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## Parents' perceived benefits of full-time online K-12 education as an educational replacement option

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Pepperdine University  
Graduate School of Education and Psychology

PARENTS' PERCEIVED BENEFITS OF FULL-TIME ONLINE K-12 EDUCATION AS AN  
EDUCATIONAL PLACEMENT OPTION

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Education in Educational Leadership, Administration and Policy

by

Joanne Vanderhorst

August, 2017

Robert Barner, Ph.D. – Dissertation Chairperson

This dissertation proposal, written by

Joanne Vanderhorst

under the guidance of a Faculty Committee and approved by its members, has been submitted to and accepted by the Graduate Faculty in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

Doctoral Committee:

Robert Barner, Ph.D., Chairperson

Anthony Collatos, Ph.D.

Sharlyn Crump, Ed.D.

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## DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my family and friends for being daily reminders of what is most important in life for without which, this would not have been possible. Thank you for your patience and understanding when I was conducting research or writing. There are no words to describe how much I look forward to all our time together.

To my son, Jonathon, thank you for being an amazing role model of resiliency and perseverance. You inspire me to not give up on my goals and to meet my challenges forthright with determination and dignity. Your dedication to stewardship of the gifts we receive from God make me so proud of the young man you have become.

To my son, Jacob, thank you for your witty humor and compassion. You remind me to laugh, especially at myself, and that everything does not always have to get done my way on my schedule. You help me to slow down and not take life too seriously and to appreciate the breath of each new day.

To Art, thank you for your steadfast faith in me and for being first in line to knock any obstacles out of my way in order for me to succeed. You were the first person to introduce me to all things amazing about Tennessee...especially yourself.

Finally, to the Lord our God, thank you for the challenges you graced upon my life. You taught me to embrace that each new challenge was in reality a blessed gift to be opened by living a faith filled life. Lord, thank you for walking beside me each and for always holding me in the palm of your hand.

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Lastly, I want to thank my patient dissertation committee for enduring confidence during this lengthy journey. Foremost, I realize that none of this would have been possible without the grace of God blessing me with the presence of Dr. Robert Barner in my life. Dr. Barner's unwavering guidance, confidence and belief in me were my source of strength, and I cherished each opportunity to get one of his hugs as they empowered me to reach new heights. Dr. Barner will always be more than a mentor, a professor, a colleague, or a friend. Dr. Barner will forever be my guardian angel.

## VITA

## Academic Preparation

Pepperdine University	
Ed. D. Education, Leadership, Administration and Policy	2016
Chapman University	
M.A. Education	2010
Tier II Administrative Credential	2007
San Jose State University	
Teaching Credential, K-12 Multiple Subjects	1990
B.S. Business Management and Marketing,	1985

## Professional Experience

Connections Learning	
Senior Program Manager of Virtual Schools	2012 – present
San Jose Unified School District	
Principal	2011 – 2012
Monterey Peninsula Unified School District	
Principal	2007 – 2011
All Saints Day School	
Teacher	2003 – 2007
Pacific Grove Unified School District	
Teacher	1999 – 2003
Gonzales Union School District	
Teacher	1991 – 1999
Security Pacific National Bank	
Branch Manager	1986 – 1990

## ABSTRACT

Given the federal thrust for educational reform and the growth of school choice options, parents are faced with increasing opportunities for educational placement options for their children including the recent composition of full-time online K-12 schools. Understanding parents' perceived benefits, which inform their decision-making when choosing from a multitude of educational placement or school choice options, provides the educational community with information to better increase parent satisfaction. The potential increase in parent satisfaction has the ability to simultaneously increase student achievement.

The purpose of this mixed methods study was to examine which perceived benefits parents held when choosing a full-time online educational placement for their child. This research study examined Middle Tennessee parents' perceived benefits of full-time online education that led them to select this educational delivery model for their child. Additionally, this study utilized an online survey and interviews to obtain quantitative data and qualitative data in the form of descriptions of the participants' shared experience with the phenomenon. Qualitative data were recorded and transcribed verbatim for each participant before the data was coded. This enabled data organization into significant statements for the development of essential structures of the parents' experiences. Analytical and descriptive statistics were conducted prior to a synthesis of the quantitative and qualitative data, which rendered a comprehensive representation of the summary of both data sets.

Trends from the survey data were compared to five identified themes generated from examining significant statements in the qualitative data. The findings of the study indicated parents' perceived benefits of full-time online education center on academic quality, a safe educational environment, and an individualized learning pace for their child. The findings of

this research provide support for exploring parents in the role of “consumers” which will enlighten an educational community that now functions in the role of “supplier.”

## **Chapter One: The Problem**

This dissertation is a study of parents' perceived benefits that parents, with children in kindergarten through 12th grade (K-12), have of full-time online education prior to enrolling their child in a full-time online school. Chapter One conveys an introduction and overview of the study and follows with a foundation of the mixed methodology research utilized in this study. The chapter concludes with a presentation of the limited research currently available on parents' perceived benefits or value of full-time online education.

### **Background**

Each year parents face the important decision of where to enroll their child in school. Before the 1990s, parents held few options for school choice outside relocating their residence, but since then options to traditional residential schools have grown each year with student enrollment in public charter schools more than quadrupling from 0.3 million to 1.6 million students from 2000 to 2010 (International Association for K-12 Online Learning [INACOL], 2013). Consequently, in addition to the prior choices of private schools and homeschooling, families are faced with the decision whether to pursue alternative educational delivery models such as the voucher system, intradistrict and interdistrict transfers, charter schools, and online education. Growing school choice options has forever changed the landscape of Tennessee's educational delivery system.

Although in 2015 Tennessee voters rejected the voucher system for the third time in five years, the Tennessee House Bill 3511 formalized two open enrollment policies in 2004, which allowed students attending low-performing schools the right to intradistrict and interdistrict transfers (State of Tennessee, 2015). The passage of this bill promoted parents' school choice by permitting parents a say in where their children would attend school by

employing a school choice within their district that was not bound to their designated residential attendance zones or a school choice outside of their district's boundary.

Simultaneously, parents embraced charter schools as a school choice option.

Even with strong state governance since the passage of the Tennessee Public Charter Schools Act of 2002, the number of approved charter schools has increased annually thus creating more options for school choice. According to the Tennessee Department of Education (2015b), the number of charter schools expanded from 2010 through 2015 by 219%, from 21 to 67 charter schools, and during this same time period, student enrollment in charter schools increased by 227% from 4,844 to 15,829 students. This increase in Tennessee charter schools currently only serves 2% of the state's student population and 7% of the student population within a student's home district as the Tennessee Department of Education underscored in their Charter Schools Annual Report, 2014, that state law prohibits charter school operation and management by for-profit entities and reserves the right to close charter schools with low academic achievement or fiscal mismanagement. From 2002 – 2015, Tennessee Department of Education conservatively approved 35% of Tennessee charter school applications to local boards of education, and the state board of education overturned 32% of rejected applications. Charter schools are presently located in four districts across the state: Hamilton County, Metro Nashville Public Schools, Shelby County, and the Achievement School District.

Further providing local school districts alternative choices to assist in their efforts to increase student achievement, the Tennessee General Assembly enacted the Virtual Public Schools Act in 2011. This afforded districts the ability to establish their own virtual public school in order to provide new learning opportunities to K-12 students. Full-time online K-12 education provides alternative delivery in the learning experience via the Internet. The

International Association for K-12 Online Learning (INACOL, 2013) defines virtual (digital) online learning to include blends of online and onsite learning to tailor instruction to individual students. These schools provide highly qualified teachers to students who are connected via the Internet or with blended models that unite the classroom experience with virtual learning.

Virtual schools are funded and accountable to the same local laws and regulations as traditional public schools and serve students desiring an individualized educational opportunity for a variety of reasons. Medical fragility of the student or their parent, competitive athletes or performers requiring frequent travel, and teen parenthood are examples of reasons students benefit from a variation of traditional schooling. According to the Tennessee Department of Education (2015c), the number of virtual schools expanded from 2011 to 2015 by 300%, from two to eight virtual schools, and during this same time period, student enrollment in virtual schools increased 13% from 1,765 to 1,998 students.

The discrepancy in the corresponding percentage of growth in virtual schools and virtual student enrollment is linked to public controversy over the Tennessee Virtual Academy (TVA), operated by K12 Incorporated. In 2012, TVA grew 74% in its second year with students ranking below all other elementary and middle schools who took the same tests (National Education Policy Center, 2014). Additionally, the National Education Policy Center (2014) reported that the media published email messages from TVA administrators directing teachers to delete failing student grades. Consequently, Tennessee House Bill 728 was proposed in 2013 in an attempt to close all virtual schools, and although it failed, Tennessee Senate Bill 157 was passed restricting virtual charter school enrollment to 1,500 students, limiting out-of-district student enrollment to no more than 25%, and imposing or removing an enrollment cap based upon student achievement growth (“Keeping Pace,” 2015). Currently in



Tennessee, any student, who is eligible to attend a Tennessee public school, may enroll in a virtual school on a full-time or part-time basis regardless if they have special needs, disabilities or limited English proficiency (Tennessee Department of Education, 2015c). Despite the TVA controversy, an increased interest in online learning is broadening parents' school choice by expanding options to the once-parochial classroom.

Parents act with full information and known preferences to choose the best option possible, in this case, school choice. The Standard Economic Theory model lends a theoretical perspective to this study, was intended to increase the limited amount of understanding about why parents choose online education for their children. Parents assume the role of consumer by exercising school choice as the funding dollars associated with each student follow a parent's decision on where the student is enrolled (Standard Economic Model of Consumer Behavior, 2009). Given the complexity of school choice decisions, parents are assumed to understand how to best rank presented choices from best to worst. Relevant to this study, standard economic theory offers the ability to make predictions about consumer behavior that correspond to the reality of where students are enrolled in school.

Standard Economic Model of Consumer Behavior (2009) assumes the rationality of people although psychological evidence contradicts this equilibrium in the market as people do not always act rationally, and markets are prone to crises of gluttony or scarcity. Parents' predictable irrationality makes economic predictions more accurate. Chaudry, Henly, and Meyers (2010) maintain parents will make optimal choices that maximize their satisfaction and consider tradeoffs or constraints such as time and budget. This theory is further applicable for studying parent' school choice as it is well structured to examine the associations of family factors, to consider individual choices, to be tested empirically, and to be predictive of capacity.

This study identified parents' perceived benefits of parents, who chose to enroll their child in a full-time online school. The research was conducted from a database of parents whose children attend or attended a full-time online school in two school systems, which serve students in the northern section of Middle Tennessee. To provide confidentiality and anonymity of the participants, the names of the two school systems have been replaced with Richard County School System and Rice County School System Schools. All 96 identified parents were invited to participate in an online survey and/or face-to-face or telephonic interview. The population included parents of full-time K-12 students indifferent as to whether their child was identified with any program or subgroup such as special education, English learners, or Title 1. This study aimed to establish a deeper understanding of parents' perceived benefits, which are held prior to enrolling their children in a full-time online school.

Virtual education remains a focal point for policymakers. Key findings and literature reviewed in this research study support online education's ability to individualize student learning, promote student achievement, reduce school operational costs, and fulfill parents' perceived benefits. Standard Economic Theory underpins online education policies enacted across the nation that provide supply and demand incentives that appeal to for-profit companies, state-led, district-led, and charter schools in meeting parents' demands. This has culminated in a fast-paced expansion of online schools across the United States.

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companies, state-led, district-led, and charter schools in meeting parents' demands. This has culminated in a fast-paced expansion of online schools across the United States.

### **Statement of Problem**

The education system in the United States today offers more alternatives than the schools just 20 years ago. Recent changes in 2008 to the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation, enacted in 2002, increased school choice options for parents in lieu of sending their child to their residential school if that school had not met adequate yearly progress goals. As our public educational system is encumbered with underachieving schools, as noted by the growing number of Program Improvement schools, school choice remains on the forefront as a volatile and debated issue by educators and parents (Oregon Department of Education, 2009).

A fundamental impact of school choice has been the multiplicity of educational delivery models that continue to arise as a response to meeting parents' expectations and the number of non-traditional public schools is growing rapidly to keep up with demand. Donohue Stetz (2009) indicates a competition for students and the corresponding revenue dollars in the form of Average Daily Attendance (ADA), which has bred competition and diversity among schools clamoring in an attempt to fulfill the demand. In Tennessee, the evolution of full-time online K-12 schools commenced in 2006 when the Tennessee Department of Education originated an online education program, Effective Engaging E-learning Environment for Tennessee (e4TN), which ceased in 2011 when federal funding for the project ended (Tennessee Department of Education, 2015c). Since 2006, the Tennessee Department of Education (2015c) reflects additional online schools and programs following the enactment of the Virtual Public Schools Act, and in 2011 the Tennessee Legislature passed House Bill 1030 in an effort to expand upon previous virtual education efforts.

Given the growing number of parents choosing to exercise their school choice option, when total student enrollment in United States' public schools has increased from 43 million in 1993 to 48.2 million in 2004 and forecasted to reach a record breaking high of 49.7 million in 2013 (Gehring, 2005), the need for clear understanding of parent motivations regarding school choice options is essential to the educational community. The charter school option, for example, may fuel improved effectiveness among all schools via competition for enrollment as the positive assessment by parents of this school option has fueled its growth during the last decade even though research results on the effectiveness of such schools has been mixed (Friedman, 2007).

Hanushek, Kain, Rivkin, and Branch (2007) stated that parents factor in many variables, such as instruction, curriculum, and leadership, when choosing an alternative to traditional residential schools because these characteristics better fulfill the needs and interests of their children. Understanding the perceived benefit of these variables has a significant impact on the education community as parents take on the role of consumer. Public schools are liable to face declining enrollment due to parental dissatisfaction with traditional educational models that have seen minimal change since the days of its founders. For instance, little change has been witnessed since Paulo Freire, who challenged educators to produce critically thinking students, Horace Mann, who helped institute public funding for free public schools, and Milton Friedman, who argued for school choice.

As distinctive groupings of schools emerge as a school choice for parents, educational leaders need to examine the motivation behind parents' decisions for a specific type of learning option for their child. The rationale for needing to understand parent perceptions lays in a district's ability to recapture student funding and/or optimized parent satisfaction and

involvement. Goldring and Craven (2007) explain parents are demanding and prepared to seek out a higher quality education for their child, and the detailed aspects of school choice must be vetted out to provide clarity on parent rationale when exercising their school choice option. While the differences between traditional public, private, and charter schools continue to be examined, growing interest and increased student enrollment in full-time online schools demand the need for further research.

Although classrooms have migrated from chalkboards to whiteboards to projectors, and wooden benches have been replaced by chairs, the physical classroom design with the teacher located at the front of the room viewed by students seated in rows has had relatively little change. However, online education as a contemporary delivery model is a substantial change in educational delivery models by impacting students and their families who chose to attend online schools.

Students and families at an online school must learn new procedures for accessing the curriculum, interfacing with teachers, and for situations where each aspect of a student's day is different in the virtual setting verses a traditional school setting. Equally, teachers who provide virtual instruction via the Internet must learn new skills for communicating with students, families, and colleagues as well as learning additional instructional strategies given teachers are no longer face-to-face with the students. Local school districts face the impact of virtual education's presence as each school district decides whether to embed full or part time online education within their district schools and/or evaluate chartering an online school in a response to the demand of students and families requesting educational options.

Upon examination of educational research databases, a scarcity of research exists on parents' perceived benefits regarding full-time online K-12 schools given their contemporary

nature. Consequently, reasons parents may specifically select a full-time online K-12 school needs exploration and is the focus of this research study. An examination was conducted of the parents who enrolled their children in a full-time online school within Richard County School System or Rice County School System. While climate surveys are traditionally distributed at the end of each school year, no empirical body of research exists on parents' perceived benefits held prior to choosing an online school for their K-12 child. Until educational leaders understand why parents choose alternative educational settings, they will not adequately meet the educational needs of students as seen through the lens of a parent.

### **Statement of Purpose**

The purpose of this study was to identify parents' perceived benefits of online education that led parents to enroll their children in a full-time online K-12 public school verses a traditional residential school.

### **Nature of Study**

The nature of this mixed methods study involved an examination of the perceived benefits or value of online education of parents who choose to enroll their children in a full-time online school. All 96 parents who chose to enroll their students in a full-time online school within Richard County School System or Rice County School System were invited to participate in a quantitative survey. The survey analyzed parents' perceived benefits surrounding their decision to enroll their child in an online school. From the same population, 10 parents were interviewed with regard to the same perceived benefits of online education. This study used mixed methodology to measure and explore the unnaturally occurring variable of attitudes or beliefs (perceived benefits) verses a manipulation of conditions.

**Research Question**

What are parents' perceived benefits when a full-time online K-12 educational placement is chosen for their child?

**Hypothesis**

It was hypothesized that parents who choose to enroll in a full-time online K-12 school verses a traditional residential school will have a negative perception of traditional residential schools.

**Rationale**

Holme (2002) states that parents hold a correlation between school quality and their socioeconomic status and thus rely on social networks to inform their decision-making regarding school choice. Mid to high socioeconomic status families, representative of the majority of school families, receive information on traditional, residential schools labeled as *good* or *bad* and use this information to inform their decision-making process when choosing a school (Holme, 2002). This unquantifiable methodology to inform gives credence to the fact that perceived benefits passed down through social networks informs parents' school choice. Therefore, the rationale for conducting a mixed methodology study into parents' perceived benefits held prior to enrolling their child in a full-time online school was compelling in determining the validity and reliability that social networks and other informational resources play upon a parent's decision-making.

**Theoretical Framework**

Standard economic theory is relevant to school choice and parental factors involved in the decision-making process as the theory stems from supply and demand economics which is based upon a perceived value of a good or service, in this case economic capital, and the

availability of such (Standard Economic Model of Consumer Behavior, 2009). Simply put, high supply and low demand devalue capital while, contrarily, low supply and high demand increase value. Standard economic theory utilizes economic interests to forecast winners and losers assuming rational people are aware of their choice consistently rank their preferences choices, and eventually chose the best option.

French social reproduction theorist, Bourdieu (1986), offered three forms of capital in his article “Forms of Capital.” The three forms of capital referenced are social, cultural and economic, and while each impacts the organizational structures of our social world, Bourdieu (1986) states economic capital is the impetus for other forms of capital. In an educational setting, the concept of educational capital refers to educational goods or services that can be purchased, sold, traded, stored and consumed.

Finn and Gau (1998) support free market economics as a reform movement and predicts consumer choice and competition between independent schools will encourage innovative approaches. This increased selection of educational delivery models will provide further options for school choice as administrative and political control of public education is turned over to parents (Chubb & Moe, 1988). Schools become highly aware of parents’ motivations and demands under a free market competition of schools. Betts and Loveless (2005) state education capital will develop under free market conditions to establish schools with absolute control of services and instructional approaches while concurrently providing parents multiple school options from which to choose.

According to Henig, Holyoke, Lacireno-Paquet, and Moser (2001) critics of standard economic theory, as applied to educational capital, question the empirical validity of parents as consumers driving demand and schools as producers supplying product. While standard



economic theory is based on the assumption that people act according to self-interest, there is evidence of people acting unselfishly, which would equate to irrationality in a free market system. The University of Georgia's Economic Department concluded that if irrational people were randomly irrational their actions could be counted on and rational people would determine the outcome, but human psychology has shown that people are irrational in similar and predictable ways thus irrationality cannot be ignored even if it is predictable; it must simply be acknowledged (Standard Economic Model of Consumer Behavior, 2009). The influence of political and educational rhetoric can distort and influence a parent's decision-making process that potentially skews their economic interest (school choice) causing them to make a choice conflicting with their inherent interests.

