Its intent is to provide the opportunity to establish a common identity among students, break down class barriers, and offer consistent experiences to children, regardless of their heritage or background. Within this orientation, education supports social mobility. It allows for the elimination of limitations related to social and cultural capital placed on children because of the limitations that exist for their parents (Coleman & Hoffer, 1987).

Education, as an agent of the family, supports parental rights to make decisions and assume authority as to its purpose and direction. The school functions as *in loco parentis* with the intent of carrying out the parent's will. Within this orientation, the school becomes a useable tool in the social reproduction of society. It helps define and create the next generation, transmitting cultural and family values, based on the preceding generation's cultural values (Coleman & Hoffer, 1987).



In this case, it is the right of parents to pass values on to their children and to pursue their own idea of what constitutes a good life. Parents' ability to control how their children are educated allows them an important sense of individual freedom from the state (Wells, 1993). Critics of public schooling, centralized decision-making, and education for the common good cite those concepts' lack of success in meeting the needs of individual students based on the commonality of the public schools (Wells, 1993).

*Family State, State of Families, and State of Individuals*

One can understand how these orientations do conflict at times and how heated this conflict can be given what is at stake is what particular education is passed on to members of families as well as members of society. Gutmann takes this concept of different educational orientations even further. Aligning very well with democratic equality, the Family State theory argues that students, to reach their potential or achieve the intended goals of their own education, must contribute to the social good. Only through contributions to the social good, can society exist in a peaceful and prosperous state. Education itself fosters a sense of unity among students by teaching them what a "good life" is and promotes the inclination for students to pursue this good life (Gutmann, 1987). It is, however, a shortcoming of the Family State and even more so, difficult to understand, how the state can take precedence in determining just what the "good life" is for all people. Furthermore, the Family State also restricts parental choices and positions related to educational purposes. It supports the notion that the idea of a good education cannot be based solely on personal or political preferences (Gutmann, 1987). This vision of education for the social or common good has had a tremendous

impact on the system of public education in America (Wells, 1993). Whether or not these visions are appropriate, have been successfully achieved, or are even effective if they have been achieved, are matters of perspective as well.

The State of Families theory holds a different perspective with regard to the control of education, aligning more with Coleman and Hoffer's (1987) second orientation. The State of Families challenges state-controlled authority over education, through a number of different points, such as what constitutes this "good life" that is to be taught? What constitutes a good society? What constitutes a good person? And why shouldn't parents be the better judge of what these things are as they pertain to the education of their children (Gutmann, 1987)?

The State of Families claims that educational authority should be with the parents of the children to be educated. They should have the right to decide on a way of life that is in line with their own beliefs and heritage (Gutmann, 1987). Yet there are obvious shortcomings with this perspective as well. History shows that unregulated education creates children who fail to understand respect for diverse groups of people as well as develop the ability to rationally deliberate among ways of life that are different from their own. While the State of Families effectively identifies the value of parental freedom, it must ensure this freedom does not obstruct the development of children as they become respectful citizens within society (Gutmann, 1987).

Neither parents nor the state can hold exclusive authority over the education of children in the United States, and each perspective has been criticized for their respective failures. Proponents of a third perspective, the State of Individuals, recognize the

inadequacies of both the state and the family. As the state teaches dominant and controversial values of society it also develops cultural prejudices in children. Parents do the same, only the controversial points and prejudices they pass along are their own (Gutmann, 1987). Either way, this does not help children to effectively find a true sense of the “good life.” The State of Individuals calls for students to be educated in a manner that allows them to have the freedom of choice in their lives. This freedom of choice is what will allow them to achieve a good life within a good society. However, critics claim that this freedom to choose presents problems for society and its people. Concerns exist surrounding what happens when students make decisions and choices that exhibit a lack of morality or virtue (Gutmann, 1987).

If parental viewpoints are effectively recognized by society and the state itself, then public school may be an attractive option for families. As mentioned earlier, from a theoretical perspective, the goals of the family and the state should be harmonious, as the state should reflect the values of people who make up the state. However, the lack of homogeneity in society contributes to differing values which create difficulty for public schools to meet the needs of all constituents. These issues related to control and decision making are infused with the challenges faced when discussing overarching educational goals of democratic equality, social efficiency, and social mobility relative to the “who, what, where, when and how” of instruction.

In many cases, historians have found that those who have promoted public schooling have done so based on the role of an American ideology and the promotion of American ideals (Selakovich, 1984). It is difficult, however, to find a consensus as to

what an American ideology actually is and social scientists, such as Heilbronner (1960) and Bell (1960), have considered America to, in fact, be a society that does not, necessarily, have a guiding ideology (Selakovich, 1984). Perhaps this lack of ideology has allowed an inconsistent understanding as to the purposes of schools and schooling to develop among Americans. This may be the reasoning behind the differing perspectives about what should be taught, who should teach it, and who should make these decisions.

Public schools depend on the support of their clients, and given this lack of strong ideology, they are forced into a balancing act of different interest groups and competing values within a changing society itself (Goodlad, 1994). On the other hand, private schools do offer particular values for families. Although, their existence also depends on how well they serve their clients and while they are regulated to an extent by the state (Selakovich, 1984), they have a different sense of independence in terms of how they do serve the families and students who attend. It is this service that appeals to and attracts different types of families and students.

### *Who Chooses Private Schools*

Based on what has been discussed here as to goals of education as well as orientations to schooling, we begin to grasp large-scale ideas related to private school choice. To develop a stronger understanding of this phenomenon and ultimately get to a detailed picture of “why” parents choose private schools, one must first look at what research says about “who” chooses public schools. The characteristics of people who opt for private schools over public schools as well as what they hold in terms of resources

and capital will help to explain who these families are that opt for something different than what the public education system has to offer.

Research has shown a number of background characteristics that are historically present in families who choose private schools. They include parents' education, income, family structure, social class, and race (Coleman & Hoffer, 1987; Goldring & Phillips, 2008; Kraushaar, 1972; Yang & Kayaardi, 2004). Coleman and Hoffer have divided these factors into two categories: orientations and resources. While orientations describe values, beliefs and understandings held by parents, resources describe things these families possess that afford them the opportunity to send their children to private schools (1987). Parent levels of education, for example, would describe an orientation, while income would describe a resource. In other instances, a factor such as family structure could be both an orientation and a resource, while race could be neither. It is important to identify how this combination of orientations and resources creates a disposition that enables some families to choose private schools.

Researchers have found that a positive relationship exists between parents' own levels of educational achievement and the likelihood of sending their children to a private school (Bosetti, 2004; Yang & Kayaardi, 2004). As parents attend school themselves, a greater understanding develops about schools, what they can offer as well as the potential impact they may have on the futures of students who attend. This experience also provides parents with the understanding needed to access and utilize information related to making informed decisions related to schooling for their children (Schneider et. al, 2000; Hamilton & Guin, 2005).

Higher income is an additional factor consistently present in families who choose private schools. Because private schools charge tuition, it seems reasonable that families with higher incomes would be more likely to send their children to private schools. Elite boarding and day schools charge anywhere up to \$45,000 (The Ivy Day School, 2011), while tuition at parochial schools is noticeably less. Although most parochial schools were designed to service immigrants in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century and would not necessarily be considered elitist, median income of both private and parochial schools families was found to be higher than that of public school families (Bosetti, 2004; Cookson, 1989). Higher income translates to more resources, which allows parents greater financial opportunities. These opportunities present themselves as the ability to afford tuition for private or parochial school. Likewise, a strong, intact family structure also contributes to more resources. Two parent households allow for the opportunity for multiple incomes to enter into a household, and possibly fewer resources, financial and otherwise, to exit a household (Coleman & Hoffer, 1987).

Research related to race and who chooses private schools has found contradicting results over a variety of studies. Several studies have shown that race bears no significant effect on whether or not a parent chooses a private school (Goldring & Phillips, 2008; Yang & Kayaardi, 2004). While Coleman and Hoffer have found that black and Hispanic students make up a sizeable percentage of parochial school populations, but not independent private school populations (1987).

Independent private school administrators have described their students as being upper or upper middle class, with a limited number of working class students attending

their school. Most students from middle or working class families, who do attend private schools, attend parochial schools (Kraushaar, 1972; Schneider et al., 2000). Occupations of parents with children who attend private schools correlate positively with levels of social class. Most parents whose children attend independent private schools were identified by Kraushaar as professional, executive, proprietors or managerial, with parents of children attending parochial schools identified as mostly professional or managerial (1972).

The findings that families who tend to choose private schools have parents with higher levels of education, higher incomes, and a stronger family structure are reasonably predictable. These findings, however, do not mean that all private schools only enroll students who come from privileged backgrounds. Many parochial school students do tend to come from backgrounds that are relatively consistent with public school family backgrounds (Coleman & Hoffer, 1987).

#### *Why Parents Choose Private Schools*

While the literature pertaining to “who” chooses private schools speaks to a certain level of predictability, what is more intriguing is the concept of social and cultural capital that exists amongst, and is pursued by, the families who do choose private schools. At the macro-level, this pursuit or maintenance of social and cultural capital helps explain why parents choose private schools. According to French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, powerful families attempt to pass on more than just economic capital to their children. Their concerns lie equally in the transmission of both social and cultural capital. The benefits related to securing different forms of knowledge found in cultural

capital as well as the benefits of developing social relationships with different people found in social capital are of critical importance to these families as they look toward securing for the next generation, the existing wealth and privilege that currently exist (Bourdieu & Passeron, 2000; Cookson, 1994; Zweigehaft, 1993).

During the late 1960's and early 1970's skepticism was growing with regard to the good intentions and moral purposes of the established authority. Society was increasingly viewed by Americans as a place where those in power sought to maintain and extend power by manipulating public opinion through use of rhetoric (Hurn, 2008). While small concessions were made by the elite, the dominant structure within society has remained.

Conflict theory supports this skepticism by arguing that dominant groups have been able to conceal their interests related to the control of schooling by pushing the idea that success in school and life is based on merit, rather than social class (Sadovnik et al., 2006). This emphasis of equality through merit hides the fact that schools are organized in such a way that cater to the wealthy and the privileged, thus concealing the true relationship between schools, both private and public, and society.

According to Bowles and Gintis (1977), schools reproduce the values and characteristics necessary to support a repressive capitalist society. Differences between schools exist, not only with regard to curriculum, but also in the social organization of instruction. Lower-status schools produce children who are versed in characteristics related to lower-status occupations. These schools emphasize rule following and obedience and provide limited opportunities for students to demonstrate choice and



discretion. High-status schools, both private and public, emphasize a capacity for independent work and decision making as well as the opportunity to internalize norms, rather than demonstrate obedience to authority. These expectations placed on students in different schools reflect the demands of the occupational and career fields that they will encounter and obtain in the future (Bowles & Gintis, 1977).

When parents take part in the act of choosing schools, whether they are public or private, they are immediately confronted with issues related to social class. Rational choice theory acknowledges that decisions do not take place in a vacuum and that power relations impact such decisions. Class structure has a profound impact on how people think and make decisions (Cookson, 1994). In addition to income, race, and gender, people are also stratified by social class values as they relate to social and cultural capital (Cookson, 1994). These class-related status characteristics are prevalent in many private schools, making the decision to attend these schools that much more important to parents.

Private schools are necessary for families of wealth and status to maintain this status across the next generation (Bourdieu & Passeron, 2000). Enrolling in these schools becomes an opportunity to separate one's self from the larger group of society in terms of resources and connections. According to Collins, it is not so much about the learning that takes place in private schools, but the credentials that come along with a diploma from privileged schools as well as the connections with other families of potential wealth, power, and resources (1979).

If the intent of parents who send their children to private schools is to preserve status through educational credentials, then they should be very satisfied with the private

school experience. Private school students appear to be much more likely than public school students to be accepted at a prestigious or Ivy League university. In 2006, *The Wall Street Journal* reported that no less than 40% of freshmen enrolled at Bowdoin, Brown, Georgetown, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Princeton, California (Berkeley), Penn, and Yale were from private schools (in Walberg, 2007). Since private school students make up only 10% of children attending the nation's schools, these percentages are quite impressive.

These social and cultural characteristics become indicators of class and status for students. As schools pass on status-related identities to students based on the reputations of particular institutions, they, in turn, alter and enhance a variety of lifestyle and career opportunities for students. The differences found between public and private schools can have a major effect on occupational, social and ultimately, lifestyle mobility (Sadovnik et al., 2006).

In many cases, private schools have educated the wealthy and the celebrated, children of heads of state and other members of American aristocracy. Private schools allow access to these circles, and in doing so, increase the likelihood of a higher level of social status and ultimately social capital (Coleman & Hoffer, 1987). Higher-status private schools are not necessarily "better" than public schools, but they promote specific attitudes and values that are appreciated and expected by high-status occupations. It is in this manner that they become a gateway to the privileged social class (Hurn, 2008). Families at the middle and lower ends of the social class spectrum can find the opportunity for social mobility within private schools; however, the likelihood of gaining

entrance to these circles is limited in many cases based on the lack of economic, cultural, and social resources of less-advantaged parents.

Based on the research literature, there is a specific picture of the families who do choose private schools. They are, in many cases, the dominant groups that exist within the current social structure of society. As conflict theory states, particular ideologies, often created by these dominant and powerful groups, are assembled in a manner that allows them to improve upon and maintain their social positions (Sadovnik et al., 2006). In doing so, the powerful legitimize the concept of inequality through the unequal distribution of resources and materials. These people have the resources and capital to place their children in private schools. Weber refers to these opportunities as examples of how dominant and powerful groups of people impose their will on subordinate groups within society (Sadovnik et al., 2006).

In terms of cultural capital, the private school itself has a tremendous ability to limit any legitimate notion of mobility and reproduce society based on the current established order. For example, the controlled selection of certain students from certain families ensures a sense of class stability and allows those who already “have” to continue to do so. What is even more interesting or troubling, depending on one’s position, is the idea that the wealthy actually appear to be surrendering the opportunity and chance to pass on their privilege to the next generation, given the “neutral authority” (Bourdieu & Passeron, 2000, p. 167) of the private school itself. Conflict theory argues that private and public schools are simply not effective, nor accurate, at identifying talented people. They are, however, institutions which reproduce and legitimate

inequalities between social classes. By emphasizing that selection is based on merit, schools become a willing instrument which supports the placement of certain individuals in high-status occupations as well as a higher level of social class. While the technical function, in a credential society, is to produce qualifications in students, its hidden social function is to maintain class differences.

This function relating to the maintenance of class differences is not something new and not something specific to the United States. Gray and Moshinsky (1938) studied high ability students in England from both economically advantaged and disadvantaged backgrounds to identify the likelihood of both groups attending secondary school. Results indicated that children from wealthier families were more likely to move on to higher levels of education, despite their equal levels of ability as measured by conventional IQ tests (Fitz, Davies, & Evans, 2006). Even seventy years ago, research indicates that social and economic inequality existed within, and was sustained by, school systems external to the United States.

Society has bestowed upon the educational system the power of transforming social advantages into academic advantages. These advantages can ultimately transform themselves into social advantages for the next generation. While these academic advantages play a major part in producing credentials and qualifications, there is a limited likelihood that they can be achieved without the prerequisite social advantages to enter such environments (Bourdieu & Passeron, 2000).

Parents who choose private schools are either pursuing higher levels of, or looking to maintain, social advantages for the next generation of their family. In doing

so, they have placed great value on Labaree's educational goal of social mobility or in many cases, what could be referred to as social maintenance. They have also placed great value on Gutmann's State of Families by intending to take control of their children's own education. At the micro-level, there are a number of reasons why parents who do choose private schools, would choose them. These reasons will be discussed shortly. However, at the macro-level, these people who do choose are looking to use economic capital and social capital to improve upon or maintain their family's sense of cultural capital as well as occupational capital.

Collins sums it up well (1979). The pursuit of education by families can be explained as a conflict between social classes. Educational credentials, as indicators of status, have become more important than actual levels of student achievement related to knowledge and skills. The rise in credentialism during the twentieth century has helped dominant groups to continue to locate greater advantages for their children as they relate to their place within the system of education as well as society.

At the micro-level a number of reasons reflect why parents choose private schools over public schools. Research indicates parents' decision to choose a private school is often very complex and it is unlikely that one particular reason is used for making a particular decision (Bosetti, 2004; Cookson, 1994). The concept of parental decision making has several dimensions, some of which extend beyond the specifics of what actually happens to students each day in the classroom (Kraushaar, 1972). Furthermore, the choice to attend private schools is not necessarily based upon parental dissatisfaction with public schools (Goldring & Phillips, 2008). It is, however, a social process that is

informed by much of what has been previously discussed involving social class and social relationships. Parents tend to rely on their personal values related to the goals of education, as well as orientations to schooling itself when choosing a private school (Bosetti, 2000; 2004).

Along with personal values, there are two additional themes consistently found within research literature which pertain to why parents choose private schools. Academics have been found to play a significant role in the parental choice of private schools (Schneider et al., 2000) and for good reason. The benefits of being enrolled in a school with an outstanding academic reputation are obvious in terms of getting a quality education. In addition to academics, school characteristics, such as small class size and more teacher attention, have also been found to play a significant part in parents' decisions for their children to leave public schools to attend private schools. Small class size and teacher attention lend themselves to a better overall experience in any school as children are more visible to staff and relationships are likely to be more genuine (Toch, 2003).

In addition to values, academics and class size, it is important to recognize that parents, when deciding what private school their children should attend, often consider proximity and convenience when choosing a private school (Archibald, 1996). Convenience, in terms of location and other logistical issues that impact parents and students, however, should not mask the complexities that exist when parents decide to leave public schools for private (Bell, 2007).

One can see the dynamic between each of these reasons and how they combine to define an all-around educational experience for students and their parents. As decision-making is a complicated process that has multiple dimensions, all four reasons, academics, personal values, school characteristics, and convenience play an important part in helping parents to make these decisions about what school their children should attend.

### Academics

Academics and student achievement are the major components of any school's or district's mission. As important as academics are to all educational institutions, private schools are able to emphasize a greater academic priority within their curricula (Cookson, 1996). The stress on academics in private schools reflects the ideological consensus and dominant values that do exist as part of the orientation in these schools (Coleman & Hoffer, 1987).

A greater focus on academics could certainly lead to higher overall levels of student academic achievement. As private schools emphasize academics more than public schools within their curriculum, it is reasonable to believe that private school students would consistently show higher test scores than their public school counterparts (Cookson, 1996). Although there is a private school effect on student achievement, the basis for these differences remains unclear. Is it the school's ability to affect cognitive skill and development? Or are these differences due to the groupings of students selected to attend private school? Even when adding a control for background factors, such as family income and more stable living arrangements, differences still exist between

private and public school students. However, these differences are not significant enough to substantiate a claim that private schools are better than public schools (Cookson, 1994).

Regardless of whether private school students have more specific academic interests themselves or the private school itself has developed and implemented a more academically driven program, research shows that higher levels of academic engagement exist in private schools. In addition to taking more academically focused courses than public school children, private school students spent more time on homework and experienced fewer instances of grade inflation than public school students (Cookson, 1985; 1996). Academic achievement is also affected by stronger climate and behavioral expectations that exist in some private schools. While it is difficult to entirely control for selectivity bias, research does support the idea that private school programming and organization does have a positive effect on the academic achievement levels of its students (Coleman et al., 1982).

This ability of some private schools to have a positive effect on academic achievement is something which private school parents are very aware. Parental perceptions in multiple studies (Bosetti, 2004; Kraushaar, 1972; Schneider et al., 2000) have shown a strong emphasis on academics when choosing private schools. Parents listed academic reputation, teacher quality, teaching style, and high test scores as major reasons for choosing private schools for their children. A study by Schneider and colleagues (2000), indicates that parents want good teachers delivering educational opportunities and experiences to their children. Results from this study found the quality



of teachers to be the characteristic cited by parents as being most important when choosing private schools. In addition, 39% of the participants in this study cited teacher quality as the single most important school characteristic cited when choosing private schools.

Bosetti's research (2004) supports these findings. When parents were asked to rank the top three factors which influenced their decision to opt for private schools, 47% of parents cited teaching style, and 46% of parents cited a strong academic reputation. Of parochial school parents, 44% also cited a strong academic reputation as a major reason they chose their particular school.

Academics have long been important to parents when choosing private schools for their children. Kraushaar (1972) shows us that academics were a priority for families more than forty years ago, placing emphasis on themes such as better teachers and a challenging academic curriculum. The idea that strong academic programs are a staple of private schools lends an understanding to the notion of private schools being preparatory schools in many instances. If an objective of these schools is to prepare students for college, then rightfully so, academics would take center stage. However, the private school's ability to place academics so close to the forefront of its mission, would also be reflective in the values these schools promote and the values which are maintained by the families of students who attend.

### Values

Strong communally organized schools that maintain core academic values have been known to increase academic achievement and student engagement (Bryk & Driscoll,

1988; Bryk, Lee, & Holland, 1993). These schools emphasize three components that are commonly found in private schools. These components include: 1. A shared set of values which focus on the school's mission. 2. The intent to develop positive and meaningful relationships between teachers and students that are linked to the school's philosophy. 3. The implementation of an agenda that consists of meaningful activities and traditions which define and speak to membership in the school community (Bryk & Driscoll, 1988; Bryk, Lee, & Holland, 1993). Each of these components presents to the public what the school values, and in turn, will draw the interest of parents who also place value on these components.

As private schools are, to some degree, part of a market-oriented approach to schooling, each school presents its product to consumers. People who feel this educational opportunity is a good product, one that is better than other options at hand, would be inclined to choose this product. It should not be much of a surprise when parents state they chose a particular private school because of the values it promotes. Each private school will sell itself to the public and perhaps even separate itself from other private schools based on these values. If they align with parents' views specific to educational goals, ideologies and philosophies, the inclination exists to pursue an education in this setting (Schneider et al., 2000).

These ideologies are based on decisions made by the school regarding the importance of such themes as academics, discipline, sports, and character, for example. Within the school environment a sense of value dominance exists between staff and

students. This dominance of particular values allows the school to develop its own identity and reputation in comparison to other private and public schools (Powell, 1996).

Many private schools market themselves based on these particular identities and they attract families who agree with and support these identities. Parents who believe in educating their child in an environment that is more nurturing and less academically competitive may pursue enrollment in a Quaker school for example, given this is a staple of their educational philosophy (Powell, 1996). Parents who agree with or believe in a more academically exacting philosophy will pursue a school whose identity promotes this type of educational climate.

While value dominance exists, and plays a major role pertaining to the existence and operations of private school schooling, it does not exist in the same manner in public schools. This is due, largely, to the diverse populations and diverse sets of values that make up public schools on the whole (Coleman, Schneider, Plank, Schiller, Shouse, Wang, & Lee 1997; Cremin, 1976). This lack of value dominance in public schools is impacted by the school's relationship to society as well.

When public schools have been successful, they have been part of a configuration that has included elements of the community that were committed to the same set of values. Public schools have failed, however, when the forces of heterogeneity have overtaken the forces of community (Cremin, 1976). As society evolves, daily routines and activities for families are based on or impacted, less and less, by the functional communities existing in local neighborhoods or towns. Methods of communication and technology have expanded these functional communities to a point where there is less of

a dominant culture and consistent value base existing within the geographic community itself (Cremin, 1976).

The absence of a value-based consensus within public schools creates a challenging situation for these schools as they attempt to meet the diverse needs of students and their families. The public school becomes the setting for different values to converge based simply on student attendance through geographic location. With different values at play here, it becomes more challenging to identify and impose value-oriented ideologies in public school (Cookson, 1994).

Philosophical expectations and understandings that exist in public school are developed through a compromise among the school, the students, and their families (Coleman et al., 1997). As different, and sometimes incompatible, values exist simultaneously in school communities, parents are able to find the motivation necessary to pursue a value-based education by leaving for a private school. It is this context that makes private schools appealing to parents and has been found to be a consistently noted reason for their choice to have their children attend private schools, especially religiously-based private schools (Schneider et al., 2000; Hamilton & Guin, 2005).

According to Hirschhoff (1986), curriculum, instruction, and even the climate of public schools may not align with the religious, moral, and cultural values of many parents. The neutrality of public schools with regard to the teaching of religious beliefs and perhaps controversial issues as well, does not necessarily meet the needs of these parents. "Such a neutrality would not be as helpful to parents seeking to inculcate

specific values in their children as would a private school that could actively espouse those values” (p. 42).

The emphasis on religious-based values for parents who choose parochial schools is evident. Bosetti (2004) and Kraushaar (1972) cited values as the primary factor in choosing a parochial school for their child. These studies, as well as Schneider et al. (2000) also found values to be a primary factor, behind only academics, for non-religious private school choice as well.

#### Size/Personal Attention

Academics and values aside, the concept of size and personal attention has also been a consistent priority for choosing families. Smaller schools mean more opportunity for teachers to work with and tend to the needs of students in class. While some may argue that larger public schools can offer a wider range of courses for students to take and in doing so, create a more comprehensive educational experience, small school advocates believe the greater level of attention given to students in small private schools more than makes up for this limitation (Toch, 2003). With more individual attention from teachers, the likelihood of more learning and achievement seems very realistic. Coleman, Hoffer and Kilgore (1982) found this to be true, as school size was positively related to achievement in private schools across reading, vocabulary, and mathematics.

According to Powell, personal attention reduces isolation, increases motivation to engage in learning, brings structure, purpose, and positive adult influence to the lives of students (1996). Personal attention also enables schools to gain a better understanding of

individual differences. It is a recognized opportunity for schools to avoid an atmosphere of student anonymity and impersonalization which encompasses so much of society.

Many advocates of small schools, believe public high schools are simply too large to be effective in supporting the learning and development of children. Students deal with multiple teachers over short amounts of time each day. When combined with the number of students that teachers see each day, the likelihood for personal attention to develop between children and adults in public schools appears to be very limited.

Small schools can enable students to be more visible to teachers, causing bonds and relationships to develop between them. Ultimately, they create a more personalized educational experience. With smaller numbers, the lines of communication and interaction can be more open. The potential outcome is more collaboration, support, and problem solving which ultimately will lead to instructional improvement (Toch, 2003).

Parents who choose private schools want a school environment that will be able to meet the individual needs of their child (Bosetti, 2004). This idea of “size” has been a major reason why private schools have consistently been able to maintain a competitive advantage over public schools (Powell, 1996). Likewise, size has been consistently identified by research as an important reason in identifying why parents choose private schools.

Sixty percent of independent private school parents placed “class size” in their top three reasons for choosing private schools. This percentage was greater than the number of parents who identified academics (47 %) and values (50 %) as a top reason (Bosetti, 2004). However, only 25% of parochial schools parents surveyed considered class size a

top tier reason. The importance of class size has been echoed by Kraushaar (1972) and Schneider et al. (2000), who found class size to be the fourth most noted reason why parents chose private school, behind only teacher quality, values, and test scores, respectively.

Individual attention is a focal point for private schools and plays heavily into how they market themselves to the public. This concept operates from the premise that a school's ability to develop personal relationships with students creates a greater opportunity for teaching, learning, and a positive, community-based educational experience. In order to establish these relationships a school must be able to commit itself to a culture that speaks to high-quality relationships between students and teachers. Unless students and teachers are visible to each other, personalization is not possible (Powell, 1996). Public schools are limited in their ability to do this based on the potential numbers of students that may be in attendance. Private schools, however, can limit enrollment ensuring a student to teacher ratio that allows for these quality relationships to be developed (Cookson, 1994).

