EXPLORING PARENTS EXPERIENCES WITH SCHOOL CHOICE WHEN CHOOSING A PUBLIC HIGH SCHOOL ON CAPE COD A QUALITATIVE RESEARCH STUDY

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Abstract

This paper explores the experiences, stories, and efforts that parents have taken when engaging in public school choice on Cape Cod. As part of the No Child Left Behind Legislation along with the Massachusetts Education Reform Act, public school systems can opt to become school choice districts. This allows parents from outside their public school boundaries to send their child to any school district that has classified itself as a school choice district. In many parts of Massachusetts parents have been given more options to educate their child. This has become a staple within the 65-mile peninsula of Cape Cod Massachusetts. Cape Cod contains fifteen towns that are comprised of eight public school districts; all of which practice public school choice. Employing the methodology of qualitative inquiry, parents in this study shared their personal stories and experiences they encountered while engaging in the process of school choice. Inquiring about parent’s thoughts, ideas, perceptions, and stories associated with the choice to enroll their students in a non-community district created insight into many themes that parents saw as important when choosing a school. The major themes that surfaced throughout the research included dynamic school leadership, high academic standards, extracurricular activities, athletic programs, social networks, and school safety. The literature related to school choice depicted how parents and school systems compete for students. Understanding that parents create their own realities and opinions based on their own experiences and interpretations leads us to look at school choice through the lens of Social Construction Theory.

Keywords: school choice, social networks, dynamic leadership, competition
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Chapter I: Introduction

Problem Statement

Scholars and policy makers have created more educational opportunities for parents over the last twenty years. Some of these policies include the creation of charter schools, increased federal funding in the form of Race to the Top, and the creation of public school choice. In 1991 the Massachusetts Department of Education created an inter-district school choice policy that allowed parents to send their children to schools, other than the schools in the communities that they lived in. This ability to choose a school that is not tied to where the child lives should increase educational opportunities for parents. Parents would be able to separate their residential decisions from schooling decisions. Previous to school choice, schools were tied to the housing market. The towns that had the highest taxes most likely had the best schools. Parents now have many more options when it comes to deciding on a school district for their child.

School choice has given parents more options and choices when it comes to selecting a school for their child. However this has caused school districts to adapt and has put more pressure on school systems to develop programs that parents and students see as prudent. Using simple supply and demand economics parents can now search for a school system they feel best fits the needs of their child. This has caused school systems to develop programs to compete for students. Schools have now been thrust into a competitive environment to optimize financial and educational resources. This is especially significant on Cape Cod were school choice has completely taken over the peninsula.

The close proximity of the school districts on Cape Cod has allowed parents to actively “shop” their child from one school district to the next in hopes of finding the school district that
will best serve their child. As one child leaves one district for another the sending school district will lose state funding for that child, basically the state funding follows the child to the receiving school district. A school district that loses many students due to school choice will have a considerable amount of its budget reduced. School Districts that market themselves effectively to parents are then put in a position to reap the financial benefits of School Choice.

The school choice process has certainly given parents more options, however schools are now working against each other to recruit students to enter their district, which is causing some school districts to lose a considerable amount of funds. School choice has brought schools into the economic world of competition and schools are now competing for students, while parents are now looking at and measuring schools productivity (Hoxby, 2003). This competitive environment certainly gives parents more choices and options, now it becomes increasingly important for schools to understand how parents determine what quality education is.

This research study explored how parents choose one public school over another public school. More specifically, it investigated factors or characteristics that parents look for when they chose a school for their child. It would seem obvious that parents would tend to review a school's standardized test scores, class size, and teacher quality when making a decision on a school. A more important question maybe where or how do parents find out information regarding schools? There are state and government resources available online for parents to research on all public schools. This research also explored the social interactions parents have with friends, neighbors, and other parents; these interactions can influence their decision on a school for their child.

Policy makers have tried to find ways to improve student achievement through a number of federal and state mandates. Parental involvement has always been a topic that contributes to
improved student achievement (Epstein, 1990). Now that parents have more options when choosing a school for their child they should be more engaged in their child’s learning process. The No Child Left Behind Law gave states the ability to implement “public school choice.” This gave parents the ability to look for a public school system that best fit the needs of their child, as perceived by them (Archibald, 2004). This literature review examined the new found competitive nature of schools through school choice, the key elements which parents look for when choosing a school district for their child, and how parents gain knowledge associated with a particular school or school district.

**Significance of the Problem**

The origins of school choice started with Milton Friedman in 1955. Freidman wrote an essay that outlined the argument that parents should have the ability to look for a school that best fit the needs of their child. This would help level the playing field and promote a more equitable educational process (Friedman, 1955). The modern adaptation of Friedman’s ideas began to significantly surface in the 1980’s and eventually become solidified under the No Child Left Behind Act in 1991 (Hess & Finn, 2007). There have been numerous types of research studies and dissertations done on school choice. These include qualitative, quantitative, and mix methods styles of research. A methodological review of twenty empirical studies done on school choice revealed that the majority of research has been done on student achievement levels due to school choice, parental involvement in regards to school choice, and socio-economic mobility as a direct impact of school choice. In addition to studying school choice throughout this country evidence suggests that this is a Global issue. There are numerous research studies that have been done in Europe, in particular Great Britain and Canada, on school choice. Inter-district school
choice is perhaps the most important form of educational choice in the United States and is expanding to many nations of the world (Carlson, Lavery, & Witte, 2011).

**Purpose of school choice.** With the inception of No Child Left Behind, the federal government turned to a market-like mechanism to help improve public schools throughout the country. The federal government created the opportunity for charter schools and instated an option for public school choice. The general idea behind school choice is to give families that live in school districts that are underperforming the option to bring their child to a district that is showing excellent results on student achievement.

School choice has two important perspectives. The first perspective is for the parents who make the decisions regarding which district to choose for their child. The second perspective is for the school district to decide if it wants to be a school choice district. The most recent research on school choice has focused on parental decision-making, improving student achievement through competition, and the socio-economics that affect all families due to school choice. Market theory suggests that an educational system that gives families more options when choosing a school will create competition among schools for student enrollments, resulting in schools being more responsive to the needs and interests of parents and students by providing different types of programs for different types of families (Bosetti, 2004).

**Justification for the research.** It has been well documented that some school districts gain a financial advantage through school choice and others lose significant funds through school choice. As of December 2011, 1,018 students on Cape Cod exercised their option of school choice (Mass, D.O.E., 2011). Over a thousand students chose to attend a different public school on Cape Cod rather than attend the school in district that they currently live in. An example of the financial implications is the town of Chatham which had 203 students enter the district, and
55 students left the district, creating a net tuition gain of $1,036,610, where as a school system like Dennis-Yarmouth had 324 students leave, and only 78 students entered the district, resulting in a loss of $1,543,799 (Mass, D.O.E., 2011).

This research explored what parents considered to be a good school versus a poor school. The results of this study should allow school districts to improve and meet the needs of their students. School choice creates competition among public school districts, while creating more educational opportunities for parents and students. The greater competition among school districts, the greater the productivity gains or student outcomes and the lower per pupil expenditures (Hoxby, 2000). As competition among schools increases it is important to understand what drives parents to move their child from one district to the next. This study determined what parents and students view as the most important criteria of a school system or school. In doing this, the school districts will be able to use this information to improve current practices and reach all students and families in their district.

**School districts financial impact of school choice.** Many school districts in Massachusetts have experienced a substantial, negative financial impact due to school choice. This is evident throughout the communities of Cape Cod. The resort communities of Cape Cod Massachusetts consist of fourteen towns and ten school districts that all participate in inter-district school choice. This has created a competitive environment between all school districts on Cape Cod. Due to the towns close proximity to each other, parents have the ability to "shop" around for the school district that is most appealing and best fits their child's needs. Dennis-Yarmouth Regional School District, which is one of the fourteen districts on Cape Cod, lost 356 students to school choice and charter schools, while taking in only 86 students. This estimates at about 4.5 million dollars lost due to students leaving the Dennis-Yarmouth District (Mass
D.O.E., 2011). This is an example of how school choice has affected the financial constraints of a specific school district.

**Parental engagement and school choice.** Proponents of school choice stress the revitalization of public education by giving parents options in the decision making process. Enhanced parental involvement, satisfaction, empowerment, and a sense of community have improved student achievement and are all components of school choice (Gorad, Fitz, & Taylor, 2001). As indicated in the research done by McCarthy in 2007, parents that facilitate choices for their child’s education are more likely to continue to be involved in their child’s education. This particular research took place in Australia and shows how school choice is a global issue. Parental involvement is an important part of education and any possible options that families can involve themselves in regarding their child’s education will continue to help improve student achievement (McCarthy, 2007). However in direct contradiction to this research Perlman and Santin reported in 2011, that if educational inputs, potential bias, and curriculum are taken into account and kept constant, there would be no differences in student achievement based on increases in parental options or choices (Perlman & Santin, 2011). This would rival most of the other studies that show how increasing parental choices will have a positive effect on student achievement. Parent’s roles within a child’s education are still not specifically defined. Research suggests that even well designed school programs that invite parents to be directly involved are met with only limited success in regards to student achievement (Hover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997). This study supports the results of Perlman and Satin that parental involvement is not as significant as curriculum and instruction.

**Parental engagement and decision making.** When researching school choice, it is vital to understand the criteria parents are using when making decisions regarding certain school
systems. There are numerous research studies that have focused on how parents make decisions regarding their children’s education. Using rational choice theory, school choice then leads us to understand how parents can utilize their decision making ability to make clear choices based on calculations of the costs, benefits, and probabilities of success of a certain school system (Bosetti, 2004). In fact research done by Bast and Walberg indicates that parents are just as likely to choose the best educational opportunities for their child as professional educators would (Bast & Walberg, 2004). This leads us to believe that school choice should improve parental involvement in the educational process. However when looking into the parental decision making process some research suggests that the amount and type of information given to parents makes a significant impact on their willingness to make positive decisions regarding their child’s education. If parents receive simplified information that specifically outlines the school choice process, they will be more likely to research the program and comprehend the process (Hastings, Van Weelden, & Weinstein, 2007). This research suggests that schools need to be proactive in informing parents of their choices. In the study done by Jennings (2010) administrators recruit high achieving students in order to help increase their schools test scores. Any information that is being sent home to parents would most likely be directed to more highly educated parents. This would create an unfair environment for the selection of school choice students. If the information is designed for affluent, highly educated parents, then the school may be shutting out a large group of the population. Parents are becoming more involved in these important educational decisions and school districts who market themselves as positive members of the community will have greater parent engagement and possibly a greater impact on their students (McCarthy & Warren, 2012).
School districts are now competing for students and state funds that are “attached” to the students. It now becomes imperative for school districts to understand what parents are looking for in a school system, or suffer possible financial hardship due to loss of enrollment. Using the ideas of social network theory, schools need to understand the motives parents’ express when choosing a school for their child (Wohlstetter, Nayfack, & Mora-Flores, 2008). Public schools are now competing with other public schools, charter schools, and private schools to provide the best possible educational opportunities for their students.

In districts or regions where there is inter- or cross-district school choice, parents can play a significant role in choosing the appropriate school for their child. How parents arrive at their decisions on school selection is vital to understanding the procedure and concepts of school choice. This is very evident in the research done by Galotti and Tinkelenberg (2009), which studied how parents of kindergartners determine placement for their child’s first grade class. The research concluded that curriculum, school structure, and convenience are the top factors that parents use when determining a first grade class for their child (Galotti & Tinkelenberg, 2009). However, in reality parents do not always have the proper guidance, knowledge, and facts to make rational decisions regarding their children’s education. In many cases school systems have recently begun to inform parents about their offerings, specific curriculum, and unique programs that a school system has to offer. Parents, whose network does not provide access to relevant and valuable information regarding options of school choice, are limited in their capacity to make informed choices (Hamilton & Guin, 2005).

**Socio-economics of school choice.** Economically based segregation has always been an issue with public schools. Parents or families that can afford affluent towns with good school systems have an advantage over families that cannot afford to live in these communities, this is
the result of economically based segregation among schools and is very prevalent in many school
districts in the United States (Archibald, 2004). Theoretically school choice maybe one way to
bridge this socio-economic gap and create social mobility among different social classes of
families. Socio-economics can play a large role in school choice process, in particular for
parents that are college educated, have a professional job, and make a significant amount of
money are more likely to exercise the school choice option (Bosetti & Pyryt, 2007). These
results seem to make sense given that in most school choice states or districts transportation is
not part of the program. Therefore parents are responsible for taking their child to and from the
school district. Parents that have the time and energy to transport their child will do so. The
Bosetti and Pyryt study used Economic Theory to show how the majority of parents that take
advantage of school choice are upper middle class parents. Also by revisiting the study done by
Galotti and Tinkelenberg the research shows that the greatest determinant of school choice is
convenience or location. These results certainly would not contribute to social mobility. Also
focusing on Economic Theory is a study conducted by Lubienski in 2007, that showed how
school choice programs attract families that place a high value on education and have the time
and knowledge to research various school choice programs. This study concluded that school
choice in general could put an uneven balance on the type of student that is involved in school
choice (Lubienski, 2007). This study introduced a couple of obvious variables, one being
convenience and the second being information. Parents need to have the ability to actually get
their child to the school that they wish to send their child to, and parents need to take the time to
read and understand the options available to their child. Bosetti contributed to the socio-
economic effects of school choice in a study conducted in 2004. She shows how parents who are
involved in school choices for their child have a higher level of education and a higher level of
income (Bosetti, 2004). The study compounds the idea that if a parent does not have the means to transport their child to a specific school outside their district due to lack of income, then the correlation that school choice increases social mobility is not significant. This study also looked at private school choice and the results showed that parents with the highest incomes sent their children to the top private schools.

With the inception of No Child Left Behind many educational programs were introduced to help improve educational outcomes for students. School choice was a program that was designed to give parents more options for their child (Bagley, 2006). However for parents to take full advantage of the school choice policies the parents must have source to expound knowledge of various schools and they must have some economic resources to transport their child to the school that they choose. If parents do not have the ability to gain appropriate knowledge about schools or the socioeconomic ability to transport their child to what they consider a better school, then these parents will not have increased their social mobility through school choice (Bell, 2008).

Research Question

To investigate this problem of practice, I explored the following research question:

- What information, criteria, and decision-making processes do a select number of parents on Cape Cod use when choosing to send their child to a public high school out of district from which they live?

Theoretical Framework

Competition among school systems has changed dramatically over the last twenty years. School systems react to greater competition by improving their educational programs to attract
students and retain students (Hoxby, 2000). This study focused on school choice through the lens of Social Construction Theory. There are significant amounts of disparity in the way that parents and community members view education. Many parents form opinions on a school’s educational quality through their own personal experience. However, schools can receive an unfair reputation due to the opinions of members of the community. In many instances the community does not fully understand the facts or procedures that are taking place in the school. Social Construction Theory would argue that opinions for public school education are the result of both individual parent experiences, along with ideas and opinions of other parents, teachers, administrators, students, and community members that have resulted in a positive or negative experience within the school. Focusing on social construction theory, this study researched parent’s perceptions of area high schools on Cape Cod. Observing perceptions of public education through social construction theory helps better define groups of individuals that share experiences and have similar opinions on education (Burr, 1995). This theory provides us with a structure that categorizes the parents of students that live on Cape Cod and share common experiences that may develop into opinions based upon shared experiences or perceptions. Assumptions of this theory are that social processes and interactions define our knowledge of the world (Schneider & Ingram, 1993).

**Social construction theory.** Social Construction is concerned with the ways we think about and use categories, experiences, and interactions with people to interpret and analyze the world (Jackson & Penrose, 1993). The interactions among individuals will result in these individuals gaining knowledge and developing opinions and ideas toward various subjects. Social Construct theory is based on the process of human interactions and gaining knowledge from these interactions. The social constructionist theory maintains that adult human emotions
depend upon social concepts (Ratner, 1990). Social constructivism emphasizes the importance of culture and context in understanding what occurs in society and constructing knowledge based on this understanding (Derry, 1999; McMahon, 1997). This perspective is closely associated with many contemporary theories, most notably the developmental theories of Vygotsky and Bruner, and Bandura's social cognitive theory (Schunk, 2000). Social constructivism is based on specific assumptions about reality, knowledge, and learning. To understand and apply models of instruction that are rooted in the perspectives of social constructivists, it is important to know the premises that underlie them. Social constructivists believe that reality is constructed through human activity. Members of a society together invent the properties of the world and when individuals interact they develop ideas, concepts, and perceptions on many different topics, these interactions will eventually draw conclusions based on human interaction and not on scientific inquiry (Kukla, 2000). Social constructivists rely on knowledge that is of a human product and is socially and culturally constructed (Ernest, 1999). Social constructivists view learning as a social process, that does not take place only within an individual, nor is it a passive development of behaviors that are shaped by external forces (McMahon, 1997). Meaningful learning occurs when individuals are engaged in social activities. Individuals create meaning through their interactions with each other and with the environment they live in this creates and environment in which meaningful learning occurs when individuals are engaged in social activities (Kim, 2001).

In relation to school choice, parents will gain knowledge and develop perceptions regarding schools, based on their interactions with members of the community, this frequently repeated action becomes cast into a pattern, which can be reproduced without much effort (Andrews, 2012). This can have enormous effects on public schools in relation to school choice.
If a school falls into a pattern in which many of its students leave for a neighboring school district, the school system will begin to develop a reputation that it is not educating its students properly. The interactions among parents in the community that have sent their children to other schools outside district can intensify and cause more parents to leave the district. All of this can happen without any academic or institutional research being done on the school system. A school's reputation can hang on the interactions or perceptions a few parents make regarding a particular school (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997). Following the lens of Social Construction Theory parents are gaining knowledge regarding schools by the interactions that occur with members of the community rather than on specific school issues or research. Perception in many cases can be more influential than facts. In the case of school choice many school systems are implementing huge marketing campaigns to influence the community in hopes of gaining or retaining students.

Positionality Statement

Currently I am working as the Director of Athletics, Assistant Principal, and the Head Football Coach at Dennis-Yarmouth Regional High School. Over the past twenty-years I have been a classroom teacher of Biology, Anatomy/Physiology, a school administrator, head football coach, head baseball coach, and assistant girls ice hockey coach. In addition I am a significant member of the Dennis and Yarmouth Communities in regards to youth sports. I serve as an advisor to both the youth baseball programs and youth football programs and I coach youth ice hockey. This makes me a member of the community that is always a positive advocate praising the Dennis-Yarmouth Public Schools. I have also been recognized at the state level as one of the state’s top football and baseball coaches. This has led a number of people to choose to send their child to Dennis-Yarmouth Regional High School to participate in high school football or
baseball under my expertise. This could be perceived as an issue when creating focus groups to
discuss why a parent might be sending their child to DY or sending their child to another public
school. I felt I had to convince any individuals that any focus group that was created was not
being created for the sole purpose of improving the football team at Dennis-Yarmouth High
School. Given my background, I believe success, and the current and former players that do not
live in the district but choose to attend school at DY, could give individuals the wrong idea about
this study.

Chapter II: Literature Review

Introduction

The expectation of school choice as an educational reform model shows that schools will
improve in terms of student achievement in order to attract quality students and faculty, or they
will shutter due to under enrollment (Greene, Loveless, MacLeod, Nechyba, Peterson, Rosenthal,
& Croft, 2010). In the ultra-competitive environment that school choice has created, parents are
given choices to determine what school districts best fit the needs of their child. That is, students
would be allowed to select higher-performing schools in different districts to which to transfer
(Kozol, 2007). It has become increasingly important to understand what parents look for in a
school district (Holme, 2002). Inter-district school choice programs allow parents to make
choices on schools that normally would not be available to them. The policy was put in place to
create competition among school districts and improve educational opportunities for all students
(Hoxby, 2000). Before school choice was available people would have to choose where they
lived based on their socio-economic income and their children would most likely attend the
public school in that community. Education then becomes part of the housing decision, if
schools are important then the individual would be willing to pay higher taxes associated with a
particular town or district. The higher amount of local taxes that are paid will generally account for more money being put forth into the school district. At this point individuals whose incomes are high will be able to live in affluent towns with better schools. The opposite would be true for an individual that has a low income and must live in a town or city that she or he can afford. This would have us believe that where you live and go to school is highly influenced by income. School choice was intended to improve both education quality and equity by providing incentives for schools to compete on academic achievement and by allowing broader access to quality public schools (Armor & Peiser, 1998).

**Inter-district school choice.** Inter-district school choice has been an option for all students in Massachusetts regardless of their achievement status since 1991. Massachusetts school choice programs allow parents an opportunity to enroll their children in a school district that is not the child’s home district. The parent does not need approval from their home district, however the receiving school district must be participating in the program and have space available. All school districts in Massachusetts have a choice to become part of the school choice program, this takes a vote by their local school board. School districts vote every year on whether to accept school choice students, with the understanding that districts cannot prevent students from transferring out. School districts that are accepting school choice students cannot have any selection criteria for the incoming student. Inter-district school choice is perhaps the most important form of educational choice in the United States (Carlson, Lavery, & Witte, 2011).

This research project centered around three areas of concern with the school choice program in Massachusetts. The first area of concern relates to competition, does creating competition among school districts provide greater opportunities for parents and students, while
also increasing student achievement. The second area of concern is determining what quality traits parents look for in a school for their child. The third area of concern is determining how parents gain knowledge to make these educational decisions. In addition to these major areas of research, transportation and funding are also important to the school choice process.

The Massachusetts school choice program does not provide any funding for transportation. Parents must provide transportation for their son or daughter to attend a district different from the district they live in. Transportation is so contentious in that it tends to discriminate between rich and poor (Dillon, 2008). The parents that can afford to transport their children to better school systems will, while the parents that can't afford any type of transportation are subjected to the community that they chose to live in. One of the major controversies of school choice comes with the funding of the school choice program. The tuition for the child is paid to the receiving school district by the sending school district, which will result in $5,000 dollars per child (Mass D.O.E., 2011). This can be a detriment to the financial health of a district that loses students to school choice. Due to the financial implications of school choice, school districts have become extremely competitive trying to attract and retain students.