### **Definition of Key Terms**

#### **Operational definitions.**

*Motivation:* Ford (1992) offers, "motivation provides the psychological foundation for the development of human competence in everyday life" (p. 2). Motivational Systems Theory (MST) defines motivation as the interaction of goals, emotions and personal agency (Ford, 1992).

*Perceived benefit:* The benefit or value a consumer (parent) expects to receive from a product or service stemming from a combination of benefits which are tangible and/or psychological and which results in a direct effect of its demand. For this study, the term perceived benefit means the worth of a product (choice of school) in the mind of the consumer (parent). This concept of perceived benefit will be measured by parents' self-reported knowledge based on a survey or interview following enrollment of their child to a full-time online school. The survey will attempt to delineate and quantify perceived benefits.

**Key terms.**

*Charter school:* A public school operating independently via a charter or performance agreement with a local public school district, county office of education, or State Board of Education; funded based on student enrollment basis; liberated of most state regulations; and subject to closure if the goals outlined in the charter are not met.

*Full-time online school:* A school that offers all courses in an educational program over the Internet to students who work toward earned credit and graduation based upon course completion. Full-time online public schools' students participate in state testing and accountability.

*K-12:* Kindergarten through 12th grade.

*Parent:* As outlined in Tennessee Code 49-6-7006 through 49-6-7009, a parent whose parental rights have not been terminated, or a person appointed by a court to make decisions regarding the support, care, education, health, or welfare of a child; does not mean a guardian ad litem or the state.

*School choice:* Provision for providing parents more than one alternative when enrolling their child in school (e.g. vouchers, tax credits, magnet or charter schools, interdistrict and intradistrict transfers).

*Student:* A person enrolled in any K-12 school.

*Traditional school or school of residence:* A public school for grades K-12 designated by the residency of a child within a local school district.

*SurveyMonkey:* Online survey platform that gathers and analyzes feedback.

## **Importance of the Study**

Understanding parents' perceived benefits that lead a parent to choose a particular type of school or educational delivery model continues to be debated in the United States, and given the academic and economic ramifications, the controversy has yet to be decided as more alternatives enter the conversation. The popularity and controversy over online schools continue to perplex both educators and legislators looking for the "best" or superlative form of education, as does Bourdieu's (1986) theory on economic capital. The rise of parents choosing the less researched online schools for K-12 students further confounds those looking to improve the educational system in the United States.

Understanding why parents chose full-time online K-12 schools would deepen the body of knowledge regarding school choice by making a distinction for virtual learning apart from traditional public schools or charter schools that resemble traditional residential schools. The importance of this study exists in informing policymakers, practitioners, and online suppliers of the perceived benefits parents have prior to selecting virtual education as a school choice option. As minimal data or research exists on this topic, a compelling need exists in understanding the role of parents as consumers of education. This is especially important given that parents' decisions have a fiscal impact on school districts charged with academic accountability and fiscal responsibility.

Notwithstanding the ability to discern the theory of economic capital of school choice, research on parents' perceived value of online education informs both the school of attendance and the residual school types parents chose to reject. Outside of generalized social networking, a study on concrete motivational factors helps schools of all types understand the complex system through which parents select schools for their children. Location, cost, academic

performance, safety, college preparation, athletics, and perceived social status are but some intermingling factors influencing parents' perceived benefits in their decision-making regarding school choice. As legislative decisions are informed by parent choice and mandate an arena from which they are made, research in this area can assist in promoting best educational practices.

### **Limitations**

A noted limitation of this study was the awareness that not all parents have the same access to school choice given their geographical setting or language ability. Additionally, similar to homeschooling, online schools require a parent, or a designated learning coach to facilitate the child's learning. This type of participation requirement may hinder a potential parent from being employed. This limitation may impact which families have the financial means to choose virtual education for their child.

In 2011, the Tennessee General Assembly approved the Virtual Public Schools Act providing local school districts the ability to establish their own online public school or contract for online services with nonprofit and for-profit entities (Tennessee Department of Education, 2015c). As of 2015, 10 online schools have been established with eight online schools currently operational; seven are managed by school districts, and TVA in Union County operated by the for-profit company K-12, Inc. There is a limitation in the availability as only eight out of 144 Tennessee school districts have online schools, and this limitation is further evident in the option for local school districts with online schools to charge tuition for out-of-district students wishing to enroll. Table 1 lists the current online schools in Tennessee. Richard County School System is not listed in Table 1 as the school district operates online education as a district program with students enrolled in the Richard County School System's online program

remaining enrolled in their district's local schools. Consequently, data from Richard County School System's online program are not reported out on the school level and causes another limitation of this study.

Table 1

*Online Schools in Tennessee, 2014-2015 School Year*

School Name	District	Date Opened	Grades Served
Bradley County Virtual School	Bradley County	4/20/12	3-12
Hamilton County Virtual School	Hamilton County	1/31/12	K-12
Memphis Virtual School	Shelby County	7/1/13	6-12
Metro Nashville Virtual School	Davidson County	7/1/11	1-12
Rice County Virtual School	Rice County	7/1/12	7-12
Tennessee Online Public School	Bristol City	11/21/11	9-12
Tennessee Virtual Academy	Union County	7/1/11	1-8
Tennessee Virtual On-Line School	Wilson County	1/1/12	1-12

Another limitation of this research study that deserves notice was the potential unconscious bias of the principal researcher. The researcher has served as a teacher, principal and school board member within California school districts, was a parent of a former full-time online child, and is currently employed as a Senior Program Manager for Virtual Schools and provides online school options for school districts and state departments of education across the nation. The importance of the data driving the research verses selective data selection was noted by the researcher, and given the researcher's extensive background in education, the extent of data collection methods utilized in this study compensated for any unconscious expectations or bias held.

### **Assumptions**

Given the vast differences in parents' ability to discern quality education, it was necessary to assume parents understand what the "best" school is for their child given it is a

parent's legal right, be they informed or not, to choose where to send their child to school. It was also assumed participants would honestly report their rationale for selecting a school for their child. To verify these assumptions, questions were built into the survey asking parents to evaluate school attributes and how this might correlate to the individual needs of their child.

## **Chapter Two: Review of Relevant Literature**

### **Introduction**

What would happen if parents were informed and consequently felt empowered to choose the school or educational delivery system for their child? In 1955, Milton Friedman foresaw exactly this progressive sentiment, education chosen by the parent outside of the constructs of the traditional residential based boundaries that define attendance in most public schools (Friedman, 2007). And thus, the pendulum of education swung to parents demanding and exercising options for their child's education outside of the traditionally mandated neighborhood "brick and mortar" school. Both parents and educators witnessed the momentum of school choice in fulfilling an essential need of the perceived benefits parents hold when enrolling their child in a school choice option like interdistrict or intradistrict transfers, homeschooling, virtual education, private schools, and charter schools.

The purpose of this literature review was to discover parents' perceived benefits, which parents reference when selecting a full-time online K-12 public school for their child. The literature review focused on two areas. The first analysis was of the relationship between full-time online K-12 schools and school choice. Secondly, parents' perceived benefits that affect their decision to choose this choice option for their child was explored. A brief history of school choice, charter schools, and the online education movement is offered before presentation of the empirical literature review. Afterwards, conclusions on parents' perceived benefits, held during their decision-making process on where to enroll their child, are presented along with implications for further study.

## History

**School choice.** The foundation of school choice is grounded in competition and standard economic theory. With decision-making placed in the hands of the consumer (parents), this theory supports that only the best schools will survive. When providing options to parents under the school choice model, schools compete for student enrollment and the assigned funding accompanying each student attending that school. Consequently, schools are motivated to turn around declining enrollment and negative fiscal impacts. In the 1960s, alternative school reform models expanded into the evolution of magnet schools, and in the 1970s and 1980s the intent of magnet schools was to alleviate racial segregation and provide education based on thematic concepts (ETS, 1990).

While interdistrict and intradistrict options were traditionally and reluctantly granted by a local school district's governing board of education (allowing a student to attend a school outside of his or her residential attendance boundary), in 2002, NCLB reform mandated local school districts provide more school choice options. Burke and Sheffield (2011) state homeschooling, now legal in every state, increased 74% in national enrollment from 1999 to 2007 while, during the same period, private schools were stagnating with 10 to 12% of national student enrollment according to the National Center for Education Statistics (Grady & Bielick, 2010). Publically funded school vouchers for a parent to apply toward tuition at a private school are, according to Grady and Bielick (2010), a school choice option currently only available in Arizona, Florida, Georgia, Maine, Ohio, Utah, Vermont, Wisconsin, and the District of Columbia. The debate over school vouchers, public education funds being used in the private sector, has been at the heart of a political debate thus making it difficult to obtain necessary voter support in enacting this type of school choice in many states.



Educationally, the 1990s were the decade of the public charter school movement as a school choice option as individual states debated creating legislation to outline the administration of charter schools. Exempt from specific state and local requirements, charter schools' independent yet public status and conformity with NCLB and chartering district's regulations, created a rapid demand for this type of schooling. In 2011, the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools (NAPCS) reported the operation of 5,277 charter schools, 5.4% of all public schools, and 65% of these schools held a waiting list (Burke & Sheffield, 2011). While full-time online private schools exist on a national level, full-time online publically charter schools are available, according to Burke and Sheffield (2011), public online schools exist in 27 states and enrolled 1.5 million students during the 2009-2010 school year.

**Charter school movement.** In 1991, the nation's first charter school laws were written with the intent to provide more independence from state and local regulations, yet they comply with the federal accountability of NCLB enacted in 2002. The charter school movement was an effort to perpetuate educational reform by supporting public schools of choice known as charter schools. The rules governing charter schools vary by the state authorizing legislation that permits the establishment of charter schools. A charter school is opened after its charter, or contract, is granted by a sponsoring agency, typically a local school district or state agency, according to individual state legislation. The charter proposed outlines the academic expectations and corollary measurement standards, mission statement, proposed demographics, and educational programs, which will be provided along with an explanation as to how the charter school provides children an inventive and original experience that is not available in that local school district's traditional residential schools. Currently, 26 states have imposed enrollment limits on charter schools consistent with outcomes from the National Alliance for

Public Charter Schools. Rationale for enrollment caps varies with each individual charter written.

Charter schools are attractive as school choice options for their autonomy from state and local regulations and their potential to develop a unique school culture. Charter schools may provide parents an option for choosing the optimal education for their child, an education not bound in the financial expense of private schools or time commitment required in homeschooling. With NCLB forcing school districts to provide parents more school choice options, charter schools have seen a significant increase in popularity with student enrollment growing 81% from 2002 to 2007, and the number of established charter schools increasing 52% (VanderHoff, 2008). This migration of students from traditional residential public schools to charter schools has created challenges for local school districts to maintain balance in racial and academic equity within their schools as declining enrollment creates an enrollment target that is continually moving during a time where stability in educational funding is uncertain (Blomeyer, 2002; Pitcock, 2009).

**Full-time online K-12 education.** The first full-time online K-12 school was established in 1991 with predictions that online delivery could become the major educational delivery model within ten years (Barbour, 2012). In addition to online school, which are established and chartered by a school district, some school districts are implementing a blended learning model where online learning is coupled with a required on-site attendance in a district school in an effort to test the effectiveness of moving toward online learning. The 2015 per pupil expenditure for education based upon the ADA is \$9,346 for the State of Tennessee, \$8,676 for Richard County School System, and \$8,077 for Rice County School System (Tennessee Department of Education, 2015a). The lower per pupil expenditure for virtual

education verses traditional brick and mortar education coupled with ongoing instability of educational funding motivates local school districts to explore online learning as an educational delivery model by developing district programs or partnering with for-profit companies (Watson, Gemin, & Coffey, 2010).

Full-time online K-12 schools, which exist nationally as fee-based private schools, are not required to adhere to individual state mandates for covering content standards, so for the purpose of this literature review, these educational delivery models were considered in the category of private schooling, and only full-time online schools that were established by a district charter, district-led, or state-led were examined. The rationale for this separation is that private schools are not required to follow state content standards and operate with little oversight, which creates a challenge in determining whether course credits are transferable between private online schools and public K-12 schools and colleges. Fordham's Institute examined online learning policies and suggested movement of school governance for these institutions from the district level to the state level (Schneider & Buckley, 2002). As a majority of states across the United States have recently adopted Common Core Standards, college and career ready standards for K-12 in English language arts/literacy and mathematics, time will determine how this adoption affects the new and growing delivery model of online education.

No longer limited by geographical distance, online schools are currently receiving bipartisan support for their ability to reach communities once physically inaccessible and for establishing this educational delivery model as a school choice option for parents. Online schools are a current player in the educational reform movement as parents discern if this new option optimally meets their child's educational needs. Proponents tout online schools as beneficial for students who could be at-risk, rural, special education, competitive athletes,

accelerated, and/or remedial students who are in need of credit recovery (Watson et al., 2010).

While a computer and Internet access are a requirement for students enrolled in online programs, forms of assistance by the district might be offered to qualifying socioeconomically disadvantaged families. Given the potential to lower overall costs for local school districts, enrollment in virtual schools is expected to expand, replace or supplement traditional schooling. Options in online learning include a comprehensive or supplementary scope, synchronous and asynchronous instruction, limitless location availability, public or private jurisdiction, full or part-time, and blended delivery models (Lips, 2010).

Publicly chartered full-time online schools adhere to individual state standards and federal accountability standards measured in annual standardized state testing, yet it is difficult for full-time online K-12 schools to show comparable academic performance to schools composed of a K-5, 6-8, or 9-12 structure. K-12 schools are combined into one entity, not broken down into K-5, 6-8, and 9-12 grade level components. As an example, to demonstrate achievement of Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP), if any one of the school's K-12 subgroups fails, the entire school is affected. Given that these online schools have different expectations and foundations or frameworks, parents need to evaluate their child's unique and individualized learning needs and compare different online programs' requirements and delivery systems to determine if placement in that particular online education setting equates to a successful educational placement choice for their child.

### **Literature Search Strategies**

School choice, as it pertains to the selection of a full-time online school, is an innovative issue in education due to online learning origin's being established only 25 years ago. As such, only research studies conducted from 1990 forward were reviewed to increase

potential access to studies pertinent to this specific topic. Pepperdine University's online library, ProQuest, and Education Resources Information Center (ERIC) comprised databases searched for this literature review using the following identifiers or terms: online learning, school choice, parent expectations, charter school and perceived benefit. The reference sections of the articles identified were reviewed to discover reoccurring themes and authors while also providing access to additional resources, which resulted in relevant studies published within the last 20-30 years.

Unfortunately, current research on online education in fulfilling parents' perceived benefits as a school choice option is often limited or narrow in scope and sequence creating a lack of relevancy. With only two exceptions, case studies that presented a qualitative perspective, the research on school choice options was limited to surveys as the only underlying methodology. Literature considering parents' perceived benefits as it impacts choosing a full-time online school for their child was not found and concluded to not exist in publishable form. The general topic of online learning was comprised of national, regional and localized research utilizing surveys to obtain information.

The objective of this literature review was to provide an integrated overview of current research on parents' perceived benefits held by parents that affected their school choice placement decision. Given the narrow scope of research addressing the proposed research question on online education, the scope of reviewed literature was opened to examine parents' perceived benefits of schools, of any composition, and the overall impact these perceived benefits have on their decision-making process when exercising their school choice option. Historical, theoretical, and empirical research is presented, and when available, their relationship to online education is discussed. Finally, implications are presented and a

recommendation for the need of further research in this area is made to inform parents, policymakers, practitioners, and suppliers of parents' perceived benefits of online education as a school choice option.

### **Theoretical Considerations**

Understanding parents' perceived benefits held when choosing a school for their child continues to be debated in the United States, and as new school choice options enter the argument, the controversy has yet to be decided or understood. This literature review examined current research on parents' perceived benefits or value when choosing an online K-12 school for their child within the framework of standard economic theory. The standard economic theory model lends a theoretical perspective to this examination as parents are assigned the role of *consumer* (Friedman, 2005).

In 1955, Milton Friedman's *The Role of Government in Education* initiated a powerful argument directed at the United States' educational system by proposing a system of school choice (Friedman, 2007). Friedman's position that the market-based logic of competition and consumerism of school choice would force schools to compete for students and result in the improvement or creation of schools more efficiently run, higher academic success witnessed, and the utilization of innovative approaches being employed (Bainbridge, 1990; Charles, 2011; Fischer, 2010; Loeb, Valant, & Kasman, 2011; Pitcock, 2009; Rabovsky, 2011). Given this scenario, Friedman (2007) characterized parents as consumers who create the demand side argument in standard economic theory and the supply side encompassing all school models.

French social reproduction theorist, Pierre Bourdieu (1986), offered three forms of capital (social, cultural and economic) that each impact the organizational structures of our social world with economic capital being the impetus for all other forms of capital. In an

educational setting, the concept of economic capital equates to educational capital and refers to educational goods or services that can be purchased, sold, traded, stored and consumed (Bourdieu, 1986).

Standard economic theory offers the ability to make predictions about consumer (parent) behavior that correspond to the reality of where students are enrolled in school. Supply and demand economics are based upon a perceived value of a good or service, in this case educational capital, and the availability of its supply (Standard Economic Model of Consumer Behavior, 2009). Simply put, high supply and low demand devalue capital while, contrarily, low supply and high demand increase value. Standard economic theory utilizes economic interests to forecast winners and losers assuming rational people are aware of their choice options, consistently rank their preferences and choices, and eventually chose the ideal educational placement option for their child. Standard economic theory is applicable for studying parents' perceived value in relation to school choice as it is uniquely structured to examine the associations of family factors, considers individual choices, remains empirically testable, and exists as being predictive of capacity.

### **Literature Review**

Previous studies dating back to the 1980s have studied traditional, charter and private schools with regard to school choice options and the effects of parents' perceived benefits on their decision-making process when considering educational placements. Sparse research has focused on the placement into the growing and popular option of full-time online schools. As parents become more active consumers of school choice and the options for the educational placements for their children continue to expand, research on the factors or perceived benefits that impact this decision-making process will inform an evolving educational community.

Although recent studies on parent satisfaction in regards to full-time online learning are evolving, studies of “satisfaction” do not equate to studies of “perceived benefits.” Satisfaction with an educational placement options focuses on an experience that has transpired after a decision is made to place a child in an alternative educational setting and the consequences of that decision have been experienced. Perceived benefits are what exist before a decision of educational placement is made or experienced. Consequently, the literature reviewed herein is absent of the consideration of full-time online education as a placement option as it relates to parents’ perceived benefits when selecting a school because of its nonexistence, and the literature reviewed focused exclusively on parents’ perceived benefits when considering traditional, charter, and private schools.

