



Capstone Project:

Recruitment and Retention in Minneapolis Public Schools

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Executive Summary

Minneapolis Public Schools (MPS) has identified that they are experiencing stagnant student enrollment in recent years, especially during the transition between elementary and middle school. Much of this may be attributed to the recent influx of charter schools in Minnesota. **Our team has conducted a study that focuses on the Northeast Middle School pathway and tries to identify the key factors that impact recruitment and retention in MPS schools.**

As part of our research, we conducted interviews with both school staff and parents. We interviewed 11 MPS Middle School staff, 3 Charter school staff, and 2 MPS Community Liaisons. In addition, we interviewed 101 parents of 5th grade students that attend the Northeast Middle School pathway elementary schools: Elizabeth Hall, Pillsbury and Waite Park. In order to learn from other cities' experiences we also review of recruitment and retention practices in other school districts across the country.

According to our findings:

- More than one fifth of the parents reported that they did not use MPS's transition process to make their school choice.
- 49% of parents did not use any information to make their choice.
- 23% of the parents said that wished they had more information on school choice.
- Our primary research suggests that many families make decisions based on the sense community in the school and/or a personal experience.
- Our nationwide review found innovative approaches of public-charter cooperation that in the long-term could improve the recruitment and retention in MPS schools.

Recommendations:

1. Develop systems to ensure parents are informed of their school choices:

- a. **Track** conversations staff are having with families around school choice.
- b. **Encourage** families to complete a school choice form.
- c. **Expand** MPS websites to include an interactive comparative tool, focusing on: academics, safety, program, transportation & community.

2. Invest in community outreach and representation

- a. **Identify** individuals who can work with MPS and act as community allies.
- b. **Invest** in staff that reflects the community of each school.
- c. **Partner** with their feeder schools and develop programs to invite future students into the school

3. Increase the coordination between MPS and Charter schools.

- a. **Develop** a common form for school enrollment.
- b. **Improve** transparency by **sharing** information across all schools.

Introduction

Minneapolis Public Schools (MPS) has identified that they have experienced stagnant student enrollment in recent years. The number of students in MPS schools has not increased at the same rate as the population of school age children in Minneapolis, indicating that children are attending schools outside of MPS. Minneapolis residents have a number of options when picking a school to send their child to, both inside and outside the district. Students can attend their neighborhood school, a different MPS school, a charter school, or a school in a different district through the Choice Is Yours program. If students enroll in their neighborhood school, there is a “pathway” that students can follow that identifies their neighborhood middle and high schools (Appendix A). By following this pathway, students stay with the same community of peers throughout their education at MPS.

Enrollment at MPS middle schools has consistently been lower than expected in recent years (Appendix B). Much of this may be attributed to the recent influx of charter schools in Minnesota. The Institute on Metropolitan Opportunity released a report in 2013 finding that **almost 50% of declines in student enrollment in Minneapolis over the past 10 years are a result of students leaving the district for charter schools.** With so many students leaving the district, it is difficult to project how many students to expect at MPS schools each fall.

MPS has identified that they are losing a high volume of students when they transition between elementary and middle school, based on inconsistencies between enrollment projections and actual enrollment. In looking at pathway enrollment data, Northeast Middle School has the lowest percentage of pathway students attending the school (Appendix B). We focused our research on this problem and asked, **what are the factors that impact student recruitment and retention in MPS schools in the Northeast Middle School pathway?** To answer this question, the team conducted a literature review to study best practices used nationally around student recruitment and retention, conducted data analysis of current and historic enrollment trends at Northeast Middle School, identified recruitment efforts that are currently practiced at MPS middle schools, and interviewed parents to understand the process that parents utilize to choose a middle school for their child.

Methodology

Research Design

Review of National Context

In order to put the research in a national context, the team conducted a literature review of recruitment and retention practices in other school districts across the country. We utilized the Center for Reinventing Public Education's resource library to identify reports on recruitment and retention in the context of school choice. We also searched for districts with comparable numbers of students, similar demographics, and similar percentages of charter schools compared to the total number of public and charter institutions. We focused our search for comparable districts on 50 cities with the highest proportion of charters to public schools, of which Minneapolis was one.

Out of the 49 districts, 5 districts had total student populations that fell within 5 percentage points of students attending charters compared to MPS and up to 5 percent difference when considering charter school market-share. Those school districts are: Oakland Unified S.D. (CA); Saint Paul Public Schools (MN); Newark Public Schools (NJ); St. Louis Public Schools (MO); & Cincinnati Public Schools (OH). However, these school districts were not utilizing unique strategies for student recruitment. The team then looked across the remaining 44 districts and found that **Detroit, Cleveland, and Philadelphia have developed innovative strategies to recruit students and connect with communities**. Our team looked deeper into those districts' policies concerning recruitment and retention and identified unique projects and methods that the districts are utilizing.

Data Analysis of Current and Historic Conditions of Enrollment at Northeast Middle School

To understand the context of the enrollment problem, the team did an analysis of enrollment data by viewing and manipulating data from Northeast Middle School and the entire MPS district. Publicly available data was accessed online through the Minneapolis Public Schools and Minnesota Department of Education websites and protected data was made available by MPS staff. To understand trends in student demographics, the team looked at the last five years of data for: demographics of the students enrolled in Northeast Middle school, stability data for all MPS middle schools, and the enrollment of students who receive Free and Reduced Lunch at all MPS middle schools. The team also looked at pathway data from 2013 and 2014 and charter school enrollment from 2006-2012 to understand the context regarding what schools students

are enrolling in. Much the team's data was limited to what we were able to gain access to.

