



ILLUSTRATION / RYAN PANCOAST

ALL OVER THE MAP

Explaining educational outcomes of the Moving to Opportunity program

The Moving to Opportunity (MTO) program sought to relocate poor families out of high-poverty neighborhoods by providing housing vouchers. Five urban housing authorities (Baltimore, Boston, Chicago, Los Angeles, and New York) participated in the demonstration program with the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, providing rental assistance and counseling to households that were randomly selected from among applicants. Researchers expected that the move to a better neighborhood would have discernible effects on the academic achievement of the children involved, yet MTO data from the five cities show no overall positive impact on the children's learning. Why?

In "New Kids on the Block," (*research*, page 60), Sanbonmatsu, Kling, Duncan, and Brooks-Gunn report the findings of their MTO study and offer several possible explanations for the program's lack of overall positive effects on academic achievement. First, for families that did use a voucher to move to a better neighborhood, subsequent moves back to highly segregated, disadvantaged areas may have either offset initial gains or prevented children from experiencing better schools. Second, the new neighborhoods were still mostly minority communities and may not have had

BY STEFANIE DELUCA

schools or other public services of substantially higher quality than those they left behind. Though more affluent, the new neighborhoods may not have been affluent enough to make a difference in the education services the students received. Third, many control group children may already have been attending a school other than one in their neighborhood as a result of expanded school choice policies, which also meant that children in the experimental group could stay in their original schools after their families moved. The researchers also mention the extreme disadvantage that characterized the lives of many of the MTO families as a possible explanation for the differences between what researchers expected (improvements in achievement resulting from moving to better areas) and the actual results.

It is important to recognize that the MTO program did enable many families to improve their lives and those of their children. Barbara, a 41-year-old mother of five, left Baltimore city for the county, where she was pleased that the schools had so much more to offer: “stepping class, drama class, singing, girls’ basketball, volleyball...when the kid is not occupied, they gonna be out there doing whatever.” She felt that if she didn’t get her daughter out of the city school system, “she wasn’t gonna make it and I didn’t want her to get caught up in all the negativity that kids can do cause there’s a lot of that up there.” Parents commonly expressed the sentiment that their children would not “survive” in the city schools, and this fear drove many of the experimental movers to participate in the program.

In this essay, I use interview data collected from the Baltimore site of the MTO program to consider possible reasons MTO did not have the expected results for educational achievement. Baltimore is the only one of the five cities in which Sanbonmatsu and her colleagues found positive impacts on reading and math test scores. But these improvements were only for elementary school-aged children from families that used restricted MTO vouchers (see sidebar above). These effects on achievement, while statistically significant, were nonetheless small. The same dynamics that diminished education benefits in Baltimore were likely at play in the other MTO cities as well.

The View from Baltimore

My colleagues and I conducted interviews in Baltimore between July 2003 and June 2004. Heads of household participated in

The Moving to Opportunity Demonstration

The MTO program began in 1994 in five cities and over the next four years, a total of 4,248 families participated: 1,729 families were offered restricted MTO vouchers (for the first year, families could move only to neighborhoods that had a poverty rate of less than 10 percent in 1990), 1,209 families were offered Section 8 vouchers (an existing HUD housing program), and 1,310 families entered the lottery but were offered neither voucher. This latter group became the control group for the experiment. About half of the families offered a voucher used it to relocate.

In Baltimore, 636 families participated in the MTO program, with 252 families offered restricted MTO vouchers, 187 families offered Section 8 housing vouchers, and 197 families placed in the control group (entered the lottery but were offered neither voucher). Just over half (146 or 58 percent) of the families offered a restricted voucher used it to move, and nearly three-quarters (135 or 72 percent) of the families who were offered a Section 8 voucher took advantage of the offer and relocated.

an in-depth interview that lasted between three and five hours, and participants chose pseudonyms to maintain confidentiality. Children’s names and school names have also been changed. Based on these interviews, I try to answer two questions: First, why is it that parents don’t switch children’s schools, either in conjunction with a residential move or in light of increasing schooling options in Baltimore city? Second, when school changes do occur, why don’t they lead to enhancements in children’s academic and developmental progress?

