



MICHIGAN FUTURE SCHOOLS  
The High School Accelerator for Metro Detroit

# Detroit Parents as School Shoppers

Summary of research findings

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*Summary of research findings*

**Michigan Future Schools (MFS)** – the high school accelerator – is an initiative of Michigan Future Inc. Its goal is to launch thirty-five new quality high schools serving students from the City of Detroit over eight years, with an initial goal of raising \$17 million to open 11 new high schools by 2013.

To date MFS has helped open four high schools. Three additional schools have been awarded grants and will open either this fall or in the fall of 2013.

Each school that MFS invests in commits to meeting high student achievement standards: At least 85 percent of each school's students will graduate from high school, and of those graduates, at least 85 percent will enroll in college, and of those who enroll in college, at least 85 percent will earn a college degree.

Opening new schools has been, for more than a decade, the primary strategy of school reformers in Detroit. The operating assumption has been "If you build it, they will come:" That there is pent up demand in Detroit for more higher quality schools, and that they would automatically attract students and parents.

Clearly that is no longer the case. In a marketplace characterized by a growing supply of schools open to Detroit students and a substantially declining number of school age Detroiters, all schools – no matter their quality – need to work at recruiting students. Simply having a good school is not enough to guarantee full enrollment.

Opening new college preparatory high schools at scale is only part of the formula for insuring that Detroit high school

## *Michigan Future Schools*



- **Detroit Delta Preparatory Academy**
- **Detroit Leadership Academy**
- **Schools for the Future**
- **Dr. Benjamin Carson High School of Science & Medicine**
- **Detroit Collegiate Preparatory High School**
- **Jalen Rose Leadership Academy**
- **Detroit Edison Public School Academy**



students receive a quality education. Today, the demand side matters as much as the supply side.

From its inception, MFS understood that the schools it invests in need to be good at operations, academics and student recruitment. All three matter. Along with financial support, MFS needed to help the schools it invests in build the capacity to be first rate in all three areas.

When it came to designing student recruitment assistance, we found that no one had done the basic research on how Detroit parents chose the schools they enrolled their children in. When we looked nationally for that kind of research, we couldn't find it either.

That is the genesis of this research and report: Doing the basic research to better understand Detroit parents as shoppers for K-12 schools. Given the absence of this basic research, we decided to focus on all students, not just high school students, and to share our research findings with everyone involved in school reform in Detroit, not just the MFS supported schools.

To do the research we assembled a team of national and state leaders in researching urban parents as school shoppers and conducting household surveys. They worked very hard to ensure that the sample is representative of Detroit households with school-age children. The research was conducted in the spring/summer of 2011.

The resulting report provides a descriptive profile of the school shopping behavior of 1,073 Detroit households with 1,699 school-age children. Based on doorstep interviews and focus group discussions with these families, the report represents one of the most comprehensive and aggressive attempts nationally to answer important questions about how urban parents think about and pursue school options. The report also provides rich descriptions of how four different school shopper types approach the school search and selection processes.

The complete report written by our lead researchers – Dr. Patrick J. Wolf, Professor of Education Reform and 21st Century Endowed Chair in School Choice at the University of Arkansas in Fayetteville, and Dr. Thomas Stewart, President/CEO of Qwaku & Associates – can be found at [www.michiganfuture.org/schools](http://www.michiganfuture.org/schools). The report provides detailed tabulation of the collected data, the authors' analysis of how Detroit parents navigate the k-12 marketplace and their recommendations on how MFS and other school operators and reformers can help parents enroll their students in higher quality schools.

Also available at [www.michiganfuture.org/schools](http://www.michiganfuture.org/schools) is a slide show that provides an overview of the research findings.



What follows is a summary of the research findings. The research answers six basic questions about the demand side of the k-12 education marketplace in Detroit:

### 1. What schools do Detroit students attend?

As can be seen in Table 1, 55 Percent of Detroit students attended their assigned DPS school in 2011 compared to 45 percent who attended a school that requires parents to choose the school.

*Table 1*

<b>Current school attending</b>	<b>Percent</b>
Assigned Detroit Public School	55.0
Detroit public magnet school	5.1
Public charter school	22.5
Public school outside of Detroit	15.2
Private or home school	2.5

Students in choice schools include those in DPS magnet schools, charters school, traditional district schools other than DPS and a small number in either private schools or home schooled.

*Table 2*

<b>Current school attending</b>	<b>PreK-5</b>	<b>6-8</b>	<b>9-12</b>
Assigned Detroit Public School	55.2 %	44.1 %	60.4 %
Detroit public magnet school	2.4	9.3	6.6
Public charter school	27.3	26.7	12.8
Public school outside of Detroit	13.7	16.5	16.9
Private or home school	1.3	3.4	3.3

Table 2 depicts the same data broken down for elementary, middle and high schools.

