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Why Parents Choose Laboratory Schools for their Children

Since their introduction in the 1800s, laboratory schools have played an important role in testing new concepts of teaching. However, the time from the 1960s onward was one of reduction in the number of laboratory schools. Hausfather (2000) reported “one half of the nation’s laboratory schools either closed or were reduced in scope, falling from 212 in the mid 1960s to less than 100 surviving today” (p. 33). The Laboratory School in this study was established in 1906. With so few laboratory schools left in the United States, one wonders why parents still choose to enroll their children in these schools. More importantly, why do parents choose for their children to not attend or leave lab schools? A recent survey of parents, whose children attend a lab school in the southeastern part of the United States, and a review of the literature, attempts to answer these questions.

Strengths of Laboratory Schools

The parent survey administered by the research team shows that the most often cited positive quality of the laboratory school is its focus on, and success with, academics. The literature, however, reveals smaller teacher to student ratios allowing students to feel more comfortable around their teachers, and permitting teachers to build solid rapport with their students was high on the list. According to Cotton (1996), “In a small school, each student can be known and valued. No one gets lost in the crowd. All the adults in the school can know all the students. Small schools can be more flexible in response to individual students and their circumstances.”(p.2)

In addition, the continuity of experience in laboratory schools across the elementary, middle, and high school levels housed in the same complex allows for a more comfortable and less stressful academic environment. Furthermore, Johnson, Howley & Howley (2000) argue that “Student achievement is higher in small schools, and even higher in small schools operating in small districts. Small schools also have much lower drop-out rates and more graduates who go to college” For example, in the laboratory school in this study, the high school students, along with elementary and middle, have consistently been in the top ten performing schools in the state. This finding further reinforces the belief in the positive effect of clustered grade levels common to lab schools.

Being located on the campus and working hand-in-hand with a university, a laboratory school, also called a university school, offers an atmosphere that promotes student interest in higher education. The authors of a compilation of articles on laboratory schools “Laboratory Schools of the Future,” from the NALS (National Association of Laboratory Schools) argue, “A campus location and a university base, offer clear advantages. Because the key to developing a

productive educational laboratory is bringing the academic community and the school community together in common harness....” (Bayne, M., Creek, R., Hechtman, J., Buck, L.B., Johnson, J.R., Tosto, B., 1991, p.166). In addition, the campus atmosphere allows students to become familiar with college at an earlier age; therefore, the atmosphere somewhat eliminates the added stress of transitioning to the post secondary environment when they attend college later, and thus enhances their achievement. In addition, students attending a school located on a university campus may take advantage of college classes being offered before they graduate from high school. The NALS authors claim, “Parents who send students to university schools accept a program tailored to the larger needs in education, not solely to the benefit of their children. Parents in public schools may be much less likely to understand, acknowledge, and accept such conditions”(1991,p.167).

Weaknesses of Laboratory Schools

One of the most prevalent reasons why parents do not choose to enroll their children in lab schools is financial; the tuition of these schools is often expensive. Some parents believe their children can have the same quality of education at a public school without paying tuition. Hausfather (2000) reports that “...only 24 percent of lab schools charged tuition in 1942, forty-five percent charged tuition in 1964” (p. 33). One wonders if the trend for laboratory schools to charge tuition corresponds directly with the number of laboratory schools diminishing in enrollment.

Another perceived weakness of laboratory schools is the frenzied environment. Most lab schools are designed to train teacher candidates. This requires student teachers and other school and university personnel to frequently enter and exit classrooms to facilitate observation of teacher candidates and the instructional methods used in the classroom throughout the year. This type of activity can be disruptive to children, who are trying to concentrate on their class material, as well as instructors trying to teach.

Additionally, McBride and Hicks (1998) stated that high turnover rates in faculty/staff members is also a problem in laboratory schools because, “having large numbers of [college] students, instructors, and researchers working in classrooms can contribute to the complexity, confusion, and stress experienced by staff members” (pg. 31).