There are five status groups of participants in the MTO experiment: control group families, experimental movers (who received restricted vouchers), experimental non-movers (who were offered but did not accept restricted vouchers), Section 8 movers, and Section 8 non-movers. I only compare the first two groups in this paper, since we expected school quality changes to be greatest between these two. For the discussion below, I analyzed 90 interviews with mothers and primary caregivers: 55 were from the control group and 35 were experimental movers, representing about one-quarter of the families in each group.

Moving Out

Families who signed up for the chance to get a voucher through MTO lived in some of the poorest and most segregated neighborhoods in Baltimore. Most tracts had 80 percent or more African American residents, and more than 40 percent of the residents had incomes at or below the poverty threshold. As is common for large urban school districts, the student body of Baltimore city’s schools is predominantly minority and poor. Baltimore city’s schools are far more racially segregated and poorer than the schools in the four adjacent counties.

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When they signed up for the program, many of the families were living in one of five public housing projects that were soon to be demolished. Thus, many control group families were forced to move, for better or worse. Control group families did not receive a voucher or any assistance from the MTO program, but could have acquired HUD vouchers through other means.

There were large differences in the moves made by MTO experimental movers and control group families. Almost all of the control group families who moved from their original neighborhoods relocated to highly segregated, poor areas, a finding consistent with much of the research on mobility among low-income minority families. Most of the families who used MTO vouchers left areas of concentrated poverty for safer, significantly less impoverished neighborhoods. While many of the new neighborhoods were still in Baltimore city, there were a number of moves into the outlying counties. But the moves, with few exceptions, did not result in families relocating to areas with much lower concentrations of African Americans (see Figure 1).

How closely tied were residence and school attendance prior to participation in MTO? Figure 2 displays the original neighborhoods for the families who used an MTO voucher (experimental movers) and the location of the schools their children attended before moving. A substantial number of the original schools were outside the family's neighborhood school zone. In our interviews, some mothers admitted that they sent their children to nonzone schools in both the city and the county, using addresses belonging to friends or family members. Some did so for school quality reasons and some for logistical reasons, such as proximity to a caregiver. Control families tended to send their children to city schools more often

between where the family moved after receiving the MTO voucher and the new school a child attended. Second, despite moves to less-impoverished neighborhoods, many experimental mover children still attended schools in the inner city. This is in line with the five-city interim impacts report issued by researchers. By the time the interim survey data were collected, almost 70 percent of children in experimental mover families attended schools in the same district as when they signed up for the program.

Navigating Chaos

While the maps and quantitative data give us an overview of the MTO program, they can also oversimplify how poor families make choices and what their lives are like. Anyone who has tried to do fieldwork with very poor populations understands that often the research itself is subject to the chaos and unpredictability of life in the inner city. In the course of our fieldwork, participants sometimes disappeared. Often, we did interviews at McDonald's because respondents were embarrassed by their housing; other times, interviews were conducted on the floor of the home because there was no furniture. Recording and conducting interviews (to say nothing about the transcription) was complicated by the noise of many different people coming in and out of the area where the interview was taking place. Often children stayed with more than one family member in a week. My colleagues and I sometimes conducted interviews over multiple sessions to accommodate these instabilities.

Frequently, severe substance use and death entered into already-disrupted young lives. I visited an MTO youth in



