

**What Do We Want from Schools?  
What Parents and Students Want Schools to Deliver**

Kelly Hallberg  
Learning Point Associates

kelly.hallberg@learningpt.org

And

Gina Burkhardt  
Learning Point Associates

gina.burkhardt@learningpt.org

And

Lawrence B. Friedman  
Learning Point Associates

larry.friedman@learningpt.org

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School leaders have long discussed and debated the introduction of competition as a mechanism for school reform. By requiring schools to compete for students, promoters of policies such as private school vouchers, charter schools, and open enrollment argue that competition will spur innovation and school improvement.<sup>1</sup> They also argue that these alternatives to the traditional public school better meet the needs of the students they serve.

This dialogue and debate appears to be powered mainly by the supply side of the issues. However, it is questionable whether enough serious effort has been made to delve deeply into the demand side of the market. Rather than looking at the quantity or diversity of options offered, it is time to look more closely at the level of understanding underneath the public's articulation of need. There is value in questioning how the supply side may or may not intentionally target specific audiences and/or influence decisions made by demanders.

To investigate the demand side of school reform, we first turned to the existing research literature. We pieced together various areas of the education literature to sketch a picture of what researchers know about demand for public education.

The research literature on the demand side of school reform provided an important jumping-off point, but we found significant gaps in our knowledge. To fill in these gaps, we collected original data from demanders themselves. With the assistance of three Midwestern school districts (one rural, one in a midsized suburban area, and one in a central city), we conducted eight focus groups: three with parents and five with high school students. We also administered surveys to parents and high school students in the suburban and rural districts. Some 181 students and 45 parents completed the surveys, providing detailed information about what they expect schools to be able to do, how they express these expectations, and the extent to which they believe schools are responsive.

The findings from both the research literature and the original data collected from stakeholders shed some light on what parents and students want from their schools and how they articulate these demands. Parents and students alike express common broad expectations of schools. They want schools to prepare students for success when they leave high school and understand that certain components, such as safe learning communities, high-quality teachers, and low class sizes, need to be in place to support student learning.

However, parents and students face several barriers in translating these demands into more specific descriptions of what these components look like in reality. Although many can articulate broad goals for schools, it is much more difficult for them to address how a school reaches these goals. In addition, some parents and students need help delineating specific needs about curricula, programs, and personnel. Add to this the fact that parents differ in their access to information about and their ability to assess school quality, leading to an inequitable distribution of resources. Finally, when parents and students articulate their needs, they tend to do so locally, speaking to teachers and school principals. These school leaders often are not equipped to handle the issue—that is, they do not have the mechanisms or levers to address the concerns that are articulated, leaving parents and students frustrated.

### **What Parents and Students Want: General but Common Goals**

Research literature and original data we collected suggest that parents and students articulate a fairly similar vision for how schools should serve students. They see the primary goal of schooling as preparing students for life after high school, not only ensuring that they could pursue a college degree, but also outfitting students with vital life skills. To ensure that schools are equipped to prepare students with these skills, they recognize that certain pieces, such as safe

learning communities, high-quality teachers, and low class sizes, need to be in place to support student learning.

### *College and/or Workforce Readiness*

Parents and students want schools that will prepare students for life after high school. Prepared students not only have the academic skills to pursue postsecondary education, but also have the practical know-how to navigate successfully in the real world. Research literature on the demand side of school reform suggests that parents and students demand that schools provide rigorous academic training.

To this end, a growing literature reports that parents stress that the academic aspects of school are most important<sup>2</sup>. For example, Stair, Rephann, and Heberling<sup>3</sup> surveyed households in a Pennsylvania town and found that community members would contribute an additional 25 percent on average to the school budget if test scores improved by approximately 10 percent.

Focus group and survey respondents in participating school districts echoed similar themes. Roughly 76 percent of students and 91 percent of parents reported that it is very important that the school system prepare students to continue their education after high school. Parents and students also were asked to rate the importance of schools in helping students develop social skills, teaching facts and subject knowledge, and developing critical thinking skills. The percentage of parents and students who rated each skill as very important can be seen in Table 1. When parents were asked which of these skills is most important, the majority (64 percent) chose developing critical thinking skills. The majority of students (59 percent), on the other hand, selected developing social skills.

**Table 1. Percentage of Parents and Teachers Who Rated Particular Skills As Very Important**

<b>How important is it that the school system ...</b>	<b>Parents (n = 45)</b>	<b>Students (n = 181)</b>
Help students develop social skills such as communicating and getting along well with others	93.3%	62.4%
Teach facts and subject knowledge	75.0%	55.2%
Develop students' critical thinking skills	84.1%	67.4%

Interestingly, in the focus groups we conducted, students also stressed the importance of practical and social skills in the training they receive from schools. For example, when asked what skills students graduating from the ideal school would have, one student said, “I think just well equipped. I think the big thing now is being able to be a leader in a group of people and just having ways of communicating ideas with others.” Another student said:

I think one thing that a lot of kids [need] is social skills, and they don't know how to interact well with other people, especially adults. They're comfortable with other students, but they don't know how to act properly with another adult.

