ALIGNING NAVIGATE STL SCHOOLS DATA PRIORITIES: LEARNING FROM PARENT FOCUS GROUPS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

By: Misti Jeffers, Ph.D., & Claire Heggie

PRiME CENTER
SAINT LOUIS UNIVERSITY

Project Overview

St. Louis City is an area where parents have access to many school options. Within this choice-rich context, understanding how parents sort and make decisions about school options and providing parents with transparent, quality information about schools is vital. One organization born out of the recognized need for more accessible information about schools in St. Louis City is Navigate STL Schools—a non-profit organization "that helps families learn about the local school system and the school options available to them." Navigate STL Schools recognizes the school enrollment process is complex and aims to give every family the tools to simplify the process, regardless of race, economic status, or academic ability.

Based on this mission, Navigate STL Schools developed an online platform to aid families in gathering information about schools in St. Louis City. This platform allows families to search for schools by location and grade level. From there, Navigate STL Schools provides data about school type, academic performance, extracurriculars, safety, discipline, and more. Additionally, the Navigate STL Schools website allows for comparison against average state and city-wide performance for each school. To ensure accuracy, Navigate STL Schools obtains all data from the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education and aggregates it to an easily accessible format.

The PRiME Center partnered with Navigate STL Schools to determine data priorities that align with parent needs. We sat down with parents in a series of focus groups to learn more about how parents make informed school decisions. We delivered a 28 page report that summarized the lessons learned from those conversations and a set of actionable recommendations based on these findings.

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Learning from Parents in Focus Groups: Methods and Participants

To help Navigate STL Schools determine data priorities to align with parent needs, the PRiME Center conducted six focus groups with a total of 28 parents with school-aged children in St. Louis City.[1] Three sessions occurred in-person and three occurred virtually and included semi-structured interview questions and guided brainstorming activities. The focus groups produced information around four guiding questions:

- **What challenges did parents face while navigating school enrollment decisions?**
- **How did parents access information to help them make school choices?**
- **What information about schools did parents find most valuable in determining what makes a school a "good fit" for their children?**
- **How did parents respond to features of the Navigate STL Schools website?** [2]

Data analysis occurred in multiple phases, using a constant comparison analysis of interview transcripts and notes collected during focus group activities. The focus group sessions were audio recorded, and participants in the in-person sessions were asked to share personal notes written during their brainstorming activities. These activities also yielded a list of collective responses to questions across group participants (e.g., the pieces of information important to families when selecting a school that was a "good fit"), which facilitators collected as a data source. These lists of collective responses were used as the initial codes (i.e., chunks of information) in the analysis process. The transcript data and participant notes were used to confirm these codes and to group codes into common categories. In the final stage of analysis, the research team developed these categories into common themes that integrate the content of each group.

To capture the diversity of experiences in St. Louis, we recruited parents across different school types and grade levels, household makeup (e.g., marital status), income level, racial identity, and whether children had special needs (e.g., an IEP). Participants were 36% White, 28.5% Black or African American, 18% Hispanic/Latinx, and 14% Asian, Middle Eastern, or Pacific Islander. Most of the parents had a household income of below $100,000. Seventeen of the 28 parents interviewed had a child with an Individualized Education Plan, which can affect school enrollment decisions.

All school types and grade levels were represented by focus group participants, and some parents had multiple children enrolled in different schools. Eight parents had at least one child enrolled in a neighborhood public school, eight parents had at least one child enrolled in a public charter school, seven parents had at least one child in a public magnet school, and four parents had at least one child in a private school. Three parents had a child enrolled in an alternative or technical education school. Most parents had children in elementary or middle schools, but seven parents noted having at least one child in high school.

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[1] *This project was undertaken as a QI initiative, and as such was not approved by an IRB.*
[2] *Findings related to the fourth question were only shared directly with Navigate STL Schools.*

Main Themes from Conversations with Parents

The findings demonstrate parents make highly individualized school choices for their families, and often, for each individual child in their family. Even amidst this individualization, conversations with parents yielded common themes related to each of our guiding questions that are important to keep in mind when providing families with the tools they need to make informed decisions and successfully navigate school enrollment processes. Key findings for the first three questions include:

What challenges did parents face while navigating school enrollment decisions?

1. Parents expressed feeling like they did not have clarity on how to get started sorting through the range of school options available in St. Louis.
2. Parents described the process of sorting so many school options as confusing, overwhelming, and exhausting.
3. Parents faced challenges meeting timelines and deadlines for admission requirements, including testing requirements.
4. Choice is an ongoing process—at each transition point across the K-12 trajectory and for each child in the family.

How did parents access information to help them make school choices?

1. Parents heavily relied on word of mouth from other parents to learn about the reputation of schools.
2. Parents used websites to learn more about the basic characteristics of schools.
3. Parents used school tours to confirm expectations and seek additional context.

