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## A Case Study of Christian School Parents Who Work in Public Schools

Timothy C. Lehman

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A CASE STUDY OF CHRISTIAN SCHOOL PARENTS  
WHO WORK IN PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Timothy C. Lehman

FACULTY RESEARCH COMMITTEE:

Chair: Dane Joseph, Ph.D

Member: Susanna Thornhill, Ph.D

Member: Gary Sehorn, Ed.D

Member: Karen Buchanan, Ed.D

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment to the Faculty of the  
Doctor of Educational Leadership Department  
in partial fulfillment for the degree of  
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“A CASE STUDY OF CHRISTIAN SCHOOL PARENTS WHO WORK IN PUBLIC SCHOOLS,” a Doctoral research project prepared by TIM LEHMAN in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Doctor of Education degree in Educational Leadership.

This dissertation has been approved and accepted by:

	_____	Committee Chair
4/10/2020	Dane Joseph, Ph.D.	APR 4.14.20 Associate Professor of Education
	_____	
4/10/2020	Susanna Thornhill, Ph.D.	APR 4.14.20 Associate Professor of Education
	_____	
4/10/2020	Karen Buchanan, Ed.D.	APR 4.14.20 Professor of Education
	_____	
4/10/2020	Gary Sehorn, Ed.D.	APR 4.14.20 Associate Professor of Education

## ABSTRACT

This case study investigated factors parents consider when choosing Christian schools for their children and how they made sense of their decision. Participants were northern Indiana public school employees who enrolled at least one child in an evangelical Christian School. In individual interviews participants were asked to reflect on their process of school choice decision making. The researcher used in-vivo and values coding to determine that the primary factors pushing participants away from public schooling are, (a) lack of individual attention, (b) low confidence in staff, (c) low academic rigor, (d) lack of Christian values, and (e) feeling unsafe. Primary pull factors drawing parents to Christian schooling include (a) alignment with values, (b) caring teachers who give individual attention, (c) Indiana Choice Scholarship (voucher) program, (d) preservation of religious identity, (e) sense of community, and (f) high academic expectations. Second cycle coding revealed that the primary commonality of all push/pull factors is self-interest. The researcher also asked participants to reflect on the moral and ethical dilemmas they face as public-school employees who chose Christian schooling for their children. Participants do not see a moral/ethical conflict between their public-school role and their Christian schooling choice. The researcher suggests that no conflict exists for some participants because their identity as evangelical Christians trumps their identity as public school employees. The results of this study suggest that this set of self-described evangelical parents are dissatisfied with the lack of Christian values in the public-school system and that Christian schools may be better positioned to serve the interests of some evangelical families. The researcher also suggests that rational choice models are inadequate to explain parent decision-making concerning school choice and that Weick's (1995) sensemaking and Klein's (2015) naturalistic decision making

(NDM) models provide valuable insight in understanding school choice decisions. Further research is needed to investigate the decision-making process of evangelical public-school employees who choose to keep their children in public schools.

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT.....	i
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	iii
TABLE OF CONTENTS.....	v
LIST OF TABLES.....	viii
Chapter 1 - Introduction.....	1
Problem of Practice.....	2
Purpose of the Study.....	4
Research Question.....	6
Significance of Study.....	6
Definition of Terms.....	7
Limitations/Delimitations.....	8
Organization of Study.....	11
Chapter 2 - Review of the Literature.....	12
Historical Background of the Literature on this Topic.....	13
Religion in the public schools.....	13
Neoliberal market reforms and the proliferation of choice.....	15
Conceptual Framework.....	20
Summary and Discussion of the Literature.....	22
Benefits maximization and school choice.....	22



Socioeconomic factors of school choice.....	26
The bounds of choice.....	33
Conclusion of Literature Review .....	34
Chapter 3 - Methodology .....	35
Design/Research Approach.....	35
The setting.....	37
Selection of participants.....	37
Data sources and gathering procedures.....	38
Data analysis procedures.....	38
Bracketing of Potential Researcher Bias.....	39
Research Ethics.....	43
Chapter 4 – Findings.....	45
The schools .....	45
Description of the Participants.....	46
Participant #1 – Casey. ....	47
Participant #2 – Rex.....	48
Participant #3 – Janice. ....	48
Participant #4 – Rob.....	49
Participant #5 – Lynn.....	49
Thematic Overview.....	50
Theme one: Push/Pull Factors. ....	50

Theme Two: Self-interest .....	57
Theme Three: Participant sense-making and identity.....	61
Summary of Findings.....	64
Chapter 5 – Conclusions .....	66
Discussion of Findings.....	66
Comparisons. ....	67
Connections.....	71
Implications and recommendations for practice .....	75
For researchers. ....	75
For Christian school leaders.....	76
For public-schools.....	77
For parents seeking Christian schooling options. ....	78
Recommendations for Further Research.....	79
Conclusions.....	80
References.....	82
Appendix A.....	91
Appendix B .....	93
Appendix C .....	95

## LIST OF TABLES

Table 1. <i>Overview of Schools</i> .....	46
Table 2. <i>Push/Pull Factors</i> .....	56
Table 3. <i>Factors Comparison of the Current Case Study with Barna Group (2017)</i> .....	69

## Chapter 1 - Introduction

Working in a Mennonite denominational school for the last 17 years as a teacher, principal, and head of school, I have observed parents as they wrestle with choosing the right school for their children. For some parents, the choice appears relatively easy. They have known for many years that their children would attend “their” private school, which is often the school that their church congregation supports. It may even be the school the child’s parents and grandparents attended. For these parents, school choice is about identity.

For some parents, there seems to be a desire to insulate or protect their children from the negative influences of public schooling. Indeed, just prior to my school’s founding in 1954, the Indiana-Michigan Mennonite Conference cautioned that “Christian parents should keep in mind that the public school, its activities and its programs, will take the central place in children’s thinking” unless parents are diligent “that the influence of school on their children be in harmony with our [the Mennonite Church’s] professed Christian standards” (Hershberger, 2004, p. 25). Reflecting on my own process of deciding on the best fit for my children’s schooling, my wife and I had mixed motives and rationales. The decision went beyond loyalty and desire to inculcate church teachings. As a parent I was attracted to the academic program, the small school atmosphere, and the extracurricular opportunities.

In Indiana, where this study takes place, there are many school choice options for parents. Parents may choose from various individual or cooperative home schools, parochial and nonreligious private schools, and public as well as private charter schools. Indiana is also an open enrollment state, which in theory allows students to attend almost any public school, regardless of where families live. Furthermore, Indiana has several programs that make private

schooling more affordable for families. These include: the choice scholarship program (voucher), educational savings accounts, and tax credit scholarships (EdChoice, n.d.).

The question arises as to how parents choose between the many public and private options available to them and what dilemmas they face when choosing. The choices parents make regarding schooling are not made in a vacuum; they are influenced by the cultural and sociopolitical context in which they live. The choice is personal and can also be agonizing when deeply held values come into conflict. Given this, there is much to understand about factors informing parental decisions about school choice.

### **Problem of Practice**

Much of the current research on school choice focuses on the student academic outcomes of various choice programs (Belfield & Levin, 2002; Jeynes, 2012). Comparatively little research is available on why parents make certain choices or how parents make sense of their schooling choices. Much of the peer-reviewed independent research focusing on how and why parents choose certain schools comes from an economic perspective, which views families as education consumers and benefit maximizers (Brasington & Hite 2012; DeBray-Pelot, Lubienski, & Scott, 2007). A rational choice framework assumes parents choose schools by eliminating successive options based on perceived costs and benefits. This model presumes that parents will always make the choice that they believe will most benefit their child or family. Rational choice theory (RCT) can help frame an understanding of parental decision-making regarding school choice. However, because all relevant information is not always available, parents are often not equipped to weigh all the costs and benefits of a particular choice. As a result, they sometimes make decisions that might seem irrational even to themselves in the light of RCT. In a quantitative study seeking to understand how parents choose elementary schools in Alberta, Canada, Bosetti

(2004) determined that parents employ a “mixture of rationalities” when exercising choice, including existing parental social networks and religious value preferences (p. 387).

Though research on school choice commonly uses market theory as a framework for parental decision making, other frameworks are available. For example, Klein (2015) concluded that many workplace leadership teams utilize naturalistic decision making (NDM) in which the decision maker takes into account primarily tacit and intuitive knowledge. Klein (2015) contends that NDM often leads to better decisions in less time than gathering data and rationalizing one’s way to a decision via choice-elimination. In a multicase study involving parents from Finland and Chili, Kosunen and Carrasco (2016) analyzed parental decision-making based on intuitions derived from “cold knowledge,” that is, published information like websites and brochures, and “hot knowledge,” that is, word of mouth, reputation, and experience. Though this study does not specifically use NDM as an overarching framework, Kosunen and Carrasco’s (2016) hot/cold knowledge framework is suggestive of Klein’s (2015) NDM model in that parents tend to gather bits of information from trusted sources and make a “gut-level” decision about schooling without a formal process of weighing costs and benefits.

Similarly, some researchers consider how parents’ worldviews affects their decision making. Bean (2014) contended that there are two predominant religious worldviews that lead U.S. politics, “orthodox” and “progressive.” The orthodox worldview predominates among Republicans and evangelical Christians. In this view, “freedom” is a strong belief in free-market capitalism, that the country was founded on Judeo-Christian principles, and that truth is unchanging and timeless. In contrast, the progressive view predominates among Democrats and liberals. In this view, “freedom” is a belief in individual expression, that the country was founded on the secular humanist ideals of the Enlightenment, and that moral authority and objective truth

lie within the individual (Bean, 2014, pp. 5-6). Glenn (2018) argued that the proliferation of “faith-based schools has not simply evolved as a form of consumer choice” whereby some parents prefer schools with a particular religious orientation (p. 463). Instead, deeper motivations tied to identity are at play in parental decisions about schooling, which arise from the conflict between orthodox (religious) and progressive (secular) worldviews.

There is little research investigating how parents make sense of their school choice decisions. Some survey research, mostly conducted by interest groups, investigates factors parents use in their decision-making. For example, a Barna Group (2017) survey of current and prospective parents of religious schools asked parents to rate the relative importance of 14 factors when considering the school. The researchers determined that prospective parents place a high value on personal achievement and social skills, while current parents place a higher value on spiritual goals. However, research in this vein is designed to help schools better position themselves in the marketplace and is not particularly helpful in shedding light on parental sense-making. The researchers did not ask parents to reflect on insights into their attitudes and practices as they navigated the school choice landscape.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this research was to better understand how public school employees make sense of their decision to send their children to private Christian schools. Asking parents to reflect on factors affecting their decision also provides insight into how evangelical identity shapes decision-making and the moral and ethical dilemmas they faced. For example, parents often weigh the interests of their children against the common good of public education.

The seeds of the idea came from my interactions with parents who express angst over their decision to send their children to a Christian school over public. In the sociopolitical

context of school choice in northern Indiana, choosing a school can be a political statement. As such, in the hyper-politicized school choice landscape, parents can feel condemnation from their peer group if they do not make the “right” choice. Furthermore, the values-laden decision of weighing a child’s welfare against deeply held political or religious beliefs means that some parents choose to send their children to private Christian school even though they espouse support for public education.

Some qualitative research investigates parental choice and sense-making of public-school parents. Researchers in England (Crozier et.al, 2008) used qualitative methodology to understand why parents choose public schools for their children even though some believe their children would benefit more from private school options. Similarly, a qualitative study of Boston public school parents (Kimelberg & Billingham, 2012) investigated how parents make sense of their decision, given all the school choice options, to enroll their children in public school. As of now, only a handful of researchers have used qualitative methodology to scrutinize this phenomenon among parents of Christian school students.

It is important to delineate the difference between studies of parental decision-making and studies of parental sense-making. Decision-making is the evaluation of alternative courses of action and making a choice among them. Sense-making is the process of making sense of decisions that have already happened (Boland, 2008). It should be noted that a similar but distinct term, sensemaking, has a specific meaning in the literature of organizational management. Weick, (1995) coined the term “sensemaking” to refer to the process of how organizations process events *post facto*. Weick’s theoretical model is also used in the study of leadership (Ancona, 2012) and communications (Dervin, 2003). Though the focus of Weick’s (1995), work is on how organizations function, his concept that sensemaking is intertwined with



organizational identity is a helpful framework for this study. That is, who people believe themselves to be shapes how they interpret events. The difference between sensemaking and sense-making are nuanced, but useful for this study. The purpose of this study was to understand how self-described evangelicals who teach in public schools make sense of their decision to send their children to private Christian schools.

### **Research Question**

This qualitative study uses questions that were designed to explore how parents make sense of their decision to send their children to private religious schools. Thus, the research question is deliberately broad.

1. How do parents who work in public schools and describe themselves as evangelical Christians make sense of their decision to send their children to private religious schools?

### **Significance of Study**

As the school choice movement gains momentum, this study may help other researchers as well as schools, both public and private, to understand why and how parents choose private religious schooling for their children. A review of the literature suggests that there are many reasons parents might choose one type of schooling over another. However, relatively little research has been conducted focusing on the subset of individuals who teach in public schools, describe themselves as evangelical, and specifically chose religious schooling for their children. This research has the potential to add to the understanding on the larger question of why parents choose private schooling for their children.

## Definition of Terms

The following are key terms central to the understanding of this research.

*Indiana Choice Scholarship (voucher).* An Indiana program that allows families to receive a portion (up to 90%) of the per-pupil spending to apply towards private school tuition. Eligibility for the choice scholarship is based on income guidelines tied to the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) free and reduced lunch program eligibility.

*School choice.* The many options and programs that provide enhanced parental choice in schooling for their children. This includes homeschooling, private schools, magnet schools, charter schools, as well as various programs to enhance parental choice such as voucher programs, scholarship tax credits, and tuition savings accounts.

*Open enrollment.* Many states have open enrollment programs that allow students to attend public schools outside their district of residence. Indiana has a statewide inter-district enrollment policy that allows students to transfer to any public schools outside their school district of residency. Schools may not charge tuition or adopt selective admissions policies. However, a school can limit the number of inter-district transfers based on available space.

*Tax credit scholarship.* A full or partial state tax credit given to individuals or businesses that donate to nonprofits that provide private school scholarships. Though the details vary somewhat, currently 18 states have such programs (EdChoice, 2019). In Indiana this program is commonly referred to as the “SGO” scholarship, after the scholarship granting organizations that distribute the money to schools (Indiana Department of Education, 2019).

*Sense-making.* The process of making sense of or interpreting decisions after the decisions have been made.

*Sensemaking.* Theoretical model developed by Weick (1995) who purports that making sense of previous decisions is intertwined with identity, that is, people believe themselves to be shapes how they interpret events.

*Rationale choice theory.* An economic theory that posits consumers make choices shaped by the costs and benefits of personal preferences.

*Evangelical Christian.* There is no generally agreed-upon definition of evangelical. Hackett and Lindsay (2008) propose three ways to define evangelical, (a) by affiliation with an organized church or denomination (or school), (b) by self-identifying, or (c) by comparing stated belief affirmations with commonly agreed upon evangelical tenants. For the purpose of this study, “Evangelical Christian” is a self-identifier.