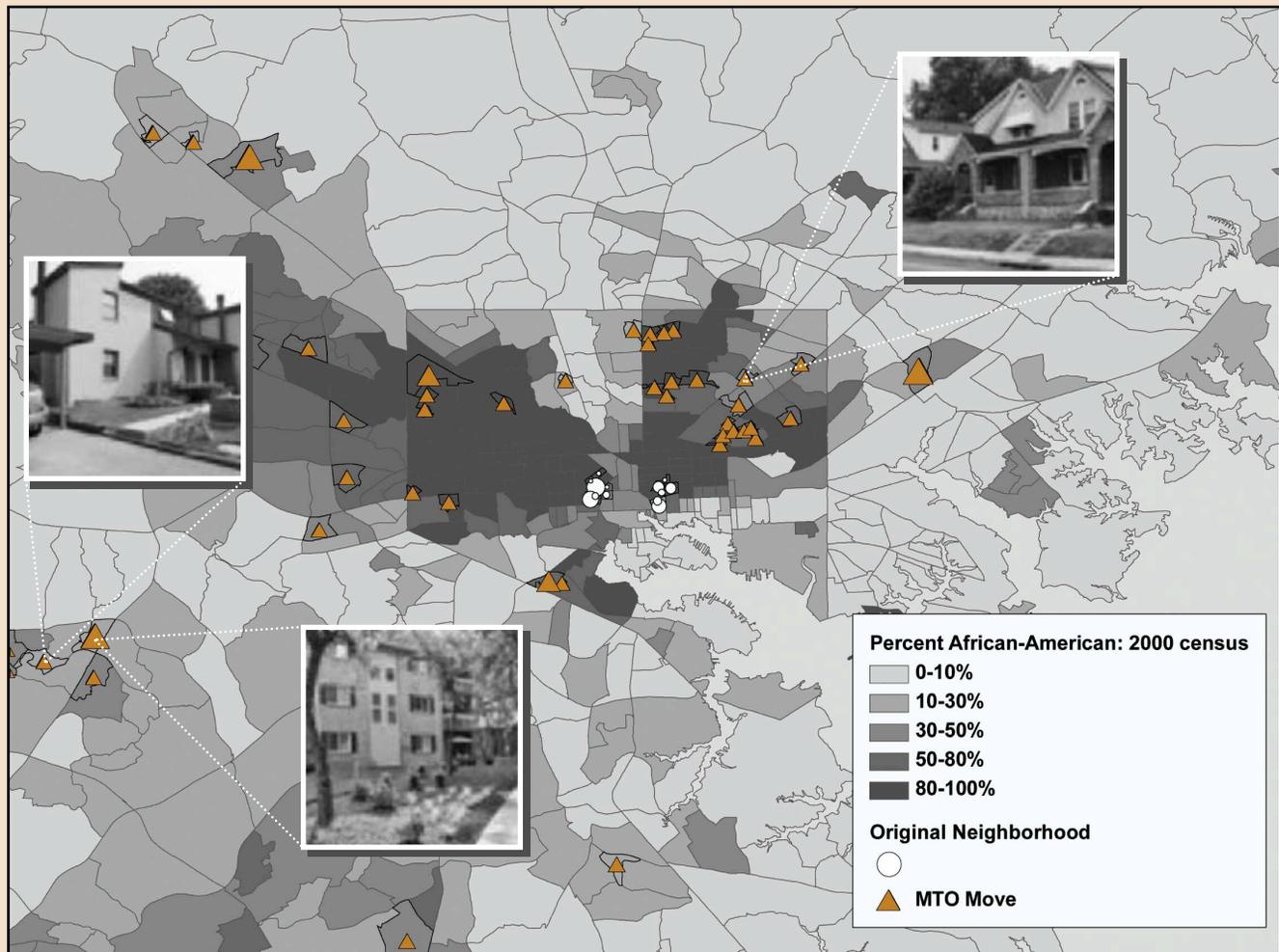
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than experimental mover families did. When the MTO program began in 1994, school choice was not much of a factor in Baltimore city, beyond some citywide high schools. But during the late 1990s and into the 2000s, schooling options for families in Baltimore city increased somewhat.

We found two patterns for the schools later attended by experimental mover children. First, there is a relationship

prison, incarcerated for attempted murder after a childhood filled with drug-addicted parents, lead poisoning, and school suspensions. A number of families had experienced the death of a mother: one was a murder in a city park, others were health-related. In the aftermath, aunts and grandmothers took responsibility for raising these children, which sometimes led to problems finding apartments large enough

Experimental Mover Families: Percent African American in old and new neighborhoods (Figure 1)



NEIGHBORHOOD PHOTOS / JENNIFER BISHOP

The moves, with few exceptions, did not result in families relocating to areas with much lower concentrations of African Americans.

Note: Photos are representative of new neighborhoods and do not depict actual homes of MTO participants.
 SOURCE: Author, from U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, Moving to Opportunity Interim Survey Data