**Parents’ perceived benefits.** In the literature reviewed, evaluations generated consistent findings that parents’ perceived benefits in a better educational opportunity for his or her child was the catalyst for transferring from a traditional, neighborhood school to an alternative placement (Watson et al., 2010). The term *better educational opportunity* is viewed and defined in the research as parents’ opinion or perception regarding a composite of factors that include discipline/safety, academic excellence, school and class size, and a collection of other factors that impact their child’s academic experience. Resoundingly, from both strong and weak studies, the most frequently rated perceived value or benefit when discerning an educational placement for their child was academic excellence (Culmer, 2011; Donohue Stetz, 2009; Falbo, Glover, Holcombe, & Stokes, 2005; Fischer, 2010; Loeb et al., 2011; Pitcock, 2009; Rabovsky, 2011; Rauh, 2011; Uplindo, 2008; VanderHoff, 2008; Watson et al., 2010). Table 2 summarizes the major studies on parents’ perceived benefits before an educational placement was determined. The first three categories reflect the most frequently occurring



themes in the literature with the final category comprising remaining areas infrequently mentioned. Of these categories, academic excellence was referenced as a perceived benefit in 92% of the studies: 34% higher than any other perceived benefit. In 2007, the New Jersey School Report Card, which included 203 parent/child observations over seven years, maintained academic success was the only benefit important to parents and further claimed parents leave or enroll in any type of school due to this unparalleled factor (VanderHoff, 2008).

Table 2

*Parents' Perceived Benefits Which Affected Educational Placement Options*

Academic Excellence	Smaller Class or School Size	Discipline or Safety	Other Reasons
Culmer, 2010			Culmer, 2010
Falbo et al., 2005			Falbo et al., 2005
Fischer, 2010	Fischer, 2010	Fischer, 2010	
Loeb et al., 2011	Loeb et al., 2011		
Pitcock, 2009		Pitcock, 2009	
Rabovsky, 2011		Rabovsky, 2011	
Rauh, 2011	Rauh, 2011	Rauh, 2011	Rauh, 2011
			Schneider & Buckley, 2002
Sconyers, 1996		Sconyers, 1996	Sconyers, 1996
Donohue Stetz, 2009	Donohue Stetz, 2009	Donohue Stetz, 2009	Donohue Stetz, 2009
Uplindo, 2008	Uplindo, 2008	Uplindo, 2008	Uplindo, 2008
VanderHoff, 2008			
Vassalio, 2000	Vassalio, 2000	Vassalio, 2000	Vassalio, 2000
Watson et al., 2010	Watson et al., 2010	Watson et al., 2010	Watson et al., 2010

In addition to overall academic excellence, Table 1 outlines the categories of discipline/safety and other reasons at a 58% frequency of reference while school/class size was referenced 50% of the time. Smaller class/school size was identified by parents as providing the

ability for a school to more effectively meet the individualized needs of students both academically and interpersonally (Donohue Stetz, 2009; Fischer, 2010; Loeb et al., 2011; Rauh, 2011; Uplindo, 2008; Vassalio, 2000; Watson et al., 2010). Discipline and safety were referenced as a cause and effect relationship equating to a singular outcome and thus complied into one category.

Discipline/safety was a perceived benefit by parents who believed increased discipline and higher behavioral expectations would provide increased safety for their child in addition to minimizing disruptions in the classroom that distracted from teaching and learning (Donohue Stetz, 2009; Fischer, 2010; Pitcock, 2009; Rabovsky, 2011; Rauh, 2011; Uplindo, 2008; Vassalio, 2000; Watson et al., 2010). Summarizing research by Gallup, Phi Delta Kappa and the Parent Teacher's Association in a 1993 survey to prioritize national education goals, Sconyers (1996) discovered parents found necessary, and wanted, the areas of discipline, study skills and the whole child, including health, vision, meals, hearing, and childcare.

While the attributes of academic excellence, class/school size, and discipline were among the highest rated perceived benefits, consistent findings in the research reveal parents believe charter schools to be the educational delivery model that best provides these benefits to prepare their child for college (Uplindo, 2008). The literature demonstrates parents' perceived benefits when placing their child in a charter schools was the perception that charter schools have a superior overall academic quality when compared to a traditional, neighborhood school (Fischer, 2010; Guggenheim, 2010; Pitcock, 2009; Watson et al., 2010). More specifically, Fischer (2010) noted that the perceived benefit of charter schools in providing a better educational opportunity for their child was most frequently noted in terms of academic excellence, superior teachers, and smaller class and school sizes.

Research was mixed in providing solid evidence that charter schools outperform traditional schools in the area of providing higher academic performance, yet parents are choosing to place their children in charter schools based upon these perceived benefits that factored into their decision-making (Hanusheck et al., 2005). Chubb and Moe (1988) predict the revolutionary promise of online education as a charter school choice as it will transform K-12 education for the better by increasing access to high quality teachers, the ability to customize school programs within school districts, increased and improved flexibility for teachers, improve productivity by the schools, their staffs and the student; and efficiency reducing costs (Lips, 2010).

*Challenges in determining perceived benefits.* Researching parents' perceived benefits is challenging, and as it is not always clear if the perceived benefits stem from dissatisfaction when exiting a current educational placement as opposed to evaluating an initial placement in its absolute form (Rabovsky, 2011). Rabovsky (2011) reports parents often transfer their children from one educational setting to another based solely on safety or discipline issues rather than complaints about academic performance or rigor, yet it was academic excellence that was the most frequently noted parent perceived benefit when considering factors into their decision-making when evaluating a new placement.

In a rigorous and landmark study, Sconyers (1996) questioned the methodology other researchers have used when evaluating parents' perceived benefits as the reasons parent make educational placement decisions and concluded most perceived benefits did not correspond to a parent's actual behavior, actions or verbal reports. Sconyers (1996) revealed that exclusively utilizing survey data, as a research methodology, predisposes parents to endorse academic excellence as the fundamental consideration in their placement choice, however, in one of the

most widely cited studies of enrollment patterns in Alabama's Montgomery County magnet schools, Sconyers uncovered racial and socioeconomic factors as the key factors in parents' decisions on where to place their child although their stated reasoning was the pursuit of higher academic excellence. In this study, white and minority parents were oriented to select schools where their child would not be prone to racial or socioeconomic isolation (Sconyers, 1996).

Accordingly, stated perceived benefits are not always congruous with revealed preferences as documented by a parent's behavior and action. Schneider and Buckley (2002) studied parents' expressed preferences, and less than 5% of the parents surveyed identified race and/or socioeconomic demographics of students to be included in the most important features of schools, however nearly 30% of the parents chose to examine the student demographic information of a school early on during their online evaluation of schools via DCSchoolSearch.com, making demographics the modal "response" category. Additionally, the surveyed parents stated high teacher quality as a concern, yet parents' search behavior essentially indicated few parents explored that section of the schools' profiles where teacher quality is provided. Schneider and Buckley further concluded studies of parents' search and/or actual behavior provide more congruent data with the actual actions parents take, and research on these behaviors will provide a clearer indicator of parents' perceived benefits.

***Complexities of determining perceived benefits.*** Multiple complexities existed in researching and isolating a representative perceived benefit or narrow grouping of benefits that pertain to parents as a generalized group. In a small study, Rauh (2011) revealed that perceived benefits of an educational placement vary dependent upon a parent's demographics and the age of the child and therefore concluded that no unique or specific benefit could represent the definitive rational parents, as a whole, consider when making an educational placement. In the

same year, Guggenheim (2010) concluded that the demographics of a parent do not factor into a parents' perceived benefits as every parent searches for an educational placement that rests in the relationship between the child and the teacher thus refuting the outcome of Rauh.

The existence of polar research conclusions was further underscored with a study in May 2001 from the Office of Survey Research at the University of Texas. Nine hundred phone interviews were conducted exploring the extent to which involvement, achievement and satisfaction played into a parent's decision on whether to place his or her child in a traditional neighborhood school or exercise a transfer option (Falbo et al., 2005). Falbo et al. (2005) discovered that 44% of the parents from this study, who choose a transfer option, could not correlate their experience to perceived benefits held at the time of their decision-making at the end of the academic year. Thus, the ability of parents to make appropriate educational choices based upon their perceived benefits, making them consumers who follow standard economic market theory, is tangentially debated in the research.

***Parents as consumers of education.*** In 1992, the Carnegie Foundation determined that “many parents base their school choice decision on four factors that have nothing to do with the quality of education: the availability of day care, convenience, social factors, and the variety and quality of high school sports” (Schneider & Buckley, 2002, p. 133-134). For standard market economics to work, the theory assumes parents have the skills to judge quality schools, yet Hanusheck et al. (2005) demonstrated there is little direct knowledge to judge a parent's ability to evaluate schools based on research from an analysis of Texas charter schools in math and English language arts (ELA) from 1996-2002 that focused on over 800,000 students' test scores in math and ELA in grades 4-8. Hanusheck et al. noted charter schools, which parents perceived as having higher academic standards and success, initially performed significantly

lower, and when the charter school finally closed the gap, many of the parents' children would have matriculated to the next grade or onto college or a career path.

A report by the Twentieth Century Fund contended parents are not “natural ‘consumers’ of education” and “few parents of any social class appear willing to acquire the information necessary to make active and informed educational choices” (Schneider & Buckley, 2002, p. 134). Chubb and Moe (1988) reported critics of parents as educational consumers argue that parents are not consistent or dependable and subsequently cannot make educational placement choices grounded in comprehensive educational criteria or values as often parents' primary concerns are more everyday matters like day care.

In a research case study, Culmer (2010) investigated multiple cases to explore parents' experiences/perceptions and uncovered that a majority of the parents agreed the school choice placement options now place more responsibility on parents to be well-informed in making schooling decisions, yet these same parents felt they did not have enough available and accurate information to make informed decisions. Sconyers (1996) disclosed that the parents, who quickly blamed schools for not supporting learning at home, were motivated to acquire more information on their own to become better informed as legislation recently passed holds parents more accountable, through fines and imprisonment, for their child's misbehavior and/or truancy.

Another layer to the complexities of studying parents' (consumers) perceived benefits, is if parents do not value appropriate educational standards that support student achievement. When the perceived benefits are based on lesser or inessential school characteristics, the education community would begin to incentivize erroneous performance measures. Uplindo (2008) studied parents' perceived benefits, including non-academic benefits such as athletics

and childcare, and concluded empirical evidence of this nature makes parents' perceived benefits compelling as informational sources that could improve educational practices.

**School choice.** Until recently, with the mandates from NCLB, local school districts have had to release their monopoly of power regarding educational placements within their schools, but the breadth of growing educational placement options to parents is changing this control in educational communities throughout the United States (Barbour, 2012). NCLB stipulates state and federal funding flexibility, increases school choice options, removes the limits on the number of charter schools and/or their school size, expands online learning opportunities, and protects homeschooling (Merolla, Stephenson, Wilson, & Zechmeister, 2005). Now widely supported, the debate over whether there should be school choice options is currently replaced with which is the optimum delivery model or structure of educational model (Wells, 1990). As control of educational placements are handed to parents, standard economic theory and free market competition infuse themselves with the educational community and public school systems.

School choice, viewed by some as educational reform, has witnessed the birth of public charter schools, school voucher initiatives in some states, and more liberal interdistrict and intradistrict choice options during the last 20 years, all which parents may now consider. The literature review examined school choice placement options with the most referenced reasons for choosing an alternative placement being academic success and parent involvement. An adverse consequence of providing school choice was the challenges parents encounter when researching school choice options.

**Virtual implications.** In *Disrupting Class: How Disruptive Innovation Will Change the Way the World Learns*, Christensen, Johnson and Horn (2008) discussed the revolutionary

promise of online schools in addition to other types of school options and declared school choice or educational placement options to be a disruption to historical educational practices that may be the only method by which educational institutions see innovative change.

Blomeyer (2002) stated that although research is just commencing and only a slight body of research examining its instructional effectiveness exist, online education is growing as a school choice option by providing remedial and accelerated benefits in addition to the standard K-12 curriculum. Additionally, research conveyed online schools as an asset to socioeconomically disadvantaged students, yet these students were not the ones necessarily enrolling in online programs (Rauh 2011).

In researching online education, Rauh (2011) discovered the demographics of students enrolling in the South Carolina Virtual Charter School (SCVCS) was not reflective of South Carolina's K-12 population possibly due to the technology needed to attend, and it was further noted that, in general, nontraditional public schools have self-selecting populations. Rauh (2011) also cautioned that *novel* schools may be selected by parents solely for their novelty while the exact utility factor or perceived benefits may not ever be known giving rise for the need to more accurately analyze social factors and parents' perceived benefits maintained prior to enrolling their child in an alternative educational placement.

The most noted perceived benefit parents articulated as influencing their decision-making in selecting an educational placement option for their child was superior academic excellence, yet the literature reported the outcome on academic achievement in online schools was varied. In 2010, the United States Department of Education, in a meta-analysis of online learning studies, discovered that students enrolled in online schools or courses performed only slightly better than students acquiring the identical course content via traditional face-to-face



instruction (INACOL, 2013). Barbour (2012) surmised the relatively slight research on online learning did not confirm positive results in K-12, and the samples were of selective nature and tended to stem from legislative audits and investigative reports where neither utilized systematic research methods or analyzed existing regulatory laws or policies.

Conversely, Rauh (2011) found the performance data in ELA and math of SCVCS students were below the state average on standardized testing, yet this was a school parents intentionally chose for their child, rationally it is assumed parents would have selected a school with higher academic outcomes thus inferring other unknown perceived benefits were a factor during the decision-making process. Accordingly, nontraditional public school benefits may be overstated, or parents' perceived benefits were not articulated or understood by the educational community.

The optimal online education configurations (full-time, part time, or blended) are not yet established or utilized in K-12 education, which made this choice option less familiar to parents, who may be unclear in what benefits may lay within such a placement decision (Blomeyer, 2002). Lips (2010) reported empirical evidence from synthesizing seven K-12 studies that reported part time or blended models were more successful than full-time online models, yet cautioned applying such results to younger students given much of the research on online education encompassed post-secondary schools.

Sconyers (1996) further implied that without more research on online education as a school choice option, there will be a resistance to further exploration and centralization of its governance as a public-school option, and virtual education will move to for profit corporations. As a result, the following recommendations were noted by Lips (2010): enact or expand statewide virtual schools, reform charter school laws to encompass online charter

schools, authorize or increase hybrid online learning programs, explore intrastate partnerships, and allow federal and state funding to follow the students.

*Superior academic excellence.* Academic quality is a perceived parental benefit that is cited for employing school choice options (Bainbridge, 1990; Fischer, 2010; Guggenheim, 2010; Hanushek et al., 2007; Pitcock, 2009; Rabovsky, 2011; Uplindo, 2008; Watson et al., 2010). In a national longitudinal survey, Chubb and Moe (1988) demonstrated student achievement differences could be seen from a well-organized school and concluded autonomy from government bureaucratic constraints empower educational institutions to meet the needs of individual students more effectively (Wells, 1990).

The argument is made across the literature that alternative placement options to traditional public school are more responsive to children's needs (Bainbridge, 1990; Chubb & Moe, 1988; Hanushek et al., 2007; Loeb et al., 2011; Rabovsky, 2011). Uplindo (2008) stated most parents articulated that they chose alternative educational placements because the parents' perceived benefits, which informed their decision-making, found the alternative educational placements provided their children a better education in preparing for high school and career or college readiness. The 81% increase in charter school enrollment from 2002-2007 and 52% growth in the number of charter schools during this same period have not demonstrated higher academic excellence over traditional public school as measured by standardized tests (Pitcock, 2009). The topic of academic excellence was essentially mixed as Pitcock (2009) reported other studies have found the inverse with charter schools reporting higher academic achievement.

In an effort to change institutional perspective to promote the benefits of differentiated education, the Administrators and Teachers' Survey provided a large, illustrative sample of public and private schools that documented the public-private differences which supported the

benefits of the school choice argument in educational research (Chaudry et al., 2010). Parents realized public charter schools provided an alternative educational placement option to traditional public schooling for various reasons, the most often being academic excellence, given the traditional system fell short of their expectations in preparing their children for work and adult life (Burke and Sheffield, 2011; Pitcock, 2009; Uplindo, 2008). Uplindo (2008) projected that parents will continue to demand more options and choose charter and private schools or independent vouchers over traditional public education if the latter does not evolve to become responsive to community expectations and meet the needs of parents.

***Parent involvement.*** One of the strong tenets and parent perceived benefits of school choice was parent involvement. Parent involvement embodied more frequent attendance at school activities, volunteering within a child's classroom or on a school committee, regular communication with teachers and staff, and assistance with a child's homework or schoolwork. Consequently, parents who exercised school choice when determining an educational place tended to be more satisfied and involved with their schools (Bainbridge, 1990; "The Facts on Learning," 2011; Loeb et al., 2011; Uplindo, 2008; Vassalio, 2000).

Reports from school choice programs involving the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program, Dayton PACE Program, New York School Choice Scholarships Program, San Antonio CEO Horizon Scholarship Program, and Washington Scholarship Fund supported parents being more involved in their child's school when parents have a voice in the decision-making regarding educational placement (Vassalio, 2000). Bridging the gap in the debates over whether parents perceive academics or parent involvement to be a higher perceived benefit, Vassalio (2000) proposed using a universal market system of school choice to place higher

expectations on parents which would generate greater parental involvement which critical research links to academic success.

*Negative implications of school choice.* While school choice first came about in 1950, NCLB has increased school choice options for parents, although political and community leaders debate the merits of school choice (Rabovsky, 2011). Given this climate, school choice created an arena whereby teachers, principals, and district officials are forced to improve their schools through the healthy competition of a choice system (Rabovsky, 2011; Vassalio, 2000). Proponents espouse that school choice promotes competition, which improves school quality in addition to securing basic individual rights of liberty whereas opponents contend that it damages the United States' educational system and leads to segregation, which undermines equity in equal opportunity for all students (ETS, 1990; Rabovsky, 2011; Rolle, 2011). During 1993 to 2007, students enrolled in traditional residential public schools dropped from 80% to 73%, yet there was no measurable difference in enrollment found with students whose demographics were Hispanic, socioeconomically disadvantaged, single parent, or parents whose highest academic level was a high school diploma or GED (Rolle, 2011). Further, most students, who were placed in an educational setting as a result of a transfer option, were inclined to be highly motivated academically and looking for better educational opportunities, and the perceived benefit driving elementary parents was race verses academic excellence for high school parents (Rabovsky, 2011).

Rolle (2011) states that in addition to causing segregation and stratification within the socioeconomic classes, school choice creates fiscal problems to arise for local school districts as students leave their traditionally residentially designated schools and take the tax dollars associated with them to their new schools of choice. Analysis of the National Household

Education Survey decreed a parent's income is directly related to the type of educational placement chosen with socioeconomically disadvantaged families more likely to choose convenience such as geographical distance from school, before and after school daycare, or familiarity with a current school over academic excellence as a benefit of choice thus demonstrating the inequity in school compositions (Bainbridge, 1990).

Goldring and Craven (2007) maintained the argument of schools increasing in number, given market competition and the autonomy of charter schools to utilize more options than traditional residential schools, is countered with institutional theory that innovation and organizational change will not result given the constructs of "powerful institutional rules" (p. 5), laws, regulations and mandates, therefore the conformity of schools of choice and traditional residential schools exist with each resembling the other. Further looking for legitimacy as alternative educational placement options, Goldring and Craven (2007) decreed that schools of choice would be prevented from adopting the change necessary for innovation.