### **Limitations/Delimitations**

Within any study there are certain limitations and delimitations to the research. Perhaps the foremost limitation in this study was my own lack of experience in conducting qualitative interviews and analysis. In qualitative studies, a researcher must develop a rapport with participants in order to elicit information that will help answer the research questions. Yet the researcher must also maintain a certain distance from or indifference to the participants. This balance between maintaining good rapport while remaining indifferent is difficult (Bernard & Ryan, 2010), particularly for an inexperienced researcher. Secondly, participants cannot be considered representative of all parents who make decisions about their children’s school. Similar dynamics could lead to significantly different outcomes for other parents in different situational contexts. Social desirability bias is also a limitation of this qualitative design (Maxwell, 2005). Participants may offer a certain “front” or “face” during the interview. For example, parents may desire to be seen as a good parent or good Christian. Another limitation is

the *post hoc* interview process itself. Rather than observing the process of parents choosing a school for their children as might be done in a phenomenological study, this case study approach requires parents to reconstruct their decision-making process after the fact. It is possible that in recollection parents may unintentionally minimize or overstate certain factors. Similarly, “the act of choosing a school can become, for parents, a means of expressing and enacting a particular identity” (Cucchiarra & Horvat, 2014, p. 486). Parents may thus attempt to ally themselves with others who have made the same choices. Furthermore, in the context of this study, it is possible that parents may express support for their choices based on their notions or perceptions about me, given my position as the head of school at a Christian school.

There are also several delimitations of this study. This study is not designed to generalize to all private school parents. It is also possible that parents give more personal agency to older students who are deciding to enroll in private schools. Therefore, I attempted to select participants who enrolled their children in the faith-based school prior to ninth grade. Lastly, I needed to rely on a “gatekeeper,” the school head, to help me identify and get permission to interview parents.

I chose to focus my study on parents in four Christian schools in northern Indiana. Furthermore, I attempted to screen potential participants to select parents who self-identify as evangelical and are public school employees. Defining who is, and who is not an evangelical is particularly problematic. Generally, researchers of religion operationalize “evangelical” in three ways, by respondents’ (a) expression of particular beliefs, (b) affiliation with an historic evangelical denomination, or (c) self-identification (Burge and Lewis, 2017; Hackett and Lindsay, 2008; Smidt, 2019). Ascribing attributes to a fuzzy construct like “evangelical” is fraught with problems. Depending on how researchers define evangelical, the percentage of

evangelicals in the United States population ranges from 7% to 47% (Hackett and Lindsay, 2008).

Depending on the assumptions and purpose of the research, researchers and organizations use different methodologies based on sociological or psychological categories. For example, George Barna of the conservative leaning Barna Research Group takes a sociological approach using an “elaborate set of belief affirmations” (Hackett and Lindsay, 2008, p. 503), which very narrowly defines evangelical. Meanwhile, Gallop pollsters take a psychological approach based on self-identification, which very broadly defines evangelical (Hackett and Lindsay, 2008). On the other hand, many researchers of religion use the religious traditions (RELTRAD) approach developed by Woodberry et al (2012). The RELTRAD approach categorizes as evangelical anyone affiliated with an historic evangelical denomination. In an analysis of all three approaches, Corwin Smidt (2019) of the Institute for the Study of Christianity and Politics recommends that researchers use the RELTRAD. However, as Hansbury and Coverston (2011) point out, “religious identities today are generally more achieved or voluntary in nature rather than ascribed; individualism, self, initiation, and choice continue to be the central characteristics in the spiritual lives of many Americans” (p. 17). Indeed, the RELTRAD approach leaves out individuals who may belong to independent churches (Lewis & DeBernardo, 2010) or denominations not historically evangelical (Bennett-Carpenter, McCallion, & Maines, 2013). In their research note *Measuring Evangelicals: Practical Considerations for Social Scientists*, Burge and Lewis (2017) concluded “that for most researchers, especially when space and time are important considerations, a simple question about broad religious affiliation followed by a born-again or evangelical self-identification question will suffice” (p. 1). For the purposes of research study, participant self-identification sufficed as a proxy for evangelical identity.

## **Organization of Study**

This research study gathers the stories and experiences of five parents who have recently made the decision to move their child from public to a private religious school. This study is organized in five chapters. Chapter 1 includes the background, rationale and research questions as well as boundaries and limitations of the study. In Chapter 2, I review the relevant literature on school choice. For context, I provide a brief history of school choice in America as well as relevant research from other countries, primarily western democracies, as it pertains to my local context in northern Indiana. Chapter 3 focuses on the methodological framework of the case study approach and why it was an appropriate approach to answer the research question. Chapter 4 describes the data of the study. Finally, Chapter 5 discusses the significance of the findings in light of the current context of school choice.

## Chapter 2 - Review of the Literature

This literature review is structured in three parts. Theme 1 provides the historical background to the literature on this topic. This section provides a broad overview of the school choice landscape. A brief history of the relationship between religion and schools in the United States is followed by a description of various neoliberal education reforms that have shaped school choice over the last several decades. Vouchers get extra attention due to the highly controversial aspect of school choice in northern Indiana, the region of this study. Participants would likely have formed opinions and values propositions that informed their decision-making processes. Theme 2 reviews literature on the conceptual frameworks on which this study was based. The third section of the literature review investigates relevant factors parents consider when choosing schools for their children. Rationale choice theory (RTC) was the underlying theoretical framework of most of these studies, and this section looks at research that views parents as benefit-maximizers. In addition, there is a brief review of socioeconomic factors relevant to school choice before delving into a discussion of the role personal identity has on parental decision-making. This section ends with a brief discussion of the limits and bounds of school choice.

During the last 2 decades as neoliberal-inspired market reforms were applied to education, school choice options in the United States multiplied rapidly. Most research on school choice was conducted in that period. Much of what turns up in popular media and books focuses on the efficacy of school choice options, for example, Diane Ravitch's best-selling book, *Reign of Error: The Hoax of the Privatization Movement and the Danger to America's Public Schools* (2014). However, this study focuses on the how and why parents make the choices they do. The efficacy of particular types of school choice options is beyond the scope of this study. Yet, it is

important to understand the political and social contexts and attitudes toward school choice policies within which parents must make decisions. Therefore, some national polls and foundation research are included in the literature review.

### **Historical Background of the Literature on this Topic**

School choice has always been present in the American system of schooling. In every era, families with enough resources could choose from a limited number of private schools or hire tutors. However, as educational institutions have become more formalized with increased top-down control from the state and federal level, “school choice as a conscious policy option emerged ultimately in response to [the] growing formalization of the public-school system” (Hentschke, 2017, p. 29).

**Religion in the public schools.** Until relatively recently, religious instruction was an important component of America’s public-school system. The Puritans of New England are often credited with creating the first public schools in America, and under their influence, these schools were clearly religious in character. The education historian S. L. Mendez (2017) pointed out that public schools in Puritan New England were established so that children would have the basic literacy needed to read and study the Bible. Without a religious grounding, it was feared that children would fall prey to pagan, that is, secularist influences. In fact, the first public school law in the United States enacted by the Massachusetts colonial legislature is often referred to as “The Old Deluder Satan Act of 1647” (Carleton, n.d.).

Protestant beliefs remained influential in public schools well into the 19th century and into the common school era. Religion historian Adam Laats (2012) contended that “(i)n general, nineteenth century common schools reflected their founders’ assumptions that protestant religiosity must play a leading role” in education (p. 332). In fact, in 1837, education reformer



Horace Mann helped establish the first state board of education and considered Bible reading an indispensable component of the common school curriculum (Tyack, 1970).

Though religious instruction has long been a part of public-school education, many religious groups with distinctive cultural and theological identities formed their own schools committed to inculcating doctrinal convictions and faith perspectives. For example, Jewish and Catholic groups have a long history with private schooling in America going back centuries. Christian Reformed and Mennonite groups aggressively promoted church related schools in the mid-20th century. And, in recent years, conservative Christian groups, usually nondenominational, created a multitude of private schooling and homeschooling groups (Roth, 2011).

Religious instruction, that is, mainline Protestant beliefs, remained ubiquitous in America's public schools until the last half of the 20th century (Laats, 2012). With increasing federal control of education in the 1950s and 1960s, that began to change. In particular, two Supreme Court cases, *Engle v. Vitale* (1962) and *Abington School District v. Schempp* (1963), changed the symbiotic relationship between public schools and religion. Both cases centered on the "establishment clause" of the United States Constitution prohibiting Congress from making laws establishing religion (U.S. Const. amend. I). In *Engle v. Vitale* (1962) the court determined that prayers composed by the State cannot be read in schools, even if the prayer is nonsectarian. Similarly, in *Abington v. Schempp* (1963), the court ruled that even if students were excused, schools' use of Bible readings and the Lord's Prayer violated the separation of church and state implied in the establishment clause. However, in many regions public-school education is still a "diverse enterprise motivated by preserving local and individual interests and values" (Mendez, et.al, 2017, p. 13). For example, one local school district in the geographic area of this study

continued to teach Bible study in its elementary schools until 2010 (Schneider, 2010). Yet, more than anything else, these two court cases forced the teaching of mainstream evangelical religious beliefs out of public schools. The resultant secularization of public schools renewed interest in independent evangelical schools (Laats, 2012, pp. 333-334). For many evangelicals, “Old Deluder Satan” was at work again.

**Neoliberal market reforms and the proliferation of choice.** Of course, increasing secularization of the American public-school system is not the only factor contributing to the proliferation of religious schools. As neoliberal inspired market reforms were applied to education over the last 2 decades, school choice options in the United States multiplied rapidly (Sahlberg, 2016). Most research on school choice has been conducted within that period. In brief, neoliberal education policies rely on creating the conditions and elements of educational competition in the belief that a diverse “market” will induce competition, which makes all schools better (Garcia, 2018).

The meaning of school choice varies depending on context. School choice, Hentschke (2017) notes, is a “catch-all label describing the many different programs . . . [and] alternatives to publicly provided schools” (p. 28). The school choice “constellation” is made up of “hundreds—possibly thousands—of separate markets, sometimes overlapping, and often composed of widely differing mechanisms” (Hentschke, p. 30). There are several school choice mechanisms. Perhaps the most common mechanisms are private schools, home schooling, charter schools, and voucher programs, as well as inter- and intradistrict open enrollment or magnet programs. All of these schooling options are available in Northern Indiana, where this study took place.

In some areas of the country, particularly in states with open enrollment or voucher systems, school choice is highly politicized (Lubienski, 2009; Malin, Hardy, & Lubienski, 2019). Since the election of Donald Trump and his appointment of school choice advocate Betsy DeVos to lead the U.S. Department of Education, support for school choice is increasingly partisan (Quinn & Cheuk, 2018). Though it is tempting to think of school choice only in terms of political partisanship, proponents and opponents for school choice do not fall neatly along a conservative/liberal or Republican/Democrat divide. This is in part due to differing arguments for school choice. Neoliberal conservatives tend to promote mechanisms that promote competition. Some liberal democrats promote choice based on social justice or civil rights arguments. In fact, as a logical progression in the struggle for equal opportunity, African Americans in Milwaukee proposed and promoted the nation's first viable school voucher system. (Fuller & Page, 2014).

As a result of the politicization of school choice, much research is conducted by foundations that have notably explicit political biases. Such incentivized institutions “use evidence in a selective and tactical way as a means to support their pre-established policy preferences” (Verger et.al, 2019, p. 81). In fact, DeBray-Pelot et.al. (2007) identified 11 alliances or foundations that oppose school vouchers and 32 that promote school vouchers. As each foundation is interested in advancing their own policy agenda within the current sociopolitical context, they selectively apply research to justify their policy positions. DeBray-Pelot, et.al. (2007) note that “liberal” and “conservative” organizations and foundations sometimes align with one another on each side of the policy debate. This was true in Milwaukee where a coalition of conservative and liberal organizations were instrumental in the establishment of the nation's first voucher program (Fuller and Page, 2015).

Much of the school choice research focuses on the efficacy of choice programs for student outcomes (Jeynes, 2012). Some researchers consider school choice from an economic perspective, which views parents as benefit maximizers (Brasington & Hite 2012; DeBray-Pelot, et.al. 2007). However, much information available on the factors parents consider when choosing schools tends to come from public opinion polls and foundations. Foundation research is infrequently peer reviewed and can be biased toward a particular policy position or agenda. As poll questions are rarely made public, it is not possible to understand what exactly the respondents are supporting. For example, the National Federation of Children commissioned a poll to assess likely voter support for six school choice mechanisms: special needs scholarships, military vouchers, educational saving accounts, public charter schools, virtual learning, and school vouchers (Schultz, 2018). However, as this survey is unpublished, it cannot be critically examined and has limited value beyond the goals of the researchers.

Some foundations are more open about the research they conduct. A Nevada EdChoice study revealed that public support for “opportunity scholarships” and “educational saving accounts” is dependent on how much knowledge respondents have of the programs (Catt, Soifer, & Shaw, 2019). Poll participants were first asked if they supported “opportunity scholarships” and “educational saving accounts.” Follow-up questions on the survey described the programs before again asking if respondents supported or opposed the programs. It is not known how the programs were described. In both cases, expressed support for each mechanism increased on the second question, once participants had more information. It is notable that the researchers used the term “opportunity scholarship” rather than “voucher program” to describe the school choice mechanism, thus potentially biasing the outcome. In public discourse, labels are important

indicators of a writer's ethical stances and political positions (Davies 2006; Malin, Hardy, & Lubienski, 2019).

**Vouchers.** Perhaps the most controversial aspect of school choice in the United States are state-supported "choice scholarships," commonly referred to as "vouchers." Economist Milton Friedman coined the term voucher in 1962, stating in *Capitalism and Freedom* (1962) that schooling could be "financed by giving parents vouchers redeemable for a specified maximum sum per child per year if spent on 'approved' educational services" (p. 89). For the most part, the public and researchers still understand voucher programs as defined by market forces. However, as most voucher programs are a compromise between theory and politics, voucher programs vary by location. Furthermore, no existing voucher system operates purely on Friedman's conception of the educational market (Carr, Holley, & Gray, 2014). Sixteen states plus Puerto Rico and the District of Columbia have some form of voucher program (School Choice in America Dashboard, 2019), each with its own rules and mechanisms. The only voucher program that matches Friedman's conception of market-based vouchers was short-lived. Douglas County, Colorado, established, albeit briefly, a program of universal school choice (Carpenter & Winters, 2015).

The Douglas County case is illustrative of how controversial school vouchers are across the country. Due to strong opposition from some sectors of the community resulting in litigation, the Douglas County voucher program was suspended and never implemented. The Supreme Court eventually dismissed the case after a new school board was elected that voted to drop the program (Meltzer, 2019). At the center of the controversy was the state's Blaine amendment. Blaine amendments were added to many state constitutions after an attempt by Congressman James Blaine to add an amendment to the United States Constitution failed in 1875. The

amendment would have prohibited the use of state tax dollars to be used for religious instruction. Failing to pass the constitutional amendment, Congress instead passed legislation forcing states to add Blaine-like provisions to the state constitution as a condition of statehood. (Sutton and King, 2011). Many people, particularly Catholics, view these provisions as an extension of anti-Catholic bias then rampant in the United States. The controversy is in the news again as a case from Montana is currently pending in the Supreme Court (Sibilla, 2020). Currently, 37 states, including Indiana, have Blaine-type provisions in their state constitutions (Huerta & D'Entremont, 2007). However, Indiana's Blaine provision is written sufficiently broad that the Indiana choice scholarship, or voucher program, has been deemed constitutional ("School Voucher System," 2013).