Interviews: School Staff

To understand current recruitment efforts in MPS middle schools, the team conducted interviews with school staff. We reached out to Principals, Community Liaisons, and other relevant staff at all MPS middle schools, staff at a select sample of Charter Schools, and MPS Somali and Latino community liaisons at the district office. Principals and Community Liaisons were identified as the staff that best understood the school-wide strategy for recruitment as well as the staff with the highest level of community engagement. In some cases, the team was connected with other school staff, such as counselors, who were better positioned to respond to the questions. Charter schools were identified based on their proximity to the Northeast Middle School pathway schools, the population served, and access to contact information.

After completing the first round of interviews, some MPS staff mentioned that they primarily hear feedback and the opinions of a very specific population of their school-white, middle class families. To get a more representative understanding of community needs, the team also interviewed the Somali and Latino family liaisons at the MPS district office. School staff that agreed to speak to the team scheduled phone interviews with a team member and answered a series of questions. Interviews were transcribed and recorded in a spreadsheet to compare across schools. **In total, the team interviewed 11 MPS Middle School staff, 3 Charter school staff, and 2 MPS District Community Liaisons.** Qualitative data from the responses were separated out by category and linked to similar responses.

Interviews: Parents

The team conducted phone interviews with parents of students in Northeast Middle School pathway elementary schools: Elizabeth Hall Elementary School, Pillsbury Elementary School, and Waite Park Elementary School. From the three elementary schools, 213 families were identified, 143 of whom listed English as their home language, 2 listed Hmong, 29 listed Somali, 40 listed Spanish, and 6 listed other. Due to language limitations within the Capstone team, the team called the families that listed English or Other as their home language and MPS identified and contracted with individuals to complete the Hmong, Somali, and Spanish calls. The callers attempted to contact each family at least two times by phone and asked the same series of questions

Responses were recorded in a spreadsheet to compare across responses. **In total, the team interviewed 101 families.**

The team achieved a **response rate of 47.4%** for parent interviews. Out of 213 potential interviewees, 101 parents answered the phone-call interviews. This is a very high response rate compared to typical phone surveys that usually have an overall rate of less than 10%. The team identified two factors that may have helped to increase our response rates: timing and association with MPS. The first round of calls was made during MPS Spring Break. We speculate that more parents were home during the day due to their child's change in schedule and therefore more available to answer our questions. In addition, the team and contracted callers called from a phone station that has a number associated with Minnesota Public School offices. It is possible that parents may have been more likely to take the call, and more willing to respond to questions, due to the team's association with Minneapolis Public Schools.

The method of analyzing the phone interview data included a **two-staged coding process** of the phone interviews. First, the team created categories of responses to questions after reviewing each of the responses received for each question. Once the questions were categorized, the team coded the answers based on the identified categories. In order to limit interpretation bias, the responses of each interviewee were categorized by one member and coded by another. The coded data was set in the form of a pivot table to analyze the responses while manipulating demographics: ethnicity, elementary school, primary language and more. The coded answers were then compiled for each response and divided to the percentage each answer was received for each question.

Findings and Analysis

Literature Review

Paul Teske (2009) identified four primary ways that families choose schools: location, safe environment, academic performance, and opportunities. To provide parents with adequate information that help them become good consumers of schools, districts should identify ways to disperse information that bridges the information gaps between lower income and affluent families. Information should be distributed in multiple languages and schools should capitalize on community networks that parents are already involved in.

DeArmond (n.d) finds that choice based enrollment is outpacing neighborhood-based enrollment in many cities across the country. This increases opportunities for students as well as challenges for families. Schools vary in their quality of education, governing

and accountability systems, and services available to families- like transportation. Parents must take the initiative, and have the ability, to track down information about each school and navigate the enrollment system. Denver, New Orleans, Cleveland, and Washington D.C. are participating in cross-sector solutions that work with both district and charter schools. These partnerships utilize common enrollment systems, comprehensive parent information systems, and common school accountability frameworks.

The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation's report (Yatsko, Nelson, & Lake, 2013) outlines the initiatives grant recipients have implemented since the grant was disbursed in 2011. The goal of the compact initiative is to "improve collaboration and innovation between charter and district schools to provide all students in a city with a portfolio of highly effective education options, accelerating 80 percent college readiness in the city." The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation awarded 16 cities, including Minneapolis, at least \$100,000 to implement this initiative. Minneapolis has the third highest charter school market share of the 16 cities in the Compact, following only New Orleans and Philadelphia.

The Compact Initiative outlines the following initiatives that school leaders could choose to agree to: expansion of high performing schools, equitable distribution of public school resources- including facilities, shared service contracts, charter schools commit to transparency around student demographics, share best practices to scale up successful programs, joint efforts to develop teachers and school leaders, work closely to address persistently low-performing schools, commit to a common school accountability framework, and implement and common enrollment system. Of these practices, the Minneapolis partners agreed to: build a talent incubator for school leaders, remove financial barriers to replicating high-performing charter schools, make MPS services available to charter schools, provide MPS facilities for high-performing charter schools, ensure transparency around student demographics in charters, and document and share successful practices. In the first two years of the grant, the Minneapolis partners replicated a high-performing charter school, passed legislation giving charter schools access to district facilities and services, and MPS adopted a process for leasing facilities to charters, grounded in academic performance.

The national scan of districts with the highest proportion of charter schools uncovered that Detroit, Philadelphia, and Cleveland have the most innovative strategies to increase student recruitment and retention. Detroit Public Schools (Roberts, 2012) has developed a system of individual learning maps for each student. From the time a student enters a district to when they exit, teachers track each student's learning by recording the topics they study and each student's achievement in that area. Students and parents have access to this information so that they can see a map of their learning

and where students have excelled, and struggled, the most. Parents can use this tool to better support their child by seeing the content their child is learning and where they are struggling.