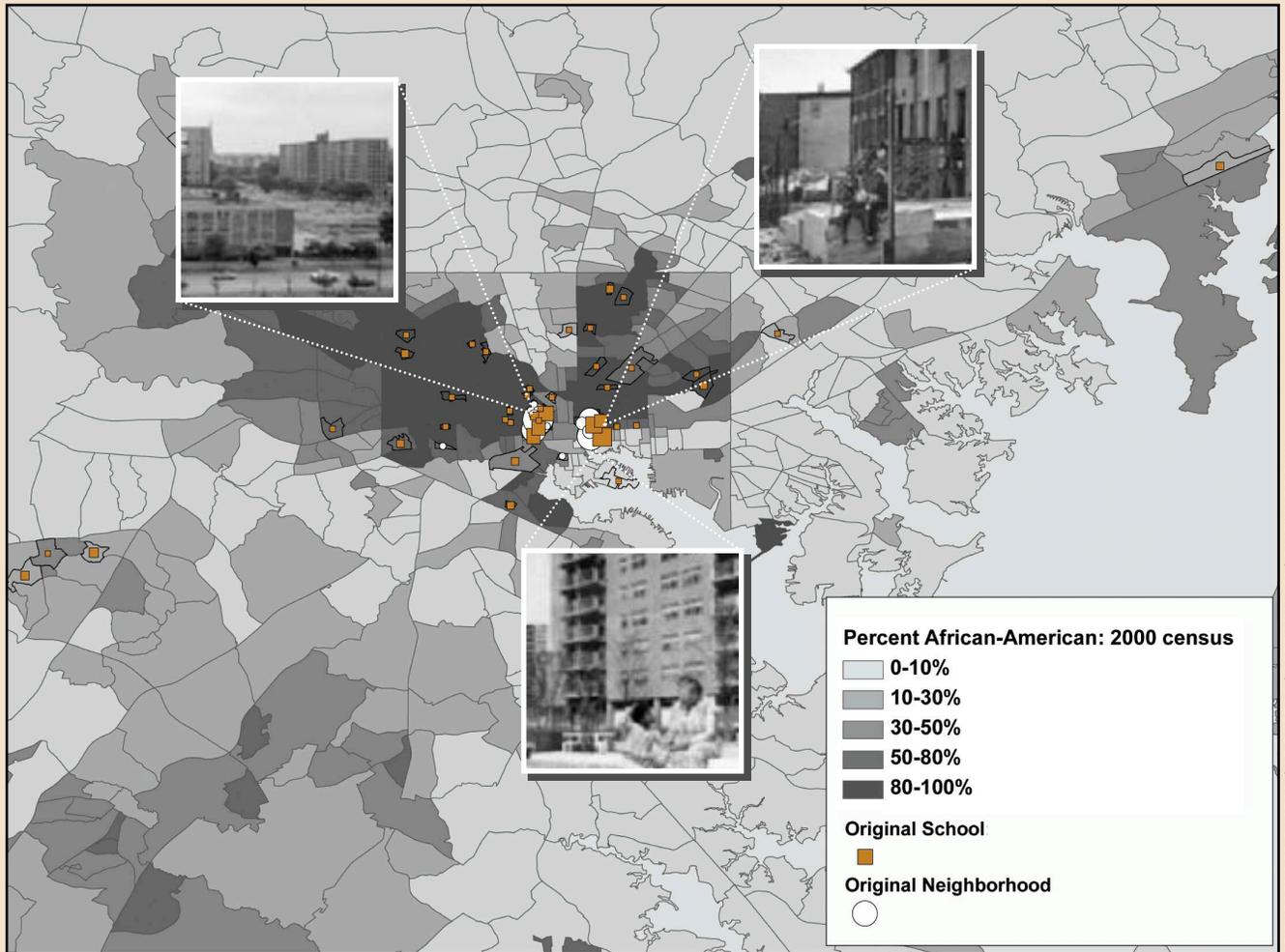
to accommodate the entire extended family. One aunt took care of her own children plus those of her sister and lived in the homes of two different cousins within a year. This led to multiple high school changes for one of the teenage girls.

Many parents were in and out of jail, work, rehab, and abusive relationships. Some mothers were homeless. Landlords complicated the situation and often made decisions that led to unexpected moves for MTO families. Such “shocks to the system” made residential mobility even more traumatic than

it might be for middle-class families and led to even more school instability.

Work schedules are another source of chaos. The job market for the inner-city poor is remarkably unstable. Scheduling and transportation issues are much more salient for the poor than for the middle class. Ironically, one mechanism for coping with mothers’ work schedules while ensuring stable schooling is the shuffling of children from one house to another. Many primary caregivers we interviewed were

Experimental Mover Families: Original neighborhood and location of children's original school (Figure 2)



A substantial number of the children's original schools were outside the family's neighborhood school zone.