Many independent private schools have made their reputations by combining academic rigor with small class size. The two go hand-in-hand, as it is impossible to develop norms within the school that effectively stress and lead to increases in academic achievement without developing strong ties between students and teachers (Coleman et al., 1997; Powell, 1996; Sizer & Sizer 2006). These private schools have acknowledged the idea that children have a need for contact with, and guidance from, adults. Private schools on average maintain about half as many students per teacher when compared to

public schools, and this fact has become a hallmark characteristic of their programming and tradition (Powell, 1996). If this concept of size, as it relates to achievement and development, cannot be found in public schools, parents may satisfy this need by pursuing it for their children in smaller, private schools. With all of this, it is also important to recognize how parents will choose a particular private school and in doing so, acknowledge the role of convenience in such decisions.

### Convenience

Geography tends to shape decisions related to choosing private schools (Archibald, 1996) in a variety of ways. Parents prefer convenient schools when choosing to leave public school for private (Hunter, 1991), however, “convenience” as a theme must be described effectively as it is quite broad in scope. While convenience initially places an emphasis on the school’s relationship to the family’s home in terms of location, travel distance, and transportation, a number of other logistical items are also included within this theme.

Bell found that the private school “day” and expectations related to student time in or at school also plays a part in determining convenience as it relates to parents’ work schedules, the school day’s effect on siblings who attend different schools, as well as family time in the evening and on weekends (2007). In addition, levels of child development also relates to convenience when determining how far from home a parent would be willing to send their child in order to attend school. Children of higher developmental levels, related to age, for example, would be more inclined to attend a school that requires a lengthy bus ride each day, than a child with a lower developmental



level (Bell, 2007). This, in turn, affects the pool of private schools to which a parent will select from.

While convenience is an important factor for parents, Mainda (2002) found parents' actual choice of schools is concentrated more on education itself and meeting education-related needs of their children. This being said, a variety of private school options with a high degree of convenience attached to them, could be a very attractive option, especially once the decision to leave public school has been made. Convenience, then, could be an important factor in choosing a particular private school for children to attend (Hunter, 1991).

A convenient setting, positive school characteristics, including size and personalization, an emphasis on the values that parents support as well as the sense of academic rigor and reputation that parents want, could certainly be enough for families to seek out private schools. With all of the varied ideologies that exist within public schools and their intent to serve the diverse needs of all members of their respective communities, one can understand the attraction to a private school that claims to meet the specific needs of particular families. While 90% of the students across the country attend public schools, the 10% who attend private schools do amount to a large number of actual students (Cookson, 1989). Each year these families opt for private schools and, for the most part, they do appear to be satisfied with their choice.

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2005), 57% of public school parents said they were "very satisfied" with public schools, while 75% of private

secular school parents were “very satisfied” with their private school. Furthermore, 78% of private religious school parents were “very satisfied” with their private school.

Bosetti found similar results. When parents surveyed were given the option to send their child to another school, with tuition being paid for by the government, 91% of private school parents said they would choose their current private school again, while only 47% of public school parents would choose the same public school again. From those public school parents who would have opted to send their child to a different school, 60% of them stated they would send their child to a private school (2004). Research supports the notion that parents who choose private schools tend to be more satisfied than public school parents whose children attend on the basis of residence-based assignment. However, this sense of satisfaction with the choice of a private school may not necessarily have to do with programming that takes place in the private school of choice.

According to Smrekar and Goldring, the act of choosing, rather than outcomes of, or processes related to instruction, is the reason why parents feel this sense of satisfaction (1999). This ability to make choices related to something as impactful as education allows a sense of control and direction that, as Gutmann has found, aligns with the State of Families theory. In addition, there is a significant amount of research and investigation on the parent’s behalf that tends to go into the pursuit of private schooling. The justification of all the time and energy put into this search by parents lends itself to viewing the child’s experience favorably. Satisfaction then, is not only determined by the

ability to make the choice, but the extent to which time and effort was invested in making this particular choice (Goldring & Shapira, 1993).

While most parents seem to be satisfied with private school experiences, not all remain so. In addition to identifying why parents in a suburban public school district would opt for private schools, this study also looks at the reasons why families leave private schools to attend public schools. Although a great deal of research focuses on why parents leave public schools for private schools, there is limited research on why parents leave private schools for public schools. Because parents initially made a choice based on particular reasons to attend private school, some circumstance must exist causing these families to enroll in their residence-based public school. Is this decision based on a lack of superior programming in private schools or perhaps financial factors? Regardless, the opportunity to study this side of the private/public school debate will bring a unique perspective that exists in a limited capacity within today's research literature.

A picture has been painted here of parents who choose private schools and why they do so. Through each theme, one can understand the complexity of school choice as it relates to society on a much larger scale. It has been stated by educational sociologists that education mirrors society (Sadovnik et al., 2006), and this is evident throughout this proposal. Overarching goals of public education are found in societal ideologies (Labarre, 1997). However, the choice of private schools itself, aligns with parents' "right" to control the transmission of values to their children (Gutmann, 1987). Cultural capital and factors related to social class both play a part in which schools parents choose

for their children to attend. Each of these elements exists in a bi-lateral relationship with each other and is ultimately tied to overall values that are held by parents. It is at this point, when all factors are combined into one complex parental ideology, that decisions about schooling are made. The understanding by parents as to what will serve their child best, combined with what resources they have promotes this pursuit of private schools.

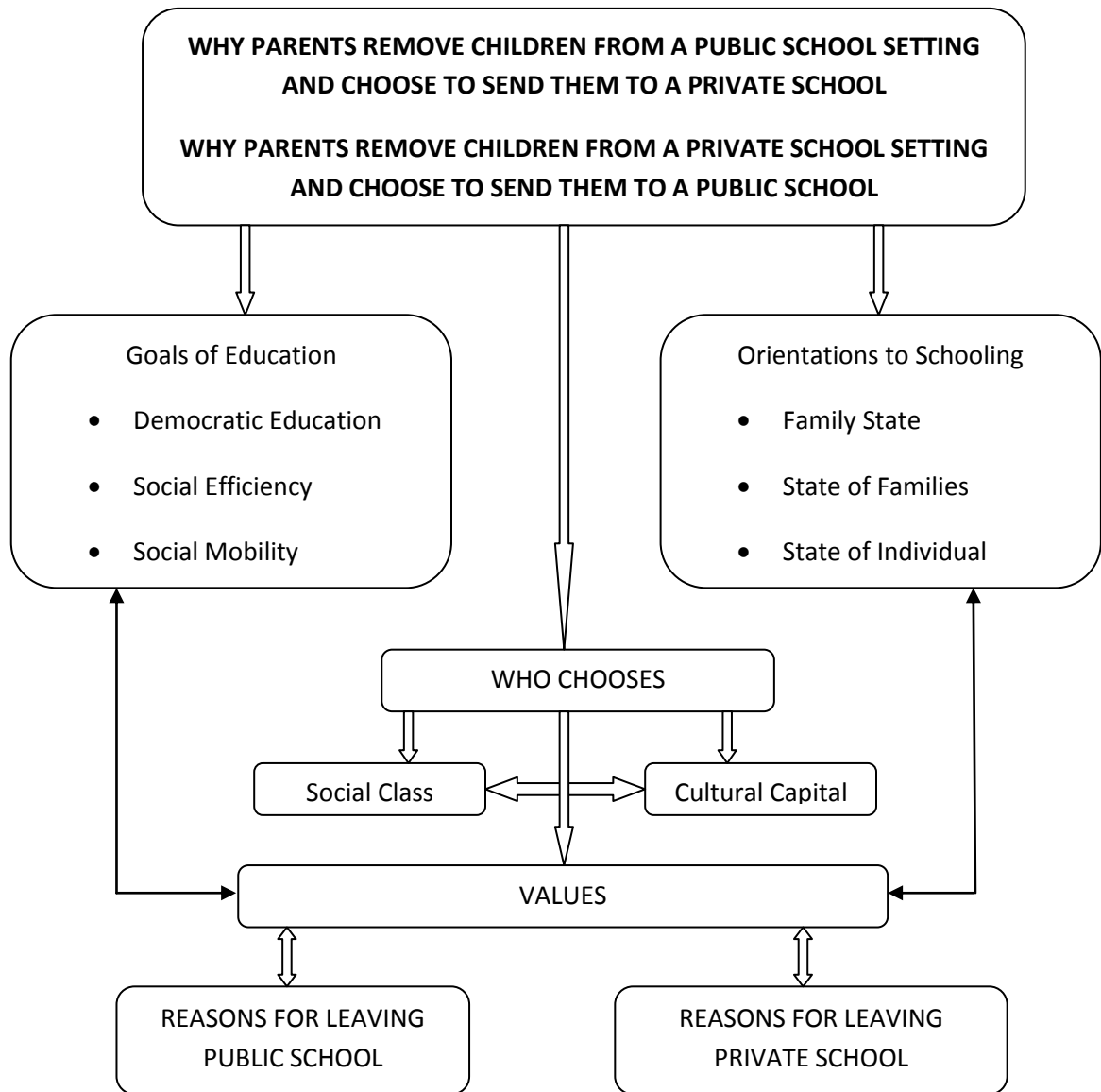


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

### *Summary*

There is a tremendous amount of history related to schooling in America. The development of common, private, and parochial schools is connected in several ways to the development of the United States and has played a critical role in establishing the foundations of school choice discussions today (Gutmann 1987). Such ideological concepts related to goals of education as well as orientations to schooling allow for an idea of who chooses private schools to emerge. In addition to who chooses private schools, research shows that the macro-level reasons related to why these people choose private schools, as they relate to social class issues, are inherent within school choice discussions today (Bourdieu & Passeron, 2000). These reasons are also supported by micro-level reasons related specifically to school programming as well as school values and philosophies (Coleman & Hoffer, 1987).

This combination of historical elements related to schooling as well as the philosophical and ideological values that are presented to, and accepted by, parents, set the tone for research involving contemporary issues related to school choice. Although many of these themes have existed for decades, if not centuries, they still serve as foundational pieces of any school choice discussion or debate today (Labaree, 2007). It is understandable however, upon digesting the entirety of the history, philosophy, and ideology related to choice of schools, just how complex the actual process can be (Cookson, 1994). To gain a deeper understanding of such complexities, it is necessary to utilize an appropriate methodology that serves the topic as appropriately and effectively as possible. These efforts to gain a deep understanding of complex decision-making

called for a methodology which would allow for an in-depth illumination as to decisions related to choosing private or public schools (Yin, 2009).

## CHAPTER III

### METHODOLOGY

The research in this study focused on exploring why parents would leave a well-supported, suburban public school to attend a private school. The research also focused on why some families leave private school to attend public school in Laurel Township. I created a holistic picture that describes the complexities that exist when making this choice. These complexities are unique based on the setting of the study. With so many private school options in the geographical area, along with the high performing nature of this suburban school district, a unique set of perspectives was found by parents. In many cases, the setting of these types of studies center on urban and/or under-performing schools (Cookson, 1994; Goldring & Phillips, 2008; Goldring & Shapira, 1993). The context of this setting created a very different dynamic examining the perspectives of study participants.

A case study method was used to illuminate parents' decisions to leave the public school to attend private school, as well as leave the private school to attend public. The case study is a preferred method of research as contemporary events are examined, and relevant behaviors involved cannot be manipulated (Yin, 2009). I supported this research by promoting in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information (Creswell, 2007). The study examined multiple cases to highlight differing perspectives of parents on the issues of why parents leave Laurel Township Public Schools for private schools and why some leave private schools to attend Laurel Township Public Schools. This allowed the issue to be studied in depth and provided rich, comparative data.



Qualitative research methods were chosen for this study in order to provide a thick, detailed description of parent decision-making regarding removing students from public school in order to attend private school, as well as removing students from private school to enter public school. While the reasoning behind decisions made by parents was a primary part of this research, it also includes data related to student records and literature from private schools. Student records detailed the academic performance, contributions, and involvement of departing, and entering, students during their attendance in public school. Promotional literature, in the form of private school brochures and website information, for example, spoke to the opportunities to which students would be exposed while attending private schools. These data added to the richness of the detail provided in this research and develop a stronger picture as to why parents would opt to leave public school for private and why other parents would opt to leave private school for public. It also promoted opportunities to extend analysis of data and enhance insights found in each case (Yin, 2009).

### *Sample Selection*

Purposeful sampling was used during this research in order to identify parents' reasons why they left public school to attend private and, in some cases, the reasons why other parents left private school to attend public. This sampling format allowed me to utilize specific families who have opted to leave the public schools as well as private schools (Creswell, 2007). Within this sample I randomly chose eight parents to interview over two cases. These parents have left the public schools so their children could attend a private, "prep," or day school. Parents who had any remaining children attending Laurel

public schools did not qualify for selection. Given the fact that I may, at some point, be this remaining child's principal, the potential exists for this relationship to alter interview responses by parents. In addition, I did choose to interview private parochial school parents despite the potential impact of religious values related to reasons why parents chose parochial schools. Because the practical intent of this study is to apply my findings in order to improve programming at Laurel schools, I was cautious not to make use of, or attempt to apply, anything related to religious instruction or values in a public school.

In addition, I randomly chose eight additional parents to interview, making up the second half of the study. These parents, however, left private schools so their children could attend public schools. I also conducted two focus group interviews prior to conducting one-to-one interviews. The first focus group consisted of the eight parents who left public schools to attend private schools. The second focus group consisted of the eight parents who left private schools to attend Laurel public schools.

Within the first case, four families who opted to leave the public school after the sixth grade year comprised the first unit. A second unit within the first case included four families who left public school after eighth grade to attend the private school. The second case also consisted of two units. The first unit consisted of four families who left the private school, to attend public school, after sixth grade. The second unit included four families who left private school, to attend public school, after eighth grade. By interviewing these families who have two different points of exit and entrance, I was able to identify and examine differences among individual parents who have exited and entered public schools at different grade levels (Maxwell, 2005). The perspectives drawn

from each case provided a more in depth, holistic view of why families leave this public school district, why they enter it from private school, and therefore enhanced the quality of my findings.

- **WHY PARENTS REMOVE CHILDREN FROM A PUBLIC SCHOOL SETTING AND CHOOSE TO SEND THEM TO A PRIVATE SCHOOL**
- **WHY PARENTS REMOVE CHILDREN FROM A PRIVATE SCHOOL SETTING AND CHOOSE TO SEND THEM TO A PUBLIC SCHOOL**

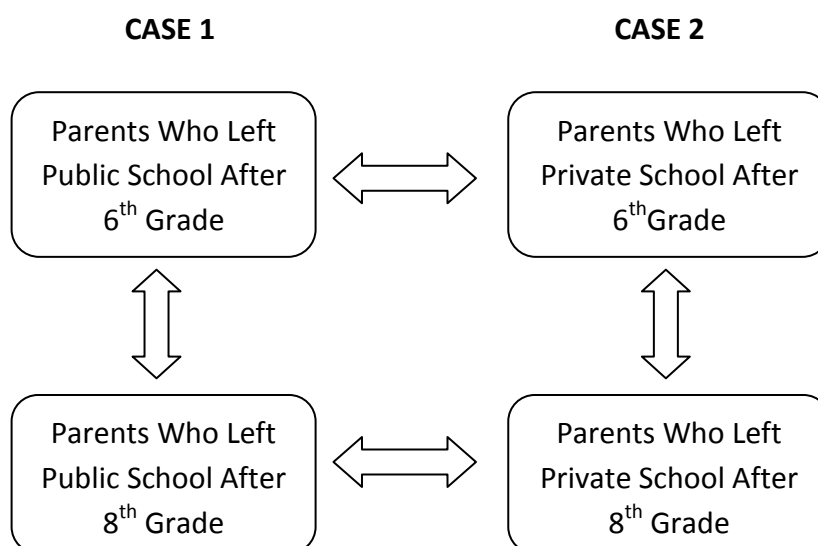


Figure 2: Case Study Design (Yin, 2009)

To qualify for the study, families who opted to leave public school to attend private school needed to have been part of the Laurel public school system for their entire school careers prior to leaving. In the first unit of the first case, this identified participants as having attended Laurel schools beginning with the kindergarten year, concluding after the sixth grade year. The second unit of the first case included parents

who also attended Laurel public schools beginning with the kindergarten year, concluding after the eighth grade year. The first unit within the second case included participants who left private schools, at the conclusion of the sixth grade year, to attend Laurel public schools beginning with the seventh grade year. The second unit of the second case included parents who left private school, at the conclusion of the eighth grade year, to enter Laurel public schools beginning with the ninth grade year. All participants were identified using the school district's database. The participants in the study (both parents who left public school to attend private school and parents who left private school to attend public school) were randomly chosen from the purposeful sample used to identify parents who met the study's criteria. These participants either entered the school district or left the school district between the years 2005-2011.

### *Data Collection*

As part of data collection methods, I employed three principles that added to the overall quality of the study. These three principles included: 1. The use of multiple sources of evidence, 2. The use of a case study database and 3. The use of a chain of evidence (Yin, 2009). In each of these three cases, I involved multiple sources of data collection to develop a rich, detailed perspective of why parents leave public schools to attend private schools, and why some parents leave private schools to attend public schools. Interview participants were chosen randomly from within the purposeful sample. Two focus group interviews as well as sixteen semi-structured interviews with parents, who met the necessary criteria, took place during the fall and winter months of 2011, and the winter months of 2012, at a time and location which was convenient for

them. These interviews allowed me to gain tremendous insight as parents provided information as to their experiences and perspectives related to public and private schools. The use of the focus group interviews allowed parents to use each others' contributions and the conversation as a whole to spark their own thoughts and contributions related to the questions presented in the interview (Krueger, 1994). One-to-one interviews allowed me to probe deeper into questions on an individual basis. This setting may have also allowed parents to speak more openly given the private nature of the one-to-one interview (Creswell, 2007).

The focus group interview questions, as well as one-to-one interview questions for parents who have left the public school, were based upon what literature states are the reasons that parents choose private schools over public schools. I conducted the focus group interviews first. Upon their completion, I interviewed parents who departed from the public school and then parents who departed from private school. Questions about why parents chose to leave private school to attend public school were also built from literature related to why parents choose private schools. This was due to the lack of literature that exists regarding why parents leave private schools to attend public schools. Parents were able to speak to large and small scale themes that helped them to make particular decisions related to where their child would attend school. I piloted these questions with approximately three parents of children who left public schools for private schools in another district as well as one set of parents who opted to attend public school after attending private school. These questions were piloted during the fall of 2011. This

piloting allowed me to refine questions prior to conducting the actual interviews for the study.

I also utilized student records whose parents participated in the study and other documents to corroborate evidence within each case being studied. Records consisted of student academics involving grades, standardized test scores, and co-curricular activities. Documents included literature and information provided by the specific private schools that children currently, or did previously, attend. By collecting data using multiple sources, I was able to increase the quality of the study (Yin, 2009) as I thoroughly identified detailed themes within each case and analyzed these themes across both cases using a cross-case analysis (Creswell, 2007).

Interview data were recorded and transcribed while all forms of data, including interview transcripts, documents and records, were stored electronically and in hard copy. Data were organized by case and a case study database was developed to verify that proper documentation has taken place (Yin, 2009). Elements of this database included interview transcripts, documents, records as well as case study notes. An annotated bibliography was also developed in order to facilitate storage and retrieval within the database (Yin, 2009).

In addition, a chain of evidence was developed in order to allow an external observer to identify steps of data collection. This process helped verify the evidence found in the case study report is the same evidence collected during data collection

procedures. This report also made appropriate citation to relevant portions of the case study database by citing interviews and other relevant documents (Yin, 2009).

### Chain of Evidence

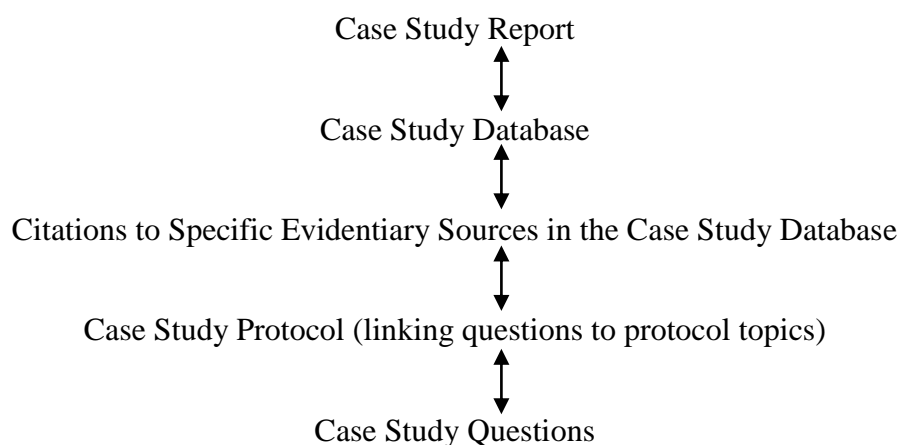


Figure 3: Maintaining a Chain of Evidence (Yin, 2009)

### *Role of the Researcher*

While collecting data for this study, I was aware that my role as a principal in this school district could easily have affected what people revealed to me as well as how I interpreted what they said. I took steps to put participants at ease and made sure they understood that I would not be offended if they said anything negative about my school or their child's experience while they attended. To put them at ease, I offered to conduct my interviews at any location and time that made them comfortable. I did not ask parents to come to my office at school if they felt uncomfortable given the potential nature and content of our interview. I strove to remain completely impartial as I interpreted meaning from statements that were made by participants. To gain any insights from this research I

needed to understand that, to some degree or another, the reasons parents left this district could very well have involved an unmet need or a shortcoming on the part of the district, my school, and perhaps even myself as a principal.

I reminded participants of the purpose of this study and I ensured that all participants were treated ethically. I informed them that participation in this study was completely voluntary and that they may have opted not to answer any questions with which they were not comfortable. I also informed them that anything said during the interviews, including names of parents, children and even the district itself would be kept confidential using pseudonyms during the actual writing.

By effectively putting parents at ease, allowing them to feel secure in what they said during an interview, the data that were collected should have provided the depth and richness needed to paint the holistic picture that describes why parents made the decision to leave public school for private, the decision to leave private school for public, as well as the complexities that existed when making these decisions.

### *Data Analysis*

This research employed a holistic analysis pertaining to why parents leave the Laurel school district for private school as well as why some parents leave private schools to attend Laurel public schools. Analysis is an inductive, data-led activity. It should be comprehensive and systematic however, it should not be rigid (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996). As a description of each case developed across each form of data collection, I narrowed my focus to center on emerging themes that were found. Given



this study used a multiple case study design I first used a within-case analysis of themes that were found in order to begin to understand the complexity of each case (Creswell, 2007). At that point, I used a cross-case analysis to examine any themes that transcend both cases. All coding of data was done by hand during this analysis.

To improve the quality of this study and make findings more valid, I triangulated multiple sources of evidence- focus group interviews, one-to-one interviews, student records, which consisted of historical grades, standardized test scores, and extra-curricular activities such as band, athletics, etc. and private school information that was available to the public via private school websites, brochures, etc. This information pertained to overall student academic performance and student extra-curricular activity involvement within the private school. Private schools in which participants' children attend, or did attend, were the particular schools from which this information was taken. In doing so, each form of data was coded to reduce data to manageable sizes. The process of coding data included the identification of relevant phenomena, the collection of examples of these phenomena, and finally the analysis of these phenomena with the intent of identifying commonalities, patterns and differences (Seidel & Kelle, 1995). While this approach allowed me to reduce data to manageable proportions, it was not necessarily to simplify data. It was, rather, to allow me to open up this data in an effort to interrogate them further (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996)

To ensure reliability and trustworthiness of data, I used member checks with each participant in order to ensure that all interpretations of interview data were accurate and credible (Creswell, 2007). This allowed me to rule out the possibility of misinterpreting

the meanings behind what participants said. It also allowed me to identify my own misunderstandings and biases that may have been incorporated into my analysis of data (Maxwell, 2005). Additionally, the case study database as well as the chain of evidence increases the reliability of information found in each case (Yin, 2009).

### *Summary*

As parental decisions related to the selection of a child's school, whether public or private, is often complex, incorporating a number of elements at both the macro and micro-levels (Cookson, 1994), the use of a qualitative case study was an appropriate choice in methodology. The case study is a preferred method of research given that a holistic picture presenting these complexities was developed by illuminating parental decisions with a thick, detailed description of such events (Yin, 2009). With sixteen parents selected for the study, multiple cases were examined and many perspectives were found across a variety of themes. While parent interviews were a primary part of the data collection, additional pieces such as student records and information related to each private school was incorporated. Using multiple forms of data allowed me to collect data in an in-depth manner, providing a rich description related to the reasons why parents chose private over public school and public over private school.

The questions posed to participants during this study allowed me to capture their experiences, as parents, in both private and public schools. They also allowed me to identify how the decision to leave took place; who was involved, and what themes played major and minor parts. By examining parental perceptions, through focus group and one-

to-one interviews, as well as student grades and private school literature and information, I was able to understand how the experience of leaving one school for another did, and did not, align with existing research. Those findings are presented in detail beginning with the upcoming chapter as the product of this qualitative study, focusing on the reasons why parents decided to leave public school for private as well as leave private school for public.

## CHAPTER IV

### LEAVING PUBLIC SCHOOL

He attended Groton, the greatest 'Prep' school in the nation, where the American upper class sends its sons to instill the classic values: discipline, honor, a belief in the existing values and the rightness of them. Halberstam (1969, p.51)

Between 2005 and 2011 each of the eight participants in this half of the study decided to leave the Laurel public schools for a private school in the Ivy area. Each parent had a unique perspective as to why they left their public school, how they chose a particular private school, and their experiences in both. Before I unpack the how and why of these decisions, it is important to identify who these parents actually are to compare this sample to the research literature.

Research has shown a number of background characteristics that are historically present in families who choose private schools. They include parents' education, income, family structure, social class, and race (Coleman & Hoffer, 1987; Goldring & Phillips, 2008; Kraushaar, 1972; Yang & Kayaardi, 2004). Coleman and Hoffer have divided these factors into two categories: orientations and resources. While orientations describe values, beliefs, and understandings held by parents, resources describe things these families possess that afford them the opportunity to send their children to private schools (1987). Parental levels of education, for example, would describe an orientation, while income would describe a resource. In other instances, a factor such as family structure

could be both an orientation and a resource, while race could be neither. It is important to identify how this combination of orientations and resources creates a disposition that enables some families to choose private schools. These combinations could provide a foundation that will ultimately set the stage at both the macro and micro-level for the overarching question which asks “why?” parents choose private schools over public.

*The Choosers: Parents*

This group of parents possessed a range of orientations and resources that provided no clear cut “type” of parent who chose to attend private school. When they were students themselves, several parents attended public schools, while others attended private schools. There was no consistent pattern identified in which this type of education, in the parents, signaled the same for the child. All parents were college educated, creating a baseline; yet there was a variety of levels of education obtained by parents beyond the bachelor’s degree. Several parents ended their schooling with a bachelor’s degree; several other parents had master’s degrees, MD’s, JD’s and PhD’s on their resumes. In addition, household income had a baseline; all parents earned no less than \$100,000 annually; yet there was a broad span of incomes beyond that baseline with some household incomes exceeding \$200,000.

Regarding the orientations of these families, many mothers and fathers had different experiences from each other in terms of public or private school. Of the four families (8 parents) who left public school after eighth grade, four (Mrs. Carson, Mr. and Mrs. Sawyer, and Mr. Stevens) went to public school; the remaining four went to some

type of private school (3 parochial private, Mr. and Mrs. Charles and Mrs. Stevens, 1 independent private, Mr. Carson).

This contrasted with the four families (8 parents) who left public school after sixth grade. Of these parents, five attended private schools. Two of these schools were private independent schools (Mr. and Mrs. Andrews); one was parochial (Mrs. Mitchell), and the remaining two (Mr. and Mrs. Richards) attended a private school outside the United States in a country where each parent was born and raised. The remaining three parents attended public schools, however two of these parents, Mr. and Mrs. Bell, attended public school outside the United States in a country where they were born and raised.