The various voucher program mechanisms as well as the interaction between vouchers and other concurrent school choice programs in the same locale results in a broad conceptualization of the term "educational voucher." Indiana's voucher program is "means tested" rather than "universal" as Milton Friedman had intended. Participation in the Indiana Choice Scholarship (voucher) program is determined by financial "means" as "tested" against the federal free and reduced lunch income criteria. Families qualifying for free and reduced lunch can receive a portion (up to 90%) of the state's per-pupil spending to apply towards private school tuition (EdChoice, 2019a).

Parents have many choices regarding schooling options for their children in states like Indiana with open public-school enrollment and various forms of subsidies for private schooling. The choices parents make regarding schooling are not made in a vacuum but are influenced by the cultural and sociopolitical context in which they live. The choice is personal and can also be agonizing when deeply held values come into conflict. Given this, there is much to understand

about the factors informing parental decisions about school choice apart from partisan or political concerns.

### **Conceptual Framework.**

An underlying premise of this research is that identity is a significant factor in parents' school choice decisions. Most research on school choice is framed by RCT in which parents are "rational" actors sorting through many options to find the "best" school for their children. However, some researchers question the value of this underlying premise. Noting that "focusing on external characteristics of schools oversimplifies how parents actually choose where to send their children to school," Cucchiara and Horvat (2014, p. 488) draw on the literature from sociology to explain how identity is intertwined with choice.

Cucchiara and Horvat (2014) studied middle class parents living in cities who were considering public schooling for their children. They determined that middle-class parents in the study define their identity in two central ways, "who we are" and "who we are not." Who we are includes: believers in public education, city people, and believers in diversity. Who we are not includes: private school people, suburban people, and people afraid of diversity. Cucchiara and Horvat (2014) also found that parents who considered the local public school but ultimately chose a private school felt abandoning the public-school option was wrong and hypocritical. Cucchiara and Horvat speculated that "the act of not choosing an urban public school undermined their own sense of who they were" (2014, p. 502). The conclusions of Cucchiara and Horvat's (2014) study hinged on the assumption that the process of making consumer choices shape collective identity. Yet they cited one study, "How Blacks Use Consumption to Shape Their Collective Identity" (Lamont and Molner, 2001), to support their assertion.

Similarly, Courtney Bell (2009) noted that the geography of “place” plays a critical role in decision making as parents seek to determine best fit between their personal identity and school of choice. In geography, “place” is the meaning people ascribe to a particular location, the social, political, and cultural characteristics (de Blij, 2011; Tuan, 1997). Schools, of course, are places to which people ascribe particular identities. As noted previously in this chapter, the prevailing identity of most public schools has shifted from “mainline protestant” to “secular.” As a result, many religious schools were founded so that parents could send their children to a school that matched their religious identity (Roth, 2011). Charles Glenn (2018) contended that religious motivations for private schools follow two distinct patterns. The first pattern was established when immigrant or minority groups founded schools to preserve distinctive cultural or religious traditions. This is the pattern Roth (2011) saw in the founding of Jewish, Catholic, Dutch Reformed, and Mennonite Schools. However, Glenn (2018) contended that a second pattern emerged as a result of the secularization of America’s public school system in the latter half of the 20th century. The second pattern, “schooling as protest,” is a direct response to the removal of “residual elements . . . of Protestant character, such as ritualized school prayer, Bible reading, and the subsequent introduction of instructional content, often around sexuality, judged inconsistent with Biblical morality” (Glenn, 2018, p. 464). Yet, identity is central to and underlies both religious schooling movements described by Glenn (2018). Furthermore, the concept of schools as “places” with particular identities helps shed light on parental decisions regarding school choice. In summary, the framework of this study presumed that evangelical parents who send their children to Christian schools do so in part because it aligns with their identity.



## Summary and Discussion of the Literature

School choice literature often sees parents as benefit maximizers. Parents weigh various options or preferences and choose what is best for their children. In the RCT model, every known factor in the decision-making process has a value, and parents simply add up the known values and make the choice with the highest return on investment.

**Benefits maximization and school choice.** In a case study exploring socioeconomic class dynamics, Lareau (2011) noted that middle class parents who “engage in a pattern of concerted cultivation deliberately try to stimulate their children’s development and foster their cognitive and social skills” (p. 5). On the other hand, due to the necessity of looking out for more basic needs, working class and poor families “[stop] short of the deliberate cultivation of children and their leisure activities that occurs in middle-class families” (p. 5). Lyken-Segosebe & Hinz (2015) used interest group theory to explain the phenomenon of middle-class parents “opportunity hoarding,” which they describe as a “strategy adopted by middle-class parents to ensure desirable academic and socioeconomic outcomes” for their children (p. 94). Lyken-Segosebe & Hinz (2015) noted that opportunity hoarding can be both “within school” and “between school.” An example of within-school hoarding occurs when middle class parents use their status and influence to secure for their children gifted and talented placements or preferred teachers. It is possible that the ability of some parents to secure the best educational benefits within a school for their children increases their perception of the quality of the chosen school. Thus, consistent with Brasington (2014), these highly educated and wealthier parents are less likely to support “between-school” school choice. Due to their ease of mobility to and from the suburbs, highly educated parents already have choices. In some circumstances, middle class parents also participate in between-school hoarding. In their research on urban “flight from

blight,” Bayoh, Irwin and Haab (2006) found that of the numerous factors contributing to out-migration from inner cities to the suburbs, school quality was the most significant. In fact, they determine that for every “1-percent increase in the school quality [as measured by ninth grade standardized test scores in math and English] of the city district increases the probability of homebuyers choosing a city residence by 3.7 percent” (p. 97). A shortcoming of this study was that the authors used census tract data and school district boundary data to formulate their correlations. However, these two data sets do not overlap precisely, which might introduce a measurement error in the results. Even if no errors were present, the situational context of Columbus, Ohio, has changed significantly, and the findings may no longer hold true. The author’s note that investment in infrastructure like roads and city services contribute to the natural evolution of cities. In addition, Ohio’s implementation of a comprehensive voucher program soon after Bayoh, Irwin, and Haab (2006) collected data, may have some effect on homebuyers’ decisions.

Paradoxically, there is also a gentrification effect that results in wealthy families “hoarding” opportunities to attend the best city schools. In a case study examining the motivations of families in Boston that chose public education for their children, Kimelberg and Billingham (2012) found that wealthy families value diversity yet want schools with a critical mass of families similar to themselves. Kimelberg and Billingham (2012), state “parents wanted to know, before making an educational decision that many of their peers and family members considered ‘risky,’ that a core group of active parents of similar class and status background would share that risk with them, thereby presumably mitigating the risk for all” (p. 220). As a result, wealthy, predominantly white families sort themselves into a few select urban school districts perceived as high quality, thus “hoarding” opportunities for their own children and

limiting opportunities of children of lower socioeconomic and minority status. Notably, “nearly all of [the parents in the study] described their political beliefs as ‘left,’ ‘liberal,’ or ‘progressive’” and placed a high value on exposing their children to ethnic and racial diversity (Kimelberg & Billingham, 2012, p. 216). Thus, parents are able to minimize the values dilemma of desiring diversity but also wanting the best schooling for their children. It is also notable that all 32 participants in the Kimelberg & Billingham (2012) study were women, and 81% held a graduate degree, hardly a representative example of all parents.

Lower socioeconomic status makes opportunity hoarding difficult for many families. However, Lyken-Segosebe and Hinz (2015) noted that “voucher programs . . . provide low-income parents with a chance to pry opportunities from higher-income families” (p. 101). In a review of the research on who chooses vouchers and why, Lacireno-Paquet & Brantley (2012) determined that voucher recipients are predominately lower income and minority. This is not surprising given the that nearly all voucher programs in the United States are “means tested.” For example, in Indiana, eligibility for vouchers is tied to family income based on the federal free and reduced lunch criterion.

Clearly, though, not all parents are trying to “pry” opportunities from their better-off neighbors. In a study seeking to understand how parents choose elementary schools in Alberta, Canada, Bosetti (2004) determined that parents employ a “mixture of rationalities” when exercising choice, with important factors being existing parental social networks and religious value preferences. Yet even though there are many private and public choices available, parents mostly send their children to the nearest public school. Bosetti (2004) speculates that lack of information about choices explains at least some of the lack of movement. Perhaps the within-school opportunities negate the benefits of between-school opportunities for families because

Alberta is a relatively homogenous province. Bosetti (2004) also found that families of lesser socioeconomic means are the least likely to access the school choice options available to them. This is consistent with the findings of Lyken-Segosebe & Hinz (2015) who noted that it is the middle-class families that best take advantage of hoarding opportunities. In a model that considers parents as education consumers and benefit maximizers, perhaps the opportunity costs were too high for those with lower means. Because tuition was not a factor, maybe difficulty with transportation or the mental “cost” of establishing a new network of friends was a factor. Perhaps parents with lesser means simply lacked knowledge of information about their choices. Alternatively, there may simply be a difference in what middle income and lower income parents value. Jarvis and Alvanides (2008) found that English families with different resource capability place the highest priority on different values. The researchers found that families with fewer resources express the importance of enrolling their child in the school in which they would be most happy, while parents with higher resource capability are more interested in building cultural capital through opportunities afforded at a “better” school. Unfortunately, Jarvis and Alvanides (2008) did not discuss or appear to consider that parental retrospective analysis of their decision making is influenced by the reality of the current situation. For example, when searching for a school, families with fewer resources may value building cultural capital above finding the school in which their child is most happy. However, in the *ex post facto* sense-making process, parents may simply be trying to justify the decision that has already been made.

In a study comparing preferences for school choice, Kosunen and Carrasco (2016) used a case study approach to compare similarities and outcomes of parental choice between two very different choice landscapes, Finland and Chile. The researchers separated what parents understand about schools into “cold knowledge,” that is, published information like websites and

brochures, and “hot knowledge,” that is, word of mouth reputation and experience. In both instances, parents relied more heavily on “hot knowledge” when making decisions about where to send their children to school. This suggests that parents do not always weigh benefits in a strictly rational manner. The cold/hot knowledge framework is a useful way to understand parental decision-making.

Applying generalizations across differing contexts must be done with caution. An old saying has it that “all politics is local.” What constituents care about in one locale isn’t necessarily what constituents care about in other locales. How parents choose schools and what they value may vary by locale. Just because parents in Finland and Chile rely more on hot knowledge in their school choice decisions does not mean that parents in Indiana will do the same. Likewise, the situational contexts of Alberta and England may be very dissimilar to those of Northern Indiana.

**Socioeconomic factors of school choice.** In his oft-cited work on school choice, Moe (2001) found that low-income parents who live in areas with poor public schooling options are likely to support and consider private schooling options. Moe (2001) was the first to delve deeply into the socioeconomic factors of parental choice after the school-choice market began to expand.

Analyzing support for a proposed statewide voucher program in Michigan, Sandy (1992) determined that family income is inversely related to support for the program. Sandy also determined that that African Americans and Catholics tend to support school choice. Sandy’s conclusion that income is conversely related to support for vouchers is contradicted by Brassington and Hite (2014) who concluded that no relationship exists between income and support for school choice. However, Brassington and Hite (2014) concurred with Sandy in that

African Americans tend to support choice. Several factors may explain the discrepancy between the findings of Sandy (1992) and Brasington and Hite (2014). Firstly, more than 20 years separate the studies, which provides ample time for attitudes to shift. Secondly, Sandy (1992) focused on one form of school choice, vouchers, while Brasington and Hite (2014) did not delineate between Ohio's various forms of choice. The difference in findings might also be attributable to obvious tangible outcomes for the respondents. If the Michigan school voucher referendum passed, Catholic schools would have gained a new source of revenue and African Americans who tend to have less disposable income to spend on education would have gained increased access to private education. In contrast, Brasington and Hite's (2014) methodology did not include an obvious financial context.

Other research shows that support for school choice based on income and race might be time and place dependent. In a study of voucher support and religious schooling, Ji and Boyatt (2007) found that low income parents earning \$30,000 to \$60,000 per year are more in favor of vouchers than parents who make over \$100,000 per year. This finding only held for White parents and not minority parents. Ji and Boyatt (2007) also determined that "parents tend to more strongly oppose school vouchers when they take into account the church stand against school vouchers" (p. 176). In this particular case, the denominational leadership feared government interference in their parochial schools and distributed literature encouraging parishioners to vote "no" on a California voucher initiative. Interestingly Ji and Boyatt (2007) also found that ethnic minority parishioners lacked knowledge and understanding of their denomination's opposition to vouchers, thinking that the denomination did in fact support vouchers.

As Ohio is one of the first states to adopt various forms of school choice, including public school open enrollment, charter schools, tuition tax credits, and vouchers for private schooling,

considerable research related to how proximity to good schooling options affects support of school choice has been conducted there. In a study of Ohio residents, Brasington and Hite (2012) affirmed Moe's (2001) findings, discovering that physical proximity to "high proficiency" public schools as measured by standardized tests reduces the likelihood that a person supports school choice. Opposition to school choice holds true even for respondents who think highly of their public school, regardless of the school's proficiency rating. Interestingly, Brasington and Hite (2012) also found that favorable opinions towards a nearby private school increased the likelihood that a person supports school choice, even when controlling for parents who had children in a private school.

In a comprehensive follow-up study of Ohio homeowners, Brasington and Hite (2014) found again that proximity to a highly-regarded public school decreases the likelihood a person supports school choice, while proximity to a highly-regarded private school increases the likelihood of support for school choice. In terms of educational attainment, persons living in an area with a high concentration of blue-collar workers are more likely to support school choice (Brasington & Hite, 2014). Similarly, a graduate degree is a "strong predictor" of opposition to school choice. The researchers also determined that older people tend to oppose school choice, even when controlling for educational attainment. A weakness of this study was that the researchers asked respondents to consider their simultaneous general opinion of all forms of school choice in Ohio. It is possible that if the survey asked about the mechanisms of school choice individually, the results would differ.

In regard to charter school choice, Stoddard and Corcorran (2007) discovered that in states with low SAT scores, voters are more likely to pass charter school legislation. This suggests that parents desire schools that have a strong academic reputation. Furthermore,

consistent with Brasington and Hite's (2012) study of school vouchers, Stoddard and Corcoran (2007) found that at the local level, poor student achievement in public schools increases enrollment in charters. In a follow-up study focusing on charter schools in Washington state, Corcoran and Stoddard (2011) affirmed that "low school quality—as measured by standardized tests—is a consistent and modestly strong predictor of support for charters" (p. 323). Academic reputation then is a significant factor parents consider when deciding to move their children out of the public-school system. Yet parents do not always focus narrowly on quality as indicated by some academic achievement metric.

Hassan and Geys (2017) found that Belgian parents tend to "rank the 'ethical' aspects of schools, such as pupil and staff happiness and equality of opportunities, above their 'efficiency' aspects, such as academic achievement or school size" (p. 1313). The authors cautioned that "survey designs on school preferences should account for the fact that real-world choices in favor of one particular characteristic often imply giving up at least some others." (p. 1313). This may be true, but in their study, it is not possible to discern if parents actually give up on certain preferences. For instance, it is possible that the relative difference between schools on factors such as size is negligible. In such cases parents may not consider school size a factor worth considering.