Note: Photos are representative of original neighborhoods and do not depict actual homes of MTO participants.
SOURCE: Author, from U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, Moving to Opportunity Interim Survey Data

grandmothers whose grandchildren live with them during the school week while their mom works.

The Interviews

The context of decision making among inner-city minority families and the serious challenges of their lives clearly moderate the link between neighborhood moves and educational enhancement. Still, it is a mistake to assume that MTO mattered

little to those who participated in the program. A couple of examples illustrate the profound relief and joy that some mothers experienced, and how improvements in neighborhood quality could change lives. The first interview I conducted was with a woman who, with the help of a housing counselor, used her MTO voucher to move herself and her daughter out of the tangle of her substance-abusing family and the threats of public housing and into a peaceful, more integrated, and opportunity-rich area in Northeast Baltimore.

When she showed me the house, I said, oh, my goodness, it was like fate.... It was an apartment, but the rooms were big. I never had a kitchen that big. I went home, boy, that week I could hardly sleep. I was packing my stuff. I was so happy.... I didn't know at the time when I moved that she was going to [attend] one of the best schools in Baltimore city. I said, oh, my goodness, I didn't know that.

A number of mothers took advantage of MTO vouchers to move out of their old city neighborhoods as part of a plan to

already attended schools in better areas using the addresses of friends or relatives. Sheila, an experimental mover, had been using her friend's address to send her children to a county school and taking turns with the children's father driving them there. They went to this trouble because they believed that, compared to city schools, the county school was a better place to learn responsibility and what society demands for adult life. Sheila felt especially strongly about this choice, given her long and painful struggle with drugs, which she attributed to the dangers of the city.



Several mothers talked about the high levels of fighting, violence, and truancy in their children's schools, but still had children in the same school for years. Sadly, many were satisfied to wait it out or accept teachers they didn't like.

stay "clean" and protect their children. Keisha, for example, used her voucher to move to the county, where she has lived for nine years. To avoid the perils of his old zoned city school, she made sure her son attended a local county magnet school. Initially, her son missed his friends from the city, but he really liked the new school and starting making new friends. Keisha and her son had to adjust to the challenge of the magnet school and the higher academic standards. With the aid of teachers, Keisha came to understand why it takes more effort in the county to achieve the good grades her son got in the city.

But success stories are only part of the picture. Other transitions to county schools were difficult, even if for the best. As her mother describes, one teenage girl had trouble adjusting to the orderly environment in the county school and was repeatedly suspended.

Plymouth was much better than Langley Court. It wasn't crazy and wild where the students was running all over the place. I actually saw a gym class going on. I see students sitting down. She just could not adapt to that calm atmosphere. She was so used to the unruliness and the craziness. I am like, you are in school to learn; you need to sit back and learn and stop focusing on that nonsense that you were focusing on before at Langley Court. Now it's time to really get down and learn.

Many MTO parents did not switch their children's schools when they moved. Why not? As noted above, some children

Some mothers expressed a desire to maintain social networks and systems of social support and, similarly, to keep children's school connections. Some MTO families saw changing schools as too disruptive.

...they wanted me to move out in Columbia really far out and I was like I wanted something that was accessible to my family, to my church, you know my support system so this is like right in the heart of all of that. And I also wanted something that was affordable, close to the school where my daughter wouldn't have to travel to get to school and like I stated she has been there from pre-K on up to 8th grade.

In other cases, parents became passive and complacent in the face of obdurate school bureaucracies and persistent problems. Some parents left schooling decisions up to the children themselves.

Renee, a mother of two, was the victim of domestic violence in several relationships. She had moved with an MTO voucher from the housing projects in East Baltimore to a safer, more integrated neighborhood in Baltimore county. In a fit of rage, her husband kicked the door in and the landlord then kicked the family out. That jolt landed Renee back in the city, in an apartment in a poor area of West Baltimore, and four more residences in the following two years. Her daughter, a motivated, bright young woman who did homework for hours each night, was referred by a teacher to try a private

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school with financial aid options. Renee left the decision up to her daughter, who preferred to stay in the city public school she was already attending.

MTO families that didn't switch their children's schools often had low expectations for what schools *in general* are able to offer and accomplish.

The only thing that Terry disliked about the school, like I said, there was always riots, they always started fires. They'd let the children go home early, you know, that's the only thing that he disliked about school. But as far as the teachers assisting him as which way is possible, he was fine with it.