This literature review focused on inter-district school choice programs and centered around three areas, *does competition among school districts provide greater opportunities for parents, what are the criteria that parents see as vital to determining a school or school district for their child, and how do parents gain knowledge about the schools they choose.*

**Creating a Competitive Educational Environment**

**Competition.** Competition among school systems has changed dramatically over the last twenty years. School systems react to greater competition by improving their educational
programs to attract students and retain students (Hoxby, 2000). It has become imperative that school systems understand what is driving parents to make decisions regarding school choice. The incentives and outcomes that are generated by school choice programs depend greatly on the parent’s school choice ideas. School choice has given parents the opportunity to select a school not just based on its academic strengths but also on its extracurricular programs, athletic programs, and music programs (Howell, 2006). Competition sparked by school choice is expected to generate greater educational opportunities, particularly for disadvantaged students, this premise is that competitive incentives will change the organizational behavior of schools (Lubienski, Gulosino, & Weitzel, 2009). When parents are involved in a competitive school market that involves choices their decision making process is greatly influenced by a schools location, convenience, information on school programs, and social networks (Bell, 2008). A school that is more productive is one that produces higher achievement in its pupils for each dollar it spends, giving parents the ability choose a more productive school over their current school would shrink the less productive schools and expand the more productive schools, until one of two things happened: the more productive replaced the less productive school or the less productive school raised its productivity and was thereby able to maintain its population of students (Hoxby, 2003). The demand and supply theories of economics apply heavily to school choice. Parents are and viewed as uniquely familiar with their own child’s needs socially, emotionally, and educationally, which allows parents to seek out the best possible school for their child (Loeb, Valant, & Kasman, 2011). School choice allows parents the ability to shop around as a consumer would and look for the best option or deal for their child’s academic success. Theories of supply and demand are often consumer driven, as is
the case with school choice, however it will only work if there are viable school options for parents to choose from (Loeb, et al, 2011).

**Competition and student achievement.** Does school choice improve student performance? Many research studies have focus on this question. As schools open up their doors to students that are not currently living in their district they become more socially diverse and more culturally mixed (Gorad, Fitz, & Taylor, 2001). This is a common thread among school choice research, as the schools become more available they will entice all different types of students to become part of their educational learning community. This will do two things: it will increase the social mobility of the lower income students who can’t afford to live in affluent communities with high tax rates, but can find transportation into a successful school in a wealthy suburb. In addition it will give these students a better opportunity to succeed through academics and into higher education. By looking at the theoretical framework of Market Structure Theory, if neighboring school districts increase student achievement and performance rates it will have a positive effect on other districts which will also want to increase student achievement so not to lose students to the school choice process (Blair & Staley, 1995). There have been a number of school choice studies that use economic theory or market theory to show how competition can improve student achievement and education in general. School systems react to greater competition by improving their educational programs to attract students and retain students (Hoxby, 2000). With the inception of school choice, parents now have more options for their child’s education. This has put more pressure back on school systems to improve educational outcomes, recruit, and retain students.

Overwhelmingly, parents indicate that academics are the main driver of their children’s education (Stein, Godring, & Craven, 2009). In the world of high stakes testing, parents can see
which schools have the highest test scores and research to see if that school fits the needs of their child. This is extremely evident in the research done by Reback in 2008. This research study looked at inter-district transfer rates in the Minnesota Public Schools. The findings by Reback show that students that transferred from one district to another were of higher socio-economic status and transferred to school districts that exhibited higher test scores (Reback, 2008). This is a strong example of performance-based movement. Parents that have the ability to research the best school districts in Minnesota and have the income available to transport their child to one of these high achieving districts are more likely to exercise school choice. This follows the idea of economic theory which suggests that school districts would want higher test scores to attract more students and in essence more state funding. Higher academic achievement by students attending schools of choice, after controlling for the families socio-economic status, is a good indicator that parents are choosing wisely; this could also be evidence that competition produces better schools by holding schools more accountable to parents, by encouraging more parental involvement in children’s schooling, or both (Bast & Walberg, 2004).

**Parents View on School Quality**

**Parental choices.** Research shows that families use a variety of factors to inform their decision to participate in school choice, including student achievement, the offering of a challenging curriculum, educational quality, class size, socioeconomic diversity, safety, and social network relationships (Hamilton and Guin, 2005). With the implementation of school choice in many communities parents now have the option to shop for the public school that best fits their child’s needs. The school choice research consistently demonstrates that parents tend to be more satisfied with the school their child attends if they are able to choose the school when compared to parents who are assigned to a school (Martinez, Thomas, & Kemerer, 1996).
Parents generally feel that academic achievement and teacher quality are the most important school characteristics to look for when trying to decide on a school (Armor and Peiser, 1998).

Parents develop their choice based on resources available to them that are heavily dependent on social class, social networking, and education level (Walsh, 2012). When studying parental choice, behavior studies indicate a difference among parents that are college educated and ones that are not college educated. A study done by Schnieider and Buckley in 2002 indicated the academics and student body composition were more important criteria for students of college-educated parents than for students of parents that were not college educated (Schieder and Buckley, 2002). In addition to academic performance and teacher quality parents will also choose a school on other qualities. Parents may select a school because of its athletic programs, co-curricular programs, racial composition, or even location (Howell & Peterson, 2002). In general, parents will look to a variety of characteristics that will determine where they send their child. However the predominant reason for choosing a school is the school’s academic achievement (Armor & Peiser, 1997). When trying to determine why parents choose one school over another school it is difficult to find significant research leading to a parents decision. There are many factors that lead to parents’ reasons that they chose one school over the other, some of which are unreliable. Research has shown that parents have a tendency to publicly state more socially acceptable factors than the core reasoning behind their decision to choose one school over the other (Hamilton and Guin, 2005).

**Parental knowledge regarding schools**

Parents used both formal and informal sources of information when choosing a school for their child (Bosetti, 2004). Formal sources of information include information distributed by the school districts and data found on state websites. Informal sources of information refers to social
networks of parents and other students that have gone through similar school choice procedures. Finding information regarding school quality is not always an easy process, parents that have gone through the school choice process have agreed that access to more reliable and accurate information would have been helpful in the school choice process, however ever in the absence of accurate information parents still made a conscious effort to match what they wanted and perceived as important qualities of a school to which they eventually enrolled their child (Goldring & Hausman, 1999).

**Public information.** Parents acquire information regarding public schools through information that is made available by government agencies (Goldring & Husman, 1999). Formal networks or in many cases government agencies give parents a means of gathering information to make informed educational choices, however a great deal of empirical evidence demonstrates that parents typically know very little information about their children’s school or the available school choices (Scheider, Teske, & Marschall 2000). The Massachusetts Department of Education provides the public with state test scores, student enrollment numbers, teacher certifications, SAT scores, and many more demographic data sets for parents. However many parents fail to acquire this information, which does not allow them to make solid informed educational choices (Ascher, Fruchter, & Berne, 1996). In addition the information about school choice is available to parents that wish to search for it, however many parents will not know where to find it or how to use it (Goldring & Rowley, 2006).

**Social networks.** Social networks can provide parents with many resources for choosing a school. Parents place a great deal of importance on the value of information gathered by these networks. Parents use these networks to learn what programs schools have to offer, what the teachers are like, and what co-curricular activities schools have. (
Schneider, Teske, Roch, & Marschall, 1997). Parent find out many nuances regarding schools through basic word of mouth. (Witte, 1996). Social Networks provide parents with insight and judgments about a schools characteristics that are diverse in relation to basic state data such as average test scores, teacher credentials, and graduation rates (Bell, 2009). These parent networks provide access to actual experiences and stories associated with real people, and perhaps most importantly, social networks can help parents conceptualize how their child might perform at a specific school (Bast & Walberg, 2004). The danger with this is that it may not always be true, instead these ideas and experiences are solely based on other individuals experiences with that school and may have no correlation to student success (Maddeus, 1990). Many parents assume that a quality of a school is directly associated with the socio-economic status of the families that the school serves, therefore if the families are of high socio-economic status the school must be good (Jankowski, 1995). In addition a study by Holme (2002) showed that parents also believed that schools were better when the served predominantly white students that came from high income families. The parents were also more adapt to believe, listen, and make decisions based on these families from high socio-economic status (Holme, 2002). Social networks do not provide parents with concrete knowledge about the curriculum, instruction, or quality of the academic offerings at particular schools, instead social networks provide parents with other parental and student experiences in regard to particular schools (Maddaus, 1990).

**School Districts’ Response to School Choice**

School choice will induce schools to educate, to be responsive, to be efficient, and to innovate (Moe, 2008). Due to the financial implications of school choice, school districts all over Massachusetts must find ways to develop programs that distinguish themselves from the
rest of the public school systems in the state. As parents look to school districts to provide the best opportunities for their child's education, public school systems must attract students from other districts, while continuing to retain students from their own district. School systems must become creative and market their system, while developing unique learning opportunities that emphasize 21st century learning skills. Competition among public school systems can have a positive effect on student productivity (Armor & Peiser, 1997). Schools are now making sure that they have accountability reports and are consistently transparent to the community on the reporting of test scores, course offerings, college acceptances, and unique outreach programs.

Uxbridge school district has a unique way of incorporating school choice parents into its system. There are four school councils in Uxbridge, one for each school and the school district has elected a school choice parent to sit on each council (Ronan, 1994). An effective strategy for school improvement is the creation of improvement plans which contain collaboratively set goals for achievement and instruction. These plans should contain references to, and effects of, school climate factors (Marzano & Waters, 2009).

It is very obvious that the competitiveness of school choice has caused school districts to continuously plan changes. Schools must develop unique programs to attract students and must offer a wide range of extracurricular activities, music, drama, and sports programs.

Superintendents in Ohio participating in voluntary inter-district transfer programs, reported doing so to increase enrollment and thus increase state funding (Fowler, 1996).

**Summary of Literature**

Empirical studies on school choice show that there is significant relationships across parental involvement, socio-economic contexts, and student achievement. The studies reviewed use a variety of methods and theoretical frameworks to present their findings. The study
conducted by Gorad, Fitz, and Taylor (2001) which focused on student achievement found that schools that exist within the framework of school choice are more socially mixed and contribute to greater social mobility. However, this is in direct contrast of the studies done by Bosetti (2004) in which she shows that social mobility is not necessarily increased because school choice. Social mobility is more a factor of parental involvement, which is in direct relation to parents that have the time and resources to investigate their family’s options for education. These options generally include public, private, or parochial school choice programs. Parental involvement along with a parents degree of education play a much larger role in determining the social mobility of a child rather than the option of public school choice (Bosetti, 2004).

The research conducted by Jennings (2010) indicated that administrators who recruited high achieving students show significant gains on standardized tests. The results of the Jennings study would be in contrast to the espoused objective of school choice increasing social mobility instead providing a track for high achieving students. In addition to the Jennings study, the research done by Lasley & Ridenour (2005) on the moral foundation of school choice are important to consider. In this study the researchers show that allowing students to go from school to school may not be the best program for public education. It is concluded in the study that for public schools to be successful there needs to be a support system in place to fix failing schools and not to allow the affluent students the ability to leave these school districts. School choice programs that have no moral conviction to create equitable opportunities for all children could in fact create educational disadvantages for children (Lasley II & Ridenour, 2005).

When reviewing the school choice literature it is evident that a vast amount of resources are available on school choice. Public school choice is an issue that will continue to affect students, parents, and school administrators both in the United States and worldwide throughout
the upcoming years. Understanding how school choice programs work and what drives parents
to make specific school choice decisions are important factors in improving educational systems
in the future. An area of literature that was not researched or found was the implication of a
school’s perception on parent’s decisions regarding school choice. Many times schools develop
reputations or public perceptions that are sometimes positive and sometimes negative. This
would be an area that should be researched and reviewed to determine if public opinion and not
curriculum, instruction, teacher quality, or convenience play a pivotal role in a family choosing a
school system for their child.

Building on this literature, school choice in Massachusetts is a highly controversial topic
where it is estimated that over 200,000 students are involved in some form of school choice
(McDermott, Bowels, Churchill, 2003). The financial impact of school choice on school districts
in Massachusetts can be extremely detrimental to the overall school budget. However giving
parents the option to choose the best educational setting for their child has a lot of merit. School
choice stimulates competition among schools, when schools compete with each other they must
develop educational opportunities that help set themselves apart from other schools. School
districts are now competing for students and developing programs to attract students from other
districts. It is still unclear as to what motivates a student and his family to enroll in a particular
school district. The research is still vague as to what factors influence school choices, and what
criteria families use to make their decisions. A bigger question that needs to be answered with
some statistical data is if school choice impacts student performance? By increasing educational
opportunities for parents and families it would be assumed that school choice would impact
student performance in a positive manner, however more research needs to be done in this area.
Chapter III: Methodology

Purpose of this Study

The purpose of this study was to clearly understand the perspectives and attitudes of individual parents who were engaged in the process of school choice within a select number of school districts on Cape Cod in Massachusetts. A qualitative research approach was well-suited for the purposes of this study, for its focus on the ideas, experiences, and stories parents have in relation to school choice options on Cape Cod. Qualitative research has become an important measure of knowledge in the social sciences. Recognizing that personal experiences are essential to understanding the social world but are difficult to quantify, the qualitative research tradition emphasizes individuals’ stories, reflections, perspectives, and beliefs as foundational to meaning making (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). Unlike quantitative research which involves the measurement and analysis of the strength of relationships between statistical variables, qualitative research seeks answers to questions that stress how social experience is given meaning. Including participants’ perspectives is therefore a hallmark of qualitative research (Maxwell, 2004).

Qualitative research is characterized by inquiry based interactions that occur through observations, focus groups, and discussions which result in flexible research designs that lead to the discovery of related evidence. The qualitative researcher is the primary instrument for data collection and analysis. Observations, interviews, and/or focus groups can reveal detailed and descriptive data that are analyzed inductively as the researcher discovers patterns and themes within the participants shared experiences (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). The qualitative community has created and agreed upon a series of rules
The study used parent focus groups and a qualitative approach to explore specific criteria and perceptions that parents use when selecting a school district of choice to best fit the perceived needs of their child. Parents had the ability to research different school districts from around the state and decide where they would like to send their child. The study was conducted to give school systems on Cape Cod an idea of what parents were looking for in a school district for their child. In addition the study examined what the parent’s perceptions were of each school district on Cape Cod. The data from this study will be used to help school systems better understand the needs and expectations of parents that live on Cape Cod. The information obtained in this study will allow school systems to develop programs to better serve the students and parent of Cape Cod.

Research Question

This qualitative research study explored the feelings, ideas, stories, and experiences of parents engaging in their school choice option. In doing so the following research question was explored:

- What information, criteria, and decision-making processes do a select number of parents on Cape Cod use when choosing to send their child to a public high school out of district from which they live?

This research question was particularly suited to the problem of practice because it addressed the issue of why parents choose one school district over another. Through qualitative inquiry the researcher engaged in real lived experiences of the participants to explore why one school system is “better” than another school system. The research was conducted through the creation of a focus groups which emphasized and explored the perspectives of parents that have been directly involved in school choice across three school districts on Cape Cod.
Methodology

This study used qualitative inquiry techniques to explore the perceptions, attitudes, and experiences of parents who were directly involved in choosing a school for their child that was not in their school district. Through the process of semi-structured focus groups, the lived stories and experiences of parents as reported by them served as the basis for an analysis of experiences and stories that may lend some insight as to how and why parents made the decisions they did to have their child enroll in an out-of-district high school. Gaining access to these parents’ thoughts and perspectives on various school systems may provide some insight as to how parents perspectives of different school systems influence how parents go about choosing a school district on Cape Cod for their child. Research coinciding with the reflective insights and observations of parental decisions on Cape Cod may contribute to the field of study regarding school choice.

Qualitative research techniques were implemented for this particular study. The qualitative method of research is used when the researcher is trying to develop an understanding to a specific research problem inquiring in to the meaning or reasons individuals or groups have with a certain social issue or human problem (Creswell, 2007). It was vital to research and assess the human activity that is structured around personal experiences and stories derived by the participants. The goal of this study was to hear the ideas, stories, and perspectives of parents that have used the school choice option to select a high school for their son or daughter. Qualitative research is a situated activity that locates the observer in the world. It consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that makes the world visible. These practices transform the world. They turn the world into a series of representations, including field notes, interviews, conversations, photographs, recordings, and memos to the self. At this level, qualitative research
involves an interpretive, naturalistic approach to the world. This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or to interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them. (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 3)

In this qualitative research approach focus groups were conducted with targeted parents that are relevant to school choice. The focus groups were used to extract the participant’s stories, feeling, and experiences associated with school choice. This qualitative research approach fell within the framework of social-cultural theory, where the researcher examined and understood how human actions are related to the social context in which they occur (Moen, 2006). The main purpose of focus group research was to draw upon respondents’ attitudes, feelings, beliefs, experiences and reactions in a way in which would not be feasible using other methods, for example: observation, one-to-one interviewing, or questionnaire surveys. These attitudes, feelings and beliefs may be partially independent of a group or its social setting, but are more likely to be revealed via the social gathering and the interaction which being in a focus group entails. Compared to individual interviews, which aim to obtain individual attitudes, beliefs and feelings, focus groups elicit a multiplicity of views and emotional processes within a group context. The individual interview is easier for the researcher to control than a focus group in which participants may take the initiative. Compared to observation, a focus group enables the researcher to gain a larger amount of information in a shorter period of time. Observational methods tend to depend on waiting for things to happen, whereas the researcher follows an interview guide in a focus group. In this sense focus groups are not natural but organized events. Focus groups are particularly useful when there are power differences between the participants and decision-makers or professionals, when the everyday use of language and culture of particular groups is of interest, and when one wants to explore the degree of consensus on a
given topic (Morgan & Kreuger 1993). The basic ideas of qualitative research was used. The participants stories were examined; ideas, thoughts and interactions that occurred in relation to educational practices on a daily basis allowed the researcher to be able to determine why a parent chose a certain school for their child. Qualitative research has become very common in educational practice, which can mainly be attributed to the nature of education and the human interactions that occur in education on a daily basis (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). The process of understanding how a person can fully explain how they feel and how they fit into society can create important qualitative research data to assess a specific subject (Bruner, 1996). A qualitative research approach will rely heavily on an individual participant’s experiences and stories that are related to specific research questions. Using focus groups in a semi-structured environment will allow the participants to be much more personal in nature than that of a general quantitative approach. Focus groups can be used to explore, study, evaluate, or develop answers to a series of qualitative research questions within a study (Kreuger, 1988). They can also be used as a method in their own right or as a complement to other methods, especially for triangulation (Morgan, 1988). In this qualitative research study focus groups were used as the primary source of data collection. Six to eight participants from each school district made up each focus group. The recommended number of people per group is usually six to ten (MacIntosh, 1993.) It was important for the researcher to keep the focus group centered on the specific questions asked, and not for individuals to get to personal and deviate from the focus group questions.

The use of qualitative research method allows researchers the ability to move beyond data and creates the opportunity for the researcher a chance to study a more holistic view of the individual being studied (Cohen & Mallon, 2001). This was ideally the approach that was needed to determine a parent’s decision making process when selecting a school for their child.
The quantitative data did not simply tell the whole story as to why a parent chose one school over the other. Instead the research investigated the experiences, stories, and perceptions that specific individuals have in relation to the study.

Narrative is an interpretive approach to qualitative research that uses stories and experiences as the prime mode of methodology (Mitchell & Egudo, 2003). The data that was collected from the stories, feelings, and experiences provided the answers to specific research questions. Narrative inquiry is human centered in that it captures and analyzes life stories of participants. Taking this approach in this research style has the ability to document critical life events in great detail (Webster & Mertova, 2007). The narrative approach of analyzing stories, research, and other forms of literature began in the 1920’s with Russian formalists Skhlovskij, Propp, Tomasevskij, and Eichenbaum (Borisenkova, 2011). However, the inquiry method of using interviews or focus groups to collect stories and to study how a group of people or an individual person felt about a topic was not developed or perfected until the 1980’s. This method of theoretical qualitative inquiry originated from the field of literary theory, using a modernism and postmodernism philosophy as significant approach to studying human-centered perspectives in educational research (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). By doing research using a narrative approach, it allowed the researcher the ability to capture an individual’s feelings, images, and perceptions that are holistic and allow the researcher to reflect and reconstruct the cultural experiences of the participants in the study (Gill, 2001).

Site and participants. For this study participants were parents of children living on Cape Cod, that chose to send their child to a public school district that is different from the school district they live in. These parents have decided to use the school choice option that is available to all families living on Cape Cod. Participants were first identified by working with
the public school districts of Dennis-Yarmouth, Monomoy, and Nauset. Parents of students that attend one of these districts but do not live in the district were identified and asked to participate in the study. The school districts were formally contacted to receive permission to begin the research. It was imperative that all school districts cooperate by helping identify the parents of students that are school choice candidates.

**Sampling strategy.** Purposeful sampling as described by Patton (2002) is used for selecting individuals that will provide a source of specific and unique information related to the relevance of the research topic. Patton (2002) further explains that purposeful sampling can be broken down into three categories, Criterion Sampling, Theory-Based Sampling, and Homogenous Based Sampling. In the case of this research topic, school choice, criterion sampling will be used. All participants must meet some specific criteria to be part of the study. For this study the participants were parents of children living on Cape Cod that choose to send their child to a public school district that is different from the school district they live in. Letters were sent out to all district superintendents that explained the study and asked for permission to contact parents that have chosen to send their child to a district other than their own. The researcher worked in the Dennis-Yarmouth Regional School District and began the research with parents who chose to send their children to the Dennis-Yarmouth district, even though they live in another district.