***Challenges in studying school choice.*** Chaudry et al. (2010) concluded that public education institutional issues are difficult to explore through empirical research as this type of research has framed the public debate by implying what comprises *good schools* and how these features should operationally be performed under *one best system*. Additionally, educational research makes it challenging to ascertain a single educational delivery model that best serves a student. Loeb et al. (2011) added that educational scholars and researchers still continue to debate the way students respond when placed in different educational settings thus convoluting any single claim that one educational delivery model is superlative to others. Furthermore, while greater parent satisfaction is experienced when parents participate in choosing an educational placement, a tenet of economic theory stipulates that the consumer is fully

informed (Falbo et al., 2005; Friedman, 2005, 2007; Loeb et al., 2011). Informed consumers, in this case parents, would have access to information on all potential choices and have the capacity to determine which of these choices best satisfy their needs.

Another challenge in examining school choice focused on parents serving in the capacity of the consumer. The educational community needs to understand their parent base and parents' perceived benefits, while simultaneously parents need to be fully informed consumers on all educational placement options for standard economic theory to be effective, and evidence seems to be inconclusive with the idea of supply and demand in schools (Friedman, 2007; Loeb et al., 2011).

Knowing whether parents understand their educational rights and placement options, and consequently make decisions as informed consumers, is a critical component in understanding the full impact of school choice and how it relates to parents' perceived benefits of schools. Falbo et al. (2005) surveyed 900 parents to study parents' decisions with regard to school selections. Of the parents surveyed, 46% were unaware of the Board of Education's process and policies surrounding school choice, yet 87% felt parents should have a choice in the educational placement of their children. Rabovsky (2011) and Loeb et al. (2011) further delineated that the socioeconomically disadvantaged and Hispanic parents have severe limitations accessing information on school quality due to language barriers and knowledge of or comfort with the educational system. These factors marginalized their ability of being informed choosers.

In addition to the uncertainty of parents as informed consumers, Schneider and Buckley (2002) revealed parents might not instinctively know which perceived benefits in their decision-making process they should fundamentally embrace, and thus parents vacillate over

educational placement options. Chaudry et al. (2010) questioned that knowing parents' perceived benefits may not answer whether schools are addressing important things such as academics and thereby questioning the relevance of parents as consumers. When parent sought morality-centered education, they chose religious schools that outperform local public schools academically but also compromise effective acquisition of democratic values and an appreciation for cultural diversity. Objectively, the two educational systems are simply different, providing distinct services in disparate ways for parents who hold dissimilar perceived benefits. Consequently, the literature gave rise to questioning the ability to compare educational institutions as a whole or parents' perceived benefits in isolation.

School choice or standard economic theory would theoretically allow parents to directly act upon their perceived benefits by more freely choosing and changing their educational placement, yet an additional complexity in analyzing school choice is the *natural monopoly* or the imperfections within standard economic theory. At times, a natural monopoly makes effective competition impossible. An example of natural monopoly plays out in smaller communities or rural areas where the number of students may be too small to substantiate more than a singular school of choice due to the fixed costs required to operate a school like the land acquisition and facility maintenance. Initial costs for launching and maintaining a school, when there is minimal student enrollment to generate revenue, circumvents school choices options from being established in a rural area or in smaller communities. This lack of school choice options makes competition unreliable in protecting the interest of the parents and children as parents are forced, by natural monopoly, to choose the singular choice (Friedman, 2007). Friedman (2007) declared that a wider variety of schools, to a greater extent than is now available, would spring up to meet parents' demands if expenditures of school were turned over

to parents as a consumer group, yet natural monopoly occasionally prevents this from occurring.

The debate over whether parents want school choice or if they are more satisfied with an educational placement once given the ability to choose is over. Parents are overwhelmingly more satisfied with their child's education in every category measured— school safety, discipline, academic excellence, teacher quality, school and class size, and school facilities, and consequently prone to re-enroll in their school of choice (Vassalio, 2000). Examining results based on 60,000 phone interviews from the National Household Education Survey (NHES) of the U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) from 1993 to 2007, Rolle (2011) examined student enrollment trends in public and private schools which revealed an increased frequency of parents choosing their child's school. Parents weighed many school characteristics and consequently held perceived benefits that lead them to utilize their alternative school choice options to find the best educational placement for their children (Uplindo, 2008). Given the trend of parents employing their school choice options, research on understanding parents' perceived benefits held at the time of their initial school placement decision would further inform the educational community's practices.

### **Summary**

The purpose of this literature review was to discover parents' perceived value or benefits when selecting a full-time public online school for their child. With no research on online learning existing with relation to parents' perceived benefits that influenced their educational placement decision, the literature focused on parents' perceived benefits that affected their decision-making process when selecting a school for their child. Subsequently, the literature reviewed centered on educational placement options and the relationship full-time



online schools interlace in this educational discussion of school choice as an educational reform.

Since the 1950s, parents are exercising their rights in selecting an alternative educational placement option at increasing rates while they simultaneously evolve as stern advocates in demanding a more diversified repertoire of school choice options. The literature examined polar opinions on the rationale for the rapid growth of school choice options and the extent of their impact on providing higher academic achievement. In addition to improved student achievement, other factors were examined that may perpetuate nontraditional school popularity in addition to fueling the emerging popularity of online schools.

While higher academic excellence was most cited by parents as a perceived benefit when making an educational placement, the research showed only slight academic improvement with this alternative placement option. Increased parental involvement and other educational factors were reviewed as parents' perceived benefits, yet the intricacies of diverse parental demographics and the desire for schools to embody certain non-educational factors, at the sake of improved academic performance, further complicated any singular coherent outcome.

With the underpinnings of school choice being constructed in market competition and standard economic theory, the tenet that only the *best school* will survive becomes an ill-defined pursuit as the concept of best school was discovered to hold attributes about which not all parents value or that factor into their decision-making process when selecting a school for their child. The complexities of being unable to determine overarching parents' perceived benefits when selecting an educational placement for their child has confused the educational community as they scramble to make ill-informed decisions based upon unknown

circumstances. This situation is exacerbated by the competition for student enrollment and its associated funding.

Higher satisfaction, not to be confused with perceived benefits, was witnessed by parents who had the opportunity to make a choice regarding their child's educational placement. In an effort to test the effectiveness of adopting online learning as a school choice delivery option, some school districts are implementing blended or full-time online education. As no research exists on the perceived benefits of placing a child in a full-time online school, further research is needed to determine the effects of this innovative and developing educational delivery model.

### **Implications**

Understanding the characteristics parents seek from their school of choice is fundamental to our educational community. To promote higher academic excellence, teachers, principals and district officials need to evaluate their ability to meet both students' and parents' needs in order to develop and strengthen the characteristics that parents value. Parent satisfaction and involvement will support improved student achievement within the schools, and failure to meet parents' needs result in continue school migration as families search for fulfillment of their perceived benefits. This school migration and associated per pupil funding negatively impacts school districts at a time when Tennessee's educational system faces fiscal challenges. Multiple lawsuits filed between 1993 and 2002 resulted in the Tennessee Supreme Courts declaring the state's school funding system unconstitutional, and in 2015 several school districts, in an attempt at a class action lawsuit, are currently in litigation against the state contending that the school funding system violates several clauses in the state constitution ("Litigation," 2015).

In addition to school's parent satisfaction surveys, further research is needed to ascertain whether there is an overarching set of criteria of parents' perceived benefits in all demographics or whether this research needs to be stratified by demographic factors such as socioeconomics, geographical location, gender, age or race. Without research of this detailed extrapolation, school leaders must examine parent rationale for the following most requested school attributes: safety and discipline, smaller school and class sizes, and academic performance.

Success will be witnessed when a collaborative network of community stakeholders work together as partners. Districts that focus professional development on understanding parents' expectations may positively impact addressing those perceptions and expectations that parents hold when exercising their school choice option. Consequently, this understanding might reduce school migration and reduce the fiscal impact of declining enrollment. Even though nontraditional schools continue to flourish, revolving student enrollment each year makes it essential to investigate key characteristics parents hold as perceived benefits when selecting an educational placement for their child as few studies have yet addressed or identified these characteristics.

### **Chapter Three: Methodology and Procedures**

The purpose of this mixed methodology study was to explore parents' perceived benefits that informed the decision-making process of parents who chose a nontraditional educational delivery system, specifically that of a full-time online K-12 school. Chapter Three begins with a description of the research design and rationale by outlining the population, participants, and sampling method. Subsequently, the methodology of this study outlines the data collection instruments used along with their corresponding data analysis and analytical techniques. The chapter concludes with steps taken that insured human subject considerations and research validity and reliability.

#### **Research Design and Rationale**

The purpose of this mixed methodology study was to identify parents' perceived benefits held that informed their decision-making process prior to enrolling their child in an online school. A survey of parents who chose to enroll their child in a full-time online school in Richard County School System or Rice County School System was conducted during the fall of 2015. The survey was designed to identify the parents' perceived benefits on online education as an educational delivery model and establish the participants' shared experience. After the survey closed, 10 interviews from within this same population were conducted to explore the phenomenon even further.

**Population.** The population of this study consisted of parents who chose to enroll their children in a full-time online K-12 school. The parent group identified for having enrolled their child in this type of school model came from Richard County School System and Rice County School System, two public school districts in Tennessee. Since 2012, Richard County School System has provided a full-time online program for grades. Richard County School System

operates full-time online education as a district program whereby students remained enrolled at their local district school yet take all their courses online from home. Alternatively, in 2012, Rice County School System established a new district school, Rice County Virtual School, to enroll all full-time K-12 students who take all of their course work online. Rice County Virtual School, like other public schools, is responsible for state testing and reporting student data for all enrolled students. All parents of full-time online students from these two districts were chosen to participate in this research thus avoiding bias to socioeconomic status, gender, and ethnicity.

**Participants.** Approval for this study and access to participants was requested and received from the boards of education of Richard County School System and Rice County School System (see Appendices A and B). All school board policies regarding requests for research were followed for both school districts. Following approval by the school districts, recruitment letters were sent to 96 potential participants. After 15 participants were eliminated due to outdated contact information or expressing a request to not participate in the research study, an invitation to participate in the survey and informed consent document was sent to 81 participants. A separate informed consent document was provided to the 10 participants who were interviewed.

**Sampling method.** The sampling procedure and invitation to participate in the study was based on parents who chose a full-time virtual education in Richard County School System and Rice County School System. All 81 parents were invited to participate in the research, and the 46 parents who actually participated in the survey yielded a confidence interval of 9.56 given a confidence level of 95%. As all identified parents were invited to participate in the research, an attempt was made to garner a distributed vertical slice of elementary, middle

school, and high school parents. The population was identified according to enrollment after the first month of school by the administrator in charge of the online program or school. Random sampling of the parent population was utilized to generate the 10 interview participants.

An online survey was distributed to parents and made available in paper form, upon request, via the United States Postal System with return postage included. Data reflects parents' self-reporting during a 3-week period when the survey was open online which facilitated parents' potentially busy personal and professional schedules. The online survey design afforded parents privacy when responding to eliminate any potential judgment they might have felt by their school system or the researcher. Accordingly, data was collected in a non-threatening manner to facilitate measuring of intended variables, and responses were treated with confidentiality. The online survey provided a simplistic data collection methodology by which the researcher gathered and formatted data for analysis.

## **Methodology**

This mixed methodology study utilized phenomenological research for the exploration of the general themes of parents' perceived value when choosing an alternative educational path for their students outside the traditional brick and mortar system. The broad philosophical common interest in this study was parents' dissatisfaction with the current traditional system of education. For this reason, a phenomenological qualitative approach was selected for this study because it facilitated the description of the meaning for several parents of their lived experiences of a concept or phenomenon (Creswell, 2007). Rather than taking unconnected events from participants, phenomenological research ties participants' common experiences to a specific phenomenon, type of event or subject. Removing the specifics of individual

experiences, phenomenology looks to capture the overarching meaning of participants' experiences to determine what the quintessence of the experience was for the participants. The themes of the phenomenon determine what the quintessence of the experience is for the participants. Collected data from the participants was then developed into an amalgamated description of the core experiences which consisted of the *what* and *how* of the collective experiences.

The historical underpinnings of phenomenological research are founded in philosophy and deeply influenced by the writings of Edmund Husserl, a German mathematician (Cresswell, 2007). Husserl's ideas still leave interpretation today and are debated as more concreteness is sought to define the parameters of phenomenological research. The philosophical base to this research is in the participants shared experience and how these experiences are described rather than explained or analyzed. Creswell (2007) notes that in 1900, four philosophical perspective imperatives to this type of research stressed the need to return to traditional philosophy and its search for wisdom, to view the philosophy of our judgments, to be firmly conscious toward object or subjects, and to refuse any subject and/or dichotomy.

A transcendental perspective to phenomenological research was taken to focus more on the descriptions pulled from the participants' experiences and less on the interpretation of these experiences. Setting aside assumptions and interpretations of the phenomenon and taking a fresh look at the concern that is being examined is a challenge as one's own perspective is rarely fully bracket, so consequently the researcher intentionally prepared to interpret data by creating an epoche. Moustakas (1994) explains a researcher must examine the phenomenon as from a fresh lens as if seen for the first time because to interfere with the textural or structural

process could taint results in acquiring the essence of the experience, so Moustakas suggests a researcher should bracket out their own experiences before collecting data from the participants. Finally, the data was synthesized to identify consistent experiences and statements which developed textual (what was experienced) and structural (how was it experienced) descriptions of the participants overall experience (Creswell, 2007).

The quantitative research tool of surveys was added to the phenomenological approach to triangulate the data discovered in the interview process. Similar to empirical phenomenology, unrelated participants were surveyed and their selection was not based on a specific group's association but rather their individual choice to pursue virtual education for their own child. Additionally, utilizing surveys provided the opportunity to access the entire population of participants and facilitated securing the desired number of interviews. While these methods did not focus on coverage of participants' diversity as a fundamental factor, the methods theorized a shared underlying experience.

**Data collection.** Collected data from the participants was developed into a compound description of the core experiences which consisted of the *what* and *how* of the collective experiences. The data collection was driven by the study of parents in Richard County School System and the Rice County School System who chose online educational delivery system over a traditional educational setting. The Tennessee Department of Education (2015a) annually provides state and district Report Cards that includes demographics, achievement on state testing, graduation rates, and American College Testing (ACT) composite scores. Student demographics from the 2014-2015 Report Cards for Richard County School System and Rice County School System identified English as the primary student ethnicity for Richard County School System (55.9%) and Rice County School System (75.5%); therefore, interviews and the



survey were conducting in English. Figure 1 displays the breakdown of the student demographics for each district.

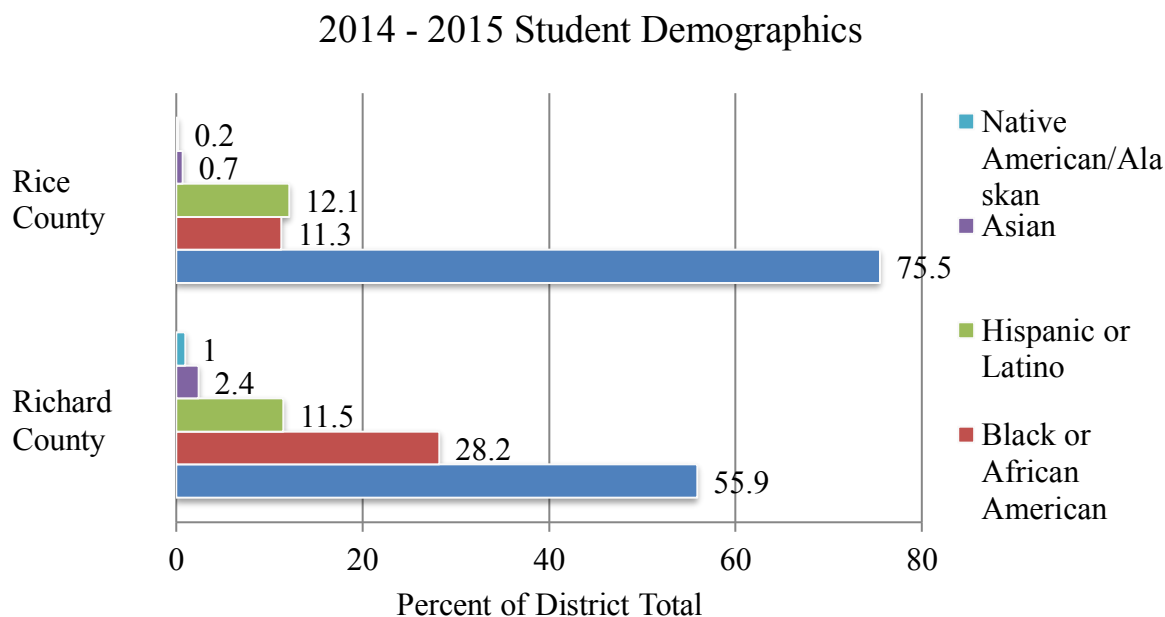


Figure 1. 2014-2015 Student demographics.

**Interviews.** In depth parent interviews, geared toward achieving textural and structural descriptions, provided a deeper understanding of the participants' common experiences with the phenomenon. Data was collected from 10 interviews during the 2015-2016 school year. Interviews were offered face-to-face or telephonically at the convenience of the participant to facilitate building rapport and reduce the feeling of formality in order to make participants feel more comfortable. Semi-structured questions permitted the researcher to ask follow-up questions or to ascertain a more detailed explanation.

The general theme of parents' perceived benefits that lead parents to choose a full-time online school was examined utilizing phenomenological research and the broad philosophical common interest of prior experiences or perceived experiences within the current traditional system of education. To provide instrument clarity, a set original interview questions were

piloted with a set of online teachers and administrators as part of a simulation to gauge the interview protocol's reliability. Participants of this simulation reported their thoughts and feelings as to whether the interview questions built upon each other thematically, provided distinction between questions, and provided the researcher clear feedback.

Based upon feedback from the interview simulation, the researcher refined the original questions and finalized eight researched based interview questions (see Figure 2) grounded in parent perceptions of schools and online learning presented in Chapter Two, which were geared toward achieving textural and structural descriptions.

Interview Protocol	
Date:	Interviewer:
Location:	Interviewee:
Position of Interviewee:	
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. What was your own experience in schools?</li> <li>2. What experience have you had with traditional schools that lead you to choose an online school for your child?</li> <li>3. What background or situation influenced or affected you in your decision to leave traditional schools?</li> <li>4. Could there have been things done/said/changed that would have affected your decision causing you to stay with traditional schools? What were they?</li> <li>5. Did you ask for the traditional school to address any concerns you shared?</li> <li>6. What were the challenges to change from a traditional school to an online school?</li> <li>7. Who were pivotal people in your change to an online school for your child? How did they participate in the process?</li> <li>8. Has the change to this alternative delivery of education met your expectations?</li> </ol>	
<p><i>Thank the interviewee for their time and participation. Remind them of confidentiality. Confirm contact information in the event future interviews are needed.</i></p>	

Figure 2. Interview protocol

Table 3 reflects the eight interview questions and their corresponding thematic grouping. The interview questions provided the ability to capture the overarching meaning for

participants of their common, lived experience surrounding why they chose a full-time online educational placement outside the traditional brick and mortar system.

