

Choosers, Obstructed Choosers, and Nonchoosers: A Framework for Defaulting in Schooling Choices

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Background/Context: *Prior research overlooks the importance of drawing distinctions within the category of defaulters or “nonchoosers” in schooling choices. Defaulters are both a theoretically and empirically interesting population, and understanding the processes by which families come to or are assigned the default school offers insight into the micromechanisms contributing to the reproduction of inequality through education.*

Purpose/Objective/Research Question/Focus of Study: *In this study, I use in-depth interview data to understand defaulting and propose a basic framework that gets beyond a chooser/nonchooser dichotomy. The purpose of this work is to help researchers and school district officials to identify areas of school choice systems that are incompatible with would-be choosers. This study further offers a useful framework for thinking about defaulters and their role in the school choice process.*

Population/Participants/Subjects: *This study draws from survey and interview data from 28 low-income to working-class African American parents in the Chicago Public Schools whose children were at a choice juncture (the transition from eighth grade to high school).*

Data Collection and Analysis: *This study utilizes survey and in-depth qualitative interviews. Surveys and interviews were conducted in person and lasted from 30 minutes to 2 hours each. Parent respondents filled out a survey that included demographic information, family and child activities, community connectedness, and basic activity around choosing a high school and then answered open-ended questions about their specific choice activities, their ideas about education, and their information networks. I employed inductive coding to analyze the interview data.*

Findings/Results: *In this study, I find that families who arrived at the default outcome did so in ways that followed patterns similar to those found in studies of choosers. Families’ inclination to choose, capacity for choice, and school preferences, as well external barriers, compose a framework that helps to explain how some parents labeled as “nonchoosers” or defaulters in other studies are actually actively engaging in the choice process and, further, how the choice process itself can lead those who perceive themselves as choosers to be classified by researchers as nonchoosers or defaulters.*

Conclusions/Recommendations: *The defaulter framework provides insight into the barriers that some families face to active choosing and, as such, suggests potential micro- and macro-level interventions to meet the needs of a variety of potential types of participants in choice systems.*

Educational choice has been a topic of discussion since Milton Friedman (1955) introduced the idea of school vouchers for educational improvement. The debate surrounding choice has expanded as other options, such as open enrollment, intradistrict choice, and charter schools, have created an array of possibilities for school districts and the families in them. Most school choice studies focus their attention on choosers, ignoring those who default or simply defining them in juxtaposition to choosers. This perspective overlooks important differences across these defaulters that are critical to understanding how and how well school choice systems work, as well as how defaulting families view school choice and its role in their children's education. Theoretically, defaulters are an interesting population because their perceived lack of participation in choice gets to the core of neoliberal assumptions about choice and societal betterment. In particular, defaulters test the idea of market freedom and choice as a systemic improvement from the inefficiency of a more bureaucratically controlled schooling system. Empirically, understanding the processes by which families come to or are assigned the default school offers insight into the micro-mechanisms contributing to the reproduction of inequality through education. Because school choice is also connected in the political arena to race- and class-based inequalities and segregation, understanding the least advantaged defaulters is particularly important. This is especially true in systems where policy makers and education scholars view default options as less desirable than their choice-required counterparts across many measures, and where minority students and English language learners disproportionately end up or remain in these "less desirable" schools.

In this article, I take a qualitative approach to better amplify the voices and experiences of those who are viewed as defaulters or "nonchoosers" and produce an understanding that most quantitative and qualitative studies currently lack. Based on inductive coding of interviews ($N = 28$) with low-income to working-class African American parents¹ in the Chicago Public Schools whose children were at a choice juncture (the transition from eighth to high school), I find that families who arrived at the default outcome did so in different ways that followed patterns similar to those found in studies of choosers. Drawing from previous classification work on choosers (Gewirtz, Ball, & Bowe, 1995; Vincent, Braun, & Ball, 2010), I examined families' inclination to choose, capacity for choice, and school

preferences, as well as the external barriers that inhibited the choice process, in order to create a framework that clarifies the ways parents arrived at the default option. This framework helps to explain how some parents labeled as nonchoosers or defaulters in other studies are actually actively engaging in the choice process and, further, how the choice process itself can lead those who perceive themselves as choosers to be classified by researchers as nonchoosers or defaulters. It further provides insight into the barriers that some families face to active choosing and, as such, suggests potential micro- and macro-level interventions to meet the needs of a variety of potential types of participants in choice systems.

Previous research has overlooked the importance of drawing distinctions within the category of defaulters or “nonchoosers.” By using in-depth qualitative data to first understand defaulting and then proposing a basic framework drawn from this data, I begin to fill this void. The three categories of defaulter that I present here get beyond the chooser/nonchooser dichotomy and help researchers and school district officials identify areas of a school choice system that are incompatible with its would-be choosers. This study further offers a starting point for others interested in school choice to begin to think about defaulters and their role in the choice process. I conclude this article with implications and policy suggestions based on the framework and empirical data.

MAKING SCHOOLING CHOICES

The assumption that parents can and will make informed choices underscores all school choice theory (see, e.g., Bast & Walberg, 2004; Chubb & Moe, 1990; Friedman, 1955) and the design of many school choice systems. However, school choice does not exist in a vacuum, and, in reality, parents respond differently to the burdens of information gathering and interpretation (Reay, 1996; Teske & Schneider, 2001). Recent empirical work illustrates the desire and need to better understand this process, in particular as it pertains to information and choice (IES Contract No. ED-IES-12-C-0100). Although there are many unknowns, prior research makes it clear that both structural and cultural characteristics impact all aspects of choice, from information gathering to enrollment. In particular, race (Lareau, 2014; Saporito & Lareau, 1999), parent’s education and social networks (Bridge, 1978; Henig, 1996; Vincent et al., 2010), as well as school characteristics (Lauen, 2009; Perez, 2009) influence the choice process from beginning to end. Further, the structure of the choice system (Henig, 1996; Thaler & Sunstein, 2008) and the geographic availability of schools (Bell, 2006, 2009; Taylor, 2001) impact the choices families are able to make and the actions that families are willing to take. Choice

scholars have found that although families exercising choice are not always “privileged” in the absolute sense, they do tend to have somewhat more education and more extensive, reliable networks than their nonchoosing counterparts. The ability to move and also use home-based learning to supplement school means that some families are better placed to facilitate choice than others (Goyette, 2014; Holme, 2002).

For obvious reasons, a great deal of attention has been paid to choosers and the impact that particular choice systems have on their schooling outcomes (see, e.g., Berends, 2015; Bifulco & Ladd, 2006; Green, Peterson, & Du, 1996; Hoxby, 2004a, 2004b; Hoxby & Rockoff, 2004; Rouse, 1998; Witte, 2000). Work that explores the impact of choice on nonchoosers typically focuses on the impact of choice on those “left behind,” both the potential positive outcomes (i.e., increased competition, efficiency, and investment) and the potential negatives (i.e., the wrong types of competition, negative peer effects). The exact differences depend on both locational context and choice type (i.e., vouchers, open enrollment, etc.). Parents across socioeconomic lines profess academic dimensions as the most important in their ideas of choice, although this is not necessarily reflected in their choices. However, those of low socioeconomic background profess an interest in more of the “basics,” such reading and math skills, than their middle-class counterparts (Schneider & Buckley 2002; Schneider, Teske, & Marschall, 2000). In practice, families that choose do so along different lines and according to their inclination toward making a schooling choice, their ability to formulate preferences and gather and use information related to these preferences (Hamilton & Guin, 2005) or draw from “cues” or informational shortcuts (Schneider, Teske, Marschall, & Roch, 1998), and their capacity to make these decisions (Gewirtz et al., 1995). As I will argue later, inclination, preference, and capacity are part of the key to understanding defaulters as well.