**Sample size.** There is no fixed sample size for all narrative research studies. When using a narrative methodology the quality of information is more important than the numbers in the sample (Creswell, 2012). The sample size in this school choice research study consisted of 18-24 parents that chose to exercise their school choice options for their child across three different but adjacent districts (6-8 parents per high school choice parents). As the research
intended to engage three school districts in the criteria by which parents selected them, there were at minimum 6 parents per each high school choice district involved in the study. The validity, meaningfulness, and insights of qualitative inquiry have more to do with the information richness of the study, the researcher’s observations, and the analysis of the data rather than with the sample size (Patton, 2002).

**Data collection.** The data collection instrument for this research study was the use of face-to-face focus groups with participants. Using a qualitative research method, the approach goal was to collect data based on specific focus group questions that focused on the perspectives of 6 - 8 participants that were utilizing their option of public school choice. Utilizing a Qualitative research style, the researcher was able to capture the detailed stories or life experiences of a small number of individuals with similar backgrounds related to the research topic (Creswell, 2012). It was a priority to protect the confidentiality of all human participants involved in this study. All participants were assured that anonymity was protected at all times. In order to protect the participants in this study and to ensure confidentiality, each participant was given a pseudonym that only the researcher had access to. Any audio recordings, focus group notes, and any miscellaneous documents associated with the participants was stored in a safe and secure location. It was imperative to continue to stress to the participants that all collected data will held in complete confidence.

**Focus group protocol.** All participants had turned in letters of consent prior to any focus groups. All participants were debriefed on the focus groups protocol before beginning the focus group, if a participant felt they would like to not go through with the process it was made clear that they could leave the study at any time. This research study was in full compliance with
Northeastern University’s Institutional Review Board Policies. There was no data collection done until approval was granted from the IRB.

The 60-90 minute discussions within the focus groups were digitally recorded, and subsequently transcribed and eventually coded. All data including recording, transcripts, and focus group questions were stored in a locked file cabinet in the researcher’s office. The purpose of the focus group was to allow the researcher to enter into the perspective of various parents who have experienced public school choice for their child. The researcher explored detailed stories, ideas, and events that the participants have experienced in relation to public school choice. The focus group process was important because it described meaningful, knowledgeable, perspectives, and experiences associated with the research topic (Patton, 2002). The participants told their stories involving their perspective of why they chose one public school district over another.

Data collection process. This qualitative research study used a narrative approach to research and data collection, which involved understanding the stories, thoughts, ideas, and lived experiences of specific individuals that were studied. To align the research and data collection with this approach, the researcher used a specific procedure to gather data. The steps to this procedure are listed below.

1. Engage participants in focus groups for 60-90 minutes across 3 “high school of choice” districts; dependent on availability 1 or 2 focus groups will be scheduled per “high school of choice” districts
2. Digitally record all focus groups.
3. Download recordings to the researcher’s lab top computer.
4. Transcribe the focus group recordings.
5. Begin the coding process using the prescribed two-cycle coding method.
6. Import the responses and codes into the computer software program MaxQDA.
7. First cycle coding will use the In-Vivo coding method.
8. Second cycle coding will follow the Axial coding method.
9. Use the computer program to analyze the distinct commonalities in disparities in responses across focus groups and “in district” responses.

**Coding the data.** To properly analyze any qualitative data it must be coded. Saldana (2010) explains this process as a word or phrase that symbolically assigning a summative, salient, essence-capturing meaning to the data. In addition, the coding process should follow two cycles. The first cycle in the coding process is typically a single word that sums up the meaning of response, while the second cycle in the coding process tends to be longer passages that capture the primary content of the participant’s responses (p.3). This is vital when analyzing more than one set of data from various participants because, for the researcher to draw any type of conclusions from the data, there must be some sort of pattern. Two methods of coding were used to analyze the data, initially In-Vivo Coding was used as a first cycle code and then the data was reviewed and coded a second time using Axial coding as the second cycle code. In Vivo codes use the direct language of the participants rather than researcher generated words and phrases (Saldana, 2010, p. 48). Axial coding describes a categories property and dimensions and explores how the categories and subcategories relate to each other (Saldana, 2010, p. 151). This is important when analyzing focus group data from various participants to look for similar patterns in the data.
Validity

To confirm the credibility and the authenticity of the research a number of steps were implemented. The researcher used in depth focus groups as a method to gather data on the participants. To validate the data the researcher used a series of triangulation methods to make sure the research is credible. The triangulation process included corroborating evidence from six to eight different participants involved in the study. Three forms of triangulation that were used to validate the data included: peer review, clarifying research bias, and member checking. Peer review was an external check of the research process to keep the research honest and meaningful (Creswell, 2012). The researcher made sure that all types of personal bias were revealed. A detailed account of the researcher’s background and possible bias was thoroughly explained in the researcher’s positionality statement. The third form of triangulation was member checking. This process involved looking at the data, analyses, interpretations, and conclusions with the actual participants (p. 252). This gave the researcher and participants some feedback and discussion on the research and the data that was analyzed.

Reliability. The research data was collected using a series of semi-structured in depth focus groups. These focus groups were recorded, transcribed, and coded. The coding process involved a first cycle code and then a second cycle code and was meticulously done. The first cycle code involved using an in vivo method of coding for each transcript. This allowed the researcher to use a one or two word code that represented a term found in the statement by the participant. This was done for all of the participants giving the researcher a number of different codes. The second cycle of coding that took place followed an axial method of coding. This entailed the creation of themes or topics that fit the descriptions of the initial coding process. By doing the second coding procedure, the number of initial codes were reduced, and themes or
categories were created. The coding process was then imported into a computer software program which analyzed the differences and commonalities among the codes and participants. The computer software that was used is MaxQDA; this enhanced the validity of the study.

**Ethical Considerations for the Protection of Human Subjects**

Ethical challenges related to this project included the confidentiality of human participants, making sure anonymity was protected at all times, implementing informed consent from all participants, and the storing of all focus group material in a secure location. It was important for the researcher to protect the research participants, instill trust in them, continue to promote integrity of the research, and guard against misconduct, and impropriety that might reflect negatively the organization or institution (Creswell, 2007). In order to protect the participants in this study and to ensure confidentiality, each participant was given a pseudonym that only the researcher could access to. Any audio recordings, focus group notes, and any miscellaneous documents associated with the participants was stored in a safe and secure location. It was imperative to continue to stress to the participants that all collected data was held in confidence. All participants had turned in letters of consent from prior to any focus groups. All participants were debriefed on the focus group protocol individually before beginning the focus groups; if a participant felt they would like to not go through with the process, it was made clear that they could leave the study at any time. The protocol that each participant was aware of will included the purpose for collecting data, how the information will be used to help the educational process, how the participants responses will be handled and kept confidential, and risks or benefits involved in participating (Patton, 2002).

**Data storage.** All data was stored in a secure location throughout the entire study. The focus group data was digitally recorded, and then downloaded and stored on the researcher’s
personal laptop computer. The researcher’s laptop computer could only be accessed only and opened by a secure password. The transcribed documents were addressed using pseudonyms to protect the confidentiality of the subjects in the study. All written, transcribed, or typed documents were stored on the researcher’s laptop computer. Any hard copy documents collected in the study were locked in a secure file cabinet that could only be accessed by the researcher. This ensured protection of all subjects involved in the study. During the process, only the researcher had access to any data, documents, or digital recordings.

**Summary of Research Design**

This study was intended to gain a deeper understanding of the parental decision-making when choosing a school district through school choice. The study drew on individual accounts of stories, ideas, thoughts, and lived experiences of parents living on Cape Cod and sending their child to a public school in a district other than the one they live in. With intent of gaining a better understanding of parental perceptions when choosing a school for their child, the researcher conducted a qualitative narrative study to answer the research questions. In depth focus groups were used as the primary source of data collection to best support the study. The analytical process also considered how the findings aligned with the literature review and the theoretical framework. The study provided school systems with thoughts and ideas that parents have when selecting a school for their child. School choice provides an educational option for parents, however it can come as a cost to many school systems. This study will allow public schools systems the ability to understand why parents may choose one school district over another school district. The data obtained in the study may help school systems improve and become more attractive to parents and students.
Chapter IV: Research Findings

The purpose of this chapter is to report and discuss the findings from the research conducted from three focus groups of 6 – 8 parents who experienced the school choice process on Cape Cod. These parents were directly involved in exercising their option of choosing a high school for their child that was not in the district that they live in. This chapter will review the parent’s thoughts and ideas associated with school choice. The chapter will be broken down into three segments based on the three focus groups. The researcher will illuminate the themes and findings associated with each group based on why a family chose a particular school. And later, the researcher will provide an analysis of prominent themes from across the three focus groups, looking specifically at the three school systems involved and why families chose one system over another.

School choice is clearly an emerging philosophy that is giving parents more educational options for their children. As choice has proliferated, researchers have increasingly focused on the role of parents as “citizen consumers” and how they have created a competitive market for choosing schools (Schneider & Buckley, 2002). Evidence of what parents are looking for in a school can be mixed. Armor and Peiser (1998) found that in Massachusetts many parents looked for high academic standards, curriculum, and facilities when deciding on a school for their child. In addition data by Schneider, Marschall, Teske, and Roch (1998) reported that 85% of parents involved in their study wanted information regarding teacher quality. This study will focus on specific factors that parents used when choosing a specific high school on Cape Cod for their child.
Context of the Study

School choice refers to the various ways parents can choose a school for their children. Throughout U.S. history, parents have been able to choose among schools indirectly by choosing where to live. But today, many other avenues are also available. For instance, many districts offer open-enrollment programs, busing and magnet school programs, charter schools, and, in a few cases, vouchers that allow some families to send their children to private schools. (Betts, Rice, Zau, Tang & Koedel, 2006). The No Child Left Behind Act provided new educational opportunities families. This federal law allows parents to choose other public schools that they feel as parent’s best suits the educational needs of their child. The Massachusetts’s school choice program allows students to attend public school in any town in the state, regardless of where they live. State education funding travels with the student from the sending to the receiving district. Sending districts may apply for state reimbursement of a portion of any net loss of state aid stemming from the program. To receive reimbursement, a district must file a plan for correcting educational deficiencies in its school district. Reimbursements are available to any transportation provider, including parents. Overall state funding for the program is limited to $20 million per year. The only constraints are that (1) a school district may, by vote of its school committee, choose not to participate in the program in any given year; (2) a receiving district may set the number of spaces available for out-of-district students; and (3) the number of students attending schools in other districts statewide cannot exceed 2% of the state’s public school enrollment, excluding students taking part in a separate student transfer program designed to eliminate racial imbalance. The No Child Left Behind Act also set standards for the states to offer parents information on school choice. The Massachusetts State Board of Education must develop and maintain a parent information system to give parents detailed information with
which to compare school systems participating in the program. The system must at least include school profiles and other information on (1) special programs offered by schools, (2) school philosophies, (3) number of spaces available, (4) transportation plans, (5) class sizes, (6) teacher-student ratios, and (7) data and information on school performance and quality. The primary goal of the system must be to ensure that all parents have an equal opportunity to participate in the inter-district school choice program.

In order to opt out of participation in the program for any particular school year, a district school committee must hold public hearing and vote on the question prior to June 1 for the school year starting the following September. The committee’s resolution must give the reasons why the district does not wish to participate and be filed with the state Education Department. Districts that are participating must submit an annual report to the state department by May 1, stating (1) the capacity of each of its schools for the following school year, (2) the number of students it expects to attend each one, (3) the number of nonresident students who went to school in the district under the choice program in the previous year and the number of such students it expects will not to continue doing so, and (4) the number of additional places available for nonresident students other than those attending under the state racial balance program (Mass, Doe, 2011). If the number of nonresident students applying for admission is greater than the number of spaces available, the district must make a random choice. If the district also operates an intra-district choice program, it must allow nonresident and Overall Funding Limit. The law limits the total amount of expenditures for the program to $20 million annually. The law allows the state and school committees also to use federal funds for the program.

**Demographic, academic, and financial data for Cape Cod school districts.** Throughout the research, each focus group was asked how much time they spent researching MCAS scores and
any other academic assessments. Each group admitted to minimally looking into state data when deciding on a school. Instead most of the parents relied heavily on the social network or peer group they associated with, the schools leadership, schools co-curricular or athletic programs, and just how the students felt after touring and taking to teachers and administrators. In the tables below all data was gathered from the Massachusetts Department of Education. The demographic data compiled represented students on Cape Cod in the following categories, low socio economic income students (Table 1), Cape Cod school districts average class size (Table 2), Cape Cod school districts percentage of students on special education Plans (Table 3), Cape Cod school districts percentage of students that are limited English proficient (Table 4), Cape Cod school district SAT scores (Table 5), Cape Cod school district MCAS scores (Table 6), and the financial increase or decrease in regard to school choice on Cape Cod (Table 7). The data below is for all seven Cape Cod Public School Districts. In addition some of the data includes the two Cape Cod Technical High Schools and the one Cape Cod Charter Public High School. This data was included to capture the demographic base of each school district on Cape Cod. Although Cape Cod is a relatively small place the school districts differ in demographics.
Table 1

Low Income Students (Mass, DOE, 2014)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DISTRICT</th>
<th>Org Code</th>
<th>Low Income %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dennis-Yarmouth</td>
<td>6450000</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barnstable</td>
<td>2000000</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mashpee</td>
<td>1720000</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Falmouth</td>
<td>960000</td>
<td>28.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monomoy Regional School District</td>
<td>7120000</td>
<td>26.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nauset</td>
<td>6600000</td>
<td>23.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sandwich</td>
<td>2610000</td>
<td>12.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sturgis Charter Public (District)</td>
<td>4890000</td>
<td>6.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State Totals</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>39.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2

Average Class Size (Mass DOE, 2014)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DISTRICT</th>
<th>Org Code</th>
<th>Average Class Size</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Monomoy Regional School District</td>
<td>7120000</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sturgis Charter Public (District)</td>
<td>4890000</td>
<td>14.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dennis-Yarmouth</td>
<td>6450000</td>
<td>15.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mashpee</td>
<td>1720000</td>
<td>15.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nauset</td>
<td>6600000</td>
<td>15.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barnstable</td>
<td>2000000</td>
<td>16.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sandwich</td>
<td>2610000</td>
<td>17.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Falmouth</td>
<td>960000</td>
<td>17.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State Totals</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>18.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3

Percentage of Special Education Student (Mass DOE, 2014)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DISTRICT</th>
<th>Org Code</th>
<th>Special Education %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Falmouth</td>
<td>960000</td>
<td>19.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mashpee</td>
<td>1720000</td>
<td>19.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dennis-Yarmouth</td>
<td>6450000</td>
<td>16.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monomoy Regional School District</td>
<td>7120000</td>
<td>16.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sandwich</td>
<td>2610000</td>
<td>15.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barnstable</td>
<td>2000000</td>
<td>14.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nauset</td>
<td>6600000</td>
<td>13.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sturgis Charter Public (District)</td>
<td>4890000</td>
<td>11.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State Totals</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>16.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 4

*Percentage of Limited English Proficient Students (Mass DOE, 2014)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DISTRICT</th>
<th>Org Code</th>
<th>Limited English Proficient %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dennis-Yarmouth</td>
<td>6450000</td>
<td>7.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barnstable</td>
<td>200000</td>
<td>6.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monomoy Regional School District</td>
<td>7120000</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mashpee</td>
<td>1720000</td>
<td>2.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nauset</td>
<td>6600000</td>
<td>1.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Falmouth</td>
<td>960000</td>
<td>1.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sandwich</td>
<td>2610000</td>
<td>0.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sturgis Charter Public (District)</td>
<td>4890000</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State Totals</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5

*SAT Scores from Cape Cod Area High Schools (MASS DOE, 2014)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DISTRICT</th>
<th>Org Code</th>
<th>Tests Taken</th>
<th>Reading</th>
<th>Writing</th>
<th>Math</th>
<th>Total Score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sturgis (Charter School)</td>
<td>04890000</td>
<td>173</td>
<td>560</td>
<td>538</td>
<td>538</td>
<td>1636</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nauset</td>
<td>06600000</td>
<td>201</td>
<td>549</td>
<td>528</td>
<td>539</td>
<td>1558</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barnstable</td>
<td>00200000</td>
<td>258</td>
<td>524</td>
<td>503</td>
<td>531</td>
<td>1542</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monomoy</td>
<td>07120000</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>527</td>
<td>488</td>
<td>527</td>
<td>1540</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Falmouth</td>
<td>00960000</td>
<td>136</td>
<td>509</td>
<td>516</td>
<td>515</td>
<td>1540</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sandwich</td>
<td>02610000</td>
<td>158</td>
<td>516</td>
<td>503</td>
<td>519</td>
<td>1538</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dennis-Yarmouth</td>
<td>06450000</td>
<td>129</td>
<td>510</td>
<td>492</td>
<td>503</td>
<td>1505</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mashpee</td>
<td>01720000</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>477</td>
<td>464</td>
<td>486</td>
<td>1427</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State Totals</td>
<td>00000000</td>
<td>49,276</td>
<td>508</td>
<td>499</td>
<td>523</td>
<td>1530</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 6

2014 Grade 10 MCAS Scores Cape Cod Public High Schools (MASS DOE, 2014)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>2014 Spring MCAS Scores</th>
<th>Percentage of Students at Each Achievement Level for Grade 10</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>English Grade 10 MCAS</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Adv + Prof</td>
<td>Advanced</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sturgis (Charter School)</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Falmouth</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nauset</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sandwich</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monomoy</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Upper Cape Tech</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dennis-Yarmouth</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cape Cod Tech</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mashpee</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barstable</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Math Grade 10 MCAS</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Adv + Prof</td>
<td>Advanced</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sturgis (Charter School)</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sandwich</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nauset</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Falmouth</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monomoy</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Upper Cape Tech</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dennis-Yarmouth</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barstable</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mashpee</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cape Cod Tech</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Science Grade 10 MCAS</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Adv + Prof</td>
<td>Advanced</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sturgis (Charter School)</td>
<td>97</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sandwich</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monomoy</td>
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<td>45</td>
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<tr>
<td>Falmouth</td>
<td>85</td>
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<td>Dennis-Yarmouth</td>
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<td>31</td>
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<tr>
<td>Nauset</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barstable</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Upper Cape Tech</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cape Cod Tech</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mashpee</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 7


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>District</th>
<th>FY14 Receiving FTE</th>
<th>FY14 Receiving Tuition</th>
<th>FY14 Sending FTE</th>
<th>FY14 Sending Tuition</th>
<th>FY14 Difference FTE</th>
<th>FY14 Net School Choice Money</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>NAUSET</td>
<td>286.6</td>
<td>$1,692,024.00</td>
<td>25.9</td>
<td>$221,337.00</td>
<td>261</td>
<td>$1,470,687.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MONOMOY</td>
<td>237.8</td>
<td>$1,507,345.00</td>
<td>189.9</td>
<td>$1,066,194.00</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>$441,151.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FALMOUTH</td>
<td>70.4</td>
<td>$412,908.00</td>
<td>35.3</td>
<td>$203,527.00</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>$209,381.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SANDWICH</td>
<td>76.3</td>
<td>$434,051.00</td>
<td>53.6</td>
<td>$324,214.00</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>$109,837.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BARNSTABLE</td>
<td>115.8</td>
<td>$749,938.00</td>
<td>111.5</td>
<td>$680,515.00</td>
<td>-4</td>
<td>$69,423.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MASHPEE</td>
<td>57.5</td>
<td>$238,414.00</td>
<td>66.1</td>
<td>$376,490.00</td>
<td>-29</td>
<td>$(138,076.00)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DENNIS YARMOUTH</td>
<td>77.0</td>
<td>$602,807.00</td>
<td>345.8</td>
<td>$2,242,051.00</td>
<td>-269</td>
<td>$(1,639,244.00)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Interpretation of the data. This data can be interpreted in many different ways. I decided to leave Sturgis Public Charter School in the data table because it is a charter high school on Cape Cod. It is located in Hyannis right in the middle of the Cape and is drawing students from all towns. I stayed away from charter schools in this research, however it would be worth looking at in the future. The Nauset school district received the largest numbers of school choice students, which calculates out to be the largest amount school choice money. Nauset also had the highest SAT scores of any Cape Cod high school other than Sturgis Charter School, but did not have the highest MCAS scores. Dennis-Yarmouth lost the most students to school choice, which has been a trend for a number of years. Every high school on Cape Cod, with the exceptions of Dennis-Yarmouth and Mashpee, showed an increase in school choice revenue due to school choice. The demographics are interesting as Dennis-Yarmouth has the highest amount of students in the low-income range. In revisiting the literature associated with school choice one of the most significant reasons not to have school is that it demographically divides students and prevents social mobility. Students from families that are financially secure,
engaged in education, and have the ability to transport their children out of the district that they live in have a greater ability to exercise the school choice option (Cookson, 1992). This could certainly be the case with Dennis-Yarmouth as 50% of the population is considered to be low income these families do not have the resources to become entrenched in the school choice process. I thought that it was interesting that parents did not place any emphasis on SAT scores; it was not discussed once in any of the focus groups, with the exception of Sturgis Nauset having the highest SAT scores of area schools. The parents that were in each focus group were clearly concerned with college and having their children attend college but they put much more emphasis on the social network or friends than they did researching the schools SAT scores. The MCAS scores throughout the Cape districts are very similar. Nauset and Monomoy High Schools scored the highest of the three schools in this study on MCAS exams. However, Dennis-Yarmouth was not far behind in the English and Science, the biggest drop off for Dennis-Yarmouth in regards to MCAS scores occurred in their Math Scores. Although this data is interesting it according to the research obtained in the focus groups it was not a determining factor on school choice for the parents involved in the study.