One student described the value of a program in which she had been involved that prepared her for job and college interviews. Another student articulated a need for more training in financial literacy.

### *Infrastructure for Learning*

Parents and students identify several components that need to be in place in order for schools to prepare students for a successful future after high school. They argue that schools

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need to be safe learning environments staffed by high-quality teachers and that class sizes need to be manageable.

*Safe Learning Environments.* In focus groups, stakeholders argued that schools must be safe places for students in order for learning to occur. They stress that violence or bullying can undermine any other initiatives in place in schools. Research literature confirms this. Schneider, Teske, and Marschall<sup>4</sup> found that school safety is particularly important among parents with no college education and among urban parents. However, in this study, safety was seen as a key issue across all survey respondents: 81 percent of parents and 68 percent of students rated school safety as a very important school quality.

*High-Quality Teachers.* Effective teachers are seen as a cornerstone of high-quality schools. Surveying 1,600 parents in four school districts, Schneider, Teske, and Marschall<sup>5</sup> found that teacher quality was chosen most frequently as the most important quality of schools. Similarly, in a series of focus groups with more than 250 middle school students from a large Midwestern urban school district, Storz<sup>6</sup> found that students articulated a desire for high-quality teachers and higher teacher expectations of students. Some of these students reported a lack of caring from their teachers as well as a lack of resources to hire permanent teachers.

In our sample, roughly 66 percent of students and 91 percent of parents who completed the survey said that having high-quality teachers in their schools was very important to them. As one student focus group participant said, “You can’t learn if you don’t have a good teacher. You’ve got to have a teacher that wants to teach, not because they are getting paid to teach.” Several students in a district that recently had experienced teacher lay-offs expressed concerns that teacher quality was not taken into account in determining which teachers were retained.

*Small Class Sizes.* Focus group participants in the school districts we worked with also noted the importance of small class sizes. This demand was most clearly articulated in the school district that recently had experienced teacher lay-offs. Students and parents in this district reported that they had seen a notable increase in class sizes as a result of the lay-offs, and they believed the larger class sizes had a detrimental effect on teaching and learning.

### **Barriers to Meeting Demand**

Parents and students run into barriers translating their demands for schools into sustained change in the opportunities and services that schools provide. These barriers limit the ability of parents and students to get what they want from schools within a traditional governance structure, especially when there is limited school choice, but also in those areas with more school choice options. The barriers to meeting demand are discussed briefly below. The next section looks at recommendations for how practitioners, policy makers, and researchers can help alleviate barriers.

### *Need for a Deeper Understanding of the Processes of Schooling*

Despite the fact that parents and students identify a fairly consistent list of demands for schools, neither parents nor students are always able to more deeply define exactly what these demands look like in successful practice. They have limited access to information that would develop their understanding of what high performance looks like and do not generally understand or often pay attention to the publicly available measures of evidence. On the other hand, when a practice is consistently not working, our participants like others in similar studies can define what bad practice looks like.

The college application and selection process is an example of this. Parents and students reported needing help dealing with the complex and often opaque college application process. They were able to provide examples of the lack of support they and their children received from schools. They reported that counselors were far too overworked and outnumbered to provide helpful guidance in this area. In fact, some of their children never see a counselor or receive any help, often leading them to abandon the whole application process.

Again, in our participating districts we attempted to probe more deeply into what “meeting needs” looks like in a school, what differentiated instruction would look like in a classroom, what defines an effective teacher, and what measures they use to define successful schooling. Answers to these questions indicated that respondents had limited understanding about how an effective school would function, with parents having difficulty articulating educational needs, interests, and values applying to students other than their own. As one parent said, “I think your ideal school setting should be able to, I guess, support a child in whatever it is they want to do or whatever their vision is.” Students were much better articulating an answer to this question. One student said:

It’s not only the pace at which people learn, but everyone has a different learning style. You’ll notice here that a lot of teachers here, their whole class consists of everybody taking notes and then doing some homework. Some kids sit there, we don’t do any examples on the board. Some people are kinesthetic learners, and some people like to see things done, some people are good at just sitting and taking notes.