Of the eight parents in this half of the study, two families sent their children to a parochial private school. In one of these instances both parents attended parochial private school themselves while the other family was just the opposite, with both parents attending public school. All tolled, these parents were split 9-7 (private vs. public) in terms of their own K-12 educational experiences. However, in five of the eight families (Richards, Charles, Sawyer, Bell, Andrews) involved in the study, both parents attended the same type of school, three having both parents who attended private and two having both parents who attended public. Messrs. and Mmes. Carson, Stevens, and Mitchell each attended a different school (one private, one public).

It is worthwhile to understand how families with both or one parent having attended public school made the decision for their children to attend private school, given

at least one parent did not have his or her own personal experience. The research literature would show that these experiences would be very important in making these decisions (Goldring & Phillips, 2008; Yang & Kayaardi, 2004). In each case it could be based on both parents' experiences as well as the experiences of their child while attending public school.

Researchers have found that a positive relationship exists between parents' own levels of educational achievement and the likelihood of sending their children to a private school (Bosetti, 2004; Yang & Kayaardi, 2004). All eight parents attended college and achieved at least a bachelor's degree. While Mrs. Carson, Mrs. Richards, Mr. Charles, Mrs. Sawyer, Mr. Bell and Mr. and Mrs. Mitchell, totaling seven parents, all have earned a Ph.D., M.D. or a J.D., five parents (Mr. and Mrs. Stevens, Mrs. Bell and Mr. and Mrs. Andrews) did not pursue a degree beyond their bachelor's. The remaining four parents (Mr. Carson, Mr. Richards, Mrs. Charles, and Mr. Sawyer) all obtained master's degrees. Of the two families who sent their child to parochial private school, the one family identified earlier as having both parents attend private parochial school themselves, also stopped pursuing their own education after obtaining the bachelor's degree.

This study does extend the existing research from Bosetti, 2004, and Yang and Kayaardi, 2004, in that every parent involved in sending his or her child to private school was college educated. It did not consistently separate out, per the research literature, parents who obtained higher levels of college education (Ph.D., M.D. or J.D.) sending children to independent private schools versus parochial private schools. The inverse of this was also identified; parents who did not achieve beyond the bachelor's degree were

found to send children to both private independent schools as well as parochial private schools (Kraushaar, 1972; Schneider et al., 2000).

In terms of resources and the relationship to “who” sends their child to private schools in Laurel Township, there was an identifiable baseline of income found in all households as mentioned earlier. Of the eight parents interviewed, one identified her household income as being between \$100,000 and \$150,000; four identified their household income as being between \$150,000 and \$200,000. In addition, three parents identified their household income as greater than \$200,000. All of these families had a significantly higher household income than the median income found in New Jersey (\$82,255) in 2011 and the United States (\$50,054) in 2011 (U.S. Census, 2012). Higher income is an additional factor consistently present in families who choose private schools (Schneider et al., 2000). Because private schools charge tuition, it is reasonable that families with higher incomes would be more likely to send their children to private schools. Higher income translates to more resources, which allows parents greater financial opportunities. These opportunities present themselves as the ability to afford tuition for private or parochial school.

Three of the four families who left public school after eighth grade fell into the \$150-\$200,000 range (Messrs. and Mmes. Charles, Stevens, and Sawyer), while the fourth set in this category (Mr. and Mrs. Carson) was “just over” \$200,000. Parents who left public school after sixth grade presented a more diversified look at family income with ranges between \$100,000-150,000 to over \$200,000. Mr. and Mrs. Andrew’s household income fell between \$100-150,000 while Mr. and Mrs. Mitchell fell between



\$150,000-200,000. Mr. and Mrs. Richards and Mr. and Mrs. Bell both had household incomes over \$200,000.

The income levels of families in this portion of the study did not support current research in that families with lesser incomes would be more likely to send children to parochial schools versus independent private schools (Schneider et al., 2000).

Independent private school administrators have described their students as being upper or upper middle class, with a limited number of working class students attending their school (Schneider et al., 2000). Most students from middle or working class families, who do attend private schools, attend parochial schools (Kraushaar, 1972; Schneider et al., 2000). While all families over \$200,000 (Mr. and Mrs. Carson, Richards and Mr. and Mrs. Bell) sent their children to private independent schools, families between \$150-200,000 sent children to both parochial schools (Mr. and Mrs. Charles and Mr. and Mrs. Stevens) and private independent schools (Mr. and Mrs. Sawyer and Mr. and Mrs. Mitchell). The family with the lowest income level (Mr. and Mrs. Andrews) of \$100,000-150,000 in the study did, however, send their child to a private independent school. Research would suggest that families with less income would send their children to parochial schools (Schneider et al., 2000).

All households in this portion of the study included two parents, which supported the literature. A strong, intact family structure also contributes to more resources. Two parent households allow for the opportunity for multiple incomes to enter into a household, and possibly fewer resources, financial and otherwise, to exit a household (Coleman & Hoffer, 1987). Although two mothers (Mrs. Charles and Mrs. Mitchell) had

divorced from the birth father at some point during their child's life, they had both remarried and were living with an intact household structure.

Research related to race and who chooses private schools has found contradicting results over a variety of studies. Several studies have shown that race bears no significant effect on whether or not a parent chooses a private school (Goldring & Phillips, 2008; Yang & Kayaardi, 2004). Coleman and Hoffer have found that black and Hispanic students make up a sizeable percentage of parochial school populations, but not independent private school populations (1987).

The backgrounds of families in this study do support Coleman and Hoffer's findings (1987) in that none of our participants who attended private independent school were black or Hispanic. Parents' backgrounds did not support the findings of Goldring and Phillips (2008) or Yang and Kayaardi (2004) related to race as all participants, with the exception of Mr. Richards, were identified as Caucasian. However, Mr. Richards as well as Mrs. Richards and Mr. and Mrs. Bell all were born and raised in countries outside of the United States. Mr. Richards was of Indian descent, while Mrs. Richards and Mr. and Mrs. Bell were from different European countries. All other parents were Caucasian who were born and raised in the United States.

Public to Private After 6 <sup>th</sup> Grade	Household Income	Parents' Schooling	Parents' Highest Level of Education	Family Structure	Race
<i>Richards</i>	➤ \$200,000	Mrs.- Private Mr.- Private	Mrs.- Ph.D. Mr.- M.A.	Intact: Married 2 Parent Home	Mrs.- Caucasian Mr.- Asian/Indian
<i>Bell</i>	➤ \$200,000	Mrs.- Public Mr.- Public	Mrs.- B.A. Mr.- M.D.	Intact: Married 2 Parent Home	Mrs.- Caucasian Mr.- Caucasian
<i>Mitchell</i>	\$150,000 -	Mrs.- Private	Mrs.- J.D.	Intact: Married	Mrs.- Caucasian

	200,000	Mr.- Public	Mr.- Ph.D.	2 Parent Home	Mr.- Caucasian
<i>Andrews</i>	\$100,000 - 150,000	Mrs.- Private Mr.- Private	Mrs.- B.A. Mr.- B.A.	Intact: Married 2 Parent Home	Mrs.- Caucasian Mr.- Caucasian

Table 1: Overview of Parental Backgrounds- Public to Private after 8<sup>th</sup> Grade

Public to Private After 8 <sup>th</sup> Grade	<i>Household Income</i>	<i>Parents' Schooling</i>	<i>Parents' Highest Level of Education</i>	<i>Family Structure</i>	<i>Race</i>
<i>Carson</i>	➤ \$200,000	Mrs.- Public Mr.- Private	Mrs.- Ph.D. Mr.- M.A.	Intact: Married 2 Parent Home	Mrs.- Caucasian Mr.- Caucasian
<i>Charles</i>	\$150,000 – 200,000	Mrs.- Private Mr.- Private	Mrs.- M.A. Mr.- Ph.D.	Intact: Married 2 Parent Home	Mrs.- Caucasian Mr.- Caucasian
<i>Stevens</i>	\$150,000 - 200,000	Mrs.- Private Mr.- Public	Mrs.- B.A. Mr.- B.A.	Intact: Married 2 Parent Home	Mrs.- Caucasian Mrs.- Caucasian
<i>Sawyer</i>	\$150,000 – 200,000	Mrs.- Public Mr.- Public	Mrs.- J.D. Mr.- M.A.	Intact: Married 2 Parent Home	Mrs.- Caucasian Mr.- Caucasian

Table 2: Overview of Parental Backgrounds- Public to Private after 8<sup>th</sup> Grade

As involved as parents were in the decision making process of choosing schools, the children themselves were the critical piece. Their ability to meet the standard of particular private schools to which they have applied was a sometimes taken for granted foundation of the entire choice process. After all, if they do not gain admission the idea of “choosing” to attend private school, regardless of the reason why, does not mean much. With the students themselves at the heart of such choice decisions, it is critical to identify who these children are in terms of patterns and consistencies related to academic and social behaviors and practices.

### *The Choosers: Students*

Since students need to meet admissions standards to enter private schools (Coleman et al., 1982; MacLachlan, 1970; Unger, 1993), there is a strong likelihood that these students will be high achieving children who are well-behaved and make positive contributions to the overall school climate. As there is a selection process, the schools themselves have the opportunity to choose the students they want to represent their school. In turn, the likelihood of high achieving, involved students being admitted to such schools is far from unreasonable (Gutmann, 1987). The results of the current study found identifying “who” our participants’ children are in terms of academic performance was consistent with the research. These students were high achievers and with the exception of a few non-proficient standardized test scores, were honor roll students with minimal, if any, discipline issues (Laurel Township Public Schools, 2012).

These eight students received outstanding grades across the years which have been saved as part of the district database. One final grade of “C” exists among all eight students over twenty combined years of records. Other than that, every grade from these children was an “A” or a “B”, qualifying these children as “Honor Roll Students.” While classroom grades will inform the study substantially about these students’ academic pursuits, it is valuable to utilize an additional form of assessment in order to effectively identify the type of student who leaves the district for private schools.

Standardized tests in the form of the New Jersey Assessment of Skills and Knowledge (NJASK), as well as the Grade Eight Proficiency Assessment (GEPA), were

given to these eight students each year in order to assess their skills and knowledge. If the research literature is correct, standardized test scores should be consistent with high classroom grades being found across the board (Coleman et al., 1987; Cookson, 1994; Gutmann 1987).

The NJASK and GEPA tests are broken down into two areas of assessment: Language Arts and Mathematics. Scoring is broken down into three categories: Advanced Proficient (250-300), Proficient (200-249) and Partial Proficiency (Less than 200) (NJ Department of Education, 2012). The district maintained a collective total of twenty assessments in language arts and twenty assessments in mathematics taken by these eight students from 2005-2012. Given the potential for selectivity during the private school admissions process, it is probable that the overwhelming majority of these students would have very high test scores, many of which would be considered advanced proficient, in addition to high classroom grades (Gutmann, 1987; Unger, 1993).

While there was certainly a number of advanced proficient scores, even perfect scores of 300 obtained by these students, there were marks not only of proficient, but also partial proficiency. Of the twenty language arts assessments taken, four results were advanced proficient; however thirteen of these results were simply proficient. Even more interesting, three of these assessments were judged to be partially proficient which is considered to be a failing score by public school standards (NJDOE, 2012).

Two of the three partially proficient assessments were taken by students who left after sixth grade, and two of these three assessments were taken by students who went on

to an independent private school. The other partially proficient score belonged to a student who left after eighth grade and went on to a parochial private school. That said, three of the four advanced proficient scores in language arts also came from students who left the public school after sixth grade.

Math assessments showed more expected results in terms of what research shows (Coleman & Hoffer, 1987; Cookson, 1994; Gutmann, 1987), with eight of the twenty assessments taken scoring advanced proficient and ten students scoring proficient. In this case, there were two assessments that scored partial proficiency. Scores in mathematics were consistent among students who left after both sixth and eighth grades; however, both scores of partial proficiency belonged to students who left after eighth grade. In this case, both marks went to students who went on to parochial private school. Added to this, no assessments that were advanced proficient in either language arts or mathematics belonged to a student who went on to parochial private school.

If one thing is to be learned here, it is that grades and standardized test scores do not tell the whole story. If there is a second thing to be learned, it is that it is not always the highest scorers or achievers who get into private school. In many cases, this is accurate, since proficient and even partially proficient students in this study were accepted to private institutions.

Prior research indicates that behavior would help to identify a type of student (MacLachlan, 1970; Coleman et al., 1982; Unger, 1993) with which a private school would be looking to fill its ranks. Again, given the selective nature of private schools,

one would believe that students admitted to private schools would have good, if not exemplary, behavioral/discipline records. At the very least, a class or school filled with well-behaved children would lead to a positive social climate, clearing the way for a deep, rich instructional climate as well (MacLachlan, 1970; Unger, 1993).

With these eight children, discipline records were almost spotless through sixth and eighth grades depending on when parents opted to leave public school. Six of the eight children (Carson, Richards, Stevens, Bell, Mitchell and Andrews) had zero discipline issues noted in their files, while one student (Charles) had a single detention for horseplay through eighth grade. The only student (Sawyer) who logged more than one entry did so because of being late to class and gum chewing. Her punishment, all totaled, was four detentions over the two years of records being kept (grades 7 & 8) in the district database.

Comparisons between sixth grade students and eighth grade students were simplistic in nature with regard to behavior. No students who left public school after sixth grade students had any logged discipline or behavioral issues. The single detention for horseplay (Charles) took place during eighth grade prior to heading off to parochial private school. The student (Sawyer) with four detentions for lateness was also one who departed after eighth grade, in this case leaving for an independent private school. Since only two students obtained any type of documented discipline during this time, with one leaving for parochial private and the other leaving for independent private, there was no substantial pattern of discipline for students entering either type of private school.

The information pertaining to behavior and discipline for these students, supports the research as identified by multiple authors over the last forty years (MacLachlan, 1970; Coleman et al., 1982; Unger, 1993). These were well-behaved students who performed well in the classroom, maintained strong overall academics and what appeared to be a commitment to learning. The final descriptor identified in the research would be “contributor.” In this case, it is known that these students were involved contributors to the school culture. However, there is a need to know the extent to which they did contribute, the activities they were involved with as well as the consistencies and patterns among these students. Their decision to be involved in extra-curricular activities supports what research indicates (Coleman & Hoffer, 1987; Cookson, 1994; Gutmann, 1987), but we must probe deeper in order to help to identify who these children are, or better yet, what type of child leaves public school for private.

The majority of students in this study who left Laurel public schools for private schools were heavily involved in extra-curricular activities, both in and out of school. Most documented activities fell into two categories including music and sports. However, these students also participated in theater, as well as community service and church-related activities. There appeared to be no differences among students who left public school after sixth grade and eighth grade in terms of involvement as students at both levels were involved in multiple activities.

For example, the children of Messrs. and Mmes. Andrews, Sawyer, Mitchell, Stevens, Bell and Charles all played an instrument including piano, cello, viola, violin, and/or guitar. These students also were involved in dancing, theater, and opera.



Athletically, most students were involved in some type of sport, with two students (Sawyer and Bell) involved in four and five sports, respectively during their time in public school. These sports which students participated in consisted of soccer, lacrosse, figure skating, golf, gymnastics, soccer, swimming, basketball, and tennis. Interestingly, almost half of the study participants had a child who participated in horseback riding as well, which reflects class expectations. Beyond music and athletics, many of these children were involved in such activities as the Girl Scouts, Model United Nation, the Science to Go Society, summer bible school, a ceramics club, as well as serving as a TV host for the Upper Elementary School's morning news show which was taped and aired in school each week.

With all of this, the evidence becomes quite clear that these students were just as impressive in their roles as involved contributors as they were in terms of academics and behavior. Students were involved in not only a number of activities, but a variety of activities which allowed them to broaden their horizons helping them to become a well-rounded individual. It may be this breadth of involvement and exposure which allows private schools to appeal to certain public school students and likewise the ability of these students to appeal to private schools as well.

According to Cookson and Persell (2010), the Groton School Academic Mission Statement prepares students for the

active work of life by encouraging breadth of intellectual  
study...[where the] curriculum as a whole introduces

students to a wide variety of course in the belief that this  
broad exposure will challenge and engage interests and  
abilities that might otherwise lie dormant. (p.13)

Public to Private After 6 <sup>th</sup> Grade	<i>Final Grades Gr. 4,5,6</i>	<i>NJASK Test Scores: Language Arts Gr. 4,5,6</i>	<i>NJASK Test Scores: Mathematics Gr. 4,5,6</i>	<i>Discipline Gr. 4,5,6</i>	<i>Extra- Curricular Activities</i>
<i>Richards</i>	Gr.4- All A's Gr.5- A's, B's Gr.6-All A's	Gr.4-Proficient Gr.5-Advanced Proficient Gr.6-Proficient	Gr.4-Advanced Proficient Gr.5-Advanced Proficient Gr.6-Advanced Proficient	None	Multiple
<i>Bell</i>	Gr.4-A's, B's Gr.5-A's, B's Gr.6-A's, B's	Gr.4-Proficient Gr.5-Advanced Proficient Gr.6-Advanced Proficient	Gr.4-Proficient Gr.5-Advanced Proficient Gr.6-Proficient	None	Multiple
<i>Mitchell</i>	Gr.4-A's, B's Gr.5-A's, B's Gr.6-All A's	Gr.4-Proficient Gr.5-Partially Proficient Gr.6-Proficient	Gr.4-Proficient Gr.5-Proficient Gr.6-Proficient	None	Multiple
<i>Andrews</i>	Gr.4-A's, B's Gr.5-A's, B's Gr.6-A's, B's	Gr.4-Partially Proficient Gr.5-Proficient Gr.6-Proficient	Gr.4-Proficient Gr.5-Proficient Gr.6-Proficient	None	Multiple

Table 3: Overview of Student Backgrounds- Public to Private after 6<sup>th</sup> Grade

Public to Private After 8 <sup>th</sup> Grade	<i>Final Grades Gr. 7,8</i>	<i>NJASK Test Scores: Language Arts Gr. 7,8</i>	<i>NJASK Test Scores: Mathematics Gr. 7,8</i>	<i>Discipline Gr. 7,8</i>	<i>Extra-Curricular Activities</i>
<i>Carson</i>	Gr. 7-All A's Gr. 8-All A's	Gr.7-Advanced Proficient Gr. 8-Proficient	Gr.7-Advanced Proficient Gr.8-Advanced Proficient	None	Multiple
<i>Charles</i>	Gr. 7-A's, B's Gr. 8-A's, B's, C	Gr. 7-Proficient Gr. 8-Partially Proficient	Gr. 7-Partially Proficient Gr. 8-Partially Proficient	Low Level, Minimal	Multiple
<i>Stevens</i>	Gr. 7-A's, B's Gr. 8-A's, B's	Gr. 7-Proficient Gr. 8-Proficient	Gr. 7-Proficient Gr. 8-Proficient	None	Multiple
<i>Sawyer</i>	Gr. 7-A's, B's Gr. 8-A's, B's	Gr. 7-Proficient Gr. 8-Proficient	Gr. 7-Advanced Proficient Gr. 8-Advanced Proficient	Low Level, Minimal	Multiple

Table 4: Overview of Student Backgrounds- Public to Private after 8th Grade

These types of students who are academically focused with strong grades and test scores, an understanding of self-discipline and appropriate behavior as well as a willingness to engage and expand their experiences across music, sports, and community involvement, fit the mold of what private schools are seeking based on Groton's 2009 mission statement. While this does not mean that all children who are these things will leave public school for private, it really cannot be a surprise that these children and their

families made this decision to leave. By doing so each family was able pursue a much more targeted educational experience, the intent of which would be to continue to push and expand the academic and social experience for each student.

*Decisions, Decisions... How Did We Get Here?*

Beautiful, rich, brimming with power and influence, these places are seductive to ambitious families and children. And the schools know it. Khan (2010, p. 97)

Deciding on where a child will attend school is a complicated process (Coleman & Hoffer, 1987). At both the macro and micro-levels there are a number of things that go into the “why” parents pick either a private or public school (Cookson, 1994). Given the familiarity with the backgrounds of parents who were interviewed, there is an understanding as to the context in which the decision itself to leave was made, certainly at the macro-level. While all parents focused primarily on micro-level reasons for choosing a private school, the decision to leave public school and the decision to attend a particular private school at the macro-level is a worthwhile piece to unpack.

When parents take part in the act of choosing a private school, they are immediately confronted with issues related to social class. Class structure has a profound impact on how people think and make decisions (Cookson, 1994). These class-related status characteristics are prevalent in many private schools, making the decision to attend these schools that much more important to parents.

While only one parent (Mrs. Carson) referenced the notion that her husband “attended private... and this was what he wanted... end of story,” the past experiences of

these parents somehow shaped how they chose schools (Soares, 2010). At some point in the conversation with parents about leaving public school, the parent's own history entered into the conversation. Whether it is on the basis of maintaining what they have or pursuing something more, the decision itself became an example of social reproduction or social mobility.

At the macro-level, the need to secure social and cultural capital helps explain why parents choose private schools. Bourdieu (2000) states that families attempt to pass on more than just economic capital to their children. Their concerns lie equally in the transmission of both social and cultural capital. The benefits related to securing different forms of knowledge found in cultural capital, as well as the benefits of developing social relationships with different people holding high levels of social capital, are critically important to these families as they look toward securing for the next generation, the existing wealth and privilege that currently exist (Bourdieu & Passeron, 2000; Cookson, 1994; Zweigheft, 1993).

The social and cultural characteristics of schools become indicators of class and status for students. As status-related identities are passed on to students based on the reputations of particular institutions, they, in turn, alter and enhance a variety of lifestyle and career opportunities for students (Sadovnik et al., 2006).

It is reasonable to believe that all parents want their children to have similar or greater opportunities growing up than they did. While nine of the sixteen parents represented in this half of the study attended private school as children, the remaining seven attended public schools. Here, one can see the idea of social and cultural capital at

work (Bourdieu & Passeron, 2000). The parents who attended private school themselves used the decision to reinforce their place within society over the next generation.

Five of these nine parents who attended private schools had no less than a master's degree. Clearly, they valued education itself, having pursued it as far as they did. In addition, two of the three families whose income was higher than \$200,000 had at least one parent who attended private school. The connections are easily made by parents related to their own attained levels of education, financial achievement, and experiences as a student.

Parents who attended private schools themselves or are already part of a privileged social class are not necessarily looking only to "maintain" what social and cultural capital they have. While they are certainly not looking to lose any social or cultural capital, they are looking to create an opportunity for their children to have more and experience a positive direction of social mobility during their lives (Labaree, 1997). This could even be found in the type of or particular private school to which they send their child. Different levels of status and reputation exist amongst and between parochial, independent, and even boarding schools (Stuber, 2010).

The same can be said for parents who did not attend private school themselves. Their choice to pursue a private education for their children speaks to the intention of offering them something different than they had as children. If it were a case of simply maintaining what the family already had in terms of social and cultural capital, the move to private would be unnecessary. In the eyes of these public school parents, this was an

opportunity to provide something different, something more, with the intention that it would pay some sort of dividend down the road. The differences found between public and private schools can have a major effect on occupational, social, and ultimately, lifestyle mobility (Sadovnik et al., 2006). Private schools, especially elite private schools, allow access to these circles, and in doing so, increase the likelihood of attaining a higher level of social status and ultimately social capital (Coleman & Hoffer, 1987). Higher-status private schools promote specific attitudes and values that are appreciated and expected by high-status occupations. It is in this manner that they become a gateway to the privileged social class (Hurn, 2008).

Regardless of parental intentions as they relate to social mobility and social reproduction, it is clear that without the financial resources to pay for a private school education all of this is moot. With tuition ranging anywhere from ten to fifty thousand dollars for the schools in which study participants' children now attend, the reality became a critical piece of the decision to leave public for private. Educating children at private schools, particularly elite private schools, can be extremely expensive and it often puts parents in a challenging place to meet high tuition fees (Cookson & Persell, 1985). It is possible to see the value, despite the high cost of tuition, in attending private schools as any child who gains admission bears the "chosen one" moniker. Throughout the history of the United States many private schools have educated children of American royalty. With this, private schools have gained the reputation of being a place for high status families to send their children for social polishing and the preparation of power attached to their birthright (Cookson & Persell, 1985).

Even since Cookson and Persell wrote *“Preparing for Power”* in the mid 1980’s, private schools have still maintained their foundational core related to status and culture. While they may have expanded to more of a global curriculum rather than one focused on western culture, they still provide a deep socialization, preparing students for upper-class membership (Cookson & Persell, 2010). As any education is an investment in the future of the child who receives that education, the investment found in private school is likely to be one with the opportunity for a greater return in the future. It is understandable then, how despite the high cost of tuition, parents would be willing to make the necessary financial sacrifices in order to support this type of opportunity for their children.

Despite the fact that some type of financial aid existed at each private school being attended, not all parents qualified for assistance, and those who did qualify, did so to different degrees. It was clear, in most cases that finances and tuition-related expenses were of concern to parents regardless of how much income existed within each household. In turn, cost and financial aid did play an important role in the decision related to leaving public school. In addition, these themes also played a role as to the schools in which the children applied to and ultimately considered attending when choosing to leave public. According to Mrs. Charles, “Price was an important factor. I would have loved to see him at Lakeville, but we had to balance our mortgage with retirement as well as college.” This type of comment and response was consistent amongst most parents regardless of whether or not they left after sixth grade or eighth grade. “Financial aid would need to be close to one hundred percent if we are going to do this,” stated Mrs. Sawyer.



Although some parents had other children already in private school or college, concerns over tuition costs were expressed by parents regardless of the number of children in each family. In addition, they recognized that going back to public school, should financial issues develop, was a real possibility for some parents. According to Mrs. Mitchell, “We are very excited to keep her in private high school when the time comes. I don’t think we will come back to public, but maybe if something happens financially, and I can’t afford to send her, we could be back.”

Also evident during interviews was the willingness of parents to sacrifice in some way so that their child could attend the private school. “My husband and I have been living like college students ever since our daughter went to Lakeville and our son went to college.” To some degree or another, parents paid some amount of money, with or without financial assistance from the school, to give their child the private school experience. Keep in mind that the public education system available in Laurel was of no cost to them, aside from paying taxes, which they did regardless of where the child attended school. This, measured against the concerns related to tuition costs, exemplifies the desire to leave the public system. “It wasn’t great to have to pay that tuition, but we were willing to do whatever was best for them,” said Mrs. Sawyer.

As important as financial issues were to parents in deciding to leave public school, to gain a more complete understanding of how parents came to the decision to leave for private school, the role of the student in the decision must be analyzed. Aside from any parental values or beliefs at the macro-level about what a private school education could offer their children, as well as the ability to somehow pay for this

education, the process of the actual decision itself is of great importance to the current study. Identifying how much of a role the children themselves had in the process to leave speaks to the overall point of the study. While we are asking the reasons why parents left public school for private, the role of the children in this decision will provide great insight into the decision-making process of parents with regard to education.

While each family had somewhat different experiences related to the participation of the child in the decision, all children in both sixth and eighth grades ultimately supported the idea of leaving public for private school. Mrs. Andrew's son had two other brothers who attended the private school and from them, he actually knew more about the private school than the middle school in Laurel. It was an easy decision, and he actually expressed the desire to attend this private school more so than his older brothers who had left public for private years earlier. Despite the fact that two of his brothers attended before him, his mother stated they "wouldn't have made the move if he wasn't on board."