**Religiosity and identity in school choice.** Religiosity is another significant influencer in parental decision-making about where to send their children to school. There is a long history of parochial schooling in the United States. Academically speaking, some parochial schools are high-quality and some are low-quality. Parents who choose religious schooling do not always do so based solely on academic quality or reputation. Even so, most of the research on parochial



schools focuses on educational outcomes, which both proponents and opponents of school choice use to justify their positions.

Sander & Cohen-Zada (2012) found that parents' frequency of church attendance is a positive predictor of private religious school choice. Of course, church attendance may not be the best proxy for religiosity. Many religious schools are run within a denominational hierarchy. However, independently-run church schools and religiously-based homeschool cooperatives increasingly account for a larger portion of religious-based schools. By religious affiliation, Moe (2001) found that Catholics and conservative Protestants are most supportive of private schooling compared to those in mainline Protestant groups. In a study of Catholic schools in the United States, Cohen-Zada (2006) contended that a primary factor in parental choice of parochial schools is the preservation of religious identity. In effect, this indicates parents choose parochial school to "shelter" children from the homogenizing effects of mainstream culture. In fact, using nationwide county-level data, Cohen-Zada (2006) concluded that when "outside influences become less threatening, the demand for separate religious schooling among the religious group decreases" (p. 372).

Of course, cultural identity is often bound up with religious identity and the accompanying expressions of spiritual practice. In a study of eight Seventh Day Adventist schools in southwest Michigan, Mainda (2002) determined that "teacher spirituality" is the most significant factor parents consider when choosing a Seventh Day Adventist School. Mainda's research supported an earlier study of Seventh Day Adventists in the southeastern United States in which found "spiritual environment" is the most significant factor for parents who send their children to the denominational schools (Hunt, 1996). Mainda (2002) also found that cost is the most significant deterrent among Adventist parents who chose public education over the

denominational school. Within a rational choice framework, this finding implies that parents actually do weigh the value of religious private schooling in terms of costs and benefits. However, from an identity framework, this finding may imply that parents who cite cost as a limiting factor do not view “Seventh Day Adventist” as a primary identity trait. Mainda’s (2002) study could be improved by deeper analysis of the cost factor for parents who chose public schools. With the study as is, it is not possible to ascertain if the Seventh Day Adventists choosing public schools did so because of cost, or, in retrospective analysis, they did not want to admit that religious identity was not really important to them. Furthermore, nothing is known of the make-up of the local public schools. It is possible that there existed within the local public school a critical mass of Seventh Day Adventist students or teachers. If such were the case, that might negate a need to attend a private school in order to preserve religious identity. This exemplifies how survey research often can only scratch the surface of parent motivations concerning school choice.

Even when there are few barriers for parents as they search for the right private school, there may be a fatigue effect when multiple choices are available. Prichard and Swezey (2016) used a grounded theory approach to ascertain the most relevant determining factor of Christian parents’ school choice decisions. To explain their findings, the researchers borrowed the term parental “satisficing” from Herbert Simon’s book *The Models of Man* (1957). Satisficing is akin to what Buckley & Schneider (2003) labelled “good enough” decision making. That is, parents choosing a school for their children will search until they are “satisfied” having found a “good enough” school. Though Prichard and Swezey’s (2016) conclusion seems intuitively reasonable, their analysis does not account for *ex post facto* sense-making. The authors conflate

the sense-making process with the decision-making process. In doing so, they miss that the story of parents decision-making process is redrafted to incorporate post-decision information.

Drawing on John Dewey's conception of "interests" in *Democracy in Education* (1916/1997), Wilson (2016) suggested that the rational choice model based on parental preferences is not adequate to explain schooling decisions. According to Wilson, for Dewey "interests is synonymous with the self," and that self-realization, (i.e., identity formation) is continually reconstructed and reformed as we make choices (2016, p. 155). In other words, our identity shapes our choices which in turn shape out identity. Thus, choosing a Christian school simultaneously articulates and constructs a Christian identity. As Cucchiara and Horvat (2014) discovered, the process of choosing a school becomes an expression of parental identity. These studies are consistent with Weick's (1995) sensemaking paradigm.

Though researchers must be cognizant of cultural differences and settings across countries, Crozier et. al.'s (2008) series of studies in England may shed some light on the thought processes of parents as they choose schools for their children. Crozier et. al. contended that middle-class parents are "caught in a web of moral ambiguity, dilemmas and ambivalence, trying to perform 'the good/ethical self' while ensuring the 'best' for their children" (p. 261). This conflict between the good/ethical self and wanting what is best for their children is rooted in political ideologies.

Summarizing her research in Melbourne, Australia, Gerrard (2015) posited that "the desire for 'public' education is a powerful rallying defense" against the neoliberal ideal of education "as being primarily an enterprise for individual gain" (p. 866). Similarly, Rowe's (2016) research in Australia found that "the positioning of public schooling as essentially secular and liberal indicates how the public school is valorized within the contemporary market place"

(p. 36). However, in a qualitative study of English public-school parents who self-identified as liberal, Crozier et.al. (2008) concluded that a combination of factors influences parental decision-making. Furthermore, Crozier et.al. noted these motivations “are not merely based on a single principle of politics, morality, ethics or pragmatism, but are contingent upon their child’s happiness and academic success” (p. 266). In other words, parents weigh a multitude of values when contemplating school choice.

**The bounds of choice.** It is clear that not all parents have equitable access to school choice. Many factors besides income limit parental choices. Long commute times are one such barrier. In addition to time wasted in a car, longer commute times put a strain on some family’s scarce resources, which act as “tax” on some school choice options (Rich & Jennings 2015). Not surprisingly, those who live near metropolitan centers have more choices than those who live in rural areas. A study identifying Indiana’s “schooling deserts” (Catt & Shaw, 2018) found that nearly ten thousand Indiana students, primarily in rural areas, do not have reasonable access (less than thirty-minute driving time) to an “A” rated school. Furthermore, nearly seventy-seven thousand Indiana students do not have reasonable access to a non-“D-rated” or “F-rated” charter, magnet, or voucher-accepting private school.

Equitable access may be limited by parental knowledge. Bell (2009) followed 48 parents residing in a large midwestern city over a 9-month period who were interviewed multiple times before and after they made the schooling choice for their children. Working under the premise that all the possible choices parents are in fact more limited than they appear, Bell’s study analyzed how parental “choice sets” are “bounded.” A choice set is defined as all the schools that the parent considers. Bell determined that there are several bounding factors that limited parental choice sets. These include parent social networks, students’ academic histories, and customary

enrollment patterns. The study shows that parents' choices are sometimes limited or "bound" by factors that they themselves do not initially recognize.

### **Conclusion of Literature Review**

The history of religious education in America has long been intertwined with the public-school system. Prior to the 1950s and 1960s, mainstream Protestantism held sway in America's public schools. The secularization of America's schools that followed increasing federal control of the nation's school systems coincided with neoliberal market reforms, creating the conditions for the establishment of many new religious schools. Indeed, many parents have since opted out of their assigned public school, choosing new schools from the many available options.

Trying to understand motivations behind parents' school choice decisions, researchers have studied the phenomenon primarily from a rational choice perspective. They have found that various factors influence parental choice decisions including a schools' reputation, socioeconomic diversity, and distance from home. Choices are sometimes limited by the information parents access, location, and resources. Some researchers have recently considered identity as an important component of school choice. That is, parents look for a good fit between who they believe themselves to be and the type of school they are considering. Given the circumstances, quite often parents choose some form of religious education for their children and may do so in part because it affirms their religious identity.

### **Chapter 3 - Methodology**

This chapter describes the methodology used in this study, which investigates how teachers in public schools make sense of their decision to send their children to Christian schools. Though the conditions and backgrounds of each family that chooses private school are different, the cases may be illustrative of other parents in similar circumstances. Thus, this study can help other researchers as well as schools, both public and private, understand why and how parents choose private religious schooling for their children. The research question was designed to explore how parents make sense of their decision-making processes. The research was guided by the following question: How do public school employees who describe themselves as evangelical make sense of their decision to send their children to private Christian schools and what are the processes through which they came to that decision?

#### **Design/Research Approach.**

The Pew Research Center estimated that in 2014, 31% of the adults in Indiana self-identified as evangelical (2019). Some of these evangelicals work in the public-school system yet have chosen Christian schooling over public schooling for their children. Focusing my research on this group constitutes a unique situation. Using a case study approach, I studied a small group of these parents across several Christian schools to shed light on the decision-making processes and moral/ethical dilemmas of other self-described evangelical public-school employees who send their children to Christian schools. The interview data could have revealed common experiences across all schools as well as unique experiences between schools that resulted in distinct cases. For example, it is possible that among other situations, religious affiliation or urban/rural context may influence the decision-making process or create differing moral/ethical dilemmas.

Saldana and Omasta (2018) noted that case studies focus on a single person or group that “merits examination for a full study because it is a unique . . . [representation of] a typical instance” (p. 148). Furthermore, Hancock and Algozzine (2017) contended that a case study approach is appropriate when the intent of the research is illustrative rather than comparative or predictive. They note case study is frequently used when an individual, or small number of individuals, are intended to represent, that is, be an illustrative example, of a group. Case studies are suited for exploring situations that “seek greater insights into decision making processes” (Hancock & Algozzine, 2017, p.15).

Research on what parents’ value and consider when choosing schools often relies on a survey method that simply asks respondents to rate the importance of several factors, for example, academic reputation, safety, religiosity. A shortcoming of this type of survey research is that it does not require respondents to reveal the real-world values tradeoffs they encountered in making those decisions. Furthermore, parents might respond to the survey questions in a way that offers the most socially-acceptable choices. For example, parents may say on surveys that they value student diversity and rate a diverse student body as a high priority, yet when it comes to making a real-life decision, diversity might take a back seat to academic reputation or athletic opportunities. Conversely, parents may say they value academic reputation above other considerations, but when faced with a real choice, they prioritize the ethnic or socioeconomic makeup of the student body. Case study research such as this can grapple with those complexities.

Two studies on school choice illustrate this point. Through analysis of search terms on a Washington D. C. school information website, Schneider and Buckley (2002) found that student demographics is the most-often searched school attribute. The key assumption of this research is

that internet search patterns will reveal real preferences. In a similar study using survey data, Weiher and Tedin (2002) found that stated preferences often do not match behavior. In this study, parents shopping for charter schools in Detroit did not indicate that racial makeup of a school was a factor in their choice. Yet, parents tend to choose charter schools that have a predominant student racial demographic matching their own race. The study revealed that the racial makeup of a school is a powerful predictor for where parents ultimately send their children.

The nuances of navigating the public discourse on school choice may prevent parents from revealing their true rationale for the choices they make. Furthermore, the dilemmas parents face when competing ethical values are at stake are often highly emotive and influenced by the social context of each family. Qualitative methods exploring the reasons parents choose private school for their children can provide more depth to understanding who chooses and what factors might go into the choice.

**The setting.** I selected four Christian schools for the interview portion of this case study. The schools in this study are situated in four adjacent northern Indiana counties with varying rural/urban gradations. Though all of the schools have a historical connection to a denomination or church congregation that still has a vestigial influence over the school's actions and mechanisms, two of the schools are now independently operated. I chose multicase sampling so that I could analyze whether the findings might apply more broadly or just to particular schools.

**Selection of participants.** This study's participants were self-described evangelical public-school educators who have at least one child enrolled in a Christian school. Participants were first identified through my personal contacts with heads of Christian schools (key informants) within a 50-mile radius of my home in Indiana. These key informants provided a



letter of introduction (Appendix A) from me explaining the nature of the research along with my contact information.

**Data sources and gathering procedures.** Interviews were semistructured and ranged in length from 60 to 85 minutes. All participants were interviewed individually. Research on disclosure in focus groups versus individual interviews has generated mixed results. For example, Kruger et.al. (2019) found that participants of individual interviews are more likely to share sensitive information. Furthermore, Saldana and Omasta (2018) cautioned that imbalances in social power or desire to conform to the group may lead to inauthentic responses. Participants were afforded the opportunity to clarify thoughts or add to their responses via e-mail correspondence.

I recorded and subsequently transcribed interviews using Otter software for later coding and analysis. The interview protocol was semistructured, which enables a researcher to add follow-up questions that could elicit richer, more in-depth reflection (see Appendix B). These steps encourage interviewees to “express themselves openly and freely and define the world from their own perspective” (Hancock and Algozzine, 2017, p. 47). The original interviews were maintained as a source of illustrative quotes in the dissertation narratives. To facilitate participant convenience and comfort, interviews were conducted in a conference room located within each school. Additionally, I reviewed websites and other published materials of each Christian school to contextualize comments of the participants.

**Data analysis procedures.** To analyze how participants understood, discussed, and characterized their actions, I used a multistep coding process. I used first and second cycle coding on focus group transcripts. Additionally, I used research memos to record my initial impressions.

I used in-vivo coding as an elemental first step. In-vivo coding is used in order to keep concepts as close as possible to the participants' own words (Saldana, 2016). In a second coding step I used emotion coding to label recalled or experienced emotions and values coding to label attitudes and belief systems. These affective coding procedures are generally used to investigate more subjective qualities of participants' experiences (Saldana, 2016). For example, I used second cycle pattern and theoretical coding to categorize, organize, and identify emergent themes. Pattern coding is used to group summaries into common themes and concepts, while theoretical coding is used to discover central categories that identify the primary themes (Saldana, 2016)

After each interview, I wrote research memos to summarize what surprised or intrigued me and to identify assumptions being made by the participant or myself. Summary memos are meant to also include basic interlocuter information for later analysis (Onwuegbuzie, Dickinson, Leech, & Zoran, 2009). After I analyzed the interviews, I conducted member checks in order to test emerging themes and gain a deeper understanding of the participants' experience. I also used analytic memos to outline and track my decision-making processes at key analytic junctures.

### **Bracketing of Potential Researcher Bias**

Saldana and Omasta (2018) noted that “the researcher’s personal and unfettered perspective is virtually unavoidable in qualitative research” (pp. 35); as such, it deserves exploration. My role as researcher was interrelated with and influenced by my current roles as an educator, administrator, and doctoral student, as well as previous roles as private school parent and psychologist. In effect, these are some of the lenses, filters, and standpoints that guided my research focus and data interpretation.

The current situational context of my “day job” is that of superintendent or “headmaster” of a grade 4-12 Mennonite school. I am in my fifth year in this position at the school. Because of the nature of this study, I should note that our board and staff are predominately “progressive.” Previously, I had served at the school as principal for 2 years and as a teacher for 10 years. Additionally, I was superintendent at a different Mennonite school for 1 year prior to beginning my current job. I have never taught or worked in a public school other than some substitute teaching 2 decades ago. Though I taught several subjects over the years, including Bible, woodworking, and AP Government, my primary area of focus was middle school history and geography. In these various private school roles, I have recruited and attempted to convey the value of a private school education to perspective parents. Certainly, some of my interest in this research is derived from my attempts to understand and articulate the value of the schools for which I have been employed.