The School District of Philadelphia has integrated a system of small learning communities within their larger district (The School District of Philadelphia, n.d.). Learning communities consist of about 20-30 schools that report to an Assistant Superintendent. By having a smaller portfolio of schools they oversee, the Assistant Superintendent can have closer relationships with the Principals and families of each of the schools in the learning community. This increases the capacity of the district to respond to the needs of individual schools by dispersing resources or adapting policies as needed.

Finally, Cleveland Public Schools are involved in a partnership with charter schools and business leaders in the community (Jackson, 2012). Together, they developed an idea for an independent nonprofit organization, The Cleveland Transformation Alliance. The Cleveland Transformation Alliance identifies the best schools in the city, whether they are public or charter, and monitors enrollment. When seats in those schools become available, they inform parents of students in other schools and assist them in the enrollment process. This partnership across the traditional district, charters, and local businesses has helped to ensure that students in the community are taking advantage of the best education that is available to them.

Current and Historic Conditions of Enrollment at Northeast Middle School

According to MPS data, in **2014, 55% of students did not follow their pathway to Northeast middle school.** This rate is highest in the MPS district, followed by 34% of pathway students who did not attend Olson middle school and 22% at Anwatin middle school (Appendix B). Of the students expected to follow their pathway to Northeast Middle School, 16% transferred to other MPS schools after graduating from the 5th grade, while 39% left the MPS system to a charter school, private school, or another school district. Data suggests that there is a steady number of 5th grade students at the pathway elementary schools that feed Northeast Middle School, while Olson's feeder elementary schools have increasing numbers of students.(Appendix D)

2014 NE Middle School Pathway Results

Elementary School	Pathway	Other MPS	Left MPS	Totals
HALL INTERNATIONAL	17	16	24	57
PILLSBURY COMMUNITY	44	12	31	87
WAITE PARK COMMUNITY	33	4	25	62
NORTHEAST Totals	94	32	80	206
Percentages	45%	16%	39%	

Source: MPS Student Accounting

Pathway Elementary School Enrollment (2011 – 2014)

School	2011	2012	2013	2014	% change
Hall	61	57	58	68	
Pillsbury	92	73	86	93	
Waite Park	63	64	67	69	
NE Pathway Total	216	194	211	230	6%
City View	9	0	0	19	
Jenny Lind	0	82	78	81	
Loring	58	64	65	63	
Nellie Stone Johnson	87	81	81	81	
Olson Pathway Total	154	227	224	244	58%

Source: MPS Student Accounting

In 2014, 51% of Northeast Middle School students identified as ethnically African American, while 21% identified as White and 16% identified as Hispanic. Taking into consideration 5-year demographic data, there is an increasing trend of African American students, while the numbers of both White and Hispanic students have stayed stable throughout that period.

Northeast Middle School Student Demographic Trends

Racial/Ethnic Categories	2010	2014	% change
Native American	19	32 (5%)	68%
African American	208	309 (51%)	49%
Hispanic	87	98 (16%)	13%
Asian American	36	40 (7%)	11%
White	135	128 (16%)	-5%
Totals	485	607	25%

Source: MPS Student Accounting

in Minneapolis, 21.3% of students who live in the city attend charter schools (9,339 students). Of these students, 58% identified as ethnically African-Americans or native African. White, Hispanic and Asian students each constitute 13% of the charters' student body. The non-charter schools (MPS) are attended by 78.6% of the students (34,436). White and African-American students (Both African-American and native African) constitute 35% of the overall students each, while students with Hispanic background are 8% of the student body.

Minneapolis Charter vs. Non-Charter Enrollment

Charter Schools

Metrics	#	%
Students		
Number of Students	9,339	
Students by Race / Ethnicity		
White	1,265	13.5%
Black	5,419	58.0%
Hispanic	1,216	13.0%
Asian	1,211	13.0%
American Indian or Alaska Native	228	2.4%

Non-Charter

Metrics	#	%
Students		
Number of Students	34,436	
Students by Race / Ethnicity		
White	12,036	35.0%
Black	12,265	35.6%
Hispanic	5,720	16.6%
Asian	2,767	8.0%
American Indian or Alaska Native	1,648	4.8%

Source: The National Alliance for Public Charter Schools

Interviews: School Staff

The staff interviewed highlighted a range of recruitment techniques they utilize to inform families about school offerings. All schools provide information packets or fliers to parents, school tours, and invite parents of perspective 6th graders to an information night about the pathway Middle school at each elementary school. Only two staff specifically mentioned that any of these materials are provided in multiple languages, however that was not a question that was specifically asked and it is possible that other schools are offering bilingual materials but did not mention it in the interview.

Beyond the basic recruitment and information sharing mechanisms, two key strategies emerged from the school staff interviews. Staff at Ramsey, Nokomis-Keewaydin, Hiawatha, Lake Harriet- Upper Campus, Marcy, and Anderson all pointed to the importance of **building relationships with the families**. Staff at these schools are in continuous communication with parents and go out of their way to develop relationships with the families early on, to ease communication as the student gets older. One staff mentioned that she “bends over backwards to make sure parents get to know [their] school,” and another principal highlighted their commitment to parents by personally answering every phone call and finishing each school tour in their office. Staff at these schools felt that their efforts encouraged families to send their children to their school because they know that they will continue to have access to staff and the principal once their child is enrolled. One MPS school and a charter school also highlighted parent education classes that they offer. The purpose and frequency of the courses were different for each school, but staff at both schools felt that these classes helped the families connect with the community and engage with the school on a deeper level.