What information about schools did parents find most valuable in determining what makes a school a "good fit" for their children?

1. Parents weighed more than test scores when considering academic indicators, including information related to the specific educational model/curriculum of the school.
2. Parents felt strongly that their schools offer opportunities for personal enrichment and social-emotional development and expressed a desire to hear more about these opportunities prior to enrollment.
3. Parents emphasized how important it was for them to learn about the school climate, paying close attention to school dynamics and safety.
4. Parents appreciated the convenience of a user-friendly, visually appealing website.
5. Details related to understanding the processes associated with accessing school features were critical, and often missing, from the information parents had access to.
6. Parents wanted to know more about teacher and leadership characteristics such as teacher attitude, experience level, retention, and how staff are supported by administrators.

Implications: Supporting Parents to Make Informed Decisions

Conversations with parents pointed to Navigate STL Schools as a resource well-positioned to meet the needs of parents looking for a one-stop source for school information as they navigated the frustrating and exhausting process of selecting a school in St. Louis City. However, there are opportunities to finetune resources and data on the Navigate STL Schools website to better align with the types of information parents find most valuable to their school decision processes. Participants of the focus groups responded positively to the website as it is currently outlined to operate, but expressed disappointment that the information in school profiles is not fully available or hard to understand and contextualize. Thus, our primary recommendation to Navigate STL Schools was to ensure the school profile tool operates as it is currently intended to function and then aspire to add or adjust elements moving forward.

While our priority was to make recommendations specifically for Navigate STL Schools, our findings have broader implications for schools seeking to market to parents as well as to other organizations that aim to support parents in making informed decisions. Overall, conversations with parents highlighted how parents consider a range of factors when weighing school options. Often, these factors extended beyond the most commonly reported metrics of school quality, such as student achievement measured by test scores. Rather, parents were interested in learning more about the broader school environment that fosters holistic development for their children. It is critical that educational leaders take into consideration these non-academic factors when marketing their schools.

Not only did parents feel data was not always accessible or transparent, but conversations with parents indicated they had differing abilities to digest and understand data points that were not well defined or contextualized. As schools and other educational stakeholders provide information to parents, it is important to present information in lay terms. We also encourage stakeholders to consider how the ways data is displayed can activate unintentional messages to parents. For example, some parents mentioned using data to rule out schools serving a high concentration of students receiving free-or-reduced priced lunch, indicating demographic data may be used to activate internal biases about school quality. This is especially troubling for schools who adopt the Community Eligibility Provision which automatically qualifies 100% of their students for free lunch. Notably, most parents in our focus groups claimed they were interested in diverse and inclusive schools. Contextualizing data and offering broader definitions of school quality might help parents in their pursuit to consider diversity and inclusion indicators in their enrollment decisions.

All in all, parents need accurate data and information on a range of school quality metrics. Currently, reliable information is hard to find anywhere, but organizations like Navigate STL Schools are uniquely positioned to fill this need.

Summary and Next Steps

This report highlights the key findings and recommendations arising from conversations with parents in focus groups to learn more about how parents make informed school decisions. Using lessons from parent conversations, PRiME's next step is to seek input from school leaders to determine what they feel families should know when making informed school decisions and how they market their schools accordingly. Taken together, these conversations with parents and school leaders will produce implications to support Navigate STL Schools' determination of data priorities to align with parent and school needs.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Misti Jeffers, Ph.D., is a postdoctoral fellow with the SLU PRiME Center.

Claire Heggie is an undergraduate research assistant with the SLU PRiME Center and a fourth year Economics & Political Science major at Saint Louis University.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Policy Research in Missouri Education (PRiME) Center
Saint Louis University
033 Fitzgerald Hall
St. Louis, MO 63103

E-mail: prime@slu.edu
www.sluprime.org
Twitter: @sluprime
Facebook: PRiME Center at Saint Louis University

Who We Are
The Policy Research in Missouri Education (PRiME) Center is a non-partisan research center housed in the Saint Louis University School of Education. Opened in the Spring of 2019, we are wholly committed to conducting and sharing research that leads to better policies, educational outcomes, and opportunities for all students.

What We Do
We conduct and share research on education. We help lawmakers, educators, and families in the state of Missouri make decisions about education policy and practice. Our mission is to ensure that the people making decisions and building policies around education have the relevant data and evidence they need to build the best and most equitable educational systems possible.

Navigate STL Schools
5501 Delmar Blvd,
Suite 200A
St. Louis, MO 63111

E-mail: connect@navigatestlschools.org
www.navigatestlschools.org

Our Mission
Our goal is for every St. Louis City family to recognize their right to local schools that serve the unique needs and interests of their children.

We advocate for equitable enrollment and share relevant resources and transparent information about the traditional, charter, magnet, and independent school options available to St. Louis City families, to help guide them as they navigate the St. Louis school search process.

We assist St. Louis City families in making informed decisions about which school is the best fit for their child to thrive.