I also have the experience of being a parent making the decision (along with my wife) to send our children to a Christian school. We created a list of the relative importance of several costs and benefits: what we could afford financially, the strength of academic programming, extracurricular opportunities, and so forth. Ultimately, the preference of our children trumped all other considerations. They not only preferred to attend the school in which I taught, they were excited to do so. However, we did experience a little bit of angst as we felt a pull as Christians to be the “salt and light”<sup>1</sup> in the community. This feeling of being the salt and light in our minds was also tied to the moral and ethical value of promoting the common good. My wife is a public-

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<sup>1</sup> “Salt and Light” is a reference to Jesus’ exhortation to his followers in the Sermon on the Mount (found in Matthew 5). In the Mennonite church, these passages are taken to mean that Christians should not retreat from the world, but influence it (i.e., flavor it with salt) and be living examples (the light) for others to follow.

school administrator, which amplified our parental dilemma of wanting to do what is in the best interest of our children and our community. Thus, my own experience as a parent deciding among schools for my children was helpful background for the empathetic approach required for case study research.

This also brings up the point of my personal religiosity. I do not think anyone close to me would describe me as evangelical, and I certainly do not describe myself that way. Admittedly, I have a difficult time understanding the common evangelical premise that God and country are or should be intertwined; that somehow the United States is uniquely blessed by God. My Mennonite upbringing and current belief is that people of faith should not mix religion and politics.

Lastly, my previous training and experience as a psychologist engaged in both psychotherapy and applied behavior analysis provides a unique lens on this research. Though I no longer work in this field, it has shaped my assumptions of how the world works. The practice of psychotherapy includes a variety of assumptions about human motivation. My training and practice centered on cognitive behavioral frameworks, in particular the Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy techniques of Albert Ellis. In this model, the therapist helps clients identify their thoughts or beliefs about an “activating” event. The therapist helps the client recognize the emotional responses, that is, the feelings that are derived from irrational thoughts or beliefs. Then the therapist works with the client to replace the irrational with rational thoughts or beliefs. By doing so, the client can change their emotional response, that is, be happy (Ellis & Grieger, 1977).

In the context of this study, participants were likely to be emotive; that is, they may express negative emotions that, from a psychologist’s point of view, were derived from irrational

beliefs. My understanding of rational emotive models of human behavior could have helped and hindered this study. It could have provided a framework for understanding in the data analysis phase. However, as it is not my place as an observer to address participants' emotions, I needed to be careful to keep a researcher mentality during interviews.

My interest in this study is born out of my own experience with private schooling as a parent, teacher, and administrator. My children asked why we as parents decided to send them to a faith-based school even though their mother is a public-school administrator. These questions prompted me to reflect on my own choices as a parent. As a teacher and administrator working for a faith-based school, I have listened to many parents state their reasons and rationale for choosing (or not) faith-based private schooling for their children. Prior to becoming head of school, the reasons and rationale parents gave barely rose above the level of mere interest. However, as head of school I assess why and how parents choose faith-based schooling for their children. I am particularly interested in the angst that some of my friends experienced as they weighed personal values and political interests against what they felt might be best for their children. It is simply not possible in my role as researcher to separate myself totally from my role as parent and school administrator. It is likely that in listening to others, I will gain insights into my own decision-making processes and need to work against projecting my own insights onto participants in the study. I also must acknowledge that in interacting with participants I may gain insights that will help me become more effective in my work. Though I do not directly work in marketing and communications, I oversee that work as it relates to my school. Even though the goal of this research was not to make me a better marketer or communicator, knowledge and experience gained through this study adds knowledge and skills that I can draw on in the future.

## Research Ethics

There were a number of ethical considerations in this case study. As the researcher, I committed to all codes of ethical behavior as set forth by George Fox University and its Institutional Review Board. This study's participants freely participated through informed consent and had the opportunity to withdraw consent at any point in the study. Participants did not receive any compensation other than thank-you gift cards of twenty-five dollars. Confidentiality was protected by storing audio files, transcripts, and other data on my laptop in a password-protected folder. Notes and memos derived from the data used pseudonyms and masked other characteristics that could potentially be used to identify participants.

Though minimal, participation in this study was not without some risk. Participants were fully informed of the risks (see Appendix C). It is also possible that in-depth reflection by participants elicited negative emotions that could cause some amount of stress. However, the opportunity to become more self-aware through guided reflection is potentially a significant benefit. My positionality could have increased the risks for some participants. The participants and I may know one another peripherally within the community or happen upon one another at a community event.

Furthermore, my position as head of school requires that I continually consider the position of the school within the community. Though the intent of this study was not to gain information to be used in direct marketing for my school or any other school, it is probable that insights derived from interviews could be used in professional practice. For example, for communication purposes, schools typically build stakeholder and consumer profiles that are used to target specific community stakeholders and prospective families. I freely acknowledge the bias that is inherent in my professional and social position and worked to be transparent and

reflexive in my work. This involved plans to conduct regular member checks in an effort to assure that the participants' views and understandings were represented as fairly and as accurately as possible.

## Chapter 4 – Findings

This qualitative study examined how parents make sense of their decision to send children to religious schools. All the participants in this study were public school employees who decided to send one or more children to an evangelical Christian school. The following research question guided the study: How do parents who work in public schools and describe themselves as evangelical make sense of their decision to send their children to religious schools?

I conducted interviews during February and March of 2020. With one exception, interviews were individual face-to-face and in-person. Due to concerns related to the coronavirus outbreak and accompanying governmental recommendation for social distancing, the last interview was conducted electronically via zoom. After each interview I wrote a summary memo, transcribed the audio recording, and coded the transcript. I used in-vivo coding as a first step. I followed this with values coding in order to identify attitudes and belief systems and emotion coding to label recalled or experienced emotions. Second cycle pattern and theoretical coding helped me identify emerging themes and placement into categories.

### **The schools**

The schools in this study were identified and selected through my personal relationships. All four schools are described by school leadership as “evangelical” or “evangelical leaning.” All the schools are also covenantal, meaning that for a student to enroll, the student and/or a parent must sign a profession of Christian faith.

Each school is located in a different county with rural/urban continuum codes ranging from 2 to 4. Two of the schools are independently operated and two schools are affiliated with a Christian congregation that provides operational oversight. See the Table 1 for an overview of each school.



Table 1

*Overview of Schools*

School	Religious affiliation / decade founded	Accreditation	Rural/urban continuum code**	Demographic Grades / student size
A	independent 1990's	CSI	2	PreK-8 100-200
B	Baptist 1970's	ACSI	3	PreK-12 >500
C	Independent 1970's	ACSI	4	6-12 100-200
D	Baptist 1980's	ACSI	4	PreK-12 >500

*Note.* CSI – Christian Schools International; ACSI – Association of Christian Schools International. \*\* The United States Department of Agriculture (2013) uses a coding system to designate each county on a rural/urban continuum. 2 – metro areas of 250,000 to 1,000,000 population. 3 – metro areas with a population of fewer than 250,000. 4 – non-metro areas with a population of at least 20,000 and adjacent to a metro area.

**Description of the Participants**

With the help of a key informant in each school I was able to identify potential participants. The key informant functioned as an intermediary between me and prospective participants. In all, I interviewed five parents from four different schools. With the exception of participant #4, all were identified and introduced to me by the head of their respective schools. Participant #4 was previously known to me. Each participant was identified as presumptive evangelical prior to the interview. I interviewed participants individually. Though all but one school have at least three known parents fitting the research criteria, not all those identified elected to participate.

Participant #1 did not describe herself as evangelical and according to the definition of terms and the methodology outlined in Chapter 3, should not have been included in this study. However, the key informant identified participant #1 as a “likely” evangelical, perhaps because she signed the parental covenant required for school enrollment. Hackett and Lindsay (2008) noted that some researchers define persons as evangelicals if they are affiliated with an evangelical religious organization. Given that participant #1 signed the school’s covenantal statement, I could take a broader view of “evangelical.” Due to the low number of participants and her similarity to the three other participants who are administrators, I elected to include her. Furthermore, I found that her individual case provided an interesting contrast to the other participants who fit the typical perception of evangelical.

Interestingly, four of the five participants are public school administrators. Participant ages range from the late-30s to mid-50s. Note that participant quotes are not always word for word; some are truncated from transcripts to provide clarity and brevity.

**Participant #1 – Casey.** Casey is a female in her late thirties from a medium sized city. She is currently an administrator of curriculum and instruction in the public system. Her two grade-school aged children attend School A, which she chose primarily for the Spanish immersion program. Casey does not “necessarily believe in organized religion” but attends church. She wants her children to have a strong moral foundation so likes the religious aspect of their school. However, she does not describe herself as evangelical and does not take seriously much of the religious instruction her children receive in school. Casey even stated that she and her husband will laugh at some of the “crazy Christian stuff” her children bring home from school. Of the five participants, Casey is the only one who never attended a religious-based K-12

or college and the only participant to express guilt or unease about the decision to send her children to a Christian school.

**Participant #2 – Rex.** A male in his early 50s residing in a small city. He attended public school through eighth grade then transferred to a Mennonite school for grades 9-12. Additionally, he attended a Mennonite college. Though in another state, his wife also attended a Mennonite high school and the same college as Rex. Currently Rex is a principal in a public elementary school. Of his three children, two are graduates and one child is currently enrolled in School B. School B is the second Christian school for each of his children. For middle school, they all transitioned from the public school to a Mennonite school because they wanted their children “in a school situation in which they had the opportunity to receive additional studies of the Bible.” However, they later transitioned to School B, in part because School B was a better fit for their religious beliefs. Rex does not use the term evangelical to describe himself, instead stating the “most important thing is that I have a relationship with my Heavenly Father and I'm a Christ follower.”

**Participant #3 – Janice.** A female in her mid-40s, Janice resides with her family in a small city. Currently Janice is an administrator in the interventionist program of a public school. She has four children in public school and one who attends School C. Janice attended public K-12 but went to a church affiliated college. Though she has been in the public system for 12 years, Janice formerly taught at a Catholic school and did her student teacher training at School C. She and her public-school children are in the same school system. Janice describes her family as an average conservative midwestern family “daily pursuing a relationship with the Lord.” Referring to the trappings of popular culture, Janice is proud that there is no “mutter and muck in our house, [like] trashy TV or movies,” yet her family is not so conservative as to “look down our

noses at others.” Lewis and DeBarnardo (2010) noted that individuals identifying as evangelical are also more likely to be politically conservative. Though certainly not all politically conservative persons are evangelical, Janice attends an evangelical church and uses God language commonly associated with evangelicals.

**Participant #4 – Rob.** A male in his late 40s, Rob resides in a small city. Rob has one child at School C and another who recently graduated. His other children attend a Christian elementary in the same town. Rob attended a “very conservative” Christian high school and a church-affiliated college. All of his children enrolled in the Christian grade school when his wife began teaching there. He noted that the school rule is “if you teach there, your kids go there.” As a public-school elementary principal in the district that encompasses the Christian school, Rob felt that his district would not like or accept that he pulled his kids from public school. To alleviate the conflict, Rob accepted an elementary school principalship in an adjoining district. Rob describes himself as a conservative evangelical Christian and holds fundamentalist views on the age of the earth and homosexuality. He believes that our country is “moving too far away from our Judeo-Christian values” and laments the fact that a school system he previously taught in can no longer offer Bible classes. Interestingly, this is the same school referred to in the literature review that only recently ended Bible classes.

**Participant #5 – Lynn.** Lynn is a male in his mid-50s residing in a medium sized metropolitan area. Currently, Lynn teaches middle school in an urban school district. He attended public school through 12th grade and graduated from a church affiliated college. After earning a master of divinity degree, Lynn was a pastor for several years before beginning teaching. Lynn has four children at school D from 6th through 12th grade and one child who is a graduate of the school. At first, his children were homeschooled by their mother. However, the family situation

changed, and all the children were enrolled in School D together when “the Lord opened doors through the voucher system.” Lynn recognizes that he fits into the evangelical category but does not use that label, noting “I just want to be known as someone who knows God's word, desires to know it, understand it, follow it, and teach it.”

### **Thematic Overview**

The five participants shared experience of why they chose Christian schooling for their children and how they made sense of that decision given their position as public school employees. Through the process of data analysis, I identified several themes. First, I organized the factors contributing to the decision in the context of the geography concept of push/pull. These resulted in five thematic push factors and six pull factors. Second, I analyzed how the participants make sense of or justify the decision to send their children to Christian schools while they themselves work in the public system. Last, I identified self-interest in doing what is perceived best for our own children. as the overarching theme or motive underlying the push/pull factors.

**Theme one: Push/Pull Factors.** Typically, researchers use market based rational choice approaches to frame parental decision-making choices about schooling. Though this cost/benefit approach can be a useful framework, I found it more helpful to analyze the interview data through a geography lens. In geography, researchers studying human migration frame the factors that lead people to move from one region to another as “push” and “pull” factors. Push factors are the conditions that prompt people to leave a particular place, and pull factors refer to the conditions that attract people to a new place (Gilbert, 2017). Generally, a combination of push and pull factors lead people to move from one place to another. For example, where a person lives might lack suitable job opportunities (push) but be close to family support networks (pull).

The strength of push and pull factors are fluid and can vary over time. For example, young people just out of college may not feel much of a pull to return home while young married couples with children may feel a pull to be connected to extended family.

The push/pull framework is also a helpful way to think about the movement of students from one school to another. Through the coding process, I identified the following primary push/pull factors.

***Push factors.*** Through the coding process I identified five primary push factors that contribute to participants' dissatisfaction with public schools.

*Lack of individualized attention.* All five participants noted this in some form. Three specifically noted the large size of their public school prevents individualized attention. Rob and Janice (School C), Rex (School B) and Lynn (School D) all indicated that their public school options have too many behavior problems for teachers to pay attention to the well-behaved children. Interestingly, only Casey mentioned large class size as the cause for lack of individual attention. The other participants seemed more concerned with the sheer size of the middle school or high school.

*Low confidence in staff (teachers or leadership).* Four of the five participants indicated that they had low confidence in either the public-school teachers or leadership. Rob and Lynn both mentioned that there are too many "uncaring teachers" while Lynn and Janice cited uncaring administrators. Janice noted that administrators at her son's public school would not do anything about bullying. Lynn indicated that some teachers are not competent, but this had to do with the circumstance of having to teach outside of their field of expertise. Casey noted that the general disorganization and lack of consistency from administration has led to high teacher

turnover. In contrast, Rex stated he sees “many dedicated and caring teachers” in his public-school system who just “don’t have enough time or energy” to support all the kids.

*Low academic rigor.* Casey and Lynn cited low academic rigor as reasons for not wanting their children in their local public school. Notably, Lynn and Casey teach and/or live in the two of the five largest school districts in the state, which according to the Indiana’s A-F grading system perform poorly overall. Casey stated that she does not want her children to be defined by grades and scores on standardized tests, which she feels are poor proxies for academic rigor. Instead she would like her children’s school to focus on creating a “growth mindset.” Rex indicated that even in situations where there appears to be high academic rigor, individual support and expectations vary. He believes that one of his children would have struggled academically in a public school where his child would have been “just a number.” Rex stated that the Christian school teachers “just knowing our kids would make the academic piece much stronger.”