**Common Themes**

During each focus group considerable attention was paid to how each individual participant handled each question. It was important to analyze the performance of the individuals in the study to see how their expressions may reflect their true feelings to various questions. Attention was paid to the individual participants nuances during the focus group interactions, such as what was said, what were omitted, facial expressions, pauses, and sighs. The focus groups were recorded and then transcribed and then coded as recommended by Saldana (2010), coding served as the transitional process between data collection and data
analysis. The focus group transcripts were read multiple times, and segments within them were labeled with “In Vivo codes” in order to “prioritize and honor the participant’s voice” (Saldana, 2010, p. 75). Specific relationships between data items were identified, and some were selected for extended focus. In line with Rubin and Rubin’s (2012) work, codes were refined and linked into categories and then into themes by working first within each category and then across categories. For example, In Vivo codes gleaned directly from the focus group transcripts included “dynamic,” “leadership,” “safety,” “students,” “athletics,” “band,” “budget,” “culture,” “word of mouth,” “perception,” “academics,” “rigor,” “expectations,” “public,” “everybody,” “knows,” “friends,” “says,” “they,” and “size”. These verbatim codes led to three prominent themes that arose in all three focus groups. The themes that emerged out of the coding were leadership, rigor, and perception. These In Vivo codes can then be coupled with the rest of the transcripts to derive three very pertinent common themes which are Dynamic Leadership, Academic Support, and Public Perception. What resonates from these themes is their connection to the literature review and social construction theory.

**Nauset Regional High School Focus Group**

Cape Cod provides the setting for Nauset Regional High School. The uniquely designed campus is comprised of nine buildings surrounding an open courtyard. Located only one mile from Nauset Light Beach in the middle of the National Seashore, Nauset Regional High School provides a comfortable and diverse learning environment. Nauset Regional High School consists of more than 1000 students from the four towns comprising the region: Brewster, Eastham, Orleans, and Wellfleet; tuition agreement students from Provincetown and Truro; and school choice students from towns as far away as Sandwich.
Nauset Regional High School, in partnership with its member communities, strives to develop responsible and educated citizens by providing an environment that expects and encourages respect for each other and the community. We uphold rigorous academic standards through a variety of teaching and learning strategies so that all students may acquire the skills, the knowledge, and the work ethic to become contributing members of an evolving society. We provide diverse extra and co-curricular activities to complement the academics, creating a rich variety of valued and supported offerings. (Nauset Regional High School Home Page, 2014).

In recent years, Nauset Regional High School has been recognized as a Massachusetts Compass School, a Massachusetts Vanguard School of Excellence, and a National Blue Ribbon High School. NRHS students have received such honors as National Merit Finalist, Advanced Placement Student of the Year, All State Musicians and Choral Students, All-American Soccer and Wrestling Players and a nationally recognized Jewelry and Metal Program and offers unique courses like Guitar Building. Living so close to the ocean encourages a great sailing team, and many other open water activities. Nauset Regional High School provides a high quality program that prepares students to pursue their dreams after high school, Nauset has a learning environment that is challenging and promotes excellence at every level. (Nauset Public Schools, n.d. 2014).

The themes identified through a review and coding of the Nauset High School parent focus group, who chose Nauset High School through school choice were as follows.

Parents who chose to enroll their children at Nauset High School instead of the high school in their community commented on the following most frequently commented on the following six characteristics:

- rigorous academic standards,
- dynamic school leadership,
- extremely positive school culture,
- community support,
- socioeconomic status, and
- significant parent communication.

The parents that chose Nauset Regional High School clearly see this school as an elitist high school. At one point in the dialogue from one parent alluded to the fact that the Principal of Nauset High School refers to Nauset as Nauset Academy. The parents were all impressed with a large variety of courses to choose from which includes many AP courses. In addition to the many AP classes that are offered, Nausets program of study stretches from Business to Law to guitar building. This variety of course to choose from was definitely a significant factor in allowing the parents to choose Nauset over other schools. Each of these will be discussed as commented on by the parents.

**Nauset’s rigorous academic standards.** The parents that chose Nauset Regional High School clearly perceived this school as a more academically rigorous high school. At one point in the dialogue one parent alluded to the fact that the Principal of Nauset High School refers to Nauset as Nauset Academy. The parents were all impressed with a large variety of courses to choose from which includes many AP courses. In addition to the many AP classes that are offered, Nausets program of study stretches from Business to Law to guitar building. This variety of course to choose from was definitely a significant factor in allowing the parents to choose Nauset over other schools. As one parent commented, “Course Load and variety were an extremely important factor for me when choosing Nauset. The number of AP courses offered along with the ability to take these AP courses at a younger age than most schools. I don’t know
many schools that allow sophomores to take AP courses like Nauset does.” Another parent discussed her experience with her daughter choosing Nauset as outstanding decision. “Nauset High School is the best high school I have ever seen. I have 3 children that have all attended different schools systems. My daughter attended Nauset on a school choice program. It was the best choice that we could have made for my over-achiever daughter. This school fulfilled all of her requirements starting with a rigorous course of studies to Co-curricular activities to travel and exchange programs”.

Dynamic school leadership. All the Nauset parents commented positively on the work by the Nauset high school Principal. Their experiences with the schools’ leadership was clearly a positive one. Although one parent did comment on how he thought the schools communication could be better. The parents clearly believe that the Nauset High School Leadership cares greatly for their child. At an initial parent meeting that included 8th grade parents from all over Cape Cod, the Nauset High School Principal, Tom Conrad, explained to the parents that he would stay as long as it took to answer every question they had regarding his school. This point made by the principal, according to our focus group, really hit home with a lot of parents. The entire focus group felt that Tom Conrad assured them that their son or daughter mattered significantly to Nauset and that he would do whatever he had to help their children succeed. “When Tom goes to speak, he is not just bragging about Nauset, he’s talking about the future. He wants to build dorms, bring in students from China, and create a true Nauset Academy.” His message is exciting to a parent that is thinking of sending their child into this environment.

Positive school culture. The parents continuously discussed Nauset’s positive school culture. Many of the parents had issues involving their child at either the middle school or even before that at an elementary school in their hometown. In one particular case one of the parents
explained how his child had four different principals in four years at his son’s elementary school. That immediately led the parents to begin to explore the school choice options. Another parent explained how they felt the discipline at the middle school level was not sufficient to learning, which led this family to look into other options. As the parents looked and researched schools they started to focus on the advantage of a positive school culture. This can be explained as interactions that occur throughout the school, including student to teacher interactions, student to student interactions, and the overall morale of the school. They all agreed that positive school culture started with the principal and flowed throughout the teachers and guidance counselors. One parent commented on her daughter shadowing at Nauset prior to attending and explained how the principal, teachers, guidance counselors, and other students made her daughter feel welcomed and part of the school. This led the parent to believe that Nauset was the place for her child. Two of the parents commented on the size of Nauset high school being smaller than the district that their child would attend. Nauset currently has 1,010 students enrolled (Mass. DOE, 2014). The parents also commented on the number of clubs, sports, and Co-curricular activities offered at Nauset that allowed their children to make positive relationships throughout the school. Although athletics was not a major priority for these parents, the entire focus group agreed that Nauset’s extensive sports offerings and no user fees to participate in sports created an environment that allowed all students to find something they may be interested in. The Nauset High School Principal also started a transportation van that would pick Barnstable students up at exit 5 in Barnstable just off the highway. As one parent explained, “We live in Barnstable and my daughter has the ability to ride this van every morning if I cannot drive her, there is some sort of transportation. In addition, my daughter’s history teacher lives ten minutes from us and he comes by our house every morning, picks up my daughter at the front door and
takes her to school. This speaks volumes to school culture because this teacher understands the importance of going out of his way to help my family and my child’s education.”

There is also a school bus that stops in the town of Dennis, which is part of the Dennis-Yarmouth School district and picks up many Dennis and Yarmouth kids to take to Nauset. “The bus stops on Airline Road in Dennis and is a life saver for us.” The parents believe that Nauset is clearly going above and beyond normal high school procedure. Not only are the students contributing to a positive school culture but the parents are also buying into it because the school is showing the parents that each child is important no matter where they live. Another parent commented on the prep-school atmosphere that Nauset has, which is different than other schools. “Nauset, has prep school feel, the students walk outside to get from building to building, the school has a relaxed sense of pride when it comes to rules, and students understand and follow any rules that are set forth.” Nauset High Schools structure contributes to this with four free standing building in which students will walk from building to building much like they would at prep school or college. Teachers, parents, students, and administrators have created this prep school culture that as previously stated has termed Nauset as “Nauset Academy”.

**Community support.** Throughout the research focus groups the parents continually pointed to the Nauset community as supporting education. As state and federal budgets continue to get slashed, all the parents agreed that Nauset found ways not to cut programs or teachers. Many other school districts are continually in the local newspaper fighting with local leaders to support and pass their budgets. However Nauset never seems to be in the position of not properly funding their school. As one parent explained, “I have been on Cape Cod for twenty years and I never remember the Nauset School District fighting over funding.” That has been an issue among a number of school districts and the parents agreed that one major factor in parents
exiting the Dennis-Yarmouth School District was the significant budget “fighting” that has occurred between the towns of Dennis and Yarmouth when trying to fund the school budget. In 2008 the towns of Dennis and Yarmouth could not agree on a school budget at which point the Massachusetts State Board of Education requires there to a joint town meeting in which the citizens of both communities come to together and vote on a budget. Parents continually refer to this because when this happened a budget was accepted at the expense of the Police, Fire, and other departments in both communities. This created a toxic work environment among school officials and officials in both towns. Parents feed into this and many have moved their children to communities that in their mind support education. This was clearly evident within our focus group where several parents from the Dennis-Yarmouth District conveyed their thoughts toward the Nauset Community as an organization that is willing to fund education. As one member of the focus group explained, “I think the community is huge. You never hear about budget battles coming from the Nauset School District. That entire community just keeps supporting education, five percent increases, six percent increase where here in the Dennis and Yarmouth community its always a battle to pass a minimal school budget.”

**Socioeconomics of Nauset High School.** Parents in the Nauset focus group clearly had a perception that Nauset students were of higher socioeconomic status than other students on the cape. As one parent explained, “let’s face it Nauset has a totally different demographic structure than Dennis and Yarmouth.” Another parent carried that thought one step further and related that to budget wars that take place in other communities as opposed to the Nauset district. “The Nauset community believes in education and they have the ability to fund it.” The Massachusetts Department of Education has some statistics on this. Nauset has 23.4% free and reduced lunch, 13.7% students with disabilities, and 1.7% are English Language Learners
(Mass doe, 2014). In addition the Massachusetts School and District Profiles associated with students plans after high school graduation show 56% of the students moving on to attend private 4 year colleges and 9% of the students moving on to attend 4 year public colleges. This message was clearly evident in the discussion and echoed by one parent which stated, “I heard that there are kids going to Harvard, Princeton, and John Hopkins just from the jazz band and these kids are peers of my son. So he is watching these kids be successful and go on to great colleges and it can only make him want to succeed and achieve at a high level.”

**Parent to parent social networking.** The parental word of mouth regarding any school district or school can be a significant factor in a parents’ belief about the school. This is clearly the case with our Nauset focus group. As one parent states, “Nauset District in general is top rate. While other districts are cutting programs and teachers, Nauset continues to find ways to keep stuff in place and work to add new if it warrants it. The kids are top of the state rankings which are achieved by great teachers. If you are looking for a great school, move to the Nauset Region, you won't regret it.” These ideas were reiterated among the focus group. Many of the parents discussed a network of school choice parents that believe so strongly in Nauset that they are willing to help students and parents in anyway, including influencing other school choice parents to exercise their option and attend Nauset High School. The group conveyed how parents how school choice parents work together to car pool kids from practices, games, and many other Co-curricular functions. The parents were also very quick to tell success stories that their children or other students at Nauset have experienced. Throughout the focus group discussion it was very easy to understand how strongly these parents feel in toward the educational opportunities that have been given to their children by Nauset Regional High School.
Cape Cod Lighthouse Charter School. There was a rather unique common thread with all the Nauset parents that relates to their middle school experience. Six out of seven parents in the focus group had been researching the school choice option for their child at an early age. All six of these parents chose to send their child to Cape Cod Lighthouse Charter School. Cape Cod Lighthouse Charter School is a middle school, with grades 6 – 8 located in Harwich. This charter school uses project based learning as a theme by encouraging students to learn through experience, allowing them to be engaged in the process of discovery and to see the practical applications of classroom lessons. What is significant is Nauset High School has a working relationship with this middle school and seems to use this school as a feeder system to attracting school choice students. The Nauset High School Principal Tom Conrad is a regular presenter at many Cape Cod Lighthouse Charter School events. In fact one parent explained that, “Mr. Conrad was very effective at the meeting-the parent meeting at Lighthouse. I feel that he (Conrad) successfully helped many families transition from Lighthouse Charter School to Nauset High School. Mr. Conrad was very accessible, he had said that he would stay here as long as you all have questions, and we will matriculate your children right into the Nauset school system, and they have first choice of those seats.” This is an interesting situation, because Cape Cod Lighthouse Charter School is using its unique charter to attract students from all over Cape Cod. However these students seem to enroll in Nauset High School as they move on from Lighthouse Charter School. When many school systems are competing with Charter Schools for students, Nauset seem to be working with Cape Cod Lighthouse Charter School to entice students to continue their education at Nauset. As the parents discussed, both schools have similar theories on educating children. The parents loved the project based education that is affiliated with the Lighthouse Charter school and it plays right into the message that Nauset is
sending with a large course offerings that is complete with a set of unique courses that will address a number of learning styles.

**Summary of Nauset parents’ reasons for choosing Nauset.** The parents in this focus group undoubtedly were influenced by peer communication. Friends of friends and discussions among parents were significant in influencing these parents to choose Nauset Regional High School for their child. It was very noticeable that if a parent or a parents’ friend had a bad experience within a school they would be very vocal about their opinion. I think this is a very common factor among parents. What makes this situation unique is that on Cape Cod the parents can then shop around for a situation that in their mind improves their child’s education and they will only have to drive a maximum of roughly 20 minutes to change schools. As one parent discussed, “Once you get on the school choice bandwagon, other influences happen.”

The word of mouth communication among parents was clearly a factor, however throughout the focus group the parents continuously indicated that Nauset High School Principal Tom Conrad had enormous influence on them making their decision. The principal’s stability, leadership, and marketing skills were clearly evident in our discussions. Only one parent admitted to researching MCAS scores prior to enrolling their child. Nauset high school has an open campus design and as one part explained, “it makes the students feel as if they are already in college.” Parents did discuss the pressure that can be put on kids at Nauset to succeed, especially in the AP classes. However the discussion continued to come back to high standards, rigorous curriculum, and lot of choices among courses. The parents were amazed at the large course offerings that were available to their children. The focus group was clear that Nauset was a safe school with a great campus atmosphere that reflected that of a college campus. Safety was not something that was really discussed in depth during the focus group. Nauset under the
direction of building principal Tom Conrad has created a positive message that is being marketed and delivered to the parents and students of Cape Cod. Nauset Regional High School’s message that is being delivered by its own school choice parents and that is by exhibiting exceptional leadership there is an understanding that there is a positive school culture that exists at Nauset which expects students to have rigorous academics, a variety of courses to choose from, plenty of Co-curricular activities, and a total focus on educating this whole child.

Table 8

*Illustrative Quotes from the Nauset Focus Group*

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Quote</th>
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<tr>
<td>Throughout the school choice process we felt that Nauset provided us with excellent leadership, has rigorous academics, lots of courses, the most AP courses offered on the Cape, good extracurricular activities, and would provide the best chance for our child to succeed.</td>
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<tr>
<td>I think peer groups and social interactions among parents play a huge role in school choice. In fact I feel that once you start talking about school choice you become part of the school choice bandwagon.</td>
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<tr>
<td>School choice was available to us</td>
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<tr>
<td>Nauset offers a huge variety of courses to choose from and it has the most AP courses on the Cape and they allow freshman and sophomores to take AP courses. My daughter is a senior and she will have taken nine AP courses before she graduates.</td>
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<tr>
<td>We sat down with the Nauset Principal, Tom Conrad and he answered every question that we had about the school and he made us feel like he would do anything we needed to help our daughter succeed.</td>
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<tr>
<td>I feel Principal Tom Conrad successful helped many families choose Nauset. He has always been very accessible, he answered all of our questions, and he just seems to give everyone a sense of commitment that he will do whatever it takes to make the school successful.</td>
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**Monomoy Regional High School**

The Monomoy Regional High School focus group consisted of six parents that used their school choice option and chose Monomoy Regional High School. This focus group is
distinctive because Monomoy is a new school district. Monomoy which is comprised of Harwich and Chatham two small towns that originally had their own high schools, are now combined and will enter 2014 in a brand new state of the art high school. What makes this focus group slightly different is some of these parents chose the Harwich Public Schools and some chose the Chatham Public Schools for their child. In the end, Monomoy High School, which is being constructed now, will have roughly between 400 and 600 students. Monomoy High School will be a brand-new state-of-the-state-art high school with outstanding educational facilities such labs, technology, art, and drama. In addition a new football / track with artificial playing surface, new weight room, exercise room, and two gyms will look to attract students from all over Cape Cod. Monomoy is expected to open in August of 2014 and be ready for the first day of classes in September of 2014. Monomoy prides itself on developing every student and it is very evident from the schools’ web site. Small class sizes, high academic expectations, caring and supportive faculty and a positive school culture – are some of the qualities that make Monomoy Regional School District the premier “school of choice” on Cape Cod (Monomoy Regional School District, 2014). This is the slogan that is found on the Monomoy web page which now has a state of the art high school facility and is actively recruiting students and parents to attend.

The difference between the Monomoy choice parent focus group and Nauset choice parent group is that the Nauset parents frequently talked about reasons that they wanted their child to go to Nauset high school, based upon their positive perception of Nauset as an academically rigorous and functional school. However, the Monomoy choice parents more often commented on leaving their local school district based on criticisms and concerns regarding their local system. These issues included:
- middle-school concerns
- safety concerns
- social networking among parents,
- peer interactions,
- school leadership, and
- co-curricular programs.

**Middle school concerns.** The middle school issues that parents were most concerned with centered on poor administrative communication, poor teacher communication, and inconsistencies with student discipline. Throughout the discussion some of the parents voiced their concerns regarding situations that occurred to their children in middle school. The parents felt as if their children had a bad middle school experience in their local district. This could have been the result of poor communication among teachers and administrators, poor interactions among their child and the other students in the school, or social networking by other parents that also had a bad middle school experience. As the parents explained when issues surfaced at the middle school they began to consider other options for enrolling their child in a different school system during these middle school years. If the parents did not make the move during the middle school years they were convinced that they should consider moving their child to another school system for high school. Most of the parents felt that communication among middle school teachers and administrators was a key factor in them looking for a different educational option for their child. As one parent explained, “My child only goes through middle school once and it took me three days to receive an email back from an administrator.” Another parent furthered the discussion explaining how difficult it was to even get time to meet with teachers on their child’s progress, “I just wanted to sit down with my son’s English teacher and find out why his
graders were so poor and all I received was an email.” When communication breaks down among schools and parents there becomes a difficult void in trust of the school. Cultivating parent teacher relationships is vital to the success of a school as a true learning community (Schussler, 2003). Two parents explained how they heard from other parents that another school district in the area uses a software program to allow parents to get periodic updates on their child’s grades and the school that they were involved in did not do that. “I know teachers are busy but all I am asking is for frequent updates to know how my son is doing, I know he does not always tell me the truth, I just want the school and teachers help, it seems reasonable.” All of these instances initiated the parents’ thoughts on changing school districts. As one parent explained, “Parenting is tough and I know that my daughter does not always explain to me what is exactly going on, so I was looking for help by communicating with the school on grades, social, and discipline issues. The only thing I ever heard was when my daughter was in trouble, it would have been nice to be able to see some of the positive things she was capable of doing.” Communication among parents and teachers is very important part of education as one parent expounded, “When one school system’s communication is perceived to be better, it makes you think about switching schools.” That same parent clarified that communication is response time to emails, online updates to grades, and online availability of events such as sports schedules, permission forms, or other school activities. The deputy director of the Learning First Alliance conducted a study of what parents perceive as communication with schools. “Many parents (47 percent) and most non-parents (59 percent) would like district updates as often as decisions are made. While the survey didn't further break down the frequency of communications to find a preference for school or teacher-level communications, it considered to be a guide for those entities as well. In addition to the 47 percent of parents wanting district updates as often as
decisions are made, 36 percent of parents would like monthly updates and 13 percent would like
quarterly” (O’Brien, 2011).

Redirecting student behavior is a significant part of any school and can lead to positive
or negative school culture. The Monomoy focus group parents had some significant issues with
student discipline at their child’s middle school. These discipline inconsistencies that occurred
caused some of these parents to begin to look at new venues of education for their children. As
one parent eluded, “It is impossible for myself to understand what type of discipline would be
handed out for certain issues that occurred at school. I can only imagine how hard it was for the
kids to understand the discipline procedures.” Middle and high school educators face big
challenges when it comes to creating a discipline and student support system that feels fair and
supportive to students and parents, which will also be effective to faculty, and enforceable to
administrators. Developing effective methods to handle and redirect student behavior is vital to
the success of any school (Crone & Horner, 2003). As one parent explained, “My son was
bullied by students in his middle school and as a parent I felt little if anything was done, so it was
in my best interest to find a school system that I felt would provide a better learning
environment.” Another parent added to that by explaining “Kids will be kids and they are
mischievous by nature which means they will get in trouble, tease kids, and do things that are
inappropriate, so I understand that but my issue stems around administrative leadership in the
school district or mainly at the middle school. I have felt that the administration, mainly the
principal, was not cooperative or accessible to any questions or concerns that I had, whether they
involved discipline or curriculum or grades.” This was a common thread among Monomoy
school choice parents and their middle school experiences. These parents explained that they felt
forced into looking at other options, which some made immediately by moving their child to
another middle school in a different district or choosing to send their child to a charter school or parochial school for middle school.