The most noticeable difference is the substantial drop off in high school students in charter schools. Only 13 percent compared to 27 percent in elementary and middle schools. The drop off is almost certainly the result of a lack of supply: most charter operators do not provide high schools.



## 2. How many Detroit parents shop for schools?

Seventy-one percent of Detroit parents are school shoppers, 29 percent don't shop for schools. To be considered a "shopper" parent(s) had to have enrolled at least one of their children in a school other than the assigned DPS school at least once during the last five years. The difference between the 71 percent of shoppers and 55 percent of students in an assigned DPS school is that a portion of students in an assigned DPS school either have a sibling who is or has been in the last five years enrolled in a non-DPS assigned school or they themselves sometime in the last five years attended a non-DPS assigned school.

## 3. When, who and how do parents shop for schools?

Most parents who shop generally consider schools between May and August. Most parents begin the school shopping process during the late spring and make their final decision during the summer. About 17 percent of parents report enrolling their children in more than one school and choosing the best option after they know all the schools their child has been accepted to.

As displayed in Table 3, mothers are the predominant decision makers of which school their children attend.

*Table 3*

<b>Primary decision maker for choice of school</b>	<b>%</b>
Mother	58
Father	23
Students	7
Other Relative	6

High school students have a voice in deciding what school they attend. They are the prime decision maker in 11 percent of the households.

*Table 4*

<b>Sources of information when shopping</b>	<b>%</b>
Other parents	61
School performance/reputation	49
School fair	38
Other, including website, school guide, etc.	31

Table 4 lists the sources of information parents used to help choose a school for their children. Parents relied most on word of mouth recommendations from other parents followed by a school's reputation.



#### 4. What do parents look for in a school?

When asked to list the top three characteristics they look for in choosing a school, academic performance ranked first followed by safety and discipline, then academic program, extra-curricular activities and convenient location. They were the only features mentioned by at least 30 percent of parents. See Table 5.

*Table 5*

Characteristic	%
Academic performance	61.3
Safety and discipline	49.9
Academic program	45.3
Extra-curricular activities	37.2
Convenient location	32.8
School and class size	16.1
Transportation	12.4
Other	33.3

When asked the one feature that matters most in selecting a school, academic performance was far and away the leader. Because of its importance to both parents and reformers, in the focus group we probed what parents defined as high academic performance. Their answers suggested some strong distrust of standardized test scores and even grades. Rather they seem to look for good teachers, student interest/engagement and homework as indicators of quality.

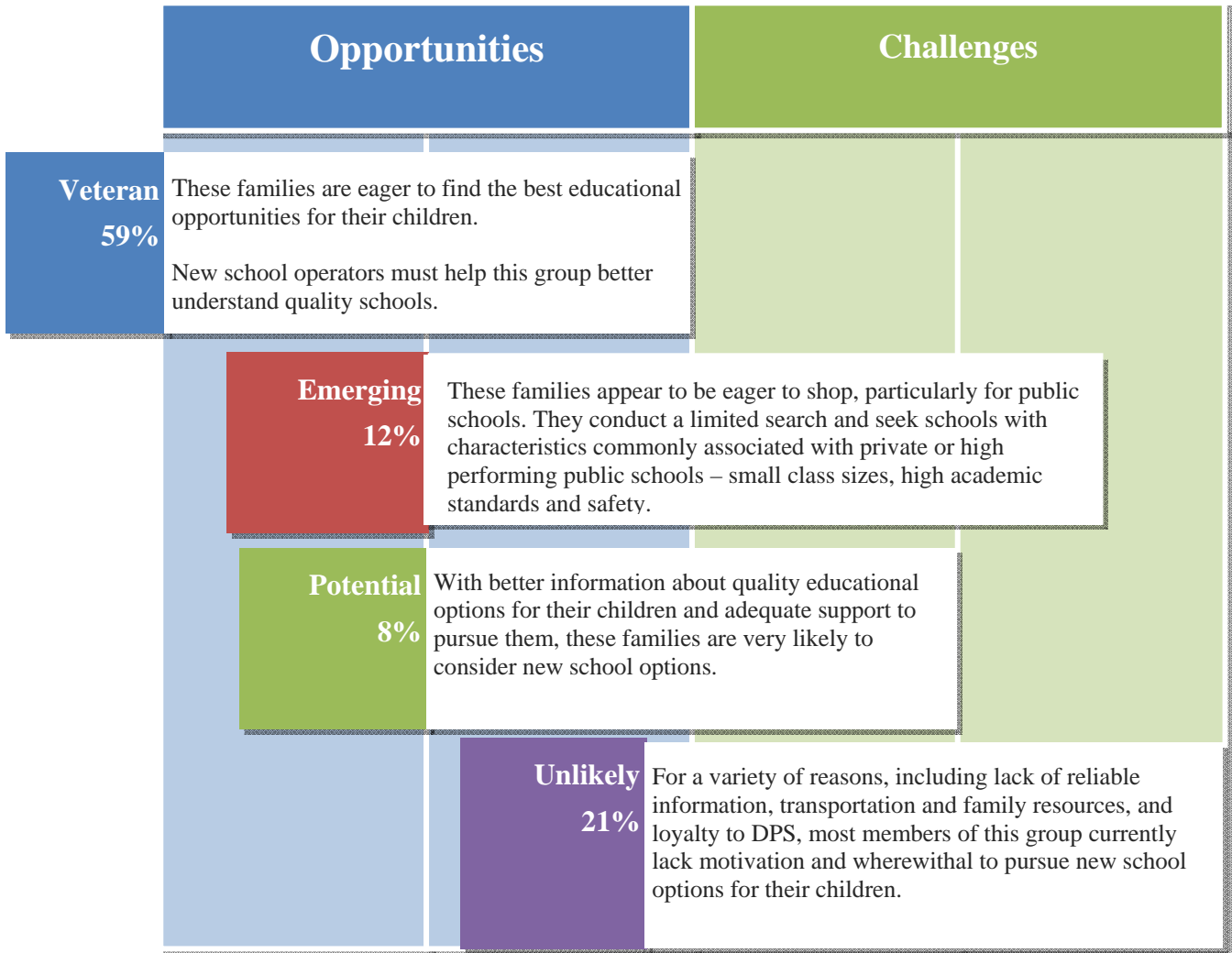
Many school operators believe that transportation is a major barrier to parents enrolling in a choice school. The data indicates that transportation may not be a major barrier. Transportation ranked low on the top 3 characteristic list. Only 7 percent of parents said they did not have access to a car. And when asked how far they were willing to travel to take their children to school, 80 percent said up to three miles or more.