*Lack of Christian values.* Two participants, Rob and Lynn cited lack of Christian values in the public school. Notably, these two are the only participants to specifically embrace the term evangelical to describe their religious beliefs. Both worry about the prevalence of humanistic secularism in public schools. According to Lynn, public schools have “no spiritual life whatsoever.” Though Casey did not cite lack of Christian values as a push factor, she did indicate that lack of attention to moral character development was a problem in her children’s public-school system. She stressed that specific programs intended to enhance student character and moral development have low efficacy because they are not integrated into the entirety of the school’s social milieu. She believes that Christian principles are helpful but not necessary for good moral and character development.

*Safety (physical and emotional).* Three of the participants noted that lack of safety is an important consideration. Lynn was speaking primarily about physical safety as he sees “what goes on in the halls every day.” Janice was not worried about her son’s physical safety but his emotional safety describing her son as “having a heart of mercy” who is deeply affected by emotional bullying he saw in his public school. Feeling free to express beliefs outside the secular mainstream can also be considered a form of emotional safety. Rex clearly indicated this, stating that in their Christian school,

if my children want to talk about their faith, they can talk about their faith. If something about faith comes up and they need to talk to someone. They know that it will be fine to question something. Or, if they just needed someone to talk to about faith, they know that it will be well received.

***Pull factors.*** Through the coding process I identified six primary pull factors of Christian schools.

*Alignment with values.* All five participants indicated that it is important for a Christian school to align with their values. Four of the participants are concerned about specific statements of faith, the nature of religious instruction, or stance on social issues. For example, Rex moved his children from one Christian school to another in part because the family’s values and stance on social issues lined up more with School B than the values and social positions of his children’s Christian school at the time. Lynn reported that due to family circumstances, his wife decided to stop homeschooling and went in search of appropriate Christian schools. She narrowed the Christian school choice down to two schools that matched their values, and chose the one that would accept all five of their children. Rob stated plainly, “A Biblical foundation is more important than academics.” Casey is an outlier in that she does not necessarily subscribe to



the religious doctrine her children learn at school and takes much of it “with a grain of salt.” Casey has a broad range of what she believes to be acceptable Christian teaching and thought that if her children turned out to be morally responsible “crazy Christians,” that would be much better than having “no moral compass at all.”

*Indiana choice scholarship program.* Three of the five participants take advantage of the Indiana voucher program. They indicated that the availability of financial assistance makes the choice of Christian schooling easier for Casey and possible for Janice and Lynn. Casey made sure to point out that she does not support the voucher program in principle but is not willing to “leave money on the table.” Rex and Rob do not qualify financially. Rex noted that his family has been blessed with good employment and thus does not need the financial assistance vouchers provide. He found no fault “in the voucher system which allows families to send their children to Christian schools.” Rob also acknowledged that some families need financial help to afford Christian education, and he “doesn’t really mind” that voucher money going to Christian schools.

*Caring teachers/individual attention.* Four of the five participants indicated that caring teachers and/or individual attention are significant pull factors. I combined caring teachers and individual attention because of the relational aspect. Caring teachers provide individual attention. Rex most directly highlighted this relationship stating that the Christian school’s staff “genuinely cares” about his children and “the attention and caring leads to a stronger academic and spiritual outcome.” When Janice recounted her son’s emotional transformation at School C, she attributed his flourishing to the staff and the tone they set for a positive school culture. This was such a significant transformation that Janice teared up while telling the story. Prior to her son’s transfer,

and based about what she heard from others about the school, Janice presumed and hoped that this would be the case. Now the affirmation serves as an anchor, holding her son at the school.

*Sense of community.* Sense of community is related closely to caring teachers/individual attention in that those factors set the tone for positive community. Participants feel that their children's Christian school genuinely has the best interests of their children at heart, which leads to a "we are all in this together" feeling. In some cases, sense of community is related to, as Lynn put it, the school as a "community of believers." In a similar vein, Rex noted the "faculty and staff not only care for the kids but they care for each other," and that he appreciates "the way the school comes together and surrounds a person in need of support." Sense of community is also a function of size; as Janice noted, "We know everyone at the school."

*High academic expectations.* Lynn and Rex both indicated that academic rigor is an important pull factor. In each case, they indicated that their children are appropriately challenged, and as a result they believe their children will have a stronger academic outcome. Casey revealed that her children's school has high expectations in some areas but results are tempered by the school having too few certified teachers. Casey believes the primary objective of grade school should be developing a love of learning, and in that aspect, she is very satisfied with the school. Only Rob expressed concerns about low academic rigor. However, he also noted the new superintendent was changing school culture by demanding much more from teachers in terms of student academic outcomes.

Table 2 summarizes the push/pull factors that contributed to the participants' decision to send their child to Christian school.

Table 2

*Push/Pull Factors*

Participant School	Public School Push	Christian School Pull
Casey A	lack of individual attention low confidence in staff (leadership) low academic rigor	alignment with values caring teachers / individual attention Indiana voucher program high academic expectations
Rex B	lack of individual attention	alignment with values caring teachers / individual attention Indiana voucher program preservation of religious identity high academic expectations
Janice C	lack of individual attention low confidence in staff (leadership) unsafe (emotional)	alignment with values caring teachers / individual attention Indiana voucher program sense of community
Rob C	lack of individual attention low confidence in staff (teachers) lack of Christian Values	alignment with values Preservation of religious identity Indiana voucher program sense of community
Lynn D	lack of individual attention low confidence in staff (tchrs, ldrshp) low academic rigor lack of Christian values unsafe (physical)	alignment with values caring teachers / individual attention Indiana voucher program preservation of religious identity sense of community high academic expectations

It is important to note that public schools also have pull factors, and Christian schools have push factors. For example, Janice and Rob both pointed out that in relation to School C the local public school has strong academics (pull), while the Christian school has low academics (push). However, both have high confidence in the school's leadership and that the school is moving in the right direction in terms of academic rigor. Rob, who is a principal, noted, "I'm so

impressed with the work [the superintendent] has done in a short period of time.” Thus, evidence that the school will get better soon mitigates some of the concern about lack of academic rigor at School C. Similarly, Casey and Lynn’s lack of confidence in leadership at their children’s assigned public school, and lack of hope that leadership will improve over the long haul, pushed them away from considering public school for their children. Casey reported continued “disorganization and lack of consistency” in her home district while Lynn lamented the ever declining academic and behavioral expectations. Notably, Casey and Lynn live and/or teach in two of Indiana’s largest school districts.

**Theme Two: Self-interest.** Taken together, all of the push and pull factors are related to the participants’ own self-interest. In all, participants want schools to provide opportunities that they feel will result in the best outcomes for each of their children. This explains in part why Janice enrolls only one of her five children in the Christian school. The child enrolled is the “sensitive one,” and she believes the others need not be in the Christian school environment as they “can handle it” in the public school. Additionally, though “special programs” didn’t make the final push/pull list, Casey feels it is in her children’s best interest to become bilingual, thus, she sought out schools with Spanish immersion programs. Rob perhaps expressed self-interest most clearly when he indicated that he may not send all his children to the Christian high school because “every kid is different.”

Rather than review each participant’s self-interest, I highlight two subthemes that led to identification of self-interest as a major theme. The Indiana parent voucher program has an obvious inherent component of financial self-interest. However, I review participant responses to the voucher program later in this chapter.

*Subtheme 2.1: A community of believers (preservation of religious identity, values alignment, sense of community).* I have clustered these three pull factors together because they overlap in many ways. Though religious identity and values are individual perceptions, they can be expressed within a community of like believers. In the Christian school context, the school is a community with a particular religious identity or identities. Each school has a formalized official identity outlined in their foundation documents and promotional materials. Schools also have community identity based on the perceptions of its employees and families. For Janice, School C's "warm and inviting community culture" is why it makes sense to send her sensitive child to the school.

Rob, Lynn, and Rex are the overtly religious participants in terms of frequent use of "God language." They all indicated God called them to serve in public schools and also appeared most focused on their children receiving a solid religious foundation through school. They desire that all of their children form a "personal relationship with their savior, Jesus Christ." For these three at least, placing their children in a Christian school community with a like worldview is in the family's self-interest. As Rob states, a person "can't be too short sighted, we have to look beyond 100 higher points on an SAT, you know, you have to look broader than that." To make his point, Rob mentioned that he appreciates that School C helped strengthen his daughter's faith through a visit to the ark and creation museum in Kentucky.

Lynn stated that at school D, "the focus is very clearly in every class on honoring God through the education process, and that's my desire for my children, having that perspective, that worldview." Furthermore he states, "my expectation, my hope, my desire is that the Lord will be working through the school, these fellow Christians, Godly people who have as their giftedness and their talents, a willingness, a desire, and ability to set an example, to teach and to guide my

own children toward walking with the Lord.” Lynn wants more from the school than religious education, he would like the community to share in his children’s proper upbringing through Biblical counseling and discipline, which takes the form in a “Christian environment where there is an understanding of correction and discipline, and that there are consequences along with grace, mercy, and love.”

Taking a slightly softer stance than Rob and Lynn, Rex also sees Christian schooling in the best interest of his family. As Rex narrated his story of how his children ended up at School B, the roles of identity, traditional Christian values, and community in the sense-making process were clear. Rex’s children began their Christian schooling at a Mennonite school, the same school that he attended and a school supported by his home congregation. He also noted that his wife attended a Mennonite school and that both sets of grandparents were supportive of his children attending a Mennonite school. On the initial decision to enroll his children in the Mennonite school, Rex stated, “It was about identity, our Mennonite background and foundation is very, very important to my wife and I and is something that will never leave us.” However, as his personal beliefs and church doctrine evolved, he came to understand his Mennonite identity was tied to history and culture, not religious beliefs or doctrine. Rex describes himself as a “Christ follower” summing up his core religious belief as “I believe in a heavenly Father that loves and cares for me and that he died for my sins.” As the values of the Mennonite school no longer matched his family’s personal values, Rex and his wife decided to transfer their children to School B. Rex’s family is now firmly ensconced in the community of School B, even attending the church that oversees the school and where staff members are required to attend.

***Subtheme 2.2: High standards (high academic expectations, caring staff/individual attention.*** I clustered these pull factors together because participants tended to talk about the

individual attention from caring staff in the same context of having high academic expectations. Here it is notable that three schools, A, B, and D, are considered by participants to have better academic outcomes than the local residence-based assigned public school. Remember that Indiana is an open enrollment state so parents can enroll their children in any public school, provided there is room and they can transport their children to the school. School C is judged by both parents to be not as academically sound as the local public-school option.

At some point in each interview all five participants cited the value of and desire for individual attention as a factor in their decision making. Rex stated as a matter of fact, “We sent our kids to private schools because we knew that the class sizes would be smaller, resulting in what we thought was more attention to helping them with their academics.” For Lynn, one of the extras of school D is “appreciating teachers and coaches who give kids their full attention.” Lynn is aware that with high academic expectations also come hard work and challenges. According to Lynn, the “good part of Christian school is that except for a rare day, and except for Wednesdays when there is no homework, my children work hard and there's their high expectations, and I know academically my kids are hurting, you know they suffer—in a good way, in the best way. It's difficult for them and that's good to see. . . I want my children to be challenged and pushed to their maximum ability and potential.”

Though Casey sends her kids to School A primarily for the Spanish immersion program, she sees the value of the individual attention as result of the relatively small class sizes of 12 or so. She stated, “I'm more worried about the way that my child is treated, and on what teachers focus on in the classroom, the attention my daughter gets and how she develops as a person.” Echoing Casey, Janice highlighted not the individual academic attention in School C, but the care and support School C staff give to her son who has been “transformed” as a result.

**Theme Three: Participant sense-making and identity.** Throughout the interview process I sought to understand how participants make sense of the decision to send their children to a Christian school while employed by the public school system. Cucchiara and Horvat (2014) found that liberal middle-class parents considering public schooling for their children who ultimately chose private schooling felt a sense of guilt, and Crozier et. al. (2008) concluded that middle-class parents in England who chose public over private schooling for their children struggled with the “moral ambiguity” or the ethical dilemma of their choice. In this study I expected to find a similar pattern of moral ambiguity and guilt surrounding participants decisions to send their children to Christian school. However, for the participants in this study there is no ethical dilemma regarding schooling choice. The good/ethical self is in alignment with participants’ identity.

The interviews make clear that none of the participants use a discernment process suggestive of rational choice theory with a formal cost/benefit analysis. This does not mean that costs/benefits were never considered. Ron feels that when “families pay tuition, the school better deliver value.” Furthermore, Ron recognizes his eldest daughter did not receive enough value for the price of tuition, thus she elected to graduate early to attend college. Ron’s experience aside, participants generally seem to make decisions based on limited formal information about the school. Parents relied primarily on what Kosunen and Cararsco (2016) refer to as “hot” word of mouth knowledge. Janice and Rob’s experience fits with Klein’s NDM model of relying primarily on a trusted source, School C’s superintendent. Janice states “I know [superintendent] and there is trust there.” Similarly, reflecting on why the Christian schooling decision was good, Ron mentioned, “I’m so impressed with the work [the superintendent] has done in a short period



of time.” However, Ron and Janice’s choice of Christian schooling is bounded by distance; there are no other Christian or private school options within a 35-minute drive.

How participants understand and view the Indiana Choice Scholarship “voucher” program is also tied to identity. Lynn believes the program to be a “blessing from God” as it enables families like his to their children Christian schooling. The two participants who do not qualify for the voucher take different positions. Rex makes a social justice argument that only families in need receive the subsidy. Rob states that he doesn’t have a problem with vouchers going to religious schools but he doesn’t like that the Republican state legislators lie about the purpose, which he sees as reducing funding to public schools. He is also concerned that “Muslim schools in Indianapolis” are allowed to receive voucher money. One way participants make sense of their support for the voucher system is to shift blame to charter schools. Trying to make sense of why it is acceptable to receive voucher money for her children’s Christian schooling, Casey said, “I really feel bad about taking the money, and I feel guilty about that,” but “I would never send my kid to a charter, it’s not possible. I hate charters.” Noting that public school teachers are “charter school haters,” Janice justifies taking voucher money for Christian schooling by pointing out to colleagues “my son’s school is not a charter!” (I add the explanation point based on Janice’s vocal inflection and physical gesturing). Ron believes it is ok for needy families to take voucher money for Christian school tuition. However, he is also angry at the Indiana state legislature, believing that the state is shifting money to charter schools that would otherwise be spent on raising teacher salaries.

Though Casey and Janice appear to be defensive about accepting voucher money, like the other participants in this study, they are not at all defensive about their school choice decision. Casey and Janice chose Christian education primarily because of their children’s needs. Casey

wanted Spanish immersion; Janice wanted a safe space free of bullying. Yet, the Christian schools they chose aligned with their Christian identity. Casey likes the idea that her children will learn Christian moral/ethical values in school stating that a “strong moral base” is needed for children to develop a “moral compass” to help them understand what is right and wrong. Yet, Casey does not appear to care all that much about the particulars stating “I don’t necessarily believe in organized religion.” On the other hand, Janice is more concerned about the particulars of the religious doctrine. Janice remarked that if she were to consider a Catholic school, she would take very close look at the bible curriculum to see how religion is taught.