While being on a university campus has its advantages, it can be disruptive to students as well as faculty due to the constant flow of outside agents conducting research and observation, causing teachers and staff members to choose other employment. Hausfather (2000) argues, “Parents of laboratory school students are often at cross-purposes with college goals, wanting traditional academic

programs over innovation” (pg. 33). Therefore, parents may choose a public school with less interruption over a research-based laboratory school.

Another reason stated in the literature for why parents may choose a public school for their children is because of the homogenous environment that lab schools tend to produce; although, in our study parents rated this homogeneity as a reason for selecting the school. In a NALS article, “Laboratory Schools of the Future,” the authors report that, “Multicultural education is the sharing of knowledge of and attitudes toward the different ethnic backgrounds of the students in the school, larger community, and the nation” (1991, pg. 162). Most lab schools are so small that children share a classroom with the same children they did in kindergarten through high school. The NALS authors go on to state “Schools need to address this issue in order that diversity be accepted and encouraged...” (1991, pg. 162). According to this same article, some parents would prefer a public school for their children to broaden their social spectrum, which would allow them to learn how to meet new people in a more diverse environment.

The Sample

The sample contained parents who chose to enroll their children in the lab school and parents who chose to withdraw, or not re-enroll, their children. Each of these groups were sent a survey which asked them to value a list of descriptors as to whether these descriptors were a major (3), minor (2) or not a factor (1) in their decision to enroll, withdraw, or not re-enroll their children. Details of these descriptors are contained in tables 1, 2 and 3.

Data Analysis

Table 1 presents the top three reasons for parents choosing a lab school for their children. The survey asked the parents to select reasons for electing a laboratory school for their children using a three point Likert scale, where 1 = Not a factor, 2 = A minor factor and 3 = A major factor, in their decision making. Table 2 reveals the reasons that parents choose to remove their children from lab schools and Table 3 displays the others factors not selected in the top three reasons parents selected to enroll or disenroll their children. In tables 1 and 2, column 1 shows the categories; columns 2-4 are the frequencies of selection using the Likert scale; columns 5-7 are the results of weighting the raw frequency scores. The weighting was accomplished by factoring column 2 by one, column 3 by two and column 4 by three. The results are contained in columns 5-7. The mean of columns 5-7 is presented in column 8 and was used to order the selection frequencies.

Table 1
Top Three Reasons Why Parents Choose to Send Their Children to Lab Schools

Reasons for Selecting a Lab School	Frequency of Selection: Raw Score			Frequency of Selection: Weighted Score*			Weighted Mean Score	Order of Weighted Selection Frequency
	Scale: 1 Not a Factor, 2 = Minor, and 3 = Major							
	1	2	3	1	2	3		
Academic reputation	0	6	37	0	12	111	41	1
Small size of school	2	7	34	2	14	102	39	2
High quality teachers	4	13	26	4	26	78	36	3

*Score weighting was conducted by factoring scale score 1 by 1, 2 by 2, and 3 by 3

When parents completed the survey, they used a variety of data sources to make their decisions. The following lists these sources and associates them with the appropriate line items. The data used by parents to establish the three major factors (Table 1) influencing the selection of a lab school by parents were:

- 1) Academic reputation of the school
 - a. School performance on the state accountability testing system, school performance on ACT and SAT tests
- 2) Small size
 - a. Fewer school transitions throughout PK-12 (all grades are in one building)
 - b. Homogenous environment for students, teachers, and parents
- 3) Quality of the teachers
 - a. Perceived high number of Master teachers (performance and educational attainment)
 - b. All meet state and NCLB (No Child Left Behind) licensing standards

Table 2 reveals the top three reasons for parents not choosing to maintain enrollment of their student or leaving the Lab School. The survey asked the parents to select reasons for not selecting or leaving the Lab School, using a three point Likert scale, where 1 = Not a factor, 2 = A minor factor and 3 = A major factor, in their decision.