**School safety.** The parents associated with this focus group expressed their concerns over school safety. These parents felt that the high school or middle school in their district was less safe than other schools in neighboring communities. This gave the parents an opportunity to look for new avenues to send their child. Unfortunately they did not have any significant facts or data to support their decision. These parents were convinced that their local school system was unsafe due to discipline issues and poor communication that has occurred with them at their middle school, along with the stories and experiences other parents had at their local high school. As a result of these parents began to visit other high schools including Monomoy. Two of the parents toured Monomoy High School prior to sending their son or daughter to Monomoy. During their visit to the school they were impressed with the welcoming attitude that the school displayed and expressed an appreciation for the school resource officer and felt the school exhibited a safe environment. As one parent explained, “When I entered Monomoy High School to visit I felt very much at home, the teachers are smiling, the administration is very helpful, and the school resource officer is present and accessible.” The parents also felt that Monomoy high School had a better discipline policy, than Dennis-Yarmouth High School, although there was no actual data to back that up the parent’s claims. One parent shared how her friend sent her child to the pre-school program at Dennis-Yarmouth High School and when she was dropping off or picking up her child she felt unsafe in the building. “My friend had told me that there were fights in the hallway and many times students were out of class, and that the administration had no control of the students. This even if it wasn’t entirely true had to make me think about sending my daughter to a different high school.”
Another parent explained how she had made her decision to look at other high schools when her daughter was in middle school. “My decision was made during my daughter’s 7th grade year at Mattacheese Middle School. My child was bullied at Mattacheese and they put me in touch with the school psychologist, I tried to talk to the principal and was never able to meet with her, instead they had me talking to a school psychologist, how does that help my child when other kids are picking on him. Again I based my decision to move from one district to the other mainly because of these issues that occurred at middle school.”

Social networking among parents. Social word-of-mouth was certainly a factor among the parents in Monomoy focus group. These parents alluded to the notion that other parents made them aware of the short falls of Dennis-Yarmouth Regional High School. One parent stated, “Dennis-Yarmouth Regional High School has a bad reputation among academics.” Another parent added “It just always seems that Monomoy and Nauset are moving ahead of DY in everything but sports.”

The communities that made up the schools became part of the discussion as well with many of the parents in the group feeling that the Harwich and Chatham communities support and will continue to support education more so than Dennis or Yarmouth. One parent commented, “Chatham has always had a great school system and Harwich has been good too, now with a brand new high school, I think that shows that both communities will continue to support education.” As one parent added “Many of the parents that I am friends with continue to tell me how the communities of Yarmouth and Dennis do not support education and it is easy to see this because the two communities continue to fight over funding the schools.” Another parent added to this and said “how can I send my kid to a school system that every year they can’t balance their budget and they have to cut staff and programs.” This created more discussion among the
group and centered around a communities willingness to support education. As one parent explained, “Just look in the Cape Cod Times and you will see Yarmouth and Dennis fighting over how to fund the school system, I don’t want my child in that environment, I believe in education and so should the community that I live in, thank god for school choice.” In addition one parent added “This is nothing new, it is all over the Cape. Everyone knows that the Dennis and the Yarmouth selectman do not like each other and do not care about education.” These parents have developed educational opinions based on the social interactions they have with had with other parents and friends. In addition these parents have read newspaper articles that have centered on the certain schools or school districts especially associated with school budgets. These social groups that are created out of the connections that their sons and daughters make in youth sports, music programs, ballet, dancing, girl scouts, boys scouts, and many other social programs. These parents get together; they discuss the issues that they believe are occurring in schools and develop an opinion on them. It is a snowballing effect that starts with one parent explaining a negative experience they had with a school that leads another parent to explain their negative experience with a school or something similar, and the next thing you know these parents are shopping for a new school.

**Academic support.** Providing educational services for students is an important part of any school district. The services provided by high schools can be college readiness, tutoring, special education, parental communication, co-curricular, advanced placement, or even enrichment programs. The parents that chose the Monomoy school district were convinced that the size of the school contributed to better communication and more direct services for their child. As one parent explained, “Barnstable and DY are much bigger districts and I was afraid that my son that has learning issues would not get the attention and services he would get at a
smaller school”. The parents also felt that the teachers in the Monomoy school district would make more of an effort to work with students above and beyond what was normally expected because of the reduced number of students they might be responsible for. Another parent looked specifically at class size as being a contributing factor in choosing a school for their daughter. She felt that Monomoy had smaller class sizes and that her daughter would get more academic support from the teachers. Many of the parents saw the school size of Monomoy and they felt that their child would receive more one on one services than at a larger school.

**Peer interactions.** Many of the parents in this focus group explained the need to look for a new school for their child because of the social group their son or daughter was interacting with. Some of the parents felt that their children were involved with a group of students that was detrimental to their child’s educational progress. As one parent explained, “The group of girls my daughter hung around with was creating a toxic environment for her. These girls were not concerned with doing good in school and were getting involved in other things, and I felt it was in the best interest of my daughter and our family to move her to another school, and she is doing better because of that.” Peer interactions play a large role in the social development and the parents of this focus group in many instances were concerned with who their son or daughter was interacting with. The impact of peer interaction on the lives of adolescents is significant. This can be intensified within schools and can lead to enhancing the learning process or diminishing the learning process. (Hartup,1999). Middle school and high school students spend more of their time with their peers as they get older, intensifying the influence of peer interaction on adolescent development (Hartup & Stevens, 1997).

**School leadership.** All parents, felt that the principal and superintendent’s leadership was extremely vital in the process of them choosing a school. They all talked about experiences
and interactions they had with school administrators prior to making the decision to change schools. Communication was a theme that surfaced with this focus group. These parents felt that there was a need for open lines of communication among parents and administrators and they felt that in the Monomoy School district there was an enhanced ability to communicate with teachers and administrators. As one parent explained, “When I was thinking of sending my son to Monomoy, I asked to talk with the Monomoy Superintendent or at the time it was the Harwich Superintendent and I was granted a time to discuss curriculum, discipline, and her thoughts on where the school system was going.” Another parent commented on how her friend had told her that the Harwich High School Principal had coffee hours with parents once a week to discuss issues related to the school. “As I was making my decision on DY or Monomoy I asked if I could attend one of these coffee hours and I was so impressed with Harwich High School Principal Kevin Turner and his willingness to sit and listen to parent concerns that I felt I could approach him with any school issues. I have not seen any other schools that do this.” Communicating with the building principal in the process of choosing a school was vital. One parent clarified this by stating, “When you pick a new school for your child this is a significant process and needs to be thought out. By working with the Monomoy School Administrators or more specifically the Harwich High School Principal I was extremely impressed with the school.” Another parent expounded on this theme by stating, “When I went to consider Monomoy the first person that I met in the office was Principal Kevin Turner. It was the summer and no one was in the school and this was in the old high school. Mr. Turner walked me through the old high school and then took me in his office and showed me what the new Monomoy high school was going to look like and I can’t tell you how impressed I was with him taking the time to show me this stuff.”
This focus group clearly demonstrated the need to have clear open communication with a school districts administration. For many parents in the Monomoy focus group, educational leadership was a key component in their school choice decision and all of them expressed the benefit or the positive interaction that they had with the Monomoy Regional High School principal. Communication may involve impressions created or words expressed, but it is a clear fact, communication begins with the welcome sign when the parent first enters the school building or a simple hello from a teacher or administrator (Chambers, 1998).

**Co-curricular programs.** Co-curricular programs were an important factor for this focus group. Four out of six parents felt that co-curricular programs were extremely important. Two of the parents were resolute on co-curricular programs playing no role at all in determining a school. They felt that school safety and school culture were much more important. As one parent elaborated, “My daughter is not an athlete and even if she was that was the furthest thing from my mind. I am much more concerned with school safety and culture than sports.” Many parents did voice their approval and importance for that these co-curricular programs. They felt that co-curricular programs would shape the school and shape the culture of the school and in many cases, their children would take part in more than one co-curricular event. These co-curricular programs include playing two or three sports, or being a member of the drama club, or being a member of a band or music or art programs. These programs are vital to the success of the school and they build connections among students, parents, and the community. As one parent explained “My son needs to participate in athletics to feel like he is part of the school. Monomoy has had a wonderful sports program that offers student’s many different options.” Another parent discussed how her daughter was going to play soccer and she felt that the connections that would be made on the field would translate into success in the classroom. “My
daughter is an excellent soccer player and needs a competitive soccer program and at the moment we feel that Monomoy is that program.” Another parent elaborated on the co-curricular programs offered by Monomoy. She explained how her daughter was a member of the student council and drama program in middle school and expected to continue her efforts in high school. “My daughter clearly feels a connection to the school because she is on the student council and a member of the drama club, I loved the advisors to these programs I think they do a great job with the program and I know my daughter is benefiting from this.”

The discussion on co-curricular programs continued but turned into funding questions. As one parent explained that Nauset High School and Monomoy High School do not have user fees to participate in athletics, but Barnstable High School and Dennis-Yarmouth High School did. One parent expressed their concern on this issue, “What does that say about the school district charging kids to play sports? Should the district view co-curricular and athletics programs as an important part of the school why should they charge extra?” However one parent did elaborate on this and explained “That he had heard both DY and Barnstable would not deny a student access to co-curricular activities because they could not afford it, instead they received a waiver to play.” This still generated discussion about who should pay and what type of message this sends to parents and families regarding athletics, band, music, etc. As one parent said “Shouldn’t the Superintendent see these co-curriculars as important and find ways to fund them?”

Monomoy summary. The Monomoy Regional High School Focus group provided some interesting commentary on school choice. It is obvious that a number of factors went into choosing a school for these parents. I think the most significant factor with this focus group was concerns that surfaced at the middle school level. Many of these parents had negative
experiences during their child’s middle school years and that caused them to look for other options. Parents were again influenced by word of mouth and interactions they had with other parents. Schools get reputations that are hard to change even if they are not true. Parental word of mouth along with the media view of a school can cause a perception that may or may not be true. The school choice option clearly gave these parents and opportunity to find a school they felt best suited their child. School leadership continues to be an important role in deciding on a school along with communication between parents, teachers, and administrators. School safety was discussed and all of the parents in the focus group felt Monomoy Regional High School provided a safe learning environment for their child. Co-curricular activities were discussed and some of the parents felt they were important although a two of the parents stated that Co-curricular activities were not a factor for determining a school for their child. The Monomoy parents involved in the focus group believed strongly in the high school principal and his accessibility. Educational Leadership among school personal is clearly a significant factor in parental decision making. These parents want to feel that the principal is helping them with their decision and with the education of their child.

Table 9

*Illustrative Quotes from the Monomoy Focus Group*

- I started to search for a high school for my daughter when she was going into middle school. I had not heard good things about Mattacheese Middle School and started to look to send my daughter to Harwich.

- I chose Harwich or now Monomoy because it has a great reputation. We were taking my son to a psychologist and he told that the Harwich Schools have a great reputation and we really should consider putting our child in that school district.

- Social and emotional development drove my decision more than anything. I did compare the a few schools, but I was not overly concerned about MCAS. I really like the interaction I had with the Monomoy Principal. I felt like he cared about kids and was trying to work with parents to improve all the kid’s needs.
Leadership comes from the top and it trickles down to the principals and teachers. I really respect the Harwich Superintend I think she did a very good job and it showed in the Harwich staff. They always seemed to have an upbeat moral and looking forward to helping students.

Ultimately I would say our decision to move our child to Monomoy was basically made through listening to people regarding the Monomoy and DY. There were a lot of our friends and neighbors that continued to tell us how bad DY was and much better Monmoy was. After we toured the school my son wanted to go to Monomoy.

We started looking when my daughter was in the fourth the grade because I did not want her to attend the Mattacheese or Wixon Middle Schools.

We were concerned with the size of Barnstable, DY, and Nauset. We felt that our son would do better in a smaller environment and Monomoy offered that.

It was a safety issue for me. I had heard that at DY it can be unsafe in terms of student behavior and I want my kids to be able to focus on school and not on other students poor behavior.

Dennis-Yarmouth School Choice Group

Dennis-Yarmouth Regional High School is made up of the communities of Dennis and Yarmouth which encompass the mid cape area. Dennis-Yarmouth High School prides itself on offering a great number of academic, social, extracurricular, and athletic opportunities for its students. The mission of Dennis-Yarmouth Regional High School is to prepare our students intellectually, physically, and socially for their roles as educated and responsible citizens.

Dennis-Yarmouth Regional High School provides a wide range of exciting educational opportunities for all of our students. It includes college preparatory classes, honors level courses and the Advanced Placement classes necessary for academic success. If students want a class we do not offer in our school, they can take the course online through the Cape’s largest Virtual High School program. Our 8th Grade Early High School program has experienced tremendous success with its emphasis on STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Math). DY offers many electives including technology classes, a strong art program, and a first class music program. Students can balance classroom academics with work-based learning internships in the
community so they can see how their knowledge is put into use in a real world setting. Sports
teams, clubs and many other after school activities help round out the D-Y experience. Come to
D-Y for a great educational experience. We DY will help you achieve your dreams. Go
Dolphins! (Dennis-Yarmouth High School Home Page, 2014).

This Dennis-Yarmouth parent choice focus group consisted of 8 parents that lived in a
town other than Dennis or Yarmouth and chose to send their child to Dennis-Yarmouth Regional
High School. Seven out of the eight parents began their school choice search in middle school
or early days of high school. Only one parent began to school choice her daughter in the DY
elementary schools. As the parents began to search for the right school for their child some
major themes surfaced. The major themes or trends that were associated with this particular
focus group centered around

- the school’s athletic programs,
- guidance support,
- school culture,
- co-curricular programs, and
- school leadership.

Each of these themes will be discussed below.

Athletic programs. When DY choice parents were asked why they chose a different
school than the one in their own community most of all the participants admitted that it was
DY’s athletic programs. As one parent explained “I know my son would be fine academically at
any school he was going to attend, but we as a family wanted to find a school that had the best
sports program on the Cape.” Dennis-Yarmouth has a rich history in athletics and has some of
the best athletic programs in state. The Dennis-Yarmouth’s field hockey team, track teams,
cross-country teams, baseball and football teams have consistently been represented in the Massachusetts State Tournament and have won state championships throughout the years. Athletics was the first comment that was made by three of the parents as one of the major reasons they decided to choose DY for their child. Educational based athletics can be the identity of the students, school, and the very fabric of the community (Perks, 2007).

High school sports do as much for the athlete as they do for the non-athlete. As the athlete achieves through success on the field the non-athlete organizes positive cheers in the stand at a Friday Night Football game and feels apart of the game and a connection to the school (Gardner, 2012). Another parent explained the importance of the entire athletic program on school culture. “At DY sports are a way of life, the Friday night football games are like no other on the Cape, the student section is incredible, the band is unbelievable, the community comes out to support the team, when my son was in middle school in chatham we used to go to the Friday Night Football games at DY, from that point on he wanted to play for DY.” One parent explained how DY’s athletics program are more than just for athletes. “Our daughter is not an athlete yet some of the parts of high school she talks most about are the sporting events, we all went to see the football team win the state championship in Lynn and then went this year to the state final at Gillette Stadium. It was a great experience for our entire family.” The students at DY even created their own twitter account called The Lagoon, which is named after the nick name of the football field, to keep students and the community up to date on DY athletics. School spirit is clearly visible throughout the district and the community as one parent explains, “When the football team won the state championship in 2011 we also had an individual athlete Jordan O’Dea win the state cross country championship, and a color guard that won their state championship. It was awesome the community had a parade and put the football team, color guard, and
Jordan on Duck Boats and called it the parade of champions. My son at the time was in middle school in Harwich and we made sure we went to the parade, what a thrill for the kids but what an event for the community.” Athletic participation during high school gives students' opportunities to grow in different areas. It is obvious that these parents within this focus group feel very strongly about athletics and what athletics can do for their child, the school and the community. Research by Marsh and Kleitman (2003) has shown that academic, physical, social and emotional benefits exist. Students who participate in sports do better in school, are in better physical shape, develop many social attributes and feel better about themselves than their nonparticipating classmates. Numerous studies have found athletics offer a wide variety of benefits to adolescents. One such benefit is on the academic side. High school students who participated in athletics do better in school on various levels (Harrison & Narayan, 2003; Marsh & Kleitman, 2003). The parents continued to discuss how the athletic programs helped their children build strong connections and friendships throughout the school. As one parent explained, “My son had a lot of friends all through elementary school, but his strongest friendships have been made here at DY, and I think it is due to his association with the football team.” In addition to the one parent elaborated on that to say “DY develops a culture where everyone works with each other to survive, it has a clear vision that everyone counts, we clearly made the right choice in sending our son to DY.”

Guidance support. The college process can be a daunting task and in this day and age it has become very competitive. The parents that represent the Dennis-Yarmouth Focus group felt that the academic support provided by the administration and more importantly the guidance department at Dennis-Yarmouth High School would give their child an edge in the college process. As one parent explained, “When we were thinking of moving our daughter into Dennis-
Yarmouth High School we had no idea that we as parents would have the opportunity to meet and discuss our daughters college plans with their guidance counselor prior to their senior year. At Barnstable High School my daughter had four different guidance counselors in three years.” The Dennis-Yarmouth Guidance department prides its self on starting the college and career readiness process as soon as the students enter the high school. This was reiterated by a parent that was overwhelmed with admiration for the guidance department taking an interest in their son in the eighth grade. As the parent stated, “What high school has regular meetings with 8th grade students to discuss PSATs, SAT, and the college process, even though during our tour of the school they told us this would happen, I wasn’t sure that they would really follow through with it. It has clearly had an effect on my son wanting to attend college.” The Dennis-Yarmouth Guidance department has progression which includes classroom presentations starting in 8th grade to make all students well aware of graduation requirements and getting them connected and involved in the career and college process. The guidance counselors also will meet with students in small groups, individually and through classroom presentations. As one parent explained, “When we were searching for different schools for my daughter, she was going into her senior year and it was not going well at the school she was at. When we toured DY we met with the guidance department and they assured us they would help her and us through the college process as soon as we enrolled.” The guidance counselors meet with students at minimum of 4 individual meetings a year, to discuss the student’s academic progress, social issues, teacher, or parent issues and to keep the students aware of upcoming college or career opportunities. “As a parent I can remember only meeting my high school guidance counselor when I was a senior and not sure what I wanted to do with my life, it was kind of to late. Now at DY I know my daughter is being engaged by a department that truly cares about the success of the students.”
The Dennis-Yarmouth Guidance Department provides continual mailings, office hours, Facebook and twitter pages to get parents involved. They also bring in partners with MEFA, College admission personnel and parent presentations to get parents connected. As one parent stated, “We were told by a friend of ours from Yarmouth, before we chose DY for our kids, what a great job the DY guidance department did helping them through the college process. They had told us about the junior college breakfast and how it helped them prepare for their daughters upcoming senior year. When we did decide to send our daughter here and then had the opportunity to experience the efforts of the DY guidance department, including that wonderful junior year breakfast, we were extremely impressed.” The Dennis-Yarmouth Junior Parent breakfast is put on every year in February to help give the parents an over view of the year of the college process. It is run by the Dennis-Yarmouth Guidance director and is structured with DY senior students that have gone through the college process, a representative from a local college admissions board, guidance counselors, and the athletics director. The parents are come in have a breakfast and are given information to help begin their process as parents in the helping their son or daughter find a college that will fit them. The parents really seem to like this procedure, in addition to this the guidance department will then meet individually with each junior parent and student in the month of March to help outline a plan for the upcoming year. As the parents continue to discuss here they feel like they are not in the college process by themselves. “DY does not always seem to get a good reputation, but I have searched four high schools on the cape and I have not found any that put the time into the college process like DY does”.

**School culture.** School culture is the stream of “norms”, values, beliefs, traditions, and the rituals built up over time (Peterson & Deal, 1998). In addition school culture also represents interactions that occur between school personnel, students, and community through a variety of
educational avenues including curriculum, instruction, athletics, band, co-curriculars, and the everyday norms of the school itself (Hollins, 1996). According to the participants in the Dennis-Yarmouth Focus group, Dennis-Yarmouth Regional High School’s school culture is clearly community driven. The parents in this focus expressed great pride in Dennis-Yarmouth High School. As one parent explained, “DY’s school culture goes far beyond the classroom. DY has something for everyone, my daughter is not an athlete but found success in many after school clubs and extracurricular activities, and when we were searching for a school we were looking for one that had a lot of extra things to offer.” DY offers a variety of after school programs that work closely with school and community. One parent explained how students believe so strongly in the school and community that they work together on many social and cultural issues, “I think a big part of what stands out to me about DY is the students school pride. The students have a culture of support and it extends to the community. We always attended St. Pius Church in Yarmouth even though we lived in Harwich. I watched many DY kids help out at numerous church fundraisers and were always very impressed at how these DY kids handled themselves, I always thought it was great that they would think to help. These DY kids are connected to the community either by clubs or athletics and they thrive to support one another.” There is a niche for most kids to get involved and something for everyone. There is clearly a culture of helping others that has fostered at DY. Another example is the Special Olympics which brings a huge crowd of kids from DY who volunteer each year. When we were living in Barnstable we had a friend whose son participated in the Special Olympics at DY we went to see the event and it was unbelievable how many DY students help make the event a success. Now that my daughter is here and a member of the National Honor Society each year they put on a blood drive for students and community members to donate blood. This is another community activity that
students participate in., and it makes me feel so proud that my daughter took part in some of these activities”.