Students in our sample groups stressed that it is important that what they are learning is perceived as relevant to their life and interests. Research literature supports this and suggests that when this is not the case, student engagement can suffer. For example, the Indiana High School Survey of Student Engagement surveyed more than eighty thousand students in 2006 and found the majority of students were bored and disengaged with their coursework. More than 50 percent

of students stated that they were bored every day, with 75 percent indicating that it was due to uninteresting material and approximately 40 percent indicating that the material was not relevant or difficult enough. Many reported the ability to earn high grades in their classes with only minimal studying. Two thirds of high school students surveyed who study three or fewer hours per week reported receiving mostly A and B grades<sup>7</sup>.

### *Differential Ability to Articulate Student Needs and Assess School Quality*

Although parents and students from all socioeconomic backgrounds tend to articulate a need for schools that better meet students' academic needs, research literature and the data collected for this study suggest that they differ in their abilities to access information about school quality and to articulate their needs for improved educational opportunities.

*Limited Access to Information.* Detailed information about school quality is not widely available to parents and students. For example, teacher quality is important to both parents and teachers, but they have limited information that allows them to assess the quality of teachers in their school. With some work, stakeholders may be able to find information about how senior a school's teaching staff is, how many teachers hold advanced degrees, or how much they are paid, but the literature about teacher quality suggests these are imperfect proxies at best<sup>8</sup>.

In this environment of limited information, parents and students rely on local media, information provided by the school, and conversations with friends and neighbors to make assessments about the quality of the learning opportunities available to them. The extent to which parents rely on these different sources of information varies. Schneider, Teske, and Marschall<sup>9</sup> find that while parents with less education are more likely to report finding helpful information from the school or the media, more highly educated parents rely more heavily on

their social network. This is likely because their social network has greater access to information about school quality creating a situation of inequitable access to information. As Schneider,

Teske, and Marschall<sup>10</sup> write:

Highly educated parents have access to an efficient pathway to information: in their daily contact with friends, neighbors, and other parents, they can gather reliable information about the schools relatively cheaply from other high educated people they meet. In contrast, less-educated individuals are tied to educational discussants with lower levels of education and with less reliable information.

*Most Articulation Is Local, but Access Is Not Equal.* Research literature suggests that parents express their demands of the education system on a continual basis through use of communication with the school, joint decision making, advocacy, or volunteering<sup>11</sup>. Parent and student focus group participants echoed this sentiment, reporting that the classroom teacher is the first resource they approach when they do not believe their needs are being met.

However, access to teachers and principals is not equal across stakeholders. Higher-income, more educated parents are more likely to successfully articulate their needs through this channel than lower-income, less educated parents<sup>12</sup>. Ethnic differences also are notable.

Linguistic and cultural barriers as well as racial and economic stereotypes can make it difficult for some parents to express their concerns and for the school to respond appropriately. This sometimes leads parents and their children to exit the school system in various ways, such as transferring students into charter schools or using tutoring services outside of the school<sup>13</sup>.

Most parents and students in our groups report that teachers are the first point of contact when they believe their needs are not being met. If this is unsuccessful, they may bring the principal in to the discussion. However, access and comfort with seeking solutions within the system seems to vary across stakeholders. It is clear that not all stakeholders have or believe they have equal access to the school personnel. In less common instances, stakeholders go outside the

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system to find out how best to have their needs met. They seek alternative service providers, pursue litigation against school systems, or move to another school system entirely. Despite direct communication being the primary means for parents and students to articulate their demands, not all parents have utilized this mechanism for articulating demand. Only 28 percent of students and 73 percent of parents who completed the survey in the two study districts reported that they had talked to the principal, superintendent, or other school administrator.

### *Even If Needs Are Articulated, Is Anyone Responding?*

Evidence from the research literature about whether schools are able and willing to respond to parent and student demand is mixed. Fowler<sup>14</sup> found limited support for this proposition in a study of open enrollment. Drawing on a survey of schools in Ohio, she found that schools were willing to compete for students if the students that could be recruited were similar to the schools' students but wealthier schools and schools that served more "desirable" populations than neighboring school districts did not "market" themselves for increased enrollment. Similarly, Funkhouser and Colopy<sup>15</sup> found that districts that had lost students under Minnesota's open-enrollment policy reduced staff, cut courses, and eliminated many afterschool activities rather than invest in new policies and practices that would attract students. However, a study of open enrollment in Massachusetts found that districts that lost students to other districts eventually stemmed their losses and became net receivers of students through interdistrict transfer. This suggests that the districts may have been able to make changes that made them more attractive to parents<sup>16</sup>.

Our district participants reported limits to how responsive the schools were to their needs. Only 13 percent of parents and 15 percent of students surveyed said that schools were very

responsive. An additional 55 percent of parents and 28 percent of students said that schools were moderately responsive.