RACE, CLASS, AND SCHOOL CHOICE

As a policy option, proponents tout school choice as a valuable tool to help students escape failing public schools; specifically, choice provides economically disadvantaged students with an opportunity that has always been available to their middle- and upper-class counterparts through private schooling and residential mobility (see, e.g., Holme, 2002). Supporters assert that choice gives rise to greater accountability and cite studies (see, e.g., Hoxby, 2004a, 2004b; Krueger & Ziebarth, 2002) that find school choice gives rise to increased competition and, in turn, higher quality education. In contrast, opponents often feel that choice is inherently biased against inadequately resourced, urban schools and

the economically disadvantaged students and families of color they often serve (see, e.g., Lipman, 2002). They believe that it has the potential to fracture an already underfunded portion of the public education system. As Gewirtz et al. (1995) asserted, “Choice is directly and powerfully related to social-class differences”; it is a factor in “maintaining and enforcing social class divisions and inequalities” (p. 55). We know that educational inequality is highly concentrated in schools with high proportions of minority—particularly Black and Latino—students (Milner, 2015; Saporito & Sohoni, 2007).

Research on African American families in particular and their approach to school choice demonstrate that although race and class are often seen as operating in concert with one another, educational choice is informed not only by their economic and educational resources but also by their prior social and race-based educational experiences around both schooling and housing (Diamond & Gomez, 2004; Jargowsky, 2014; Lareau, 2014; Lareau & Horvat, 1999). As a result, African American families may take an approach to choice that is different than their same-class, White counterparts based on their experiences in the educational and housing arenas rather than necessarily a lack of desire for educational excellence/academic achievement (Kleitz, Weiher, Tedin, & Matland, 2000). In particular, working-class African Americans may have a more confrontational relationship with their children’s teachers or schools that can spill over into choice (or defaulting) and other school participation/nonparticipation; in contrast, middle-class Black parents are more likely to engage in more positively perceived opposition to schools and focus on customizing their children’s educational experiences (Lareau & Horvat, 1999). Across classes, Black parents further operate under different constraints than their White counterparts (Jargowsky, 2014; Pattillo, 2015). Omi and Winant (2014) offer a strong explanation of the intersection of social structure and lived experience for African Americans that can lead to both an inability and unwillingness to participate within systems such as education and educational choice. Similarly, a strong body of work in the area of critical race theory in education and beyond focuses on theorizing the centrality of race in both the structure and cultural expression/lived experience—that is, the centrality of race in both the restraining and framing of the potential actions and reactions of African Americans (Ladson-Billings, 1998; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995, 2006). Such work explores the ways that, in particular, the cultural capital of African Americans is devalued in educational settings (Milner, 2013; Yosso, 2005). Although its appeal and value are touted, school choice has the potential to serve as a space of both intentional and unintentional exclusion for African American families. Research points to the stark differences in the choice

processes across race and class lines, with middle-class White families engaging far more in residential choice to yield schooling choices than their low-income, Black counterparts (Goyette, 2008). Additionally, there is evidence that low-income, African American participants in school choice systems experience limited agency, empowerment, and control (Pattillo, 2015). Understanding low-income and working-class African American defaulters serves to advance current understandings of the potential interplay among race, class, and school choice.

DEFINING NONCHOOSERS IN SCHOOL CHOICE LITERATURES

Outside of education, nonchoosers or defaulters play a somewhat more prominent role in choice literature, in particular when looking at the choice of pension or healthcare systems. Researchers examine nonchoice “actions” to determine the effectiveness of default settings in meeting consumer needs (see, e.g., Beshears, Choi, Laibson & Madrian, 2009; Choi, Laibson, & Madrian, 2005). In these cases, the impact of defaulting is evaluated in terms of programmatic success rather than gaining an understanding of those not exercising choice. Although there is an abundance of work on defaulters within a rational choice framework, particularly in the field of economics (see, e.g., Becker, 1978; Lovett, 2006; Smelser, 1992), it is commonly accepted within both the social and behavioral sciences that choice processes are less mechanistic than posited by rational choice models and are instead dominated more by heuristic simplifications and the biases they produce (see, e.g., Kahneman, 1991; Tversky, 1972). In behavioral sciences, both active choosing and defaulting behaviors are studied in terms of the known biases and heuristic processes that may influence the ways that choosers engage information to make a choice, from information gathering to ultimate decision making, although decision makers (and defaulters) are typically unaware of their activation.

For instance, Bertrand, Mullainathan, and Shafir’s (2006) and Botti and Iyengar’s (2006) work illustrates the potential for heuristic simplifications of choice to incorrectly eliminate favorable options among economically disadvantaged populations—an issue of increasingly greater import as many potentially social-welfare-improving systems, such as education, move toward choice. Within other fields there is a precedence of advocating to improve default options or influencing (“nudging”) behaviors because of both the ethical implications of defaulting and the potential for promoting increased welfare (see, e.g., Blumenthal-Barby & Burroughs, 2012; Dolan et al., 2012; Halpern, Ubel, & Asch, 2007; Thaler & Sunstein, 2008), which requires an understanding of the domain-specific “whys” and “hows” around defaulting—in this case, for school choice.

As indicated earlier, the profiles of school choosers look different depending on both the location and the type of choice offered. Presumably, the same can be said for nonchoosers or defaulters; however, this remains largely unexamined. Nonchoosers are typically defined in juxtaposition to their choosing counterparts. Previous studies, both quantitative and qualitative, have taken a number of views of what it means to be a nonchooser or defaulter. Larger, typically statistical studies (see, e.g., Lauen, 2009) tend to focus on a clear division: Choosers or participants are those who visibly exercise choice by attending a school that is not their neighborhood or default option. Nonchoosers are those who remain in the default school. This is a simplistic distinction, typically dictated by the limited availability of choice process information in large data sets. Studies that examine application and acceptance (see, e.g., Jennings, 2010; Rosenbloom, 2010) tend to take a more nuanced view because of the availability of process-related measures, and they include students who attend a default school because they applied but were not accepted to another school. Studies looking more qualitatively at choosers (see, e.g., Bosetti, 2004; Gewirtz et al., 1995; Goldring & Hausman, 1999) tend to have greater detail about respondent behavior. They take into account that those remaining in the default school may have chosen this alternative and thus define choosers as parents who “seek information to weigh alternatives to neighborhood assignments, and then choose” either the default option or an alternative (Bosetti, 2004, p. 390). Nonchoosers, in contrast, do not seek information and “end up” in the default school (Bosetti, 2004, p. 390). Although this conception of choosing allows some with a default outcome to be defined as choosers, these studies do not explore the behaviors of the choosing defaulters to understand how they might differ from other choosers. A notable exception is found in studies of “voucher decliners” or “voucher nonusers”—those eligible for vouchers who, for a variety of reasons, do not use them (Cowen, 2010; Fleming, Cowen, Witte, & Wolf, 2013). These studies point out the ways that family characteristics and constraints—including race, family structure, social networks, employment status, and religion—influence the decision to refuse a voucher. These studies take a step toward conceptualizing defaulters (in this case, voucher refusers/nonusers) as active participants in the school choice process who do not ultimately enroll their child in a choice school because of hurdles to participation or misalignment with their preferred schooling option.

Beyond vouchers, Vincent et al. (2010) approached the category of defaulters asserting that they don’t really see differences between schools and expect all schools to be equally capable of educating their child. In general, however, many researchers make comparisons between choosers and nonchoosers or defaulters (e.g., Martinez, Thomas, & Kemerer, 1994)

without acknowledging that differences exist within the latter category. To understand how the choice process occurs, the constraints of a choice system, and potential choice improvements, differences within the category of nonchooser matter.

Gewirtz et al. (1995) set forth a typology of choosers in which they focused on the concepts of “inclination” and “capacity” and described choosers as skilled, semiskilled, or disconnected. Skilled choosers are those who have both strong inclination to choose and strong capacity to engage with choice. Semiskilled choosers have a strong inclination to choose but are limited in their capacity to interact with the market. Disconnected choosers have neither the inclination nor the capacity to choose in ways that meaningfully interact with the system. Their typology presents a useful starting point for beginning to understand nonchoosers as well. However, Gewirtz et al. overlooked both within-class typology difference and the potential that evaluating nonchoosers has to shed light on the persistence of social class divisions and inequality. The category of “disconnected chooser” begins to address some of the ideas that many have about defaulters, but drawing from empirical data, the current article demonstrates how defaulters can be engaged and still obtain the default option. I also draw from Vincent and colleagues’ (2010) conception of defaulters and “preference” because without it, evaluation of choice is more akin to normative judgment on the worth of families’ schooling decisions. Understanding the ways defaulters view the choice process and the ways they engage in it allows us to pinpoint where potential choice “roadblocks,” or barriers to choice, can occur.

DATA AND METHODS

The data for this study come from interviews and surveys with 28 parents of rising ninth-grade students collected the summer before the start of the academic year. The respondents are part of a larger project that examines the choosing behavior of 91 families of eighth- and ninth-grade students.

RECRUITMENT AND SAMPLE LIMITATIONS

At the time of the study, the 28 parents included in this sample had children starting ninth grade at “Neighborhood High,” a neighborhood high school located on Chicago’s south side. Neighborhood High was chosen for the larger project because of its low ranking across CPS measures (described in more detail next) and because of the rise in charter school alternatives geographically proximate to this school. The larger intent of the full study was to illuminate differences in the ways that families view and undertake school choice using data collected from families in schools located in one neighborhood.

A team of four researchers recruited parent respondents at Neighborhood High's freshman orientation. The orientation was held a few weeks before the start of school in the summer before the students' ninth-grade year. Although mandatory, many families did not attend the orientation. During recruitment, approximately 75 ninth-grade parents (one quarter of the roughly 300-student incoming freshman class) attended the open houses. The research team was given permission to set up a recruitment table at all orientation events. Researchers greeted all parents/guardians as they entered the orientation, provided them with flyers about the study, and answered any questions. Parents/guardians varied in their level of interest in the study and their time or willingness to participate in an interview. Of the roughly 75 parents in attendance, the research team recruited 28 parents to participate in this study—just under 10% of the full class. At that time, the team also scheduled interviews with those parents who were interested in participating. Interviews were conducted at times and places convenient to respondents—including the cafeteria at the school following orientation, the local library, and in the homes of the respondents.

Because researchers did not have access to data for all the parents of ninth-grade students at Neighborhood High, the representativeness of this sample, both as a reflection of Neighborhood High parents and as a reflection of the larger CPS population, is unknown. Because of the information as well as the time and effort required to attend the orientation, I assume that the sample has some bias toward including more knowledgeable and engaged families, as well as those with fewer barriers (transportation, childcare, etc.) to attend such an event; however, this is only an assumption. Although the depth of the sample offers qualitative insight into families at a default school, it cannot be considered representative of parents either at Neighborhood High or in the district. Although this sampling frame limits the generalizability of the findings, it does not limit the exploratory nature of the study and the important insight it offers into the attitudes and understandings of defaulters. The study lays a foundation for future study of defaulters and encourages continued research on this population.

DATA COLLECTION AND CODING

Data for this study were collected through both surveys and in-depth interviews. The parent respondents first filled out a survey that included demographic information, family and child activities, community connectedness, and basic activity around choosing a high school (see Appendix A for survey questions). Following the survey, respondents answered

open-ended questions about their specific choice activities, their ideas about education, and their information networks (see Appendix B for interview questions). The interviews lasted from 30 minutes to 2 hours each and were recorded with respondent consent for accuracy. Following the interviews, study researchers transcribed all interviews, and I developed a database for all survey responses.

After reading through all interviews and recording survey responses, I employed inductive coding (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) to reveal themes and potential patterns across interviews. As themes emerged throughout the interviews, I developed coding categories to better understand the issues and to organize the data (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Because school choice was the overarching discussion topic in the interviews, most of the themes generated related to education, choice, and parental action or inaction.

After developing an initial set of themes, I reviewed the interviews and coded them broadly, though more explicitly for parental awareness, parental characteristic preference, parental interest in choosing and parental action.

I refined this coding by drawing from the literature on choosers (discussed earlier), in particular Gewirtz and colleagues' (1995) typology, to make sense of both parents' actions and their understanding of how their child came to attend Neighborhood High. Table 1 demonstrates a sample of the explicit themes used in coding transcribed from this study. Appendix C demonstrates this initial coding using an excerpt of transcript data from this study.

Following data on the broader CPS context and an overview of Neighborhood High, I discuss my understanding of defaulting parents' actions and understanding in the school choice process based on this coding.

CONTEXT AND SAMPLE DEMOGRAPHICS

At the time of the study (2008), the Chicago Public School system (CPS) had close to 408,000 students, with roughly 113,000 students attending a CPS high school (Chicago Public Schools, 2009). Chicago provides an important context for studying school choice because of extensive school reform occurring in the city in the late 1990s and early 2000s (see, e.g., Bryk, 2003) and the existing quantitative studies of choice undertaken in this district (see, e.g., Cullen, Jacob, & Levitt, 2005; Lauen, 2007, 2009).

At the time of the study, CPS espoused a high school open enrollment policy, which allows students the opportunity to apply for enrollment in any school in the district without selective admission requirements (Chicago Public Schools, 2005). All students who live within the attendance

Table 1. Sample Transcription Coding

Categories	Examples
Parental Awareness (PA)	While I was looking at the graduation level, the tutoring programs to make sure that they have tutoring programs because in a lot of ways he seems to need help and I want to make sure that he's able to get them so those are the most important things right now.
<i>Information Knowledge (PAik)</i>	They got computers, the ROTC, the basketball, the wrestling, just a lot of stuff there to keep them interested.
<i>Information Lack (PAil)</i>	[We] didn't have no expectation like that because I know he had to go there because that was his only option because his grade level was too low to go anywhere else. So that's the only school that he could be accepted in. No because I don't know nothing about them. I really can't give an opinion on something I really don't know nothing about.
Parental Characteristic Preference (CP)	
<i>School characteristic (CPsc)</i>	Well number one is convenience. Convenience and transportation. That played a big role as well as the safety.
<i>Child/family characteristic (CPcc)</i>	He, you know, he's small to be going into the freshman in high school. I didn't want anyone to pick on him and I didn't want his stuff to be stolen. And, his safety—his health issues and that's what I was really looking for. And I just have to say that if you want to be successful, if you want, W-A-N-T, to be successful you have to reach out. You can't just sit back and let somebody else do it all for you. You doing for you so that you get what you need for you.
Parental Interest Choosing (PIC)	
Parental Action (PA)	
<i>Action (PAa)</i>	Well, I asked was it available to us, was in our district and then I had a book too. They gave me a book that I read and what is [Neighborhood's], what is their profile? . . . DCFS have provided us good case managers and what I would mention is that they would chip in and help. They would get literature for me.
<i>Inaction (PAia)</i>	No because I didn't receive anything that I can remember of saying of listings for different schools. Once they put it in the system that she was gonna go to Neighborhood I just went along with it.

boundaries are automatically enrolled in their neighborhood school unless they apply to and are accepted into another school (Chicago Public Schools, 2005). During the eighth-grade year, students are able to take tests to enroll in selective enrollment or other schools (such as Catholic schools), as well apply to other public high schools outside their neighborhood. Students in a given neighborhood, then, have three possible “choices”: defaulting into their neighborhood high school, actively choosing their neighborhood high school among other options, or choosing another school.

The Chicago Public Schools continue to employ a model of open enrollment as in the time of the study described here (2007–2008 school year); however, the choice landscape has changed. For example, although the model and the language from CPS remain consistent with the time of study, with website directions indicating that families should determine their individual child’s needs, explore their neighborhood school, and identify choices beyond this if so desired (Chicago Public Schools, 2016), choice information aids (such as an interactive locator map and a more comprehensive open house calendar) are now available, and the district employs a centralized application process across school types. In addition, there are currently 176 high schools, 95 district-run schools, 70 charter schools, 9 contract schools (operated by private entities with a contract with CPS), and 2 SAFE schools (schools designed for students removed from their traditional placement for behavioral violations). Recent data indicate that approximately half of students opt not to go to their assigned neighborhood school.

NEIGHBORHOOD HIGH

As stated earlier, the sample for this article consists of 28 parents of incoming freshman students at Neighborhood High, a neighborhood high school in CPS. Neighborhood High accepts any student in its attendance boundary and does not require any prior application. However, CPS sees all its schools in the choice rubric, and students outside the area can apply to Neighborhood High. The school is located in a Black working-class neighborhood on Chicago’s south side. At the time, Neighborhood High had roughly 1,300 students (Grades 9–12). Over 99% of the students attending were Black, and CPS defined over 90% as low income. Four percent of students met or exceeded state testing standards, and 37% of freshman graduated within five years. Table 2 shows some of the CPS Score Card data for Neighborhood High. The Score Card, which is available for each school in CPS, is a one-page overview of student and school outcomes that allows comparison across schools in the district. It is available at the district website and in the annual district-issued choice book. The

Table 2. Score Card Info for Neighborhood High

Student Outcomes	CPS rank	2006	2007	2008
Freshman graduates within 5 years	63 of 66	38%	37%	33%
One-year dropout rate	110 of 111	16%	15%	26%
Average days absent per student	103 of 104	45	45	75
Academic Progress				
Meet/exceed PSAE state standards	77 of 90	4%	5%	4%
Students exceeding PSAE state standards	90 of 90	0%	0%	0%
Students making expected gains (data reported for 2005–07)	75 of 90	41%	35%	36%
Freshmen on track to graduate	64 of 78	54%	48%	43%
Students enrolled in Advanced Placement classes	64 of 71	1%	2%	3%
Students scoring 3+ on Advanced Placement exams	38 of 65	0%	4%	3%

Source: cps.edu/school/pages.

total number of ranked schools varies from one measure to another based on the number of schools that had data available for that measure.

As evidenced in the Score Card overview, at the time of study, Neighborhood High ranked low across many academic and student quality measures, with some of the highest dropout rates and days absent per student in the district. Such outcomes do not make it an obvious “choice” school along academic quality lines. Based on the CPS performance, remediation, and probation policy, which includes an assessment of school performance across 11 academic performance measures, Neighborhood High consistently achieved a low academic performance rating and was, at the time of study, on probation.

Table 3. Demographic Data for the Sample

Parent age	45.29
Parent race (Black/African American)	1
Parent female	0.86
Kids at home	3.54
Education (years)	11.75
Employed	0.32
Household income	14000

n=28

Table 3 shows the demographic information for the study sample. The table shows the mean responses on the survey for parent age, parent gender, number of children in the home, parental education, employment status, and household income for each group. Age is measured in years. Annual household income is measured on a 1-to-5 scale, from earning *less than \$10,000 per year* to *greater than \$75,000 per year*. The midpoint of each range was used to determine the above means. Education is measured on a 1 to 8 scale, ranging from *less than a high school diploma* to *a professional degree*. Each level was assigned a number of years based on the average time taken to complete that level of education. These numbers were used to calculate the means. Employment status is an indication of whether the respondent was employed or not and had a yes/no (0/1) response. One hundred percent of the sample racially identified as African American/Black. Parent respondents from Neighborhood High had, on average, received just below a high school diploma or GED (12 years of schooling) as their highest level of education, made roughly \$14,000 in annual household income, and were more likely to be unemployed (32% employment). On average, the respondents have just over 3.5 children living in their home, and the majority of parents interviewed were female (either mother, grandmother, or adopted female household head).

DEFAULTING, CHOOSING, OR FALLING SHORT?

The actual school “choice” that parents and children make appears as the end result of a choice process. It is the action that is most apparent and an outcome typically discussed in studies of school choice. Because of this, I will start the empirical examination by looking at the self-perceived choosing behavior of the families in this study. An overview of who the parent respondents believe made the high school decision appears in Table 4.

Table 4. Who Made the High School Choice

Survey Question:

Which statement best summarizes who made the decision for your student to attend this school?

I chose the school he/she will attend in the fall.

He/she chose the school that he/she will attend in the fall.

He/she and I made the choice together.

Someone other than me and him/her made the choice.

He/she was assigned to a school for the fall; we did not choose a particular school.

Choice Maker

Parent/guardian	21%
Student	17%
Parent/guardian & student together	17%
Other	3%
Assigned (did not choose)	42%
	<i>n</i> =28

Researchers asked parent respondents which statement best summarized who made the decision for their student to attend their current high school and then read five statements about who made this decision.

Forty-three percent of parent respondents from Neighborhood High indicated that their child had been assigned to the school. A smaller percentage of parents in the sample indicated that they had chosen Neighborhood High on their own (21%). The student choosing alone and the student and parent choosing together received an equal amount of responses (17%). These outcomes are an oversimplification and do not get at the subtlety of the choice process. However, it is important to note that even with a simplified outcome, the table indicates that despite the

same default neighborhood school outcome, over 58% of the families in the sample saw themselves as having engaged in some kind of choice.

This basic look at choice overlooks the nuance of understanding how families come to their outcomes. Exploring parents' narratives about what they actually knew and understood about the choice, what actions they took, and, finally, what they wanted for their children and themselves in the process allows us to understand different types of defaulters. Next I explicate a framework of defaulters that appeared in the data and provide examples to illustrate the differences between the three categories.

TYPES OF DEFAULTERS

Drawing from the coding of the 28 interviews, I find that the ability to choose and the desire to choose matter for the actions that parents take in their information gathering and ultimate actions (and inaction) in the choice process. Drawing from Gewirtz and colleagues' (1995) terminology, I define these aspects as capacity and inclination. Similar to Hamilton and Guin (2005), I also found that families choose schools across varying measures, not just those expected by researchers and policy makers. Because of this, I also added family preference as an aspect of the framework; without it, evaluations of choice become normative judgments of what schools are "good" and "bad" from a researcher or policy maker's point of view. Before describing how parents demonstrated these aspects of defaulting, I first define them.

Capacity is the ability to engage with and utilize choice (Gewirtz et al., 1995). It involves both decoding and navigating the school system, including knowledge of where and when choice information is available, whom to talk to, the timing of the school choice process, and the actions that both parent and child need to take to put a child in contention for a place at a particular school. Capacity is central to choice because it is ultimately the connection between chooser and system. Without it, even those interested in choice are unable to exercise it. Inclination is the idea that having a choice between schools is worthwhile and thus one should engage in it. Those with inclination believe that exercising choice matters, and choosers have a stake in the outcome. Inclination is important to understanding the behavior of choosers and nonchoosers because it is part of the underlying motivation behind their actions toward choice. Finally, preference is distinguishing between schools on a set of factors deemed important by the family. Preference is the expression of the ways that families evaluate schools and can motivate or inhibit their desire to choose.

Focusing on the presence, absence, and interactions of capacity, inclination, and preference, I find that the parents interviewed for this study

demonstrate three broad types of defaulters: choosing defaulters, obstructed defaulters, and nonchoosing defaulters. In the next section, I describe each type and illustrate how it looks in practice using respondents from my data who exemplify the category.

CHOOSING DEFAULTERS

“I’m very impressed with [Neighborhood]”

Choosing defaulters are parents who actively choose the default school among other options. They have information and know and understand the choice process. Based on their or their child’s preferences, they decide not to apply to other schools and want their children to attend the default school, or they apply elsewhere but ultimately choose the default from their options. These defaulters are classified as choosers in a few studies (see, e.g., Bosetti, 2004; Gewirtz et al., 1995). The reasons behind the choice vary—these parents may choose for the academic or social aspects of the school or focus on the constraints of practical concerns, such as location/proximity in relation to safety concerns or other children in attendance. They demonstrate the inclination and capacity to choose and demonstrate preference for what would be their default option.

Parents in the choosing defaulter category are choosers. They talk about choice and acknowledge that, at least to some extent, they or their child have it. Further, they discuss the default and other schools with knowledge that they have gained from a source or sources outside their own opinion. They are pleased that their child will be attending Neighborhood High because it was the school they wanted. Ms. Nelson exemplifies this category. A college graduate in her early 60s, Lenora Nelson started thinking about where her grandson would attend high school when he was in seventh grade. Ms. Nelson indicated that education was very important to her and in her experience required advanced planning:

He was in the seventh grade and I knew that the time was coming when he would be making that step into the high school curriculum, and I wanted him to do well. I have had children that have been very, very successful going to high school and even college.

She further made it clear that she was well informed, having accessed the available literature on schools in the district and talked to her grandson’s guidance counselor and teacher:

Well, I asked was it available to us . . . and then I had a book too. They gave me a book that I read and what is [Neighborhood’s], what is their profile? And I read up years ago about the profile

and they're steady changing to upgrade their profile of . . . students and they just got a tremendous outline for young people.

Ms. Nelson understood the choice process and planned in advance to participate on her grandson's behalf, indicating the importance that she placed on making the choice. Ms. Nelson conveyed her capacity to engage the system by speaking with two school representatives, a teacher and a guidance counselor, and accessing relevant school literature. Further, her comments regarding the steady improvement of Neighborhood, as well as her positive opinion of the curriculum, indicate her preference for Neighborhood. She chose to enroll her grandson there because she felt that it was a good choice.

Ms. Johnson, a mother who had an older child attend Neighborhood and go on to receive a college scholarship and graduate from college, expressed similar sentiments. She looked at other schools for her younger daughter, Trina, but felt they had little more to offer than Neighborhood High:

I had to really put my oldest daughter in there and find for myself what type of school it was. Mm-hmm. And it worked out just fine because it's all in the kid. I also looked around other schools like Magnet High. Western High. And everything kind of like weighed out . . . you know every school has its flaws you know.

Similarly, Ms. Rollins watched Neighborhood High over the years and talked to both teachers and guidance counselors to learn more about its programs. Informed about Neighborhood, she decided it was a good fit for her daughter Keisha. When Keisha enrolled, Ms. Rollins also began to get involved at Neighborhood High:

I was very enthused with the curriculum, the new academic level of education that Neighborhood has up there now. It's very different of the old cliché of what it used to be. Neighborhood is a general school in the neighborhood. Anybody can go to Neighborhood. Well now they have a very good curriculum there and I have been up there several times to talk to the teachers, the guidance counselors for my sophomore, my other daughter that attends Neighborhood and I'm very impressed with it. . .

We bought our home July 13, 1973. It'll be 34 years. It's a big difference. I've seen the change. The safety is very important because it used to be fights and—girl, you said put it in my own words? It was like hell going in there. [laughs] Quote, unquote but it's totally different. It's totally changed now.

These parents and others like them make up the most active “defaulters.” They had all three aspects of choice: the capacity to choose, interest in choosing, and distinguishable preferences. Using these, they chose the default option with the belief that it was their best option.

“I just really wanted him to go . . . where I could keep tabs on him”

Some choosing defaulters have an inclination toward choosing but along lines that limit their choice to the default school, in particular, sibling attendance or proximity. Parents in the sample indicated a strong preference for the proximity and familial convenience that Neighborhood offered, while still possessing some information about other schools in CPS.

Ms. Finley, a single mother of three whose oldest child had been accepted to another school, indicated that she chose Neighborhood because of proximity and her desire for her son to be comfortable. She had spoken to the guidance counselor at his eighth-grade school, as well as one of his teachers and some relatives about the choice.

Well, as far as I just really wanted him to go a school that he would be comfortable. . . where I could keep kind of tabs on him cuz he’s still only 14 and this is new for him. But, I really I just really wanted him cuz really it doesn’t matter what school you go to, like I said, it’s what you put into the school. As long as you try to do your best or whatever, you know I just really wanted him to be at a school that he was comfortable with. . .

A father who equated proximity with safety, Mr. Curtis indicated that the convenience of Neighborhood high meant a lot in his decision to send his son there. He and his wife had recently relocated to the area to live near his mother, and he had assistance from school staff in choosing a high school. Mr. Curtis said,

It’s in the area that we are going to be living in, and we’ve had a child to graduate from there with no problems and wasn’t a lot of fighting or anything going on and my son’s safety means a lot to me and the things that’s going on right now, that’s the main issue with me is safety. And I want to be able to get to my son if something happens so it wasn’t a hard decision at all.

Although there is a range of motivation for the choice of the default, it is clear that choosing defaulters engage in choice-making activity. Ultimately these respondents view themselves as having made a successful choice within the school choice system and should be conceptualized in the “chooser” category.

OBSTRUCTED DEFAULTERS

“Maybe I could’ve stepped up”

In the obstructed defaulter category are parents whose ability to choose a school beyond the default is blocked or prevented in some way. For example, they may do some information gathering but don’t know what to do with the information to make a choice and put their child in competition for a school other than the default. These parents might attend a choice event, such as the high school fair or an open house, or have and reference choice information, such as brochures or guidebooks. Despite this information, because of process uncertainty or information limitations, they don’t submit applications, or they submit incomplete applications or after required deadlines. However, they conceive of themselves as “choosers” and seem surprised when their students are assigned to the default school. They have inclination and preference but lack capacity or have their capacity thwarted by systemic barriers.

The respondents in the obstructed defaulter category frequently seemed mystified when they didn’t hear back from other schools that they were interested in and were instead assigned to Neighborhood High, despite not having applied on time or completed all the necessary application components. They often relied on their own (frequently outdated or incorrect) knowledge, having attended high school in the area, and were unsure of how to evaluate or use information they had gathered in the choice process. Some of these parents talked in a somewhat informed to almost savvy way about choice despite falling short in choice behavior.

Ms. Barnes indicated that she started looking and applying to schools for her eighth-grade daughter in January, after the December application deadline of which she was unaware.

January, I knew it was getting closer, you know, to her going to high school so I started thinking, you know, and they did send some different papers home to fill out for different schools. They did, but I guess she wasn’t selected for none of those schools . . . I don’t think she heard from those schools either because we didn’t get letters or nothing. The only school that they chose for her was the Neighborhood.

Despite her daughter’s interest in schools besides Neighborhood High and Ms. Barnes’s knowledge of some other schools, her lack of knowledge CPS’s timeline resulted in her daughter’s attendance at Neighborhood.

Ms. McCauley also had information about choice but was impaired by the lack of application materials available to her son. She wanted her son

to attend a career-oriented school and was highly concerned about violence levels in CPS. She acknowledged that she could have done more to assist her son in getting into another school:

Well I kinda asked him you know “Did you fill out any papers or whatever?” I said “If you didn’t fill out all the papers you know you’re gonna have to go to the area school.” So he was like “Mom, they kept telling me there wasn’t no more papers. No more applications.” So that’s the only thing we discussed about. Maybe I could’ve stepped up. . .

Despite inclination and preference, Ms. McCauley’s lack of capacity, exhibited in her lack of follow-up with her son’s school and, in turn, the lack of support from the school or district to address this need, kept her from helping her son apply to high school.

Ms. Smalls also indicated that she stopped short of completing the choice process. With help from her father, she and her son gathered information at the CPS-hosted high school fair, talked to teachers at potential high schools, and looked at print information, but when no one followed up with her, she was unsure of how to complete the process.

I signed up mostly for every school in there [the high school fair] that I thought that would be good for him and I didn’t receive nothing from none of the schools. I had to call Leadership Charter. . . . I called Arts High. I called Arts High to ask a couple of questions about the dress code, the grade levels, the school period. I even talked to some of the students because I used to ride the bus with them but I didn’t receive . . . no nothing from none of the schools. No nothing. None of them.

These parents illustrate that obstructed defaulters know that choice exists and believe it was at some point available to their children. They have taken action to obtain information about the choice. They voice preferences and rankings about how they see the school on criteria that are important to them—criteria that they do not feel the default option meets. However, they fall short of being choosers because they do not fully understand the choice process, such as where they could have submitted applications or when the applications were due. After the initial steps of information gathering, they encounter a sticking point in the process, and there are no systematic safeguards or supports in place to ensure that they complete the process.

NONCHOOSING DEFAULTERS

“I didn’t know nothing”

In contrast to the previous two categories, where “defaulting” families play some role in choice, even when they are obstructed or fall short of their choice, are those in the Nonchoosing defaulter category. They know little to nothing about choice, and although they sometimes discuss schools and choice, they know nothing about potential schools and what they or their children needed to do to get information and make a choice. Those in the Nonchoosing defaulter category are defaulters who have little to no actual knowledge about the choice. In some cases, they express preference with little information base; in other cases, they have no information about school choice or are not aware that any choice exists for them and their child.

In the data, these parents exhibited an extreme lack of knowledge about the choice process, indicating either directly or indirectly that they did not know much, if anything, about the choice. Sometimes, they indicated they had information, but it was incorrect.

Fifty-eight-year-old Thelma Dalton started thinking about where her son Tyrell would attend high school in March of his eighth-grade year, after receiving a letter from the neighborhood high school indicating that he would be attending there in the fall. Ms. Dalton did not want her son to attend this school, citing violence and gangbanging. Of her son, she said, “He’s debatin’ about going to [Neighborhood]. He really don’t want to go, you know. But, he don’t have no choice. [He’s] gonna have no choice.” Although in the interview, she indicated that Tyrell was not looking forward to going to Neighborhood, she had no information about schools in the district and expressed no interest or engagement in the choice process.

A similar conversation with Ms. Alda, an older adoptive mother, revealed that she did not understand why her daughter Myra would be attending Neighborhood and knew nothing about the school itself. When asked about Neighborhood, she responded,

No. I didn’t know nothing, you know, but they say kids keep up a lot of mess, but I don’t think they keep much. You know why I say they don’t keep up that much? . . . Cuz I don’t see nothing on the news about that. I don’t see—if they was raising so much sand at Neighborhood you’d see some of that, wouldn’t you?

Further, Ms. Alda indicated that Neighborhood was the only school available to Myra because of her testing outcomes. In contrast, Myra felt it was a locational issue.

Ms. Alda: No, but you see, my understanding was Neighborhood, was, I guess was the only place she could go right then because I guess that her test score sent her there.

Myra: They said I couldn't go because, I couldn't go to other school because I wasn't in the district.

Ms. Alda not only knew little about Neighborhood High but was also uninformed about why Myra would be attending this particular school.

Similarly, Ms. King was very forthcoming about having no information about schools or the choice process, saying simply, "I haven't heard about no other schools have sent me any pamphlets or anything about coming, only Neighborhood." She knew nothing about her son's right to apply to any other school.

OTHER POSSIBLE CATEGORIES

Earlier I illustrated a broad framework of three types of defaulters. Because of the combinations of the three aspects (capacity, inclination, and preference), it is certainly possible that there would be additional categories of parents employing the combinations not found in this data (for example, a parent with the capacity to gather information and navigate the system, as well as preferences among schools, but lacking inclination toward choice making).

Additional research may uncover parents who meet these categories within a similar sample of parents, find that they exist in other nonsimilar populations, or not uncover these combinations at all. I take up the need for such future research in the discussion section.

DISCUSSION

The data in this study illustrate the importance of inclination, capacity, and preference in understanding how those often defined as "defaulters" may actually be choosing or falling just short of choosing. Choosing defaulters demonstrate some degree of inclination in both word and action. They indicate that choice is valuable to them, and they believe that having it makes a difference. Their actions, however, illustrate that inclination is necessary but not sufficient for engaging in the choice process. In many ways, inclination acts as the point of engagement because those who do not believe choice is valuable, regardless of their capacity and preferences, may be difficult to compel toward making a choice. In particular, previous negative experiences may make those lacking inclination doubtful of the value of choice.

Capacity, the ability to engage with and utilize choice, includes understanding what steps need to be taken to exercise choice, as well as the

ability to “decode” the information surrounding choice. Across default types, parents differ in their capacity to gather and interpret information, illustrated by their discussions of how they thought the choice process worked and how they navigated it, whether successfully or unsuccessfully. Capacity differentiates the would-be chooser from a nonchooser merely interested in choice. Although information is an important element of this, the obstructed defaulters category demonstrates that having information and being savvy about the system are not the same, and the latter has greater potential to lead to choice. This further offers insight into the limitations and implications of the types of information, information presentation, and support utilizing information that families may or may not receive from the schools and districts with which they interact. Building capacity by modifying the information and process offers the most potential for engaging obstructed defaulters—those at the “edge” of choosing—because schools and districts have the most control over these aspects of the choice process.

Preference draws on aspects of both capacity and inclination, leading families to be able to not only formulate ideas about what characteristics of schools are important to them but also distinguish these characteristics across choices. Preference also has the potential to reveal normative judgments about what system designers or evaluators believe choosers should prefer or evaluate in terms of preference. The framework, however, makes it clear that choosers can form preferences that may be irrelevant in terms of the system design. This has the potential to lead to “bad” choices along other lines, which, in the case of education, may have a negative impact on students’ schooling outcomes. For example, choosing defaulters have preferences and may be compelled by proximity or sibling attendance, undermining the possibility of attending more academically rigorous schools.

In addition to the individual aspects of the framework, each of the three categories sheds light on both the interaction between choice systems and potential choosers as well as policy initiatives that can improve choice prospects for defaulters. It is both naïve and paternalistic to think about forcing all potential participants in a choice system to choose. However, as some choice systems move toward an “all choice” model, additional assistance and systematic tweaks are necessary to assist those who are attempting to participate in the system but are falling short, particularly when this process of defaulting is better understood.

PRACTICAL AND POLICY CONSIDERATIONS

Choosing defaulters should be categorized across studies as choosers. They may not be choosing in ways envisioned by schools, researchers, or policy makers, or they are, but based on outcome, their choice is interpreted differently. Choosing defaulters need to be recognized in larger outcome studies to see if their default action has different results than their Obstructed default or nonchoosing default counterparts. The outcomes of choosing defaulters need to be explored in more depth to understand their outcomes in comparison with those typically designated as choosers in other studies. Better understanding of whether they have the same outcome as more traditionally defined “choosers” is important to understand both how their choices impact their children’s schooling outcomes and how and why their “choice” is or is not as effective as choosing a nondefault school. Similarly, choosing defaulters challenge the idea of what are the traditionally agreed-on measures of school quality. Because their choice is right for their child or family but doesn’t fall in line with other measures of quality, whether they need assistance depends on the view of what choice is designed for. This category is a strong reminder of the interlinking of neighborhoods, schools, families, and peers for academic outcomes.

Other nonchoosers, particularly those in the obstructed default category, may think they have made a choice, while still not fully understanding the outcome or how they got there. In the case of school choice, they illustrate the clearest “sticking” points in the process where nonchoosers can become choosers—particularly in going from information gathering to actual application submission, and further, in following up with schools after applications have been submitted. The obstructed default category presents the most obvious place for systemic improvements because the people in this category want to be choosers and can be given assistance to meet this goal. Because they lack capacity, there are a number of ways to combat their inability to apply effectively. Simplified information has been found in past studies to improve choice (Hastings & Weinstein 2008). Interactive websites (such as those in Hartford, Connecticut; see, e.g., Dougherty et al., 2013) also provide families with more detailed and useable information. Targeted assistance at places where such families are already active, such as the high school fair and open houses, may also allow families to fill out applications and turn them in a more contained environment.

Nonchoosing default families may be aided in manners similar to those in the Obstructed default category—with targeted assistance and interactive websites. However, assisting them would likely require more intense

intervention that could occur at the school by involving children more heavily in the choice or within the community by tying school choice information dissemination more directly to other community organizations (such as religious institutions, community centers, and local business establishments). Families in the Nonchoosing default category present the most critical challenge to current choice systems. Although they would require intense support that may not be possible or desirable because of costs for particular choice systems, they do present a moral dilemma with regard to how much information participants in a choice system should have. In particular, in a system where the outcomes vary widely and success across measures (academic achievement, safety, and so on) depends not only on choice but on informed choice, the number of people in this category matters greatly.

In addition to affecting the school that students ultimately attend, research demonstrates that school choice impacts longer term outcomes—for example, students who actively choose to attend a high school other than the default option are more likely to graduate (Cullen et al., 2005). Although I cannot connect the outcomes of families in this study to impacts of their high school choice, there is potential for impact on other valuable long-term outcomes, such as college attendance and job prospects. Measures of the long-term outcomes of the children by category would provide a greater understanding of the impacts of choosing and the various types of defaulting. As systems move to offering greater levels of choice, this understanding by category is essential. In particular, if choice generally improves outcomes for both choosers and nonchoosers (i.e., one does not have to be the chooser to reap potential schoolwide benefits of choice), this is less worrisome. However, if choice is damaging to nonchoosers but is not mandatory, the system merits evaluation.

WHAT SCHOOLS, DISTRICTS, AND RESEARCHERS CAN DO

As outlined in the preceding discussion, there are some clear intervention points for schools interested in addressing the defaulting population. At the most fundamental level, improvements in all schools help defaulters because their choice or lack of action-based choice results in a more favorable outcome. The ways in which we conceptualize informed choice and successful choices matter. In particular, we need to more explicitly conceptualize what constitutes a successful or effective schooling choice and better understand aspects of the process, such as what it means to have information versus actually utilizing it to make a schooling choice.

In addition, an understanding of defaulters provides clear interventions to clarify choices, inform would-be choosers, and assist obstructed

defaulters toward completing the choice process. Simplified information—which CPS and other districts have increasingly tried to provide—has positive impacts on parents’ capacity to choose and ultimate choice action (Hastings & Weinstein, 2008) and may be worth compiling and disseminating. Targeted assistance, including guided websites, mobile apps, and house parties, such as those discussed in Dougherty et al. (2013), both at local schools and across the community, would increase awareness of school choice as well as the possibility that defaulters will be better able to engage in it. Non-school-based assistance may be of particular interest among populations (such as those discussed by Diamond & Gomez, 2004) whose experience with formal education systems may yield distrust among parents and students. Although the parents in this sample did not explicitly discuss this, ample literature demonstrates that populations that have been historically marginalized by schools, such as African Americans and English language learners, demonstrate distrust of schools and the information they provide. In this case, third parties or organizations with which families are more comfortable or familiar may serve an important choice-assisting role. Although these changes would likely serve to support all choosers—not just defaulters—the inclusion of different types of defaulters in both academic and policy-directed research on school choice would also help to increase both the understanding of outcomes as well as their voice in the school choice process.

Studies on behavioral “nudges” in other defaulting and nonchoosing populations offer further consideration. This includes offering incentives to parents or schools for completion of tasks connected to the choice process within the required time frame (e.g., attending an open house or filling out and returning an application), providing general information about the broad benefits of engaging in choice, and targeting of materials to those perceived most likely to default. Considered in other fields, particularly health care, these suggestions are not without financial, ethical, and practical considerations that may be beyond the interest or capabilities of schools and districts (Blumenthal-Barby & Burroughs, 2012).

As indicated previously, it is my intent that this study will serve as an initial exploration and that future research will both apply the framework and submit it to further testing. In particular, it would be useful for future research to explore whether the types mentioned previously exist in other populations and contexts both similar and dissimilar to this one. As well, a study juxtaposing defaulters and almost-defaulters who had received intervention or assistance would offer insight into the ways that schools and districts can help defaulters in practice. Because defaulters do not only exist at economically disadvantaged and working-class schools, a study looking at middle- and upper-class parents who default when presented

with choice would offer insight into the connections between residential choice and school choice, as well as potentially different narratives from these parents related to their understanding of choice and their ultimate actions. Finally, a study exploring the full spectrum of chooser/defaulters behavior—from parent choosers who are highly involved, possess a great deal of relevant knowledge, and are both interested and able to navigate the process to defaulters with no choice-relevant knowledge or understanding—offers the possibility to create a “fuller” framework or typology encompassing both choice and defaulting behaviors.

Given this exploration of defaulters, it is clear that the distinction between “chooser” and “nonchooser” or defaulter provides little insight into the process that actually results in a default outcome. Rather, understanding families’ inclination to choose, capacity for choice, and school preferences sheds light on the ways that seeming “nonchoosers” or defaulters may actually be engaging in or attempting to engage in school choices. The framework demonstrates that rather than a monolithic category, defaulting should be viewed along a spectrum. Empirical application of the framework demonstrates some ways that choice design may be improved to better assist particular categories of defaulters, addressing both misaligned intent and systematic shortcomings. Understanding defaulters is essential to improving school choice to best meet the needs of those it is supposedly designed to serve. As researchers and policy makers, it is our role to understand and develop policy that not only privileges choosers but also acknowledges and works to be aware of the limitations of choice systems for defaulters. This study begins to address the differences across the population of defaulters and should be used as a starting point to better evaluate the outcomes of school choice.

NOTES

1. I use the terms *Black* and *African American* interchangeably throughout this article.

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APPENDIX A

Sample Survey Questions

1. What is your relationship to the child who will be starting high school in the fall?
2. Number of children living in home _____
3. What is your current marital status?
4. What is the highest level of education that you have completed?
5. Are you currently employed? Full-time or part-time?
6. Do you attend a church, mosque, or other kind of religious organization?
7. What month did you start thinking about where your child would attend high school?
8. Which statement best summarizes who made the decision for your student to attend this school?
 - a I chose the school he/she will attend in the fall.
 - b He/she chose the school that he/she will attend in the fall.
 - c He/she and I made the choice together.
 - d Someone other than me and him/her made the choice.
 - e He/she was assigned to a school for the fall; we did not choose a particular school.
9. Who did you talk to about high school options? Did you talk to...

Guidance counselor	Teacher	Principal
Religious leader	Neighbor	Family member/relative
Coworker	Child	Parent of child's friend
Other: (indicate who) _____		
10. Did you attend high school fair(s) or open house(s)?

APPENDIX B

In-Depth Interview Questions

I would like to ask you some in-depth, open-ended questions about making schooling choices. There are no right or wrong answers. Please answer as honestly and thoroughly as you can.

1. When you make important decisions, who do you talk to about them? Can you tell me who gives you the most helpful information? Whose information are you likely to listen to when you have an important decision to make?
2. How would you describe your son/daughter? What is your relationship with him/her like? What are your future goals for him/her?
3. What are you looking for in a high school? Do you think there are any differences between what you and [your child/your parent] thinks is important about choosing a high school?
4. What do you think about the CPS? About education in general?
5. Is there anything particular about your child/you that makes you look for certain things in a high school? [probe: gender, learning style, special needs, safety?]
6. What kind of conversations are you having with [your child/your parent] about high school? Could you give me some examples? Is there a high school that [he/she/your parents] really want you to go to? If so, why?
7. I'd like you to talk about the people you've talked to/are talking to about this decision. Could you give me a few examples of conversations you had? What kind of things did you talk to people about? Were there any people whose opinions or advice you found particularly useful?
8. Have you gotten any flyers or any other kind of papers about high schools? Where were they from? What did they say? Were they helpful? Why/why not?
9. In addition to talking to people or reading things, are you going to any particular places or organizations or agencies for information?
10. [If R went to high school fairs or information sessions] Could you tell me about the school fairs you went to? What was the presentation like? What kind of questions did you have even if you didn't actually ask them?
11. Do you have any special way of finding out about high schools that we haven't asked you about?
12. What would you like to know about making this choice that you don't know or aren't sure about?

APPENDIX C

Sample Transcription Coding

Codes: **Resources—R** **Cited Information—Inf**
 Preference—Pref **Inclination—Inc**

Interviewer: And you mentioned some of the other people that you talked about choosing a high school, such as the guidance counselor. What types of conversations did you and they have?

Respondent: Well, I asked was it available to us, was in our district and then I had a book too [R]. They gave me a book that I read and what is [Neighborhood's], what is their profile [R]? And I read up years ago about the profile and they're steady changing to upgrade their profile of inducting people in and students and they just got a tremendous outline for young people [Inf]. And then the thing is once you pull them in, keep them. You know, make it exciting for them. It's not like during my time paper and pencil and look at the teacher and paper and pencil. It's all kind of opportunities [Pref]. They got computers, the ROTC, the basketball, the wrestling, just a lot of stuff there to keep them interested [Inf]. And the coaches were wonderful to my son. They were and they would always say this is a good kid here, and he would say me and my teammate, I was his teammate, did it. So I was pleased there [Pref] and he graduated and like I say went on to Columbia College so I expect the same thing for this one. Matter of fact I expect more because they have upgraded and they have people that you can communicate with [R, Inf, Pref]. Some of the staff and personnel at [Neighborhood] high school.

Interviewer: So aside from like you said reading the newspaper and going to the school events and stuff like that were there any other places like any other agencies or special places that you went to get information about high schools?

Respondent: No but I'm going to say too that we have good case—DCFS have provided us good case managers and what I would mention is that they would chip in and help. They would get literature for me [R]. And I appreciated that and they were encouraging to say the least and stuff. And I just have to say that if you want to be successful, if you want, W-A-N-T, to be successful you have to reach out [Inc]. You can't just sit back and let somebody else do it all for you. You doing for you so that you get what you need for you [Inc].

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