Another key strategy that a small number of staff highlighted was **developing a strong connection between the elementary school and the middle school**. Middle school staff noted that they invite 5th graders to come to the school and take a tour as a school sponsored field trip, which increases the student’s comfort level with the school and gets them excited to attend. Northeast Middle School was one such school and the team heard the benefits of the field trip in the parent interviews; 10% of families said that their child had gone on a school tour to Northeast and that was the reason they were attending the school.

Beyond field trips, other middle schools invite their pathway elementary school students to participate in clubs and attend athletic, theater, or music events and fairs. By creating opportunities for students to step into the school early on, the students and their families feel as if they are part of the community well before they need to pick a middle school. One school has taken a particularly intentional approach to bridging the schools. The principals, teachers, and PTA all come together to create intentional

activities so that the students genuinely feel that they are part of the community when they arrive at their new school.

Staff at charter schools highlighted their community outreach efforts, even though each charter school we spoke with has an extensive waitlist. Staff connects with parents by attending events and activities in the community and by asking parents what they are looking for in a school. One staff highlighted that their school focuses on informing parents about all their school options rather than promoting their own school. This empowers parents to make a fully informed choice, even if the parent doesn't end up choosing their school. Another school, with a waitlist many times larger than their enrollment, said that they don't do any recruitment but parents talk about their school to the community, which encourages other parents to put their child on the waitlist. Finally, charter school staff pointed to their culturally specific offerings that appeal to parents. They listed their bi-lingual staff, policies that reflect particular cultures, and language offerings at the school as primary reasons that parents choose their school.

School staff at MPS and charters highlighted a number of values that parents use to determine if the school will be a good fit for them. **The top 5 values were: academic rigor, safety, enrichment offerings social development, and a sense of community- particularly for students of color.** These values were reinforced in parent interviews as well as the literature review, with the addition of location and access to transportation. Many MPS school staff quickly amended their responses with the context that most of the parents they hear from are white, middle class families and that the criteria of these families may be different from families of different communities.

To account for this bias, the team also spoke with the Somali and Latino liaisons at the MPS district office. The liaisons emphasized that beyond anything else, Somali and Latino parents want their kids to feel welcome at the schools, to feel as if they belong. When parents are pulling their children from schools, this is often the root of their complaint. The liaisons and staff at the charter schools identified that when parents leave MPS schools or choose to go to charter schools, they are often looking for schools where their child can identify with the language and culture of the school, even if the academics are not better than the MPS school they are leaving. To address this issue, both liaisons pointed to the importance of culturally representative staff at the schools, particularly highlighting the need for bilingual staff. They also emphasized the need for cultural competency training for existing staff because of their close interactions with a diverse array of students and families.

Finally, MPS middle school staff mentioned that there is a **disconnect in the school choice process when parents are asked to complete school choice forms.** The elementary schools do not encourage the families to fill out the forms, which means that

it is difficult to know how many students to expect in the fall. Furthermore, staff expressed that many families are not aware of the school choice process, which was confirmed in the team’s interviews with parents. Staff had an anecdotal impression that it was primarily white, middle class families who were filling out the forms, however the team has not been able to confirm that data as the timing of the project did not allow for access to information about the forms that were submitted in 2015.

Interviews: Parent

The phone interviews with parents confirmed many of the responses we collected from school staff as well as the information collected in the literature review. Our first series of questions asked about where their child would be attending 6th grade in the fall: 35% of respondents plan on enrolling their child at Northeast Middle school, 13% are going outside the district, 4% are going to charter schools, 6% are still deciding between two options, including charter schools, and 31% did not know. Of the 31% of respondents that did not know where their child would be attending, 5% had no information about choosing a middle school. The remaining respondents were still making a decision (18%), waiting to hear back from a school (4%), or considering moving (4%).

What school will your 5th grader be attending in the fall?

Responses	% of parents
Northeast Middle	35
Don't know	31
District other than MPS (Choice is Yours program)	13
Other MPS	11
Multiple Considerations	6
Charter school	4
FAIR school (WMEP)	1

Reasons parents had not made decision

Don't know	% of parents
Still considering options	18
Not informed	5
Possibly moving	4

The next series of questions asked about the process families used to make a decision about which middle school to enroll in: 22% of respondents did not follow any kind of process and 48% of respondents did not identify that they spoke to anyone about their choice. Other methods include: relying on a personal experience or connection with the school (18%), speaking with friends or family members (14%), visited the school (13%),

looking at the school website (10%), or simply following the established pathway to Northeast Middle School (8%).

What process did you follow to make your choice?

Responses	% of Parents
No process	22
A personal experience with the school (siblings/parents attended etc.)	18
Talked to other parent/friends	14
Visited the school	13
Checked schools' websites	10
Other	9
Know about the pathway	8
Just starting the process	6
Talked to school staff/counselor	6
Child Decided	4
Word of mouth	4
Visited MPS offices	1

Respondents who felt that they did not have sufficient information to make a choice requested receiving general information about the schools (23%), information specifically about academic performance (19%), detailed information on the choice process (16%), information about program offerings like extra-curricular activities and special education services (19%), information on social and behavioral supports (8%), and information on transportation availability (5%). The team's secondary research in the literature review and school staff interviews reinforces this data as the primary criteria that families consider when making a decision about school enrollment.

What other information do you wish you had before making your decision?

Responses	% of Parents
Information on Schools	23
Academics	19
Choice Process	16
Special Education Information	11
Help With Social/Behavioral Issues	8
Extracurricular activities	8
Information on Transportation	5
School Tours	3
Opportunities to Talk to Parents	2
Graduation Rates	2
Curriculum	2
General Information	2

Limitations

Our research had a number of limitations based on the research design and access to people or information. Much of the literature review was conducted by reviewing the research available from the Center on Reinventing Public Education (CRPE) resource library. CRPE may have a particular bias that could have limited the perspectives our team considered in conducting the literature review. Further, the literature review was limited to the information that was reported. In many of the reports, we did not have full information on funding or how external factors affected the programs in the report. Finally, our understanding of each program was limited to the author's definition of success or achievement, without reporting on other factors.