In the case of Mrs. Bell's daughter, she actually picked the school. While both parents and daughter were in favor of leaving the public school, the decision to attend this particular school came directly from the child. If it were up to her mother, she would have "picked a different school, something softer given her age at the time." At one point while interviewing at another school, Mrs. Bell's daughter leaned over to her parents about five minutes into the interview and said, after the interviewer had stepped away, "Can we go? I don't think this school is for me." Mrs. Richard's daughter was concerned about leaving friends behind, and it was not initially perceived as a good idea by the child. However, after visiting the private school for a day, she "got right on

board.” She had a very good time interacting with her potential classmates and was ready to make the jump to private, based on one day’s worth of time spent there.

Students who left public school after eighth grade were also supportive of this decision. Mrs. Carson and Mrs. Charles considered the decision to leave the public school mutual between parents and child, while Mrs. Stevens and Mrs. Sawyer stated it was each of their daughter’s decision to make. Mrs. Sawyer’s daughter actually pursued the application process on her own accord and found a way to pay for the Secondary Scholastic Admission Test (SSAT) which is used to help determine placement for students applying to private schools (Secondary Scholastic Admission Test, 2012). According to her mother, she was accepted to multiple schools without her parents knowing anything about it. It was after her acceptance letters came home that she broke the news to parents, and at that point, discussions began as to what parents could do in terms of financing the decision.

In all of these situations, one can see how the students involved were in favor of leaving public school. Their willingness to try a new school allowed parents to pursue a different experience that could benefit their children at both the macro and micro-level. Four of the parents interviewed all made a point of noting they would not have followed through with the decision to leave if the child in question was not in favor of leaving.

Outlined here are elements that speak to the decision process as well as large scale reasons at the macro-level for leaving Laurel public schools. Backgrounds, financial ability and the decision itself, while separate pieces of the puzzle, ultimately come

together to help paint the picture which shows how the decision was made. In addition to these three, however, it is also important to recognize and speak to the theme of convenience and its role in the actual decision. Convenience may play a role in terms of where students apply and ultimately enroll in private school (Bell, 2007).

Research indicates that parents do prefer convenient schools that are located close to home and allow, logistically speaking, for flexibility related to parent work schedules as well as evening and weekend expectations at school for students (Archibald, 1996). While being close to home is an important factor for parents, convenience, according to Mainda (2002), is less important than the type of education parents feel their child would receive at particular schools.

With approximately twenty private schools existing in the Ivy area, the theme of convenience is inherently part of the decision for parents to leave public school. In many cases, private schools are physically closer to student's homes than the town's public schools. Convenience and exposure to these private schools is a given for parents as they are an ingrained part of the town of Laurel as well as other towns that border Laurel. Most private schools provided transportation for students; however parents in this study were willing to drive their children to private school. Given the proximity of many of these private schools, convenience existed and travel was not a significant issue even if parents were driving students themselves.

Although many private schools were located within fifteen minutes of participants' homes, most parents identified approximately thirty minutes as their marker

for travel. The thirty minute limitation on travel still provided no shortage of schools within that travel limit. As exemplified by Mrs. Richards, “Our daughter has applied to six high schools for next year. All of them are within thirty minutes of our home.” Mrs. Bell added, “We looked at three schools we liked that were within twenty minutes of where we live.”

While it is recognizable that convenience, in terms of location of the school and proximity to parents’ homes, existed for each parent involved in this study and certainly played a part in the decision to leave public school, the question within this theme asks, “Just how convenient is convenient enough?” Mrs. Sawyer jokingly asked her daughter, upon getting accepted to two schools in the area, “Can you just go to Lakeville? It’s right down the road, and I’ve got to go to work. Ivy Day is a bit more of a schlep for me.” No parents in the study identified a need to pursue a school that was closer to their home. In the end, all schools were convenient enough regardless of whether or not transportation were provided by the school.

It is evident how much went into the actual decision not only to attend a private school, but which one to attend upon being accepted. Each private school was different and offered a slightly different product, according to study participants, with sometimes small but noticeable variances in programming, culture, and values. The ability to gain acceptance, the decision to attend, and the resources to pay for it were three obvious and often openly discussed pieces of the private school choice conversation. Despite everything that comes from specific conversations related to “why” and “how” decisions

to leave public school were made, the potential influence that status culture has on choice decisions cannot be ignored. Khan (2010) writes:

Since at least the 1930's, scholars have shown a robust and consistent advantage to elite schooling... There is a reason why people want to go to Harvard, and it is not because a student will better understand Plato upon graduation... Put simply, going to Harvard matters because if you go to Harvard you will have a better chance of becoming rich than if you go to a less highly esteemed school. (pp. 98-99)

*The Good, the Bad, and the Alternative*

While parents, whether it was after sixth grade or eighth grade, ultimately left the Laurel school district for private schools, their entire experience was not unsatisfactory. Nor were these parents were so unhappy with the public school system that they did not support it even now. Parents did, in fact, believe that children could get a good education in Laurel. At some point during the years, parents either experienced or anticipated a downward trend that did or would soon cross their “line in the sand” as to what they would expect and what they would accept from the public school system. Although this is where the story ends up, this is not where it begins.

The Good

We couldn't have wished for a better [early] elementary school experience. - Mrs. Carson

Parents involved in this half of the study had many positive things to say about their experience in Laurel elementary schools, particularly the early elementary level. Parents viewed academics, support, values, and expectations favorably. There were no negative comments by any parent regarding any element of their child's experience in any of the early elementary schools.

In Laurel, students attend one of four elementary schools (Grades Pre K-3) before all four elementary schools come together as a whole at Grade 4. Each elementary school traditionally maintains between three and four classrooms per grade level, whereas the upper elementary school (Grades 4-6) has historically offered twelve classrooms at each grade level divided up into two teams per grade level (Laurel Township Public Schools, 2009). All of these schools (elementary and upper elementary) have consistently been designated as New Jersey Schools of Character and, at least the early elementary schools, have consistently scored high on the New Jersey Assessment of Skills and Knowledge (NJASK) exams (Laurel Township Public Schools, 2009).

Particularly in the early elementary schools, the educational program in Laurel Township was considered by parents to be very strong. At some point during the interviews, most parents, regardless of whether they left the public schools after sixth or eighth grade, spoke of how happy they were with the early elementary school experience. According to Mrs. Carson, "We couldn't have wished for a better [early] elementary school experience." Parents felt their child learned and grew academically, and they were pleased not only with the quality of instruction provided, but also with the academic reputations of these schools. Each school was consistently putting out student test scores

which met or exceeded state standards related to No Child Left Behind legislation (Laurel Township Public School, 2009).

Parents also praised the academic and social/emotional support at both elementary levels (early and upper). They were happy with class size, staff to student ratios, counselor support and, in particular, the concept of *personalization*. Parents felt the adults in these schools knew not only who their children were, but also who they were as parents. Personal connections had been made with families and that “went a long way” in supporting the education of their children.

According to Powell (1996), personal attention reduces isolation, increases motivation to engage in learning, and brings structure, purpose and positive adult influence to the lives of students. Personal attention also enables schools to gain a better understanding of individual differences. It is a recognized opportunity for schools to avoid an atmosphere of student anonymity and depersonalization which encompasses so much of society.

Small schools can enable students to be more visible to teachers, causing bonds and relationships to develop between them. Ultimately, they create a more personalized educational experience. With smaller numbers, the lines of communication and interaction can be more open. The potential outcome is more collaboration, support, and problem solving which ultimately will lead to instructional improvement (Toch, 2003).

Keeping with this theme, two points should be noted; first, two of the four elementary schools have no more than 250 students enrolled in them. Second, although, the upper elementary school has approximately 900 students between grades 4-6, the



school's administrative design included two principals beginning in 2006. One for the fourth grade and one for grades five and six, along with a vice principal attached to those grades (Laurel Township Public Schools 2009).

Parents were also very happy with the values promoted by each early elementary school, as well as the buy-in that existed with parents of other children at these schools. "At the [early] elementary school, it seemed like everyone was on the same page, selling the same product...a safe, challenging work environment. It seemed everyone was legitimately trying to help kids do well," said Mrs. Stevens. Teachers promoted high standards in classrooms and pushed students to their potential, not accepting what parents referred to as "teaching to the middle." Parents, too, were heavily involved in the schools with high numbers of PTO (Parent Teacher Organization) supporters and high numbers of parents attending school events, according to study participants.

Research supports how these elementary schools have found success in Laurel Township (Bryk & Driscoll, 1988; Bryk, Lee, & Holland, 1993). When public schools have been successful, they have been part of a configuration that has included elements of the community that were committed to the same set of values (Cremin, 1976). Strong, communally organized schools that maintain core academic values have been known to increase academic achievement and student engagement (Bryk & Driscoll, 1988; Bryk, Lee, & Holland, 1993). These schools emphasize three components that are commonly found in private schools. These components include: 1. A shared set of values which focuses on the school's mission. 2. The intent to develop positive and meaningful relationships between teachers and students that are linked to the school's philosophy. 3.

The implementation of an agenda that consists of meaningful activities and traditions which define and speak to membership in the school community (Bryk & Driscoll, 1988; Bryk, Lee, & Holland, 1993).

Each of these four early level elementary schools represents a quadrant of the town that has its own distinct flavor and community composition. Despite attempts by the district to rezone and redistrict over the years, each of the four elementary schools maintains somewhat homogenous student populations existing in each part of town, according to parents. While parents commented on the reputations of all elementary schools in Laurel, all participating families sent their children to one of two particular elementary schools in Laurel Township. This sense of homogeneity amongst these four schools supports the success of the elementary schools in terms of values, relationships, and membership in the school community (Cremin, 1976).

It is in fourth grade where the entire district joins together and carries through in this manner for the remainder of the K-12 experience. The upper elementary school houses students in fourth through sixth grade, the middle school grades, seven and eight, and finally the high school with students in grades nine through twelve (Laurel Township Public Schools, 2009). It is here where the schools begin to lose that sense of homogeneity found in any of the four elementary schools. Beginning in grade four and carrying through twelfth the district sends students from all parts of town to one building, depending on the grade level. With this, the likelihood of a much more heterogeneous population in school is evident. The upper elementary school is where themes related to why parents have opted to leave the public school began to emerge, according to parents

in this study. In some cases, the decision to leave after sixth grade was based on what happened in the upper elementary school or what parents believed would happen in the middle school if they stayed and enrolled in that school.

Public schools have failed, according to Cremin, when the forces of heterogeneity overtake the forces of community (1976). Research also supports that the absence of community as well as personalization does exist in schools that are large and disjointed. When students take a number of classes, and likewise when teachers teach an expansive number of students, this poor sense of community and lack of attention for students becomes a staple of the school's culture (Toch, 2004).

As Powell states, advocates of small schools, believe public high schools are simply too large to be effective in supporting the learning and development of children. Students deal with multiple teachers over short amounts of time each day. When combined with the number of students that teachers see each day, the likelihood for personal attention to develop between children and adults in public schools appears to be very limited (1996).

Parents' experiences at the upper elementary school were good, for the most part, particularly parents who left after eighth grade. Parents who left after sixth grade, however, felt there were "cracks in the foundation" of what was built in the early elementary schools. Three of the four parents interviewed who left after sixth grade noted things were beginning to "slip academically" in terms of the challenge presented to their children by teachers. These types of concerns led parents to wonder, "If this is what is happening now, what can we expect in middle and high school?" "We saw a tendency

of the challenge and the quality of schooling getting weaker as she went on [through the upper elementary grades] and we became more concerned with what would be coming [academically speaking] in the middle and high school programs,” said Mrs. Bell. Mrs. Carson agreed, “Academically, things started off strong [in the early elementary grades] and then as she went up the grade levels it seemed to get weaker. By the time we got to the middle school, my husband had no trouble convincing me to try a private school.”

Despite the academic concerns of parents who left after sixth grade, the bulk of the micro-level reasons behind their decision to leave public school centered on climate-related themes. All four parents spoke to the idea of their child “getting lost” in a bigger school. Parents were also concerned about a lack of personalization in the upper elementary levels, as well as at the middle school level. “At the elementary level, our daughter did get the treatment she needed in terms of personalization and support, but as she got older, all of this stopped,” said Mrs. Richards.” Mrs. Andrews added, “He had great services and support through fifth grade, but he was a shy kid, and no one would help draw him out of his shell after that.”

In addition to getting lost and a lack of personalization that began to appear in the upper elementary grades, parents were also concerned about bullying. Whether their child was bullied directly or if bullying simply existed in their school, it was important enough for three of these four parents (Mmes. Richards, Mitchell, and Andrews) to cite as an important reason behind their decision to leave public school after sixth grade. Mrs. Mitchell spoke to this point, “We went to private so we could help her in an environment where she didn’t have to worry about what clothes she wore or any mean

girl stuff. I became concerned because I wouldn't have been able to protect her at the middle school."

A final piece of the discussion related to climate centered on bomb scares. Two parents whose children attended the upper elementary school at the same time voiced concerns about a series of "bomb scare evacuations" that took place over the course of one to two years at both the upper elementary school and the middle school. Mrs. Bell and Mrs. Andrews were concerned about safety, not knowing what was going to happen to their children when they went to school. Despite the fact that no bombs were ever found in either school, these evacuations removed a sense of academic focus, according to these parents, as students were kept out of class for hours at a time while police swept the buildings.

For these students whose parents opted to remove them from Laurel schools after sixth grade, the decision was made given several fundamental needs of the children were not being met by the school. While there were concerns academically, the emphasis in the decision was placed more on primary needs such as safety, belonging, and support (Maslow, 1954).

Threats to safety, stability, and protection in human beings can cause one to regress from the pursuit of higher level needs to more basic needs. This could lessen or even eliminate any academic development of students. In addition to safety needs, needs related to support, group inclusion, and development of relationships with others are threatened by a poor climate where issues related to bullying and poor treatment by other

students exist (Maslow, 1954). Parents acknowledged these primary needs as being critical to social-emotional development as well as to cognitive and academic development in elementary school or in years to come over middle school. As a result, these parents opted to leave the public school after sixth grade.

### The Bad

I was looking for teachers who would channel his intellectual energies, allowing him to make progress and grow. This wasn't happening and finally I said 'No more.' - Mrs. Charles

The four parents who left after sixth grade did so, as noted earlier, due to a combination of “cracks in the foundation” related to the academic and social climate at the upper elementary school. In addition, these parents also cited their fears of what the middle school would be like based on their experiences at the upper elementary level. The remaining four parents, who left Laurel public schools for private, did so after eighth grade. These parents were willing to remain in district after sixth grade, unlike the other four participants, for the middle school years. However, their experience at this level encouraged them to opt out of the public schools only two years later.

Laurel Middle School has traditionally housed seventh and eighth grade students, since 1985. Prior to that, it was a junior high school for eighth and ninth grade students. Over the years, population increases forced the district to reallocate what grade levels attended which schools and since that time, the current configuration has existed (Laurel Township Public School, 2009). The school is the second stop for children where all

students from the district attend together extending the heterogeneous environment that was first seen at the upper elementary school. Each grade level maintains approximately 300 students, pushing the total student population of the school to approximately 600. One principal and one assistant principal compose the administrative leadership team. The house concept exists in the middle school, as well as at the upper elementary level, with students being assigned to one of three houses during both years. All teachers are certified within the discipline they teach as per state regulations (NJDOE, 2013) and district expectations, and students rotate through approximately six teachers' classrooms each day (Laurel Township Public Schools, 2012).

Parents whose children left the public school district after eighth grade focused their reasoning significantly on the lack of academic and instructional quality at this level. A lack of skills developed related to writing, reading, and mathematics primarily, as well as content learned across subject areas, was consistently noted by these parents. While each parent considered themselves to be a "supporter" of the public school district, they felt it was not working for their child at this point. As "things" were noted to begin to "slip" in the upper elementary school, by the time these students were through their seventh grade year, the experience was quickly becoming very "unimpressive."

According to Mrs. Carson,

I wasn't wild about the middle school from an academic point of view. My husband and I swear neither one of [our children] learned anything there. Seriously, we just weren't impressed. Academically, things started off strong in the

public school and then as she went up in the grade levels it seemed to get weaker academically. By the time we got to the middle school, my husband had no trouble convincing me to try a private school.

Parents believed their children were not being challenged, and that the lessons provided by teachers were targeting the mid-range students, in many instances creating a “dumbing down” of the curriculum. On the whole, academic expectations were too low for these families. Students were “allowed” to simply “get by” rather than be pushed toward and reach their academic potential.

My daughter was a bright kid who was never challenged. She was comfortable with her B's, but the expectations from the teachers to get more from her just weren't there. [Her performance] was acceptable despite the fact that she could have done more with the right amount of [academic] push, said Mrs. Stevens.

Parental perceptions in multiple studies (Bosetti, 2004; Kraushaar, 1972; Schneider et al., 2000) have shown a strong emphasis on academics when choosing private schools. Parents listed academic reputation, teacher quality, teaching style, and high test scores as major reasons for choosing private schools for their children. A study by Schneider and colleagues (2000), indicates that parents want good teachers delivering educational opportunities and experiences to their children. Results from this study



found the quality of teachers to be the characteristic cited by parents as being most important when choosing private schools. Bosetti's research (2004) supports these findings. When parents were asked to rank the top three factors which influenced their decision to opt for private schools, 47% of parents cited teaching style, and 46% of parents cited a strong academic reputation.

Although parents cited poor academics as the primary reason for leaving the public school system after eighth grade, three sub-themes also emerged, each of which lent itself to the existence of a poor academic climate. These three themes, in alignment with the research literature, included social climate, values/expectations, and support.

Parents consistently mentioned disruptive and distracting behavior by students in class, as well as bullying. Their points were not so much that these events were taking place, but the impact that they had on teachers' ability to teach and students' ability to learn in such a climate. "Neither of my kids coped well with 'chaos' in the classroom," said Mrs. Carson. Mrs. Stevens added, "The classes she was in, there was a lot of goofing around going on. She seemed to be mixed in with classes that had kids [and parents] who just didn't care." Mrs. Sawyer noted, "In the middle school she was scared. Behaviorally it seemed the classes were out of control and it began to affect her. One day she came to me and said, 'Mom, I've had it.'" Parents saw these behaviors as the types of things that either kept teachers from actually teaching or simply wore teachers down to the point where they just accepted poor behavior.

The acceptance of such behaviors led parents to note the theme of expectations, which they did not feel were high enough at the middle school. This sub-theme on its own was an issue with which parents were not pleased; however, the bigger picture spoke to how it affected the academic climate. Acceptance of disruptive behavior led to a failure to provide challenging instruction. Parents also felt that teachers allowed, to their dissatisfaction, students to work and perform below their potential. Additionally, these parents felt that low standards were also accepted by the administration and parents.

Parents who participated in this study felt administrators needed to ask more of their teachers and that many teachers were not as committed as they needed to be at the middle school. “With the exception of one or two teachers at the middle school level, I never saw them try to instill that love for the subject in students,” said Mrs. Carson. Added to that, the perception by these parents was that many parents had very different “levels of purpose” with regard to the education of their children. “It was always the same few parents who were involved in everything and I could see that not everyone had bought into the fact that you’re there for the purpose of getting as much out of the school experience as you can,” said Mrs. Charles.

This lack of consistent values and expectations lent itself to an academic environment that was not conducive to student growth in the eyes of their parents. The combination of a weak social climate as well as a lack of expectations across the board only contributed to parents choosing to leave the public schools after eighth grade. As important as these two sub-themes were, the final sub-theme of support which promoted a personalized educational experience for students was emphasized very much by

parents. Support was an issue related to both how it affected academics and instruction as well as how it simply made students feel while they attended school.

The lack of acknowledgement of their children by the school left parents very unhappy, especially when it was consistently noted by the administration about the “plan” to personalize the educational experience. Parents felt teachers and administrators were not on the same page as the “talk didn’t match the walk.” Mrs. Charles noted,

I would have to say the public schools didn’t understand where I was coming from with regard to what my son needed. There was a lot of discussion about personalizing education and helping to address individual needs, and I felt this was where it fell apart. He wasn’t acknowledged as an individual. He was one of a huge number of kids, and he couldn’t find his place. I was really dissatisfied with my son’s experience at the middle school.

These elements of support are consistently found in the research with regard to personalizing the educational experience and reducing class size. Parents firmly believed that their children would have done better if relationships were stronger between school staff members and their children. Parents also felt that large class sizes had to do with this inability to for students to make connections and, in turn, learn more and perform better. “Large classes were very frustrating. At the end of the day, the classes were just too crowded [for any learning to take place],” said Mrs. Charles.

Many independent private schools have made their reputations by combining academic rigor with small class size. The two go hand-in-hand, as it is impossible to develop norms within the school that effectively stress and lead to increases in academic achievement without developing strong ties between students and teachers (Coleman et al., 1997; Powell, 1996; Sizer & Sizer 2006). These private schools acknowledge that children need contact with, and guidance from, adults. Private schools on average maintain about half as many students per teacher when compared to public schools, and this fact has become a hallmark characteristic of their programming and tradition (Powell, 1996).

Mrs. Bell added,

If you triple the number of kids...in public school  
[classes]...of course that will make a difference. It's like  
when I had her friends on a play date, you can do different  
things when there are just two or three [as opposed to]  
when you have ten.

The collective picture becomes very clear as to a variety of needs that were not met for these families regarding their children's education, particularly in the middle school. Each of these micro-level reasons supports the research literature regarding why parents choose private schools. Each sub-theme of social climate, values/expectations, and support all lend themselves to an unacceptable academic experience as noted by these parents. What needs to be unpacked now involves the private school experience itself. It is understandable now, why the parents left the public school, whether it was

after sixth grade or after eighth grade; however, what is needed now is to understand how things turned out once students left the public school system.

### The Alternative

The private school offered a more customized program. She wouldn't get the chance to hide, and the teacher would be able to push her and keep her going. – Mrs. Bell

As each interview unfolded with parents who left public school to attend private, the discussion eventually turned to how each child was faring in private school and whether or not it was worth the move. All eight mothers viewed the move as a positive one, and all eight either remained in private school until graduation or are still there. No study participants have the intention of returning to public school, although, should finances and tuition become an issue that could change, according to some parents.

All parents in this portion of the study identified the move to private school as the “right one” for their child. Much of this discussion centered on the concept of “fit” and how private school was a better one for their child. Parents could not articulate this concept of fit so much in concrete terms, but it was identified more as a “feeling” they had based on observations of their child in terms of social interactions with students, professional interactions with teachers and staff, as well as academic focus and purpose. Whether it was related to social or academic issues, all parents noted that the environment was simply a better place for their child. According to Mrs. Sawyer,

My daughter was telling one of her girlfriends [in public school] about our trip to the opera. The friend said, ‘Stop talking about that. It’s weird.’ My daughter said, ‘I’m not

weird, I'm cultured.' She always felt like academically and culturally, she didn't fit within the [public school] district. But then she goes to [private school] and she is very popular. She has lots of friends...because there was just a whole different group of kids [who were willing to accept her] there. She just didn't fit in public school. She was a fish out of water.

While fit was presented in more of an abstract manner, parents were able to speak in more concrete terms as to how satisfied they were regarding their move to private school in a variety of areas. These areas of satisfaction were directly connected to the micro-level reasons why they left public school in the first place. Simply put, everything they did not find to their liking in public school was found in private. Parents found improvement in areas related to academics, social climate, support, school expectations for students, values, and parental involvement, as well as communication between the school and home.

Parents found the academic climate to be better in each private school that was attended than in their public school. There was a greater focus on academics by students and teachers in the private schools, and this was reflected in the levels of challenge and rigor delivered to each child. Each participant's child was thriving in this atmosphere with stronger academics. In addition, two parents, Mrs. Richards and Mrs. Mitchell commented on how unprepared their daughters were upon entering the private school. "She is keeping up in private now. In the beginning she was behind the other kids. Other

kids knew how to study, take notes, and summarize better. She thought, ‘I don’t even know where to start,’” said Mrs. Richards.

Mrs. Mitchell added,

The transition from sixth to seventh was like night and day.

The upper elementary school did not prepare her in English for that level of writing in private school. Although, she was accepted, she had to repeat sixth grade before moving on to seventh.

Parents also liked how the private schools were not so “controlled” by the state in terms of telling the schools what they had to teach, when they had to teach it, and how much or many classes students had to take. “All their time is heavily focused on the academics. They are not driven by any of the stuff that comes down from the state that says ‘You have to teach this; you have to have so many hours of that,’” said Mrs. Carson. Parents also noted a more obvious love by teachers for the subjects they teach at the private school. Several parents also liked the idea of having teachers with degrees in their field of concentration. For example, a master’s degree in history was viewed more beneficial to being a good history teacher than a master’s in teaching. Parents felt more teachers in private school were specifically skilled in their discipline than in public school, and it showed in terms of commitment and instructional quality.

Social climate was also a significant part of the decision to leave public schools after both sixth and eighth grades. In private schools each parent spoke about how different the environment was when compared to the public schools. They felt a sense of

order and discipline that was absent in the public schools. While discipline exists in these private schools, it is not the focus. The focus, according to parents, is on “learning, not custody.”

Parents also identified a sense of “harmony” among students and with teachers in private school that was not found in public school. Relationships were evident as people knew about each other and seem to be legitimately interested in who they are, not only as students or classmates, but as people in general. This development of relationships helps reduce isolation, increases motivation to engage in learning, brings structure, purpose, and positive adult influence to the lives of students (Powell, 1996). Attention to people and students also enables schools to gain a better understanding of individual differences (Toch, 2003).

Students in private school were also found by parents to be “more polite” than in public school and had a certain “level of care” about themselves that parents did not see in public school. “They hold the door open for you [and are] willing to help. No sass, no attitude. It is simply a warm and inviting environment in the private school,” said Mrs. Charles.

Following the patterns found related to why parents opted to leave public school, the theme of support was identified as being much more evident in day to day life for students in private school. As research indicates, personal connections and small class size are hallmarks of a private school education (Powell, 1996). In each case, parents spoke to how much better the support was for their children in private school. This was



true for parents who left after sixth grade and eighth grade. In many cases, parents felt the level of support was almost “overdone” in the private school.

On the whole, class sizes were much smaller than in the public school. Mrs. Richards stated that most classes contained between ten and twelve students, while a large class at her daughter’s new school enrolled about fifteen students. Mrs. Bell indicated class size varied depending on the course; however, an average class usually has no more than fifteen students. Smaller class size was noted by almost every parent as a major difference between the public and private school experience. In addition to class size, a prominent part of the discussed theme of support involved personalization. For example, all eight parents believed that private school teachers had a better understanding than public school teachers, on the whole, of who their children are, what kind of person they are and where their interests lie. They were also more satisfied with the amount of attention their child received from all staff members. Private school was a more “customized” program and according to Mrs. Richards, “Whether you like it or not, you’re getting more attention at private school.” Mrs. Sawyer added, “My daughter has really blossomed there. She has received all kinds of attention. It is extraordinary. They make every effort to draw kids out who are shy and no one falls through the cracks there.” This idea of “understanding” children was a major factor for parents when discussing why the private school experience for students was better than their experience in public school.

In addition parents, particularly those who left after eighth grade, noted how impressed they were with the private school administrators. Private school principals

were identified as warm and caring people to whom parents could go when they had an issue or concern. In many instances parents were not happy with the role of administrators in Laurel and their lack of expectations and follow through with what they told parents they would do. Mrs. Stevens commented,

The principal's speech [at the private school] was so warm.

She told us 'We are here for you and we are going to love your child.' I don't know many people that would love teenagers as much as this woman. She was tremendous. She made you feel like if there was ever a problem, you could go to her [directly], and she has followed through with that.

Many parents felt that the expectations for students in the public school, particularly the middle school, were too low across the board. They felt the school tolerated too much with regard to poor behavior and allowed students to get by with low levels of academic effort. They did not place enough emphasis on academics, working hard, and treating others well. Parents were, however, very satisfied with the expectations set by the private school. This was the case for parents who left after both sixth and eighth grade. However, parents who left after eighth grade were more aware of these improvements in their new school and mentioned it consistently during the interviews. Whether it involved expectations placed on students by teachers, or the expectations placed on the teachers by the school itself, parents noted how much higher the bar was set in private school when compared with the public school.