Table 3

*Thematic Questions Grouping*

Question	Themes
What was your own experience in schools?	Prior school experience
What experience have you had with traditional schools that lead you to choose an online school for your child?	Prior school experience
What background or situation influenced or affected you in your decision to leave traditional schools?	Prior school experience
Could there have been things done/said/changed that would have affected your decision causing you to stay with traditional schools? What were they?	Resolution
Did you ask for the traditional school to address any concerns you shared?	Resolution
What were the challenges to change from a traditional school to an online school?	Transition
Who were pivotal people in your change to an online school for your child? How did they participate in the process?	Transition
Has the change to this alternative delivery of education met your expectations?	Transition

Face-to-face interviews were conducted in a neutral location outside of both school districts as agreed upon by the participant, and both face-to-face and telephonic interviews were audio recorded to facilitate the capture of data. All interviews were conducted over a period of 2 weeks, from October 5, 2015 to October 18, 2015. Participants were not provided the list of questions prior to the interview to limit potential sharing of interview questions among the population. Transcriptions of the interviews were completed by December 1, 2015 and available to the interviewees upon request.

*Surveys.* The variable being measured in this study was parents' perceived benefits used to inform their decision-making when choosing online education for their child. Traditional measures in parent satisfaction surveys alone are not comprehensive in determining the reason a parent selected their school of choice. Satisfaction surveys tend to reflect a level of satisfaction verses rationale or motivation behind having made a choice. A new instrument was needed because existing measurement tools in the area of parent motivation/rationale as it relates to school choice did not factor in the characteristics of online K-12 education. Additionally, on instruments determining school choice as a generalized option, online learning has not been found to be a selection. Therefore, a new tool was developed to support or refute the unique attributes of parents who choose online education for their child.

Consequently, a preliminary survey was created with online education features that were modeled after a survey by Bainbridge (1990) and Sundre (1991) that addressed key factors parents want in their children's education. Additionally, the initial survey was also influenced by a survey created by Dr. Hunter Gehlbach of Harvard Graduate School of Education. Dr. Gehlbach used interviews, focus groups, and pre-testing techniques to analyze if parents understood what was being asked of them in order to modify ambiguous language in the survey design that might lead to erroneous interpretations by the participants (Survey Monkey, n.d.).

The proposed survey was reviewed and validated by a panel of experts who are educational leaders with extensive experience in teaching, administration and program management of online schools on a national level. The panel of experts provided feedback on the survey design to ensure questions asked provided accurate and useful data. Furthermore, the

expert panelists utilized their knowledge and expertise to contribute to the instrument's validity and reliability.

Prior to disseminating the survey (see Appendix C), the researcher made appropriate changes to the survey design based upon feedback from the panel of experts. Virtual education colleagues of the researcher performed an online test of the reliability of the survey. The results of this pilot testing informed operational changes that the researcher incorporated into the final survey design to increase validity and reliability of the instrument.

SurveyMonkey, a cloud-based online survey development company, constituted the data collection venue for the online survey created by the researcher using Survey Monkey (<http://www.surveymonkey.com>). Participants were invited to the survey via an email containing a link to the online survey and the researcher's name and email address in the event a participant had any questions. The survey would have been sent via the United States Postal System, including a self-addressed stamp envelope to return the survey, for any participant requesting a hard copy of the survey. Data from the hard copies of the survey would have been manually inputted into SurveyMonkey, yet there were no such hard copy requests by any participant. To motivate a larger response, invited participants were offered an electronic version of the survey data collected at the completion of the research study.

Explicit written instructions preceded the survey data collection, and participants provided informed consent via an expressed agreement built into the survey design before responding to multiple choice, open-ended, and Likert Scale rating questions. No follow up was made with any participant. During the three-week window the survey was open, the researcher, who had sole access to the survey data collected via SurveyMonkey, made written notations on unanswered questions and time of survey submissions to monitor data accuracy. As

SurveyMonkey is the storage center for the collected data, its database was utilized for an export analysis of the quantitative data that provided the mean and standard deviation for each question and the export of the qualitative data of all participants' comments collected.

**Data analysis.** Given the mixed methodology of the research study, independent qualitative and quantitative data analysis was needed. Quantitative and qualitative data were arranged around three key categories that emerged in both sets of data: special education, benefits of online education, and prior school experience. Within each of these three categories, the data was presented in the following manner:

- Quantitative survey data
- Qualitative data
- Synthesis of quantitative and qualitative data

Analytical and descriptive statistics were made of the quantitative survey data, which was comprised of rating scale (Likert Scale) questions to numerically describe the participants' responses from which to generalize revealed themes of their shared experience that led them to choose a full-time online school for their child. The number of responding and non-responding participants was reported and raw data converted to a form that facilitated data analysis. In preparation for data analysis, survey responses were coded by the assignment of numeric values and data entry errors were cleaned. The data was visually inspected, and a descriptive analysis was created which facilitated checking the normalcy of data distribution and synthesis with the qualitative data. Reported scores were ranked from high to low and accompanied by their corresponding average and standard deviation. Qualitative survey data, from open-ended questions, was transcribed and combined with the raw interview data for a qualitative analysis.

Analysis of the interview data began with the researcher attempting to set aside bias by recognizing personal experiences with the phenomenon, although the researcher has full recognition that not all bias may be set aside. The researcher acknowledged her professional work with online education and that her son attended a full-time online school during 10th and 11th grade. There was no negative prior experience with traditional schools on part of the researcher, who professionally held roles as a teacher, administrator and school board member in the traditional school system and was a parent of children who attended traditional public schools. The researcher acknowledged professional, but no personal, experience with special education in her former public school system roles and currently in her position as Senior Program manager of Virtual Schools.

Subsequently, an initial reading of the interview transcripts generated an overall sense of the data that was reread before the following data analysis steps were performed:

- Significant statements, equally weighted, developed from a horizontalization of the data.
- Overlapping or repetitive statements were eliminated.
- Significant statements were clustered into themes.
- A textural description (what happened) and structural description (how it happened) were developed.
- An essence of the experience was identified.

Following the aforementioned steps, an overall description of the interview results was written that interpreted and summarized the culminating aspects of what the participants experienced with their common lived experience or phenomenon.

Next, a synthesis of the quantitative and qualitative data rendered a comprehensive representation of the summary of both data sets. This synthesis was presented in narrative statements and visually augmented with the construction of graphical illustrations around the three categories: special education, benefits of online education, and prior school experience. Finally, the results were interpreted to determine how the initial research question was answered and how the outcomes compared with prior explanations reported in past literature and research studies.

### **Human Subjects Considerations**

Guidelines for Pepperdine University's Graduate School of Education and Psychology (GSEP) Institutional Review Board (IRB) were reviewed to assure this research study complied with the directives of the institution. Participants were required to give informed consent before participating in the study. To insure anonymity and confidentiality, no individual names were used during the data collection, and if the identity of a participant became known, the identity of the participants was kept private and treated in a confidential manner. Parents were assigned research numbers known only to the researcher to secure the identity of the participants was kept private and confidential.

In addition, no subject responses were linked in any way to individuals to protect subject identities, and participants were able to refuse to answer any questions posed on the survey and/or the participant could have chosen to withdraw from the study at any time without negative consequences to themselves or their child. All collected data was kept securely in Dropbox using password-protected files. All hard copies will be destroyed three years after the conclusion of the study when research materials are no longer needed.



There was no other minimization of risk outside of maintaining confidentiality. Security was pursued, and participants were not incentivized in any manner for their participation in this research study. The study did not contain any deceptive motive and its intent was to solely perpetuate educational research. There was minimal psychological, physical, legal, social or economic harm risks resulting from participation in the study, and any anticipated benefits in the aforementioned categories were serendipitous and not directly provided. Richard County School System and Rice County School System administrators were utilized to secure approval from each district's board of education.

Even though a new data collection instrument was introduced, no conflict of interest or copyright clearances were required at the inception. Finally, participants were informed that they could elect to receive a copy of the final dissertation. Additionally, participants had the opportunity to request and review transcripts of their interviews for accuracy, although no participants made such a request. Had a request to review a transcript been submitted, the researcher would have required that recommended revisions be returned to the researcher within 10 days of receipt of the transcript.

### **Validity/Credibility**

Validation of the interview protocol/instrument and survey surrounded providing a well-grounded and supported study to insure the research did not influence the participants' data collection or content. Internal validity was addressed by minimizing threats of participant attrition and selection bias in the research design. External validity to ensure the results applied to a larger population was established by the utilizing the entirety of the available population.

An expert review board, comprised of a Senior Director of Virtual Schools and Senior Program Managers of Virtual Schools of a for-profit company that provides online education to

school districts and state department of education across the nation, collaborated on the survey and interview questions prior to the survey distribution or commencement of the interviews. Peer debriefing sessions with the administrators of the online program for Richard County School System and Rice County School System provided validity and an external check of the research. To further triangulate the data for validity, quantitative data were examined to verify participants' authenticity in the program.

The reliability of scores of the collected data were checked and assessed to determine if they represented meaningful indicators of the survey or interview questions asked. Reliability of the survey ensured the data was consistent and stable over time. Instrument test and retest results were checked for the dependability of scores.

To ensure research credibility, several techniques were used in conjunction with research validity. In addition to peer debriefing, the researcher maintained a separate journal to identify any potential bias. The journal was used throughout the research with special emphasis on pre- and post- interviews of each participant. The intention was to reduce any potential researcher bias.

## **Chapter Four: Results**

This chapter presents the findings of this mixed method study on parents' perceived benefits of full-time online public education. The research question addresses the variable of parents' perceived benefits which influenced their decision to enroll their child in a full-time online public school. This variable was studied through a survey of parents who enrolled their child in a full-time online school and then by interviews of this same population. The "perceived benefit" variable, as defined by this researcher, means the benefit or value a parent expects to receive from an online public school. This variable was examined to determine if trends existed in the parents' perceived value of full-time online public education.

The results of this study were derived from three sources of data. The first source was the quantitative data from the survey, and the second source was the qualitative data from the survey. The final source was the qualitative data from the interviews. The three data collections were examined collectively by use of a convergent parallel mixed method design to obtain phenomenological descriptions from the participants on parents' perceived benefits of full-time online education. The researcher utilized the methodology detailed in Chapter Three to analyze data collected by survey or interview.

### **Participant Characteristics**

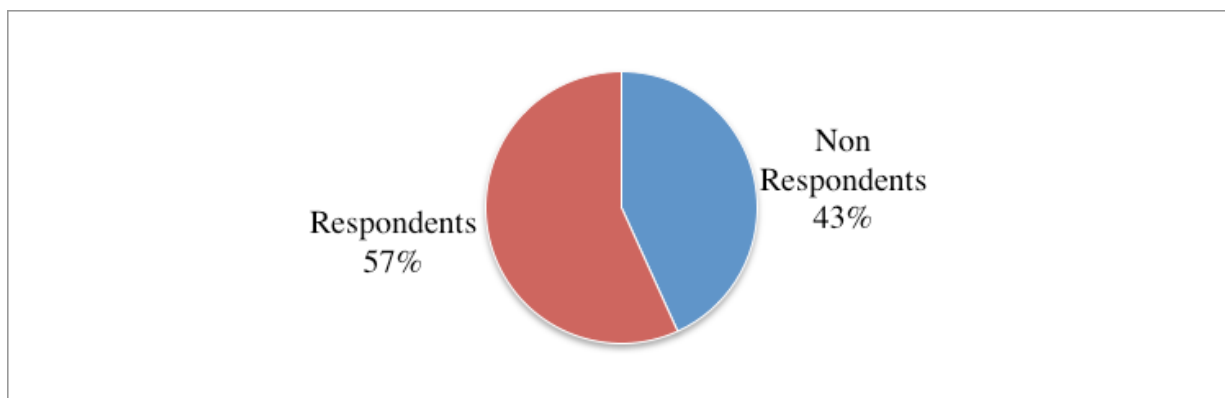
There were 46 combined respondents from Richard County School System and Rice County School System. The data from these 46 participants were analyzed collectively given the neighboring districts are part of Tennessee's Core of Regional Excellence (CORE) Mid Cumberland District, which supports regional collaborative relationships.

All participants had the opportunity to choose to skip a question if desired, however all participants appeared to have answered every question. Additionally, all participants could

have elected to provide comments at the end of each section of the survey with the final question of the survey specifically written as an open-ended question to solicit any additional information the participant would have liked to share. This question was left blank by 30 of the 46 participants. The high percentage of participants choosing not to respond to the open-ended question might indicate the survey and interview questions were constructed in such a comprehensive manner as to provide participants an appropriate opportunity for feedback when answered.

### **Response Rate**

**Survey.** From a population of 96 potential participants, 15 participants were eliminated following distribution of the letters of recruitment when the researcher determined a participant's contact information was inaccurate or upon receipt of a request of non-participation. This created a working sample of 81 participants. The survey analysis includes 46 survey responses from the 81 potential respondents. This comprised the first and second data sources: quantitative survey data and qualitative survey data. No requests for mailed surveys were received; consequently, the 46 survey responses were a direct result of data from the online survey, which was hosted by the website Survey Monkey. The survey yielded a 95% confidence level with a 9.5% margin of error. Figure 3 reflects the survey response rate.



*Figure 3.* Survey response rate.

**Interviews.** Interviews were used to measure data in the second phase of the study. The qualitative data from the interviews is considered to be the third source of data. Interviews were requested by email from the 81 participants who received the survey. The researcher secured a commitment of four interviews by email and then randomly called participants to request an interview until a commitment of six more interviews were secured. The 10 participants chose either a face-to-face or telephonic interview at a time convenient to the participant, and interviews were conducted over a period of 2 weeks, from October 5, 2015 to October 18, 2015. The researcher transcribed all of the interviews to facilitate the data analysis.

### **Data Analysis and Coding**

After a review of the participants' data gathered from the survey, findings are presented utilizing a side-by-side approach around three categories: special education, benefits of online education, and prior school experience. Within each category, quantitative survey findings are followed by qualitative findings and concluded with a synthesis of both sets of data.

Conclusions, implications for policy and practice, and recommendations for further research are discussed in Chapter Five.

The survey data were initially and individually analyzed on an item-by-item basis by the researcher. After visually inspecting the data, the researcher compared all survey items with each other to provide numeric descriptions of potential data trends in order to reveal generalized themes. Qualitative data that originated from the free response or comments sections were incorporated into the interview data for coding and development of themes that described the phenomenon the participants experienced.

Table 4

*Significant Statements Supporting Themes*

Themes	Significant Statements
Special education-health concerns	<p>“Due to the increased medication required and additional doctor visits/testing to continue to treat her autoimmune conditions.”</p> <p>“During her illness, prior to virtual school my child was missing school.”</p> <p>“My child suffered from migraines, her physician recommend this school.”</p>
Academic quality	<p>“My child was in the gifted program, which met 45 minutes each week. Otherwise, she was bored in school.”</p> <p>“My child finished their work quickly and ended up spending most of their time helping other student.”</p> <p>Academic enrichment was obviously not a priority, which is why we left.”</p>
Parent-school relationship	<p>“Waiting for months to determine if my son qualified for SPED. In other words, they passed the buck, rather than address the issues.”</p> <p>“When I met with the principal about a particular teacher's questionable practices and inaccuracies in material, the principal laughed.”</p> <p>“Our child is gifted, and was bored and unchallenged in her "advanced" classes. Conferences with teachers and principals led nowhere.”</p>
Safe learning environment	<p>“We KNEW online learning would give our child the safe environment they deserved.”</p> <p>“Our child is highly intelligent but socially disadvantaged hence the bullying.”</p> <p>“My child was threatened by another student, and when she told her parents, a teacher made fun of her.”</p>
Flexibility of academic day	<p>“We felt that our son would benefit from having teachers who are subject matter experts, while still enjoying the flexibility that comes with the online schooling option.”</p> <p>“I felt that an online environment would allow my daughter to work at times that would be more beneficial to her, rather than a traditional schedule. “</p> <p>“On-line school has given us the freedom to learn at her own pace.”</p>

After analysis of the quantitative data, the researcher recounted personal experience with the phenomenon and reviewed interview transcripts before the coding process to create an accurate description of the phenomenon. Interview data were viewed as separate and unique, and based on the data analysis; significant statements were extracted from the verbatim transcripts and qualitative data from the survey. Table 4 includes example of significant statements, which generated the final set of five themes.

Table 5 represents the final five themes that emerged and the corresponding number of participant responses that came from the qualitative data. The findings from the qualitative data are presented in detail following a discussion of the participants' demographics. The qualitative data contains quotations taken verbatim from transcripts of the interviews in which the participants described their experience with the phenomenon. These quotes were selected because they represented the textural and structural descriptions of the data and the foundation upon which the remaining process of analysis moved forward. Within the categories of special education, benefits of online education, and prior school experience, the qualitative data are presented alongside the quantitative survey data before a synthesis of both sets of data. Each participant was coded with a new number for each of the five themes in order to protect their confidentiality.

Table 5

*Theme Tallies Ranking of Participants' Agreement: Benefits of Online Education*

Themes	Number of Responses
Special education-health concerns	12
Academic quality	10
Parent-school relationship	9
Safe learning environment	9
Flexibility of academic day	7

## Presentation of Findings

**Demographics.** The first survey question asked participants how many children they had currently enrolled in a full-time online school. With all participants responding, the majority (72%) of participants reported having one child currently enrolled in a full-time online school, and the remaining participants (28%) note they had no children enrolled (see Figure 4).

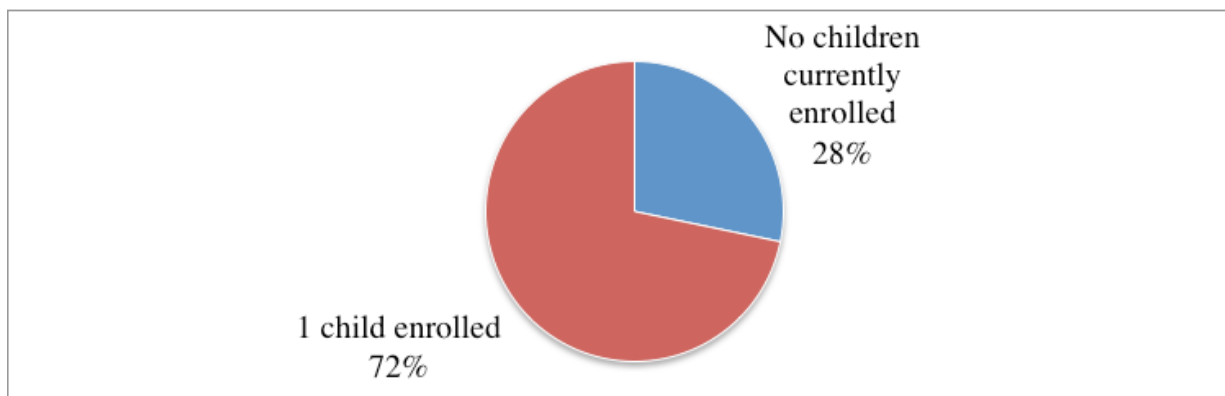


Figure 4. Participants' report of children currently enrolled in full-time online school.

Participants were asked to select all types of schools that they considered prior to their final selection of an online school. With all participants responding, Figure 5 illustrates a distribution of 74 placement options. The majority (38%) of participants considered traditional neighborhood schools followed by homeschooling (30%) and private schools (27%).