For Casey and Lynn, identity played a secondary role. However, for Rex, Rob, and Lynn, identity played a central role in their school choice decisions. Their school choice decisions were informed by and aligned precisely with who they believe themselves to be as evangelical Christians. Perhaps Rex expressed this best when he said that it was his calling to teach in the public school but it is God’s “calling that my kids go to a Christian school, and it was never an issue” or inconsistent with his calling. That is to say, Rex never felt any moral ambiguity or guilt about the decision to send his children to a Christian school. Similarly, Lynn states “I have it in me by God's design to have a bit of a heart for the needy and the troubled” students in public school. Yet he wants his own children in a school environment with a Christian worldview in which the “focus is very clearly in every class on honoring God” and he believes that it was God that made that possible through vouchers. For Rex and Lynn, their decision to work in public schools while sending their children to Christian schools make perfect sense to them as Christians following God’s call. Their identity as evangelical Christians and public school teachers are not at all in conflict.

## Summary of Findings

This case study examined how parents make sense of their choice of Christian schooling for their children. The schools in the study are evangelical or evangelical leaning. In attitudes and beliefs, four of the five participants interviewed comfortably fit underneath the evangelical umbrella.

To puzzle out the primary factors that contributed to participants' decisions, I used a push/pull framework common to the geography of migration. Though it is important to recognize the public-school push factors that contribute to participants' decisions, I chose to focus primarily on the Christian school pull factors. This is primarily because the two lists are closely related. Push factors included (a) lack of individual attention, (b) low confidence in staff, (c) low academic rigor, (d) lack of Christian values, and (e) feeling unsafe. Pull factors include (a) alignment with values, (b) caring teachers who give individual attention, (c) Indiana voucher program, (d) preservation of religious identity, (e) sense of community, and (f) high academic expectations. Through second cycle coding I determined that the primary commonality of all push/pull factors was self-interest. Using the pull factors as a foundation, I supported this premise using the participants' own words.

I also delved deeper into participants' sense-making process. I found that the participants did not really use a cost/benefit analysis but relied more heavily on gut reactions and what they heard about the Christian schools. In some cases, evangelical identity played a critical decision-making role, particularly for those participants who expressed the most traditional conservative views. As the Indiana voucher system is a hot button issue in the public private school debate, I focused more specifically on how participants justified their acceptance of the vouchers program. I found that participants reconciled the voucher program by changing their perceptions of

vouchers, seeking out new information and/or shifting anger to charter schools. A significant finding in this latter stage was that participants did not express feelings of guilt or shame, nor did participants see the decision-making process as posing any significant moral/ethical dilemma due to their status as public-school employees.

## **Chapter 5 – Conclusions**

The purpose of this research was to explore the nature and complexity of the private/public school divide through the stories and experiences of self-described evangelicals who work in public schools but send their children to private Christian schools. I wanted to know how these parents make sense of their decision. The research process followed the traditional steps of a case study dissertation starting with a review of the relevant literature, building the methodology, gathering data in the form of interviews, coding, and analyzing the data to identify themes. The major themes were (a) common push/pull factors that influenced participants' decision making, (b) self-interest of the family as the underlying precept, and (c) participants experienced no moral ambiguity, or guilt and shame as public school employees sending their children to Christian schools. In this chapter I discuss how key findings relate to the literature, draw conclusions from the findings, and provide key insights, implications, and recommendations for practice and further research.

### **Discussion of Findings**

My interest in this study developed through my own role as head of a Christian school and my experiences with parents deciding on the best schooling option for their children. Additionally, during the initial literature review process, I was drawn to the case study methodology as a way of understanding parental choices and the sense-making process. Of particular influence were three studies, (a) Cucchiara and Horvat's (2014) study of middle-class parents living in cities who were considering public schooling for their children; (b) Crozier et al.'s (2008) study of middle-class parents who chose public over private schooling for their children but struggled with the "moral ambiguity" of wanting what is best for their children while simultaneously desiring to support the public system; and (c) Kimelberg & Billingham's

(2012) investigation of how parents in Boston make sense of their schooling decisions, given all the school choice options, to enroll their children in public school. These three studies all focused on public school parents. I could find no similar research that scrutinized the same phenomenon in Christian school parents. I chose evangelical Christian schools for the practical consideration that there are several in my region of Indiana. Additionally, I recognized that narrowing the focus to a particular school type creates a more unique case. I chose to concentrate on public-school employees because I thought they may face a particular ethical dilemma in being public school employees who send their children to Christian schools.

Though initially intending to conduct focus group interviews, due to lack of interested participants, I conducted individual interviews. Through the interview and data analysis process I developed three themes, each of which is discussed below in the context of comparisons and connections to the literature review.

**Comparisons.** No matter the theoretical or methodological framework used to ascertain the factors that go into parental decision making about schooling, it ultimately comes down to what parents value most. In this sense, the rational choice framework is not wrong, nor is the NDM model of Klein (2015). Keeping in mind that what parents say they value may differ from what their actions show they value (Schneider & Buckley 2002), my research results align with most other researchers' findings.

When searching for the right school, participants appeared to rely on gut instinct as suggested by Klein's (2015) NDM model, or on what Kosunen and Carrasco (2016) referred to as "hot knowledge," meaning information from trusted sources. This was evident in Janice and Rob's choice of school C, even though their options were bounded somewhat by geographic location. Both Janice and Rob acknowledged that a significant factor in their decision was

hearing good things about the superintendent. Rex too relied on hot knowledge gained through friends and acquaintances and the gut feeling that school B “seems right” for his children. Conversely, it appears Lynn’s schooling choice was based on “cold knowledge” through his wife’s formal vetting process of previously unknown schools.

Often, the cost of tuition can be a limiting factor for parents wanting Christian schooling for their children. Mainda (2002) found this to be true for Seventh Day Adventist parents in Southwest Michigan. Indeed, at my own school, cost is the primary reason given by admitted students who decide not to enroll. The importance of the Indiana choice scholarship program in making Christian schooling affordable for three participants in this study cannot be overstated. In fact, Lynn referred to the choice scholarship program as “God’s blessing,” and Janice worried about affording school and the negative impact on her son if the voucher program ends. A factor notably absent from the Barna Group (2017) research of current and prospective Christian-school parents is “affordability,” which didn’t make the list of most important considerations for parents. However, it is likely current parents had already bought into the schools’ values propositions, that is, by virtue of being current parents, they had already decided the tuition is worth the Christian school value.

Perhaps the most similar research to this study in terms of participants and setting was conducted by the Barna Group (2017). In a survey of current and prospective parents of ACSI schools, the researchers determined that the attributes current parents care most about are: caring teachers, accessible teachers, spiritual formation, character education, alignment with values, safety, academic excellence, good peer influence, and small class sizes. Several of these align with the push/pull factors identified in this case study, which involved current parents at schools affiliated with ACSI or similar (CSI) accrediting organizations. The Barna Group (2017) also

identified four themes important to ACSI parents: safety, quality teachers, academic excellence, and character/spiritual development. These themes are reminiscent of the two subthemes that I used to identify the primary theme of self-interest (see Table 3).

Table 3

*Factors Comparison of the Current Case Study with Barna Group (2017)*

Current Case Study – push/pull	Barna Group – current parents want
values alignment	values alignment, spiritual formation, character education
caring teachers/ individual attention	caring teachers, accessible teachers, small class size, safety
Indiana voucher program (affordability)	no similar attribute
preservation of religious identity	good peer influence
sense of community	good peer influence, safety
high academic expectations	academic excellence
Themes	
community of believers	safety, character development, spiritual development
high standards	quality teachers, academic excellence

In their study of middle-class parents in England who chose public schooling over private schooling for their children, Cucchiarra and Horvat (2014) concluded “the act of choosing a school can become, for parents, a means of expressing and enacting a particular identity” (p. 486). Likewise, for the three most conservative participants in this study (Rex, Rob, and Lynn) the act of choosing a school seemed related to expressing and acting upon a particular evangelical identity. When moving from home schooling to Christian schooling, Lynn’s wife



considered only schools that fit the family's values and identity. Rob and his family ended up choosing identity over high academic standards. For Rex, family values and school values fell out of alignment, thus necessitating choosing another school that fit better with the family's evangelical values.

Notably in this study, all the participants in some form cited values alignment as a significant factor in their decision making. This is consistent with what might be expected given historian Adam Laats' (2012) assertion that secularization of public schools since the 1960s has led to interest in private evangelical Christian schooling. As all of the schools in this study were founded in the 1970's or later, it could be that these schools were founded partly in response to the secularization of public schools. As such, participants saw these evangelical Christian schools as "safe" places for their children to express their Christian identity. In research on Catholic schooling, Cohen-Zada (2006) concluded that the demand for Catholic schooling declines when outside influences seem less threatening. Conversely, the general purview of all of the schools' websites affirms that these schools were established in part because parents or the founding church believed explicitly Christian teachings are absent from public schools. In Lynn and Rob's case, it was not merely the absence of Christian values, but the threatening presence of secular values that factored into their decision making. In as much as the schools in this study represent a distinctive evangelical identity, historian John Roth (2011) is correct in asserting that religious groups with distinct cultural identities tend to form their own schools. This is also consistent with Moe's (2001) oft-cited research that Catholics and conservative Protestants are most likely to support and choose private Christian schooling.

In a study of English private school parents, Jarvis and Alvanides (2008) found that lower income families placed a high value on enrolling their children in the school that would make

them most happy while middle income parents were more interested in building cultural capital. Even though three participants in this study qualified for the Indiana choice scholarship program, in the United States, most people with professional jobs are not considered lower income. My results suggested that for some participants in this study, building cultural capital is an unstated but underlying factor in their decision making. Building culture capital of course aligns closely with self-interest, which I identified as the principle underlying theme. Building cultural capital is most upfront in Casey's desire to enroll her children in a bilingual program. Additionally, Rex and Lynn cited high academic expectations as factors in their decision, which implies better positioning their children for college and careers. It is also possible that participants' desire to find a school aligning with their Christian values is a form of building cultural capital within the evangelical community.

**Connections.** There are several possible connections of this research to other schools of thought. Much of this research centers around participants' evangelical identity and what it means to live "in the world but not of it." In terms of schooling the participants are "in the world" and "of the world" in the sense that they must conform to the secular rules and mores of public schools. At the same time, these participants chose to insulate their children from public schooling, which makes their children "not of" the secular world of public school.

*Evangelical identity and the Christian school.* In *The Politics of Evangelical Identity: Local Churches and the Partisan Divide in the United States and Canada*, Bean (2014) contended that two distinct world views predominate in the evangelical movement, the orthodox view and the progressive view. Bean (2014) asserted that the orthodox world view predominates in the United States, and core principles include belief in free market principles, that the country was founded on Judeo Christian values, and that truth is absolute. Bean's (2014) defining

characteristics of the orthodox world view is plainly evident in the statements of Rex, Rob, Lynn, and, to a lesser extent, Janice. Brasington (2014) found that highly educated parents are less likely to support school choice. The well-educated participants in this study quite obviously do support school choice, suggesting that evangelical identity concerns trump all other considerations.

In the Barna Group (2017) research, “safety” includes physical and emotional safety as well as cultural safety, the freedom to ask questions and raise doubt. Cultural safety is related to the pull factor of “values alignment.” For some parents, the Christian school is a safe place to hold conservative opinions and address controversial issues like same sex marriage and transgender identity. This is consistent with Glenn (2018) who argued that schooling decisions arise from the conflict between conservative religious (orthodox) and secular (progressive) world views. This conflict is what Lynn saw as the “socialistic mindset” of public-school institutions professing that “all people are good” but that also “do not even allow Christian clubs.” Rob speculated that “Christian Schools are primed to really grow in the next few years” because of the secular anti-Christian character of public schools. He cited as creeping secularism, the “Obama regulations” allowing transgender students to use the restrooms of their choice, and an area public school being forced to stop offering Bible classes. Lynn and Rob are not necessarily wrong in their understanding of the increasing secularism of the public-school system. Both Lynn and Rob fit the Christian “schooling as protest” model proposed by Glenn (2018)

Certainly, the connection can be made between parents looking out for their children’s self-interest and Brasington and Hite’s (2012) rational choice theory approach, which views parents primarily as benefits maximizers. The participants in this study take advantage of their middle-class status to secure a place in private Christian schools. However, I do not perceive that

the participants are “opportunity hoarding” to borrow Lyken-Segosebe and Hinz’s (2015) phrase. Participants in this study are not using economic and social status to secure or hoard opportunities for themselves to the detriment of the less powerful as in the case of public-school parents in Boston (Kimmelberg & Billingham, 2012). In Crozier et. al.’s (2008) study, parents faced the dilemma of choosing between what was best for their children and the desire to conform to their good/ethical self by supporting public schools. There is no dilemma for the participants in this case study. The good/ethical self is in full alignment with what is best for their children, which is in agreement with John Dewey’s (1916/19 “interest being synonymous with the self” (Wilson, 2016, p.155).

The sensemaking paradigm of Weick (1995) also helps explain why participants saw no ethical dilemma associated with being public school employees who send their children to public schools. For these participants, evangelical identity trumped their public-school employee identity. Applying the sensemaking model, who participants believe themselves to be will shape how they interpret events. With the exception of Casey, the participants in this study identify first evangelical. Therefore, it is to be expected that participants would interpret their school choice decisions through the lens of who they are as evangelicals. If participants identify first as evangelicals, their children to Christian schools is in total alignment with their identity. However, if participants identified first as public-school employees, then it is possible they would have experienced some dissonance between their identity and actions.

***Sense making and cognitive dissonance theory.*** Cognitive dissonance theory (Festinger, 1962) was a useful framework with which to analyze how participants make sense of their decision to send their children to Christian schools. A central premise of this theory is that when our beliefs and actions do not align or come in conflict with each other, we attempt to bring them

into alignment by changing our beliefs. In other words, our actions influence our beliefs as much as our beliefs influence our actions, which is reminiscent of Dewey's (1997/1916) idea that interest and self are synonymous. Secondly, when our beliefs and actions do not align, it causes discomfort, so we change our dissonant belief, perception (i.e., rationalize away), or action to relieve the discomfort. Third, failure to resolve dissonance results in emotional distress such as feelings of anger, guilt or shame. (McLeod, 2018).

The process of eliminating dissonance can be seen in several participant's attitudes toward the voucher program. Even though she fundamentally disagrees with the program, Casey justifies accepting the voucher money because it would be "stupid for anybody to leave money on the table." In this way she changes the weight of her perceptions to bring actions and beliefs into alignment. Being stupid is worse than the harm vouchers might do to public schools. Notably, Casey is the only one of the participants who expressed any guilt over not sending her children to public school. Lynn stated unequivocally, "The Lord opens doors through the voucher system," therefore, there is no conflict whatsoever. Janice took a different approach by educating herself on how the voucher system works. She now responds to colleagues that question her integrity by trying to educate them on school finance. She noted that state, not local tax dollars support the voucher, and that it saves the state money because the state allocates less to families receiving the money than they would give to the public school. Finally, as discussed in the results section, participants primarily blame charter schools for Indiana's inadequate funding of public schools. Thus, if charter schools are at fault for low state funding for public schools, it is appropriate to accept or support the voucher system.

### **Implications and recommendations for practice**

While it is dangerous to make broad generalizations from this small sample case study research, there are a few practical insights that can be beneficial to others. Based on my literature review, results, and discussion, I offer the following implications and recommendations for practice.