Several mothers talked about the high levels of fighting, violence, and truancy in their children's schools, but still had children in the same school for years. Sadly, many were satisfied to wait it out or accept teachers they didn't like. They thought that it would be all right because their child only had "another year or two." Such minimal expectations stretched to their communication and involvement with the school.

I've got a couple letters from the teachers. I have even gotten a couple of calls from the teachers concerning my son in reference to his behavior and his work habits and everything. And by the conversation, I can tell that they were pretty much concerned with his learning. So right there I said, "Okay, this is a pretty good school if I can have a teacher call me and tell me he has some concerns about my child."

Some parents simply wanted to be allowed to visit or be given "some general idea that you know my child is in this school somewhere here."

Low-income parents often lack the basic information necessary for school choice decisions. If parents don't realize that the schools they send their children to are extremely low performing, or that they can exercise choice options and receive financial aid, they are unlikely to take an active stance to change the situation. In a discouraging case, one well-meaning parent mistook a scholarship to one of Baltimore's elite schools for a loan and didn't send her child on to the better school. This mother had previously enrolled her children in Catholic school, but thought that they didn't learn enough "social skills" there, so she sent them back to public school in the county. Another mother misunderstood the school transfer process between Baltimore city and Baltimore county.

Many of the MTO parents took a backseat approach to their children's education. Niecy left the school choice decision entirely up to a higher power, believing that she had little information to contribute:

Every school that they go to cause I always praying and say Lord you know I don't know what school, wherever school you

have them to go to, whatever school they go to, that's the school you pick, I thank you Lord, so that's it. And they're good schools.

It is quite striking how little some parents thought that school mattered for learning, relative to what the child contributed through hard work and a "good attitude."

Tisha, an experimental mover and 32-year-old mother of two, explained that despite how awful the children's schools were, it was up to the child to "get what she needs." She dismissed private schooling in light of what children contribute to their own education.

That school is crazy. I have to pray for her, it's like I send my child to hell every day and then I expect her to get good grades and learn. But like I said it's up to the individual 'cause she could separate herself from that and she could get what she needs. And she could keep going or she could fall into that crowd to which she's a follower and she'll mess herself up....

...you can send a hard head to a private school and it's not gonna make a bit of difference. You can send a good child to what you might think a not-so-good school and as long as they focus and pay attention it'll benefit them.

Even once aware of a new school choice program, some parents opted to keep their children in their current schools.

Now they have the program with the school system where you can pick. If your child goes to a school that's—how do they put it? That didn't do too well at certain times, you can choose the school that did better. I guess it's doing better than the school that they currently go to or was going to... Neither one of us would be able to take her to school so that's why she's going to go to the school she's going to, which is just as much of a school. It's not a great school but I always tell them, you can make it 'cause the education is there. It's really what you try to get out of school—you know what I mean.

Some MTO children did change schools after a move. Why didn't school changes lead to improved outcomes? One reason is what I call the decoupling of school change from school quality. Many parents made decisions about schooling that had little or nothing to do with academic quality. During interviews we asked, "What makes a good school? Do you think your child's school is a good school? Why?" Few parents focused on high school graduation rates, rigorous courses, and college preparation. For many poor families, choices about where to live involve proximity to transportation, supportive family members, and moms' jobs. Schools come after that.

I came to the area. I knew where the subway was, right down the street here. So here it was convenient for me to still catch the bus to work. So that's why I picked here.



Successfully enhancing education opportunities for the types of families who participated in the MTO experiment will depend on gaining a better understanding of how these families view the school choice process and where it fits into their overall strategies for well-being.

Even parents who placed more value on school choices still didn't take school quality as seriously as other issues. They trusted that "the education is there" if their child wants to work for it. Some sought a sense of comfort and a welcoming atmosphere rather than academic rigor. Parents wanted to feel that they were welcome in their child's school or that the teachers really cared for the children.

He had a great teacher last year, Miss Worth. She'd always say to each child, no matter if they were bad or good, "My little miracle! You're my miracle! I want you to do better tomorrow." She'd hugged each child as they pass by her. That's great! You don't find many teachers, not even parents that can do that!

Some school changes happen involuntarily and cannot really be considered "school choice." Forced school transfers and expulsions accounted for some of the school mobility experienced by MTO youth, especially by boys. Several parents explained that their children were "put out" of school, usually because of behavioral problems and attendance issues. One respondent told us that her 3rd grader got into a fight with his teacher and "swung on her" because "he said she was choking him and he was trying to get away...it's two sides to every story. I wasn't there."