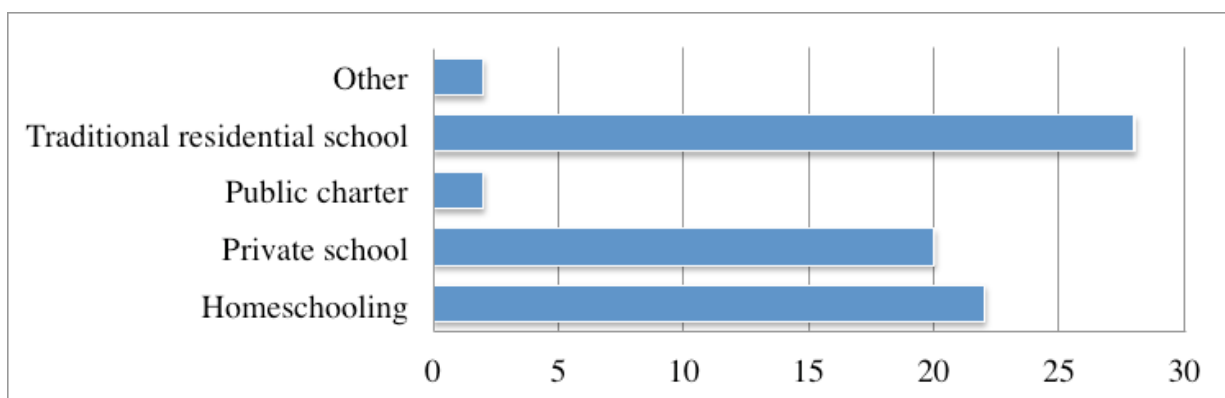


Figure 5. Choices participants considered other than online education.

A majority (59%) of participants reported that they first started their child in a full-time online school in high school. For this survey item, elementary school was defined as grades



Kindergarten through 5th grade, middle school as grades 6-8, and high school as grades 9-12.

Figure 6 reflects the responses from all participants.

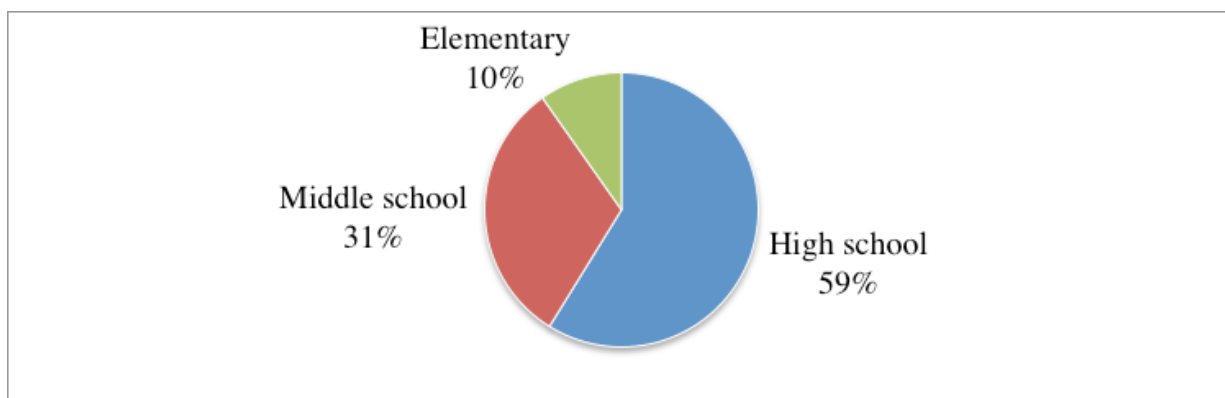


Figure 6. Participants' report of grade level their child started online education.

The length of time full-time online education was considered before the participant selected an online school for their child is conveyed in Figure 7. The 46 responses indicated all participants responded with a majority (70%) of participants considered full-time online education for zero to three months before enrolling their child.

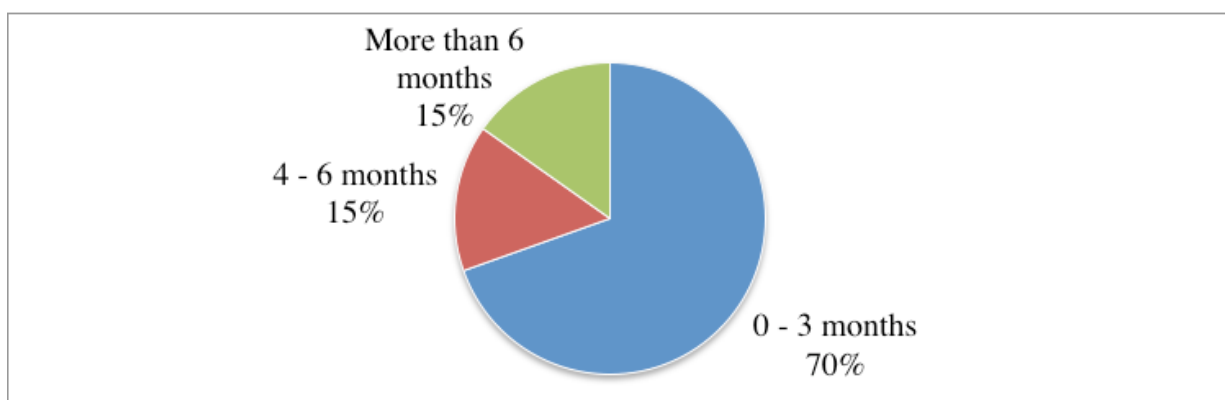


Figure 7. Length of time participants report online education was considered prior to enrollment.

Figure 8 reflects the responses received from all participants on their agreement that their child is academically ahead in relation to their child's grade level with strongly agree (35%) and agree (28%) receiving the most responses, 63% collectively.

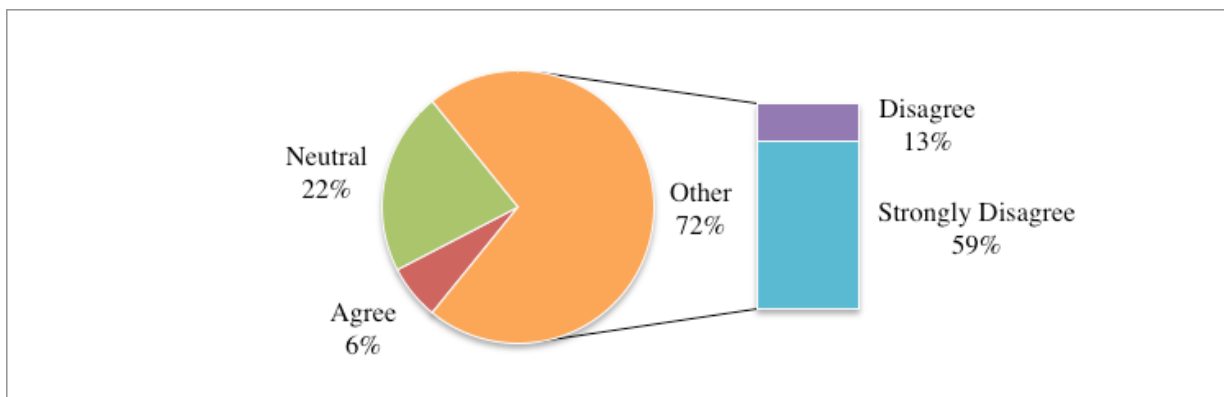


Figure 8. Participants' agreement that their child is academically ahead.

All participants reported on their agreement that their child is difficult to control. Strongly disagree (48%) and disagree (37%) received the most responses, 85% collectively. Of the 46 participants' responses, two selected strongly agree, one selected agree, and four selected neutral while the remaining 39 participants selected disagree or strongly disagree (see Figure 9).

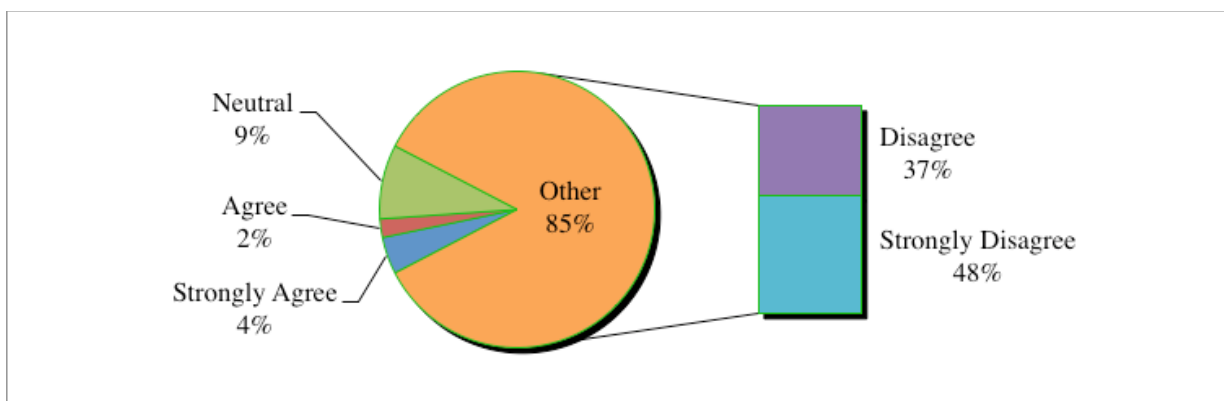


Figure 9. Participants' agreement that their child is difficult to control.

### Special education.

**Survey data.** Survey items 7 and 8 asked participants the following questions regarding special education experience with their child's prior school and before enrolling their child in a full-time online school:

- Did you have a child with an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) or 504?
- Does your child have any healthcare issues?

The purpose of these questions was to identify whether a portion of the population surveyed represented parents with special education students or students with healthcare concerns to determine if the delivery of special education-healthcare services could be a perceived benefit of full-time online schools. If the participant responded no to either question, question skip logic directed the participant to the next survey item. Skip logic is an online survey feature that altered what question or page a participant would access next based on how they responded to the current question.

Of the 23 participants who responded yes to these questions, representing 50% of all participants, each was asked to describe their level of agreement with the statements regarding their experience with their child's prior school:

- I was satisfied with the Special Education services.
- My child made progress on their IEP or 504 goals.
- The special education teacher understood my child's needs and provided appropriate support.
- My child's disability was a reason for choosing online education.
- My concerns were addressed.
- The teacher understood my child's health issues and provided appropriate support.

Table 6 reflects the ranking of responses received on participants' agreement with the above-mentioned statements and are reported by their mean average and corresponding standard deviation. Responses were based on a 5-point metric rating system with the highest rating of *Strongly Agree* being 1.00 and the lowest rating of *Strongly Disagree* being 5.00.

Table 6

*Ranking of Participants' Agreement: Special Education Services*

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Disability reason for choosing online education	2.17	1.24
Progress on IEP or 504 goals	2.50	0.72
Teacher understood health issues and provided appropriate support	2.50	0.72
Teacher understood needs and provided appropriate support	2.76	0.68
Satisfied with special education services	3.14	0.76
Health concerns were addressed	3.14	0.76

*Note.*  $N = 23$ . Ratings based on 5-point metric. 1 = *Strongly Agree* to 5 = *Strongly Disagree*.

In the category of special education, the highest ranked item was participants' agreement that their child's disability was a reason for choosing online education. The two lowest ranked items, receiving the same score, reflected participants most strongly disagreed that they were satisfied with special education services at their prior school or that their child's health concerns were addressed.

**Qualitative data.** Special education-health concerns was the most referenced theme that emerged from the qualitative data with a total of 12 responses. Participants reported a variety of personal reasons why their child's special education or health concerns were better addressed in an online environment. Participant 2 stated, "My child suffered from migraines, her physician recommend this school." Participant 1 further described the benefit of an online environment: "My child has breathing difficulties and PE at school was almost impossible for her. She does an exercise program at home and the gym that is more suitable for her breathing problems."

Flexibility of academic day was a theme participants additionally referenced in appreciation that their child could now work at an independent pace to prevent falling behind in course work or to catch up on course work they had fallen behind in at their former school.

Participant 3 conveyed, "My daughter suffered from autoimmune encephalitis during the last

part of her 8th grade year and is still recovering from the neurological effects of this, which is why she is academically behind.” Participant 7 stated,

My child has severe ADD. Not ADHD. He stated after a summer school retake of a class due to failure that he functioned much better with online classes as he was not interrupted and could work at his own pace and repeat lessons as often as needed to make better grades.

In addition to catching up on work or to their child’s grade level, participants noted that their child was no longer missing school days or instruction. Participant 7 stated,

Very glad this type of schooling was available for my child during her illness prior to virtual school my child was missing school and parents were called to pick up due to illness numerous times. This school made a difference! Great work everyone that made this school possible.

Within responses coded with the special education-health concerns theme, 25% of the participants also referenced, with frustration, the theme of parent-school relationship when conveying their experience the phenomenon of what perceived benefits they held that led them to choose online education for their child. Participant 8, whose response also included the theme of safe learning environment, replied,

Our child has Asperger’s. Our child is highly intelligent but socially disadvantaged hence the bullying. We had an IEP in public school until switching to a private school. We had to constantly fight the "experts" who didn't know our child, never met our child and would presume to know their needs without wanting to hear our opinion. Only when I contacted both state and federal departments of education did they listen; and we were right. Each Asperger child is individual in the way they are affected. Although IEP is SUPPOSED to be individual what really happens depends on the nature of the IEP members and the awareness and involvement of the parents.

Another Participant 10 responded,

Before my daughter went to Middle College, that her academic and health issues were at least somewhat addressed by her teacher and administrators, and they took them seriously. At Middle College, the principal took it upon herself to float a diagnosis of Asperger's, threatened to call social services, and when my daughter's evaluation only confirmed previous diagnoses of anxiety and depression, the principal and the guidance counselor decided that Middle College was not the appropriate environment for my daughter. In other words, they passed the buck, rather than address the issues.

*Synthesis.* After analyzing the quantitative and qualitative data independently, the data was examined holistically to provide a deep, rich understanding of the data within the category of special education. Data from survey items 7 and 8 along and coded interview responses were analyzed, and themes from the qualitative data themes were compared to the quantitative data to understand how participants experienced the common shared experience of special education.

The triangulation of both data sets indicated a convergence and strong relationship with the qualitative data confirming the results of the survey. The quantitative data revealed the participants' strongest agreement in this category was that their child's disability was a reason for choosing online education, and their strongest disagreement was that their child's prior school had addressed their child's health concerns. The qualitative data highlighted participant's dissatisfaction by participants' frequent reference to theme of parent-school relationship where the data disclosed that participants experienced poor, untimely, or negative communication from their child's prior school regarding this shared phenomenon. While participants responded in a neutral manner on whether their child made progress on their 504 or IEP goals in the quantitative data, the qualitative data underscored the importance of flexibility in the academic day to prevent their child from missing school or falling behind in school work.

#### **Benefits of online education.**

*Survey data.* Survey item 10 asked participants to describe their level of agreement with 17 statements regarding the benefits of online education and the significant reasons that participants may have held prior to choosing a full-time online school for their child. Table 7 reflects the ranking of responses received on participants' agreement with the 17 statements and are reported by their mean average and corresponding standard deviation. Responses were

based on a 5-point metric rating system with the highest rating of *Strongly Agree* being 1.00 and the lowest rating of *Strongly Disagree* being 5.00.

Table 7

*Ranking of Participants' Agreement: Benefits of Online Education*

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Accredited program	1.6	0.65
Safe learning environment	1.7	0.83
Quality of curriculum	1.76	0.79
Courses taught by certified teachers	1.78	0.73
Better academic environment and learning experience	1.83	1.11
Better option than home schooling	1.91	0.95
Tuition free program	2.00	0.93
School is part of public school system	2.02	0.90
Flexibility to pursue other interests	2.04	1.01
Flexibility for extracurricular activities	2.16	1.12
More suitable fit for Gifted and Talented	2.18	1.16
Smaller class sizes	2.20	0.83
Smaller class size	2.49	1.24
More direct parent involvement	2.50	1.19
Dissatisfaction with local public school	2.67	1.45
Accommodations of children's health issues	2.84	1.24
Accommodation of religious needs	3.31	0.94

*Note.*  $N = 46$ . Ratings based on 5-point metric. 1 = *Strongly Agree* to 5 = *Strongly Disagree*.

In the category of benefits of online education, the highest ranked items were participants' agreement that online education was an accredited program and safe learning environment. In actuality, four of the top five highest ranked items focused on academic quality with the other item being safe learning environment. The lowest ranked items reflected participants most strongly disagreed that accommodation of health issues or religious needs were a perceived benefit that influenced their choosing an online school for their child. The low ranking in agreement on children's health issues in this survey question compared to the prior

survey question is that the entire population responded to this question wherein only parents with children with special needs responded to the prior question.

*Qualitative data.* The category of benefits of online education encompassed all five themes that emerged from the qualitative data. Examples of participants' experience with the phenomenon related to the category of special education-health concerns was noted in the section, yet the researcher noted the category of special education-health concerns dovetailed with the category of benefits of online education given 50% of participant population self-identified as having children qualify who are identified as special education students within the public school system. This section focuses on the participants' shared experience with relation to the remaining four themes: parent-school communication, academic quality, safe learning environment and flexibility of academic day.

The theme of parent-school communication was referenced alongside the theme of academic quality in the category of benefits of online education when participants expressed frustration with their child's prior schools and their desire for higher academic quality.

Participant 4 voiced,

We began to consider online school out of frustration with public school. Our child is gifted, and was bored and unchallenged in her "advanced" classes. Conferences with teachers and principals led nowhere. We were trying to establish some independent study options when virtual school was suggested.

Participant 5 stated, "She loves online school and no more coming home in tears everyday or going to school in tears everyday! And she is excelling and able to spend more time with her writing and outside activities with less stress." Participant 2 responded, "My child was in the gifted program which met 45 minutes each week. Otherwise, she was bored in school."

Participant 3 coupled the themes of academic quality with flexibility of the academic day that comes with online education and stated, "We felt that our son would benefit from having



teachers who are subject matter experts, while still enjoying the flexibility that comes with the online schooling option.” Participant 6 avowed, “I felt that an online environment would allow my daughter to work at times that would be more beneficial to her, rather than a traditional schedule.” Participant 1 underscored the benefit of a flexible schedule, and replied, “On-line school has given us the freedom to learn at her own pace. We are very thankful to have the opportunity to participate.”

Participant 8 coupled the themes of academic quality and a safe learning environment, and described,

My child was threatened by another student, and when she told her parents, a teacher made fun of her. Several of her classes had to keep moving, because there wasn't a room to use. When I met with the principal about a particular teacher's questionable practices and inaccuracies in material, the principal laughed. Academic enrichment was obviously not a priority, which is why we left.

Participant 2 responded, “We choose online school because the safety issues and other children can be mean to a child who does not fit the standard mold.” Participant 7 replied, “I put my child in online school last year because she was being bullied badly.” Participant 1 stated, “In the most important sense, we didn't consider ‘perceived benefits’ because safety became THE overriding concern. We KNEW online learning would give our child the safe environment they deserved.”

**Synthesis.** Quantitative and qualitative data were first analyzed independently within the category of benefits of online education. The data sets were then collectively compared to determine to what extent and in which ways the results interacted within the category of benefits of online education. The triangulation of the data sets indicated a convergence and strong relationship revealed in the qualitative data within the highest ranked areas, yet there was a divergence surrounding the second lowest ranked topic.