In conducting an analysis of the current and historic conditions of enrollment in the Northeast Middle School pathway and comparing it to other schools, it was difficult to do a full analysis of the raw data given time restraints and the complexity and volume of data that exists. Without the time or capacity to do a full analysis on all the data, we were only able to draw limited conclusions. Additionally, the team did not have access to information about student movement outside of MPS schools. For example, we knew that 39% of students did not follow the Northeast Middle School pathway and left MPS, however we did not have linked data that could tell us which schools those students were attending. Without that data, we weren't able to draw conclusions around charter or outside district enrollment.

School staff self-selected to be interviewed for this report by responding to the initial email sent by the team. Staff could be motivated to respond if they wanted to highlight some innovative recruitment strategies and might be less likely to respond if their school doesn't have extensive activities to inform or recruit families. Thus, the sample may have been skewed towards schools that conduct more intentional activities around recruitment. School staff identified that the feedback they receive is often times from white, middle class families, severely limiting our understanding of the problem and community needs. The team attempted to counteract this bias by interviewing Somali and Latino family liaisons that work at the District office, however they are one step removed from the schools themselves and could have a different perspective of the problem.

In the team's focus on interviewing only parents in the Northeast Middle School pathway, our data is not representative of the entire district and should not be taken as such. Rather, this is a sampling of parents in one particular pathway with experiences with one set of elementary schools and Northeast Middle School. The findings from parent interviews can inform approaches in other pathways, however they may not be directly transferrable.

The research team consisted of eight different individuals conducting interviews, each with a different understanding of the MPS context, different biases that could affect interpretation and follow-up questions, and even differences in the language in which the interview was being conducted. These differences could cause inconsistencies in the data, inserting bias into the analysis. The team attempted to limit the effect of the bias by having multiple team members clean and code the data.

Finally, the methodology of the phone interviews was impacted by the time constraints on the research. The phone interviews were a blended method of qualitative and quantitative data, which allowed for more nuance than purely quantitative but also didn't have the richness of purely qualitative data. Given more time, the team could have conducted in depth interviews with select respondents. Furthermore, the questions we asked respondents were somewhat repetitive and limited the scope of the data we were able to collect. With more time, the team could have piloted the questions, identified the problem, and adapted the script before conducting the full set of interviews.

Discussion

The team's literature review, interviews with school staff, and interviews with parents have reinforced common themes across our research: families are not receiving the information available to them, schools must connect with the communities around them, and school partnerships - within and outside MPS- are essential for parents to make fully informed decisions.

The phone interviews with parents identified that many families are not well informed about the choice process, or that they even have a choice regarding school enrollment. With the MPS system of pathway schools, it is possible for a student to go through the system without making a single choice about what school they will attend. When asked if they had considered other schools before making a choice, 8% of respondents said that they were not aware they had a choice, and 18% were still considering options, indicating that they may have missed the choice deadline. When parents are not informed about what process they need to follow to navigate the system of public schools, it prevents them from making the best decisions on behalf of their child. This can also lead to frustration with the district, which can encourage a family to ultimately pick a school outside of the district.

School staff raised a concern that not many families are filling out the choice forms, and of those families that do, most are white, middle class families. Due to the timing of the project, the team did not have the data to confirm this assertion, however the perception

in and of itself is a concern. School choice forms are a useful tool for families to exercise their choice and find a school that is the best fit for their children. Furthermore, when families are aware of the choice form and deadline, parents have a clear understanding of the choice process, compared to the current state of confusion and misinformation. Finally, the district makes enrollment projections for each school based on submitted choice forms. When families do not complete choice forms but still plan on going to a school that is not their pathway school, it makes it difficult for the district to project the number of students to expect each fall. This could affect hiring, bus contracts, and other essential decisions school administrators make before each school year.

Of the families we spoke with, **22% of respondents reported that they did not use a process to make their choice and 49% did not use information to make their choice.** Our interview methodology didn't allow for a further understanding of these responses, however it is clear that a large number of families are not using an intentional process of information gathering to make their choice. Minneapolis Public Schools releases a packet with detailed information about every MPS school each winter. However, **23% of respondents said that they wanted more information on schools** to help them make an informed decision.

The desire for more information and the large number of respondents who didn't use information to make a choice highlights a disconnect between the information that Minneapolis Public Schools is releasing and the information all parents are receiving. MPS is a diverse district that encompasses families with a wide variety of life experiences and languages spoken. Not all families can visit schools to pick up packets, read English, have reliable access to internet, or have the same home address from one night to the next. These differences in abilities to access information must be taken into consideration when communicating with families. Without processes that ensure that information is available to all families, the district's efforts to inform parents will not be sufficient.

When parents are given the option to pick a school for their child, they will seek input from their community in addition to the formal information provided by the district or school. When parents were asked about the process they followed to make a choice, 16% of respondents indicated that they spoke to a friend or family member. The relationships between a school and their surrounding community is essential for student retention. When the community members have positive experiences with their school, they will pass that information on to other families, who will enroll their children in that school. One charter school staff was clear that parents are the most effective advocates of their school. Conversely, negative experiences will also be shared and may prevent families from sending their child to a particular school.