Conclusions

The interviews conducted in Baltimore shed light on the explanations for why the MTO experiment didn't lead to better schools and educational achievement. Many MTO parents told us about frightening conditions in their children's schools and their concern for their children's well-being. Yet these fears and realities did not always translate into efforts to remove their children from these environments. Poor mothers and their children juggle myriad extreme conditions, and schooling is not always on the top of the list. Murder, crippling drug addiction, suspicious landlords, diabetes, and depression took center stage in the lives of many, if not most,

MTO families we interviewed. While neighborhood change could be a necessary condition to protect children and improve their schooling, it is not sufficient in light of the deep morass of issues that characterize the lives of the urban poor.

Many social policies assume that all low-income parents approach opportunity the same way that most middle-class families do, and that the main problem is a lack of financial resources. Our interviews provide a reminder that poor families are not just wealthy families without a bankbook. Poor parents often have less information about school choice programs and school quality than do middle-class parents. Poor families may approach opportunities, and in particular may secure schooling for their children, in ways that diverge from many research models of educational decision making.

These insights are also relevant to school choice policy in general. Many cities, including those in which MTO families were living, have expanded school choice programs. No Child Left Behind gives parents the option of sending their child to another school if the current one doesn't make adequate progress. The success of these policies in enhancing education opportunities for the types of families who participated in the MTO experiment will depend on gaining a better understanding of how these families view the school choice process and where it fits into their overall strategies for well-being.

Obviously, only part of the solution lies in information enrichment. Years of failed urban school-reform efforts and concentrated residential poverty exacerbate the passive orientations that poor families have toward schooling. The evidence in the research base to date suggests that housing and neighborhoods need to be an important consideration when thinking about solutions to educational inequality. Recurring themes in our interviews support integrated policies and interventions that target schooling in conjunction with housing, mental health services, and employment assistance.

Stefanie DeLuca is assistant professor of sociology and an affiliate of the Center for Social Organization of Schools, both at Johns Hopkins University.

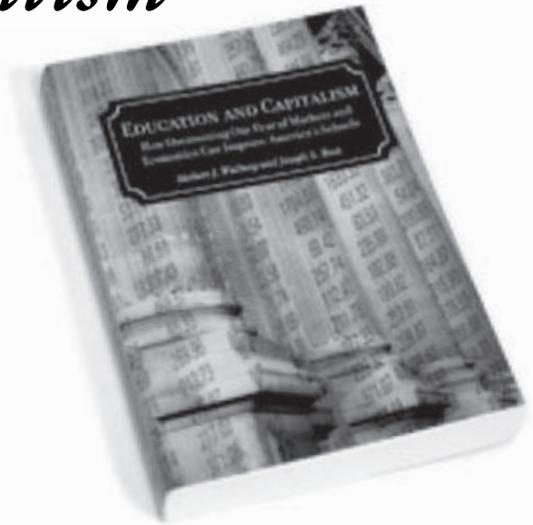
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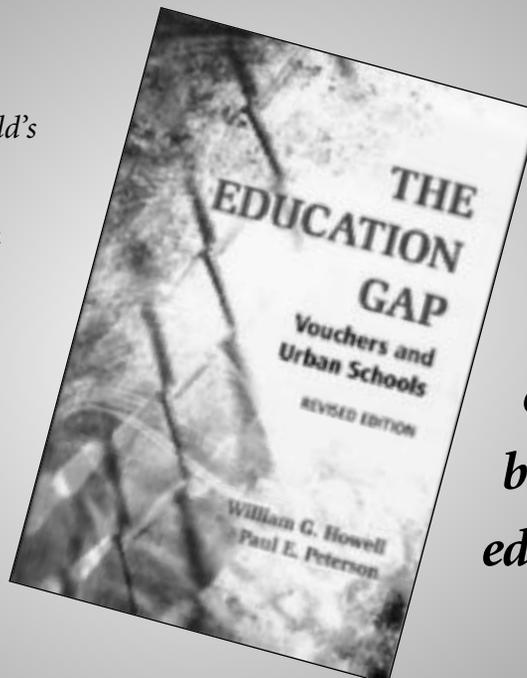
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