#### 5. What can be done to convert current non-shoppers into future shoppers?

Dr. Stewart and Dr. Wolfe determined that there were four categories of Detroit shoppers, as displayed in Figure 1. Two are already shoppers – veteran and emerging. Of the other two, only those categorized as potential are considered to be realistically convertible into shoppers. The potential group includes only 8 percent of Detroit households with school-age children.



Figure 1



One factor that hinders school shopping is that preponderance of Detroit parents say they are satisfied with the schools they have enrolled their children in. Only 13.6 percent of parents say that they are dissatisfied with the schools their child attends. As you can see in Table 6, the category with the highest dissatisfaction levels is safety and discipline at a still low 20 percent.



Table 6

Item	Very Satisfied	Satisfied	Dissatisfied	Very Dissatisfied
In general	34.9 %	51.8 %	7.6 %	5.6 %
Teacher quality	34.8	53.3	7.5	4.4
Academic performance	38.0	48.4	9.4	3.7
Safety & discipline	38.6	45.0	10.9	8.1
Interaction with parents	38.1	46.3	10.1	5.4
Accommodate student needs	35.0	49.0	10.4	5.7
Extracurriculars	35.4	47.7	10.5	6.4
Location/ transportation	40.5	46.1	8.6	4.8

This, of course, is in stark contrast to most thought leaders and reformers who view most schools that Detroit students attend – no matter the form of governance – to be substandard at best.

Every school will have to decide how it can improve its offerings to students and parents – both academic and other. Some areas that emerged from the research are transportation (either providing it or paying for it), safety on the way to the school (may matter as much as safety in the school) and before and after school programs.

But the data seem to suggest that the biggest recruitment payoff is in better marketing, with a focus on aggressively communicating with parents what the school uniquely offers their children.

Some of the ideas that emerged in the focus groups around both attracting new shoppers and helping current shoppers choose higher quality schools include:

- Creating an easy to use objective ranking of schools. There was a widespread feeling that little up-to-date objective information is available
- Connecting veteran shoppers with emerging and potential shoppers. Parents want to have mentors who can help them navigate the shopping process.
- Going beyond open houses and job fairs by offering parents a chance to observe the school in operation. Potential shoppers were especially interested in visiting schools and observing teaching and learning.





## 6. How many of the current non-shoppers are unlikely ever to be shoppers?

Drs. Stewart and Wolf concluded that 21 percent of households with school-age children – a substantial majority of the non-shoppers – are not now and unlikely in the future to be school shoppers. These households not only have not in the past five years enrolled any of their children in a choice school, but also have high levels of satisfaction with the current schools their children are enrolled in, are loyal to DPS and/or its teachers union and have not shopped for any supplemental education services that are available to the children.

So a central conclusion of the research is that there is not a large pool of untapped households that can substantially increase the demand for choice schools. More likely is that as the supply of choice schools expands they will compete with each other for a shrinking student population. (Unless choice schools can attract students from outside of Detroit.)

If you have questions about the research or are interested in exploring the results further, please feel free to contact Kim Trent, Michigan Future Schools Student Recruitment Manager, at [kim@michiganfuture.org](mailto:kim@michiganfuture.org).