The private schools attended by all of these parents' children were also identified as being able to cultivate an environment where the "norm" was to work hard and "do your best." The norm in these private schools was to do each of these things, and the culture that was established by teachers and administrators supported this mindset. "The kids are expected to do be respectful toward teachers, administrators, and other students, here and they're held to that standard," said Mrs. Mitchell. In the private schools kids did not ostracize each other for good performance.

It wasn't cool to be smart in public school. In her new school, it wasn't even discussed. It was just the attitude between the kids that said 'you don't have to be the best, but you do the best you can [here], noted Mrs. Bell.

All parents in the study also spoke of their ability to find a consistent set of values in private school that built upon the theme of expectations. Values related to strong academics and behavior were consistently found among parents at both exit points, sixth and eighth grade. Even more evident was the idea of being with "like-minded" students who had parents who took their education as seriously as the parents in the study. "It seems like everyone there has bought into the fact that you are there for the purpose of getting as much out of the school experience as you can," stated Mrs. Charles.

Hirschhoff (1986) claims that curriculum, instruction, and even the climate of public schools may not align with the religious, moral, and cultural values of many parents. The neutrality of public schools does not necessarily meet the needs of these parents. "Such a neutrality would not be as helpful to parents seeking to inculcate

specific values in their children as would a private school that could actively espouse those values” (p. 42).

As these parents pursued private schools to attend, it became very much like looking for colleges, according to Mrs. Bell. Information provided by schools was very comprehensive and, in the end, the decision to attend the particular private school had a great deal to do with what they had to offer families and children. From the perspective of these selecting parents, the private school was able to say “These are all the things we can offer. If they interest you, let’s talk some more.” This selling point allowed parents to select a school that could meet their needs, and in the end, they did.

Parents in the study also noted how other parents were much more involved in the private schools. Although many families come from further away geographically, parents have the time, willingness and commitment to participate and support their children by attending and involving themselves in many events and initiatives.

Three of the four study participants who left after eighth grade (Mrs. Carson, Mrs. Charles, and Mrs. Stevens) mentioned an improvement over the public school in the area of communication as well. Although it was not enough of a concern to be a reason why parents left the public school, the differences were clear enough that most parents spoke of it during the interviews. The private schools were considered to be “much more informative and much more communicative” with parents than public school. “I had to work much harder to stay informed at the public schools. At private, I get weekly correspondence from the school. You see everything that is going on with classes, construction, planning, and hiring,” said Mrs. Carson.

Parents were also more pleased with communication from teachers regarding what was happening in class with their children. Teachers, on the whole, at private school were more effective at responding to parent inquiries through email and telephone calls and were more accessible to students and parents. According to Mrs. Charles,

When we email teachers, they respond. I can't say I had the same experience in public. At the public school, I called several times and was never able to catch up with his teacher about something. After five voicemails [to which the teacher never returned any] I just stopped calling.

After analyzing each interview, it was evident that parents had a set of needs, most of which were consistent among the families. Improvements in the areas of academics, social climate, and support, as well as expectations and values, were common points amongst each couple. Although the emphasis was different between parents who left after sixth grade and eighth grade, they both support existing research to a large degree. As each family went looking for a place that could meet these needs, they eventually found that place in the private school they chose to attend. The fact that parents were satisfied with their choice of schools also supports existing research.

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2005), 75% of private secular school parents were “very satisfied” with their private school, while 78% of private religious school parents were “very satisfied” with their private school. Presuming parents legitimately did find improvements to instruction, curricula, and climate and were not claiming higher levels of satisfaction simply because it was their

decision to choose a school (Goldring & Shapira, 1993; Smrekar & Goldring, 1999), this entire process can be viewed as a complicated unpacking of unmet needs which bears direct and indirect connections to each other at both exit points. As these needs are unpacked, their reflection in the research is clear, as well. Parents in Laurel want the same thing that parents in other studies want: strong academics, good teachers who know their students all coming together in a calm and peaceful learning and social environment. While the focus of interview discussions existed at the micro-level, one cannot forget the macro-level reasons behind choosing the private school over public. Although they were never formally identified by parents, the incorporation of such concepts as social mobility and social reproduction are evident in the decision making process as an end to the means. Micro-level reasons exist as the means to the end.

Over the course of these interviews with parents, a picture has been drawn speaking to who these parents are, what they expect from schools, and what their experiences were in both public school and private. Themes emerged that were, for the most part, consistent with research literature. Parents also showed the other side of the coin in how their decision to leave public school turned out. The research literature weighs in heavily on why they left, but here a glimpse of what it was like on the other side is offered. In the case of each family the grass on the other side *was* greener.

While these eight parents sought and found a way to meet their needs as parents and the needs of their children as students, the second half of this study focuses on the same questions but in reverse, so to speak. In the next chapter, a picture will be drawn of parents who left private school for public; who these parents are, what they expect from

schools, and what their experiences were in both private and public schools. These interviews will show the other side of the discussion and allow this study to come full circle with the idea of private and public school choice.

## CHAPTER V

### LEAVING PRIVATE SCHOOL

I want [my son] to be a well-rounded person [who can] adapt to different environments...I want him to be pushed, but not bulldozed...You have to get used to a lot of things in the world...but at private [school] you begin to adopt certain beliefs; like everybody outside [the private school] operates the way you do inside [the private school]. – Mrs. Smith

The second half of this study involved eight participants, similar to the first half of the study, who, between 2005 and 2011, opted to leave their current school for another. In this case, however, these parents opted to leave a private school to attend the Laurel public schools. Each of these parents, who left private schooling for public, had a unique perspective as to why they left private school, their willingness to attend the local public school in Laurel, and their experiences in both private and now public school. Prior to examining these decisions and experiences, it is important to identify who these parents are having entered public school after sixth and eighth grade.

These data will stand largely on their own as there is no significant research literature that specifically speaks to parents leaving private for public school. While this is the focus of this half of the study, it is important to look at the entire process of parents' decisions to attend private school and then public school. As research speaks to



parents who left public for private, this will be incorporated into this discussion, because the parents initially chose to attend private schools over public. The fact that these parents opted *not* to stay in private school makes understanding the initial decision to attend private school that much more intriguing.

Analysis of family backgrounds to identify similarities and differences among families who also left public schools, but chose *not* to return to public, is a critical starting point for this portion of the study. The research literature has shown a number of background characteristics that are historically present in families who choose private schools. They include parents' education, income, family structure, social class, and race (Coleman & Hoffer, 1987; Goldring & Phillips, 2008; Kraushaar, 1972; Yang & Kayaardi, 2004). This combination of parental orientations and resources creates a foundation to serve as the basis for decisions related to choosing to attend private school or choosing to attend public school.

#### *The Choosers: Parents*

Parents involved in this half of the study maintained a broad range of orientations and resources in certain areas such as parents' education and income. These parents who left private school to attend public had diverse levels of education, ranging from high school graduates to Ph.D.'s and varying levels of income, ranging from less than \$50,000 to over \$200,000 annually. Participants, however, maintained a very concentrated range of orientations and resources when speaking to themes such as parents' schooling, family structure, religion, and ethnicity. Of the sixteen parents involved in this half of the study,

most attended public school themselves, were either Catholic or Jewish, and all but five parents, were Caucasian. Each of these parents were married and lived with their family in the same household.

Of the four families (8 parents) who left private school after eighth grade, six parents (Mrs. Havens, Mr. and Mrs. Smith, Mrs. Hill, Mr. and Mrs. Willis) went to public school while the remaining two parents (Mr. Havens and Mr. Hill) went to private school. Parents who left private school after sixth grade followed a similar pattern with seven parents (Mr. and Mrs. Bullock, Mr. and Mrs. Manning, Mr. Adams, Mr. and Mrs. Lester) attending public school. Only one parent who exited private school after sixth grade (Mrs. Adams- parochial) went to private school which was in her native country in Europe.

Of the eight families in this half of the study, five sent their children to a private religious school prior to choosing to attend Laurel public schools. Three left their private school after sixth grade and two after eighth grade. Of these five families (10 parents) only one parent (Mrs. Adams) attended a private school as a child. The remaining nine parents (Mr. and Mrs. Bullock, Mr. and Mrs. Lester, Mr. and Mrs. Smith, Mr. and Mrs. Hill and Mr. Adams) attended public schools as children.

It is important to understand the reason parents, who did not attend private school themselves, initially chose for their child to leave public school and attend private school. Because the research literature speaks to how parents' own experiences in school play a part in deciding what type of school their child will attend (Goldring & Phillips, 2008;

Yang & Kayaardi, 2004), the decision to attend a private school and then a public school is worthwhile to unpack and examine.

The research literature discusses the positive relationship between parents' own levels of education as well as family levels of income and the likelihood of sending children to private school (Bosetti 2004; Yang & Kaayardi, 2004). Because these participants had such a broad range of educational levels and such a broad range of family income, this investigation must analyze how both of these played a part in the decision to attend public school after having chosen to attend private school.

Two of the sixteen parents in this half of the study ended their personal education after earning their high school diploma (Mr. Bullock and Mr. Lester). Six parents obtained bachelor's degrees (Mrs. Bullock, Mrs. Lester, Mr. and Mrs. Smith, Mr. Hill and Mrs. Willis), while seven parents earned master's degrees (Mr. and Mrs. Manning, Mr. and Mrs. Adams, Mr. Willis, Mrs. Hill, and Mr. Havens). In addition, one parent (Mrs. Havens) obtained a Ph.D. Based on the existing research (Coleman & Hoffer, 1987; Schneider et al., 2000), it is believable to extend these findings related to who chooses private school with regard to education and income by stating that parents with less education and lower income would be more likely to leave private school after having tried it. However, in this study, parents with more education and higher income also withdrew from private school to attend public school. One could have expected a pattern of parents who initially chose private school, only to later leave that private school setting, to have less education and income on the whole. Although two members of the participant pool stopped their education after graduating high school, the fact that

six and seven parents obtained their bachelor's and master's degrees respectively, along with one parent who obtained a Ph.D., counters this expectation. In addition, while one family claimed their annual income was less than \$50,000, there were multiple families who reported their income at well over \$150,000.

The income levels of families in this half of the study did not support research as to who chooses private school nor the expectation of who would leave that private school. With private schools charging tuition to families, it is believable in that families with greater income would have more resources, and therefore more financial opportunity, to support sending their child to a private school. One may also infer that parents who have less income would be more likely to leave private school at some point to attend public school.

Speaking to these financial resources, of the parents who left private school after sixth grade, one family reported household income to be less than \$50,000 (Mr. and Mrs. Bullock) while the remaining three families identified their annual income as no less than \$100,000. One family reported income between \$100,000-150,000 (Mr. and Mrs. Manning), one family reported income between \$150,000-200,000 (Mr. and Mrs. Adams) and the fourth family (Mr. and Mrs. Lester) reported income of over \$200,000 annually.

All parents who left private school after eighth grade identified their annual household income at no less than \$100,000. Two families (Mr. and Mrs. Smith, and Mr. and Mrs. Willis) reported income between \$100,000-150,000. A third family reported income to be between \$150,000-200,000 (Mr. and Mrs. Hill), while the fourth family to

leave private after eighth grade stated their income was over \$200,000 (Mr. and Mrs. Havens).

While research has historically supported families with less income sending their children to parochial school, and families with more income sending their children to private independent schools (Kraushaar, 1972; Schneider et al., 2000), this was not the case with this half of the study. The family who reported a household income of less than \$50,000 (Mr. and Mrs. Bullock) did send their child to parochial school, and so did a family (Mr. and Mrs. Lester) who reported a household income of over \$200,000. Likewise, parents who sent their children to private independent schools had reported incomes of \$100-150,000 (Mr. and Mrs. Willis and Mr. and Mrs. Manning) as well as over \$200,000 (Mr. and Mrs. Havens). Despite these findings, parents, with the exception of Mr. and Mrs. Bullock, had household income levels which were significantly higher than the median income found in New Jersey (\$82,255) in 2011 and the United States (\$50,054) in 2011 (U.S. Census, 2012).

All parents interviewed in this half of the study stated their household included two parents who were married to each other. The research literature supports two parent families being more likely to choose private school given the opportunity for more resources to remain with the family whether those resources are financial or personal, such as time, for example (Coleman & Hoffer, 1987; Schneider et al., 2000).

The racial backgrounds of the families in this portion of the study did support Coleman and Hoffer's research because most families were Caucasian (1987). Five and

one half of the eight groups of parents, totaling eleven people, were Caucasian, while one set of parents was African-American (Mr. and Mrs. Willis), and another set of parents (Mr. and Mrs. Bullock) was Hispanic. Mr. Manning was also of Spanish descent. Mr. and Mrs. Willis' daughter did not attend a parochial school nor did Mr. and Mrs. Manning's son. However, Mr. and Mrs. Bullock's son did attend a parochial school. Despite this, the sample did not support Coleman and Hoffer's claim as to the makeup of parochial schools being sizably African-American and Hispanic students (1987). Additionally, the sample did not support Goldring and Phillips (2008) and Yang and Kayaardi (2004) who claim that race bears no significant effect on parents choosing to attend a private school. This was evident in that the participant pool in this half of the study was comprised predominantly of Caucasian families.

Private to Public After 6 <sup>th</sup> Grade	<i>Household Income</i>	<i>Parents' Schooling</i>	<i>Parents' Highest Level of Education</i>	<i>Family Structure</i>	<i>Race</i>
<i>Bullock</i>	< \$50,000	Mrs.- Public Mr.- Public	Mrs.- B.A Mr.- H.S.D.	Intact: Married 2 Parent Home	Mrs.- Hispanic Mr.- Hispanic
<i>Manning</i>	\$100,000-150,000	Mrs.- Public Mr.- Public	Mrs.- M.A. Mr.- M.A.	Intact: Married 2 Parent Home	Mrs.- Caucasian Mr.- Hispanic
<i>Adams</i>	\$150,000-200,000	Mrs.-Private Mr.- Public	Mrs.- M.A. Mr.- M.A.	Intact: Married 2 Parent Home	Mrs.- Caucasian Mr.- Caucasian
<i>Lester</i>	➤ \$200,000	Mrs.- Public Mr.- Public	Mrs.- H.S.D. Mr.- B.A.	Intact: Married 2 Parent Home	Mrs.- Caucasian Mr.- Caucasian

Table 5: Overview of Parental Backgrounds- Private to Public after 6<sup>th</sup> Grade

Private to Public After 8 <sup>th</sup> Grade	<i>Household Income</i>	<i>Parents' Schooling</i>	<i>Parents' Highest Level of Education</i>	<i>Family Structure</i>	<i>Race</i>
<i>Hill</i>	\$150,000 – 200,000	Mrs.- Public Mr.- Private	Mrs.- M.A. Mr.- B.A.	Intact: Married 2 Parent Home	Mrs. Caucasian Mr.- Caucasian
<i>Willis</i>	\$100,000 – 150,000	Mrs.- Public Mr.- Public	Mrs.- B.A. Mr.- M.A.	Intact: Married 2 Parent Home	Mrs.- African-American Mr.- African-American
<i>Smith</i>	\$100,000 – 150,000	Mrs.- Public Mr.- Public	Mrs.- B.A. Mr.- B.A.	Intact: Married 2 Parent Home	Mrs.- Caucasian Mr.- Caucasian
<i>Havens</i>	➤ \$200,000	Mrs.- Public Mr.- Private	Mrs.- Ph.D. Mr.- M.A.	Intact: Married 2 Parent Home	Mrs.- Caucasian Mr.- Caucasian

Table 6: Overview of Parental Backgrounds- Private to Public after 8<sup>th</sup> Grade

As was the case in the first half of the study, parents are an important piece of the decision making process when choosing schools, whether that school is private or public. However, the children's perspectives themselves are just as important as the parents'. Although public schools will not turn students away based on admission standards as can be the case with private schools, the picture of who these students are may help to explain the decision to leave private school. By examining academic and social behaviors of students, one can begin to gain a more complete understanding as to why parents chose to attend public school despite initially opting to attend private school.

#### *The Choosers: Students*

Similar to the students in the first half of this study, these students needed to apply and gain admittance to the private school they attended before opting to enroll in the public schools in Laurel. The same presumption could exist whereby the likelihood

would be that these children are high-achievers who are well-behaved and make positive contributions to the overall school climate (Coleman et al., 1982; Gutmann, 1987; MacLachlan, 1970; Unger, 1993). However, the fact that they opted to leave private school reminds us that a standard must be held by students in private school, given the school's prerogative and right to deny students the continuance of studies. Getting in is one thing; staying in is another.

These eight students earned above average grades, for the most part, during their time in private school. Based on academic transcripts in each student's file, prior to their post- sixth grade departure most of the grades for each student were "A's" and "B's". With the exception of one "C" for Mrs. Bullock's son and one "C" from Mrs. Lester's daughter, the other thirty-seven final grades earned by these four students during their sixth grade year were "A's" and "B's" (22 "A's" and 15 "B's"). Mrs. Manning's son and Mrs. Adams' daughter both made honor roll for the year, with all "A's" and "B's" for the year.

Upon entering the public school in seventh grade, these students made average to excellent grades with final scores tallying anywhere from "A's" to "C's". In an effort to promote consistency among grades examined, only the seventh grade year in public school was used, as some students were currently in their seventh grade year at the time of this study. Only one of the students (Manning) made honor roll for the year by obtaining 4 "A's" and 4 "B's". The remaining three students scored a combined 6 "A's", 8 "B's", and 11 "C's". No grades of "D" or "F" were received by these students during their seventh grade year.



Students who left private school after eighth grade demonstrated strong academics in private school as well. In grades seven and eight, three of the four students (Smith, Havens, and Hill) all obtained nothing less than an “A” during this time. The fourth student (Willis) earned 2 A’s and 10 B’s during these two years in private school. None of the four students scored anything less a “B” over the preceding two years before leaving private school for public.

In an effort to ensure consistency among grades examined after eighth grade as well, only the ninth grade year was used as some students were currently in their ninth grade year at the time of this study. Upon entering high school, these four students continued with high marks for the most part; however, two of the four students did earn “C’s” for final grades. Mrs. Willis’ daughter earned 3 “C’s”, while Mrs. Smith’s son earned 1 “C” for the year. Aside from these “C’s”, both students earned all “A’s” and “B’s”, with Mrs. Willis’ daughter earning 4 “B’s” and two “A’s”. Mrs. Smith’s son scored 5 “A’s” and 2 “B’s” in the remainder of his classes during the ninth grade year. The remaining two students (Hill and Havens) obtained honor roll grades during the ninth grade year with nothing less than a “B”. Mrs. Hill’s son earned 9 “A’s” and 1 “B” for the year, while Mrs. Haven’s daughter earned 8 “A’s” and 2 “B’s” during the ninth grade year, as well.

While grades are an important measure of student performance, they can contain some element of subjectivity at both the middle and high school level, whether it is in public or private school. With this, it is important to add another form of assessment in order to gain a deeper understanding as to who these students are that opted to leave

private school for public after both sixth and eighth grades respectively. Standardized tests in the form of the New Jersey Assessment of Skills and Knowledge (NJASK) as well as the Northwest Evaluation Association's Measures of Academic Progress (MAP), are administered to seventh and ninth grade public school students in Laurel Township, respectively, in order to assess their skills and knowledge.

The NJASK and MAP tests are broken down into two areas of assessment: Language Arts and Mathematics. Scoring for the NJASK test is broken down into three categories: Advanced Proficient (250-300), Proficient (200-249) and Partial Proficiency (Less than 200) (NJ Department of Education, 2012). The MAP assessment is broken down to achievement levels at each grade level ( three scores per grade level above the median indicating high to higher achievement, as well as three scores per grade level below the median indicating low to lower achievement). Scores for the reading assessment (9<sup>th</sup> Grade) run from Higher Achievement- 241 to a median of 222 to Lower Achievement- 199. For the 9<sup>th</sup> grade mathematics assessment scores run from Higher Achievement- 258 to a median of 233 to Lower Achievement- 205 (Northwest Educational Association, 2012). Seven of the eight private schools these students attended previously did use a variety of standardized tests to assess student performance. These exams included the Terra Nova, ERB Comprehensive Testing Program 4 (CTP 4), and the Iowa Tests of Basic Skills (ITBS). Although these assessments were different, in all seven cases, student performance on standardized tests during the last year at private school was consistent with their public school performance on either the NJASK or the MAP assessment with regard to proficiency and achievement.

The four students who enrolled in public school after sixth grade each took the NJASK 7 test in language arts and mathematics during the seventh grade year. Language arts scores were considerably low, with two of the four students (Bullock and Lester) scoring Partial Proficiency at 170 and 178 respectively. The remaining two students (Adams and Manning) were both Proficient with scores of 223 and 205. In mathematics, all four students (Bullock, Adams, Manning, and Lester) scored Partial Proficiency.

Given that each of these four students was able to gain admittance to a particular private school at some point years earlier, these scores for students who left private after public are surprisingly low. While classroom grades were relatively high, the standardized test scores for most students did not reflect these earned grades. Neither class grades nor test scores individually provide the complete picture related to academic performance however some measure of consistency between the two could be expected. Students earning good grades from the private school would not give rise to any thought calling for a need to withdraw from school due to poor academics. Despite good grades, a connection between consistently low test scores and a decision by these parents to leave private school may exist.

Students who left private school after eighth grade performed very differently on the ninth grade MAP test. Scores, for these children, were relatively consistent with the distribution of their classroom grades. On the Language Arts/Reading assessment, all four students scored no less than the median of 222. In fact, all scores were above the median, with three of the four assessments (Hill, Smith, and Havens) being in the higher achievement range. In addition, two of these three students scored considerably higher

than the mark for higher achievement (241). Mrs. Hill's son and Mrs. Haven's daughter scored 253 and 256 respectively. Student scores on this assessment placed them in the following percentiles compared with students taking the MAP test across the country: Mrs. Willis' daughter scored 231, placing her in the 69<sup>th</sup> percentile. Mrs. Hill's son's score of 253 placed him in the 98<sup>th</sup> percentile and Mrs. Smith's son scored 241, placing him in the 87<sup>th</sup> percentile. Finally, Mrs. Haven's daughter's score of 256 placed her in the 98<sup>th</sup> percentile.

These same students performed in a similar manner on the mathematics assessment in ninth grade where one student fell below the median score of 233, while the remaining three scored in the high achievement range. As was the pattern with the reading assessment, two of these three students (Hill and Havens) scored higher than the mark for higher achievement (258). Mrs. Hill's son scored 268, while Mrs. Haven's daughter scored 267. Student scores on this assessment placed them in the following percentiles compared with students taking the MAP test across the country: Mrs. Willis' daughter scored 230, placing her in the 37<sup>th</sup> percentile. Mrs. Hill's son's score of 268 placed him in the 96<sup>th</sup> percentile while Mrs. Smith's son scored 255, placing him in the 84<sup>th</sup> percentile. Finally, Mrs. Haven's daughter's score of 267 placed her in the 95<sup>th</sup> percentile.

It is difficult to utilize grades and test scores effectively for these children in order to identify a type of student who would leave private school for public. Because they were initially accepted into private school, good grades and higher test scores could be presumed. However, the combination of leaving, along with lower academic

performance in some instances on standardized tests, could have something to do with academic needs not being met, despite what classroom grades were earned. These children may not have been performing to their potential in private school, as indicated by lower standardized test scores upon enrolling in public school, and therefore, private school was certainly not worth the financial investment for parents.

It is important to remember that this concept would not apply to almost half of these students, certainly those who left after eighth grade. Test scores and grades were very high, and it is evident that they were academically capable of being successful in the private school. The fact that students of varying academic strengths opted to leave private school speaks to the challenges in trying to identify a “type” of student who leaves private school for public. With all of this information, more still needs to be included in order to identify what type of student leaves private school for public. As was the case with students who left public for private, this study will now examine student behavior and discipline before moving on to extra-curricular involvement as well.

Discipline records from each student’s private school were not included in files sent to the public school upon enrolling there. With that, all findings related to student behavior/discipline were based on events that took place while attending the public school. In all cases, those leaving private after sixth grade and eighth grade, with the exception of one student who exited private after sixth grade (Adams), there were no disciplinary infractions in the files of any of these students. Mrs. Adam’s daughter, however, did have 14 detentions logged for the 2011-2012 school year for a variety of

low level offenses. These included lateness to school and class, cell phone violations, gum chewing, and improper use of a school computer.

The majority of students in this study who left private schools for public schools were heavily involved in extra-curricular activities, both in and out of school. Most documented activities, identified by parents, fell into three categories similar to students who left public school for private school. These categories included music, theater, and sports. Involvement in these activities took place at times during enrollment at both the private and public school. It is important to recognize that some private schools did not have as many offerings as the public schools, according to parents. In order to identify a type of student who would leave private for public, it was important to include all activities in both schools rather than limit the description of these students because a private school may not have offered these opportunities.

Mmes. Manning, Havens, Hill, Smith, Lester, and Willis all had children who were somehow involved with theater groups, both in and out of school. Five students (Manning, Havens, Hill, Smith, and Lester) were involved with a music program in and/or out of school, either as singers with the choir/madrigals or musicians (flute and guitar). In addition, more than half of these students were involved with athletic programs at some point, with Mrs. Willis' daughter playing basketball and tennis. The children of Mmes. Havens, Smith, Hill and Lester played lacrosse, soccer, golf, and softball respectively. These students also participated in a number of club activities at both levels of schooling such as the Chess Club, S.T.E.M. (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) Club, Debate Club, Chemistry Club, Student Council,

Junior Statesmen of America, and the Robotics Club. In addition to these, one student was highly involved with his church, serving as an altar boy and singing in the church choir. Two students (Havens and Hill) were also involved in the Girl and Boy Scouts of America, with Mrs. Hill's son recently earning his Eagle Scout Badge.

Participation in extra-curricular activities was consistent among students who left private school after sixth grade and eighth grade. Students were involved with a variety of activities in private and public school as well as the greater community itself. Areas of extra-curricular interest were very broad, which allowed children the opportunity to expand their horizons in an effort to become more well-rounded people and students. Despite inconsistencies in some cases between classroom grades and standardized test scores, students, for the most part, were relatively strong academically. They demonstrated an understanding of appropriate behavior with only low levels of behavioral infractions identified against one student. There was also a willingness to engage in a variety of extra-curricular experiences across music, theater, athletics, and a variety of club activities.

Private to Public After 6 <sup>th</sup> Grade	<i>Final Grades Gr. 7</i>	<i>NJASK Test Scores: Language Arts Gr.7</i>	<i>NJASK Test Scores: Mathematics Gr.7</i>	<i>Discipline Gr.7</i>	<i>Extra-Curricular Activities</i>
<i>Bullock</i>	A's, B's, C's	Partially Proficient	Partially Proficient	None	Multiple
<i>Manning</i>	A's, B's	Proficient	Partially Proficient	None	Multiple
<i>Adams</i>	A's, B's, C's	Proficient	Partially Proficient	Low Level, Substantial	Multiple
<i>Lester</i>	A's, B's, C's	Partially Proficient	Partially Proficient	None	Multiple

Table 7: Overview of Student Backgrounds-Private to Public after 6<sup>th</sup> Grade

Private to Public After 8 <sup>th</sup> Grade	<i>Final Grades Gr. 9</i>	<i>NWEA Test Scores: Language Arts Gr. 9</i>	<i>NWEA Test Scores: Mathematics Gr. 9</i>	<i>Discipline Gr. 9</i>	<i>Extra-Curricular Activities</i>
<i>Hill</i>	A's, B	High Achievement	High Achievement	None	Multiple
<i>Willis</i>	A's, B's, C's	Average Achievement	Average Achievement	None	Multiple
<i>Smith</i>	A's, B's, C	High Achievement	High Achievement	None	Multiple
<i>Havens</i>	A's, B's	High Achievement	High Achievement	None	Multiple

Table 8: Overview of Student Backgrounds-Private to Public after 8th Grade

Given that these children were previously private school students, it is not a surprise to observe all of these things. As was the case with students who, in the first half of the study, left public school for private school, these children have aligned themselves



with the Groton School's Academic Mission Statement whereby students are prepared for the:

active work of life by encouraging breadth of intellectual study...(where the) curriculum as a whole introduces students to a wide variety of courses in the belief that this broad exposure will challenge and engage interests and abilities that might otherwise lie dormant. (Cookson & Persell, 2010, p. 13)

While these children may fit the mold for being private school students, it is evident that not all well-focused, well-behaved, well-involved students attend private school, nor do they always stay in private school despite attending at one point.