**For researchers.** It is important for researchers to pay attention to the power dynamics that are inherently manifest in certain methodological approaches. It is notable that four of the five participants in this study were school administrators. The pool of potential participants included more teachers than administrators, yet only one teacher elected to participate. It is possible that my positionality as a school administrator scared off teachers from participating. It could be that teachers are uncomfortable with the proposition of sharing personal values and judgments about schooling with an administrator. Perhaps teachers fear that somehow their opinions and experiences could make their way back to their boss. Administrators of public schools do not necessarily have this fear as they are interviewing with a peer. With three of the administrator participants there seemed to be a clear sense of comradery. One of the administrators even asked permission to use my informed consent letter as a model for her dissertation consent form.

I initially intended to conduct focus group interviews. In all but one school there would have been enough eligible participants to do so. However, I was not able to secure enough willing participants to conduct focus group interviews. Perhaps this is related to the power dynamics mentioned above. Even for the school in which I secured two participants, both e-mailed independently to request individual interviews. With an expectation that public-school employees will valorize public education, perhaps the nature of this study was too controversial

for participants to feel comfortable in a group setting. As such, for this research question it seems less likely that focus group interviews would have garnered the kind of responses necessary to understand participant sense-making.

Lastly, education researchers have paid scant attention to evangelical Christian schools. The results of this research suggest an underlying school choice motive of self-interest in desiring what is best for their own children is common. In this respect, rational choice theory, which supposes parents are cost/benefits calculators, may not be a good model to use in order to understand parent decision-making on school choice. At least for evangelical parents, identity may play a much more important role in school choice decisions. However, this is not to say that there are no key differences between self-described evangelicals and other parents seeking Christian schooling for their children. Both my research and the Barna Group (2017) identified values alignment as an important consideration. Yet, what is meant by values alignment may vary. In this study, the only participant who did not fit the study's operational definition of an evangelical (self-report) had a vastly broader criteria for what it means to be values aligned. Researchers will do well to keep this in mind when reviewing others' work, for it is possible that parents of children at evangelical schools have a very narrow definition of values alignment.

**For Christian school leaders.** It is important to recognize that parents will always have their child's best interest in mind. Though this study did not include denominational schools, it seems apparent that recruitment appeals geared toward supporting the church or denomination will fall flat. This may not be all that surprising as organizations like National Association of Independent Schools (NAIS) and Independent Schools Management (ISM) advocate that recruitment efforts should highlight student outcomes. Appeals to congregational and denominational loyalty are less likely to be effective. However, linking the school's Christian

identity to student outcomes could be an effective strategy, particularly if the school can show how the school's identity and the individuals identity match.

This research also highlights the importance of a "good enough" academic program. In this case study, participants values alignment seemed to be more important than academic programming, provided the academic program of the Christian school was as good or better than the local public option. Indeed, in terms in the state assigned grade all the participants in this study chose a Christian school rated the same as or higher than the local public option, but not necessarily the school with the best academic reputation. This is similar to Prichard and Swezey's (2016) assertion that parents searching for a Christian school will continue looking until they are "satisfied," which implies that parents are not looking for the best school but merely the one that meets minimum criteria in several areas. However, it is important to point out that parents in Prichard and Swezey's (2016) study were located in a large urban area with many school choices, nor were they bounded by money or distance. School leaders should also consider that high academic standards may simply mean individual attention, which provides opportunity for each student to thrive.

In terms of recruitment, word of mouth (hot knowledge) is likely more important than formal (cold knowledge) found in official publications and marketing materials. The participants in this study seemed to rely more on a gut feeling about the school community. Publishing average SAT scores or well-crafted mission statements appear less important than what other parents say about the school.

**For public-schools.** The results of this study indicate that many parents simply want what they believe is in the best interest of their children. For the evangelical parents in this study, caring teachers and individual attention were important. Obviously, public schools have many



caring teachers. However, sometimes the perception is more important than the reality. Parents want to know what teachers are doing for their child to help them succeed. Furthermore, several parents in this study indicated that either public school classes were too big or that “problem kids” drew too much teacher attention. It seems then, that parents just want their child to “be known” by the teacher. An anecdote related to me by a public-school principal highlights this point. At the beginning of the principal’s first year at a large public high school, he was tasked with improving parental satisfaction. He noted that the school had tried numerous interventions but nothing seemed to work. Then, several months into the school year he discovered that many teachers did not yet know all the names of their students. Immediately, he mandated that all teachers needed to stand outside the classroom door and greet each student by name as they entered the classroom. Soon student satisfaction with school increased, which had an ancillary effect of increasing parental satisfaction. Most public-school teachers and administrators can do little about class size, nor can they determine which students are in their classes. However, setting aside time for teachers to communicate directly and frequently to parents about their child’s successes can go a long way in creating a feeling of caring and individual attention.

**For parents seeking Christian schooling options.** Parents should be clear about what they want from a school and what outcomes they expect for their child. However, there are multiple paths that can lead to the same outcome. As Casey asserted, the most important thing a parent can do for their child is put them in a situation that will foster a love of learning. Of course, values alignment is important. Current parents may have the best hot knowledge and the most accurate read of what it feels like to be a part of the school community. Therefore, it is important to keep in mind that what a school advertises may be different from the feel or vibe of the school culture.

## **Recommendations for Further Research**

The purpose of this study was to explore the nature and complexity of the public/private school divide through the stories and experiences of evangelicals who work in public schools but chose Christian schooling for their own children. The participants in this study represent an extremely small subset of evangelical school parents and an even smaller subset of all evangelical parents. To date, few educational researchers have focused exclusively on the evangelical community. It would be interesting to conduct similar case studies with a representative sample of all evangelical school parents. In that regard, it is probable that focus group interviews would be a more efficient methodology.

The small sample size of my research did not allow for comparisons between men and women. In the evangelical community, beliefs about male headship of the family and the proper role of women may be a mitigating or sharpening circumstance for factors that influence school choice decisions. Besides general differences between men and women, it could be fruitful for researchers to compare the perceptions between spouses. Similarly, there are likely to be other differences based on ethnicity and region. All the participants in this study were white middle-class parents from Northern Indiana. It cannot be presumed that all evangelical parents across class, ethnicity, and location will place similar value on the primary push/pull factors found in this study.

It would also be interesting to study the evangelical parents who considered Christian schooling but ultimately decided to keep their children in public school. Researchers might consider if these parents keep their children in public school because they saw little added value in Christian schooling. In these cases, perhaps their public school's community values fit well with the evangelical worldview. Or, it is possible that parents desire that their children be the salt

and light in the school community. Or, perhaps the public school is small and all students are truly known by their teachers. Indeed, a public school in the area of this study recently advertised on billboards, “private school feel at public school price.” With Indiana’s open enrollment policy, public schools compete against one another even more than they compete against private schools. Additionally, some of the more urban public schools lose a significant number of predominantly white students to the rural schools. School leaders often blame this white-flight phenomenon on latent racism. As the rural schools in the area of this study appear to me as having a more orthodox worldview, perhaps this phenomenon is simply related to the desire of parents to send their children to a school that matches their values.

The Indiana choice scholarship, or voucher, program provides additional research opportunities. A larger scale study could look for differences between parents who qualify for the vouchers and those who do not. In this case, researchers could use voucher eligibility as a proxy for socioeconomic status. Or, researchers could study of evangelical parent’s support/nonsupport of the voucher program. Perhaps the orthodox evangelical worldview is closely aligned with neoliberal free market choice policies as understood by Milton Friedman (1962).

## **Conclusions**

I am deeply embedded in the Christian school world. As such, I thoroughly enjoyed the conversations with participants. Though my school does not fit the criteria to be included in this study, I could see similarities between the mostly progressive parents of my school and the more conservative parents from evangelical Christian schools. Namely, they all try to do what is best for their children. This key commonality suggests that despite our differences in world view, we

can work together for the common good. That is important in this time of partisan divide and heightened political and social conflict.

In this case study I sought to understand how public-school employees who send their children to private schools make sense of their decision. First, I determined the common factors that went into participants' schooling decision. Analyzing those factors, I determined that self-interest was a primary motivator. This is consistent with the parents as benefits maximizers premise of rationale choice theory. Through analysis and discussion of evangelical identity, I attempted to understand how participants made sense of and justified their decisions. I concluded that for the parents in this study, there was no ethical dilemma regarding schooling choice, that the good/ethical self was consistent with participants' identity.

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## Appendix A

### INVITATION LETTER

The following letter of introduction was distributed via email by the key informant at each of the participating schools in the study. Each of the key informants personalized their email greeting.

Dear parent,

My name is Tim Lehman and I am the head of school of Bethany Christian Schools in Goshen, IN. I am also a student in the Doctor of Education program at George Fox University. In partial fulfillment of the requirements for a Doctor of Education degree, I am conducting research designed to help me better understand the nature and complexity of the public/private divide in deciding where to send one's child to school. You are being invited to share your story with me in a focus group interview which includes other parents from [your school] who are in a similar situation.

#### **What to expect**

**The interview:** The questions are related to you as a parent and how you make sense of your decision to send your child to [name of school]. Questions include topics such as: a) what factors contributed to your decision, b) how do you make sense of your decision given your status as a public-school employee.

**Time requirement:** About 90 minutes.

**Location:** Interviews will take place at [school] in a suitable location determined with the help of [key informant]

**Date/time:** If you decide to participate, I will send you a Doodle poll with potential dates and times. I will choose the date/time that is most suitable for the majority of participants.

As a token of appreciation for your participation, I am offering a \$25 gift card at the completion of the interview. If you are interested in participating or would like to learn more, you may contact me via email or phone as indicated below.

Thank you for your consideration,

Tim Lehman

[tlehman17@georgefox.edu](mailto:tlehman17@georgefox.edu)

cell phone: 574-536-2567

## Appendix B

### SAMPLE INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

**Planned Opener.** This study is designed to help me better understand the nature and complexity of the public/private divide in deciding where to send one's child to school. You have some role in public education, which suggests you are supportive of the public-school system, yet you have decided to send your child to a private school. I'm curious about this and would appreciate knowing the story of how you made this decision and what sorts of factors entered into it for you. This conversation is designed to help us think together about the issue of making a decision of schooling for one's child; thank you for exploring it with me.

Remember that there are no wrong answers but rather differing points of view and experiences. Please feel free to share your point of view or experience even if it differs from what you think my view is. You have probably noticed the microphone. I am recording the session because I don't want to miss any of your comments or misrepresent your statements. I want to pay close attention to what you are saying rather than trying to furiously write notes. We will use first names today but remember that the final study will not include your name but may use a pseudonym. I will also give you an opportunity clarify your responses and check to see if I have represented your thoughts and statements accurately.

**Sample interview questions and script.** (Primary questions are numbered. Potential follow-up questions are small case letters.)

Introductory Question:

1. Let's begin by getting to know one another a bit. In a couple of minutes, please tell me a little bit about yourself and your family.

Primary Questions:

2. I am interested in knowing why you chose this school for your child. Thinking back on the decision, what were some of the factors that were considered and how did you weigh them against other priorities?
  - a. Are the reasons you chose this school still valid? Or, have you discovered other factors that are important or should have been considered?
  - b. How much influence did your child have in the decision?
  - c. Was your role as a public-school teacher a factor your decision?
  - d. How did your religious convictions influence your decision?



3. Often our ideals come into conflict with decisions we must make in real-life. How do the ideals of civic education or your religious ideals mesh with your decision to withdraw your child from the public system?
4. How do you feel about being a public-school employee that sends their children to a Christian school?
  - a. Given the highly charged nature of Indiana's voucher system supporting private school tuition, what has been the reaction of your colleagues to your decision?
  - b. Given what you said, how do you make sense of your decision?

Ending Questions:

5. Suppose that you had one minute to explain your choice to someone else in your situation. Of all the things we discussed, what is the most important?
6. Thank you for all of the valuable information. Remember that This conversation is designed to help us all think together about the issue of making a decision of schooling for one's child and that I am particularly interested in how as a public-school employee you made the decision to send your child to this school. Is there anything else that you would like to add or clarify?

Other examples of probing follow-up questions used during the interviews

- a. Tell me more about that
- b. And how did you feel about that?
- c. What do you mean when you say...

**Appendix C**

**IRB APPROVAL DOCUMENTS**

## INFORMED CONSENT LETTER

**Title of Study:** A Case Study of Christian School Parents Who Work in Public Schools.

**Funding Source:** None

**Institutional Review Board (IRB) Approval:** January 13, 2020

**Principal Researcher:** Tim Lehman, tlehman17@georgefox.edu

**Dissertation Chair/Other Investigator:** Dane Joseph, PhD, djoseph@georgefox.edu

**Description of Study:** Tim Lehman is a doctoral candidate at George Fox University completing this research in partial fulfillment of the requirements of a Doctor of Education degree. The purpose of this research is to explore the nature and complexity of the private/public school divide through the stories and experiences of self-described evangelicals who work in public schools but send their children to private Christian schools.

If you agree to participate, you will participate in a focus group with parents in similar circumstances. The focus group questions are related to you as a parent and how you make sense of your decision to send your child to [name of school]. Questions include topics such as: a) what factors contributed to your decision, b) how do you make sense of your decision given your status as a public-school employee. Interview audio will be digitally recorded and transcribed. Transcripts allow the researcher to be attentive during the interview and will be analyzed to identify major themes and concepts. Interviews will last approximately 90 minutes. The researcher may follow-up with you so that you have an opportunity to clarify or modify your statements and as a check to see if the researcher accurately reflects your thoughts.

**Risks/Benefits to the Participant:** Your responses will contribute to a better understanding of how parents making schooling decisions for their children in the context of the public/private school divide. Though minimal, participation in this study is not without some risk. The

researcher will strongly encourage participants not share their statements outside the focus group. However, there is not really any way to assure that does not happen so it is possible that other participants may misunderstand or misrepresent your statements to others. It is also possible that in-depth reflection may elicited negative emotions which could cause some amount of stress. However, the opportunity to become more self-aware through guided reflection is potentially a significant benefit.

**Confidentiality:** All data will be protected by storing audio files, transcripts and other data on the researcher's laptop in a password-protected folder. Notes and memos derived from the data will use pseudonyms and mask other characteristics that could potentially be used to identify participants. Specific school names will not be used in the reporting of the results. Your email and telephone numbers will only be used strictly for communicating with you about this study.

**Participants Right to withdraw from the Study:** You have the right to refuse to participate or withdraw from this study at any point during the study up until the time results are published. Data will always remain de-identified.

**Cost and Payment:** There is no cost to participate in this study other than periphery expenses like transportation. Participation is voluntary and no payment is provided other than a thank-you retail gift card of \$25 for those who complete the focus group interview.

**Authorization:** I have read and fully understand this letter. I understand that [child's school] is not involved in the study other than to help recruit participants and to provide a space for meeting. If I have questions, I will ask the primary investigator prior to participation. I understand that by signing my name below, I voluntarily choose to participate in this study. I also understand that my consent does not take away any legal rights in the case of negligence or

other legal fault of anyone who is involved in this study. I further understand that nothing in this consent form is intended to replace any applicable Federal, state, or local laws.

Participant Name (Printed or Typed):

Date:

Participant Signature:

Date:

Principal Investigator Signature:

Date:

Signature of Person Obtaining Consent:

Date: