

PUBLIC SCHOOL CHOICE: A STUDY OF THE PERCEPTIONS OF ALABAMA
PUBLIC SCHOOL PRINCIPALS

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Julius N. Shanks

CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL:

William A. Spencer
Professor
Educational Foundations,
Leadership, and Technology

James E. Witte, Chair
Associate Professor
Educational Foundations,
Leadership, and Technology

Cynthia J. Reed
Associate Professor
Educational Foundations,
Leadership, and Technology

Joe F. Pittman
Interim Dean
Graduate School

PUBLIC SCHOOL CHOICE: A STUDY OF THE PERCEPTIONS OF ALABAMA
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Julius N. Shanks

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Date of Graduation

VITA

Julius N. Shanks, son of Peter A. and the late Aveline C. Shanks, was born September 1, 1973 in Brooklyn, New York. He graduated from John Jay High School in Brooklyn, New York in 1990. He received a Bachelor of Science Degree in Political Science in 1994 from Tuskegee University. He completed a Master of Education in Special Education from Alabama State University in 1996. He received a Sixth Year (AA) Certification in Educational Administration from Auburn University in 2003. He has served in public education as a teacher, assistant principal, principal, and currently a central office director. He is married to Aris Turner and has three sons: Aaron, Julius II, and Joshua.

DISSERTATION ABSTRACT
PUBLIC SCHOOL CHOICE: A STUDY OF THE PERCEPTIONS OF ALABAMA
PUBLIC SCHOOL PRINCIPALS

Julius N. Shanks

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Public School Choice is a controversial educational reform measure that is federally mandated through the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB). The federal Act (NCLB) contains 10 titles that outline assessment mandates, accountability measures, and public school choice policies as a means for narrowing the achievement gap and ensuring that every student is provided a quality educational experience.

This survey-based study explored the perceptions of Alabama public school principals on public school choice. One hundred principals responded to the survey instrument which included twenty questions using a Likert-type scale for responses. The self-reported perceptions of the respondents were analyzed according to personal and school characteristics.

Findings of the study suggest that principals' perceptions of public school choice are impacted by ethnicity, school district classification, level of school choice offered, and percentage of students who participate in the free/reduced lunch program. Principals' gender, educational level, years of experience as a principal or school size were not indicated as having an impact on their perceptions towards public school choice. The principals from this study also were not likely to report public school choice as possessing a threat to the current educational system in the state of Alabama.

This study provided insight for practitioners, parents, researchers, and policy makers as to the perceived effectiveness of public school choice policies by a sample of Alabama public school principals. Therefore, the results reported in this dissertation should be interpreted cautiously.

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I. INTRODUCTION

An educated society is beneficial in sustaining and enhancing an individual's well being, standard of living, and in maintaining a democratic society (Dewey, 1916). John Dewey, an early educational philosopher, viewed American education as a means of creating a social continuity of life (Dewey, 1966). The North American educational system was founded upon the belief that it is essential for citizens to make intelligent and conscious decisions about selecting who will represent them in government (Dewey, 1966).

Horace Mann, as the first Massachusetts Secretary of Education, sought to develop a public educational system in his state to educate children of diverse backgrounds (Bowles & Gintis, 1976). This educational system, known as common schools, was created to promote public education in America and develop the educated citizenry envisioned by John Dewey. Mann theorized that common schools were needed to instill national pride in American children (Bowles & Gintis, 1976).

The purpose of public education in North America is consistently presented as a debatable and challenging issue among practitioners, theorists, and policy makers (Bierlin, 1993; Murphy, 2002; Ravitch, 2000). One fourth of all students entering the ninth grade fail to graduate from high school. The 2000 National Assessment of

Educational Progress also indicated that 63% of African-American and 58 % of Hispanic fourth graders score below a minimal basic level in reading (NAEP, 2000).

According to numerous sources (Citizens Commission on Civil Rights (CCCR), 1999; Cooper, Fusarelli, & Randall, 2004; Raywid, 1990), public education is experiencing a national crisis. Political leaders, business persons, and educators have joined together in search for answers to solve this educational crisis.

Educational reform has become an espoused priority of American presidents for over thirty years. The late President John F. Kennedy attempted to gain passage of an unprecedented federal aid to education bill in 1961 (Berube, 1991; Bierlein, 1993; Ravitch, 2000). However, his successor, former President Lyndon B. Johnson was able to obtain legislative support and he signed the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA) (Berube, 1991). This act focused on ending poverty in North America and increasing the federal government's role in public education. The Elementary and Secondary Education Act proposed an increase in federal funding and mandated accountability for public education (Berube, 1991).

During former President Ronald Reagan's administration in 1983, *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform* was published by the President's Commission on Excellence in Education. This publication called for improving the level of education for the general populace through excellence reform. The National Commission on Excellence in Education (1983) reported:

The educational foundations of our society are presently eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity on our very future as a nation and a people. If an unfriendly foreign power had attempted to impose on America the mediocre educational

performance that exists today, we might have viewed it as an act of war. As it stands, we have allowed this to happen to ourselves. (p. 36)

Raywid (1990) reported that *A Nation at Risk* called for the improvement of public education nationwide in order to compete against our international competitors for an educated workforce. Unfortunately, these mandates were accompanied by a decrease in federal funding (Bacharach, 1990). Another outcome from *A Nation at Risk* was the shift toward decentralization and site-based management for public schools. The focus of this shift is to place greater decision making abilities in the hands of local school administrators (Murphy, 1994; Raywid, 1990; Sergiovanni, 2001).

President George H. Bush's administration launched America 2000: An Education Strategy, which outlined six basic goals that were to be reached by the year 2000 (Simms, 1993). These goals were:

- (1) All children will enter American Schools ready to learn.
- (2) The high school graduation rate will increase to at least 90%.
- (3) American students will achieve demonstrated competence at grades 4, 8, and 12 in challenging subject matter.
- (4) American students will be first in the world in mathematics and science achievement.
- (5) Every adult will be literate and will possess the knowledge and skills necessary to compete in a global economy. They will also be able to exercise their rights and responsibilities.
- (6) Drugs and violence will be eliminated from every American school and they will offer a disciplined environment (Bierlein, 1993, p.60).

These goals were designed at an educational summit where fifty governors were called to establish clear and identifiable national performance goals that will result in American students becoming internationally competitive again (Berube, 1991).

The Clinton administration introduced Goals 2000: Educate America Act. (Elam, 1993). This act sought to decrease the achievement gap and improve literacy in America's schools while building upon the basis of America 2000 (Elam, 1993). Goals 2000 and America 2000 proposed the creation of a new structure to guide the states towards a national strategy for decreasing the achievement gap (Ravitch, 2000). One of the differences between Goals 2000 and America 2000 was the intention for national standards to not be held at the community level (Ravitch, 2000). Goals 2000 was intended to be achieved through the emergence of charter schools, and vouchers which are not always confined to a particular community (Finn, Manno, & Vanourek, 2002).

The most recent educational reform measure presented by current President George W. Bush's administration is the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001. The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001(NCLB), requires public school choice to be fully available in all the nation's school districts for the first time (United States Department of Education, 2002). The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 is the most comprehensive form of federal involvement in education this nation has ever experienced. An espoused theory of this act is to improve student achievement and close the achievement gap between minority and White majority students (Cooper, Fusarelli, & Randall, 2004; Meier & Wood, 2004; U.S. Department of Education, 2002).

A summary of NCLB states that when all students are provided high quality educational options, and when all parents receive enough information to make intelligent

choices among these options, public school choice can increase both equity and excellence in education (U.S. Department of Education, 2002, p. 43). Presently, students attending Title I schools that are failing have the option of transferring to high performing public or if available charter schools (U.S. Department of Education, 2002). As a result,, some researchers report that schools who are not doing well academically will be forced to improve or close (Meier & Wood, 2004; Merrifield, 2002).

According to Lubinseki (2001), public school choice has three prominent models: magnet schools, inter/intra-district enrollment and charter schools. Public school choice differs from school choice because it seeks a solution for remedying educational inequities only from within public school districts (Bierlein, 1993).

School choice is a much broader concept where private as well as public schools are presented as viable options (Levine, 2001). Regardless of the approach, both school choice and public school choice share a common element that parents should be given the right to choose their child's school and consequently direct their child's education (Doerr, 2000; Merrifield, 2002). When examining choice policies the principles of equity, efficiency, liberty, and excellence are reported as visible (Bierlin, 1993).

It is theorized by Bierlin (1993) that choice can be traced back to Milton Friedman an economist, who developed a model to provide parents with educational choices for their children. Friedman outlined this concept in his 1955 book, *Economics and the Public Interest*. Friedman (1962) sought to transfer public monies to private schools in his plan. He noted that public education was mediocre and private schools could do more with the public money. Friedman wrote that the competition model would help all students regardless of financial background (Friedman, 1962). Friedman also

argued that competition is a powerful method to ensure school quality and he theorized that the schools doing well would experience an increase in enrollment and those doing poorly would witness a decrease in student enrollment (Friedman, 1962).

Over the last 30 years, many researchers claim school choice programs were used to desegregate schools, accommodate students' individual needs, provide parents with greater control over their children's education, and produce a more competitive educational system (Chubb & Moe, 1990; Sunderman, Kim, & Orfield, 2005). Some school choice plans offer parents choices within the boundaries of a single school district; others encompass an entire state and let parents choose for all families, whereas others simply offer the promise of choice without and guarantee that quality schools will accept or educate students with limited money or without prior school success (Ritter, Rush, & Rush, 2002). This study will examine public school choice as defined within the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001.

The theoretical framework for this study is predicated upon the concepts that there are present inequities in the educational opportunities for students from low income communities in comparison to economically privileged students. Examining public school choice as an educational reform measure to assist in narrowing the gap in the educational output among these groups is pertinent for policy analysis and effectiveness.

Statement of the Problem

There is a great deal of controversy surrounding the quality of North American education (Kozol, 1991; Murphy, 2002; Cooper, Fusarelli, & Randall, 2004). Public school choice is mandated as a viable educational reform measure under the No Child

Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) to address a number of the deficiencies reported in public education (Sunderman, Kim, & Orfield, 2005).

This research provides a quantitative look at the perceptions of Alabama's public school principals on public school choice as an effective educational reform measure. A principal's perception toward public school choice can positively or negatively impact the implementation of these policies into the total school program. Sergiovanni (2001) states that principals have a great deal of autonomy, which provides freedom for their own values and preferences to influence the professional responsibilities they are given.

Need for the Study

This research has important implications because it assesses and communicates the perceptions of Alabama public school principals on the effectiveness of NCLB's public school choice policy. The increase in site-based management initiatives heightens the responsibilities of the school principal (Murphy, 1994; Sergiovanni, 2001; Vinovskis, 1999; Wilmore, 2002). Principals are responsible for the daily operations within the building; this entails curriculum, human resource management, fiscal monitoring, and student services. Principals are oftentimes the mediators between teachers, parents and the central office (Findley & Findley, 1992; Wilmore, 2002). Therefore, the successful implementation of public school choice policies can be influenced by the principal and their perceptions can transcend to the faculty, parents, and students (Teske, Schneider, Buckley, & Clark, 2000; Wilmore, 2002).

Examining how Alabama public school principals view the federal government's public school choice policies is significant for successful statewide policy realization.

This study will help determine if there are significant differences between the perceptions of principals on public school choice policies in Alabama. This information may also assist in policy and professional development in the subject of public school reform.

Research Questions

The following research questions provide a guide for the study:

1. What are the relationships among principal demographics and their perceptions of public school choice?
2. What are the relationships among school demographics and principal perceptions of public school choice?
3. What are the overall principal perceptions of public school choice?

Definition of Terms

Charter schools — public schools formed through charter agreements between a group of stakeholders and the local board of education (United States Department of Education, 2003).

Inter-district choice — parents are allowed to select a school from outside the district where they reside (Cookson, 1994).

Intra-district choice — provides parents an opportunity to select a school for their child within the district where they reside (Cookson, 1994).

Magnet schools — schools with special instructional programs that were designed to attract students to normally unpopular urban areas, often for the purpose of promoting racial balance (Cookson, 1994).

Public school choice — federal mandate that requires students who are presently in a school that is failing the ability to choose to attend a better school within the district or in a neighboring district if a better school does not exist within the student's geographical zone and transportation is provided by the home district (United States Department of Education, 2002).

School choice — Parents are given opportunities to choose schools other than those assigned by their local district or even enroll their children in private schools if they can afford to do so (Cookson, 1994).

Title I (schools with a student population of greater than fifty percent who participate in free/reduced lunch program) — schools that fall within one of the following categories must offer public school choice to their students:

1. Schools that are in their first year of school improvement. (This is achieved after two consecutive years of not meeting adequate yearly progress (AYP) as defined by the State Department of Education).
2. Schools that are in the second year of school improvement.
3. Schools that are in corrective action.
4. Schools that are restructuring (U.S. Department of Education, 2002, p. 4).

Limitations

1. The study was limited to the responses provided by Alabama public school principals who attended the Council for Leaders in Alabama Schools (CLAS) convention during the summer of 2005. Therefore, it may be difficult to make generalizations about principal perceptions on public

school choice in other states or on all of Alabama's public school principals.

2. There was no measure for non-response bias.
3. The study relied on self-reporting and it was not possible to determine the veracity of the responses in relationship to the respondents' practices at their schools.
4. This was an exploratory study on principals' perceptions; therefore, the collected data should be viewed as baseline.

Assumptions

Data were collected through the use of a researcher-developed survey instrument. In defining survey research, Babbie (1999) notes survey research is perhaps the most frequently used mode of observation in the social sciences. It is probably the best method available to the investigator for collecting original data when describing a population too large to observe or interview. It is assumed that the principals had sufficient knowledge to answer the survey questions, survey participants were honest in their responses to the questions, and the survey instrument was reliable and valid.

Results

The purpose of the pilot study was to enhance the validity of the instrument as a consistent stage in the research process (Rea & Parker, 1997). An analysis of reliability was also conducted. According to Rea and Parker (1997), mathematically, reliability is

defined as the proportion of the variability in the responses to the survey that is the result of differences in the respondents.

Once modifications were made, the survey instrument was then distributed to 115 public school principals who are currently working in the state of Alabama. A cover letter and consent form (Appendix C) accompanied each survey to explain the purpose of the study. The data were collected at the annual Council for Leaders in Alabama's Schools (CLAS) convention held in Mobile, Alabama during 2005 for principals and other school district administrators. The surveys were numbered from 100 to 300. The investigator was responsible for the printing of materials, distribution, and collection of the surveys. A return rate of eighty-five percent was achieved. The data were analyzed using SPSS version 11.0 by utilizing descriptive and inferential statistics.

Significance of the Study

This research sought to examine the perceptions of public school principals on public school choice policy implementation in Alabama. The principals surveyed in Alabama provided information as to the perceived successes, failures, and obstacles related to public school choice. An analysis of public school choice is necessary because public school choice is a locally implemented national educational reform measure designed to close the achievement gap existing in public education.

Summary

This chapter presented a brief review of some of the background leading to public school choice as a national educational reform method. The definition of public school

choice as adopted through the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) was outlined. The rationale, purpose, and questions that guided the study were presented. Chapter two reviews the literature related to the implementation of public school choice policies. Chapter three outlines the research methods used in the study. In Chapter four, the hypotheses are statistically analyzed, tested for significance, and the findings are presented. Finally, in Chapter five, conclusions are drawn about the relationships between the perceptions of principals on public school choice according to the findings. A summary, implications, and recommendations for further research are also presented in chapter five.

II. REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

The purpose of the literature review is to provide a contextual framework for acquiring an understanding of the issues involved in the public school choice movement. This review begins with an overview of a historical perspective of American education, an examination of federal involvement in American education, and an analysis of public school choice as an educational reform strategy.

A purpose of education in the United States is to develop deliberative or democratic character (Dewey, 1966). This purpose can be accomplished through a common set of values and knowledge to create citizens who can function democratically (Levin, 1987). Dewey (1916) defined public schooling as a safeguard for democracy. Democracies need citizenship, and good citizens need to be educated (Dewey, 1916). A standard curriculum is needed to prepare citizens to effectively participate in an open political system as law-abiding, competent, and active individuals. No other social institution can perform this task other than schools (Dewey, 1916).

Horace Mann, the first Secretary of Education for the state of Massachusetts, launched the common school movement because of the increase in illiteracy and the emergence of political strife within his state (Heemst, 2004). All students were included in the attendance of schools regardless of race, class, or religious affiliation. Children

were assigned to specific schools based on their family's place of residence termed as common schools.

Mann also wrote that public schools were common schools whose primary purpose was to educate and socialize all citizens into the American way of life. It was theorized that anyone could be molded into a productive citizen because of the common school (Heemst, 2004). Lubienski (2001) described the common schools:

As the greatest discovery ever made by man... Other social organizations are curative and remedial; let the Common School be expanded to its capabilities, let it be worked with the efficiency of which it is susceptible, and nine tenths of the crimes in the penal code would become obsolete; the long catalogue of human ills would be abridged; men would walk more safely by day; every pillow would be more inviolable by night; property, life, and character held by a stronger tenure. (Mann, 1841, p. 15 as cited in Lubenski, 2001)

Common schools were designed as community institutions which operated under religious control, funded by a combination of local and private funds, and managed at the discretion of the community (Finn, Manno, & Vanourek, 2002). According to Kaestle (1983), charity schools, tax-supported free schools, independent pay schools, tutoring, dame schools, church schools, elite boarding schools, town, district, and ward schools were widely viewed as public schools.

Education was believed to provide an opportunity that would equalize diversity among different social groups or classes. The common school movement became widely welcomed by the American public and by 1860; over 50% of the nation's children were enrolled in schools that were financed mainly through property taxes (Bierlein, 1993).

A Historical Perspective of School Choice

Thomas Paine is credited as being the first American to propose granting families public funding to purchase education for their children (Coons & Sugarman, 1978). In his book *The Rights of Man* (1792), he outlined a system of income tax to give poor families an opportunity to educate their children. John Stuart Mill proposed a similar plan with the exception that the rights of the individual child were paramount. He wrote:

Children should be guaranteed access to education deemed appropriate by their parents.... The response is that the right to education should not be limited by parental resources; parental duty regarding education. Therefore, unless the child is taken from his parents, this requires a subsidy of the parents by the state. This way the child's hope for an education can be delivered. (Coons & Sugarman, 1978, p. 25)

Mill acknowledged that the state was responsible for the enforcement of compulsory education, but he believed parents had a right to choose which school would provide this education (Heemst, 2004). Dewey (1966) also notes, "what the best and wisest parent wants for his own child that must the community want for all its children" (p. 3).

Friedman (1962) noted that government should have a limited scope in education and competitive capitalism should be the order. He theorized that a democratic society must have a literate populace (Friedman, 1962). Friedman further contended that education benefits not only the individual and his parents but also the overall society. The "gains of education to a child accrues not only to the child or to his parents but also to other members of the society" (Friedman, 1962, p. 26). Friedman suggested a voucher

plan where parents would receive a specified sum of money per child to expend on appropriate educational services with standards minimally set by the government. The educational services could be provided by, private enterprises or non-profit institutions. This system placed the level of control in the hands of parents where they could have a substantial voice in their child's education. It was theorized by Friedman that a voucher plan would force schools to operate according to the demands of the parents. Friedman also argued that government support of public schools protects the schools and provides them with an unfair advantage when compared to non-public institutions (Friedman, 1962).

A premise of Friedman's plan is that families with less wealth would not have the same opportunities to attend the caliber of schools and be exposed to the level of educational services as their privileged peers without financial assistance (Friedman, 1962). Therefore, conducting a government sponsored voucher system will provide equalization of educational opportunities. However, the type of educational reform system proposed by Friedman gave affluent families an advantage for they would be able to put more personal resources along with the assigned voucher amount to participate in private education as opposed to parents who are not as privileged (Bierlin, 1993).

Federal Involvement in American Education

Failure to mention education in the constitution does not indicate a non-existent federal role in public education (Berube, 1991). The Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment is a mandate for federal departments and agencies to monitor discrimination against children (Citizens Commission on Civil Rights, 2004). Thomas

Jefferson clearly noted the need for public education in order to make democracy work (Pierce, 1987). Jefferson theorized that the ultimate powers of society rest in the hands of the people. If we believe the people are incapable of exercising this power, the solution is not to disarm them but to enhance their discretion by education (Pierce, 1987). Jefferson contended education was critical because it not only affected the needs of the church, community, and even the state, but it was in the best interest of the nation's destiny (Burke, 1990).

Responsibility for providing formal education was reserved for the communities where schools exist. The first school legislation in America was passed by the Massachusetts Colony in 1642 and again with the Old Deluder Act in 1647. This law detailed that "every township in this jurisdiction, after the Lord hath increased them to the number of fifty householders, shall then forthwith appoint one within their own to teach all such children as shall resort to them to write and read, whose wages shall be paid either by the parents or masters of such children or by the inhabitants in general" (Pierce, 1987, p. 12). As time passed and the scrutiny of public schools heightened the federal government increased its involvement in public education.

According to Pierce (1987) the first direct support education received from the federal government was the provision in the Northwest Ordinance of 1785 that allocated the sixteenth section of each township of federal land to the states for the establishment and support of public schools. The ordinance also established categorical grants of federal funds to support schools. Through the years, federal funds have been appropriated to support specific purposes of education in the states (Berube, 1991).

The U.S. Office of Education was established in 1867 with the limited function of gathering statistics and later to conduct research on teaching methods (Burke, 1990). The Office of Education drafted the Smith Hughes Act of 1917 that granted funds to states for an explicit educational purpose with the submittal of an acceptable state plan. The requirement that federal funding is contingent on states meeting federal conditions and regulations began with the Smith Hughes Act (Burke, 1990).

The federal government increased its interest in education during the early sixties for two major purposes: national security and social reform (Pierce, 1987). The government's interest can be traced to the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, which denied school systems federal funding if they failed to comply with the mandates outlined in the act. The passage of the 1964 Act was the result of the Supreme Court ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) stating that racial segregation in public elementary and high schools is unconstitutional in that it violates the equal protection clause of the Fourteenth Amendment to the Constitution (CCCR, 2004).

In 1954, Justice Warren summarized that in the field of public education, the doctrine of separate but equal has no place. The *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) ruling resulted in Black students, previously prevented from entering White schools in the South, attending integrated schools in increasing numbers (CCCR, 2004). The Supreme Court's opinion in *Brown v. Board of Education* produced significant and positive changes in American society (Hurn, 1993).

According to Hurn (1993), the ruling that segregated schools were unequal because they were inherently inferior sent a resounding message throughout the South and the nation as a whole. Therefore, the Court opened the way to a much broader

conception of equality in educational opportunities, one that stressed the communities' or the school's responsibility to make opportunities available to everyone (Hurn,1993). The courts increasingly began to rule that equality of educational opportunity required that black and other minority students should experience practiced rather than espoused opportunities to attend the same schools as white students (Heemst, 2004). The expansion of federal scrutiny was needed in order to guarantee the equal protection and due process clauses were being upheld in public education (Hurn, 1993).

Wells (1996) stated that many Americans refer to school desegregation as a failed social reform, one that resulted in unexpected white flight, and resegregation. This resegregation was often accompanied by continued educational inequities (Wells,1996). Many states and districts defied the federal government's mandate for desegregation until the early 1970s. The Center for Education Reform (2002) noted that America faces a widening gap between good and bad schools, between the students who get a substantial education and those who emerge from school barely able to function academically.

Poor and minority children have a propensity to attend inferior schools, have less expected of them, are taught by less knowledgeable teachers, and have the least power to change their educational situations (Heemst, 2004). Heemst (2004) also noted that African-Americans, more than other groups, live in the poorest, least attractive, and most dangerous communities within metropolitan regions. As a result of policies whereby students are assigned to schools on the basis of where they live, public schools inherit all of the racial inequalities that plague housing markets. African -Americans appear to suffer most under a system of public education based on residency (Heemst, 2004).

In 1966, Congress commissioned a major analysis of educational inequality in America known as the Coleman Report, named after its author, sociologist James Coleman (Berube, 1991). A major finding from the Coleman report was:

Schools bring little influence to bear on a child's achievement that is independent of the background and general social context; and that this very lack of an independent effect means that the inequalities imposed on children by their home, neighborhood, and peer environment are carried along to become the inequalities with which they confront adult life at the end of school. (Berube, 1991, p. 31)

The results of the Coleman Report led to a number of federal programs to address the War on Poverty during Lyndon B. Johnson's presidency. The Act containing these programs was the 1965 Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). This act focused on adding poverty to the list of differences that needed equitable treatment. The Elementary and Secondary Education Act began the advent of active and heightened federal involvement in education (Lee, 2002). The following timeline illustrates the unique influence individual president's had on American public education. Beginning with former President Lyndon B. Johnson and concluding with the current presidency of George W. Bush.

Lyndon B. Johnson's Presidency (1963-1969)

The Elementary and Secondary Act of 1965 (ESEA) originated at the end of John F. Kennedy's presidency as the School Assistance Act of 1961 (CCCR, 2004). Former President Johnson theorized that if poor children were provided a higher quality of education as their more advantaged counterparts, they ultimately could escape the vicious cycle of poverty (Borman, 2003). Former President Johnson stated: We have the

opportunity to move not only toward the rich society, but upward to the Great Society. We need to build the Great Society in our cities, in our countryside, and in our classrooms (Berube, 1991 p. 60).

Viteritti (1999) noted that poor schools have a greater negative impact on disadvantaged students than other children; while good schools have a stronger positive impact on disadvantaged students. Quality education is the best way to empower the most disadvantaged students. Educational opportunity is the new civil rights struggle (Heemst, 2004).

According to the CCCR (1999), Title I a major section of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act authorized \$1 billion for compensatory education programs for those whose economic deprivation led to educational disadvantages. Title II provided \$100 million for books and other instructional materials. Another \$100 million under Title II for education improvement centers was intended to provide school districts with mobile libraries, labs, audiovisual materials, and television equipment, programmed learning materials, and guidance services. Title IV established a network of university-based educational research centers. Title V provided \$25 million to State Departments of Education in order to strengthen their coordination and information functions but federal funds were denied to segregated school districts (CCCR, 1999).

Richard M. Nixon's Presidency (1969-1974)

The Education Amendments of 1972 was an educational initiative under former President Nixon's administration. It extended ESEA and added several major new programs including the Emergency School Aid Act (ESAA) and the creation of the National Institute of Education (Stickney & Marcus, 1984). The 1972 version of ESEA

contained provisions to help raise the achievement levels of minority children whose educational opportunities were hampered by racial isolation exasperated by the operation of segregated schools. The Act under former President Nixon focused heavily on in-service teacher education programs in such areas as race relations and cultural heritage courses (Bierlin, 1993).

1. The purpose of the Emergency School Aid Act was to provide financial assistance: to meet the special needs incident to the elimination of minority group segregation and discrimination among students and faculty in elementary and secondary schools (Stickney & Marcus, 1984, p. 24).

For school districts to receive their funding allocations under the ESAA, they had to meet the requirements of the Office for Civil Rights of the Department of Health, Education and Welfare (HEW).

Jimmy Carter's Presidency (1977–1981)

The education amendments of 1978, during the presidency of Jimmy Carter updated ESEA (CCCR, 1999). The major changes, according to Stickney and Marcus (1984), was a greater allotment of Title I funds were given to central cities and poor rural school districts. On October 17, 1979, the Federal Department of Education was created to effectively design and monitor educational policies. Former President Jimmy Carter's signing of PL 96-88 which states "that Congress declares the establishment of a Department of Education is in the public interest, to promote the general welfare of the United States, help to ensure that education receives proper treatment at the federal level, and can enable the federal government to coordinate its educational activities more

effectively” provided an increased federal effort to improve American public education (Stickney & Marcus, 1984, p. 67).

The Secretary of Education became a member of the President’s cabinet in 1979. The department had 152 programs, six different Cabinet departments, and a budget over \$14 billion (Martin & Burke, 1990). According to Stickney and Marcus (1984),

It is the intention of the Congress ... to protect the rights of state and local governments and public and private educational institutions in the areas of educational policies and administration of programs. To also strengthen and improve the control of such governments and institutions over their own educational programs and policies. The establishment of the Department of Education shall not increase the authority of the federal government over education which is reserved to local school systems and other instrumentalities of the states. (p. 54)

Illinois Congressman John Erlenborn stated that:

The creation of the Department of Education would place more educational decision making as to course content, textbook content, and curriculum to be made in Washington at the expense of local diversity ... The Department of Education will end up being the nation’s super school board (Stickney & Marcus, 1984, p. 54).

Congressman Erlenborn was joined in his opposition to the creation of the Department of Education by Monsignor Wilfred Paradis, the Secretary of Education of the United States Catholic Conference, who stated “there is good reason to fear that a new Department of Education will further increase federal interference in both public and private education

in areas that rightfully belong to parents and the local community (Stickney & Marcus, 1984, p. 55).

Ronald Reagan's Presidency (1981–1989)

In 1981, American education witnessed a new form of leadership under then President Ronald Reagan. Former President Reagan sought to dissolve the United States Department of Education in his effort to create federal budget cuts. President Reagan proposed replacing the Department of Education with a Foundation for Education Assistance accompanied by a significantly reduced budget of \$8.8 billion (Stickney & Marcus, 1984). President Reagan stated that the “creation of the Department of Education symbolized the progressive intrusion of the federal government into an educational system that has drawn its strength from diversity, adaptability, and local control” (Stickney & Marcus, 1984, p.57).

President Reagan had an ideology of less government interference and removed many of the educational mandates that were implemented under the Johnson administration (Berube, 1991). The result of the reductions would lead to massive reversal in the long trend towards increased federal involvement in public education and a return of the basic public service to state and local jurisdictions. School systems were no longer required to provide the programs that were designed to meet the needs of minority students (Lee, 2002).

During President Reagan's administration, *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform* was published under the direction of then Secretary of Education Terrel H. Bell and the National Commission on Excellence in Education (NCEE). This publication called for improving the level of education for all Americans (Martin &

Burke, 1990). *A Nation at Risk* concerned many citizens and launched an excellence movement as opposed to the equity movement that was the premise of the previous presidential administrations (Ravitch, 2000). The recommended reforms outlined by the commission included requiring all diploma-seeking high school students to be versed in the Five New Basics which should involve successful completion of:

- (a) four years of English;
- (b) three years of mathematics;
- (c) three years of science;
- (d) three years of social studies;
- (e) one-half year of computer science (Stickney & Marcus, 1984, p. 180).

A heavily emphasized re-organizational focus under the recommended reform was a shift towards site-based management. Local educators and administrators were given more control over managing their schools, but they were also accountable for students achieving the desired results (National Commission on Educational Excellence, 1983). The school personnel were expected to ensure that every child reach a certain standard of performance but state and local governments were not provided any new funding to achieve the desired results and in fact experienced a decrease in federal funding (Schmitz, 1990).

According to Schmitz (1990), the Reagan administration consolidated all monies and gave the power of allocation to each state. The local districts were empowered with the ability to structure programs that were tailored to the needs of the academically superior students. Children in need socially and academically frequently found themselves left behind (Berube, 1991).

George H. W. Bush's Presidency (1989–1993)

During President George H. W. Bush's administration, six educational goals labeled as America 2000: An Education Strategy, were developed under the hope that the goals would be attained by the year 2000 (Elam, 1993). Those goals were:

1. By the year 2000, all children in America will start school ready to learn.
2. By the year 2000, the high school graduation rate will increase to at least 90%.
3. By the year 2000, American students will leave grades 4, 8, and 12 having demonstrated competency in subject matter.
4. By the year 2000, American students will be the first in the world in mathematics and science achievement.
5. By the year 2000, every adult will be literate and possess the skills necessary to compete in a global economy.
6. By the year 2000, every school in America will be free of drugs and violence and will offer a disciplined school environment conducive to learning (Elam, 1993, p. 41).

The responsibility for achieving these goals rested heavily on the states and local communities without an increase in federal funding allocations to propel this plan (Bierlein, 1993).

William J. Clinton's Presidency (1994–2002)

Former President Clinton's educational plan, known as Goals 2000, grew out of Former President H. W. Bush's plan, America 2000. Goals 2000 was initiated to help states and communities realize the national commitment of ensuring that all children

reach high academic standards. Goals 2000 was designed around three overarching principles (U.S. Department of Education, 2003):

1. Students learn best when their teachers, administrators and the community share clear and common expectations for education. States, districts, and schools need to agree on challenging content and performance standards that define what children should know and be able to do.
2. Student achievement improves in environments that support learning to high expectations. The instructional system must support fulfillment of those expectations. School improvement efforts need to include broad parent and community involvement, school organization, and coordinated resources.
3. Student success stems from concentrating on results. Education reform needs to be results oriented through reliable and aligned means that answer the critical, bottom-line question, to what extent are students and schools meeting the standards? Carefully developed accountability systems for interpreting and responding to results and supporting improved student performance for all children must be implemented (U. S. Department of Education, 2003, p.21).

According to Ravitch (2000), Goals 2000 was influenced by the 1992 report of the National Council on Education Standards and Testing (NCEST), a group initiated by then Secretary Lamar Alexander, authorized by Congress, and made up of various stakeholders. This group was to advise the federal government on the feasibility of establishing national standards and a national system of assessments. The national system

of assessments was to serve only as a guide for the development of state standards and benchmarks. Goals 2000 was designed as a vehicle to facilitate state defined reform strategies as opposed to demanding federal mandates that were introduced in America 2000. Goals 2000 differed from America 2000, where national standards held weight at the community level (Ravitch, 2000).

Ravitch (2000) reported another major educational reform stemming from the Clinton Administration was the reauthorization of Title I. The reform was based on a shift from remedial education to higher standards and higher achievement. The reforms called for raising academic standards, building the capacity of schools, adopt testing and assessments that fairly and accurately measure what children know, ensuring accountability by school officials, and the inclusion of all children (CCCR, 2002).

Prior to the reauthorization of Title I, which was renamed Chapter I from 1981 to 1994, this federal mandate required accountability for finances and not student achievement. The CCCR (2002) asserts that there will be little hope for schools to improve without the strong intervention, support, and accountability measures intertwined within this federal law. One researcher noted that Title I could magnify its impact substantially if a portion of Title I funds could be devoted to improving curriculum, instructional practices, classroom management skills, assessment practices, other skills of the regular classroom teachers, enable schools to engage in school-wide improvements in organization, professional development, and parental involvement. (CCCR, 1999) The effectiveness of Title I was questioned by a group of congressional lawmakers because:

1. It was designed to teach only the basics,

2. High expectations for poor and minority students were implemented,
3. A number of the youngsters were subject to classroom pull-outs for remediation (CCCR, 1999, p. 25).

The 1994 amendments for Title I require that states and school districts:

1. Set high standards for all students, including low-income and limited English proficient students, in all subjects.
2. Develop new assessments that measure the progress of students, schools, and school districts in meeting high standards.
3. Schools and districts that have a high concentration of children from low-income families will receive targeted resources.
4. Develop accountability measures for school districts and individual schools in order to meet the goal of high student achievement.
5. School-wide improvements are encouraged in schools where more than half the children are from low-income families.
6. Ensure that Title I schools have the capacity to teach to high standards, including adequate professional development, and the accessibility to extra resources for eligible schools (CCCR, 2002, p. 3).

Title I allows states to design their own standards, assessments, and reform efforts, with the following key elements for meaningful school improvements:

1. Adequate yearly progress (AYP);
2. Public engagement;
3. Identification and help for schools in need of improvement;
4. Corrective action; and

5. State plans by the State Department of Education (CCCR, 2002, p. 4).

The United States Department of Education (2002) noted that a major purpose of federal assistance is to promote both excellence and equity by providing additional resources to help historically underserved groups of children reach the goals for academic achievement that their state establishes for all children (CCCR, 2002, p. 97).

Levine (2002) reported “that we live in an age where an education is a requirement for success in a capitalist nation. Sending a child to a poor school is to deny him or her future or a chance of success. When such choices are based solely on parent’s income it should be viewed as a sin” (Levine, 2002, p. 32). Kahlenberg (2001) wrote that Abraham Lincoln noted education as the most important subject a people can be involved in. Today education constitutes the single largest budget item in nearly every state budget, and still there is a large segment of the population receiving substandard education.

The first structural barrier that poor children face is that North America’s K–12 educational system is based upon one’s place of residence (Heemst, 2004). The most urgent need in North American education is to remove the barriers to opportunity that now face poor children, particularly children of color, children with disabilities, and children with limited proficiency in English. Those students who live in poverty, a condition that disproportionately affects Black, Latino, and other minority children encounter the greatest obstacles (Yu, & Taylor, 1999). Schmitz (1990) also states,

... regardless of their racial background ... urban disadvantaged children become part of the decaying landscape of the inner-city. Most tragic is that states deny

these children the only leverage which could lift them from the impoverished underclass; an adequate, equal education. (p. 21)

Obstacles that at-risk students are likely to encounter are under-qualified teachers, less access to needed services such as early literacy programs, counseling and professional development for teachers (Heemst, 2004).

No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001

George W. Bush's Presidency (2001–)

The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001, implemented under current President George W. Bush, is the most comprehensive educational reform model experienced in public education (Sunderman, Kim, & Orfield, 2005). Throughout educational history, the federal government seldom intervened in what has traditionally been a state responsibility (Koscyczuk, 2002). In its 1,100 pages, this federal act contains 10 titles that are filled with assessment mandates, accountability measures, and public school choice policies as a means for solving the educational crises perceived to be prevalent in this country. NCLB endorses the belief that all students can learn through high-quality instruction and access to a strong curriculum (CCCR, 2004).

In addition to specific accountability measures, the standards-based framework of NCLB requires that expert assistance be provided to students and schools needing significant improvement. The standards framework calls upon all those responsible for delivering public education, teachers, school and district administrators, and state officials to be held accountable for achieving a measurable level of student performance. NCLB aspires to close achievement gaps among subgroups of racial/ethnic minorities,

low-income students, students with disabilities, and students with limited English proficiency (CCCR, 2004).

President Bush signed the NCLB Act on January 8, 2002. The No Child Left Behind Act imposes obligations on states and local public education agencies receiving federal funds under Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (U.S. Department of Education, 2002). Title I is the federal government's largest program of educational assistance to elementary and secondary schools, providing over \$8 billion annually to meet the needs of disadvantaged students (CCCR, 1999). NCLB uses the leverage of federal funding under Title I to force state compliance with its testing and measurement requirements (Symonds, 2002). The United States Department of Education (2002) purports that "When all students ... are provided high quality educational options and when all parents receive enough information to make intelligent choices among these options public school choice can increase both equity and excellence in education" (p. 37). NCLB is based upon four pillars:

- 1) Accountability for results
- 2) Changes based upon scientific research
- 3) Expanded parental options; and
- 4) Expanded local control and flexibility (U.S. Department of Education, 2003, p. 37).

President George W. Bush was quoted as saying that NCLB when fully implemented will:

Establish a system of rewards and punishment for schools, which would be judged by how well their students do on new annual exams in grades three

through eight.... Children in schools that consistently test poorly and fail to boost scores for two consecutive years would be able to transfer to other public schools or to charter schools at public expense. (Koszczuk, 2002, p. 14)

The ultimate goal of this act is to have all students enrolled in America's public schools reading at or above grade level by the year 2014 (U.S. Department of Education, 2002).

Assumptions underlining NCLB are:

1. Schools fail because the leadership and staff are disinterested or inept.
2. If they are given some aid and if they are threatened with mass withdrawal of their students and also with termination, the leaders and staff will turn things around. This implies that they know how to improve student achievement but don't and will not do so.
3. There are enough good performing schools to absorb students from all of the poor performing schools (Schwebel, 2003, p. 43).

No Child Left Behind represents a significant breakthrough on the road to equal educational opportunity in America. Almost all knowledgeable people can agree that schooling for poor children is in a crisis state (Sunderman, Kim, & Orfield, 2005). Many poor children, particularly children of color, live and attend school in areas of concentrated poverty (CCCR, 2002). The fault for these conditions is not to be blamed on the children but in our schools, our society, and ourselves (CCCR, 1999, p. 64). Kozol (1995) also asserts that Americans should be indicted for their conscious neglect and their collective devaluation of these children and their families; he argues that persistent and concentrated poverty is not accidental and that structural economic inequities require both a political and a theological response.

However, all students within a failing school must be offered public school choice before the beginning of the school year. The school must provide notification to parents in a comprehensive format and in a language that parents can understand (CCCR, 2004).

The notification must cover the following:

1. Inform the parents that their child is eligible to attend another public school due to the below standard performance of their current school;
2. List each public school, including public charter schools, that the parent can select;
3. Explain why their may be limited choices;
4. Describe the performance and quality of those schools of choice; and
5. What the current school is doing to improve achievement and the help it is getting from district or state officials (U.S. Department of Education, 2002, p. 8).

In addition to mailing notices directly to the parents,

6. The school district must provide information about choice options through broader means, including newspapers, posters, and the internet.
7. The school district must ensure that the parents have sufficient time to make an informed decision about selecting a school (U.S. Department of Education, 2002, p. 9).

Schools that are found in one of the four following categories must offer choice to their students.

1. Schools that are in their first year of school improvement. (This is achieved after two consecutive years of not meeting adequate yearly progress (AYP) as defined by the State Department of Education).
2. Schools that are in the second year of school improvement.
3. Schools that are in corrective action.
4. Schools that are in restructuring (U.S. Department of Education, 2002, p. 4).

Public school choice has three prominent models: Magnet Schools, Inter/Intra-district transfers, and Charter Schools. These choice plans vary on degree of control where magnet schools generally keep the authority within the central management and charters are on the opposite end of the spectrum with a degree of exemption from state and local regulations (Ogawa & Dutton, 1994). Meier (1996) explains an important distinction between choice and public school choice: as two unrelated perspectives, with the same word within them. Choice refers to private enterprise and the means to get rid of public education. Public school choice seeks to create educational reforms through recreating the prototype model of education.

Public school choice is designed to provide an immediate benefit to students in low performing schools by enabling them to transfer to high performing schools, while special efforts are made to improve the quality of education in their original school. Students will have the option to transfer to other public schools or a public charter school that is not in school improvement (U.S. Department of Education, 2002).

No Child Left Behind does not outline inter-district transfers as a mandated reform strategy. However, the federal government strongly encourages inter-district

transfers for school districts where all of the schools are within one of the requirement categories for public school choice (CCCR, 2002). These school districts must make a concerted effort to form an agreement with a neighboring school district or public charter school that does not have a school under any form of school improvement (U.S. Department of Education, 2002). If a child's school fails to make AYP for three consecutive years, the district is required to provide students with the opportunity to enroll in supplemental services. These services are essentially providers such as private tutoring companies who are paid out of a portion of a district's Title I funds (Hess & Finn, 2004). The final stage for schools failing to show progress for five consecutive years is to create a restructure plan with one of the following themes:

1. Reopen the school as a public charter school.
2. Replace all or most of the school staff that are associated with the school's failure to meet AYP including the principal.
3. Formulate a contract with a private entity that has a track record for operating a public school.
4. Relinquish operation of the school to the state department of education if permitted by state law and agreed upon by the state.
5. Any other major restructuring of a school's governance agreement (Education Commission of the States, 2004).

The following table outlines the stages that a Title I school could possibly experience under NCLB.

Table 1

NCLB School Improvement Timeline

Year 1	Baseline Performance	
Year 2	Fail to make AYP	No consequences
Year 3	Fail to make AYP	No consequences
Year 4	1st year of School Improvement	Develop two-year school improvement plan, technical assistance, public school choice
Year 5	2nd year of School Improvement	Technical assistance, public school choice, supplemental educational services
Year 6	Corrective Action	Technical assistance, public school choice, supplemental educational services. Take at least one of the following corrective actions to bring about meaningful change at the school: Replace school staff Implement a new curriculum based on scientifically based research
Year 7	Restructuring	Public school choice, supplemental educational services, create a plan for restructuring, carry out one of the following options: Reopen school as a charter school Replace principal and staff

(table continues)

Table 1 (continued)

		Contract with private management company with demonstrated effectiveness
		State takeover
		Any other major restructuring of school governance
Year 8	Implementation of Restructuring	Implement alternate governance plan developed in year seven no later than first day of school year.

^a Plan must include research-based strategies, a 10% set-aside of Title 1 funds for professional development, extended learning time as appropriate, strategies to promote parental involvement and mentoring for new teachers.

^b Assistance must address the academic achievement problem that caused the school to be identified (CCCR, 2004 p.27).

Low performing schools will have either to improve or face closure. The key to survival would rest upon effective school organization that can guarantee student achievement at the required state and federal level (U.S. Department of Education, 2002). The federal government set the foundation for the implementation of NCLB; however, the law gives limited guidance on the actual implementation at the school level (Wayson & Wilson, 2003). To underline the support of public school choice, the federal government within the Department of Education established an Office of Innovation and

Improvement headed by a Deputy Undersecretary. This office administers two dozen discretionary grant programs, including the Voluntary Public School Choice program with \$25 million in FY 2002 and close to \$ 27 million in FY 2004 (CCCR, 2004). The Office of Innovation and Improvement also oversees the public school choice and supplemental educational services requirements in NCLB (CCCR, 2004).

Magnet Schools

During the 1970s, many school districts established magnet schools within the efforts to desegregate public schools and their districts (Alves & Willie, 1990; Blank, Levine & Steel, 1996). The Supreme Court in 1971 concluded in the decision of *Swann v. Charlotte-Mecklenburg Board of Education* that a range of strategies including quotas, transportation, and designing new attendance zones could achieve racial balance pairing schools (Goldring & Smrekar, 2000). Magnet schools focus on a particular segment of the curriculum, such as art or music, or a particular profession, such as law or medicine. The great majority of magnet schools in the U.S. can be found in urban areas and over fifty percent are located in low-income neighborhoods (Levine, 1997). At least a third of the students in Los Angeles, Cincinnati, and Buffalo, New York, attend magnet schools (Colvin, 2004). Only about a third of all magnet programs use selective admissions policy, and they usually involve a minimum test score requirement or an audition in a performing arts magnet school (CCCR, 1999). The magnet design, allows parents opportunities to choose or switch schools. Schools developed programs to attract students and parents; the most popular programs were duplicated to avoid monopolies (Viteritti, 1999).

For example, one may find a magnet school that has an emphasis on the performing arts, hard sciences, languages, mathematics, and career orientations (Chubb & Moe, 1990). According to the 1997 report by the Citizens' Commission on Civil Rights (CCCR, 1997),

magnet schools offer effectiveness in reducing racial isolation and providing high quality educational programs ... that benefit all students regardless of race, sex, or national origin ... encourage desegregation, and satisfy the test of serving poor children more effectively than the schools they previously attended. (p. 37)

Magnet schools are viewed as an effective way to enhance diversity and equity among schools, increase educational quality in a school district and stabilize enrollment (Smrekar & Goldring, 1999). The funds to create magnet schools were made available through the federal Magnet Schools Assistance Program (MSAP) which began administering funds in 1985. These funds are made available to districts that are implementing magnet programs voluntarily or under court desegregation orders (CCCR, 1997).

Black (1996) noted that although the primary focus of magnet schools may be to create schools with high interest, motivation, and learning for students with support and satisfaction for parents, their survival depends on addressing diverse student populations effectively. A number of studies have been conducted on magnet school's effectiveness in reducing racial isolation and providing high quality educational programs (Black, 1996). The Citizen's Commission on Civil Rights (CCCR, 1997) concluded that magnet schools encouraged desegregation and met the test of serving poor children more

effectively than the schools they previously attended, and therefore should be greatly expanded. Metz (1990) concludes that:

The nation currently operates a system of choice in education that is based upon residence and the availability of private education for the have's. The broad costs and benefits of magnet schools, and their specific effects on equity, must be calculated within the context of the reality. (p. 143)

Magnet schools have become successful to the level where many parents would leave private schools if their child is afforded an opportunity to attend a magnet school (Algozzine, Yon, Nesbit, & Nesbit, 1999). Magnet schools provide an avenue for parental and student choice (Mac & Abele, 2000). Students who entered the magnet schools reading on an average level tended to improve their reading achievement more than comparable students who attended regular schools. The magnet school students also earned more credit toward graduation and were less likely to drop out before high school (Crain, Heebner, & Y-P Si, 1992). At the beginning of the 21st century, there was a record 1,400 magnet schools (CCCR, 2002). Most magnet schools identify with the following three characteristics:

1. a distinctive curriculum based on a special theme or instructional method;
2. voluntary school of choice by the student and the parent, with variable criteria established for inclusion; and
3. access to students beyond an attendance or single subdivision of a district (Douzenis, 1994; Greenwood, Horton & Utley, 2002).

Thacker (1997) wrote that strong administrative leadership, clear instructional focus, high expectations, a safe environment, and parental involvement help provide the attractiveness of magnet schools (Blank et al., 1996).

Opponents of magnet schools suggest the high academic achievement experienced by magnet school students is due to the creation of an inequitable system, where the cream is skimmed from off the top and a two-tiered educational system exists (Archibald, 1996). The creaming is based on the assumption that many low-income families are not exposed to the information, time, and access to transportation needed to attend the magnet school (Moore & Davenport, 1989). Also, the belief that magnet schools possess a greater amount of resources, committed teachers, and educationally supportive parents is another factor in their reported high achievement (Hurn, 1993).

Magnet schools can be labeled as a catalyst, to the elitism and socioeconomic segregation that can be commonly found within schools of choice (Hurn, 1993). West (1994) called magnet schools a desegregation tool that backfired. The schools themselves are racially balanced, minority students are often placed in remedial and lower level classes, while many white magnet students inherit most of the schools' benefits and resources.

Inter/Intra-district Choice

Inter-district choice enables students to transfer to any public school inside their geographical district or in another district but not always at public expense (Cookson, 1994; Unger 1999). Inter-district choice is the less controversial of choice policies. This policy lies in the middle between magnet and charter schools. Inter-district choice offers

parents greater opportunities to choose among public schools (CCCR, 1999). Students are not caught in the controversy of public money going to private enterprise or additional costs. Intra-district choice allows students to transfer to other schools only within their home district at public expense, including costs for transportation to and from school, textbooks, and other school materials (Cookson, 1994; Unger, 1999). The most commonly highlighted intra-district programs are East Harlem, New York; Montclair, New Jersey; and Cambridge, Massachusetts. Bastian (1992) outlined six key elements of intra-district programs:

- 1) Choice is part of a district-wide school improvement effort;
- 2) Every school becomes a school of choice;
- 3) Choice provides teachers more teaching freedom;
- 4) Choice provides real opportunities for parents and students;
- 5) Detailed information is available to parents;
- 6) Choice districts have acquired higher funding. (p. 35)

Students who changed schools had two primary reasons: They did not like their old schools, and the new schools offered courses they could not previously take. These responses held true regardless of family income (Center for Education Reform, 2002).

CCCR (2004) reported that the opportunity for public school choice among parents has grown dramatically in the last decade. The choices have become less dependent on income and place of residence. Choice for lower income parents has a short history as opposed to affluent parents who have always had choices by virtue of their ability to live where they want or to pay for private schools. In affluent suburbs, good schools inflate property values and if choice were to give access of good schools to

people who live in other neighborhoods, property values may decline. This reason stands as a premise for the resistance of inter-district enrollment by many communities (Heemst, 2004). The policies of many suburban school districts restrict the utility of transfer options that are limited to the district of residence. In cities where there are a large number of schools in need of improvement, meaningful options may not exist without inter-district choice (Heemst, 2004).

In 2004 there were 20 states allowing inter-district transfers. In many urban districts, the numbers of schools in need of improvement are too large to find successful schools to transfer. In many rural districts where all schools are identified for improvement, there are no other schools from which to choose (CCCR, 2004). Michigan adopted a voluntary inter-district choice program in the 1990s that allows parents to choose any school within their own district or a contiguous district. There is no requirement for districts to accept the out of district students and transportation is not provided (CCCR, 2004). However, state and local funds follows students to their new district (CCCR, 2004).

As the number of schools in need of improvement increases, there will be fewer options and more reliance on supplementary educational services, especially in urban areas. Inter-district choice could ease this problem with the addition of more charter schools (Center for Education Reform, 2005). CCCR (2004) suggests that states should play an active role in encouraging inter-district choice especially to districts that have been unable to provide adequate transfer opportunities within their own borders. The state should use whatever persuasive, and if needed, legal power it has to facilitate inter-district transfers.

Charter Schools

The premise of charter schools is to provide a vision of schooling that was not realized in traditional neighborhood public schools (Wiel, 2000). Charter schools have the opportunity to create a school with a shared vision (Manno, Finn, Vanourek, & Bierlein, 1998). Charter schools hold the promise of breaking up large, factory style schools with burdensome and often non-friendly educational bureaucracies and administrations. Charter schools provide neighborhoods with the chance to govern their own community-based schools through decentralization and site-based management principles (Manno, Finn, & Vanourek, 2000). These schools are an attempt to prevent the privatization of schooling sought through conservative calls for vouchers and school choice (Wiel, 2000).

The first charter school law was passed in Minnesota in 1990. There was one charter school in 1991 and as of April 2005, there are 3,400 charter schools serving close to a million students and operating in 41 states across the country (Center for Education Reform, 2005). The states with the heaviest density of charter schools are Arizona, California, Michigan, Florida, Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Texas. Congress initially funded charter schools through a \$12.7 billion 1994 reauthorization of the 1965 Elementary and Secondary Education Act. The government allocates over \$100 million dollars for costs incurred with charter school start-ups (Center for Education Reform, 2002). The charter itself is a legal document between the people who create and operate the school and the public body that authorizes and monitors the operation for a designated period of time (Manno et al., 2000).

Osborne (1999) noted charter schools typically have three to five year charters that are performance contracts with the governmental organizations that authorize them i.e., local school boards, city councils, county boards, state board of education, or even colleges and universities. Charters can be revoked at any time if a school fails to fulfill the terms of the contract. Nationally only about 4 percent of charters granted have been revoked and very few of this percentage were revoked for low student performance or failure to meet educational objectives (Manno et al., 2000). However, charters have been revoked for lack of fiscal accountability, embezzlement, declining student attendance, and inaccurate student enrollment/attendance record keeping (Fikac, 1999).

Charter contracts normally include the following components:

1. An instructional plan;
2. Specific educational results and how they will be measured;
3. A management or governance plan; and
4. A financial plan (Hill, 1996, p.20).

The funding for these schools normally comes from the home district of the students enrolled. The charter school receives public funding at or around the per pupil level of other public schools in the district in which it operates (Finn et al., 2000). Charter schools must attract and retain enough students to be successful and finance their operations. The four main goals of charter schools as defined by policymakers are to:

1. Provide options for families and teachers;
2. Encourage innovation in teaching practices and teacher professional development

3. Provide a strong system of accountability to both the sponsors and to the public; and
4. Create authentic site-based management in public schools (Finn et al., 2000).

Finn et al. (2000) defined charter schools as “independent public schools of choice, freed from rules but accountable for results” (p. 14). Charter schools are distinct from other public schools in that almost anyone can create one and they are exempt from most state and local regulation. Therefore, they possess more fiscal and curricular autonomy, are staffed by educators who have chosen them and are attended by children whose parents choose them (Finn et al., 2000). Charter schools may have the freedom to lengthen the school day, adopt school uniforms, organize the school’s curriculum around core subjects or a particular theme, and operate a single sex school (Finn et al., 2000). No one can be forced into a charter school, and no one can be stopped from leaving if they are dissatisfied. The Hudson Institute (1997) succinctly explains charter schools as:

The charter concept is simple but powerful; Sound school choices can be provided to families under the umbrella of public education without micro-management by government bureaucracies. Independent schools that are open to all, paid for with tax dollars, accountable to public authorities for student learning and other results, and subject to basic health, safety, and non-discrimination requirements, are legitimate public schools even if they are governed or managed by a committee of parents, a team of teachers, or a profit seeking firm (Hudson Institute 1997, p. 6).

According to Bonsteel and Bonilla (1997), the success of charter schools can be evaluated by the following criteria: parental satisfaction, economic value, academic

innovation, and enhanced opportunities for teachers, increased focus on low achieving students, and the avoidance of discrimination. Lubienski (2001) noted that charter schools share several defining characteristics. The schools serve similar student populations, founders often form partnerships with organizations outside of traditional educational circles, the schools are generally small in size, mission driven, staffed by teachers, and administrators attracted by the school distinctive features (p. 68).

Charter schools are free to set their own salaries and reward systems (Hudson Institute, 1997). Ogawa and Dutton (1994) categorize charter schools as generally placing more control in the hands of school level professionals than do magnet school programs. Charter schools are smaller than traditional public schools, with an average enrollment of approximately 300 students. Some schools enroll less than 20 students and others over 2,000. Preliminary studies indicate that many charter schools serve a more diverse student population than public schools (Manno, et al., 2000).

Nathan (1996) categorized charter schools as the creation of new more accountable public schools or the conversion of existing public schools. The charter idea also introduces fair, thoughtful competition into public education. Strong charter laws allow these schools to be sponsored by more than one type of public organization, for example, a local school board, a state school board, or a public university. Perceived advantages of charter schools have been identified as:

1. Parents are given an opportunity to choose an educational setting that fits the needs of their family;
2. An increase in parent participation;
3. The development of innovative educational reform programs;

4. Greater opportunities for high-quality teachers to earn higher salaries; and
5. Overall academic benefits for students (Finn, Manno, & Bierlein, 1998; Taebel et al., 1998).

Manno, et al. (2000) view charter schools as a viable effort to redefine or reinvent public education. Charter schools are creating a new kind of public school. One of the claimed intentions of charter schools is not simply to produce a few better schools but to improve education for all students. Charter schools provide families with choices and give skilled, entrepreneurial educators an opportunity with accountability to create more effective public schools (Nathan, 1996). Charter schools are likely to increase equity because of the potential for low-income students to desire a choice from their present academic placements. If middle and upper-income parents believed that public schools were failing they could opt to enroll their children in private school, or move across district lines. Low-income parents are not afforded these types of opportunities (Maranto, Milliman, Hess, & Gresham, 1999).

Cited disadvantages or concerns about charter schools are:

1. Resegregation of schools;
2. A major reduction of the taxpayers' commitment to traditional public schools (Center for Educational Reform, 2002; Finn et al., 1996).

Orfield (1998) argued that charter schools are not the panacea proponents present them to be. He reported charter schools are not well regulated and are not serving their students appropriately. Fuller (2000) reported that charters drain resources from the central state's power to address the causes of the learning gap between children from advantaged and disadvantaged families. Many founders of charter schools, particularly

teachers, are astounded by the unexpected demands and administrative details that entail operating a school. Non-certified teachers teach many charter school students. Charter schools are indicted for creaming the best students from predominately white privileged public schools and thus contribute to the segregation of America's schools (Weil, 2000). Opponents also argue that selective admission and exclusionary policies will create racial imbalances within charter schools. Bastian (1996) addressed the private entrepreneurs who operate charters:

We have the right to be skeptical about good intentions when the bottom line is profitability not education. These educational entrepreneurs have attracted high profile educators and contracts, but they have not been able to thrive. They often promise to bring new resources to a school district, but in practice, they are front loading their programs with technology, new teachers, and a fresh coat of paint. They have diverted resources from other public school programs and from their investors. However, they have not improved our schools, nor contributed to solving the enormous problem of school finance (Bastian, 1996, p. 48).

Charter schools are a new hybrid containing the similarities of public schools and a number of the attributes of private schools but they display their own uniqueness (Finn et al., 2000).

The Role of the Principal

For over two decades there has been an expansion of research that indicates excellence in schools is more directly related to the performance of their administrators than anything else (Sergiovanni, 2001; Wilmore, 2002). Wagoner and Urban (2004)

wrote that today the principal is viewed as the head of the school in the traditional public school system in America (p. 24).

Principals must ensure that implementation procedures for new mandates such as No Child Left Behind are introduced, outlined, explained, and clarified for faculty, staff, parents, students, and even community members (Wilmore, 2002). Educational reform efforts rest upon leadership at the building level to ensure its effective implementation (Holland, 1997; Murphy, 1994; Wilmore, 2002). Principals generally believe that fundamental changes such as school choice and site-based decision making will greatly increase their workload (Houlihan, 1988). Murphy (1994) listed the functions a principal must perform when involved in a reform experience:

1. Helping formulate a shared vision
2. Cultivating a network of relationships
3. Providing information to staff
4. Allocating resources that correlate with vision and promoting teacher development (p. 27).

Principals set direction, facilitate change, and communicate with stakeholders on a regular basis, they also allocate necessary resources to support selected goals, and priorities, solve problems throughout the process, and monitor implementation of the specified program (Haycock, 1999; Murphy, 1994; Sergiovanni, 2001). American policy makers have come to view the principal as the linchpin in the plan for educational change (Murphy, 1994).

The Educational Leadership Constituent Council (ELCC) standards serve as the foundation for educational leadership preparation programs and professional

development for practicing administrators (Wilmore, 2002). The ELCC guidelines were revised to incorporate the National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) and the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) standards (Wilmore, 2002). The standards from ELCC identify a school administrator as an educational leader who promotes the success of all students by:

Standard 1: Facilitating the development, articulation, implementation and stewardship of a school or district vision of learning that is shared and supported by the school community

Standard 2: Advocating, nurturing, and sustaining a school culture and instructional program conducive to student learning and staff professional growth

Standard 3: Ensuring management of the organization, operations, and resources for a safe, efficient, and effective learning environment

Standard 4: Collaborating with families and community members responding to diverse community interests and needs, and mobilizing community resources

Standard 5: Acting with integrity, fairness, and in an ethical manner

Standard 6: Understanding, responding to, and influencing the larger political, social, economic, legal, and cultural context

Standard 7: Substantial, sustained, standards based experiences in real settings that are planned and guided cooperatively by university and school district personnel for graduate credit (Wilmore, 2002, pp. 13-14).

These standards outline the important role and responsibilities of the principal. Standards 2, 4, and 6 are pertinent to the belief that principals and teachers will respond to the potential threat of losing students to schools of choice by improving the quality of education they offer.

Teske, Schneider, Buckley, and Clark (2000) found three main areas in the change of administrative behaviors when the threat of choice increased:

- 1) Principals made adjustments in administrative and educational processes as the pressure increased.
- 2) Even when there was no response at the district level principals reacted to the pressure of parents exercising choice.
- 3) There was a relationship between a principal's expectation of losing students through competition from charters and the number of reforms implemented. The researchers further noted that being the chief school administrator principals may feel the effects of students transferring to stronger schools and may react more quickly (Teske et al., 2000).

It can be reasonably concluded that the principal is the one individual that can make things happen or hinder advancement in the school (Houlihan, 1988). The principal is extremely powerful in the school and in the area of school effectiveness. School success must be directly related to the role of the principal (Houlihan, 1988).

Advantages/Disadvantages of Public School Choice

Proponents of public school choice such as former U.S. Secretary of Education, Lamar Alexander, who served during former President Bush's (1988–1992)

administration, stated that choice is beneficial to parents and students and is good for our society. “What we are trying to do is provide educational opportunities to those who normally are not afforded a choice” (Young & Clinchy, 1992, p. 27). Public school choice provides public school students with the same kind of choice that students in private schools enjoy. Public school choice may open a rich array of educational options to all students, and give less affluent families opportunities that are now available mainly to the privileged but within the public arena (Carnegie Foundation, 1992).

As cited in a study by Clewell and Joy (1990), proponents of choice argued in favor that it would promote educational excellence, increase parental involvement in the schools, encourage varied program offerings, and improve racial balance. According to Nathan (1996), expanding choice helps public schools produce a healthier relationship between home and school: “Parents send their children to a specific school and teachers choose to teach them because they want to, not because they have to” (pp. 29–30).

Goldhaber (1999) outlined two premises surrounding public school choice: (1) competition among schools for students will help reduce inefficiencies in the delivery of education and eventually improve educational output, and (2) choice would provide more control over educational decisions to parents that would choose good schools for their children. Theorists assume that if given the time and freedom, school personnel such as teachers and principals would be able to have a great effect on raising student achievement (Sergiovanni, 2001).

Consequently, Goglia (1997) argues that there is no incentive for poorly performing schools to improve and parents cannot take their business elsewhere. Parental choice is said to increase parental involvement, institute healthy competition among

schools force administrators to seek more innovative teaching and learning strategies, and foster a collegial environment between teachers and administrators in public education (Burke, 1990). Many of the lowest performing schools are racially isolated and have students from high poverty areas that can offer opportunities for desegregation.

Additionally, parents as consumers will inject needed competition into public education creating dramatic improvements (Goglia, 1997). Meier (1987) contended that because parents are better educated today and are demanding more involvement in the education of their children, public school choice will provide that desired avenue of involvement. The author cited six reasons why the role of parents in the education of their children will improve through public school choice (Meier, 1987):

1. The primary responsibility for the education of children lies with the family.
2. Research findings confirm that students learn more when their parents are involved in their education.
3. Choice for parents means empowerment and voice.
4. Parents' satisfaction with schools increases as their influence on their children's environment grows.
5. Parental choice makes for more accountability for parents, teachers, and administrators.
6. Choice allows public schools to become more diverse (p. 76).

Schmitz (1994) noted the underlying concept of public school choice is that the total quality of the school system will improve as individual schools compete with each other for prospective students. The author further noted that teachers are crucial in the

implementation of school choice and their expertise could be marketed through a choice program. Glenn (1990) summarized the role public school choice has on the poor: The people who will benefit the most from choice are those who are at the greatest disadvantage. The children of minorities are, commonly the most poorly served by the schools which they are involuntarily assigned, and they are less able to purchase private education or move to areas with better schools (p. 51). According to Gintis (1995), choice has more often been afforded to those individuals of wealth who could dictate their options through fiscal, political, or cultural currency. To empower parents and their children with greater educational opportunities is ideal in a democratic society.

Levine (2001) reports there is a strong correlation between student success and parental involvement, the parents who are more likely to exercise their options and transfer their children to other schools will in reality take the most successful students. Under this scenario, successful students become more successful and unsuccessful students are left in an environment to become less successful (Brown, 1995). In response, schools will be forced to accommodate the requests of the higher performing students (or their parents) and with tight resources; these accommodations will take resources away from the students who need them the most. More opponents agree that low income students are at a disadvantage and that some would benefit from choice schools, but they fear that the students and schools remaining behind will be worse off (Brown, 1995).

Heemst (2004) summarized education as a fundamental right and we should not give more or less of it based on one's income. Public school choice may open the doors of the finest schools to all children. Poor children will no longer be condemned to failing schools operating on a bare minimum of funds within their own school districts. Heemst

(2004) also wrote that the poor will be empowered and the barriers that presently exist will be removed through public school choice. Public school choice will give poor children a chance and hope for a better education. Providing poor students an opportunity to attend a good school will not solve all the child's problems. It will not guarantee the child a future of prosperity, but it will provide a greater chance to a brighter one (Heemst, 2004).

Public school choice will help ensure that equity is brought to all children in order for them to succeed. It can elevate the performance of at-risk children, provide for more parental involvement, and increase school accountability (U.S. Department of Education, 2002). This nation is obligated under the common school design by Mann to ensure that all children, regardless of their parent's residence and economic availability, have the opportunity to a quality education for student success (Heemst, 2004).

However, Kohn (1992) wrote that competition motivates us to do our best and that we would cease being productive if we did not compete is simply a myth. The impact of the competitive arrangement in a structural incentive model, in witnessing a winner and loser will ultimately drive a wedge and promote hostility among the participants (Kohn, 1992).

Opponents of public school choice cite a number of theoretical views about the questionable effectiveness of the policy (Apple, 2000; Kozol, 1992). Public school choice offers very few incentives for recipient schools where they have to find space in schools, and disrupt bus routes. It is also unlikely that students who enter these schools will boost the receiving school's performance (Hess & Finn, 2004). Mac and Abele (2000), as well as other opponents of competition among schools, claim that parents who have the

initiative and flexibility to take advantage of choice are those who are already most involved in their children's education. The students who leave neighborhood schools for better schools take needed resources from the school and the students who are left behind (O'Neil, 1996). Opportunities for choice are not evenly distributed across geographic locations. There may be fewer or non-existent options in suburban and rural districts, where there is often only one public high school to attend (Schneider, Schiller, & Coleman, 1996).

Chubb and Moe (1990) are major proponents of the choice movement but their observations provided another level of justification for opponents. Chubb and Moe (1990) claimed that the strategies provided by choice offer no guarantees for successful educational reform. The constituency of a single public school is a huge and heterogeneous one whose interests are variously represented by politicians, administrators, and other factions.

Opponents such as Goldhaber (1999) also argued that public school choice would result in better educational opportunities only for white, middle class, and talented students; increase transportation costs for the school district; cause resegregation of the schools; and result in a lack of diversity in program offerings. Kozol (1992) theorizes that despite the belief that choice will provide equal access to education, across classes; in practice, people rarely have equal access. Choice will further benefit the advantaged and leave the disadvantaged behind. He also added that choice will experience increased bureaucracy, and problems with the dissemination of information to stakeholders.

Hess and Finn (2004) wrote that many administrators may view public school choice as beneficial because it can ease their overcrowded situations. District officials

may have no issues with intra-district choice because it will not create an increase or decrease in state and federal funding. It can however cause disruptions with the choice programs that may already be in existence.

Michael Apple (2000) asserts that public school choice will provide further issues for the disadvantaged because it will place the differences between popular and unpopular schools on a hierarchal scale. Public school choice will provide an intensified way to outline the traditional distinctions between the types of schools and the different people who attend them.

According to Nelson, Carlson and Palonsky (1993) the most educationally disadvantaged students are likely to have parents who have a poor educational foundation that did not prepare them to make conscious choices for their children. It would require a great amount of money and resources to help parents of this type of disadvantage to make informed and educated choices for their children. Fantini (1973) summarizes the debate against public school choice by suggesting that the parents who lack the ability to make educated choices can simply continue to participate in hit-or miss decisions and ignore the costs for children, as they move from school to school yearly.

The following table (Table 2) provides a summary of the key advantages and disadvantages found in public school choice.

Table 2

Summary Key Points of Public School Choice

(+)	(-)
<p>1. Competition opens system-wide improvement it will eventually lead to improvements in educational output (Goglia, 1997).</p> <p>2. Power to choose schools for the disadvantaged not available in their school or district of residence (fostering racial integration) (Heemst, 2004).</p> <p>3. Parents and students will be more committed to and more satisfied with schools of choice (Nathan, 1996).</p> <p>4. Can foster a higher level of professionalism and expertise among teachers through the threat of public school choice (Schmitz, 1994).</p>	<p>1. Competition will not improve quality but the production of a winner and loser which can promote animosity and resentment among the participants (Kohn, 1992).</p> <p>2. Public School Choice will promote resegregation and lack of diversity. White middle class students may benefit the most (Goldhaber, 1999).</p> <p>3. The parents who will participate are already likely to be those who are involved in their children's education (Levine, 2001).</p> <p>4. Principals and teachers may not respond to the threat of public school choice by improving the educational quality of schools (Goglia, 1997).</p>

Conclusion

Chapter II provided an overview of the literature with respect to federal involvement in public education. The categories of public school choice for the purpose of this study including magnet schools, inter/intra-district choice, and charter schools were defined and examined. The next chapter discusses the investigation, its participants, the procedures used, and how the data were analyzed in addressing the research questions.

III. METHODS

The purpose of this study was to examine the perceptions of public school principals in Alabama on public school choice. This study was also designed to determine if there are differences among principal perceptions according to their ethnicity, level of education, years in the profession (experience), school district characteristics (urban, suburban, rural), size of the school, socioeconomic status of the enrolled students (percentage free/reduced lunch participants, and level of choice currently offered). This chapter presents the methods and procedures used in collecting, analyzing, and interpreting the data from this study. The data collection and analysis procedures employed were submitted and approved by Auburn University's Office of Human Subjects Research prior to conducting this research study (Appendix B).

Background of the Study

Public school choice is a highly controversial issue in North American education. Lawmakers, educators, parents and the business community are searching for answers to the perceived dilemmas in public education. Many parents view public school choice as a way to level the playing field for the inequalities that exist in public schools (CCCR, 2004).

This study is an examination of the perceptions of public school principals on public school choice. The findings may provide pertinent information to stakeholders in the educational process by illuminating the perceptions of principals. The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 outlines public school choice as a major component in educational reform. One of the premises of this policy is that students who are trapped in low-performing schools are provided an opportunity to receive an education in a higher performing public school (CCCR, 2004).

Statement of the Problem

There is a need to gain an understanding of public school choice because of its potential effects on the state of public education. Alabama schools are implementing public school choice statewide for the first time due to federal mandate. Principals across the state need to possess knowledge of this educational reform because they will experience effects from choice in some form. A number of principals may witness an exodus of students from their schools while another group of principals may witness an increase in student enrollment from students whose parents exercise the options provided by public school choice.

Research Design

A survey research (quantitative) design was used for this study. The survey instrument (Appendix A) was used to collect data based on the perceptions of public school principals in Alabama on public school choice.

Research Questions

The following research questions were addressed in this study:

1. What are the relationships among principals' demographics and their perceptions of public school choice?
2. What are the relationships among school demographics and principals' perceptions of public school choice?
3. What are the overall principals' perceptions of public school choice?

Instrumentation

Babbie (1999) notes survey research is perhaps the most frequently used mode of observation in the social sciences because it is probably the best method available to the investigator when collecting original data for describing a population too large to observe or interview. The use of a survey for collecting data is both cost and time effective. The survey instrument (Appendix A) utilized in this study consisted of 20 items and required approximately 15 minutes for respondents to complete. The review of literature did not reveal any published instruments to examine the perceptions of public school principals in this area so the researcher developed an instrument specifically for this study. An unpublished dissertation (Drake, 2000) was extremely valuable in developing the instrument for this study by examining the questioning. The researcher is not aware of any existing studies that examine principal perceptions on public school choice in the state of Alabama.

The survey instrument (Appendix A) consisted of two sections: (I) a questionnaire pertaining to personal characteristics of the principals and the schools they

represent, and (II) a section focused on the perceptions of the respondents (principals) on public school choice. The questions were designed to ascertain principals' perceptions regarding parents in relation to public school choice, as well as public school choice and its effects on student achievement from teacher's and administrator's perspectives. A five-point Likert type rating scale was used in responding: SA = Strongly Agree, A = Agree, N = Neutral, D = Disagree, and SD = Strongly Disagree.

The researcher conducted a pilot study and made necessary adjustments before accepting the use of the survey instrument. As part of the pilot study, the instrument was distributed to twelve principals from various parts of the state, who were participants of the University of Alabama Superintendent's Academy. The panel review resulted in editorial changes and three questions were reworded for better comprehension.

Validity

According to Aiken (1987), validity is the degree to which an instrument measures what it proposes to measure. Content validity refers to how well the test samples the subject matter. The instrument was piloted using twelve principals from the University of Alabama's Superintendent's Academy. There was a 100% return rate from the principals who helped establish content validity for the survey instrument. The principals within the pilot group are currently leading schools in Alabama and are from various parts of the state representing urban, suburban, or rural schools. All the principals were familiar with public school choice. These principals met with the researcher on two occasions to review items from the survey instrument and respond to issues of clarity and validity. Changes were made based upon the feedback provided by the pilot group. The principals from the pilot group found errors in the wording of questions four, seven, ten,

eleven, and sixteen. The pilot group noted that the questions were leading and perhaps indicated a bias.

The review of literature presented three constructs, principal perceptions of parental response to public school choice, administrative threat to public school choice, and principal and teacher perceived response to public school choice. The survey responses were subject to an exploratory factor analysis (EFA) using principal component analysis with a varimax, orthogonal rotation. Through the EFA process two constructs were established, parental response to public school choice and principal and teacher perceived responses to public school choice.

The confirmatory factor analysis confirmed two structures from the survey of principals' perceptions on public school choice and loaded the items within the two factors. The first factor loaded six items that focused on principals' perceptions of parental response to public school choice. This construct provided a Goodness of Fit Index of .95. The Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) is a measure of discrepancy between the model and population. A RMSEA of .05 or lower indicates a good fit (Huck, 2004). The (RMSEA) was .02 for the first construct principal perceptions of parental response on public school choice. The Cronbach's Alpha as an estimate of internal consistency was .83. According to Huck (2004) reliabilities should not fall below 0.80, and an alpha above 0.90 is considered robust.

The second construct, loaded four items that focused on public school principals' perceptions of administrator and teacher concerns towards public school choice. Results of the confirmatory factor analysis provided the internal structure with the pattern coefficients exceeding a critical ratio ($CR > 1.96$). The RMSEA was .144; the Good Fit

Index (GFI) was .93 which determines the level of fit between the model and the data.

The Cronbach's Alpha as a measure of internal consistency for this construct was .90.

The percentages indicate that this model provides a marginal fit for the data.

There was a total of ten items dropped from analyses because their item-to-total correlation was below .3. The wording or design of these items may account for their inability to significantly contribute to the total instrument. The construct loadings can be viewed in Table 3.

Table 3

Rotated Factor Matrix

Item	Factor 1	Factor 2
Q1	.663	
Q2	.827	
Q3	.599	
Q5	.648	
Q7	.482	
Q8	.649	
Q16		.659
Q17		.875
Q18		.869
Q20		.649

Research Participants and Data Collection

The population for this study consisted of public school principals who are currently leading schools in the state of Alabama. These principals represent various public schools throughout the state. The principals surveyed attended the annual Council for Leaders in Alabama's Schools (CLAS) convention held in Mobile, Alabama during June 2005. The researcher received an opportunity to introduce himself to the principals in attendance at the conference during one of the affiliate meetings. The purpose of the research was explained, accompanied by a letter of consent (Appendix C), and the

collection location for the surveys was indicated. The state of Alabama was chosen for the collection of this research for the following reasons:

1. The researcher is a former public school principal in Alabama and has developed a number of relationships with principals across the state.
2. The researcher was aware of the fact that the Council of Leaders for Alabama Schools (CLAS) membership is comprised of a large number of school principals.
3. The researcher attends the CLAS convention annually, which made the research population accessible.

The conference organized by CLAS, offers professional development for administrators in the state of Alabama. This study is limited to the public school principals who were present and responded to the survey at the CLAS convention. According to the officials of CLAS the principals in attendance at the convention represent various school systems throughout the state of Alabama. School systems labeled as affluent or economically challenged as determined by per pupil spending were both represented at the CLAS convention. Professional development sessions scheduled at the conference addressed special education discipline laws, differentiated instruction, and making schools work through literacy instruction as well as others. The researcher administered the survey instrument during principal affiliate meetings for professional groups known as the Alabama Association for Secondary, Middle, and Elementary School principals. Only public school principals were chosen as the sample population because they are required to follow federal policies on education as opposed to private

school principals who have the freedom to operate under their own policies and guidelines.

There are 1,454 public school principals in the State of Alabama as reported by the State Department of Education for the 2005–2006 academic year representing the total population of the respondents. A total of 740 principals were in attendance at the CLAS convention. The survey instrument was distributed to 115 public school principals in Alabama during the Annual Council of Leaders for Alabama’s Schools (CLAS) convention. One hundred (100) principals responded to the study for a return rate of 85% and a representation of one fifth of the target population. The data from the surveys were analyzed through the use of SPSS 11.0 version.

The following steps were taken to collect the data:

1. A cover letter with a release clause was used to explain the study (Appendix C). Principals were instructed to keep the cover letter/release form and return the survey.
2. The surveys were numbered from 100 to 250.
3. To maintain confidentiality the principals returned the surveys face down in a paper tray at an indicated location.
4. The researcher sorted the surveys and placed them in a secure box.
5. The researcher analyzed the surveys using a statistical package (SPSS 11.0).

Summary of Sample Characteristics

Survey participants were asked to indicate their gender. Of the principals who responded, females comprised 53% of the total sample population, while males comprised the remaining 47% of the total sample population (Table 4).

Table 4

Gender of Respondents

Number of Males	47
Number of Females	53
Total Sample Population	100

The principals from the study were asked to indicate their ethnicity. Table 5 summarizes the ethnicity of the survey respondents. Of the participants who responded 54% were Caucasian, 44% were African-American and the remaining 2% were of Native American ethnicity (Table 5).

Table 5

Ethnicity of Respondents

Caucasian	54%
African-American	44%
Native American	2%
Total Sample Population	100%

The principals were asked to indicate the highest educational level they obtained. Table 6 summarizes the responses from the principals surveyed. Of the participants who responded 31% have a master’s degree, 35% a specialist degree, and 14% obtained a doctoral degree (Table 6).

Table 6

Education Level of Respondents

Master’s Degree	31%
Specialist Degree	35%
Doctorate	14%
Total Sample Population	100%

The principals surveyed were asked to indicate the number of years they served in the role of principal based on five categories: 1–5 years, 6–11 years, 12–17 years, 18–23

years, and 24 or more years. Table 7 provides a summary of the years of experience as a principal according to the respondents. Of the participants who responded, 30% reported having 0–5 years principalship experience; 28% fell into category two, 6–11 years; 11% fell into category three, 12–17 years; 7% fell into category four, 18–23 years; and the remaining percentage, 24% indicated principal experience of 24 years or more (Table 7).

Table 7

Years of Experience as a Principal

1–5 years	30%
6–11 years	28%
12–17 years	11%
18–23 years	7%
24+ years	24%
Total Sample Population	100%

The next category in the demographic section asked the participants to identify the geographical location of the school district they represent within Alabama. The respondents were allowed to select among the three categories: Suburban, Urban, and Rural. Of the principals surveyed 19% indicated they were from a suburban school district, 27 % of the principals who responded indicated they were from an urban school district, while the remaining 54% indicated that they represent a rural district (Table 8).

Table 8

District Characteristics of Respondents

Suburban	19%
Urban	27%
Rural	54%
Total Sample Population	100%

The next demographic item asked the survey respondents to indicate the classification of their school within five categories: unit school (K–12), where the principal may be responsible for all grades levels within one building; primary school (Pre-K–1); elementary; middle; high school; or other. Of the principals who responded 9% represented a unit school, 2% represented a primary school, 46% represented an elementary school, 10% represented a middle school, and the remaining 3% represented a high school (Table 9).

Table 9

School Classification of Respondents

Unit School (K–12)	9%
Primary	2%
Elementary	46%
Middle	10%
High School	31%
Total Sample Population	100%

The next category in the demographic section asked for student enrollment at the school in which the principals represented according to four categories: 0-499, 500-999, 1000–1499, and 1500–1999. Of the participants who responded, 37% reported a student enrollment in the first category, 0–499; 47% reported student enrollment in category two, 500-999; 13% reported student enrollment in category three, 1000–1499; and the remaining 2% reported student enrollment in category four, 1500–1999 (Table 10).

Table 10

Student Enrollment of the Respondents

0–499	37%
500–999	47%
1000–1499	13%
1500–1999	2%
Total Sample Population	100%

Data Analysis

The following questions provided the framework for the statistical analytical procedures.

Research Question 1: What are the relationships among principal demographics (gender, ethnicity, educational level, and years of experience) and principals' perceptions of public school choice?

Procedure: Data related to question one and two were analyzed using inferential statistics. Mean scores and standard deviations of White and Non-White respondents were compared using Fisher's least significant difference procedure (LSD) when statistically significant differences were detected during the ANOVA procedures.

Research Question 2: What are the relationships among school demographics (school classification, school size, and socioeconomic level of students) and principal perceptions of public school choice?

Procedure: To determine if possible significant differences existed among principal perceptions a series of one-way ANOVA's, were conducted and reported in summary tables. ANOVA is appropriate when the researcher is seeking to determine significant relationships between the mean scores of at least two independent groups (Huck, 2004). Post-hoc procedures (Fisher's LSD) were also employed for statistically significant differences among independent variables with three or more levels.

Research Question 3: What are the overall principals' perceptions of public school choice?

Procedure: Data related to this question were analyzed through the use of inferential statistics where the mean and standard deviation scores for the survey items, were compared at face value for the purposes of discussion.

The primary focus of this study was to determine the perceptions of public school principals on public school choice. A five-point Likert-type index scale was utilized and the responses were assigned numerical values: 1–Strongly Disagree, 2–Disagree, 3–Neutral/No Response, 4–Agree, and 5–Strongly Agree.

A one-way ANOVA allowed the researcher to use the data from the samples for the purpose of making a single inference in examining a sample population (Huck, 2004). The ANOVA is recommended over separate t-tests because it can compare two or more means simultaneously and keep the family wise error level at .05 (Ravid,1994).

A one-way ANOVA was conducted for this study because only two dependent variable were identified, principals' perceptions of parent and teacher response on public school choice. In addition, the independent variables provided low levels of statistical

significance when grouped together. Therefore, analyzing the independent variables (gender, ethnicity, education, years as a principal, school classification, school enrollment, school location, percentage of student free/reduced lunch enrollment, type of choice offered) separately provided data that can be analyzed for the research questions. Follow-up analyses (post-hoc) when necessary for the ANOVAs were conducted using Fisher's LSD (least significant difference). Results of these analyses are reported in Chapter 4.

A separate MANOVA analysis was conducted with the two dependent variables (principals' perceptions of parent and teacher responses to public school choice) across the six independent variables presented earlier. Statistical level of significance at or below .05 was found within the following independent variables: ethnicity, district classification, type of choice offered and percentage of students enrolled in the free/reduced lunch program (>50%). The MANOVA procedure conducted in this study indicated that gender, educational level, years as a principal, school classification, and student enrollment, did not prove statistical significance in relation to principal perceptions. However, the findings from the MANOVA analysis presented to be similar to the findings from the ANOVA analysis.

Conclusion

This chapter explained the methods used in the study. In addition, the research design, methods for data collection, and demographic information for the sample respondents were presented. The majorities of the respondents from this study were found to be Caucasian (54%), females (53%), that have at least an educational specialist degree (EdS.) (55%). Most of the respondents served 1 to 11 years as a principal (58%) operate elementary schools (46%), in rural settings (54%), with an enrollment of between 500 and 999 students (47%). The students from the respondent's schools are enrolled in districts that currently offer inter/intra-district choice programs (81%). Chapter IV outlines the findings of this study and presents data related to the research questions.

IV. FINDINGS

The purpose of this study was to examine the perceptions of public school principals on public school choice. This chapter presents the results of the quantitative analyses conducted with the survey data. The results for each of the three research questions are presented separately within this chapter.

Demographic Data Exploration Differences

Inferential statistics were used to address the three research questions that guided the study. A series of one-way ANOVAs (Analysis of Variance) were conducted to evaluate for possible significant differences and in determining whether to retain or reject the null hypothesis. The null hypothesis states that there are no statistically significant differences in the perceptions of public school principals according to the characteristics analyzed.

Research Question 1: What are the relationships among principal demographics (gender, ethnicity, educational level, and years of experience) and principals' perceptions on public school choice? The one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) found no significant differences in principals' perceptions according to gender, educational level, and years of experience as a principal. The following tables indicate the omnibus test statistic, p-values, and the LSD (least significant difference) pair-wise comparison for

possible statistically significant differences. The post-hoc comparison was utilized to provide insight if the F-value indicated significance. The p-value was set at .05. Any statistical result above the set level experienced the post-hoc procedure (omnibus test).

Table 11 represents the results of the analysis of research for question one. Table 11 illustrates statistically significant differences found in the perceptions of principals according to ethnicity from the ANOVA procedures. The level of significance was set at $p < .05$. There were three levels of ethnicity reported by the respondents, but only two categories were measurable White and Non-White, while two respondents reported other. White respondents represent 54% of the total sample population and the Non-White respondents are the remaining 46% of the sample population. When examining the mean scores of the two categories under ethnicity the Eta squared score of .13 indicates that ethnicity of the respondents accounts for 13% of the possible differences in principal perceptions. This represents a marginal effect size for the total sample.

Table 11

Ethnicity

Df	Mean Square	F-value	p-value	Eta-Squared	Sig.
1,97	394.641	15.50	< .01	.13	.000

Questions 1, 2, 3, and 5 surveyed principals' perceptions of parental issues related to public school choice. Non-white respondents were more likely to report parents as

having positive attitudes towards public school choice. White respondents were less likely to perceive parents as having a less positive attitude towards public school choice. Non-white respondents were more likely to indicate that access to information plays a vital role in parents utilizing public school choice (Question 7, Mean = 3.83). The results indicate that White respondents were less likely to respond than non-White respondents that public school choice improves the academic quality of all public schools in Alabama (Question 20, Mean = 2.53).

Tables 12-14 directly address Research Question Two which states, “What are the relationships among school demographics and principals’ perceptions of public school choice (district classification, school classification, school enrollment, socio-economic level of students (% of free/reduced lunch students) and type of choice presently offered by the school district of public school choice?”

Table 12 illustrates the results of the one way-ANOVA analysis where significant differences were found according to the type of district represented by the respondents. The one-way analysis of variance found no significant differences in principal perceptions regarding school classification and school size. On question three the principals were likely to indicate that public school choice will not provide parents living in poor communities access to quality education (Mean = 3.26). Respondents also were likely to indicate that access to information plays a vital role in parents utilizing public school choice (Question 7 Mean = 3.83). The Eta-squared statistic in Table 12 illustrated that 11% of the statistical significance in the responses can be attributed to the type of school district the respondents represent. Respondents were likely to respond that

public school choice will not increase the community’s confidence in public educational reform (Question 8; Mean = 2.85)

Table 12

District Classification

Df	Mean Square	F-value	p-value	Eta-Squared	Sig.
2,97	166.309	6.25	.03	.11	.003

Table 13 illustrates the results of principal perceptions according to the percentage of students receiving free or reduced lunch at their school. There were two sections for this category. The first section was for a school with over fifty percent (>50%) of their students eligible for free or reduced lunch. Those principals represented 59% of the total sample population and schools that have less than fifty percent (<50%) of their students eligible for free and reduced lunch. The remaining 41% of the total sample population represented the other category. The principals from both groups (>50% < /free reduced lunch students) were likely to indicate that parents should not have a right to choose what school their child attends regardless of school zone (Question 1 mean score for both groups = 2.71).

Table 13

Percentage of Free and Reduced Lunch Students

Df	Mean Square	F-value	p-value	Eta-Squared	Sig.
1,98	209.215	7.58	.03	.07	.007

Respondents representing a school of more than or less than 50% of free/reduced lunch students were more likely to report that access to information will play a vital role in parents utilizing public school choice (Question 7, Mean = 3.83). The respondents also were more favorable to respond that public school choice will not increase the community's confidence in public education (Question 8, Mean = 2.85).

The following table (Table 14) illustrates the statistically significant differences in principals' perceptions according to the type of public school choice the respondent's district offers. The respondents from both magnet and inter/intra-district choice school districts were likely to indicate that public school choice will cause parents to have a voice in their child's educational curriculum (Question 5 Mean = 3.21). According to the Eta-squared statistic, the level of public school choice the respondent's district offers accounts for 6% of the statistically significant differences. The respondents from inter/intra-district school (n = 81) districts also were likely to indicate that public school choice will not improve the academic quality of all public schools within Alabama.

Table 14

School Choice

Df	Mean Square	F-value	p-value	Eta-Squared	Sig.
2,97	93.726	3.33	.01	.06	0.40

Research Question 3: What are the overall perceptions of public school principals on public school choice?

An analysis was conducted from the overall mean and standard deviations for each survey question item (Table 15). The total from the male and female respondents were combined (n = 100). The respondents from the sample were likely to respond that public school choice will not increase parental involvement at their individual schools (Mean = 2.79; Question 2). Respondents were also likely to respond that public school choice will not provide parents living in poor communities access to quality public education (Mean = 3.26, Question 3). The respondents indicated that access to information will play a vital role in parents utilizing public school choice (Mean = 3.83; Question 7). The respondents were likely to provide the response that public school choice will not increase the community’s confidence in public educational reform (Question 8, Mean = 2.85). Respondents were likely to indicate that public school choice will not improve academically failing schools (Question 16, Mean = 2.55). Respondents were likely to indicate that public school choice will not improve the academic quality of all public schools within Alabama (Question 20, Mean = 2.53).

Table 15

Total Means and Standard Deviations of the Respondents

Survey Questions	Mean	Standard Deviation
Q1	2.73	1.40
Q2	2.79	1.31
Q3	3.26	1.23
Q5	3.21	1.22
Q7	3.21	.862
Q8	2.85	1.17
Q16	2.55	1.22
Q17	3.19	1.18
Q18	3.33	1.19
Q20	2.53	1.24

Summary of Findings

1. An analysis was conducted to determine if there are any statistically significant differences of principals' perceptions in relation to personal characteristics such as gender, ethnicity, educational level, and years of experience as a principal. Ethnicity was the only personal characteristic that indicated to be statistically related to differences in respondents' perceptions.

2. There were statistically significant differences discovered in the perceptions of principals in relationship to school characteristics for student socio-economic status (student percentages of free and reduced lunch), district classification, and type of school choice offered by the district.
3. Possible differences according to the school enrollment did not produce statistically significant results from the respondents.
4. The majority of the principals surveyed were less likely to indicate that public school choice will assist in improving schools that are academically failing.
5. The majority of the principals surveyed were more likely to report that public school choice will not improve the academic quality of all public schools in Alabama.

Conclusion

Chapter IV provides a summary of the quantitative findings for the study. The data indicates that principal perceptions of public school choice, are impacted by ethnicity, school district classification, level of school choice offered, and percentage of students who enroll in the free/reduced lunch program. Principals' gender, educational level, years of experience as a principal or school size were not indicated as having an impact on their perceptions of public school choice. Chapter V provides a discussion of the overall findings, recommendations for further research and a summary.

V. DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS, IMPLICATIONS, AREAS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH, AND SUMMARY

This chapter presents a discussion of the findings and their relevance to the subject of study. Areas for further research and a summary are also presented.

The purpose of this study was to explore the perceptions of Alabama public school principals on public school choice. It is believed that this study may be instrumental in acquiring a better understanding of public school choice policy implementation in Alabama because the state's public school leaders are the ones responsible for implementing the policy. The principals' perceptions can influence the implementation level of public school choice for its intended outcome.

Some researchers report public school choice as an educational reform measure used to level the playing field for students from impoverished backgrounds with their privileged peers (CCCR, 2004). One of the major issues surrounding public school choice is uncertainty about how effective the educational reform measures are in helping to improve troubled schools to achieve adequate yearly progress (AYP) as measured by state standards.

The interpretation and implementation of this national policy occurs at the school level. This belief is supported by Murphy (1994), Holland (1997), and Wilmore, (2002) who noted that educational reform policies rely upon leadership at the building level to

ensure effective implementation. Further research may provide information on the operational expectations and vital issues that surround public school choice for examination by stakeholders.

Summarized representations of the respondents from the sample were provided. The majority of the respondents from this study are Caucasian (54%), females (53%), that have at least an educational specialist degree (EdS.) (55%). Most of the respondents served 1 to 11 years as a principal (58%) operate elementary schools (46%), in rural settings (54%), with an enrollment of between 500 and 999 students (47%). Students are enrolled in school districts that currently offer inter/intra-district choice programs (81%). These findings slightly differ from the findings of Drake (2000), who reported the majority of the principals in Georgia as Caucasian (89%), males (64%) with a large percentage having at least a Master's Degree (41%). This study was conducted five years after Drake (2000), possibly accounting for the increase in the educational level of public school principals and the respondents from this sample represent public schools only in the state of Alabama.

Discussion of Findings

This study did not indicate any significant differences among the principals' perceptions according to educational level, gender, years as a principal, or school size. However, the study found statistically significant differences in the perceptions of principals according to ethnicity, location of the school, percentage of students participating in free/reduced lunch programs, and type of school choice offered by the district.

Drake (2000) noted little research on African-American principals' perceptions on school achievement has been conducted. The number of African-American respondents in this study was 46, which is a larger number in comparison to Drake (2000) where 24 African-American respondents were sampled. There were 54 Caucasian principals who responded to this study. A further investigation into the perceptions of principals according to ethnicity could be conducted. Research of principal perceptions according to ethnicity may provide a narrower focus and examine issues that are ethnically related to improving school achievement. Research indicates that a large number of schools that are labeled as not achieving AYP have a substantial population of free/reduced lunch recipient students and a heavier minority enrollment in comparison to schools that have achieved AYP.

According to district characteristics (Research Question 2) of the respondents, statistically significant differences were found for suburban, urban, and rural principals. Rural principals represented fifty-four percent (54%) of the respondents within this study ($n = 54$). Fisher's LSD further revealed significant differences between urban and rural respondents. This finding may be attributed to the fact that students who are eligible for public school choice in rural districts may not have the ability to choose another school due to location and lack of choices available. In addition, principals from urban districts may have more concerns about public school choice because their students have opportunities to exercise choice and attend high performing public schools within or outside of the district. The exodus of students can lead to a decline in enrollment, school funding, and possibly a reduction in faculty and staff.

From analyzing the data (Research Question 2), size of the school (student enrollment) did not prove to be statistically significant. This finding might be attributed to the fact that the majority of the schools surveyed had a student enrollment between 500-999 students (n = 47). Therefore, there was not a significant representation across the four categories to sufficiently analyze the data. Type of school indicated lack of statistical significance and can be attributed to the fact that the larger number of academically troubled schools are at the middle/high school level. The majority of the respondents represented elementary schools (46%) where possibly a lower number of academically troubled schools exists.

The school characteristic (Research Question 2) of the principals surveyed that proved to be statistically significant was the percentage of students who receive free or reduced lunch. Schools with greater than fifty percent > 50 %, (n = 59) free and reduced lunch enrolled students indicated statistical significance with respondents when analyzing the data. Possibly this finding can be related to the fact that schools containing a high number of students, who participate in free/reduced lunch program, are categorized as Title I. These students are eligible for public school choice if their current school is identified as low performing. Student background and culture serve as a factor in socio-economic status. Principals may possibly want relief from the high pressures, external and internal demands that are associated with leading high poverty schools as opposed to principals who have a lower percentage of students participating in free/reduced lunch programs and may welcome public school choice for their students.

The findings within this study indicated that principals were likely to indicate that public school choice will increase parental involvement at their school (Question 2, Mean

= 2.79). This response is in conflict with Meier (1996), who contended that public school choice will provide the desired arena of involvement for parents

The principals in this study were also likely to indicate that public school choice would not force teachers or principals to become more accountable for student achievement (Questions 16 & 17). This response opposes the research of Teske et al. (2000) who wrote about the change of administrative behavior when the threat of choice increased. Teske et al. (2000) noted that principals may feel the effects of students transferring to stronger schools and will react with a greater response. Many principals may make adjustments in administrative and educational processes as the pressures of decreasing student enrollment increases. The United States Department of Education (2002) wrote that if school leaders are given aid, threatened with the mass withdrawal of their students, and the fear of losing their jobs, they will improve student achievement without delay. This theory is premised on the belief that administrators can improve student achievement and in some cases are not focusing on it as a priority.

An examination of the data indicates that principals were likely to respond that public school choice will improve the academic quality of all public schools in Alabama (Question 20, Mean = 2.53). These findings appear to be in opposition to research by Hess and Finn (2004), who wrote that public school choice will improve the total quality of the school system as individual schools compete for students. The possible reasons for this response from principals could be attributed to the belief that public school choice alone cannot improve the academic quality of Alabama's public schools. Some researchers reported that teacher expectations and instructional leadership play a significant role in school improvement (Murphy, 1994; Sergiovanni, 2001).

Recommendations for Further Study

The following recommendations for further research are based on the findings and conclusions of this study:

1. Ethnicity was a statistically significant characteristic of the principal's perceptions and therefore should be investigated further to determine a comparison in Caucasian and African -American principals' perceptions on public school choice. This comparison may indicate to be significant due to the primary premise of public school choice as a policy to close the achievement gap that is commonly noted across economic and racial lines.
2. Studies should be conducted on the degree principals' perceptions impact parent and teacher's perceptions of public school choice and ultimately student achievement. Principals are normally respected and trusted in their communities and are viewed as the instructional leader of the school. Information or policies that they present can be interpreted without question in a number of schools by both teachers and parents.
3. Principals from neighboring states should be surveyed to determine if their perceptions differ from the findings of this study. Especially states where policies promoting charter schools are established.
4. Qualitative research may provide a narrower focus and richer investigation of this topic. This topic may not be measured accurately through a Likert scale because respondents may not understand the nature of certain questions and they may not be honest in their responses. Interviews can help the researcher determine if there

is a need for probing questions and honest responses may be reported at a higher level in qualitative research.

5. The survey instrument should be refined to include additional items and further test its validity and reliability. A number of question items did not measure what was intended as indicated by the confirmatory factor analysis.
6. Further studies are needed to determine if there are any differences in a principal's perceptions on public school choice and the actual practices that coincidences or contradicts the principal's responses.

Conclusions

The overall purpose of this study was to identify the key factors that influence the perceptions of public school principals on public school choice. The review of literature suggested that principals play a significant role in implementing educational reform at the school level. Principals are responsible for introducing, explaining, and clarifying educational mandates for faculties, parents, students, and the community (Murphy, 1994; Sergiovanni, 2001; Wilmore, 2002). By assessing the perceptions of principals according to personal and school demographics, this study offered insight for those who want to provide students with an opportunity to receive an equitable and quality education regardless of residential zone.

Public school choice is a newly mandated policy under the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001. According to CCCR (1999) without guidance from the federal government, the benefits of reform will never reach the students who are disadvantaged. The government must provide insight for state departments of education through the

presentation of a true system of educational options, ensuring that parents, educators, and law-makers are knowledgeable of the information to the level of making sound educational decisions.

However, the findings from this study indicated that principals were unlikely to report that public school choice will provide parents living in poor communities access to quality education for their children (Question 3, Mean = 3.26). This response is in contradiction to one of the premises identified for public school choice implementation. The United States Department of Education, (2002) reported public school choice as an educational reform measure that can possibly close the achievement gap and provide students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds an opportunity to receive an education comparable to their privileged peers. The responses from the principals within this study indicate that the implementation of public school choice may not result in the desired product outlined by policymakers and a number of researchers.

The researcher recommends that policy makers seek reform efforts other than public school choice for closing the achievement gap. A proposed solution could be the creation of national educational standards, where students can receive a first class education regardless of the school's location or the student's economic background as intended by the framers of the constitution. School districts can operate on the same economic playing field through an increase in federal funding above the state formula for the systems that are not fortunate enough to have industry or expensive homes to supplement their tax base. In addition, policy makers can possibly influence the perceptions of principals by providing exposure to the research on successful

implementation of public school choice policies in sections of the country to encourage its utilization for student achievement and school improvement.

Findings of the study indicated that ethnicity, district location, student's socio-economic level, and the type of choice offered by the respondent's district impacted their perceptions on public school choice. However, the principal's gender, educational level, years of experience as a principal, and school classification indicated to not represent an influence in the perceptions of principals on public school choice. As a group, principals indicated that public school choice will not improve the academic quality of Alabama's public schools. This study failed to support the findings of a number of researchers (Heemst, 2004; Sunderman, Kim, & Orfield, 2005; Teske, Schneider, Buckley, & Clark, 2000; United States Department of Education, 2002) who identified public school choice as increasing school accountability and ultimately student achievement.

This study sought to fill the gaps in the research on principal perceptions and public school choice implementation. Principal perceptions may impact the degree to which they embrace public school choice as an effective educational reform measure. It is anticipated that this study may offer opportunities for further investigation of public school choice as an espoused effective educational reform measure. It is important to examine the perceptions of public school leaders because their beliefs and practices can influence teacher instruction, student achievement, and ultimately school effectiveness. Allegorically stated the implementation of this policy is interpreted at the street level and the principal serves at that level in ensuring federal mandates are carried out for student achievement.

However, in practice public school choice may be an attempt by policymakers to address a small portion of a greater dilemma that exists in America's public school systems. As indicated by the United States Constitution education falls within the general welfare clause, and is protected under the Fourteenth Amendment for all citizens. In the United States the words equitable and appropriate can be found within numerous educational law summaries but currently there are a number of students who experience inequities in educational services and opportunities because of the scarcity in financial resources for some school districts.

People are able to choose a number of public services but education is one of the few that is provided according to residential zones. The disparities that exist in public education may not be achieved by allowing a segment of underprivileged students to attend affluent schools outside of their residential districts. The students who are left behind are given a nonverbal message that their functioning within a sub-par education system in comparison to the school that is provided as a choice option. Poverty and its related educational consequences is one of the major issues that must be addressed before public school choice can be an effective educational reform method.

From examining the findings of this study the respondents indicated that the solutions for closing the achievement do not solely exist within the school system the solutions must be seriously addressed within the communities, where citizens who are interested in achieving the type of educated society envisioned by the framers of the constitution exist.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A
SURVEY INSTRUMENT

Survey of Public School Principal's Perceptions on Public School Choice

Public school choice as defined under No Child Left Behind (NCLB) is the opportunity for a student to attend a public school within or outside their home district providing their zone school (Title I) has not met the required goals of AYP over a specified period of time.

Part I: Background Information. Please mark the appropriate answer.

Gender: Male Female

Ethnicity: White (Caucasian) Black/African-American Hispanic

Asian Indian/Native American Other(Please Specify)_____

Highest Educational Level: Bachelor's Master's Eds. Doctorate

J.D. Other_____

Years of experience as a principal

1-5 6-11 12-17 18-23 24+

Your School District's Classification:

Suburban Urban Rural

Your School's Classification

Primary Elementary Middle School High School Unit School (K-12)

Other (Please Specify)_____

How many students are currently enrolled in your school?

0-499 500-999 1000-1499 1500-1999 2000-2499 2500-2999

3000 +

What percentage of students in your school qualify for free and reduced lunch? _____

What form of public school choice does your school district offer?
(Check all that apply)

___ Magnet Schools ___ Inter/Intra-district transfers Other (Please specify)_____

Please circle the response that best represents your perception towards each statement.

	SD	D	N	A	SA
	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
1. Parents in my community should have the right to choose what school their child attends regardless of school zones.	SD	D	N	A	SA
2. Public school choice will increase parental involvement in my school.	SD	D	N	A	SA
3. Public school choice will provide parents living in poor communities access to quality education for their children.	SD	D	N	A	SA
4. Parents and students may choose non-residential schools for non-academic reasons.	SD	D	N	A	SA
5. Parents will use public school choice as a voice in their child's educational curriculum.	SD	D	N	A	SA
6. Transportation can have a negative effect on parents ability to utilize public school choice.	SD	D	N	A	SA
7. Access to information will play a vital role in parents utilizing public school choice.	SD	D	N	A	SA
8. Public school choice will increase the community's confidence in public education reform.	SD	D	N	A	SA
9. Public school choice will create competition	SD	D	N	A	SA

among public schools in Alabama.

10. Public school choice will further widen the gap between the academically sound and deficient schools in Alabama.	SD	D	N	A	SA
11. Public school choice will result in students leaving strong academic programs for weaker ones.	SD	D	N	A	SA
12. Public school choice will result in students leaving public to attend private schools.	SD	D	N	A	SA
13. Public school choice will lead to the formation of charter schools in Alabama.	SD	D	N	A	SA
14. Public school choice will result in an increase of students from private schools to enroll in public schools.	SD	D	N	A	SA
15. Public school choice will reduce the student drop-out rate in your district.	SD	D	N	A	SA
16. Public school choice will assist in improving schools that are academically failing.	SD	D	N	A	SA
17. Public school choice will make teachers more accountable for student achievement.	SD	D	N	A	SA
18. Public school choice will make administrators more accountable for student achievement.	SD	D	N	A	SA
19. Public school choice will result in an enrollment decline of students in low-achieving schools.	SD	D	N	A	SA
20. Public school choice will improve the academic quality of all public schools within Alabama.	SD	D	N	A	SA

APPENDIX B

AUBURN UNIVERSITY INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD (IRB) LETTER

Auburn University

Auburn University, Alabama 36849



Office of Human Subjects Research
307 Samford Hall

Telephone: 334-844-5966
Fax: 334-844-4391
hsubjec@auburn.edu

July 7, 2005

MEMORANDUM TO: Julius Shanks
Educational Foundations Leadership & Technology

PROTOCOL TITLE: "A Study of Public School Principal's Perceptions of Public School Choice"

IRB FILE: #05-136 EP 0507

APPROVAL DATE: June 24, 2005
EXPIRATION DATE: June 23, 2006

The above reference protocol was approved by IRB Expedited procedure under Expedited Category #7 on June 24, 2005. You should report to the IRB any proposed changes in the protocol or procedures and any unanticipated problems involving risk to subjects or others. Please reference the above authorization number in any future correspondence regarding this project.

If you will be unable to file a Final Report on your project before June 23, 2006, you must submit a request for an extension of approval to the IRB no later than June 10, 2006. If your IRB authorization expires and/or you have not received written notice that a request for an extension has been approved prior to June 23, 2006, you must suspend the project immediately and contact the Office of Human Subjects Research for assistance.

A Final Report will be required to close your IRB project file. You are reminded that consent forms must be retained at least three years after completion of your study.

If you have any questions concerning this Board action, please contact the Office of Human Subjects Research at 844-5966.

Sincerely,

Peter W. Grandjean, Chair
Institutional Review Board for the Use of Human
Subjects in Research

cc: William Spencer
James Witte

APPENDIX C
PARTICIPANT LETTER OF CONSENT

Auburn University

Auburn University, Alabama 36849-5221

Educational Foundations
Leadership and Technology
4036 Haley Center

Telephone: (334) 844-4460
FAX: (334) 844-3072

INFORMATION LETTER

For

A Study of the Perceptions of Alabama's School Principals on Public School Choice

You are invited to participate in a research study investigating The Perceptions of Alabama's School Principals on Public School Choice. This study is being conducted by Julius N. Shanks, a doctoral candidate at Auburn University; and is under the supervision of James E. Witte, Associate Professor in Educational Foundations, Leadership and Technology. You were selected as a participant because you are presently a principal in one of Alabama's public schools.

If you decide to participate, you will be asked to complete a twenty-question five-point Likert scale survey. The survey will take about fifteen minutes to complete. By participating in this study you will help to build a broader understanding of public school choice. Additionally, this study will offer insights into the perceived effectiveness of public school choice in Alabama.

There are no foreseen risks involved with participation in this study. Any information obtained in connection with this study will be confidential. You may withdraw from participation at anytime, without penalty. Information, collected through your participation may be published in a professional journal and/ or presented at a professional meeting. If so, no identifying information will be included.

Your decision whether or not to participate will not jeopardize you personally or your future relations with CLAS, Auburn University, or the Department of Educational Foundations Leadership and Technology in any manner.

If you have any questions you may ask them now or should you have any questions later you may contact Julius N. Shanks at (334) 396-0998 or by e-mail at shankjn@auburn.edu or Dr. James E. Witte at (334) 844-3054 or witteje@auburn.edu.

For more information regarding your rights as a research participant you may contact the Auburn University Office of Human Subjects Research or the Institutional Review Board by phone (334) 844-5966 or e-mail at hsubjec@auburn.edu or IRBChair@auburn.edu.

HAVING READ THE INFORMATION PROVIDED, YOU MUST DECIDE WHETHER TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS RESEARCH PROJECT. IF YOU DECIDE TO PARTICIPATE, THE DATA YOU PROVIDE WILL SERVE AS YOUR AGREEMENT TO DO SO. THIS LETTER IS YOURS TO KEEP.

Julius N. Shanks 6/23/05
Investigator's signature Date

HUMAN SUBJECTS
OFFICE OF RESEARCH
PROJECT # 05-136EP 0507
APPROVED 6/23/05

A LAND-GRANT UNIVERSITY