Focus group participants reported that although school administrators listen and are sympathetic to their demands, they often are unable to enact desired changes. As one participant stated, “I think the school is willing to listen. Whether we have an influence, I question that.” Stakeholders reported that although administrators often agree that the things they want are necessary, they often are told that the district is powerless to make the desired change as a result of limited resources, restrictive teacher contracts, and requirements imposed by the state department of education. One parent said:

Everyone’s pretty accessible. But if I went to the principal at the high school and said this is really a deficit, you’d hear it’s the budget. That’s pretty much what you’d hear. We can’t do anything because of the budget.

Two concerns need more study and review. The first is that if parents and students can recognize bad practice and articulate a high level of need for better or different practice in certain areas, are they going elsewhere to get their needs met when the district or school does not respond? Does the availability of options influence how and when choices are made? Do costs and geography unduly impact how aggressively demanders seek alternatives and/or choose options? How does socioeconomic status, ethnicity, and tradition affect how aggressively choice is pursued? It is unclear from the focus groups and surveys for this study whether participants access alternative resources. Rather, it appears that there is considerable willingness to just accept district or school responses that change cannot happen because of administrative, budgetary, or regulatory reasons. And, because demands tend to be articulated locally, state law makers and departments of education may not become cognizant of the demand and do not take steps to respond even though they may be more able to address the needs being articulated.

The second concern is whether, given the facts about levels of information and knowledge, suppliers can target those parents and students who more strategically align with their goals and selectively recruit students who better fit their models for success.

## **Conclusion and Recommendations**

The findings presented here shed some light on what parents and students want from their schools and how they articulate these demands. Parents and students across socioeconomic status and locale express some common broad expectations of schools. They want schools to prepare students for success when they leave high school and understand that certain pieces, such as safe learning communities, high-quality teachers, and low class sizes, need to be in place to support student learning.

However, parents and students face several barriers in translating these demands into reality. Although they articulate broad goals for schools, it is much more difficult for parents and students to articulate specific details about how to reach these goals. Parents and students need help identifying specific needs and curricula, programs, and personnel that will meet these needs. In addition, parents differ in their access to information about and their ability to assess school quality, leading to an inequitable distribution of resources. Finally, when parents and students articulate their needs, they tend to do so locally, speaking to teachers and school principals. These school leaders often are not equipped to address the concerns that are articulated, leaving parents and students frustrated.

Even with expanding school choice options, more attention needs to be paid to the demand side of education to help eliminate or reduce the barriers to meeting parent and student

demand. Some of these barriers are significant, and resources must be brought to bear to overcome them. Practitioners, policy makers, and researchers all have a role to play.

### *Practitioners*

Parents and students need more assistance clarifying their specific demands, identifying individual student needs, and assessing school offerings. They need reliable information about school quality and assistance using it. Informing parents about school quality cannot be left to informal social networks that provide unequal access to information. If the school system cannot meet the demand for assistance in using the information to make informed decisions, the system should help those who can connect with those seeking the service. Districts leaders have the responsibility to ensure that they are reaching all parent groups and that they are not ignoring those who have language and/or cultural barriers to understanding or interacting with officials. Some examples might include creating parent tasks forces, establishing informational programs in diverse languages, and providing more easily interpretable information about school quality that goes beyond standardized test scores.

### *Policy Makers*

As policy makers explore school choice as an avenue for improving school quality, they must grapple with the inefficiencies in the educational marketplace. Receipt of public funds should be tied not only to the provision of services, but also to the provision of accessible information about school quality and support for its use that can assist parents and students in making informed choices. In addition to supporting policies to increase information access for parents and students, policy makers need to make sure that they hear local consumers of

educational goods and strive to better understand the demand side of education, supporting policies that will better meet the needs of parents and students.

### *Researchers*

The research reviewed in this paper provides insight into how schools can address more effectively the demand side of school reform. However, it generates more questions than answers. A closer and ongoing examination is needed of how parents, students, and community and business leaders define the skills—both academic and practical—that they expect students to master prior to graduation. It is important to examine whether priorities hold as these skills are more clearly articulated. Another set of questions concerning access and cost should be pursued: Do many of these stakeholders indeed have access but cannot afford alternative choices? What barriers exist to exploring and/or choosing alternatives because of geographical, cultural, or transportation constraints? Are public and private suppliers creating conditions that directly or indirectly inhibit access to and information about options? Research into these and other aspects of the demand side of education could provide useful insight to practitioners and policy makers as they strive to better meet the needs of parents and students.

Finally, attention must be paid to how those who supply supplemental or supplanting options to parents and students are equitably marketing and targeting their resources. More data must be collected to learn how districts and schools that wish to stay strong on the supply side are targeting and marketing their programs and how well they are building mechanisms to respond to demand-side needs.

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