Table 3 displays the others factors not selected as one of the top three. Column 1 shows the categories. Columns 2-4 are the frequencies of selection using the Likert scale. Columns 5-7 are the results of weighting the raw frequency scores. The weighting was accomplished by factoring column 2 by 1, column 3 by 2, and column 4 by 3. The results are contained in columns 5-7. The

means of columns 5-7 are presented in column 8 and were used to order the selection frequencies.

Table 2

Top Three Reasons Why Parents Choose not to Re-enroll Their Children in Lab Schools

Reasons for Selecting a Lab School	Frequency of Selection: Raw Score			Frequency of Selection: Weighted Score*			Weighted Mean Score	Order of Weighted Selection Frequency
	1	2	3	1	2	3		
	Scale: 1 not a factor, 2 = minor, and 3 = major							
Unhappy with teachers	2	4	8	2	8	24	11	1
Not satisfied with academics	4	6	5	4	12	15	10	2
Unhappy with administration	5	5	5	5	10	15	10	2

*Score weighting was conducted by factoring scale score 1 by 1, 2 by 2, and 3 by 3

The data used by parents to establish the three major factors (Table 2) influencing the decision to remove or not re-enroll their children are:

- 1) Unhappy with teachers
 - a. Teachers' personal views embedded in classroom instruction
 - b. Lack of interpersonal skills when relating to students and parents
- 2) Not satisfied with academics
 - a. Lack of academic rigor
 - b. Lack of comprehensive class choices
- 3) Unhappy with administration
 - a. Lack of discipline
 - b. Failure to develop relationships with students and parents

The major factor in the selection of the lab school, for parents enrolling their children, is the academic reputation of the school. Conversely, for parents who chose to remove their children, there seems to be a disappointment with the school's academic performance both in presentation, class offerings, and academic rigor. While the reasons for choosing the lab school are abstract, the factors for leaving are concrete. When expectations of parents are not met in academics, by teachers and administrators, students leave the school. Table 3 presents the other factors (excluding top three) parents selected that influenced their decisions to choose or not choose/leave a lab school.

Table 3
Additional reasons for and against Lab School attendance in order of frequency of selection

Why Parents did not choose to stay in the Lab School	Reasons for Selecting a Lab School
Friends going to another school	Ability to take university classes in high school
Classes not offered at lab school	High quality administrators
Physical building/resources	Level of parent involvement
Transportation not available	Part of university college of education
Safety issues	Gifted program
Increase in tuition	Friends go to school here and like it
No placement for sibling	Having siblings together
No sports program	Tuition is more reasonable than private school
No after school care available	Sports programs
No marching band	Parent is faculty member at university
	Special Education program
	After school care works for family

Conclusion

Laboratory schools were created to improve teaching through research. While there can never be a perfect way of teaching, there can always be room for improvement. Although few laboratory schools exist today, they continue to contribute to the education of children. In order to preserve laboratory schools and their ideologies, it is important to know their strengths and weaknesses. By understanding what makes parents choose or not choose lab schools for their children, administrators can see what is working for their school and what they can improve. In keeping with their history, laboratory schools can enhance the educational experience for the students who attend by working with parents. While this study looked at the literature and conducted a survey in one lab school, it must be noted that the number of persons surveyed was small and additional lab schools need to be reviewed and surveyed in order to associate these findings across the population.

Recommendations and Implications

- 1) In order to enhance laboratory school enrollment, administrators need to research the benefits of academic reputation, small school size, impact of no transitions between schools, high-quality teachers, and beginning college matriculation early.
- 2) While marketing strategies may bring students into lab schools, administrators need to make the abstractions, often embedded in the reputation, concrete, by monitoring the actual performance of teachers and administrators and comparing them to a baseline standard such as a national and/or regional accrediting agency. Further, when administrators evaluate teachers, they need to emphasize that dispositions are paramount in maintaining students in lab schools. In addition, as a part of that evaluation, administrators should make clear that personal opinions should not guide instruction.
- 3) Additionally, student access to rigorous courses must be insured to accommodate the expectation of parents and insure, where appropriate, a high score for the ACT and/or the SAT with the potential of scholarship opportunities always in mind.

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