*Decisions, Decisions... How Did We Get Here (and There to Begin With)?*

I thought, let's go somewhere small and look for a different approach, which is what [the private school offered] ...  
[But] I don't think [the private school] was able reach her and push her to the best of her potential. – Mrs. Willis

Initially, the parents in this half of the study, like our parents in the first half of the study, chose to attend private school for a reason. Despite the fact that they ultimately changed their mind, it is worthwhile to break down the reasons they opted to attend private school before looking at the reasons they chose to leave private school.

Given that research indicates the past experiences of parents have an impact on how they choose schools (Soares, 2010) for children, analysis should take place at both the macro and micro-level in order to determine the reasoning behind these decisions. Five of the eight parents in this portion of the study attended public school, yet initially chose private school for their children. Their own experiences had something to do with both of these decisions perhaps at the macro-level. While no parents whose education consisted of public schooling indicated they wanted something “more” or even “different” in terms of their child’s education, this initial decision spoke their desire to give something particular to their children. Whether it was something identified at the macro-level or the micro-level, the private school had an allure that fit parents’ needs initially.

Their choice to pursue a private education for their children speaks to the intention of offering them something different from what they had as children. In order to simply maintain what the parents or family currently had in terms of social capital, this initial move to private would have been unnecessary. However, this decision to pursue something different from what they had as children was an opportunity that hopefully, would offer a return in future years. As Sadovnik et al., found, the differences between public and private school can have a major effect on occupational, social, and lifestyle mobility (2006).

As was the case with the first group of parents who left public school, no macro-level reasons were discussed as to why they opted to attend private school in the first place. While it is difficult to ignore ideas related to social class and cultural capital when

making choice-related decisions (Cookson, 1994), the initial decision to leave public school, according to parents, had to do with a variety of micro-level reasons similar to parents in the first half of the study.

Five of the eight parents in this portion of the study attended public school in Laurel Township at the time they made the decision to leave public school for private. Their micro-level concerns were very consistent with parents who left Laurel schools after sixth and eighth grades in the in the first half of the study. Parents were concerned about class and school sizes as well as climate-related issues. “We left public school originally because the classes were so large. It was hard for her to focus, and for some reason the teachers weren’t able to reach her,” said Mrs. Willis. Mrs. Havens echoed these sentiments and the sentiments of several parents from the first half of the study by praising the early elementary school experience.

The [early] elementary school [in Laurel] was a wonderful experience. Teachers got to know the kids and they were [just] lovely. We looked at the move to fourth grade and thought ‘Oh my goodness, she is going to be in this big, giant school.

As research indicates, private schools tend to be smaller schools with smaller class sizes. With this comes the ability to establish and develop relationships with students. These personal connections related to attention afforded to students are foundational pieces of a private school education (Powell, 1996; Toch, 2003).

Parents also had concerns with regard to the upper elementary and middle school climate, paying particular attention to bomb threats that were taking place over a few years at both schools. “My daughter was in kindergarten at the time when all of the bomb threats were happening. It seemed to be a little crazy, so I went and pulled her [from public school] and put her in private,” said Mrs. Lester.

Although no parents voiced concerns related to the quality of academics found in the public elementary schools, they did note the idea of programming and values provided that could be found in private school. This initial move to private for these parents was more about “fit” as it related to programming and pedagogical themes. Parents had concerns about teachers’ ability to reach their child and their child’s ability to grow and develop. “The private school [was centered on] creativity; it’s very artful with lots of hands on, interactive opportunities. I really thought it would be a good fit for her at the time,” said Mrs. Willis.

Not all parents whose child attended a parochial school, noted religion and religious instruction as important; however, some did. Of those who did, this was especially important given the children were of such a young age at that time of enrollment. “We wanted to provide a solid religious foundation for our kids when they were younger. It was important and it served them well,” according to Mrs. Smith.

These parents all had particular reasons for pursuing private school in the first place. Although not every child attended Laurel public schools before leaving for private, certain themes supported by research, particularly class and school sizes as well as

climate, were evident in the decision making process here as well. As much as the reasoning behind the initial move to private school by these parents was, in some way, supported by the research literature similarly to the first half of the study, these parents' role in the study centers on their decision to leave the private school and enroll in public school. It is critical to unpack the how and why parents opted to reverse the initial decision to leave public school for private. In doing this, it is important to begin by analyzing the decision itself, who and what played a role in the decision. The private school experience itself needs to be analyzed: the positive points and the negative points. In addition, it is important to look at the transition to public school as well as the experience there: how it relates to their previous experience in private school and whether or not it was the right decision for families.

### *The Decision Itself*

All four families who left private school after sixth grade identified financial issues as having played a part in the actual decision. Because it was not always a case of families being unable to afford the tuition, the theme often centered on the value parents were getting for the money. Was it worth ten or twenty thousand dollars to send their child to the private school? "Different times call for different venues," said Mrs. Adams. While the private school may have been the right choice for parents while their children were very young, now it simply was not worth the cost.

Developmentally, private school fit my daughter when she  
was younger, but now we are looking for a greater sense of

social exposure for her. The private school, given how small it was, couldn't give this to her and it just wasn't worth the money, said Mrs. Adams.

In other cases it was simply about the ability to afford tuition. As tuition prices continued to rise in some areas, it became too much for families to balance, especially those with multiple children who may have been attending or who would have planned to attend private school at some point.

[We] wouldn't have been able to send her [to the private high school in a few years]. We probably could have swung the tuition with one child, but we couldn't swing two. They are only a year apart. If the private school did not cost anything, I would have continued to send her there, said Mrs. Lester.

While tuition played a critical part in this decision for children who left private school after sixth grade, in some way this theme was often combined with something else. Examples included the need for parents to now pay for student involvement in sports or provide their own transportation. Climate-related issues such as bullying also made the value of sending a child to private school much less, especially when combined with the fact that families were paying tuition. Mrs. Manning noted, "We are not going to pay \$21,000 to be bullied. He could go to the public school and get bullied for free."

The cost of tuition was also a theme for parents who left private school after eighth grade; however with three of the four families, a decision needed to be made one way or the other, given the private school they attended did not include a high school component. While private high schools to which each of these three K-8 schools traditionally fed existed, the decision to leave private school as a whole presented itself as a “clean and easy break.” With these parents, the “choice discussion” as to the next school to attend had to, in some way, take place, whether it was private or public. In the end, the value was not there for these parents either. According to Mrs. Havens,

It would have cost us up to a quarter of a million dollars to send our kids to private high school. It was hard to justify unless there was some real driving force. We told the kids ‘You know it’s private high school or college. You pick one.’

Research indicates that there is value in attending private school, especially at the macro-level (Cookson & Persell, 1985). By entering social groups present in many private schools, students have the opportunity to become part of higher status circles that can link them to upper class membership. In the long run, the willingness to invest in a private education is likely to provide a substantial return for children (Cookson & Persell, 2010).

Yet, despite what research says about the value of private school education, these parents did not find that value at either the macro-level or the micro-level and were

willing to pursue education in the public school after sixth and eighth grade. As far as the decision to attend Laurel schools, it is important to understand the child's role in all of this: to what extent and in what manner they were involved in the decision making process.

In all but one case, students either initiated the discussion or were significantly involved in the decision to attend the public school. With most families, this move to public was going to happen due to parental perspectives related to finance and tuition issues; however, parents were pleased that their children were in agreement. Of the children who left after sixth grade, one child (Lester) initiated the conversation with her mother. A second (Adams) recognized it was a good move from a social perspective and the third child (Manning) did not want to return to the private school due to bullying. The fourth child (Bullock) wanted to stay in private due to relationships with his friends in that school.

With these children, themes related to social exposure and the desire to be with a larger circle of children were evident during interviews with parents. Mrs. Lester's and Mrs. Adam's daughters were satisfied with the move given how small their private schools were combined with their desire to expand on social relationships with other children. "She actually asked to go to the public school," said Mrs. Lester. While private schools are known for their small size and therefore their ability to personalize education for children, the question for Mrs. Adams was "How small is too small?" and "Would a larger school with more exposure to different types of children help her daughter to grow at this point in her education?" Her answer was "Yes, it would."



Those students who left private school after eighth grade played an even larger part in the decision to leave private compared to those leaving after sixth grade. Some conversation was going to take place for most families since their journey in the K-8 private school was coming to an end. Whether it was private school or public school some choice about the next level had to be made. Although their experiences in the private schools were different, the children in all four families were willing to attend public high school for a variety of reasons.

These reasons, according to parents and children, included such things as a lack of “fit” by their child in private school, social expansion, exposure to different students, as well as a poor behavioral climate in the private school with regard to bullying. Additionally parents noted a lack of flexibility based on values and expectations in the private school as contributing to their decision. Convenience also played a small, but noticeable part in the decision to leave private school after the eighth grade break in schooling.

The concept of “fit” was found in three (Mmes. Hill, Willis, and Havens) of the four interviews where parents felt their child did not fit or would not have fit at the high school level within the structure of private schools. In two (Mmes. Hill and Havens) of these three interviews, the families had to make a decision about the following year, given the K-8 school did not offer a high school experience. Fit was connected, not only to student interactions in school, whether they were social or academic, but also to the idea of values and expectations set down by the school. According to Mrs. Willis,

It seemed very clear that if you didn't fit into or subscribe to that perspective, then there is really no place for you there. If you can feel an alignment or a connection with their approach, then that is great. If not, there [are schools] elsewhere.

Mrs. Havens added, "They have really specific expectations for kids' behavior and if you don't fit into that...there's the door. Private high school would not have been a good fit for my kids."

During all four interviews with these parents whose children exited after eighth grade, social exposure was a dominant theme. Each of the four families stressed how the small size of the school became very confining, and it was important for their child to, certainly at this age, to expand socially.

She likes to connect with people and be social. Going to public was the reasonable step for her. We thought, if she goes to another private school, it will probably be another very small situation, noted Mrs. Willis.

It was important to not only make new friends and meet new people, but to be a part of an environment that was more connected to the "real world." Emphasis was placed on finding the ability to interact with students of different backgrounds, ethnicities, and cultures. Parents did not feel their experiences in private school were

adequately preparing their children to deal with other people (teachers and students) who were much different from them.

[We] wanted more diversity. You have to get used to a lot of things in the world and when you 're in a private school, you tend to forget that [in some ways] everyone here operates one way, but on the outside the world operates another way, said Mrs. Smith.

Although bullying was not a major reason why parents left private schools after eighth grade, it was noted by parents in several instances (Stoudt, Kuriloff, Reichert, & Ravtich, 2010). Issues related to bullying were often mentioned in conjunction with the lack of size in the private school. When students had issues with students, there was limited opportunity to avoid or remove themselves from these types of situations, given the small environment. This sense of isolation allowed climate-related problems to exist and fester over time. It was not always a case of these things happening to their child, but having knowledge that this behavior was taking place between other students in class.

He may have been on the receiving end of some bullying. We heard a lot of little things and thought 'How could these things be happening in such a small school. They should have had a handle on those issues,' said Mrs. Smith.

Aside from the larger climate and exposure-related themes, parents also spoke to the convenience factor when discussing their decision to enroll in public school. As

geography is likely to help shape parents' decisions in terms of proximity and logistical convenience (Archibald, 1996; Bell, 2007) when choosing private schools, it may also be a factor when leaving private school to attend public. Parents spoke to the notion of having peers and friends who lived on their street or in their neighborhood. While these children may have already been friends with their child, the idea of seeing them at school each day and riding the bus with them only lent to the development of stronger friendships with these children. In one case, a family lived very close to the public school; however, they would have had to travel up to an hour to find a private high school that supported particular religious values. "None of the private [religious] schools for us are nearby. We didn't plan on making it an hour commute for him," said Mrs. Smith.

Although private schools did provide transportation for children in most circumstances, this was not the case for Mr. and Mrs. Bullock, who upon moving to Laurel, were no longer able to receive transportation services to their chosen private school. This, when combined with rising tuition fees, was enough for them to leave the private school and enroll in the public school. Aside from Mr. and Mrs. Bullock, transportation was not a factor in the decision to leave, and many parents liked the idea of going to school in the town to which they lived. It was not so much an issue of physical proximity to school, rather involvement and connections as a form of convenience between the school and their place in the community as residents. Parents often cited a disconnect from students who did not attend private school in local neighborhoods as well as the challenges that existed when coordinating time for friendships with private school students who did not necessarily live in Laurel.

Parents also noted their child's role in the decision to leave private school. In most cases students at both the sixth grade and eighth grade level had a role and a willingness to leave private school. Seven of the eight children (Hill, Willis, Manning, Smith, Havens, Adams, and Lester), according to parents, recognized a need to expand socially, wanting to develop more relationships with a greater number of students as well as get involved with more extra-curricular activities. Mr. and Mrs. Bullock's son, however, did not wish to leave private school because he would miss his friends.

Commonly found in discussions with parents whose children exited after eighth grade, was the willingness on the parents' part to pursue private school if the child showed an interest. Mrs. Havens spoke to the time when many students in her son's eighth grade class were gaining acceptance into a variety of private high schools. "It was similar to applying college. When kids would share where they planned on going, my son would say, 'I was accepted early decision to Laurel.'" She further noted how students would look quizzically after he made this statement, "'You mean Lakeville, right?' 'No,' he said, 'Laurel.' He just never showed the interest at that point."

Regardless of the reason why families opted not to attend another private school, some parents' decisions to attend public school had to do specifically with Laurel schools themselves. In one case, Mr. and Mrs. Willis opted to relocate to another town at the same time they withdrew from the private school. They, along with their daughter, conducted visitations to public schools as part of the decision pertaining to where they would live. Collectively, they decided, in a similar manner to choosing a private school, what public school she would attend and therefore the town to which the family would

live. In the end, Laurel offered them what they were looking for in terms of social exposure, academic, and extra-curricular opportunities. Mrs. Manning noted, “If we lived in another town, like Hilton or Enfield, where we weren’t happy with their public schools, we would have moved to a different town.

Just as was the case for families in deciding to attend private school, a significant amount of thought seems to have gone into the decision to leave private school and attend public. While there is no doubt, according to parents, that private schools do offer a number of positive things related to education for students, in each of these cases, for some reason or another, the private school experience did not fit their child’s needs. Although a variety of reasons why parents opted to leave private schools has been illustrated, it is important to break down the positives and negatives of the actual private school experience in order to gain a much deeper understanding as it ultimately connects to the decision to leave.

### *The Good, the Bad, and the Alternative to the Alternative*

As these parents ultimately found a reason important enough to leave private school after either sixth or eighth grade, their experience at the private school did have a number of positive elements. In fact, if private school did not cost families a significant amount of money in the form of tuition, several would have opted to continue on in a private school setting. As noted, in several instances it became an issue of whether or not the tuition was worth what parents and students were receiving in terms of educational services, not whether those services were good or bad. At some point, however, the

negative factors outweighed the positive, and families opted to remove their children.

Prior to examining these negative factors that somehow supported the decision to leave, it

is worthwhile to examine the positive factors involved in the private school experience.

This examination allows for a greater understanding of just how influential the negative factors really were given the end result of disenrollment from private school.

### The Good

High expectations pay off when consistently applied to students by adults who know them. -Powell (1996, p. 198)

Parental experiences supported the research literature, to different degrees, when discussing the positive elements of their private school experience. The most significant form of praise parents gave to their child's private school centered on personalization. Small class size was consistently noted by parents, and with small class size, came the concept of personal attention in class. Parents mentioned class sizes of ten to fifteen students at both the elementary and middle school levels. In addition to a high level of personal attention for students, parents themselves felt a certain level of attention from the school that was appreciated. This translated into effective forms of communication between the school and the family. "You could talk to the teacher right there at the end of the day. You can call her and talk directly to her right then...and if not, she would call you right back," said Mrs. Manning. It also helped parents to stay connected to what was going on in class with their child. Parents felt very much "in the loop."

This high level of personal attention lent itself to a stronger academic experience as well. Mrs. Manning added, “He had one-to-one attention there...and an A in mathematics. Because the class was so small [the teacher] could help him right there [in class].” All four parents who left private school after sixth grade also commented positively on the academic rigor present in the private school setting.

Academics and student achievement are the major components of any school’s or school district’s mission. As important as academics are to all educational institutions, private schools are able to emphasize a greater academic priority within their curricula (Cookson, 1996). The stress on academics in private schools reflects the ideological consensus and dominant values that do exist as part of the orientation in these schools (Coleman & Hoffer, 1987).

Historically, some private schools have claimed to represent the best of society whereby the “only reliable antidote to mental flabbiness was a rigorous, regular regime of mental calisthenics” (Cookson & Persell, 1985, p. 73). Private schools have been able to focus more on academics than public schools, and in doing so, place an emphasis on viewing these academics as a challenge rather than something with which simply needs to get done (Cookson & Persell, 1985). Whether a family’s goals are at the macro-level related to culture and status or the micro-level related to curriculum and instruction, the private school curriculum, certainly the elite private school curriculum, promotes a sense of intellectual challenge and competition (Cookson & Persell, 1985; Cookson & Persell, 2010). With this, it is not a surprise that parents, even those who opted to leave private



school, would recognize and speak positively to the academic setting which existed in their child's school.

Although many parents in this half of the study positively identified academic rigor, at least at the elementary level, in private school, the focus again, was on the concept of support and personalization. As found in the research literature, the focal point of private schooling "has always been individual attention... [and] is the centerpiece of the schools' claim to educational distinctiveness...(Powell, 1996, p. 203). This sense of attention is also connected to academics and plays into parents supporting such academic programs in their child's previous school. Simply put, more attention from teachers means more opportunities for growth and achievement (Coleman et al., 1982; Toch, 2003). "High expectations pay off when consistently applied to students by adults who know them" (Powell, 1996, p. 198).

With these views of support for private schools, Mrs. Havens offered a straightforward and profound comment related to this theme of "value" as identified by parents, "[This concept of] relationships is what they do at private school. You pay all of this tuition for a more personalized experience...and that is what you get. And that is what you should get." With the indication that things should be better in private school because parents pay tuition for their children to attend, it is understandable how parents can become frustrated or unhappy with the experience when things are not better. When services are not better than or only comparable with public school, parents become dissatisfied and begin to lose their commitment to this type of education.

### The Bad

Why pay money to go to private school when you can get bullied at the public school for free? – Mrs. Manning

While parents exiting after both sixth and eighth grade did support the private school efforts in particular areas, and likewise supported, to an extent, existing research about private schools, there were a number of areas with which they were unhappy. Again, levels of unhappiness had much to do with their levels of expectations, from a value standpoint given this was a private school to which they paid a significant amount of tuition each year.

Parents at both exit points focused their dissatisfaction with the private school experience largely on themes related to the social climate. Several incidents involving bullying were considered a priority for some parents and were also noted as *the* reason one family (Mr. and Mrs. Manning) opted to leave. Other parents cited student and even parent cliques related to the idea of private school “fit.” Several parents also identified the small size of private schools as being a negative factor in their child’s experience at private school. Given that research indicates overwhelmingly how the small class size and personal attention found in private schools are cornerstones of their approach, these comments, indeed, are very interesting.

Multiple parents considered bullying a concern for their child. This was a major issue for one parent who left after sixth grade (Mrs. Manning), and although it was not the reason others (Mmes. Hill, Smith, and Havens) left private school, it was important

enough to be part of discussions during interviews. Given the size and nature of private school, where administrators had more discretion, in parents' opinion, related to retaining and dismissing students, they were surprised this was such an issue. "There was a group of kids who really weren't nice to him, not accepting. If you didn't have or meet the standard with them, then you were in trouble," said Mrs. Hill. Mrs. Manning added "[My son] was terribly bullied at the private school. We tried very hard to deal with the situation and he did too. My son asked the bully 'Why can't we just be friends' and the kid said, 'You'll never be a friend. I just hate you.'"

Bullying is not something that is limited to public schools. It is, however, an important way in which hegemonic masculinity is often established in both public and private schools (Gabarino & de Lara, 2003). Parents in the study may have been surprised that this takes place in private school given, for one thing, the selectivity in admissions. However, in reality, they should not be surprised. As noted earlier in this chapter, bullying does exist in private schools (Stoudt, et al., 2010). These schools are no exception to established "pecking orders" among students, and it is here that they "learn the real lessons of power and privilege from their peers," (Cookson & Persell, 1985). Private school bullying is often linked to intellectualism which helps to legitimize it as a normal part of social interaction in private school circles (Stoudt et al., 2010).

These social challenges were not limited to students, however. Parents noted they themselves did not always feel comfortable in social settings with other parents in private school. It seemed, according to parents that other parents "knew too much" about them; "Everyone knows everything about everyone's business." Parents indicated how they felt

the intimacy of private schools could be confining for them as well as their children. This confinement represented the alternative side of a personalized private school experience, where that sense of personalization, becomes too much, and students, faculty, and parents are too involved and too aware of the personal details of everyone else's lives. Along with this notion of parents being too involved in each other's lives, the idea of "keeping up" with other parents and families in the private school based on social class and cultural capital was also noted. Mrs. Havens concluded that while not all private schools are like this, she felt,

There was a whole status and snobbiness thing that came along with private school that was a real turn-off. We weren't interested in having our kids be in an environment where they were being taught to think of themselves as some kind of elite [group].

Given how small the private schools were, several parents stated their children also felt a sense of isolation regarding the limitations on the social and educational environments there. With such small numbers of children in one's peer group at school, difficulties emerged if a student did not get along with, or could not find connections with, other students in class. With this, parents voiced concerns about having a positive social network at school. "Small classes and schools do have their problems," said Mrs. Hill. "If you don't get along with those kids, you are just stuck for years with them." Mrs. Havens added, "If you don't find your groups in a small school, then, what are you left with? It can be very isolating. In a bigger school, there's somebody for everybody."

Concerns about schools environments which were too small were not confined to limitations found in a social context with other students. Parents also voiced concern regarding the challenges that come with less numbers of teachers who work with students. With fewer teachers, students are confined to particular styles and methods of teaching. While parents who exited after sixth and eighth grade enjoyed the potential for continuity with teachers with whom their children worked well, they felt a lack of options to deal with teachers with whom their children did not work well. If, for some reason, a student has difficulty developing a rapport with, or adjusting to a pedagogical style of delivery, he or she could be “out of luck.” Parents also felt that limited exposure to teaching styles failed to build adaptability, and in the long run, could create an unnecessary challenge toward being successful in and beyond college.

Despite initially choosing to attend private schools over public schools, each of these eight families opted to return or enroll for the first time in public school. While there were certainly a number of positive experiences for these students, many of which aligned with the research literature, the value for parents was not there. The prominent theme of *value* was largely supported by parental disappointments related to sub-theme elements such as bullying, cliques, isolation, and exposure in the private school. With these negatives focusing primarily on climate and social related themes, it is evident that, for these students, at this point in their scholastic careers, their social-emotional needs, to some degree, were not being met by the private school. Keep in mind, however, several parents noted that if the private school did not charge tuition, they would have opted to stay.

At this point, the public school experience itself needs to be examined. It is now known, why parents chose private school and why they left private school. The focus now is on the experience after the decision to leave the private school which they initially chose. The situation, in this case, is very interesting because of their earlier decision to attend the private school, over public school, in the first place.

#### The Alternative (to the Alternative): Life After Private School

My husband and I are thrilled our kids are here [in public school]. – Mrs. Havens

During interviews with parents, a substantial amount of time was spent discussing the circumstances which led to the decision to leave private school, as well as their experiences that took place while there. In addition, parents were willing to share their experiences in public school since enrolling. In most cases, parents and children were happy with the experience in public school; however, parents did voice concerns particular to areas such as academic rigor and climate, particularly at the middle school. Parents recognized the balance between the positive and negative things they experienced in private school and how these differences would play out in a public school setting. With this, there was a combination of positive and negative experiences at the public school as well. Themes such as academics, personalization, school climate, and social exposure were prominent in the discussion related to the public school experience and how it compared to that of private school.

All four parents whose children left private school after eighth grade were satisfied with social exposure and a sense of choice in terms of academic courses and

extra-curricular activities that were available in the public school. Students were broadening their horizons, meeting new students and were involved in a number of activities, many of which were new and at a more expansive level. Examples of these activities were discussed mainly by parents who left after eighth, whose children were now in high school. They included sports teams, the band, theater group, debate team, and chemistry club, for example. A number of these parents were dissatisfied with the theme of social exposure at the private school while the opportunities that existed at the public high school level proved to be a major positive for parents and students. “[My husband and I] are thrilled that our kids are here. They come home and talk about other kids whose life experiences are so different from theirs. [Public school] has been great for my kids,” said Mrs. Havens.

Two (Mrs. Adams and Mrs. Lester) of the four parents at the middle school who left private school after sixth grade were also pleased with the social exposure their child was now finding in public school. This satisfaction was not based particularly on academic course opportunities or the number of extra-curricular activities as found at the high school level. It was, however, based on the idea that their children were able to be part of the “real world,” helping to prepare them appropriately for being social members of the greater society.

There are more kids in the middle school than there are in the entire private school [where she came from] and I think she likes that. There are different kinds of kids here and she [found this to be] amazing upon entering the school.

She likes the differences amongst the kids [she spends time with at school], said Mrs. Lester.

No parents in the study, who left private school after either sixth or eighth grade viewed social exposure and exposure to a variety of children from different backgrounds as a negative. There were, however, a number of concerns in areas related to school climate and personalization as well as academic rigor amongst parents who left private school after sixth grade. No parents who left private school after eighth grade voiced these concerns as to their experience in the public high school. Concerns related to school climate and personalization, were identified by three of the four parents interviewed (Mmes. Manning, Adams, and Lester). Issues related to bullying, teasing, and, that other students made fun of her son, still existed for Mrs. Manning. This was the main reason she and her husband removed their son from the private school to begin with, and these concerns still existed in the public school. In addition, Mrs. Manning also noted concerns related to personal attention in the classroom. In this case, her son needed to pursue extra help after class because his teacher was unable to give him enough time and attention to grasp concepts due to the number of students and discipline-related off task behavior that needed attention during lessons.

Mrs. Adams also recognized issues related to personal attention in the public school when compared to the private school experience. However, she acknowledged this was a negative in attending public school versus private. It simply “was what it was” given the heterogeneity and open-door “policy” of public schools and their commitment to any and all students who were residents in Laurel. Mrs. Lester echoed Mrs. Adam’s



statements regarding a lack of personalization in the public school, stating she felt her daughter was “more of a number here.” While she did not appreciate this lack of personalization, she had accepted this as a fact of going to public school.

It is a bit different than the private school. When you go into [the public school main office], the staff acts like ‘Hmmm, no I don’t remember you.’ I don’t like that it is less personal, but there’s nothing you can do about that.