Quantitative data from survey item 10 was underscored by qualitative data in four out of the top five areas of the survey: safe learning environment, quality of curriculum, courses taught by certified teachers, and better academic environment and learning experience. Accredited program was the one area not supported by the qualitative data. The researcher noted that participants may have equated the term “accredited program” with quality of curriculum or certified teachers; hence, this might reflect a rationale that it was not being referenced in the qualitative data.

There was a divergence between the quantitative and qualitative data around the topic of accommodations of children’s health issues. This was the second lowest ranked item in the survey on benefits of online learning, yet the qualitative data helped to reconcile this disagreement and provided a different perspective as participants responding in this category may or may not have had a child with special education or healthcare needs. In the prior category, where participants were a subset of the larger population and had a child with special education or healthcare needs, the topic of accommodations of children’s health issues was strongly correlated between both sets of data. Another divergence was in the quantitative data reporting participants were neutral (2.67) regarding dissatisfaction with their prior school while the qualitative data underscored repeated example of discontent. The research extrapolated multiple references to a child’s prior school experience being that of homeschooling verses a traditional public school. Due to confidentiality of participants and the survey design, it cannot be determined if there is a difference in the dissatisfaction with a prior traditional school verses the homeschooling experience; however, details in the descriptions from the qualitative data denote dissatisfaction experienced found more so in traditional public schools verses homeschooling.

**Prior school experience.**

*Survey data.* Survey item 11 asked participants to describe their level of agreement with 21 statements concerning their child's prior school's facilities and overall learning environment. The purpose of this question was to determine if a participants' level of dissatisfaction with their child's prior school could equate to a reason or perceived benefit that participants may have held prior to choosing a full-time online school for their child. Table 8 reflects the ranking of responses received on participants' agreement with the 21 statements and are reported by their mean average and corresponding standard deviation. Responses were based on a 5-point metric rating system with the highest rating of *Strongly Agree* being 1.00 and the lowest rating of *Strongly Disagree* being 5.00.

In the category of prior school experience, the highest ranked items were participants' agreement that their child's prior school was easy to located and that their child made good progress at the prior school, yet none of the top five highest ranked agreements about the prior school experience coincide with the highest ranked perceived benefits of online learning reported in the prior category. The lowest ranked items reflected participants most strongly disagreed that their child enjoyed their former school or that the curriculum was challenging. The five lowest ranked items representing participants' strong disagreement regarding their prior school experience coincides with perceived benefits sought in an online school, which were reported in the prior category.

Table 8

*Ranking of Participants' Agreement: Prior School Performance*

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
School easy to locate	1.8	0.65
My child made good progress	2.29	1.11
Extracurricular activities provided	2.4	0.94
School facilities were clean	2.49	1.08
Adequate room to learn comfortably	2.6	0.85
Satisfied with amount of contact with the support staff	2.69	1.11
Satisfied with opportunities for extracurricular activities participation	2.71	1.09
School provided opportunities for interaction with other families	2.73	0.97
School facilities were friendly and inviting	2.89	1.18
School facilities were safe	2.89	1.22
Variety of learning activities	2.92	1.23
Curriculum was high quality	2.93	1.19
Size of class supported learning	2.98	1.26
Satisfied with amount of contact with principal	3	1.14
Satisfied with amount of contact with teachers	3	1.14
Time child spent on schoolwork and homework was appropriate	3.02	1.08
My child felt safe at school	3.27	1.38
My child learned at individualized pace	3.45	1.35
Teachers improved learning experience	3.48	1.28
Child enjoyed former school	3.51	1.28
Curriculum was challenging	3.51	1.28

*Note.*  $N = 46$ . Ratings based on 5-point metric. 1 = *Strongly Agree* to 5 = *Strongly Disagree*.

**Qualitative data.** This section focuses on the participants' shared experience in the category of prior school experience with relation to all five themes: special education-health concerns, parent-school communication, academic quality, safe learning environment and flexibility of academic day. The theme of parent-school communication was referenced by 80% of the participants in this category and usually alongside one or more additional themes.

Participant 4 voiced,

The prior school she attend and most Richard County School System schools lack communication. ‘They’ believe since a child is in Middle or High School ‘They’ do not have to communicate ... It's the students responsibility. I have personally have been told from our middle school Principal that ‘they’ are trying to help my children to be responsible. I believe ALL schools need to communicate with parents so WE (parents) can help our children do what the teachers want done! Now I have one child in on-line school and another in the ‘regular’ high-school where the communication is worse.

Participant 1 echoed communication challenges and stated, “ I'm frustrated with their inability to communicate or consider they need to communicate with parents and involve parents so we can help keep children on track.” Participant 2 conveyed the delays in the prior school communicating or taking action and conveyed, “She is eligible for 504, but this wasn’t addressed until 2nd grade.”

Participants addressed a positive prior school experience yet still chose online education for the academic quality or challenge. Participant 6 stated,

Our son spent one year in public school (5th grade). He had been home schooled prior to and has been home schooled following that year. His public school experience was positive, and we only chose to bring him back home because he asked to be home schooled again. He enjoyed his teacher, made some great friends, and excelled academically. We chose to enroll him in his current full-time online education option in order to challenge him more than I felt we could at home. He has enjoyed working with his online teachers and has done well with CVS.

Similarly, the theme of academic quality and lack of the prior school’s ability to address the issue was summed by Participant 5: “My child is capable to doing the work in public school, but is choosing not to comply.” Alternatively, some participants were ambiguous in conveying how or why their child left their traditional school and was enrolled in a full-time online school. Participant 6 stated, “I did not choose online schooling for my child. It was suggested and encouraged by the public-school district online coordinator.” Participant 7 responded, “This year I only have one child enrolled in online school. Last year I had all three of my kids

enrolled in online school. They all had different reasons for being pulled out of traditional school.”

*Synthesis.* After the quantitative and qualitative data were analyzed independently, the quantitative data was compared to the qualitative data to understand how participants experienced the common shared experience of their child’s prior school experience. Drawing on mixed methodology’s qualitative and quantitative research strengths, the researcher uncovered unexpected results as the data sets provided different types of information. This triangulation uncovered both a convergence and divergence with the phenomenon.

Based on the survey and interview data, participants strongly disagreed that their child’s prior school provided challenging curriculum, was an atmosphere that permitted their child to enjoy school or feel safe, where their child could learn at an individualized pace or where teachers improved the learning experience. Each of these survey items was ranked as one of the five lowest topics by the participants, which indicated they strongly disagreed that their child’s prior school provided those supports. This was supported in the qualitative data that highlighted that participants want flexibility in the academic day, improved academic quality, a safe learning environment, better parent-school communication, and special education-health concerns addressed in a compassionate and timely manner.

Alternatively, a divergence occurred when only one of the top five ranked items, which the participants rated as strongly agreeing their prior school provided, was mentioned in the participants’ qualitative data: “My child made good progress.” While ranked as the second highest agreement, there were conflicting contributions by participants over their child’s progress. Some participants reported their child was not making adequate progress and falling behind their grade level due to lack of support and interventions. Conversely, other participants

reported their child was making adequate progress yet was bored due to the lack of challenge within the curriculum or the slow pacing of the course. This discrepancy could be a result of not all participants having come from the same point of reference regarding “prior school” experience. Data was not collected to quantify how many participants’ prior school was a traditional public school verses a private school, charter school, or homeschooling environment. The quantitative data was more meaningful when interpreted alongside the critical qualitative information from the survey and interview results that revealed a potential discrepancy in pinpointing participants’ type of prior school experience before their child was enrolled in a full-time online school.

### **Summary of Findings**

Chapter Four discussed the key findings from the online survey and interviews from a population of 46 parents who participated in this study; 23 parents (50%) were identified as having children with special needs. Data collection, coding, and analysis were covered prior to a presentation of the participants’ demographics. Qualitative data findings from the survey and interviews, which researched parents’ perceived benefits of online education, produced five themes related to the research question: special education-health concerns, academic quality, parent-school relationship, safe learning environment, and flexibility of academic day. The number of responses for each theme ranged from 7-12 responses. The most frequent theme was special education-health concerns followed closely by academic quality; however, many responses were coded for multiple themes, which revealed issues were not necessarily looked at singularly but rather as overlapping with other issues.

The quantitative and qualitative data were analyzed in three categories: special education, benefits of online education, and prior school experience. A key finding in the

special education category was that participants strongly agreed that their child's special needs was a reason for moving from their prior schools to a full-time online education environment. In the category of benefits of online learning, the themes of academic quality and safe learning environment from the qualitative data converged with the quantitative data to reveal parents' perceived benefits, or their demands as consumers, for choosing a full-time online school in the free market of education. Finally, key findings in prior school experience were participants' emphasis that challenging curriculum, an atmosphere that permits their child to enjoy school and feel safe, and learning at an individualized pace were key factors in market competition that the parent consumers to choose a full-time online school as the product that best fulfilled their needs. Chapter Five presents conclusions, unexpected findings, implications for policy and practice, and recommendations for further research.



## **Chapter Five: Conclusions and Recommendations**

Recent growth in the online education market has been driven by parents exercising their school choice option and selecting online education for their child over the traditional residential school in addition to a multitude of other choice options. The National Educational Policy Center (2014) notes blended-learning opportunities for students are increasing, and by 2019, 50% of all high school courses will be comprised of an online component. During the 2012-13 school year, there were 338 full-time online schools, enrolling 243,000 students, which comprised a 22% increase in student enrollment from the previous year (National Educational Policy Center, 2014). As online education enrollment increases across the nation, and it is essential to research the benefits of online education and parents' perceived benefits that lead them to choose such an educational placement for their child. The findings of this research study have the potential to educate and guide educational practitioners and policymakers regarding the establishment of future online schools and to better determine whom they might best serve. Standard economic theory of school choice and parental factors involved in the decision-making process for their child's educational placement will continue to be a foundation to guide the supply and demand economics in the growth of online schools. This chapter compares conclusions from the key findings to the literature review, provides implications for policy and practice, proposes recommendations for further research, and concludes with final thoughts from the researcher.

The purpose of this mixed methods research study was conducted with online survey and participant interviews of parents who had placed their child in a full-time online school in order to answer the overarching research question: What are parents' perceived benefits when a full-time online K-12 educational placement is chosen for their child? Furthermore,

a phenomenological approach in this mixed methodology study allowed the researcher to convey the significance from detailed stories that were revealed by these parents about their shared lived experience (Creswell, 2007). The combination of quantitative survey data and qualitative interview data from this mixed method study provided the perspective of two ends of a continuum rather than two separate research methods.

This mixed methods research was conducted in Middle Tennessee, specifically in Richard County School System and Rice County School System. From the data, significant conclusions were determined through a careful analysis of the quantitative data that was derived from 46 participants who responded to an online survey of 12 questions and of the qualitative data from 10 of these respondents also participated in a face-to-face or telephonic interview containing eight questions. The interview was designed to collect the responses of the participants in their own word as related to their shared experience revolving around the research question. Significant statements from the qualitative data produced five major themes that emerged to answer the research question in conjunction with the quantitative data. This chapter includes a detailed discussion of conclusions from the key findings of the data. Each conclusion is compared to the related literature and standard economic theory discussed in Chapter Two.

### **Conclusions**

A total of three significant conclusions related to the research question resulted from an analysis of the findings related to data collected for this research study.

**Academic quality and safe learning environment.** Academic quality and safe learning environment are the highest ranked parent perceived benefit when selecting a full-time online school for their child. This research study confirmed that parents' perceived

benefits that factored into placing their child in a full-time online school most strongly centered upon academic quality and a safe learning environment. Multiple key data findings in both quantitative and qualitative data support this conclusion. Academic quality and safe learning environment encompassed the top five ranked benefits from the survey data and were prevalent in all five qualitative themes.

The literature reviewed in Chapter Two reference academic quality as a perceived benefit in 92% of the studies followed second by discipline/safety that was referenced in 58% of the studies. Resoundingly, the most frequently rated perceived benefit from both strong and weak studies when discerning an educational placement for their child was academic excellence (Culmer, 2011; Donohue Stetz, 2009; Falbo et al., 2005; Fischer, 2010; Loeb et al., 2011; Pitcock, 2009; Rabovsky, 2011; Rauh, 2011; Uplindo, 2008; VanderHoff, 2008; Watson et al., 2010). Additionally, the literature supports academic quality as parents' most compelling educational factor (Bainbridge, 1990; Fischer, 2010; Guggenheim, 2010; Hanushek et al., 2007; Pitcock, 2009; Rabovsky, 2011; Uplindo, 2008; Watson et al., 2010). A safe learning environment is the second most significant perceived benefit that affects a parent's school choice option when selecting a full-time online school supporting the finding that parents who believed increased discipline and safety promote a more successful learning environment for their child (Donohue Stetz, 2009; Fischer, 2010; Pitcock, 2009; Rabovsky, 2011; Rauh, 2011; Uplindo, 2008; Vassalio, 2000; Watson et al., 2010).

Contrariwise, incongruities existed between the literature reviewed and this research study. Parents identified smaller class or school size as the third most referenced perceived benefit by parents in the literature (Donohue Stetz, 2009; Fischer, 2010; Loeb et al., 2011; Rauh, 2011; Uplindo, 2008; Vassalio, 2000; Watson et al., 2010), yet the key finding from this

research study resulted in a different conclusion. Small class or school size was never referenced in the qualitative data and only ranked as average or neutral in the quantitative data. Similarly, research studies in the literature review found online schools performing only slightly better or below other students who took the identical course in a traditional face-to-face instruction (INACOL, 2013), which contradicts parents holding academic quality as a perceived benefit.

The key finding of this research are of interest because they support parents in the role of consumers of education and standard economic theory as a theoretical consideration. Chubb and Moe (1988) and Wells (1990) established academic quality differences in schools could be seen by parents in school and concluded school choice options for parents empowered them to see their individual child's needs were more effectively met. Findings from the data reported parents' dissatisfaction with their prior school experience led them to choose online education, and the literature reviewed concluded greater parent satisfaction occurs when parents participate in choosing an educational placement, and a condition of standard economic theory stipulates that the parent or consumer should be fully informed (Falbo et al., 2005; Friedman, 2007; Friedman, 2005; Loeb et al., 2011). Participants within this study responded that they considered a variety of educational placement options, which demonstrated their choice of a full-time online school was not made in isolation or without consideration of other choices.

**Individualized learning pace.** A child's ability to work at an individualized learning pace was a nonexistent topic in the literature reviewed yet has emerged as a perceived benefit for parents who selected a full-time online school for their child. Quantitative data revealed parents considerably disagreed that their child learned at an individualized pace at their prior school, and individualized pacing was identified in the qualitative data within the theme of

flexibility of academic day whereby parents expressed multiple examples of frustration with academic pacing at their child's prior school.

Alternative placement options such as full-time online schools are more responsive to children's needs compared to traditional public schools (Bainbridge, 1990; Chubb & Moe, 1988; Hanushek et al., 2007; Loeb et al., 2011; Rabovsky, 2011). Consequently, some of parents' unmet needs at their child's prior school developed into perceived benefits when parents began to search for alternative placement options. These perceived benefits will only begin to be fully identified when further research refines methodology to more poignantly answer this study's research question: What are parents' perceived benefits when a full-time online K-12 educational placement is chosen for their child? Watson et al. (2010) and Uplindo (2008) generated findings consistent with this research study that parents' perceived benefits are manifested in a desire for a better educational opportunity, comparable to individualized learning pace, is a catalyst for parents exercising their school choice option just as participants of this research study did in selecting a full-time K-12 online school.

Furthermore, the absence of individualized learning pace in the literature review in relation to school choice might reflect parents' not instinctively understanding which perceived benefits would best satisfy their needs thus causing indecisiveness and vacillation over both perceived benefits and educational placement options (Chaudry et al., 2010; Schneider & Buckley, 2002). While the educational community needs to understand parents' perceived benefits, parents need to be fully informed consumers for standard economic theory to be effective, and Loeb et al. (2011) determined an inadequacy of evidence to support the idea of supply and demand in schools. Contrariwise within the literature, Friedman (2007) depicted parents as consumers who create the demand side argument in standard economic theory within

a market-based competition. Therefore, in the school choice competition, schools are forced to compete for students resulting in the improvement or creation of schools that more effectively meet students' needs (Bainbridge, 1990; Charles, 2011; Fischer, 2010; Loeb et al., 2011; Pitcock, 2009; Rabovsky, 2011). Parents might not instinctively know which perceived benefits to embrace or factor into their decision-making process and consequently vacillate over educational placement options (Schneider and Buckley, 2002). The continued growth in student enrollment in full-time online schools is a result of this school choice market-based competition, yet the role of parents as consumers of education may still be unclear to parents, the educational community, and policymakers until more surety is understood as to parents' perceived benefits which factor into parents' school choice decision-making.

**Special education-health concerns.** The ability for full-time online schools to meet the needs of their child's disability was the highest ranked perceived benefit by parents of students with special needs. In the survey, parents, who self reported as having a student with special education or health concern needs, ranked their child's disability as the major reason for exercising their consumer's right to choose a full-time online school under the standard economic framework. Likewise, within this same parent population, parents referenced all five themes generated from the qualitative data; the most frequently referenced theme was special education-health concerns.

Parents with from this subpopulation strongly disagreed that they were satisfied consumers of special education services at their prior school or that their child's prior school addressed their child's health concerns. This study's results support the findings of Watson et al., (2010) that parents' perceived benefits in a better educational placement stemming from dissatisfaction with their current education placement was the catalyst for transferring to a new

school under a standard economic framework. A frequently referenced theme in the data of this subpopulation of parents was a frustration with the parent-school relationship. Parents reported their prior school did not address their child's special education-health concern in a timely manner, and parents felt an adversarial relationship with the prior school when advocating for their child's special needs. Frustration with a prior school experience leads parents to exercise ownership of their school choice option which results in a great satisfaction with their child's new educational placement (Bainbridge, 1990; "The Facts on Learning," 2011; Loeb et al., 2011; Uplindo, 2008; Vassalio, 2000). Parents, acting out of frustration with their prior school's handling of special education-health concerns, will continue to choose an alternative educational placement option for their child outside of the traditional residential public school as evidenced in student mobility each year that accounts for the increasing growth in online schools.

Standard economic theory lent a theoretical perspective to study parent's dissatisfaction with special education and health concern services relative to school choice while simultaneously creating an arena where schools are forced to improve their schools or experience through the healthy competition of a choice system (Rabovsky, 2011; Vassalio, 2000). However, as mentioned early, the literature reviewed debates parents' role as consumers of education. Hanusheck et al. (2005) contradicted there is little direct knowledge to judge a parent's ability to evaluate schools, and researchers still continue to debate the way students respond within different educational settings hence convoluting any singular claim of one superlative educational delivery model (Loeb et al., 2011). Understanding the special education and health concern characteristics parents desire from their school will develop, strengthen, and motivate schools to supply these characteristics in a product that parents value. Under standard

economic theory, schools could then turn around declining enrollment as responsive suppliers to the parent consumers (Friedman, 2007). Failure to meet parents' prerequisites will continue to perpetuate school migration as families search for fulfillment of their perceived benefits.