School staff and community liaisons raised concerns that parents pull their students from schools when they don't feel welcome or their community is not represented at the school. As demographics in Minneapolis have changed, demographics of the MPS student body have also shifted. Unfortunately, staff have heard from families that many schools are not adapting to serve the broader community. There are few staff who speak the primary language of many of the families at MPS schools. Schools with a majority population of Latino or Somali students will have very few, and in some cases no, staff who speak the primary language of the families. When families need to speak with school staff, they must rely on their child to translate or go through the liaison at the district office. These barriers discourage families from engaging with the school unless there is no other option.

There are many high quality staff at MPS schools, however many of them do not reflect the background of their students. They may be highly effective educators but need to better understand the context in which their students and families experience the world. Current staff should participate in cultural competency trainings to better understand how to effectively support and educate students who have different life experiences from their own. **If families don't feel that their children are supported or their cultures are represented, they will often move to a school that intentionally builds community around these needs.**

The most basic way that schools can begin to build community is by making themselves available to parents. A handful of Principals highlighted their efforts to connect with families. They personally respond to every phone call requesting information about the school, each school tour ends in the Principal's office, and school staff go into the community to engage with families and solicit feedback. **By making it easy for families to connect with school staff, parents know that they will have access to staff when they send their child to the school.**

When Middle Schools partner with their feeder elementary schools, parents and students feel more closely connected to the school community before their first day. They know how to find their classroom, where the bathrooms and staircases are, and what a day at that school looks like. Parents are at ease because they, too, have spent time at the school and have a better understanding of what their child will experience. Bringing elementary school students into the middle school for clubs, events, buddy programs, and school-sponsored tours allows them to become part of the community before they have even enrolled, increasing the likelihood that they will select to attend the school when their time comes.

School partnerships must go beyond connections between pathway elementary and middle schools. Traditional district schools and charter schools must partner to provide the best educational opportunities available to all students. The charter school presence in Minnesota has been increasing for over 20 years without any signs of slowing. If district schools do not adapt to the increasing presence of charter schools, students will continue to leave the district for charters. Rather than competing against charter schools for students and looking for ways to market schools more favorably to families, traditional district schools and charter schools must coordinate their services to best serve their communities.

The team's research in the literature review was clear that parents are in the best position to make informed decisions when the traditional public school district and charter schools work together to provide information to families and access to the best educational opportunities available. **Traditional districts and charter schools that share a geographic area should have better coordination** to develop comprehensive information sharing that include all schools, shared enrollment systems, and communication about promising practices. Information can be shared by including both district and charter schools on the district's website, including all schools in information packets, and inviting charter schools to attend school choice fairs, as MPS did this year. When district and charter schools work together to help families navigate these complex systems, students end up in schools that best meet their needs.

A higher level of coordination between traditional school districts and local charter schools requires commitment from both sides. Charter schools cannot expect traditional districts to make their resources available without something in return, and likewise traditional districts cannot expect charters to share information without also receiving information. If both sides are able to share their strengths, coordinate efforts, and learn from each other, families will be empowered to pick the school that best meets all their needs.

It is possible that information sharing and transparency about the choice process could lead to more students initially leaving the district for other schools. However, if the district is transparent with their information and procedures, this could assist in building trust with the communities they serve. The primary research the team conducted made it clear that many families make decisions based on community and personal experience. If the district is able to connect more deeply with communities by building trust through transparency, they may make up those student losses in the long term. Student enrollment aside, districts and charters must coordinate their efforts to best serve students living in their community.

Recommendations

Based on the research from the literature review, analysis of enrollment data, and school staff and parent interviews, the team recommends the following actions to increase recruitment and retention of students in Minneapolis Public Schools.

1. **Develop systems to ensure that parents are informed about their school choice options.**

Many families are not receiving the information that Minneapolis Public Schools has made available to parents. Diverse districts like MPS consists of families that need to access information in different ways. MPS should:

- a. **Ensure that all families are having explicit conversations about school choice between 5th and 6th grade and 8th and 9th grades.** Conversations with administrators or teachers and outreach to families can be tracked at the school level so that every family has a minimum of 3 points of contact in which they are discussing school choice options.
- b. **Encourage all families to complete a school choice form.** Communication about the school choice form clarifies the choice process and increases the visibility of different MPS options. The form should be available in various formats (web and print) and disbursed at school and through the mail. When more families complete the school choice form, MPS will be able to make more accurate projections of student enrollment.
- c. **Expand the Minneapolis Public Schools website to include an interactive tool that allows parents to compare MPS schools** to each other, based on the primary criteria that parents use to choose schools: academic rigor, safety, program offerings, transportation, and community.

2. **Invest in community outreach and representation.**

Families enroll in new schools when they do not feel welcome at their current school or if their culture is not adequately represented. Further, many parents use informal information gathering techniques, like word of mouth, when deciding on a school to enroll in.

- a. **Identify individuals who can act as community allies for each MPS school.** These individuals will partner with schools to inform their community about the offerings at the school and also to give feedback to the school from the community. MPS should provide trainings to the community allies on group facilitation techniques and other relevant skills.

- b. **Invest in staff that reflects the community of each school.** Further, MPS should have a policy regarding the number of bilingual staff a school must have in relation to the proportion of families that list a language other than English as their home language. MPS should provide cultural competency trainings and require that existing staff participate in a minimum number of trainings so that they are adequately prepared to serve a diverse student body. MPS should consult the community to identify the content of the trainings.
- c. MPS middle and high schools should **partner with their feeder schools and develop opportunities to invite future students into the school.** Schools can invite students from feeder schools to participate in clubs, attend athletic or arts events and fairs, or to participate in a “buddy” mentoring program. Feeder schools should also take transitioning students on a field trip to their pathway school before the school choice deadline.

3. **Increase the coordination between MPS and Charter schools.**

In the long term, MPS would put themselves in a position to best serve students by coordinating with charters. Integrating processes and sharing information across all Minneapolis schools will allow for greater efficiencies and better programs. These recommendations require commitment from both MPS and Charter schools and administrators, otherwise they will not be successful. Communities are best served when everyone is working on behalf of the students, with transparency and equal levels of accountability.

- a. MPS and charter schools should **use a common form for school enrollment.** Using the same form across schools simplifies the process and increases a family’s ability to make the best decision for their child. Further, when all schools use the same process, it is more feasible to make forms available in multiple languages.
- b. **Improve transparency by sharing information across all schools.** When district and charter schools share smart practices, all schools are elevated in their ability to provide a high quality education. Each school can determine which practices best meet the needs of their students and coordinate with other schools already providing those services.

Conclusion

The goal of our research was to identify the main factors that impact recruitment and retention in MPS schools, specifically in the transition between elementary schools to middle schools. We focused mainly on the Northeast Middle School and its feeder elementary schools as a case study for the district as a whole. In consulting both primary and secondary research, we provide deeper insights and a variety of recommendations, despite the limitations of time and resources. The actions we suggest can serve as initial first steps and some long-term goals to address the challenge of decreasing enrollment. However, more comprehensive research will be needed to identify recommendations to address the root causes of this issue.

Appendices

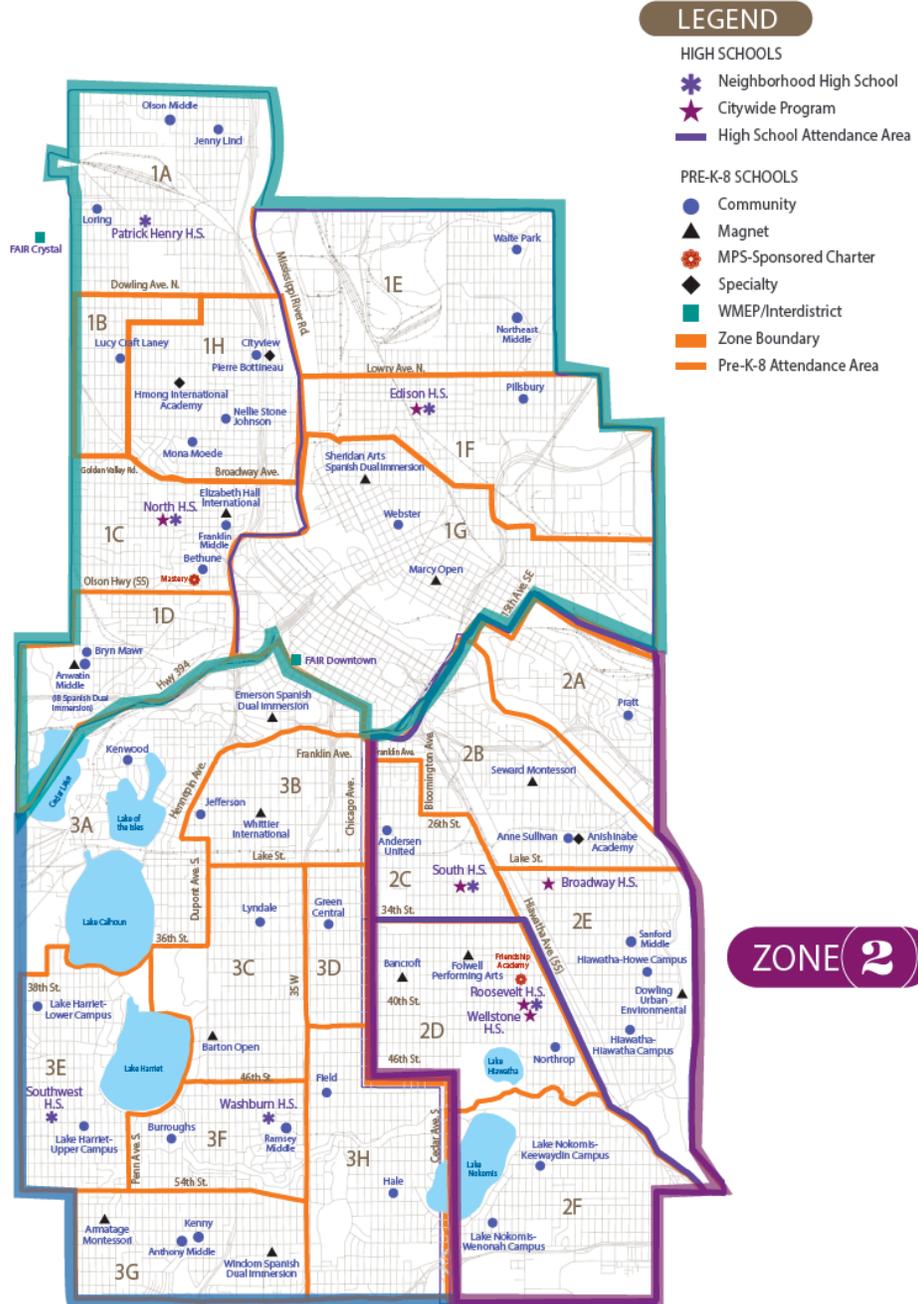
Appendix A. Zones and Attendance Areas

ZONES AND ATTENDANCE AREAS

ZONE 1

ZONE 3

ZONE 2

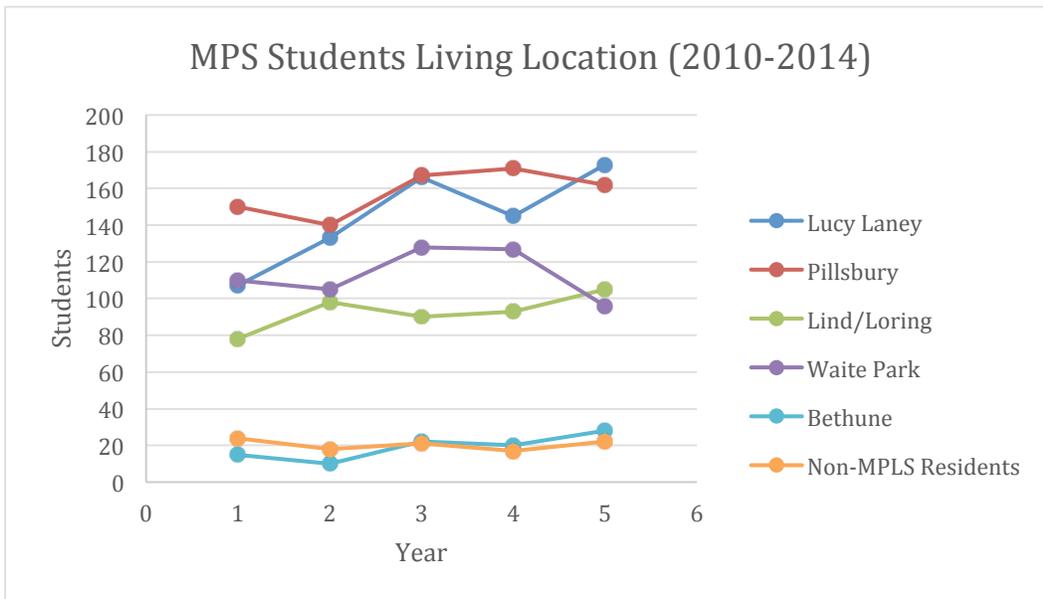


Appendix B.1

MPS Students Living Location (2010-2014)

Elementary School	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014
Lucy Laney	107	133	166	145	173
Pillsbury	150	140	167	171	162
Lind/Loring	78	98	90	93	105
Waite Park	110	105	128	127	96
Bethune	15	10	22	20	28
Non-MPLS Residents	24	18	21	17	22
Total	484	504	594	573	586
Total Enrollment	491	518	607	591	607
Percentage in Top 6	99%	97%	98%	97%	97%

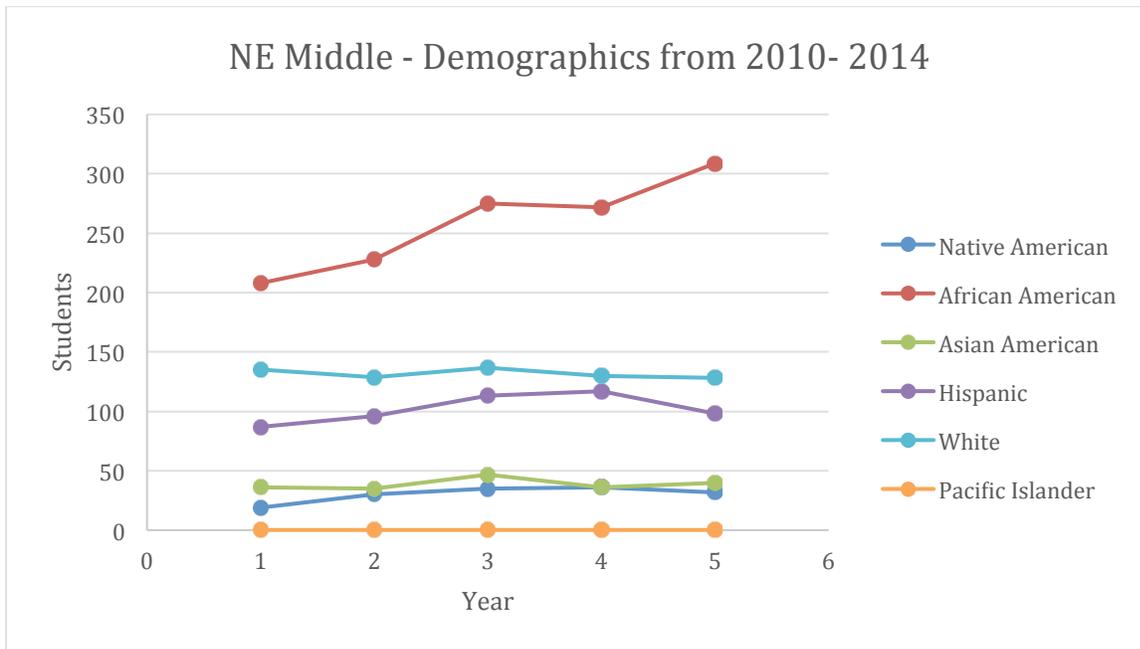
B.2:



Appendix C.

Northeast Middle Schools Demographics (2010-2014)

Racial/Ethnic Categories	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014
Native-American	19	30	35	36	32
African-American	208	228	275	272	309
Asian-American	36	35	47	36	40
Hispanic	87	96	113	117	98
White	135	129	137	130	128
Pacific Islander	0	0	0	0	0
Total	485	518	607	591	607



Appendix D. 1.

MPS Elementary Schools Students Following Northeast Pathway:

Elementary School	Pathway	Other MPS	Left MPS
Hall international	30% (17)	29% (16)	41% (23)
Pillsbury community	51% (44)	14% (12)	36% (31)
Waite park community	53% (33)	6% (4)	40% (25)
Northeast total	46% (94)	16% (32)	39% (79)

D.2.

MPS Pathway Students Leaving the District (For other districts or charters schools):

Middle School	Percentage Left MPS
Northeast	39%
Olson	34%
Anwatin	22%
Sanford	19%
Anthony	14%
Ramsey	10%

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