The school has also offered a work to career program that allows students the ability to go out and do real work internships within the community in a field that they may be interested in. This was clearly a common thread throughout the focus group. Four parents explained how their child loved the work to careers program at DY. One parent described this program as “a model for other schools”. “When we were looking at schools for our son, in addition to the outstanding athletic programs offered at DY we were captivated by the work to careers program. We felt that allowing our son to experience the work environment through our community would make him focus more on going to college and getting a job when he graduates.” Another parent reiterated the same sentiment, by explaining how their daughter was interested in medicine and because of this program had the ability to go to Cape Cod Hospital and work alongside doctors and nurses every day. “The work base learning program has developed into one of the most successful work to career programs on the Cape, where else can a student leave high school and have real work experience that will allow him or her to feel like they are part of the work force? We feel this certainly contributes to the positive learning culture of Dennis-Yarmouth High School.” The Dennis-Yarmouth High School work to careers program is an outstanding program that students gravitate to and the community thrives on. Dennis-Yarmouth Regional High School’s School-to-Career Program focuses on college and/or career preparation through awareness, in-depth exploration and experiential education. Students will develop the knowledge and skills necessary to provide access to the career of their choice. The parent’s that chose Dennis-Yarmouth feel an extraordinary sense of pride associated with the school and community. As the parents explained the culture of Dennis-Yarmouth intermingled throughout
the community and this is seen at football games, band concerts, art shows, and community events such as career day. This can be attributed to a number of factors that include a very diverse population, outstanding athletic program, championship caliber football team, outstanding marching band and music program, significant course offerings, and a very unique work to careers program. These diverse programs shape the school and community and give Dennis-Yarmouth an identity that stretches across many boundaries.

**Co-curricular programs.** Dennis-Yarmouth Regional High School offers many co-curricular programs for its students. Student co-curricular activities represent an integral part of Dennis-Yarmouth Regional High School’s educational program and provide an opportunity to support, apply and extend learning. Participating in clubs and organizations is a wonderful way to meet new friends, learn leadership skills, and put talents to use. All students are strongly encouraged to join one or more of the clubs and organizations D-Y offers (Dennis-Yarmouth Regional High School Student Handbook, 2014). In addition to an outstanding athletics department the Dennis-Yarmouth Marching Band has been Massachusetts Division IV State Champions and New England Champions three years in a row. The Marching Band and color guard play and compete at all football games and compete in band competitions most Saturdays throughout the fall. As one parent explained, “What an experience Friday Nights are at DY the football is one of the top in the state and the band plays right along with them. It is an atmosphere worthy of a small college, it clearly was one of the reasons we chose DY.” Another parent corresponded by saying how embarrassing it is to go to another high school football game and listen to band music being played over the PA system, mainly because they do not have a marching band.” In addition to a championship marching band the school offers a jazz band and concert band which is outstanding. “As a parent of a student that is in the color guard it is
wonderful to see the admiration and respect given to clubs and co-curricular activities that is given to the athletic programs. We can honestly say that one of the reasons we chose DY is for their band and color guard. A friend of ours daughter was in the state champion color guard back in 2011 and that was the year the football team won the state championship, the school had a parade of champions and honored the football, color guard, and a track athlete that had won the state championship. As a parent what could be more gratifying seeing, it was wonderful.”

Dennis-Yarmouth has clearly established a balance between academics, athletics, and co-curriculars. The school offers 22 co-curricular clubs or activities that offer students a diverse opportunity to engage in learning beyond the school day. The parents in the focus group expressed a sense of pride that DY has a diverse population that is involved a great many number of activities.

**School leadership.** Research related to school improvement has continually acknowledged instructional leadership, in regard to teacher evaluation, curriculum, and academic progress as the most important role of the principal to propel school improvement (Hallinger and Hausman, 1993). However in a world in which education is constantly changing and parents are receiving more opportunities to choose a school that best fits their child the role of the principal is changing. The impact of school leadership on student achievement is indirect, and improvements to learning are connected to the work of teachers engaging student into the learning process in their classrooms (Smith, Desimone, & Ueno, 2005). The principal’s leadership plays a pivotal role in shaping the school culture and driving organizational changes that ultimately will lead to a more effective learning environment for the students (Murphy, Elliott, Goldring, and Porter, 2007). In the realm of school choice parents feed off this school culture and become aware of what is happening within a school. Many times social word of
mouth can paint a positive or negative picture of a schools culture and its leadership. The Dennis-Yarmouth focus group felt that school leadership was an integral part of their reasoning behind choosing Dennis-Yarmouth High School for their son or daughter. As one parent explained, “We sat down with Principal Jenks prior to deciding on a what school to send both our daughters to. Mr. Jenks was extremely welcoming; he explained the positive aspects of the school and was extremely genuine with his comments. He made us feel, that he really cared about our child and that he was going to help our child succeed.” Cape Cod has become extremely competitive when it comes to choosing a school for your child. Parents have a great number of options which include public, private, and parochial. The principal’s role has changed considerably due to these school choice options. School choice programs should alter the traditional roles of all stakeholders involved in the education of children, including principals (Hausman & Goldring, 2001). Changes in principals’ roles are predicted to change or modify from the more traditional roles of curriculum and instruction techniques to a more promoting and marketing approach. Principals will need to be more responsive and accountable to parents due to the nature of schools of choice (Finn, 1990). In the case of the Dennis-Yarmouth leadership the parents appreciate the visibility of Principal Jenks and Superintendent Woodbury. As one parent explained, “I see Mr. Jenks and Mrs. Woodbury at all the football games, concerts, drama productions, and many other school and town events.” In addition to being visible Principal Jenks has commanded the respect of the community, however he has also been able to create a persona that is approachable. “I feel Mr. Jenks is one of us, he is always there to talk to me if I see him outside of school or in passing he always says hello and remembers our meeting and to ask how things are going now that we made the decision to school choice to DY. I did not get
that same feeling from Nauset and Nauset’s leadership. Instead I felt as if they were up on a pedestal and could not be approached.”

The principal will continue to create positive school culture that promotes learning, however with the implementation of school choice principals will have to become more competitive and take on a leadership role that is “school promoting” to attract new students and keep current students from wanting to leave. This idea of principals and other administrators promoting their school was discussed at length by the Dennis-Yarmouth Focus group and the consensus was that the school needed to do more marketing and more promoting of its positive attributes. “The Dennis-Yarmouth school district has been so good to our two children and we are so proud of it, however it gets a bad rap sometimes and it shouldn’t. I think the district should promote all the positive things it has to over more than it does.” The parents really felt that Dennis-Yarmouth’s principal and superintendent were doing a great job. They felt they constantly cared about kids, were trying to improve the school and the community, and were visible members of the community. However they really felt as parents that more could be done to get the message out to the public of what a great school Dennis-Yarmouth High School really is.

**Dennis-Yarmouth Regional High School summary.** Dennis-Yarmouth Regional high school is a place that many parents and students feel is very misconstrued. The parents that participated in the Dennis-Yarmouth focus group were extremely pleased with the decision they had made to have their son or daughter attend DY, even though at that had been told by friends that it would not be a good decision. Throughout the research the focus group was impressed with the athletics programs, school culture, school spirit that Dennis-Yarmouth Regional High School exhibits. Six out of eight participants chose DY for its athletic programs and most of the
parents felt that the athletic programs along with the successful music and band programs contributed to a very positive school culture. The participants were very impressed with the school’s principal and his accessibility. In some instances parents met with the principal prior to deciding to send their child to DY. The parents spoke very highly regarding he schools guidance department and academic support programs. It was very evident that these parents appreciated the extra work that was being put in by the school to help the students and parents with the college process.

All eight participants were well aware of the reputation that Dennis-Yarmouth has in the public. During their school choice process many of the participants were told by their social constituents not to send their child to DY. As stated earlier one parent explained how a teacher at Nauset had used the term “Gangsta School”. The parents were extremely disappointed about the reputation that has fostered around DY mainly because their sons and daughters are having such a great experience. All eight parents expressed the need for the Dennis-Yarmouth School District to do a better job marketing its self in a positive light to the media whenever it can. The parents also expressed concern with the school budget and the battles that do occur between Dennis and Yarmouth on a regular basis when it comes to trying to pass a school budget.

Table 10

*Illustrative Quotes from the Dennis-Yarmouth Focus Group*

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<th>Quote</th>
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<td>One of the main reasons we chose DY was guidance department. My older daughter had attended Barnstable up until she was a senior and in her three years there she had 5 guidance counselors. As soon as we made the choice to move her to DY the Dennis-Yarmouth guidance department really took over and implanted ways to make her feel connected to DY.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Choosing DY turned out to be the best decision I have made for my son in his life.</td>
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<tr>
<td>When we were looking for a school my son wanted to play football at a high level and in our opinion DY offered the best opportunity for that.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Well I think DY does not have a good reputation across the board. I think this is really</td>
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unfortunate because there are so many good programs here at DY that the public needs to know about. I always thought it was a troubled school until I actually made the decision to send my daughter here and even with that I was completely discouraged by my neighbors and friends from Brewster.

- We were attending Nauset with both our son and daughter and everyone kept saying what a great place Nauset it and it has everything. But something was clearly missing our kids did not feel good about themselves. We made a switch to DY with our son first, then a year later our daughter, and we even enrolled our youngest son into the Mattacheese Middle School. All my kids feel very engaged and connected to the school and community. I am so proud of my kids for taking the chance to come to DY and I am extremely happy with the teachers, administrators, and guidance counselors at DY for helping my children succeed.

- The school culture at DY is line no other school around here. Friday Nights in the fall are for football, cheerleaders, and the band. The band is exceptional and makes for fantastic and exciting football games. In addition the championships, back in 2011 the football team won the state championship and the town gave the football team a parade, however we also had a state champion color guard, and a girl on the cross country team won the state championship. It was awesome to see three completely different groups of kids celebrate together and by an entire community for their accomplishments.

- Before making our decision we met with the DY Principal Mr. Jenks and he made us feel like he was one of us. Mr. Jenks walked us through all the offerings, he talked about the college process, what DY had done for he own kids, and we just felt that he was a true representative of the community and that he really cared. It made us feel like he was looking out for our child.

- We really wish DY had a better reputation and we feel some of it stems from the constant budget issues that the two towns fight over every year. It feels like every year the two towns and the schools are fighting over the cost of education. I just wish they could all get on the same page.

Prominent Themes

Coding and analysis of each of the three parent choice focus groups allowed the researcher to identify specific themes in relationship to the information, perspectives, beliefs, and values of each set of parents who chose to send their child to each of the three different high schools. Here the researcher looked across the commentary of each set of focus groups to look for common themes, as discussed across the three focus groups.
Just as was undertaken for an analysis of themes for each individual focus group, the researcher undertook a review and analysis of common themes and/or perspectives from across the three focus groups in order to determine whether there were any commonalities on how parents across the three enrolling districts made their choice to send their son or daughter to another school outside their local community.

This analysis resulted in the identification of

- Dynamic leadership
- Academic support, and
- Public perception / Social networking

Each of these will be discussed below.

**Dynamic leadership.** Parents in all three focus groups strongly believe that dynamic leadership by the principal was crucial to having a successful school. In order for high schools to be successful principals need to create a positive school culture that promotes learning, engages students, and is a liaison with parents. Principals that take a hands-on approach with teachers, students, and parents and help develop programs that bring out the best in these areas seem to be the most successful (Habegger, 2008).

Each group was very much concerned with the school’s leadership. All of the parents from each focus group expressed the desire and need for dynamic school leadership to help shape and foster a positive school environment. The Nauset focus group discussed how the Nauset high school principal stayed all night at an open house to answer any and all questions parents had regarding his school. In analyzing the parent’s transcripts it become obvious that this positive interaction developed a sense of trust between the schools leadership and parents. “Mr. Conrad is a wonderful principal who helps everyone that he can and is the reason why
Nauset has such a good reputation. He is an excellent speaker, motivator, listener, and leader to all students, teachers, and parents.” The Nauset parent focus group was extremely impressed with Principal Conrad’s leadership and felt strongly that his ability to lead was clearly one of the reasons these parents chose Nauset High School for their child. The only negative impact the Nauset focus group saw with the school leadership was the school notification procedures. One parent was very definitive with his comments that Nauset High School does not do a good job with informing parents of what is going on at the school. As this parent explained, “The school could do a better job informing parents of upcoming events, important dates, new programs, etc. and if this falls under the school leadership category then I would hope it could improve.”

The Dennis-Yarmouth parents expressed their pleasure and dealing with Principal Jenks. They felt that no matter how busy Mr. Jenks was that he would the find time to meet with them and most importantly the parents felt that Principal Jenks would always do what was best for the students. The parents believed his leadership was student driven and consistently and that he always wants the best for students at Dennis-Yarmouth High School. “Mr. Jenks always tries to put the students of Dennis-Yarmouth High School in position to succeed”. The parents felt that Dennis-Yarmouth High School’s leadership was approachable and down to earth. The group also discussed the sense of community that is driven home by Principal Jenks. “I think students thrive when their high schools encourage positive learning relationships among families, teachers, business, and community members. Mr. Jenks continues to do this by supporting all kinds of outreach programs, and student driven community projects. Mr. Jenks lives in the community and I can’t tell you how many times I have seen him at the grocery store and he is always willing to talk to me about education and DY.” The approachability factor of the Dennis-Yarmouth Principal was obviously a factor in parents choosing DY. The parents of the students
that have school choice to DY believe that principal Jenks is clearly fighting for their child to have a successful time throughout their years at Dennis-Yarmouth and if they need anything they feel they can go to Mr. Jenks and he will genuinely help them with an issues they have.

The Monomoy High School parents were highly impressed with Mr. Turner’s coffee hours, in which he would meet with parents and discuss any issues that may surface at Monomoy High School, this was very evident in the case of one parent attending a coffee hour prior to making a decision to send her child to Monomoy. The parents felt that Mr. Turner was a leader that was approachable and willing to listen to their concerns. An effective principal must develop a leadership style that inspires students, staff, and the community to want to learn (DuFour & Mattos, 2013). The parents were convinced that Mr. Turner did a great job keeping the school safe from drugs, weapons, and any other potentially dangerous issues. The size of Monomoy High School being smaller than both Nauset and Dennis-Yarmouth was an issue that surfaced in the discussions. The parents felt that Mr. Turner along with the size of the school was able to encourage a more peaceful and focused learning environment from the other two high schools in the study.

All three principals in these high schools are effective leaders and are continually developing innovative improvement strategies that captivate the entire community. As highlighted by the data obtained from these three focus groups the parents in each group view school leadership slightly different. When interpreting the data the parents in the Nauset focus group view their leader as someone that is clearly “dynamic”, he is out in the public letting everyone know why Nauset is the best school around and constantly developing new and innovative strategies to distinguish his school. The Dennis-Yarmouth parents view their school leadership (principal) as one of them, a hard working blue collar person that just happens to be
the high school principal. The Dennis-Yarmouth principal could blend right into any crowd of DY parents, however it is obvious that these parents know and understand that he is fighting to help their child succeed. The Monomoy school choice parents perceive their principal as someone who is clearly approachable but is also someone who is providing a small safe structured learning environment that is student centered. The parents felt that due to the small nature of the school that Mr. Turner as the principal would provide a more concentrated learning environment.

**Academic offerings and support.** The parents in all three focus groups discussed their concern for academic support. As the researcher analyzed the transcripts across all three groups, parents often alluded to the need for a school to have high expectations, offer a considerable amount of honors and advanced placement courses, and help students with the college process. Throughout the research it was obvious that the parents in the Nauset focus group felt that that Nauset offered more honors classes and more AP classes than any other school on the cape. However when urged to divulge their sources the parents could not come up with anything substantial. In fact in one instance a parent reiterated that “everyone says Nauset offers more AP classes than any other school”. In another case a parent explained how the Nauset Principal explained how Nauset is the only school that has freshman and sophomores taking AP courses, which would translate to a student being able to take more AP course before they graduate at Nauset than at other schools. The parent’s each focus group felt convinced that the school they chose had high expectations and provided all students with an opportunity to succeed. The Dennis-Yarmouth parents felt very strongly about the guidance department and that their son or daughter had been given a clear pathway to achieve their goals. They felt that the guidance department did a great job outlining a plan to help their children succeed in school and to be
prepared for college. The parents from all three focus groups really felt strongly that all three schools did a good job with providing honors and AP classes while commanding high expectations and rigorous standards from their teachers. The Monomoy focus group looked at academic support through the lens of communication. The parents in the Monomoy focus group felt that a school was taking a serious interest in the son or daughter by how well they communicated with them. These parents cited one of the reasons they chose the Monomoy school district lack of or poor communication in their previous school system. These parents felt that communication between parents, teachers, and school administrators was vital to the success of their child. They also alluded to the type of communication school exhibit; these parents expected the principals and teachers to genuinely care about the families that were attending their school. They felt that in some instances they could feel an administrator communicating with then but not really focused on them or their child. The parents also felt that size of Monomoy High School contributed to better communication and better services for their child.

**Public perception & social networking.** Institutions live or die by public opinion. It is important to dispel misperceptions about the quality and safety of public schools, although most parents preferred schools close to home, more advantaged parents were willing to sacrifice convenience in favor of their peers' recommendations (Petronio, 1996). All three focus groups relied heavily on public perception and social word of mouth. This was clearly evident in the Nauset focus group as all the parents agreed that Nauset had rigors academic expectations and high standards. However there evidence was not substantiated other than what they had heard. In the Monomoy focus group one parent sent her child to Monomoy because Dennis-Yarmouth High School is not safe. Again the person had not evidence other than her own perception of the school. The Dennis-Yarmouth school choice parents in some regards had to overcome public
perception to feel comfortable sending their child to DY. Many of the parents in the Dennis-Yarmouth focus group were told that DY was a “ganster school”, it was “dangerous”, and the “academics were poor”. A parent from the Nauset focus group explained to that she did not hear good things about Dennis-Yarmouth and felt it was in her best interest to look at other schools. “When my child was in the 8th grade we had not heard anything good about DY and everyone we talked to told us that Nauset was the best academically and had the most to offer our child so we chose Nauset and he has had a great experience.” The parents in the Dennis-Yarmouth focus group continued to explain how happy they were with Dennis-Yarmouth Regional High School and all it has to offer including its outstanding football teams, band, co-curricular programs, AP courses, and work to careers program. However the extreme budgeting issues between both Dennis and Yarmouth were also discusses. The two towns have fought diligently on the amount of money they should be contributing to fund the schools on a yearly basis. The feud has become public and is written up in the local newspapers and has caused many people to look to other options for their children’s education. The public perception of the two towns among focus groups is that the towns do not appreciate education. The towns of Dennis and Yarmouth are solely concerned with trimming the town budget. As one parent explained, “You never hear about budget battles in the Nauset school system, all you see is how they just keep supporting education, where here at DY every time you open the newspaper the towns and the school department are struggling to fund the school budget.”

Throughout the focus group discussions the term peer group continued to surface. The peer groups or circles those parents and their kids interact with have a huge impact on how people learn about school. If one group of parents decides to send their child to a certain school and has a good experience that parent will influence other parents to do the same and vice versa
with a bad experience. These social groups can be sports related like little league or youth football or can be neighborhood related or with the case of Dennis-Yarmouth and Barnstable made up of parents that went to those schools and feel like their child could do better. In addition many of the parents that chose Nauset had enrolled their son or daughter in the Lighthouse Charter School for middle school. In fact one parent explained how 8–10 kids that all “hung around” together decided to go to Lighthouse Charter School for middle school. These parents all lived in Yarmouth and car pooled their kids down to East Harwich where the school is to have their son and daughters go to school. These parents and kids developed their own social group that supported the charter school and eventually would lead to the parents choosing a school out of their district.

**Summary of findings.** All the participants in the three focus groups illustrated their experiences and reasons for choosing the schools that they did for their child. Through in-depth discussions it was clear that many of the parents had powerful feelings to support their decision. Several themes emerged from the focus groups and that clarified their responses to school choice. The parents believed strongly in school leadership and were very clear that it certainly played a role in their decision. Almost all the parents connected with the building principal at some point in their search process for a high school. In the of two Monomoy parents they viewed the importance of school leadership as vital for their child’s success and left the DY district because the Leadership at the elementary school level continued to change. One of the parents explained that his son had 4 principals in four years. This was extremely unsettling and they decided to take their son out of the DY district and into the Monomoy district. In addition to the interactions between parents and school leadership academic support was very important. Each focus group looked at academic support slightly different. For Dennis-Yarmouth it was the
accessibility of the guidance department and their capability to facilitate the college process. Many of the DY parents admitted to meeting with guidance during the search process and how guidance had reassured them they would be very involved in helping parents complete the college process. The Nauset parents were extremely impressed with the large amount of AP courses offered and the accessibility for students to take these AP classes in the 9th and 10th grade. The Monomoy parents looked at academic support in terms of school and class size and in their opinion Monomoy High School was smaller in general population and offered smaller individual class sizes. However the most distinct and apparent reason for exercising the school choice option seems to be social word of mouth. The undercurrent throughout all the focus groups pointed to the impact of social discussions among parents and friends regarding schools. The participants’ experiences during the school choice process have remained with them as they continue to navigate their child’s education. All of the participants in the study felt that they had made the right decision for their child except for one parent. This particular parent was moving her daughter back into the district high school where they lived. Her reason for this was the social group of individuals that her daughter was around. As the parent explained it was not a good fit for her daughter based solely on the interactions that were occurring with other girls in the school. Throughout the research it was evident that these parents were completely engaged in their son or daughters education. School choice has given these parents a connection to a school that may not have been available without school choice. It is also noted that as the parents continued to work closely with their child and the school throughout high school. As the discussions continued it was easy for parents to get off topic and discuss why they continue to like the school they chose. School choice on Cape Cod has clearly given parents many more options for their child’s education and has kept these particular parents engaged in the process.
Chapter V: Discussion of Research Findings

Revisiting the Problem of Practice

Parents are vital to the success of student achievement and without parent interactions significant gains in student outcomes cannot occur, therefore gains in education are greatly increased when parents are commitment to education (Epstein, 1990). Therefore understanding how parents view schools and how they may choose a high school for their child is important when trying to determine how to improve public education. Many times educators look for parents to be more involved in their child’s education, they try and develop partnerships with parents to take a more active role in helping develop their own children socially, emotionally, and educationally. The implementation of No Child Left Behind has increased educational options for parents. The creation of charter schools and the option of public school choice have given parents educational options to help best serve their own children. Now that parents have these options how are they using them? What are some of the key characteristics that parents are looking for when choosing a school for their child?