### **Unexpected Findings**

The qualitative data from the interviews brought forth information the researcher had not considered at the time of the research design, and therefore, the topics were not included in either of the instruments' designs. One area was the acknowledgment that the student's prior school might not have been a traditional public school. Some participants reported that prior to choosing a full-time online education for their child that their child attended a private school or was homeschooled. The inability to tie the category of prior school experience to the traditional residential public school restricted the researcher from drawing conclusions regarding student mobility that were directly tied to traditional public schools.

Several of the participants expressed they were happy with their child's prior school experience of homeschooling, yet as the curriculum grew more challenging and made the participant question their ability to effectively teach their own child, alternative choices were pursued. Two participants reported that their parent-child relationship had become strained when the parent was simultaneously functioning in the roles of both the parent and teacher. Stories generated from the interviews spoke to a lack of delineation between the two roles of parent/teacher that the participants experienced that consequently contributed to a decrease in the quality of family life. The stress and anxiety surrounding a decrease in the quality of family life led some participants to the selection of a full-time online education as a placement choice.

Lastly, during the ten interviews, three participants developed tears in their eyes while conveying their personal stories or experiences with the phenomenon. One of three participants



wept and took long pauses to recount her son's experiences that led up to her decision to place him in a full-time online school. It was anticipated that participants would convey an array of emotions when conveying their shared experiences with the phenomenon, yet the researcher acknowledged a lack of preparation for the deep and painful responses felt by these three participants. The emotionality stemmed from participants reliving and recounting a time in their or their child's life that led the parent to eventually choose a full-time online school for their child. These three participants described times of hopelessness, depression, fear for their child's safety, and despair. Collectively, these emotions deeply centered on parents wanting to do whatever it would take to help their child succeed in their prior school, yet an information asymmetry existed between their child's prior school and the parent creating an imbalance in power. Standard economic theory would describe the potential for market failure to occur when there is an imbalance of power due to either the supplier or consumer having more or better information. In the case of these three parents, market failure occurred when the parent removed their child from the prior school and chose a full-time online school as the new school of choice.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

This research study represents an initial step in examining parents' perceived benefits when determining an educational placement decision for their child. Given the findings of the literature review and the key findings of this study, it seems evident that parents are becoming more viable consumers in our educational community. School districts would benefit from a deeper understanding of what motivates parents' school choice decision-making, and more research would be ideal in this field as full-time K-12 online school enrollment continues to grow. Data, key findings, and unexpected findings of this research provide a foundation that

supports the following recommendations that are not presented in any order of importance; each area has the potential to become a meaningful study in and of itself.

With the significant and ongoing growth in online education, definitions related to online education, even within the educational community, are not fluid as education is continually divided into smaller and smaller bits of consumption. Consequently, terms often are used interchangeably or misused. For example, it is difficult to identify a concrete definition of the term *blended learning* among educators. Until there is a universal acceptance to educational terms relating to the growing field of online education, a risk for the misidentification and misreporting of data exists that will only perpetuate the problem. While the concept might be precise, the term could be inaccurate or an error in translation could occur resulting in the potential for major obstacles in determining accurate conclusions. The first recommendation would be to investigate and audit the use of online education terminology within each state and nationally. Standardizing the terminology could:

- Facilitate precise receiving, recording, comparing and exchanging of information
- Provide a collective understanding across the continuum
- Identify and monitor needs or outcomes by amalgamating data from multiple sources
- Improve access to relevant literature and support research activities
- Enable accurate reporting of data

Further research on the terminology associated with online education would contribute to an online education taxonomy to support shared best practices for parents, educational practitioners and policymakers.

Another area for future research would be to explore how parents first learned about full-time K-12 online education and the key people that facilitated the educational placement change to an online school. The unexpected finding in this research study noted that some of the participants did not leave a traditional residential school to place their child in an online school but that the prior school was a homeschooling environment. While a portion of this research addressed participants' experience with their former school, it did not delineate delineated the category of former schools in order to determine if there was significance in the former school type that could inform the key findings. Future studies should examine who in the participants' lives assisted in their decision-making process and how the topic of online education came to fruition. Was it someone whose child was already enrolled in a full-time K-12 online school? Was it information received from the homeschooling community? Was it a school official or the participant's own independent research? One viable study might be an initial survey to analyze participants' demographics on a deeper level to vet out the answers to some of the aforementioned questions. The next recommended step would be to perform an in-depth phenomenological study of subsets of the population as defined by the demographic data gathered. For example, data generated from stories and descriptions of participants with the same prior school setting could be pursued to develop a better understanding of the participants' reasoning for selecting a full-time K-12 online school placement option. Perceived benefits of full-time online education could potentially differ if the prior school was a homeschooling environment, a charter school, a private school, a traditional public school the parent chose to leave, or a traditional school where the school district initiated the transfer.

Finally, this research study narrowly focused from a specific geographic area and participant pool within the state of Tennessee. Since education is primarily a responsibility

of and regulated by individual state's local government that legislate the existence of or enrollment in online schools, it would be noteworthy to conduct separate statewide research in addition to an overarching national study. Although a challenge to acquire access to participants for a statewide or national research study, examining these finite populations would contribute greatly to this new body of knowledge. Improved methodological enhancements to this research study could be improved upon if repeated or replicated. The researcher recommends the following enhancements:

- Statewide population sample
- National population sample
- Change in the research design approach to facilitate a phenomenological approach to subsets of the population based participants' demographics
- Improvements to the data collection instruments
- Incentivize participant to increase data collection

### **Concluding Remarks**

Online education, around for roughly 25 years, is at a critical time having caught the attention policymakers interested in educational reform. Proponents tout qualities of individualized education, greater student achievement, safe learning environment, and lower operating costs while opponents question the lack of research to back up such claims. Online education, especially full-time online schools, have become a focal point for policymakers interested in increasing student achievement scores, expanding school choice options, and improving operational efficiencies (NEPC, 2015). The results of this research study underscore the parent's role as a consumer of education and point to the need to better understand parents' perceived benefits that inform their educational placement decisions.

While enough is not known about online education best practices, especially full-time online schools, what is known is the increase in student enrollment continues each year as parents are choosing this educational placement option for their child. To serve this growing population of full-time online students, focus has recently shifted from state run virtual schools and online schools chartered through a school district to localized school districts serving own student population and occasionally accepting students from a regional area, yet minimal evidence supports the position that legislative actions are informed by the emerging research on online schools as only 30% of proposed bills have been enacted (“Keeping Pace,” 2015). Consequently, key findings and conclusions from this study can guide policymakers with their struggle to distinguish online educations’ distinct delivery models from other instructional models in order to facilitate more research for a better understanding of the characteristics of online schools and ensure student data from local, state and national agencies clearly identifies this population.

Currently, data is insufficient to compare online programs as many types of programs exist based on state, charter, or district led governance or enrollment qualifications being geographically linked to state and district residencies. Schneider and Buckley (2002) suggested movement of school governance for these institutions from the district level to the state level. Such a movement would facilitate in creating standards for data gathering and reporting to enable comparison across district and states will increase competition and access to higher quality schools, which is supported by the standard economic theory that guided this research study. Disaggregated data based upon delivery models is a necessity for ongoing data collection to understand parents’ perceived benefits of online education that lead them to enroll their children in a full-time online K-12 public school verses a traditional residential school. Failure

to do so will see public schools facing continual declining enrollment due to parents' dissatisfaction with the traditional educational delivery system.

The disparity in online delivery models is further complicated by their associated funding models. Funding models for state-led online programs are fundamentally different than funding models for single-district online programs, multi-district online programs, and online charter schools. Almost all state led programs are funded by sources that are not tied to the number of students or number of course completions but rather by state appropriations and a combination of course fees. For district led programs, funding is generally tied to a geographic reach within the state in which funding differs by the location of the district. Therefore, states must decide whether to fund online students at the rate of their district of residency, the rate of the district in which the program is located, or an arbitrary rate specific to each individual charter schools.

Independent of delivery model or funding structure, it is critical for parents and all stakeholders to evaluate online schools' program quality. Similar to all other public school students in the United States, full-time online students must participate in standardized state testing as required under NCLB. Policymakers need to discern whether a given online school or program meets minimum academic standard in order to be acceptable as a public-school choice option for parents dissatisfied with their traditional school choice options given these options are funded by federal and state funds. Policymakers need to develop standards and governance mechanisms to safeguard online schools from prioritizing profits over student achievement. The National Education Policy Center (2015) noted that in the 2013-14 school year, 28% of virtual schools had no accountability performance rating while only 41% of 285 rated schools were judged academically acceptable. Policy needs to enforce sanctions and limit online school

models that have resulted in questionable student performance and endorse online school models that demonstrate successful student achievement.

This study was intended to increase the limited amount of understanding about why parents choose online education for their children yet barely scratched the surface of the crucial topic of parents' perceived benefit of online education within the realm of school choice. The continued growth of online schools, in their myriad of program types, has resulted in an array of state policies that suggests full-time K-12 online education is still in its infancy of development, and the researcher anticipates that the results of this study will spark much needed dialogue to further contribute to the underpinning of online education as a full-time educational placement option. The initial footing of online education research is beginning to grow only to be met with a wider array of research questions. Full-time online schools are a vital school choice option within our educational community, and efforts into further researcher should be met with collaboration in an effort to inform and guide educational practitioners and policy.

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## APPENDIX A

### Online Survey

#### **Welcome to My Survey**

You are being invited to participate in a research study titled “Parents’ Perceived Benefits of Virtual Online K-12 1. Education as an educational Placement Option.” This study is being conducted by Joanne Vanderhorst, doctoral student at Pepperdine University, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for dissertation under the supervision of dissertation chair, Dr. Robert Barner. The study is designed to investigate parents’ perceived values of virtual education that led them to leave a traditional residential school and enroll their children in a full-time virtual online K-12 public school. You were selected to participate in this study because your child or children currently attend or formerly attended a virtual school.

If you agree to take part in this study, you will be asked to complete this online survey, which will take approximately 10 minutes to complete, about the perceived value you held when enrolling your child or children in a full-time virtual school. You do not have to answer any of the questions on the survey and may leave such items blank and have the right to discontinue at any point without being questioned about your decision. If you should choose not to participate in the research, your class standing and/or job status will not be affected.

You may not directly benefit from this research; however, your participation in the study may give a voice of parents with children in virtual education and may have an impact on education research, which will enlighten the educational community.

Although minimal, there are potential risks that you should consider before deciding to participate in this study. These risks are minimal psychological, physical, or social harm risks resulting from participation in the study. In the event you do experience any of the

aforementioned risks, you should contact the school administrator or myself to pursue your concern in more depth.

All responses will be kept confidential by coding survey responses and providing access to the data only by the principal researcher. To minimize any potential risk, data will be reported in a way that will not identify participants, and participants' names will not appear in any report presented to professional audiences or published. Any material collected will be securely stored in a locked filing cabinet or encrypted and password protected on electronic devices. Research records will be destroyed three years after completion of the study.

If you have questions about this project or if you have a research-related problem, you may contact Dr. Robert Barner at 310-568-5533. For additional information, or if you have questions about your rights as a research participant, please contact Dr. Thema Bryant-Davis, Chairperson of the Pepperdine University's Graduate and Professional School IRB, [gpsirb@pepperdine.edu](mailto:gpsirb@pepperdine.edu), 310-568- 5753, 6100 Center Drive 5th Floor, Los Angeles, CA 90045.

By clicking "Next" below you are indicating that you are at least 18 years old, have read and understood this consent form and agree to participate in this research study. Please print a copy of this page for your records.

### **Background**

In this survey, I am interested in learning about your thoughts, feelings, and attitudes on your perceived benefits that influenced your decision to choose a full-time online school for your child or children. When answering these questions, please consider what benefits you thought online learning could provide prior to your child being enrolled in an online school.

1. How many children do you currently have enrolled in a full-time online school?
  - No children currently enrolled
  - 1
  - 2
  - 3
  - 4 or more
2. Other than online education, which types of schools did you consider prior to choosing an online school? (Select all that apply.)
  - Homeschooling
  - Private school
  - Public charter school
  - Traditional residential (neighborhood) public school
  - Other (please specify)
3. For each child you chose to enroll in a full-time online school, please select the grade level he/she started online school. (Select all that apply.)
  - 12th grade
  - 11th grade
  - 10th grade
  - 9th grade
  - 8th grade
  - 7th grade
  - 6th grade
  - 5th grade
  - 4th grade
  - 3rd grade
  - 2nd grade
  - 1st grade
  - Kindergarten
4. How long did you consider online education prior to choosing an online school?
  - Less than 1 month
  - 1 - 3 months
  - 4 - 6 months
  - 7 months - 1 year
  - More than 1 year
5. Please state how much you agree or disagree with the following statements for each child you enrolled in a full-time online school. (Select all that apply.)

**Strongly Agree, Agree, Neutral, Disagree, Strongly Disagree**



- My child is difficult to control.
- My child is ahead academically.
- My child is behind academically.

6. Do you have any comments about any of your answers to the questions in this section?

### **Special Needs**

Please respond to the questions on this page for each child you enrolled in a full-time online school. (You may select multiple responses per statement if you enrolled more than one child in a full-time online school.)

7. At your prior school, did you have a child with an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) or 504? If “yes,” please state how much you agree or disagree with the following statements about special education services provided by a prior school.

#### **Strongly Agree, Agree, Neutral, Disagree, Strongly Disagree, Not Applicable**

- I was satisfied with the Special Education services.
  - My child made progress on their IEP or 504 goals.
  - The Special Education teacher understood my child’s needs and provided appropriate support.
  - My child’s disability was a reason for choosing online education.
8. Does your child have health issues? If “yes,” please state how much you agree or disagree with the following statements about your child's prior school.
- My concerns were addressed.
  - The teacher understood my child’s health issues and provided appropriate support.
9. Do you have any comments about any of your answers to the questions in this section?

**Benefits of Online Education**

Before responding to these statements, please think back to what you thought about online learning prior to enrolling your child in a full-time online school. (You may select multiple responses per question if you enrolled more than one child in a full-time online school.)

10. Please state how much you agree or disagree with the following statements regarding a significant reason you may have held prior to choosing a full-time online school for your child.

**Strongly Agree, Agree, Neutral, Disagree, Strongly Disagree**

- Tuition free program
- Courses taught by certified teachers
- Accredited program
- School is part of the public-school system
- Dissatisfaction with local public school
- Safe learning environment
- Accommodations of children's health issues
- Smaller class size
- Flexibility for extra-curricular activities
- Flexibility for children to pursue other interests (e.g., work part-time, volunteer, etc.)
- More suitable fit for Gifted and Talented children
- Better option than a home schooling approach
- Accommodation of religious needs
- More direct parent involvement with children's education
- Better academic environment and learning experience

- Quality of curriculum
- Other (please specify)

### **Prior School Experience**

Before responding to the statements on this page, please think back to school(s) your child attended prior to attending a full-time online school. (You may select multiple responses per statement if you enrolled more than one child in a full-time online school.)

11. Please state how much you agree or disagree with the following statements about school facilities and overall learning environments for schools your child attended before attending an online school.

#### **Strongly Agree, Agree, Neutral, Disagree, Strongly Disagree, Not Applicable**

- My child felt safe at school.
- The school facilities were friendly and inviting.
- The school facilities were clean.
- The school facilities were safe.
- There was adequate room to learn comfortably.
- The school was easy to locate.
- The school provided opportunities for interaction with other families.
- The amount of time my child spent working on schoolwork and homework was appropriate.
- My child enjoyed their former school.
- The curriculum was challenging.
- The curriculum was high quality.
- My child made good progress.

- The size of the class supported the learning.
- The teachers improved the learning experience.
- My child learned at an individualized pace.
- I was satisfied with the opportunities for participation in extracurricular activities.
- There were a variety of learning activities (e.g., computer-based, textbook-based, project learning, etc.).
- Extra-curricular activities (e.g. events, clubs, activities, and/or field trips were provided.).
- I was satisfied with the amount of contact with the support staff (e.g., school secretary, custodian, aides, etc.).
- I was satisfied with the amount of contact with the principal.
- I was satisfied with the amount of contact with teachers.

### **Conclusion**

12. Is there any additional information you would like to share regarding the perceived benefits you held prior to enrolling your child in an online school?

**Thank you for your participation in this survey!**

## APPENDIX B

## GPS IRB Approval Notice

# PEPPERDINE UNIVERSITY

## Graduate & Professional Schools Institutional Review Board

August 3, 2015

Joanne Vanderhorst

Protocol #: E1213D01  
Project Title: Parents' Perceived Benefits of Virtual Education

Dear Ms. Vanderhorst:

Thank you for submitting your application, *Parents' Perceived Benefits of Virtual Education*, for exempt review to Pepperdine University's Graduate and Professional Schools Institutional Review Board (GPS IRB). The IRB appreciates the work you and your faculty advisor, Dr. Barner, have done on the proposal. The IRB has reviewed your submitted IRB application and all ancillary materials. Upon review, the IRB has determined that the above entitled project meets the requirements for exemption under the federal regulations (45 CFR 46 - <http://www.hhs.gov/ohrp/humansubjects/guidance/45cfr46.html>) that govern the protections of human subjects. Specifically, section 45 CFR 46.101(b)(2) states:

(b) Unless otherwise required by Department or Agency heads, research activities in which the only involvement of human subjects will be in one or more of the following categories are exempt from this policy:

**Category (2) of 45 CFR 46.101**, research involving the use of educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures or observation of public behavior, unless: a) Information obtained is recorded in such a manner that human subjects can be identified, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects; and b) any disclosure of the human subjects' responses outside the research could reasonably place the subjects at risk of criminal or civil liability or be damaging to the subjects' financial standing, employability, or reputation.

Your research must be conducted according to the proposal that was submitted to the IRB. If changes to the approved protocol occur, a revised protocol must be reviewed and approved by the IRB before implementation. For any proposed changes in your research protocol, please submit a **Request for Modification Form** to the GPS IRB. Because your study falls under exemption, there is no requirement for continuing IRB review of your project. Please be aware that changes to your protocol may prevent the research from qualifying for exemption from 45 CFR 46.101 and require submission of a new IRB application or other materials to the GPS IRB.

A goal of the IRB is to prevent negative occurrences during any research study. However, despite our best intent, unforeseen circumstances or events may arise during the research. If an unexpected situation or adverse event happens during your investigation, please notify the GPS IRB as soon as possible. We will ask for a complete explanation of the event and your response. Other actions also may be required depending on the nature of the event. Details regarding the timeframe in which adverse events must be reported to the GPS IRB and the appropriate form to be used to report this information can be found in the *Pepperdine University Protection of Human Participants in Research: Policies and Procedures Manual* (see link to "policy material" at <http://www.pepperdine.edu/irb/graduate/>).

Please refer to the protocol number denoted above in all further communication or correspondence related to this approval. Should you have additional questions, please contact Kevin Collins, Manager of the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at [gpsirb@pepperdine.edu](mailto:gpsirb@pepperdine.edu). On behalf of the GPS IRB, I wish you success in this scholarly pursuit.

Sincerely,



Thema Bryant-Davis, Ph.D.  
Chair, Graduate and Professional Schools IRB

cc: Dr. Lee Kats, Vice Provost for Research and Strategic Initiatives  
Mr. Brett Leach, Regulatory Affairs Specialist  
Dr. Robert Barner, Faculty Advisor