The school is just a lot bigger, said Mrs. Lester.

Concerns related to academic rigor were noted by two parents who left private school after sixth grade. Mrs. Manning and Mrs. Adams both commented as to these concerns and noted the connection between academics and school climate in the form of discipline and class size/attention that played a part in their concerns related to the academic environment. While these concerns were not considered an immediate priority for Mrs. Adams, she did recognize the differences between the private and public school environments. Mrs. Manning did, however, consider these concerns to be very significant as they pertained to her son’s education.

Despite concerns related to the school climate and personalization, as well as academics, by parents whose children left private school after sixth grade, several parents, whose children left private school after eighth grade, were satisfied with what the public school had to offer their children in these areas. Academically speaking, three (Mmes. Hill, Smith, and Havens) out of the four parents felt the scholastic climate at

Laurel High School was comparable to the private school in most subjects. “My son is challenged in Laurel, challenged at a good level. I feel like he is really learning and growing now,” said Mrs. Hill. The only negative pointed out by these parents had to do with a lack of rigor in the foreign language program at Laurel High School. Mrs. Havens was quick to point out that she felt the foreign language program in private was very good. “Then again when you have ten kids in class, it is a lot easier to hold conversations in the target language.” This point lends itself to the connection between class size and the ability of any school, public or private, to provide a strong academic program.

All things considered, according to these four parents, the size of Laurel High School was an appropriate balance of “not too small, but small enough” as far as high schools go. Parents indicated class sizes ranged, depending on the course, from high teens to mid-to-high twenties. In many cases parents believed that these numbers were acceptable, allowing students to develop a sense of adaptability as well as self-advocacy.

I can’t say that I would want her in a [private school]  
 setting where everything just unfolds in front of her,  
 teachers catering and pampering her. I’m not sure that  
 would be good for my daughter at all, said Mrs. Willis.

In addition to an appropriate balance related to school and class size, a common theme among these four parents involved counselor support. Two (Mrs. Hill and Mrs. Willis) of the four parents noted specifically how satisfied they were with the levels of support offered by their public school guidance counselors. They were identified as

warm and welcoming as well as accommodating; taking phone calls and walk-in visitations at the school on a moment's notice, as late as 6:00 pm. This sense of support allowed, not only the children to feel good about the decision to leave private school and attend Laurel High, but their parents as well. Mrs. Willis commented,

When we met him, he talked to us for an hour and at no time did he get impatient, looking at his watch like, 'Okay, this is a public school, what you get is what you get.' I had to remind myself that this wasn't a private school. The investment he gave us was really impressive, [so much so that] it could have been a private school.

As parents opted to leave private school for public, there was a variety of discussion points that came along with this decision by each parent. Unlike parents who opted to leave public and stay in private as found with the first half of the study, there was a level of apprehension by some parents, at the middle school level, about attending public school. Parents recognized that, although there were areas of uncertainty and concern within the private school, the value factor took precedence according to parents in the decision to leave. The question of whether or not tuition was affordable, in most cases, was not the issue. The primary issue was, however, whether or not the tuition was worth the price for the experience children were receiving.

With these findings of parents whose children left public school for private and parents whose children who left private school for public, after sixth and eighth grade, the

analysis of such findings will allow for an in-depth examination and cross examination of a variety of themes. Not only will the critical analysis of the decisions to leave respective schools take place, but also an analysis of the parents and children themselves be presented. While there were noticeable differences between parents' decisions to leave public school after sixth and eighth grade, reasons for leaving private school were more consistent between parents at both exit points. Parents and students themselves, in terms of backgrounds, found notable differences and similarities when compared to each other and to research literature. It is within this analysis that research questions will be answered and contributions will be identified, described, and ultimately made to research.

## CHAPTER VI

### DISCUSSION

This qualitative study described the reasons why parents would opt to remove their children from public school in order to send them to private school; as well as describe the reasons why parents would opt to remove their children from private school and send them to public school. As direct as these two questions may be, their answers are often quite complex (Cookson, 1994), and to varying degrees, very different from one another. Parents were interviewed after exiting either public or private school at two different points, after sixth grade or after eighth grade.

Private schools offer parents the opportunity to pursue an alternative to what local public schools can offer (Coleman & Hoffer, 1987). This is what allows them to continue to operate. If they offered nothing different from public schools, the likelihood that they would remain open seems very small. It is, however, this sense of choice that exists which gives parents the opportunity to educate their children in a manner that aligns itself to their own values and ideologies (Schneider et al., 2000).

Despite the fact that most parents are satisfied with their choice to attend private schools (Bosetti, 2004; National Center for Education Statistics, 2005) parents may decide to leave private school to attend public school. There could be any number of reasons why a parent would choose to attend public school instead. Ultimately, it may come down to what parents' value and what they feel best fits the needs of their child (Kraushaar, 1972).

The optimal educational system is one that successfully promotes the development of good citizens and good workers, while providing the opportunity for mobility and social opportunity (Labaree, 1997). It is a challenging task, to develop and prepare students to successfully enter the world as young adults. At the same time, it is reasonable to believe that without an effective balance among all three goals being struck, to find satisfaction in what any school has to offer, parents would likely seek out alternative options to public or private education.

Educational goals exist as a foundation upon which everything else in schools can be built. Whether or not the foundation of education in any community, i.e. its goals, is built well, is often a matter of parental perception; however, it is exactly these perceptions that open the door to parents, in many cases, making decisions as to where they want to send their child to school. This notion asks us to consider what people truly value in their schools; what they want from these schools, what are they willing to concede in order to get what they want, and ultimately, what they believe is in the best interests of their particular child. Subsequently, it is essential to revisit the guiding questions in order to examine and analyze these concepts.

### *Revisiting Research Questions*

Research Question #1: Why do parents remove their children from Laurel Public Schools in order to attend private schools?

Research Question #2: On what do parents base their decisions to leave public school for private school?

Parents who left public school after both sixth grade and eighth grade had a number of reasons that spoke to why they left public school when they did. These reasons were particular to the needs of these children and the specific values that parents were looking for in a school (Hirschhoff, 1986; Kraushaar, 1972; Schneider et al., 2000). While those needs and values may have been met in the public schools at different levels of schooling, there ultimately came a time when these needs and values were not being met. Parents leaving after sixth grade cited a number of issues developing toward the late elementary years into the early middle school years. While parental backgrounds varied to a certain extent across a number of factors (parents' education, parents' schooling, household income), none of them played a profound role in the decision made to leave public school after sixth or eighth grade. Parents focused on a variety of micro-level reasons that affected students at these grade levels in terms of their primary needs. Parents whose children exited public school after sixth grade voiced concerns that were heavily based upon primary needs related to the social climate of the upper elementary school (Maslow, 1954).

At this level, students became exposed to elements of bullying and bomb threats, both of which, began to affect students' social-emotional needs as they grew closer to pre-teen years. School became a scary place, if not for the students themselves, then certainly for parents of these children. Not knowing what was going to happen to their children was a major concern for parents each day during these years.

Concerns related to the social climate of the upper elementary school also affected parental perceptions related to the academic climate. While elements of bullying were

beginning to take place and safety-related issues, which had students evacuating the building on weekly and even daily bases, the academic program was suffering, with parents identifying “cracks in the [academic] foundation.”

Added to what parents who left after sixth grade were experiencing themselves at the upper elementary school, the decision to leave public school was also affected by their own perceptions related to what would happen to their child once they began to attend the public middle school. Parents believed there were multiple issues surrounding the climate of the middle school. These issues included the following: Teachers who could not teach and challenge students effectively because of other students in class who were poorly behaved; incidents of bullying, as well as documented bomb threat evacuations at the school. Parents were also afraid of their child getting “lost” at the middle school where no one would “look out” for them. Although parents were aware the middle school had a smaller number of students attending than the upper elementary school, they were still concerned with a lack of connections being made between adults and children, fearing less support would equal less growth. This was of particular concern according to parents, given middle school students, as early adolescents, would need a strong sense of support, direction and validation by teachers (Maslow, 1954). As parents were already seeing a downward trend in the upper elementary school, they believed the experience was only going to get worse at the middle school.

The decision to leave public school at this time was made as a form of “preventative maintenance” where parents recognized a number of social-emotional concerns that were identified due to a deteriorating social environment. This slippage



was beginning to cause a similar deterioration of the academic environment and the move became somewhat of a “preemptive strike” against the public education system.

Although, these parents never actually experienced the middle school with their children attending in seventh or eighth grade, their presumptions and perceptions of this school had a great deal of influence on their willingness to pursue other options.

Parents whose children left public school for private after sixth grade did so due to the beginnings of what they felt was a downward trend in services as well as the beliefs that things were only going to get worse at the middle school. Parents who left public school after eighth grade, however, were willing to attend the middle school and experience it firsthand, rather than presume one thing or another regarding the quality of services delivered to children in this school. These parents “lived” the middle school experience, and in doing so, had slightly different reasons for leaving than parents who exited after sixth grade. This was not only because they actually attended the middle school and could truly comment on the things the previous group of parents presumed or “heard about,” but because the children were now a few years older with parents holding a different set of expectations related to programming at school.

While there was still a great deal of emphasis by parents on social climate concerns related to bullying, discipline, and behavior, the emphasis on academics and quality of instruction became a primary focal point for parents. Although parents who exited after sixth grade did raise concerns about the quality of academics, it was still secondary to the social climate for those parents. Parents who exited public school after eighth grade now had a different focus related to their child’s education.

This focus centered on teachers not challenging or connecting with these children as well as not pushing students to their potential. Parents were dissatisfied, as they believed that teachers were willing to accept mediocre effort from children. The heterogeneous makeup of the school and classes, academically speaking, was taking away from their child's growth. Teachers were teaching to the middle, placing more emphasis on supporting low-achieving students rather than challenging bright students. Although the concept of differentiation of instruction and personalization was consistently preached by building administration, it never translated, in parents' eyes, into actual classroom practice.

While parents who left after sixth grade were concerned with things "getting worse," parents who left after eighth grade acknowledged that things actually had "gotten worse." As the academic climate was far from acceptable for these parents, the social climate was also a problem for them and their children. Bullying, bomb threat evacuations on a daily basis for a period of time, as well as a school lockdown related to a fist fight and fleeing student, were examples of what parents were unhappy with at the middle school. Parents were also dissatisfied with small scale elements of general classroom management as well. "Chaos," according to parents, was not relegated to staff members chasing a student down the hall after a fight broke out. It included other students simply not being engaged in class, holding sidebar conversations, using foul language, and demonstrating a general lack of academic purpose at school. Parents did not believe the teachers or administration took a strong enough stand, culturally, regarding the appropriate engagement and focus of many students who were in school

and class with their children. These distractions were enough for these parents and their children to recognize how their whole middle school experience was suffering.

It is important to note that although many parents' had concerns particular to the academic program at the middle school, their perceptions were not substantiated by test score data. Test scores were relatively consistent among the upper elementary, middle, and high school grades during this time period (Laurel Township Public Schools, 2010). While the early elementary schools meet NCLB goals more consistently than the upper elementary, middle, and high schools, their sample sizes, in many cases, were not large for subgroups to count as per guidelines from the state (Laurel Township Public Schools, 2010).

These points of emphasis related to leaving public school as spoken to by parents did not, reflect concerns or presumptions that the high school experience in Laurel would be worse than the middle school for parents exiting after eighth grade. They were simply "done" with the public school experience in Laurel. Upon leaving sixth grade, these four sets of parents had some concerns about the middle school however these concerns, at the time, were not enough for them to make the decision to depart the public schools. After two years of attending the middle school, initial concerns were validated and likewise, the decision to leave was as well.

Unlike those who left after sixth grade, there was a greater emphasis on "fit" and "fitting in" made by parents whose children left after eighth grade with regard to their child's place in class or the school as a whole. The fact that some of these students were

identified as “fish out of water” contributed to the decision to leave as well. Parents emphasized strongly the notion of social interactions with peers and noted how these challenges contributed to their decision. While these students had small groups of friends and were very involved in different activities, they felt ostracized for “wanting to learn” as being smart in the public middle school “wasn’t cool,” according to parents.

Likewise, there was a greater sense of input and initiative toward the decision to leave by students exiting after eighth grade. In some cases the students themselves even initiated the move to private school by securing the application and signing up for the entrance exams. While students who exited after sixth grade were not opposed to leaving, their role in the decision and certainly pursuit of particular schools to attend was much less than the eighth grade students. With this additional proponent advocating their own attendance at a private school, parents felt more secure not only in making the decision to leave, but also upon selecting an actual school. With contributions from their soon-to-be high school sons or daughters, parents felt very comfortable knowing they chose the “right” private school that would, again, “fit” the needs of their child.

In addition to the decision to leave public school for private, parents also had to make decisions about what private school they would attend. With so many options to choose from in the Ivy area, this decision was complicated as well (Cookson, 1994). In many cases the cost factor became very important to families and helped drive their decision to pursue and eventually attend a particular school. Parents were committed to making this move to private school on behalf of their children however the notion of “sacrifice” was recognized and accepted, in several cases, by parents.

With varying levels of income amongst participant households and a variety of additional factors coming into play such as home mortgage costs, education of siblings, college tuition, and parental retirements, financial aid packages were very important when selecting schools. This was the case at both the sixth and eighth grade level, with even more attention being placed on this at the sixth grade level. Since the exiting sixth graders would be in private school for six additional years prior to their high school graduation versus four years for exiting eighth graders, these parents recognized how the cost factor would impact their decision even more than the parents of exiting eighth graders.

Despite varying particulars related to the actual experiences of children exiting public school after sixth and eighth grade, these eight sets of parents found relatively common ground as to why they made their decision to leave public school for private. There were differences related to the developmental ages of children between sixth grade and eighth grades (Maslow, 1954) and therefore different areas of emphasis for parents in making this decision. Ultimately the decision for exiting sixth grade parents came down primarily to environmental factors within the school climate that were affecting the overall experience for the child. This, the initial connections between social climate and a slowly deteriorating academic climate as well as the fear of what was on the horizon both socially and academically at the middle school level was enough for parents to look for an alternative to the public school. The decision for exiting eighth grade parents came down to the combination of a poor academic climate at the middle school which was driven by a poor social climate. Parents, in this instance, had lived the middle school

experience in Laurel, were not satisfied and opted to seek an alternative to the public schools after eighth grade.

Research Question #3: Why do parents leave private schools to attend Laurel public schools?

Research Question #4: On what do parents base their decisions to leave private schools for public?

Parents who chose to leave private school and enter public school after sixth and eighth grades did so for a number of reasons. While a variety of topics and issues were discussed with parents related to their experiences in private schools, two major themes appeared evident at both exit points. Primarily, the concept of “value” was consistently offered by parents as a major reason why they opted to leave private school. Immediately behind value, parents cited “social exposure” as an important piece of the decision to leave the private schools.

Value was found throughout, at both sixth and eighth grade exit points, with parents identifying, in most cases, nothing “wrong” with the private school. In fact, parents were, for the most part, very satisfied with the private school experience. On the whole, parents indicated if the private school was of no cost, they would have continued to send their child to that school. The differences however between services in the private school and public school were simply not worth the financial cost. For most families it was not a question of affordability, although financial implications related to tuition

payments at home and macro-level economic conditions in society were consistently noted by parents.

Parents initially felt private school was the right choice, based on the grade and developmental levels of their children upon making the initial move to private school. They recognized this was not so much the case anymore and also wanted their children to gain greater social exposure at both the sixth and eighth grade levels. Most private schools that children attended were considered too small by parents and while they served their purpose in providing a strong foundation, academic and faith-based in several instances, it was now time to engage in something more comprehensive that was reflective of society as a whole.

Parents who opted to leave private school after eighth grade felt that the public school was the right choice for their children. In public school these students would learn to interact with children who were very different than they were in terms of race, culture, religion, family life, and socio-economic backgrounds, for example. This exposure would also promote adaptability in terms of learning how to self-advocate in the presence of multiple students, multiple teachers, and multiple teaching styles.

These students, at both exit points, had as much input into the decision to leave private as those who left public after both sixth and eighth grade. Given the size of these schools it was clear to parents that their children were concerned with the lack of alternatives and options when social issues, such as bullying or “mean girl” incidents, developed. This was not limited to the obviously negative social incidents as mentioned,

but less obvious social issues, such as small numbers of friends and a lack of true connection between them. Multiple children at the sixth grade level wanted more social options and communicated this to parents.

After eighth grade most children were faced with the decision to pursue another private school or public school option as their current schools ended programming with the eighth grade year. All four students were interested in pursuing something on a larger scale with more social options in terms of people and activities. This sense of student input was a very important piece of the decision to leave private schools. Parents of exiting eighth graders indicated that should their child have expressed an interest in continuing to attend a private high school, they would have been willing to pursue it, despite their thoughts related to tuition and the value that existed in the private school.

Parents who entered Laurel high school with their children in ninth grade felt supported by staff and counselors, in many cases, to the level they would have expected from the private school they previously attended. Parents also considered the levels of academic rigor in most classes to be comparable to the private school. Although this was the case, no parents initially opted to leave private school and attend public because of the academic program in the public school. As noted, parents were satisfied with most elements of programming in private school.

Although parents felt the need to leave private school and enroll in public school after sixth grade, they did have concerns about the public middle school in the areas of social climate and academics. These concerns were similar to the parents who left public



school after eighth grade. Issues related to behavior of students and its impact on instruction as well as pedagogical practices by teachers did exist for parents. On a side note, two of the four families who chose to leave private school to attend the middle school after sixth grade, opted to leave Laurel Middle School at the end of the seventh grade year. One student returned to the private school from which he came and the other student was now attending, and paying tuition, in the public school district in which one of his parents worked.

Parents were satisfied with most elements of private school education, yet they still opted for their children to leave in order to attend public school. Themes identified by parents whose children left private school after both sixth and eighth grades consistently focused on social exposure and value. Themes related to a poor social climate as well as finance and convenience also supported the decision by parents to leave private school. As exemplified by Mrs. Lester's statement that if her daughter's private school did not charge tuition, she would have kept her there, exiting parents were not unhappy with the private school education; the value simply was not there. One year later, the value, however, was there, for the two families (Manning and Bullock) who then exited the public middle school to again, attend and pay tuition at another school.

While social exposure was found with parents who opted to leave private school after sixth grade it was also prevalent with families who left private school after eighth grade. With a number of opportunities unique to the public school, when compared to their previous private school, parents felt there was more value in attending Laurel High School. The chance to attend a school with comparable academics, a more diverse

population of students and teachers, and a greater variety of extra-curricular activities to engage in, that was in their hometown, was worth more than paying tuition to private school.

### *Findings in Light of Research*

There were three goals of this study: 1. To understand why families decide to leave a well-supported public school district in favor of private schools; 2. To understand why families choose public education after choosing private education; 3. To understand the decision making process by families with respect to both, leaving public school for private and private school for public. Achieving these goals meant looking to research as a potential foundation to build upon with the findings of this study.

Researchers have found that parents' decisions to choose private schools over public schools for their children to attend is a very complicated process and it is unlikely that only one reason alone drives this particular decision (Bosetti, 2004; Cookson, 1994). As complex as this process may be for families, it is this very sense of choice which gives parents the opportunity to make decisions specific to educating their children in a manner the connects itself directly to their own values and ideologies (Schneider et al., 2000). Private schools exist as an alternative to local public schools (Cookson, 1989) when the collective mission of the public school system does not work for parents and their children.

Historically speaking, public schools were meant to create social harmony and restore relationships among groups of people (Wells, 1993), breaking down class barriers

in an effort to provide consistent experiences for children regardless of their background or heritage (Coleman & Hoffer, 1987; Gutmann, 1987). Despite being attended by a majority of students across the United States, public schools do not always meet the needs of students and their parents, several of whom are identified in this study.

According to Gutmann, the primary issue related to the topic of school choice centers of the concept of control and whether or not the state should have that control over such things as the education of parents' children (1987). Although, the idea of control was not spoken to directly during interviews, parents wanted certain things for their children in terms of a school experience within a school environment. As they were unable to find these things in both the public and, in the second half of the study, private schools, their ability to exercise control in the form of deciding to attend school elsewhere was evident.

Parents' big picture focus centered largely on the concept of values and needs as well. This was found in both; parents who left public school for private and parents who left private school for public. Although this was identified in many micro-level issues, the underlying point, in most cases, was that each respective system, public or private, was not meeting parent and student needs related to the core focus of its intended educational program. Public schools were not following through with what they said they would and, while private schools did, it simply was not effective for families who opted to leave.

Critics of public schooling have cited their lack of success in meeting the individual needs of students, given the commonality of public schools (Wells 1993). As public schools are forced to recognize competing values within their communities, the

challenge lies in balancing the interests of different groups that make up these communities (Goodlad, 1994). As parents noted in the study, the tendency at Laurel Middle School was for teachers to “teach to the middle.” In doing so, any needs related to academic rigor or challenge would not be met for high-achieving students, forcing them to look elsewhere for a school that would meet these needs.

According to Hirschhoff (1986), it is the neutrality of public schools that fails to meet parental needs in many cases. While parents may be looking to invoke specific values in their children, many public schools simply cannot do this as effectively as a particular private school could. This was evident in discussions with parents in the study who, for example, opted to send their children to parochial schools at early ages in order to develop a strong faith-based foundation in their lives.

Aside from reasons related to religion, the four early elementary schools in Laurel were well received by attending parents in the study. It was also noted how each of these schools had a very specific “neighborhood feel” according to parents. Enrollment numbers in three of these four schools were found to be approximately 300 students during the years of attendance by parents who later opted to leave Laurel schools (Laurel Township Public Schools, 2009). The support for these schools may have been largely based on the offered and accepted values by each of the sending quadrants of the town (Bryk & Driscoll, 1988; Bryk, Lee, & Holland, 1993).

Strong communally organized schools have been known to emphasize multiple components often found in private schools; 1. A shared set of values. 2. The development

of positive relationships between teachers and students. 3. The implementation of meaningful activities and traditions which speak to membership in the school community (Bryk & Driscoll, 1988; Bryk, Lee, & Holland, 1993). If a school, whether public or private, can set forth educational goals, ideologies and philosophies that are consistent with those of parents and students, the inclination exists to pursue an education in this setting (Schneider et al., 2000). The implementation of such would be easier to establish in a particular quadrant of a town than the entire town itself, therefore making the experience there likely to be more positive for students and parents. This would also help to explain why parental dissatisfaction began at the upper elementary school, which was where all students in Laurel come together as a whole for the first time.

While a number of historians have found that those who support American public schooling have done so by promoting American ideals, it is difficult to find consensus as to what American ideology actually is (Selakovich, 1984). With American public schools reflecting the mosaic of nationalities, ethnicities, cultures, and backgrounds of people who comprise the country itself, it is understandable how public schools also reflect the lack of a true ideology that has historically been applied to the United States as a whole (Bell, 1960; Heilbrunner, 1960; Selakovich, 1984). It is this lack of consensus that undermines a true value base in Laurel public schools as the district attempts to be all things to all people, while those attending have very different understandings and expectations related to public education (Coleman, et al., 1997; Cookson, 1994; Cremin, 1976, Gutmann, 1987).

Democratic equality, social efficiency, and social mobility have historically been viewed as critical pieces of public education's mission (Labaree, 1997). At its core, the differences between these three have been based on whether education is identified as a public or private good. Although these eight sets of parents left public school for private, emphasizing elements of social mobility and social reproduction in their decision at the macro-level, elements of democratic equality were also noted by these parents during interviews. Parents recognized the importance of citizenship and making contributions to society based on the greater good. Parents who opted to leave private school to attend public school emphasized primarily the goal of democratic equality, citing the importance of exposure to students of different backgrounds. While individual advancement was important to parents whose children left private school, they also emphasized the importance of making positive contributions as citizens and members of society. These parents also noted the importance of attending school with children of different backgrounds. By doing this, their children would be able to develop a strong skill set in order to exist in a world full of different people, regardless of social class (Cremin, 1974).

Although parents whose children left public school for private did acknowledge democratic equality, their emphasis on social mobility was easily recognized. Most conversations at both the sixth and eighth grade exit points, identified the importance of a good education and ultimately what that good education could provide (Collins, 1979). A good secondary school education, leads to a good college education, all of which is

ultimately exchanged for a good life in the form of such things as a career, financial security, prestige, and power (Labaree, 1997).

Parents whose children left public school did not speak directly to such macro-level elements of social mobility and social reproduction, however, their micro-level reasons for leaving did support these concepts and indirectly addressed such themes related to social class and social status. Private schools allow access to certain class-related circles, offering a higher level of social capital, becoming a gateway to the privileged upper class (Coleman & Hoffer, 1987; Hurn, 2008).

Consistent with the research literature (Cookson & Persell, 1985; Khan, 2010; Powell, 1996) students who have graduated from many of the private schools attended by students in this study have matriculated into some of the most prestigious colleges and universities across the United States. As reported in *The Wall Street Journal* in 2006, no less than 40% of freshmen enrolled at Bowdoin, Brown, Georgetown, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Princeton, California (Berkeley), Penn, and Yale were from private schools (in Walberg, 2007). The impact of such credentials can have significant impact on social mobility and cultural capital (Collins, 1979). These specific private schools that Laurel students have opted to leave public school for boast over 400 Ivy League placements since 2007 (Lakeville, 2012; Ivy Day School, 2012; Hayden Prep, 2012; Emerson Day School, 2012).

While Laurel public schools have placed students into all of the same Ivy League institutions (Laurel Public Schools, 2012) over the same amount of time, it is the sheer

volume of students that these private schools have sent to these colleges and universities that sets them apart from Laurel public schools. With significantly less students comprising private school enrollments when compared with public schools (Powell, 1996) these matriculation placements are particularly impressive. As status symbols matter in terms of cultural capital, “for a student to say ‘I graduated from Harvard,’ impresses, regardless of how one ever did at that school” (Khan, 2010, p. 99).

Whether or not social mobility and social class were a conscious part of the decision making process, the act of leaving public school for private for these parents acknowledged the differences between public and private schools and how these differences can have a major effect on lifestyle mobility (Sadovnik et al., 2006). Along with a quality “formal” education, an “informal” education also takes place in private school as relationships are developed with other private school students. It is within these relationships that benefits related to social class and social capital are established and promoted within the private school (Cookson, 1994).

Historically, many private schools have functioned specifically as an agent related to the separation of the upper class from everyone else in America. These private schools were a training ground for upper class children, providing them with an educational experience unlike what the public schools of the time were able to provide (Mills, 1959). Contemporary private schools are not much different, attempting to provide an uncommon educational experience, one that is different from what can be found in modern public schools as well (Powell, 1996). Although not discussed on the surface of the interviews with parents whose children left public school for private, it is these



relationships, which are developed with other students in private school, that create the potential for former public school students to secure a new place, or maintain a current one, amidst a privileged class of students and their families (Bourdieu & Passeron, 2000; Zweigehaft, 1993).

Research has shown a number of background characteristics that have historically been present in families who choose private schools. These have included parents' education, income, family structure, and race (Coleman & Hoffer, 1987; Goldring & Phillips, 2008; Kraushaar, 1972; Yang & Kayaardi, 2004). Results from this study support this research to a degree. As independent private school administrators have described students as coming from upper middle class to upper class homes (Kraushaar, 1972; Schneider et al., 2000), five of the sixteen parents in this study indicated their household income was higher than \$200,000. Parents who chose private schools over public, showed relatively higher levels of income and education than parents who opted to leave private school for public school. Most parents in both parts of this study went to public school, showing no consistent support for research in this area (Hamilton & Guin, 2005). Of those families whose children left public school for private, nine of the sixteen parents attended private elementary and secondary schools. Of families who ultimately left the private school to attend public, thirteen of the sixteen parents attended public schools themselves.

All students came from intact families with two parents, findings that support the research (Coleman & Hoffer, 1987), while twenty-six of the thirty-two parents making up both sides of the study were Caucasian. One Asian parent left public school for private

after sixth grade and five parents, two who were African-American and three who were Spanish, left private school for public (the three Spanish parents left after sixth grade and the two African-American parents left after eighth grade). These results showed minimal support for research indicating that race bears no significant effect on parents' choice of private over public school (Goldring & Phillips, 2008; Yang & Kayaardi, 2004).

As students need to meet admissions standards in order to gain entry into private schools, the likelihood of these children being well-focused, well-behaved, high achievers was very high (MacLachlan, 1970; Coleman et al., 1982; Unger, 1993). On the whole this was true at both exit points for both students who left public school for private school and students who left private school for public. In a small number of cases, however, student grades were average and standardized test scores were not passing. That said, however, the majority of students were very well-behaved on both sides of the study and all students were engaged in a variety of extra-curricular activities. While "creaming" or "skimming" did exist (Gutmann, 1987), with strong students leaving public school for private after both sixth and eighth grades, students who left private school for public showed similar strengths and weaknesses in terms of academics, behavior, and involvement.

In addition to the backgrounds of parents and students, the presence of so many private schools in this and surrounding towns, connects backgrounds to the geographical area itself, and the convenience in which living in Laurel brings to attending private schools. A number of studies have shown choice of schools, by parents, to be connected to proximity to those schools (Archibald, 1996; Bell, 2007; Hunter, 1991). While parents

may not have chosen the closest school to their home, the number of Ivy-area private school options easily supports research related to proximity.

The prominence of private schools appears to be so entrenched in this community that their existence as a school choice option is almost taken for granted by those parents who choose to pursue this form of education. In some cases, parents indicated they would have traveled up to thirty minutes on a daily basis to take their child to school if necessary, but within a thirty minute car ride in the immediate Laurel/Ivy area one could find at least a dozen schools from which to choose. In many cases, these families actually lived closer to a private school than the public school in which they attended before leaving the district. The convenience factor was so inherent given the residential location of families in the study that parents seemed to be unaware of “convenience,” at least in terms of proximity, as an element in their decision.

For parents whose children, in the second half of the study, left private school to attend public, the convenience factor did play a small part in the decision. With some students who would have had to travel almost an hour each way to attend particular religious schools upon entering a new school as a ninth grader, the ease of attending a public school in their own town was a positive for parents.

The bulk of this study’s findings, however, are connected with research related to micro-level reasons in which parents opted to leave public school for private. Emphasis on academics, although to different degrees when leaving after sixth and eighth grade, were important in the decision making process when choosing to attend private school

(Bosetti, 2004; Coleman et al., 1982; Kraushaar, 1972; Schneider et al., 2000). With private schools being able to stress academics more prominently than public schools within their curriculum (Cookson, 1996), parents were able to meet their needs by attending. This stress on academics in private schools reflects a particular value system and ideological consensus present in these school environments (Coleman & Hoffer, 1987). Parents in this study consistently noted their pursuit of stronger academics and the belief that they found stronger academics in private school, supporting research over a number of studies (Bosetti, 2004; Kraushaar, 1972; Schneider et al., 2000).

While a private school effect on student achievement does exist, the basis for this remains unclear which has historically limited claims that private schools are better than public schools (Cookson, 1994; 1996). This is supported by parents in the second half of the study who opted to remove their children from private school to attend public school. These student grades and test scores were, in many cases, consistently high whether students were attending private school or public school.

Findings in this study related to school climate through personalization, as well as class and school size, also consistently supported research. This, too, was a major focus for parents whose children exited public school after both the sixth grade and eighth grade. Parents wanted more attention for their children and less distractions from other students in an effort to promote, not only the academic experience, but the social-emotional experience as well (Bosetti, 2004; Toch, 2003). By making students visible to teachers, schools can increase personalization and develop stronger relationships between staff and students. Doing so creates a greater opportunity for teaching, learning, and a

positive, community-based educational experience (Coleman et al., 1997; Powell, 1996; Sizer & Sizer, 2006).

Numerous private schools have established reputations based on this ability to combine a sense of academic rigor with small class size (Powell, 1996). In the first half of this study, parents who opted to leave public school for private acknowledged this and found it to have resulted in a better experience for their children. Their decision to leave public school was, for them, the right one and their reasons behind this decision add support for existing research.

While academic values and the concept of size have been consistently identified as a major reason why private schools (Powell, 1996) have been able to maintain a competitive advantage over public schools, not all parents feel this way. As noted by several parents in this study whose children left private school for public, the size of the private school was an important factor in choosing to leave. With limitations on social exposure for their children, due to this lack of size, students were not reaping the supposed benefits of a private school education. This combined with other climate-related elements such as bullying, forced parents to examine the value of their tuition dollars in a private school setting. In many cases, the value was not substantial enough to warrant staying in the private school.

These parents who opted to leave private school for public add support in many ways for current research given they too made an initial decision to attend private school at some point in the past. Their decisions to do so were based on similar themes that

parents in the first half of this study cited upon leaving public school. The decision to leave private school and return to, or attend for the first time, public school also contributes to research related to school choice, perhaps even more uniquely, given the lack of choice-related research particular to leaving private school for public. The fact that parents found climate-related challenges and negative perceptions related to at least one hallmark of private education in small class size, as well as a major issue based on the worth or value of private education, shows private education is not as utopian an experience as one may believe.

### *Implications for Future Research and Current Practice*

This qualitative study of parents whose children left public school for private and private school for public after both sixth and eighth grades, examined the complexities behind such decisions. As debate and discussion surrounding school choice continues to take place and with alternatives to public school rising historically over the past three decades, parents are able to take advantage of this competitive marketplace that has existed for some time (Cookson, 1994). With parents being viewed as consumers in this environment, they have had, for years, the opportunity to make decisions related to schooling. These choice-related opportunities have allowed them to identify and pursue what meets the needs of their child as well as their needs as parents (Sadovnik, 2006; Schneider et al., 2000).

In this study, a major focus of discontent centered on the middle school experience. Whether it was related to the school climate and academic experience or

simply the perception of what that experience would be like upon arrival in the seventh grade, parents directed a significant amount of time during discussions toward the middle school. Understandably, the middle school years are often a storm of physical and emotional changes in children (Maslow, 1954) and it is worthwhile to understand the educational experiences of other students and families at this level in other school districts. Given Laurel has only one middle school, further analysis would have to extend to nearby towns. However, with similar proximity to area private schools by towns adjacent to Laurel, this pursuit would be beneficial in an attempt to extend this study's findings. Just as Laurel parents reflect the research related to parents' opportunities and abilities to pursue education that meets their needs in the present competitive marketplace, so too would parents in nearby towns, presuming demographics and backgrounds were consistent.

Additionally, a valuable extension of this study related to particular families in Laurel Township would include an examination of parental reasons for leaving Laurel public schools after third grade. Third grade is the first point of exit between schools where children leave one of four early elementary schools (K-3) to enter a larger school in grade four where the entire district comes together for the first time. The third grade year has also been identified as a relatively common exit point for parents to leave Laurel public schools for private schools (Laurel Township Public Schools, 2009).

It would be useful to identify how much of parents' decision making, when leaving after third grade, would support literature being based on academics, climate, and values. Perhaps this decision would involve the perception of the upper elementary

experience, rather than the actual experience as was found in many cases with parents who left after sixth grade in relationship to the middle school. Given the consistently positive marks the early elementary schools did receive from parents in this study, an analysis of reasons why parents would leave at this point would be a strong piece in order to extend study findings within the actual district the initial study took place.

Finally, with the prominence of social class within research literature (Bourdieu & Passeron, 2000; Collins, 1979; Cookson, 1994; Hurn, 2008; Zweigehaft, 1993), it is critical to examine this component with parents. While parents in this study focused mostly on micro-level reasons when leaving public school and leaving private school, these questions surrounding social class, cultural capital, and social mobility need to be addressed. Although, being away from “those” kids and being with “these” kids never came to the surface during discussions in the first half of the study with parents who left public school to attend private, there were periodic comments related to issues of “privileged” status by parents who were leaving private school for public. During interviews, Mrs. Havens, for example, recalled, upon moving to her current neighborhood in Laurel Township, conversations with families on her street who, “for whatever reason,” never entertained the idea of attending the public school.

The challenge with this involves the recognition that parents who choose to participate in a study are volunteering to do so. At any point in time, as was the case in this study, they could choose not to answer a question or simply withdraw from the study. Discussions related to issues of social class and privilege as it relates to private schooling



(Cookson, 1985; Cookson, 2005; Powell, 1996) call for a delicate hand so as not to offend participants and in doing so, limit the study.

Despite these potential challenges within the methodology, an in-depth analysis of the relationship between the decisions to leave public school for private and private school for public as they connect to issues of class-related themes is of great importance to extending this study. This examination would offer a more effective and complete understanding of parental decision making by pursuing subsurface-oriented macro-level reasons. It would also offer substantial support to class-based research with regard to private and public school choice.

### *Limitations*

This qualitative study examined the reasons why parents opted to leave public schools to attend private schools as well as leave private schools to attend public schools. Families involved contributed their own unique perspectives on a variety of themes related to both public and private schooling. It is difficult, however, to generalize the findings of this study given its particular focus brought with it a number of issues specific to Laurel Township and private schools found in the Ivy area.

The findings were based on information that parents were willing to provide. Choice options related to private and public school may have involved reasons that parents were unwilling to provide. My presence as a public school administrator may have limited what, or the degree to which, parents were willing to discuss certain topics as they related to public and private schools. Although parents were willing to respond to

additional questions, following our interviews, the fact that only two interviews took place with these sixteen parents (1 focus group/1 one-to-one) may have limited opportunities for substantial in-depth follow up to topics and themes previously discussed.

### *Conclusion*

Every private school maintains its own set of norms and values that exist amongst that school's community (Powell, 1996; Wells, 1993). Public schools, despite a lack of true ideology, do exhibit norms and values that establish a school's reputation in the eyes of the community (Bell, 1960; Heilbrunner, 1960). Students, faculty, administrators, and parents are all directly or indirectly involved and affected by these norms and values as they describe the identity of each particular school. It is by examining these existing identities, the norms and values of different schools, that parents make decisions about whether or not they choose for their children to attend. This examination becomes a very complex process in which parents must make complicated decisions related to the educational needs of their child (Cookson, 1994).

Depending on what parents consider important, they may opt to leave the public school system in favor of private education. These reasons may exist at both the micro-level and the macro-level (Bourdieu & Passeron, 2000; Powell, 1996). Consequently, as this study points out, this is also the case for parents who opt to leave private school for public. Beliefs related to the foundational components of education, including democratic equality, social efficiency, and social mobility (Labarre, 1997), along with

beliefs about the state's role in educational programming may come into play while making such decisions (Gutmann, 1987). These decisions related to school choice can potentially affect future lifestyle mobility of the children involved (Hurn, 2008; Sadovnik et al., 2006) and with that, it is understandable how critical such decisions for parents can be.

Kraushaar (1972) makes the point as to parental choice of private schools however, this point is also applicable for parents who have opted to choose public school over private.

The chief rationale of the independent school is to offer a 'better' education than that which is available in the public school. Most parents desire for their children the best education within their reach. But 'better' and 'best' in this connection mean different things to different people. The best may mean academically or intellectually best, but not necessarily. What makes a given education 'better' or 'best' depends not only upon the available options but upon the value perspective of the parent who chooses. (p. 7)

Public school administrators need to be aware of such reasons in order to develop and implement effective instructional programs given the competitive environment that involves both public and private education (Cookson, 1994). As parents have extensive options related to school choice, this awareness is critical to successfully obtaining and retaining students and their families as part of a student body and school community

(Coleman & Hoffer, 1987; Gutmann, 1987; Schneider et al., 2000). It is in developing this awareness that more public school administrators should be better able understand why and how they fail to meet student and family needs as well as what they need to do in order to reverse this trend. In doing so, the educational climate has the potential to become even more competitive as public school options become stronger and better able to meet the needs of particular families and students.

## APPENDICES

### APPENDIX A: DATA COLLECTION INSTRUMENTS

#### Interview Protocol (Parents who have left public school for private school)

All interviews will follow an open-ended format (Yin, 2009). Focus group interviews shall take no more than one hour, while one-to-one interviews will take between 45 minutes and 1 hour each. During the focus group interviews and the one-to-one interviews I will ask parents to share their experiences related to the following topics:

- Public School Experience
  - Decision to leave
  - Academics
  - Communication
  - Climate
  - Support
- Private School Experience
  - Decision to enroll
  - Academics
  - Communication
  - Climate
  - Support

## Interview Schedule

November 2011	December 2011	January 2012	February 2012	March 2012	April 2012	May 2012
Pilot One-to-one interview questions _____	Schedule Focus Group Interview w Parents who left Public School for Private School _____	Conduct Focus Group Interview w Parents who left Public School for Private School _____	Schedule and Conduct One-to-One Interviews w Parents who left Public School for Private School _____	Conduct/Complete One-to-One Interviews w Parents who left Private School for Public School _____		Begin data analysis _____

### Focus Group Interview Questions: Parents Who Left Public Schools for Private Schools

Date of Interview:

Location of Interview:

1. Why did you leave public school to attend private school?
2. Based on your experience with the private school, how does the private school education compare to the public school education your children previously received in terms of:
  - a. academic challenge
  - b. school climate
  - c. communication with/from the school
  - d. student support/attention

### One-to-One Interview Questions: Parents Who Left Public Schools for Private Schools

Date of Interview:

Location of Interview:

Interviewer:

Interviewee:

#### Background Questions:

1. What type of school did the child's father attend?  
     Primary schooling?  
     Secondary schooling?
2. What was the highest level of education attained by the child's father?
3. What type of school did the child's mother attend?  
     Primary schooling?  
     Secondary schooling?
4. What was the highest level of education attained by the child's mother?
5. What is the current family structure that exists for the child?
6. What is the religious preference(s) of the child's family, if any?
7. What is the ethnicity/ethnicities of the child's family?
8. What is the total income for the family of the child?  
     Under \$50,000  
     \$50,000-100,000  
     \$100,000-150,000  
     \$150,000-200,000  
     Over \$200,000
9. What things within a school system do you value as a parent (academics, test scores, character education, etc.)? Please explain.

#### Public School Questions:

1. How long did your child attend the public school?



2. What was the last grade he/she was enrolled in as part of the public school system?
3. Why did you opt to remove your child from the public school system?
4. In general what was the academic experience like for your child at his/her former school (public school) in terms of challenge and workload?
5. Please describe the support (types/amount/value of) your child's teachers provided (at the public school) as it relates to his/her development; academically and social emotionally.
6. What was your experience like as a parent with regard to communication from the public school(s), specifically the administration and the teachers?
7. How did you feel about the climate in the school(s) as to behavior, safety, bullying, etc.? Please describe your thoughts, both positive and negative.
8. What do you think the public school's (and district's) reputation is within the county? State? Why? What drives your thoughts regarding the school's (and district's) reputation (test scores, word of mouth, community perceptions, etc.)?

Private School Experience:

1. What was it about the private school that made you want to send your child there?
2. Did the existence/location of so many private schools in the immediate area have any influence on your decision to leave public school? If so, please explain. (i.e. Would you have chosen this school if it was further away from your home?)
3. What has your experience as a parent been at the private school in terms of academics, communication and climate as it relates or compares to the public school?  
Please explain in terms of challenge, support, resources, communication, etc.
4. What types of experiences are available at the private school for students (and parents) that did not exist in the public school (smaller classes, athletics, etc.)?

Final Question:

1. Based on your experiences in both public and private schools, what do you think could be done to improve the public school experience at this school (district)?

## APPENDIX B: DATA COLLECTION INSTRUMENTS

### Interview Protocol (Parents who have left private school for public school)

All interviews will follow an open-ended format (Yin, 2009). Focus group interviews shall take no more than one hour, while one-to-one interviews will take between 45 minutes and 1 hour each. During the focus group interviews and the one-to-one interviews I will ask parents to share their experiences related to the following topics:

- Private School Experience
  - Decision to leave
  - Academics
  - Communication
  - Climate
  - Support
  
- Public School Experience
  - Decision to enroll
  - Academics
  - Communication
  - Climate
  - Support

## Interview Schedule

December 2011	January 2012	February 2012	March 2012	April 2012	May 2012	June 2012
Pilot One-to-one interview questions	Schedule Focus Group Interview w Parents who left Private School for Public School	Conduct Focus Group Interview w Parents who left Private School for Public School	Schedule and Conduct One-to-One Interviews w Parents who left Private School for Public School	Conduct/Complete One-to-One Interviews w Parents who left Private School for Public School		Begin data analysis

### Focus Group Interview Questions: Parents Who Left Private Schools for Public Schools

Date of Interview:

Location of Interview:

1. Why did you leave private school to attend public school?
2. Based on your experience with the public school, how does the public school education compare to the private school education your children previously received in terms of:
  - a. academic challenge
  - b. school climate
  - c. communication with/from the school
  - d. student support/attention

### One-to-One Interview Questions: Parents Who Left Private Schools for Public Schools

Date of Interview:

Location of Interview:

Interviewer:

Interviewee:

#### Background Questions:

1. What type of school did the child's father attend?  
     Primary schooling?  
     Secondary schooling?
2. What was the highest level of education attained by the child's father?
3. What type of school did the child's mother attend?  
     Primary schooling?  
     Secondary schooling?
4. What was the highest level of education attained by the child's mother?
5. What is the current family structure that exists for the child?
6. What is the religious preference(s) of the child's family, if any?
7. What is the ethnicity/ethnicities of the child's family?
8. What is the total income for the family of the child?  
     Under \$50,000  
     \$50,000-100,000  
     \$100,000-150,000  
     \$150,000-200,000  
     Over \$200,000
9. What things within a school system do you value as a parent (academics, test scores, character education, etc.)? Please explain.

#### Private School Questions:

1. How long did your child attend the private school?

2. What was the last grade he/she was enrolled in as part of the private school?
3. Why did you opt to remove your child from the private school?
4. In general what was the academic experience like for your child at his/her former school (private school) in terms of challenge and workload?
5. Please describe the support (types/amount/value of) your child's teachers provided (at the private school) as it relates to his/her development; academically and social emotionally.
6. What was your experience like as a parent with regard to communication from the private school, specifically the administration and the teachers?
7. How did you feel about the climate in the private school as to behavior, safety, bullying, etc.? Please describe your thoughts, both positive and negative.
8. What do you think the private school's (and district's) reputation is within the county, State? Why? What drives your thoughts regarding the school's reputation (test scores, word of mouth, community perceptions, etc.)?

Public School Experience:

1. What was it about the public school that made you want to send your child there?
2. What has your experience as a parent been at the public school in terms of academics, communication and climate as it relates or compares to the private school?  
Please explain in terms of challenge, support, resources, communication, etc.
3. What types of experiences are available at the public school for students (and parents) that did not exist or are different than the private school (athletics, clubs, parent groups etc.)?

Final Question:

1. Based on your experiences in both public and private schools, what do you think could be done to improve the public school experience at this school (district)?

## APPENDIX E: CONSENT FORMS

**Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey**  
**INFORMED CONSENT FORM**

Initial: \_\_\_\_\_

You are invited to participate in a research study I am conducting as part of my doctoral dissertation through the Graduate School of Education at Rutgers University. The purpose of this research is to explore the issue of student and family attrition from a public school system when parents choose to remove their child from a suburban public school to enroll them in a private school. This research also examines family attrition from private schools when students attend their local public school after having previously attended a private school.

The study procedures include 1 focus group interview that will take 1 hour and 1 one-to-one interview that will take place in person or over the telephone and last approximately 1 hour. **Approximately sixteen parents will participate in this study over during the Fall of 2011 and Spring 2012. Parents who participate in this study will grant me permission to access, from Lawrence Township Public School computer database, information related to their child's academic performance (i.e. grades, standardized test scores) and extra-curricular activity involvement (i.e. band, athletics).**

This research is confidential. Confidential means that the research records will include some information about you such as your name, age and sex. In addition, this information will be stored in such a manner that some linkage between your identity and your responses in the research exists. This information will be kept confidential by limiting individual's access to the research data and keeping it in a secure location. In addition to me, as the principal researcher, the Institutional Review Board (a committee that reviews research studies in order to protect research participants) at Rutgers University is the only party that will be allowed to see the data, except as may be required by law. If a report of this study is published, or the results are presented at a professional conference, only group results will be stated, unless you have agreed otherwise. All data from this study will be kept for 3 years, as necessary by IRB protocol. After that time all hard data will be shredded and all electronic data will be erased.

There are no foreseeable risks to minds or bodies of participants in this study.

The benefits of this study may include adding to current research relate to why parents choose private schools and why parents return to public schools. This study will also allow public schools insight into reasons parents opted for private school over public school. This insight may assist public school officials in improving their educational program to better meet the needs of their students.

Participation in this study is voluntary. You may choose not to participate, and you may withdraw at any time. In addition, you may choose not to answer any questions with which you are not comfortable.



If you have any questions about the study or study procedures, you may contact me by email at [jdauber@ltps.org](mailto:jdauber@ltps.org), by phone at 609-671-5454 or by mail at 2525 Princeton Pike, Lawrenceville, New Jersey 08648.

If you have any questions about your rights as a research subject, you may contact the Institutional Review Board. Please contact the IRV Administrator at Rutgers University at:

Rutgers University, the State University of New Jersey  
Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects  
Office of Research and Sponsored programs  
3 Rutgers Plaza  
New Brunswick, NJ 08901-8559  
Tel: 732-932-0150 ext. 2104  
Email: [humansubjects@orsp.rutgers.edu](mailto:humansubjects@orsp.rutgers.edu)

Please sign below if you agree to participate in this research study:

Participant's Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Researcher's Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Participant's Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Researcher's Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

**AUDIO/VIDEOTAPE ADDENDUM TO CONSENT FORM**

You have already agreed to participate in a research study titled **“Public vs. Private: Parental Choice of Schools and the Reasons Why.”** With your permission, I will audiotape the interview that you will be taking part.

**Data from these recordings will be analyzed and used for research purposes only.**

The recordings will include the name of the participant being interviewed as well as the conversation that takes place between you (the participant) and me (the researcher).

**The recordings will be stored electronically. Written transcripts of the interview will be stored a locked file cabinet. Both sets of data will be linked with a code to participants’ identity. All data from this study will be kept for 3 years, as necessary by IRB protocol. After that time all hard data will be shredded and all electronic data will be erased.**

Your signature on this form grants me (the researcher) permission to record you as described above during participation in the above-referenced study. I will not use the recordings for any other reason than those stated in the consent form without your written permission.

Participant’s Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Participant’s Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Researcher’s Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Researcher’s Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

RUTGERS UNIVERSITY  
Office of Research and Sponsored Programs  
ASB III, 3 Rutgers Plaza, Cook Campus  
New Brunswick, NJ 08901

October 13, 2011

P.I. Name: Dauber  
Protocol #: 12-020M

Dear Jonathan Dauber: ✓

( Initial / Amendment / Continuation / Continuation w/ Amendment )

**Protocol Title:** "Private vs. Public: Parental Choice of Schools and the Reasons Why"

This is to advise you that the above-referenced study has been presented to the Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects in Research, and the following action was taken subject to the conditions and explanations provided below:

<b>Approval Date:</b>	9/16/2011	<b>Expiration Date:</b>	9/15/2012
<b>Expedited Category(s):</b>	6,7	<b>Approved # of Subject(s):</b>	16

This approval is based on the assumption that the materials you submitted to the Office of Research and Sponsored Programs (ORSP) contain a complete and accurate description of the ways in which human subjects are involved in your research. The following conditions apply:

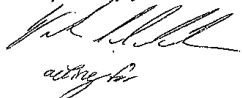
- **This Approval-**The research will be conducted according to the most recent version of the protocol that was submitted. **This approval is valid ONLY for the dates listed above;**
- **Reporting-**ORSP must be immediately informed of any injuries to subjects that occur and/or problems that arise, in the course of your research;
- **Modifications-**Any proposed changes **MUST** be submitted to the IRB as an amendment for review and approval prior to implementation;
- **Consent Form(s)-**Each person who signs a consent document will be given a copy of that document, if you are using such documents in your research. The Principal Investigator must retain all signed documents for at least three years after the conclusion of the research;
- **Continuing Review-**You should receive a courtesy e-mail renewal notice for a Request for Continuing Review before the expiration of this project's approval. However, it is your responsibility to ensure that an application for continuing review has been submitted to the IRB for review and approval prior to the expiration date to extend the approval period;

**Additional Notes:** Expedited Approval per 45 CFR 46.110

**Failure to comply with these conditions will result in withdrawal of this approval.**

Please note that the IRB has the authority to observe, or have a third party observe, the consent process or the research itself. The Federal-wide Assurance (FWA) number for the Rutgers University IRB is FWA00003913; this number may be requested on funding applications or by collaborators.

Respectfully yours,



Sheryl Goldberg  
Director of Office of Research and Sponsored Programs  
gibel@grants.rutgers.edu

cc: Catherine A. Lugg

**RUTGERS UNIVERSITY**  
**Office of Research and Sponsored Programs**  
**ASB III, 3 Rutgers Plaza, Cook Campus**  
**New Brunswick, NJ 08901**

August 9, 2012

**P.I. Name: Dauber**  
**Protocol #: 12-020Mx**

Dear Jonathan Dauber:

( Initial / Amendment / Continuation / Continuation w/ Amendment )

**Protocol Title:** "Private vs. Public: Parental Choice of Schools and the Reasons Why"

This is to advise you that the above-referenced study has been presented to the Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects in Research, and the following action was taken subject to the conditions and explanations provided below:

<b>Approval Date:</b>	8/6/2012	<b>Expiration Date:</b>	8/5/2013	<b>Expedited Category:</b>	8c
<b>Approved # of Subjects:</b>	16	<b>Currently Enrolled:</b>	16		

This approval is based on the assumption that the materials you submitted to the Office of Research and Sponsored Programs (ORSP) contain a complete and accurate description of the ways in which human subjects are involved in your research. The following conditions apply:

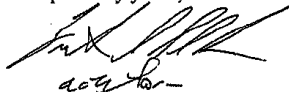
- **This Approval**-The research will be conducted according to the most recent version of the protocol that was submitted. **This approval is valid ONLY for the dates listed above;**
- **Reporting**-ORSP must be immediately informed of any injuries to subjects that occur and/or problems that arise, in the course of your research;
- **Modifications**-Any proposed changes **MUST** be submitted to the IRB as an amendment for review and approval prior to implementation;
- **Consent Form(s)**-Each person who signs a consent document will be given a copy of that document, if you are using such documents in your research. The Principal Investigator must retain all signed documents for at least three years after the conclusion of the research;
- **Continuing Review**-You should receive a courtesy e-mail renewal notice for a Request for Continuing Review before the expiration of this project's approval. However, it is your responsibility to ensure that an application for continuing review has been submitted to the IRB for review and approval prior to the expiration date to extend the approval period;

**Additional Notes:** Continuation Expedited Approval per 45 CFR 46.110  
 - IRB Approval has been provided for data analysis only. PI is to contact the IRB prior to the recruitment of additional subjects or further interactions/interventions with subjects.

**Failure to comply with these conditions will result in withdrawal of this approval.**

Please note that the IRB has the authority to observe, or have a third party observe, the consent process or the research itself. The Federal-wide Assurance (FWA) number for the Rutgers University IRB is FWA00003913; this number may be requested on funding applications or by collaborators.

Respectfully yours,



Sheryl Goldberg  
 Director of Office of Research and Sponsored Programs  
 gibei@grants.rutgers.edu

cc: Catherine A. Lugg

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