Public School Choice is a reform movement focused on affording parents the right to choose which school their child attends. Public school choice, in its various forms, gives parents the option of transferring their children out of lower-performing public schools to higher-performing public schools. Until public school choice was implemented parents were subjected to sending their child to a public school within their town. If the parents could afford a private school they could do that but if they could not then they had no other option but to send their child to the school within their city or town. This allowed for a great deal of socio-economic disparity across schools dependent on their community/district. Parents that lived in wealthy communities with high taxes usually had the best and most well-funded schools. School choice
has attempted to level the playing field. Unlike more affluent families, poor families cannot choose to buy homes in communities that have good schools, and some studies have found that choice programs have positive effects on low-income families (Greene, 2000; Witte, 1999).

**Types of school choice.** There are different forms of school choice and are subjected to state and local jurisdiction. *Intra-district choice* allows parents to select among schools within their home districts. This is often used within a city that has many different types of public schools. *Inter-district school choice*, which is the focus of this research, allows parents to select from schools not only in their home districts but also schools across district lines. There is also *controlled choice*, which requires families to choose a school within a community but choices can be restricted so as to ensure the racial, gender, and socioeconomic balance of each school. *Magnet schools* which are public schools that offer specialized programs, often deliberately designed and located so as to attract students to otherwise unpopular areas or schools offers a type of school choice to parents. *Charter schools* are publicly sponsored schools that are substantially free of direct administrative control by the government, but are held accountable for achieving certain levels of student performance. The last type of school choice is called *voucher plans*, these are federal funds that enable public school students to attend schools of their choice, public or private (Cookson, 1994).

School choice advocates contend that giving parent’s choice creates healthy competition among schools, providing schools with an incentive to improve. Based on the ideal of the free market, the school must meet the needs of the consumer [parents and students] in order to stay in business. Following that theory, if a school does not meet the needs of its students, parents and students should have the option of seeking better education opportunities elsewhere (Garrett, 2001). Competition between schools, will lead to increased school accountability. In turn,
increased school accountability will encourage individual schools to experiment with different educational approaches in order to find those that work best for the students they serve (Raywid, 1992). As a result of experimentation, advocates say, schools will step away from a one-size-fits-all education model. They also contend that offering parents the right to choose increases parental involvement in schools (Aguirre, 2000). Opponents to school choice also worry about the potential loss of financial support for failing schools. If students move from a failing school in one district to a school in another district, the original district will lose valuable per-pupil funding. The loss of funding at the district level can hurt the already struggling school, one study found (Lyons, 1995).

**Review of Methodology**

This study was specifically designed to address the following research question: What information, criteria, and decision-making processes do a select number of parents on Cape Cod use when choosing to send their child to a public high school out of district from which they live? To answer this question, a narrative inquiry was conducted in which the experiences of three school choice focus groups were explored using in-depth, semi-structured discussions. The participants were parents that lived on Cape Cod, Massachusetts and sent their child to a high school different from the high school in their home district. The parent’s stories, experiences, and reasons for changing school systems were probed for significant themes. Research evidence related to school choice and parental decision-making was compared with the major themes that were extracted from the data by implementing various coding techniques. The research data was done in a secure and trustworthy manner to assure that all participants were kept anonymous.

This chapter will be broken down into the following sections: discussion of the major findings, discussion of the findings in relation to the theoretical framework, discussion of the
findings in relation to the literature review, conclusion, limitations, significance of the study, future studies, and next steps.

**Discussion of the Major Findings**

The focus groups yielded the parents’ experiences and thoughts when using their school choice option to choose a high school for their child on Cape Cod. In reviewing the focus groups transcripts, the following themes, as presented in Table 11, emerged as part of the participants’ stories, and are discussed below.

Table 11

*Major Themes*

| • Dynamic School Leadership          |
| • Academic Support                  |
| • High Academic Standards           |
| • Co-curricular Activities / Athletics / Band |
| • Safety                            |
| • Social Network                    |

**Dynamic school leadership.** The parents across all three focus groups had an affinity for school leadership, referring to the importance of the principal’s leadership ability. They all felt that a principal needed to give students and parents the feeling he or she was in charge and leading to help their child succeed. Important characteristics of the principal, included being accessible, trustworthy, and student-centered. Most of the parents explained how they had met with the principal prior to making a decision on school choice. Many parents felt that all three principals were very easily accessible and genuinely wanted to help their children succeed. They also wanted to feel that the principal was committed to the success of the school.
Communication was also a term that surfaced throughout the focus group process. The parents wanted to feel informed or connected to the school and they felt that the principal was ultimately responsible for connected the parents and the students with the community.

**Academic support.** The parents in all three focus groups expected their son or daughter to attend college. They were searching for a high school that they felt gave their child the best opportunity to pursue college. Academic Support throughout high school is an important commodity for all schools. The parents clearly were impressed with Dennis-Yarmouth’s guidance department and its efforts to facilitate the college process. The Nauset parents were also happy with the Nauset high school guidance department. As a Nauset school choice parent explained, “When my son returned home from college one of the first people he went to visit was his guidance counselor. He had so much respect and admiration for his guidance counselor for helping him reach his goal of attending the college of his choice, that he wanted to visit with him and thank him personally.” The Monomoy parents viewed academic support through the lens of a smaller school, with smaller class sizes, and more one on one interactions to help improve academic success. Monomoy High School consists of grades 8 – 12 and has an enrollment of 625 students. Dennis-Yarmouth High School has an 8 – 12 enrollment of 981 students and Nauset High School has a 9 – 12 enrollment of 959 students. The problem with this theory is Monomoy’s average class size is 19-20 students where Dennis-Yarmouth claims an average class size of 13.6 and Nauset claims average class size of 13.7, and Monomoy claims an average class size of 19-20 students. In addition Nauset and DY both have 5 guidance counselors on staff where Monomoy only has 3. Dennis-Yarmouth boasts the smallest student to teacher ratio of 10.8 students to 1 teacher. Nauets student to teacher ratio is 12.6 to 1 and Monomoy’s student to teacher ratio is 10.1 to 1. The data shows very little discrepancy among the three schools in
relation to class size and teacher-student ratio. Dennis-Yarmouth and Nauset both boast smaller class sizes and more guidance counselors.

**High academic standards.** Most of the parents that participated in the study were concerned with high academic standards or academic rigor. The parents that chose Nauset clearly felt that Nauset High School was the superior academic public school on Cape Cod. As one parent explained, “We chose Nauset for its academics.” The parents felt that Nauset offered the most rigorous academic challenges for all students, stating the ability to take Advanced Placement courses in grades 9 and 10, where most schools don’t start having students enroll in AP courses until grades 11 or 12. All three schools boast high academic standards in their mission statements. Monomoy is a new district that is comprised of Harwich and Chatham. Monomoy High School opened in the fall of 2014 creating greater academic, arts, and athletic opportunities for its students. The new high school has allowed students to be able to take additional AP Courses that were not offered in the previous two high schools and an expanded foreign language department. The school has new athletic facilities and upgraded technology. Monomoy, now that it has merged with Chatham to create this new district, has been able to add more Advanced Placement Classes to raise its academic rigor. The parents that chose Monomoy felt that Harwich and Chatham both had a great reputation for academic success and MCAS success and with the addition of the new building were convinced academics would continue to be a staple at Monomoy High School. Dennis-Yarmouth offers a wide range of honors and advanced placement courses along with an extensive virtual high school program that allows students to take any AP course they would like. Nauset has the most AP courses listed in its program of studies, however it is unclear how many are offered each year.
Co-Curricular activities / athletics / band. The importance of Co-Curricular activities showed the most discrepancy among focus groups. All parents involved in all three focus groups felt that Co-Curricular activities were extremely important when choosing a school. However it was only some of the parents in the Dennis-Yarmouth Focus Group that specifically chose Dennis-Yarmouth because of its athletics programs. The parents that chose Monomoy and Nauset were very impressed with each school's offerings of Co-Curricular activities, however they were clear that it was not a selling point on why they chose that school. As one parent explained, “My son does not play football and is not into marching band therefore Dennis-Yarmouth, to us was not a practical option and if he chooses to participate in something, Nauset’s athletics program is sufficient.” The Dennis-Yarmouth participants defended the importance of a strong athletic program by elaborating on the education of the well-rounded student. The parents were impressed the emphasis Dennis-Yarmouth places on its Marching Band, Jazz Band, and Athletic Programs. The family explained how incredible it was to see their daughter participating in the Marching Band, Jazz Band, and then running track in the spring. From these parents perspective this could not happen at any other school. Nauset and Monomoy have music programs but do not have a Marching Band.

Safety. During the parents decision-making process school safety was a concern of some of the parents. Many of the Monomoy Parents explained that Monomoy, being a smaller school, would provide a safer environment than Dennis-Yarmouth or Nauset. The parents in the Nauset focus group loved the idea that Nauset High School is set up with four buildings that the students walk to and from to attend class. The parents explained that it gave them a “prep-school” or “college” feel while they were in high school. Many of the Nauset and Monomoy Parents felt that Dennis-Yarmouth High School was not a safe school. One Monomoy school choice parent
expressed her approval for Monomoy High School because of the way that the teachers made her son feel when they toured the school. She explained how the teachers were very welcoming and made her son feel like he belonged in that school. The Dennis-Yarmouth focus group expounded on the large offerings of co-curricular activities offered by Dennis-Yarmouth High School to help many different types of students feel welcomed at DY. Creating safe schools involves more than preventing crimes. Students must feel connected to the school and to the teachers in the school. In addition, parents and students must feel that the school is a place that fosters learning and gives students a place to succeed (Bluestein, 2001). The parents in all three focus groups felt that the school they chose provided an emotionally safe learning environment for their child. As the Monomoy parents reiterated they felt it was a welcoming place that provided their son or daughter a connection they did not have in their previous school. The Nauset parents felt that the school structure having a prep school or college campus atmosphere contributed to high academic expectations for all students and giving their children a platform to strive to advance into higher education. The Dennis-Yarmouth parents felt that the extremely successful co-curricular opportunities including athletics, band, and the many school clubs offered gave many students a specific connection to the school.

**Social networks.** During the parents school choice process the participant’s interactions with friends was a vital part of choosing a school. Most of the parents in the study chose the school by drawing on either past experiences or information provide from members of their social network. Many of the parents did not use specific data such as MCAS Scores, SAT Scores, or discipline data to determine the quality of a school. Instead these parents relied heavily on word of mouth information from friends and neighbors regarding various high schools. The parents in the study had developed a trust among their social group that provided
them with information about area schools. The information was in no way statistically significant, however the parents believed strongly in their process. Parents that use research and choose schools for their children are more likely to do so through a social network that facilitates the school choice climate (Goldring & Rowley, 2006). The parents in this study used their social networks to provide the majority of information necessary to allow them to choose a school for their child. In addition to the social networking of friends and neighbors, many of the Nauset school choice parents opted to send their child to Cape Cod Lighthouse Charter School for their middle school years. As the parents explained when they decided to send their child to the charter school they were introduced to a network of parents with similar ideas and concerns regarding education. These parents over the course of their children’s middle school education began to discuss various high school options. The parents developed a car pool arrangement to allow easier transportation to and from the charter school. This association continued and when it was time to choose a school most parents from the Lighthouse Charter School chose Nauset High School because it offered, in their opinion, the most similar education.

Discussion of the Findings in Relation to the Theoretical Framework

This study was informed through the perspective of Social Construction Theory. This theory served as a lens through which to explore and understand the experiences parents use to choose a school for their child. Massachusetts allows parents to use public school choice as an option for parents when looking for a school for their children. This research studied the criteria parents use when choosing a school for their child.

Social construction theory. The perceptions and experiences parents use when determining a school for their child have resulted from this qualitative inquiry. Social Construction theory in relation to parental decision making is based on the notion that parents
make decisions relative to the interactions that they experience with other individuals. Using social construction theory as a lens to study parent perceptions of schools and investigate what criteria parents use when choosing a school for their child is highlighted in the research.

Parents’ knowledge of a schools culture, curriculum, teachers, and students through the social constructionist view is a result of learned knowledge. Knowledge is a product of human interactions and is socially and culturally constructed by interactions that occur within a social environment (Derry, 1999). The parents in this study stated that friends or other parents helped shape their decisions on school choice. The participants in this study reported that listening and discussing school choice options with their friends made a significant difference in determining what school they chose for their child. They also admitted to “hearing” that certain schools were good or were not good. When asked about who they heard it from the parents stated, “The people in our group or circle.” The parents in this study obtained the majority of information about the schools they chose or rejected by relying on their social networks for school information. Most of the parents did meet with building principals and have their son or daughter shadow a student for a day at a particular high school they may want to attend. However this was most likely after they were informed of the school by one of their acquaintance’s from their social network.

The parents did not rely on information from just anyone. These parents relied primarily on the opinions of their friends and neighbors. These networks conveyed various parent opinions regarding the quality of a school as either good or bad. The parents then took this information without considering its validity, mainly because it came from one or more parents within their social network. People learn through social interactions and through collaboration with other learners through community of practice, (Kim, 2001). Parents in this study relied
heavily on their social sources of knowledge. By linking together sources of knowledge based on the connections of a network of people from one social circle people gain knowledge (Davis, Edmunds, & Kelly-Bateman, 2008). Parents in this study were clearly influenced by their social network.

The goal of this research study is to understand what criteria parents used when choosing a high school for their child on the Cape. This inquiry relied on participant’s experiences, which originated through the lens of Social Construction Theory, to explore specific characteristics parents look for in a high school. Public school choice is giving parents more options for education while also engaging parents in their child’s educational process. School choice a common process to many families on Cape Cod. Public schools are trying to attract students, while also trying to keep students from changing districts throughout Cape Cod. As parents continue to stay engaged in their child’s education, it is reasonable to expect that parents will continue to shop for schools that best fit the needs of their children. While the aim of this qualitative research study was not to generalize, but instead explore the stories and experiences associated with choosing a high school for a group of parents on Cape Cod, it had become evident that social networking played a large part in their decision making process.

**Discussion of the Findings in Relation to the Literature Review**

The findings from this study strongly align with the literature presented in Chapter 2. The main focus of the literature review centered on three areas.

1. Does the implementation of school choice options for parents create greater competition among schools and increase educational opportunities for students?

2. What parents look for use when choosing a school?

3. How do parents research and gain knowledge about the schools they may choose.
The school choice literature indicates that parents who participate in school choice exhibit increased parental involvement, have high educational priorities, and interact within social networks.

**School competition.** The literature detailing school choice clearly indicates that using economic ideals and market theory to increase competition among schools will increase the educational opportunities for students (Hoxby, 2000). This phenomenon was evident throughout the findings during this study. The schools on Cape Cod are all competing with each other for students. All schools are very conscious of what they offer and what they cut during budget time. Parents are also extremely aware of what schools are offering and the quality of the programs that are being offered. School districts have created slogans such as “The DY Advantage” to help attract students from other districts to Dennis-Yarmouth. In addition to a slogan Dennis-Yarmouth has invested in radio commercials to help market their opportunities to parents. This study focused specifically on Cape Cod and the competition that surrounds the public school districts on the Cape. Through focus group interviews and discussions with numerous parents it is obvious that parents are well aware of their school choice options. All of the school systems on Cape Cod recognize the competition among each other.

Over the last 3 – 4 years there have been significant changes to school districts to help improve their educational opportunities and help attract students. Sandwich High School has implemented the STEM Academy and now is made up of grades 7 – 12. Barnstable and Dennis-Yarmouth both have grades 8 – 12 with a wide offering of co-curricular, athletics, and band opportunities for 8th grade students that might not have been offered at a traditional middle school. The towns of Harwich and Chatham have combined to form the Monomoy School district and built a brand new state of the art Monomoy High School for grades 8 – 12. Nauset
High School has made numerous facility upgrades, which include a new artificial turf football field, new and upgraded weight room, and a new wrestling room. All the schools have done this to compete for students.

School choice is a market-based educational approach that has redefined schooling in terms of economic competitiveness and infusing fundamental market principles into the structure of American schools (Hursh, 2007). In Massachusetts school choice is an option that all school committees have and this has been primarily limited in many school districts by student capacity and facility space. However it has flourished on Cape Cod, mainly because of a declining population and the close proximity each school district has to each other. The high-stakes testing and rigid accountability requirements written into NCLB (2001), for example, discipline schools in the ways of the market while providing the "objective" data administrators, policy makers, and parents require to hold teachers (and students) accountable and to enable parents (consumers) to make informed choices about schools for their children (Apple, 2000; Hursh, 2007). This is exactly what is happening on Cape Cod; schools are becoming more competitive in enhancing educational opportunities for students. With this model of market based education it is expected that parents make sound decisions on education for their child.

**Parental characteristics of good schools.** Research clearly demonstrates that student achievement is improved by keeping parents engaged in the learning process (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997). A number of research studies show that parental involvement in children’s learning activities positively influences their levels of achievement and motivation to learn (Epstein, 1992). However as students move into high school parental involvement decreases (Epstein, 1995). One way of engaging parents in the learning process is through school choice. The data collected from the three focus groups shows that these parents are concerned and
involved with their children’s education. Furthermore, school choice in Massachusetts does not involve any type of extended transportation. Therefore if parents want to send their child to a school that is not in their sending district they must find their own transportation for their child. This also demonstrates an increased level of parental engagement.

Through analysis of the data some key themes emerged in relation to how parents judge schools. Some of the key attributes that parents are looking for in high schools coincide with that of the research. Parents indicate they choose schools that have high academic standards, have a safe learning environment, and are convenient to where they live (Smrekar & Goldring, 1996; Hamilton & Guin, 2006). The literature also indicates parents that participate in school choice are more engaged in their children’s education, and these parents also place more emphasis on educational priorities that are associated with academic outcomes such as student achievement (Goldring & Hausman, 1999). It is clear from the data analysis that all twenty-four parents are extremely involved in their child’s education and these parents feel that a school needs to have high expectations and rigorous academic standards. In addition to high academic priorities some parents are also concerned with school size and safety within the learning environment (Schneider, Marschall, Teske, & Roch, 1998). In combing through the data it is evident that parents are also concerned about rigorous or high academic standards. This was made clear in the data by analyzing the parents views toward school offerings. Parents expected schools to have a wide range of choices for their children. They wanted to see large course offerings especially in the area of AP Courses. Many of the parents aligned themselves with the literature on school safety. Parents in the study expected a safe learning environment and in some cases moved their child to another school because they felt it provided a safer educational atmosphere.
In this study, it is clear that the high school principal’s role in school choice process also was significant. In these three communities, the principal can no longer just be an educator but also be a marketer (Hausman & Goldring, 2001, Chubb and Moe, 1990). The changes that are expected of principals stem from competition that is created from area schools. Principals now have to sell their school to parents, they have to be experts on curriculum, instruction, and special education services. At the same time, the principal must be able to show why their school will do the best to accommodate the learning opportunities parents want for their child.

School choice is often assumed to be associated with bottom-up reform that is characterized by the empowerment of teachers and principals (Finn, 1990). School leadership was very important to the parents in this study. In each setting parents explained how the high school principal played a pivotal role in convincing them to send their child to his or her school. As noted by one parent in the Nauset focus group, “Nauset High School Principal Tom Conrad has successfully helped many families become part of the Nauset school system, I know he helped my family feel we were making the right choice.”

The literature suggests that market-driven organizations have a stronger tendency to develop strategies to meet the needs of customers, in this case the students and parents (Slater and Narver, 1995). This also means that schools must improve the quality of their educational offerings to compete in an open market setting. In the case of school choice on Cape Cod, it mirrors this principle of free market competition, and in this particular case, it is the competition for students. This puts different demands on principals, which include improved curriculum, innovative pedagogy, and professional development for teachers, with the addition of financial stress, competition for high-performing students, and public comparisons of high stakes testing (Bagley, 2006).
The data collected clearly demonstrated the importance of the principal and the leadership put forth by that principal. In all three focus groups parents discussed various situations in which they met personally or in a group setting with the principal of that high school. The parents felt that the principal provided a platform to help them choose. In doing so, the principal was marketing his school. As a parent in the Dennis-Yarmouth focus group explained, “We sat down with Principal Ken Jenks before we decided to move our daughters to DY. He made us feel like he really cared, he was welcoming, genuine, and we felt he was going to do everything he could to help our daughters achieve their goals.” Each principal had a slightly different approach to marketing and communicating with parents, however it was clear from the data that parents that are deciding on a public school for their child are interested in a schools leadership. It has become evident that school choice has changed the principals’ role in education and because of this a principals need to adapt and change to accommodate these parental demands.

Social networking. The social network literature reveals that interpersonal networks are an efficient resource for gathering information (Schneider, Teske, Roch, & Marschall, 1997). Therefore, these interpersonal networks are important when parents are searching for a new school for their child. This phenomenon clearly surfaced during this research study. The parents that were involved in the three focus groups stated on numerous occasions that the group of parents and friends they hung around with made a big difference in determining what school they would send their child to. Social “Word of mouth” and “talking to others” are the most typical ways parents use to find out about schools and about school choice options (Boyer, 1992; Wilson, 1992; Witte, 1996). Throughout the focus group discussions, I found that most of the parents in this study did not know a great deal about their chosen school’s instruction, teachers,
and programs prior to making their choice. In fact, of the twenty-four parents who had participated in the study, only two had admitted to researching MCAS scores. Instead these parents were more concerned with what other people had told them regarding the neighboring schools.

As the researcher reviewed the transcripts and data from the focus groups, it became clear that the decisions these parents made in regard to school choices were not primarily based on school quality, because they actually knew very little about the schools teaching, learning, and instruction. Instead most parents based their choices primarily on information from other parents within their social network. Most of the parents did take a tour of the school, met with the principal, and a couple had their child shadow a student for a day. However, what became clear was that these social networks passed along general opinions of a school, as to whether or not a school was considered good by a number of parents in each other’s neighborhood or social network. Furthermore, the parents in this study placed their faith more in the information or opinions shared with them by other parents than in specific facts about instruction or programs. Factual information about good schools was not often passed through these social networks. Instead the reputations of schools were socially constructed through the interaction of parents in such networks (Becker & McCall, 1990).

In addition to these social networks helping create a reputation among area schools it was evident that the Nauset focus group felt that Nauset High School carried a higher-status among area high schools. As one parent explained in the focus group, “The socio-economic base they have up at Nauset is totally different than socio-economic base of parents in Dennis or Yarmouth or Barnstable…So that definitely plays into our decision because they seem to support education more, than in the communities of Dennis and Yarmouth.”
The parents in the Nauset focus group admitted to trusting the opinions of other parents in their social networks to a very large degree. In fact when they were asked how accurate they thought the social network was on steering them toward Nauset High School they responded with a resounding “extremely accurate” and they all said it was clearly the best educational decision they had made regarding their child’s future.

**Limitations of the Study**

This study has been successfully completed with significant data being gathered and analyzed on school choice. However there are several limitations to the study that must be noted. Given the small sample size of each focus group, claims cannot be made regarding the generalizations of the results. In addition the focus groups consisted of parents that wanted to be engaged in their child’s education. These parents were concerned with the academic advancement of their son or daughter’s education. All of the parents involved in the study had visions of their child attending college. This cannot be considered the norm of all parents from the three school districts. There are parents who may exercise their school choice option and not be concerned with their son or daughter attending higher education. Qualitative research can rely on a small number of participants, as the researcher dives into the lives and experiences of this small sample size instead of searching to obtain a broad data collection pool (Holloway & Freshwater, 2007). Qualitative inquiry has more to do with the perspectives, beliefs, and shared observations and stories of participants than the strength of undertaking a quantitative study with a large sample size (Maxwell, 2004).

Another limitation of the study is that the researcher is directly involved in the school choice process. The researcher is the Athletics Director at Dennis-Yarmouth High School and the schools’ Head Football Coach. As an administrator and coach, the researcher has worked
numerous hours to help market and sell Dennis-Yarmouth High School as a positive educational high school on Cape Cod. Many of the individuals associated with the Dennis-Yarmouth Focus group were parents of DY football players who had chosen DY for its outstanding football program, coaches, and athletic programs. While this personal connection of the researcher also means that the findings cannot necessarily be generalized, this limitation is inherent in narrative inquiry. The goal of narrative inquiry in general, and of this study in particular is to understand the experiences, stories, and methods that parents use when they choose a public high school for their child on Cape Cod.

**Next steps.** With the immense competition associated with school choice on Cape Cod it would make sense to research what building principals, superintendents, and school committees are doing to help entice students and parents to join their school or school system, while continuing to keep students from leaving their school system. To conquer the school choice phenomenon it will be important for school committees, town selectman, and school leadership personnel work together as a community to find out what the needs are of their parents and students and develop programs that best suit these needs. Providing effective information to parents that is transparent in curriculum, instruction, co-curricular programs, and budgets is an important way to keep parents engaged in the educational process. As the research showed parents are greatly influenced by social networking. School systems must be aware of this and be willing to compete against inaccuracies developed by social networks. School districts need to provide parents with realistic and appropriate information that effectively demonstrates how they plan to provide educational services for all students in the district.

**Conclusion**
The primary research question that directed this study was: What information, criteria, and decision-making processes do a select number of parents on Cape Cod use when choosing to send their child to a public high school out of district from which they live? Parent’s experiences within the school choice process provide great insight into how parents make decisions regarding schools. Analyzing the stories and experiences of the parents has revealed that parents place a great deal of importance on the information passed on and shared through their social networks in making a choice of school. Parents place a great deal of emphasis on the information and perspectives of their friends or acquaintances. Many of the parents who chose Nauset High School relied heavily on individual friends or neighbors for their information. Most noted that they heard about their chosen school’s reputation from other parents in their social circles. In addition all but one of the eight parents in the Nauset focus group sent their child to Cape Cod Lighthouse Charter School and it was at that school that the parents were informed of their options for high school. To many of these parents the charter school presented the parents with two options: Sturgis Public Charter School or Nauset Regional High School. It was important to many of these parents that they were told about a school’s reputation of Nauset Regional High School by Cape Cod Lighthouse Charter school administrators and other parents.

The area that made the most impact on parental decision making was social networking. All schools develop reputations as being good or bad. A bigger question is what is determining a school’s reputation. In all three focus groups parents made numerous comments toward schools because, “they had been told this school was better.” In the case of a Nauset school choice parent, he explained that his neighbors and friends began to look for high schools other than the one in their district which began to influence him and his wife to look for high schools for their
children. He referred to it as the school choice bandwagon. “Once you get on the school choice band wagon with everyone else there are a lot of people influencing you on your decision.”

Competition among schools on Cape Cod is increasingly fierce, as each school district fights for students and state education aid. The Massachusetts school choice model of state funds following the student from district to district has made Cape Cod the wild west of school choice. Schools are extremely aware of class size, course offerings, discipline records, MCAS scores, athletic programs, co-curricular activities, and the upgrading of facilities. The parents that were involved in the study were well aware of their school choice options. The area that was least discussed by parents was the schools test scores. In fact at one point a Nauset parent admitted to checking MCAS scores and was thrilled that Nauset had the best scores on the Cape. However, her information was inaccurate, although Nauset had very good MCAS they were not at the top.

The data was clear on the need for dynamic and approachable school leadership. The parents in the study all indicated that the school principal made an enormous impact on their decision. The principal was expected to provide a conducive, safe learning environment with high standards, and lots of course choices for the students. In addition the principal must be approachable and dynamic in a way that will sell their “product” or vision to the community. These qualities have not always been associated with the position of the principal.

In analyzing the entire data, parents look to social networks to begin the process of choosing a school. If a parent had a relative, friend, neighbor that had a good experience at one school or a poor experience at a school their influence can get the school choice process moving. However social networking cannot be the only source for a parent choosing one school over the other. As the data shows the principal plays a central role in the recruitment of students and is
vital within the community to show that the school is a good option for parents and students. In addition parents that are searching for a school are concerned with athletics programs, band, co-curricular activities, strong guidance departments, a safe learning environment, and on a smaller scale test scores.

**Significance of the Study**

This study is important to the field of education because it highlights the forces that shape parents’ attitudes, characteristics, and experiences that shape what they look for in a high school. No Child Left Behind has given parents more options for their child’s education, but understanding how these parents view these options is important for schools, teachers, and administrators. Educational opportunities are being coming more competitive and schools need to adapt to this new competition. This is study exposed some of the key qualities that parents look for in schools. Cape Cod provides a unique playing field for public school choice. The number of towns and school districts in close proximity to each other allows parents the ability to shop for a school that best fits their child’s needs. Along with these parental choice options comes significant financial changes that school districts all over the state must be aware of. The Massachusetts FY15 school choice reimbursement is $5,000 dollars per student, which follows the student from the sending district to the receiving district. This is small compared to the amount of per pupil expenditures that most school district spends. However, the debt or increase is in the numbers. If a school district losses 100 students from k – 12 they would be looking at a loss in state aid of $500,000. That is significant in an era were state budgets and educational funding is constantly being reduced. This study will give school districts the opportunity to see why certain parents choose one district over the other. School districts will have the ability to
see what these parents are looking for in a school and create programs that may recruit or retain students based on the findings in the research study.

Future Studies

The following list represents recommendations for further future research:

- Expansion to include more school choice parents
- Administering a survey to gather quantitative data
- Expand the data to include public charter schools and even private schools
- Exploring expanding roles that principals and superintendents experience on Cape Cod in reference to school choice.
- Research what school systems are doing to attract students and to keep students.

What specific educational programs have been implemented to help recruit and retain students in districts on Cape Cod?

The findings from this study will hopefully shed some light on what parents are looking for when they choose a school for their child. The data compiled in this research project may present valuable information to school systems in response to school choice. The data will hopefully give school systems on Cape Cod the opportunity to see why parents are leaving one system for another. This information may allow school systems to make changes or implement new and innovative strategies to improve their district and attract more students.

Personal Reflection

School Choice has clearly given parents more educational options for their children. School Choice, where available, has in some cases increased the competitive balance of public schools across many communities since first suggested in the No Child Left Behind legislation. This has never been more evident than on Cape Cod. All seven public school districts on Cape
Cod exercise school choice and all seven compete for students. This inquiry has been personally meaningful to me as it has led me to delve into my own philosophies and theories on education. Personally I am a competitive a person. I was a Division 1 college athlete at the University of Connecticut, Division 1 college coach, and am today a successful high school coach. I believe strongly in all facets of competition and have always felt that the best work gets done by turning the heat up on people. I have worked in the Dennis-Yarmouth Regional School District as a teacher, coach, and now administrator and have worked extremely hard to market our product. As a coach, I spent most of my time marketing our athletic programs. I feel strongly that our athletic programs continue to attract students from other districts and are outstanding among Cape Cod high school programs.

Dennis-Yarmouth Regional School District does a great marketing its band, athletics, and co-curricular programs. However, we as a district also have a lot to offer academically and have some outstanding teachers that put in countless hours to see students succeed. Throughout this research it was hard to see Dennis-Yarmouth at the bottom of the MCAS Scores, SAT scores, and the Financial Net School Choice Money. Over my last 14 years at DY I have seen students go to Harvard, Cornell, Tufts, Boston College, Holy Cross, Dartmouth, West Point, University of California Berkley, Northeastern, MIT (2 in the last 2 years), UNC, Michigan, University of Virginia, Columbia, Williams, Amherst, Bates, Bowdoin, UMass, UConn, and many other successful and prestigious colleges. However the reputation of Dennis-Yarmouth High School is not good in many people’s eyes on Cape Cod. In this competitive educational environment school districts have to find ways to improve, attract students, and market their school. As a member of the Dennis-Yarmouth school district this is a constant battle and our reputation is
constantly on the line. This battle cannot be won by just teachers and administrators, it must be tackled by the entire community.

Part of the problems that surfaced during the focus groups was the constant budget battles that occur between the towns of Dennis and Yarmouth. Participants in all three focus groups expressed their concerns with the annual budget issues that both towns have when funding the school district. As one parent explained, “The budget issues that occur every year between Dennis and Yarmouth give the general public [the impression] that the communities do not care about education, but instead only care about saving money.” This is a view that is common around Cape Cod and is clearly hurting the reputation of the school district. Throughout this research I continued to ponder how the reputation of Dennis-Yarmouth High School could be changed. What could I do to improve the district that I work in? How could I get the message out to the community that good things are happening at Dennis-Yarmouth High School? It is an extremely difficult and complex issue to deal with. It is not as simple as saying DY has a kid going to MIT so everyone else should go to DY.

I have learned a great deal from the research on parent decision making and I continue to contemplate many other questions about parental decision making choices. Among the lessons I have learned are:

- Parent social networks are huge influences in the parental decision making process.
- Parents greatly value school leadership and the accessibility of school leadership
- Co-Curricular Activities, athletics, and band, play a vital role in some parents decisions when deciding on a school for their child.
- Schools’ reputations carry a price that is hard to change among community members.
For school districts to improve it will be important to find out why parents left and what parents are looking for within a school?

It is my opinion that school districts like Dennis-Yarmouth need dynamic leaders that can work closely with the community to deliver a positive message to parents, students, teachers, and elected officials. It is important for school leaders that they do not operate individually but instead as a community. School districts need to market all the positive programs, students, and successes that occur in their schools on a regular basis. Administrators need to be visible throughout the community and be willing to work side-by-side with other town agencies to help improve the entire community. Changing the reputation of a business, school, or community is extremely difficult and cannot be done by one person. It may take the leadership of one person to begin the process but it will take a village to change the entire reputation of a school and school district.
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Educational Leadership 56 (1), 28-30.


*Economics of Education Review*, 402-416.


Appendix A
Permission Letter Principal Dennis-Yarmouth Regional High School

February 28, 2014

Dear Mr. Jenkins,

I am currently enrolled in the Doctor of Education program at Northeastern University and am in the process of pursuing my dissertation study. My research is focused on how parents make their decision to choose a high school under the school choice provisions on Cape Cod. Cape Cod has been a model for public school choice throughout Massachusetts and I will be researching thoughts, ideas, and experiences parents have used when choosing a school for their child.

Through this qualitative study, I look to identify those attributes of high schools parents are considering when choosing a high school of enrollment for their child(ren) outside of their home district. I would like to conduct a focus group with 8 parents who have selected Dennis-Yarmouth Regional High School as their school of choice, asking them how they went through the decision-making process and what factors they considered in making that choice. To let you know, I am also pursuing doing the same at Monomoy and Nauset Regional High Schools. In the end, the data could potentially provide some very pertinent information considering those key factors parents look for or target when choosing a high school for their son or daughter.

I am hoping that this study could serve to benefit the Dennis-Yarmouth Public Schools as well as many other high schools and school districts in Massachusetts if not nationally.

At this time, I am contacting you to see if you and the district would be willing to forward a letter from me to a random sample of no more than 40 parents who have chosen to send their child to Dennis-Yarmouth Regional High School requesting their participation. I have included this letter for your review. Your participation is completely voluntary.

If you should like to discuss the possibility of your participation, please contact me directly at (508) 527-3975 or via email at funk.p@husky.neu.edu or my faculty advisor Dr. Chris Unger at Northeastern University (617) 272-8941. Thank you in advance for your time. I look forward to hearing from you regarding this request.

Sincerely,

Paul Funk
Doctoral Candidate, College of Professional Studies
Northeastern University, Boston MA

APPROVED
9-19-05
VALID THROUGH 9-19-10
Appendix B
Permission Letter Principal Monomoy Regional High School

February 28, 2014

Dear Mr. Turner,

I am currently enrolled in the Doctor of Education program at Northeastern University and am in the process of pursuing my dissertation study. My research is focused on the how parents make their decision to choose a high school under the school choice provisions on Cape Cod. Cape Cod has been a model for public school choice throughout Massachusetts and I will be researching thoughts, ideas, and experiences parents have used when choosing a school for their child.

Through this qualitative study, I look to identify those attributes of high schools parents are considering when choosing a high school of enrollment for their child(ren) outside of their home district. I would like to conduct a focus group with 6-8 parents who have selected Monomoy Regional High School as their school of choice, asking them how they went through the decision-making process and what factors they considered in making that choice. To let you know, I am also pursuing doing the same at Dennis-Yarmouth Regional High School and Nauset Regional High Schools. In the end, the data could potentially provide some very pertinent information considering those key factors parents look for or target when choosing a high school for their son or daughter.

I am hoping that this study could serve to benefit the Monomoy Public Schools as well as many other high schools and school districts in Massachusetts if not nationally.

At this time, I am contacting you to see if you and the district would be willing to forward a letter from me to a random sample of no more than 40 parents who have chosen to send their child to Monomoy Regional High School requesting their participation. I have included this letter for your review. Your participation is completely voluntary.

If you should like to discuss the possibility of your participation, please contact me directly at (508) 527-3975 or via email at funk.p@husky.neu.edu or my faculty advisor Dr. Chris Unger at Northeastern University (857) 272-8041. Thank you in advance for your time. I look forward to hearing from you regarding this request.

Sincerely,

Paul Funk
Doctoral Candidate, College of Professional Studies
Northeastern University, Boston MA
Appendix C
Permission Letter Principal Nauset Regional High School

February 28, 2014

Dear Mr. Conrad

I am currently enrolled in the Doctor of Education program at Northeastern University and am in the process of pursuing my dissertation study. My research is focused on the how parents make their decision to choose a high school under the school choice provisions on Cape Cod. Cape Cod has been a model for public school choice throughout Massachusetts and I will be researching thoughts, ideas, and experiences parents have used when choosing a school for their child.

Through this qualitative study, I look to identify those attributes of high schools parents are considering when choosing a high school of enrollment for their child(ren) outside of their home district. I would like to conduct a focus group with 6-8 parents who have selected Nauset Regional High School as their school of choice, asking them how they went through the decision-making process and what factors they considered in making that choice. To let you know, I am also pursuing doing the same at Dennis-Yarmouth Regional High School and Nauset Regional High Schools. In the end, the data could potentially provide some very pertinent information considering those key factors parents look for or target when choosing a high school for their son or daughter.

I am hoping that this study could serve to benefit the Nauset Public Schools as well as many other high schools and school districts in Massachusetts if not nationally.

At this time, I am contacting you to see if you and the district would be willing to forward a letter from me to a random sample of no more than 40 parents who have chosen to send their child to Nauset Regional High School requesting their participation. I have included this letter for your review. Your participation is completely voluntary.

If you should like to discuss the possibility of your participation, please contact me directly at (508) 527-3975 or via email at funk.p@husky.neu.edu or my faculty advisor Dr. Chris Unger at Northeastern University (617) 272-8941. Thank you in advance for your time. I look forward to hearing from you regarding this request.

Sincerely,

Paul Funk
Doctoral Candidate, College of Professional Studies
Northeastern University, Boston MA
Appendix D
Participant Recruitment Letter

April 4, 2014

Dear Parent/Guardian:

My name is Paul Funk and I am doctoral candidate in the College of Professional Studies at Northeastern University and a teacher and athletic coach at Dennis-Yarmouth Regional High School. For my Thesis, I am conducting a study about the factors that parents look at when choosing a high school for their child. The parents in this study have been identified as parents who exercised the option of public school choice and sent their child to a high school other than the one in the town in which they live.

In order to gather data about this research topic, I am inviting you to participate in my study. Participation would include participating in a 60-85 minute focus group at the high school with 5-7 other parents whose children are enrolled in the high school.

I am inviting you to participate in this research project because you have a child that you decided to send to high school other than the one in the town that you live in. Your ideas, thoughts, and experiences that are involved in the school choice process will be extremely valuable in obtaining information for this study.

Please be aware that any participation in the study will be completely confidential, and that names and any other personal information will not be used to identify participants or their child(ren).

If you would be interested in participating, please respond via email to my Northeastern University email at funk.p@flyway.new.edu. If you should have any questions regarding the study or your potential participation, I would be happy to answer them as well.

Thank you in advance for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Paul Funk
Appendix F
Signed Informed Consent Document

Northeastern University, College of Professional Studies
Investigator Name: Principal Investigator, Dr. Chris Unger
Student Researcher, Paul Funk

Title of Project: School Choice: How Parents Engage in School Choice on Cape Cod: A Case Study Approach of Cape Cod Public High Schools and Public School Choice

Informed Consent to Participate in a Research Study

Why am I being asked to take part in this research study?
You have been identified as having a son or daughter that is participating in the Massachusetts Public School Choice option. In addition you had expressed an initial interest in participating in this study from a previously sent request letter.

Why is this research study being done?
The purpose of this study is to identify and describe key factors influencing parents’ choice of high school for their child. Three focus groups will be conducted with parents that have chosen a high school different from the high school in which the live. This may lead to the identification of specific factors that parents use when selecting a public high school for their child(ren).

What will I be asked to do?
The researcher will be looking for you to participate in the following ways: Participate in a 60-85 minute focus group session that will be digitally audio recorded.

Where will this take place and how much time will it take?
The focus groups will take place either at your child’s high school or a public location of convenience for all participants. The focus group discussion should last between 60-75 minutes.

Will there be any risk or discomfort to me?
There are no significant risks involved in being a participant in this study.

Will I benefit by being in the research?
There are no direct benefits for participation. However, benefits may include an opportunity for participants to reflect on the factors that have led to your decision making process of choosing a public high school for your child. With your insight and feedback, your participation could potentially help high schools improve by creating programs that may appeal to more students and parents.

Who will see the information about me?
Your part of the study will be completely confidential. Pseudonyms will be used for all study participants. Only the researcher will be aware of the participants’ identities. No reports or particular information will be used to specifically identify you in any way.

As focus group participants, your participation will be confidential. The other participants in your focus group will hear your ideas, but confidentiality will be discussed with all participants. The data collected for this study will be kept by the researcher, including digital audio recordings, and will not be shared with others. Only first names will be used during focus group sessions and in transcriptions. False names will be used in reports related to focus groups. All digital audio recordings will be destroyed following transcription of the focus groups.

In rare instances, authorized people may request to see research information about you and other people in the study. This is done only to be sure that the research is done properly. The researcher would only permit people who are
authorized by organizations such as Northeastern University to see this information. No identifying information will ever be shared outside Northeastern University.

If I do not want to take part in the study, what choices do I have?
You are not required to take part in this study. If you do not want to participate, you do not have to sign this form.

What will happen if I suffer any harm from the research?
There are no significant risks involved in being a participant in this study.

Can I stop my participation in this study?
Participation in this study is voluntary. You may discontinue your participation in the research program at any time without penalty or costs of any nature, character, or kind.

Who can I contact if I have questions or problems?
Paul Funk
Dennis-Yarmouth Regional High School
210 Station Ave
South Yarmouth, MA 02664
Home # (508) 432-4756
Cell # (508) 527-3975
Funk.p@husky.neu.edu

Dr. Christopher Unger
College of Professional Studies
360 Huntington Ave (BV 20)
Northeastern University, Boston MA
Cell # 857-272-8941
cunger@neu.edu

Who can I contact about my rights as a participant?
If you have any questions about your rights as a participant, you may contact Nan C. Regina, Director, Human Subject Research Protection at n.regina@neu.edu or (617) 373-4588. You may call anonymously if you wish.

Will I be paid for my participation?
There is no compensation for participation in this study.

Will it cost me anything to participate?
There is no cost to participate in this study.

I have read, understood, and had the opportunity to ask questions regarding this consent form. I fully understand the nature and character of my involvement in this research program as a participant and the potential risks. Should I be selected, I agree to participate in this study on a voluntary basis.

Research Participant (Printed Name)  

Research Participant (Signature) Date

APPROVED

Northeastern University - Human Subject Research Protection
Rev. 03/2013