

# Intensive Mothering and the Unequal School-Search Burden

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## Abstract

Expanded school-choice policies have weakened the traditional link between residence and school assignment. These policies have created new school options and new labor for families to manage and divide. Drawing on interviews with 90 mothers and 12 fathers of elementary-age children, I demonstrate that mothers across class, racial, and ethnic backgrounds absorb the labor of school decision-making. Working-class mothers emphasize self-sacrifice and search for schools that will keep their children safe. Middle-class mothers intensively research school information and seek niche school environments. Working-class and middle-class black and Latinx mothers engage in ongoing labor to monitor the racial climate within schools and to protect their children from experiences of marginalization. Partnered fathers and single primary-caregiver fathers invest less time and energy in the search for schools. These findings identify an important source of gender inequality stemming from modern educational policies and suggest new directions for research on school choice.

## Keywords

parental involvement, school choice, family structure and education, gender, qualitative research on education

U.S. schools have long promoted parental involvement in children's education (Domina 2005; Lee and Bowen 2006). Research on parental-involvement activities primarily centers on parents' involvement in their children's classrooms and their engagement with teachers and administrators at schools (Horvat, Weininger, and Lareau 2003; McNeal 1999; Sui-Chu and Willms 1996). Less attention has been paid to how school-choice policies generate new expectations for parental involvement (Denice and Gross 2016; Lauen 2007). This question is of increasing interest as large school districts implement new school options available to families regardless of their place of residence (Archbald 2004; Berends and Zottola 2009; Renzulli and Roscigno 2005; Schneider, Teske, and Marschall 2000; Weininger 2014). Although default zoned schools are generally still available, choice systems implicitly

normalize a more involved and deliberative process for choosing schools, creating new obligations for families to manage (Bast and Walberg 2004; Chen and Moskop 2020; Lubienski 2003).

School-choice systems create both opportunities and risks for families. Families have more school options, but parents are expected to engage in increased labor to make school decisions. The amount of labor involved in the school-choice process has increased in recent years, requiring parents to review enrollment procedures, rank

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school preferences, and meet registration deadlines (Denice and Gross 2016; Fong and Faude 2018; Lareau, Adia Evans, and Yee 2016; Neild 2005).

Family dynamics have long been structured by the constraints and opportunities provided through schooling (Lareau 2000a), yet we know more about how parents affect schooling than about how schooling affects parents. Parents' new decision-making responsibilities under school-choice systems are embedded within a broader context of gendered expectations for raising young children (Hays 1998; Hochschild and Machung 1989; M. K. Nelson 2010). Across socioeconomic backgrounds, mothers face deeply embedded norms around parenting that adhere to the ideology of "intensive mothering" (Collins 1998, 2016; Cooper 2007; Dow 2019). Intensive mothering ideologies compel mothers to take total responsibility for household planning, decision-making, and child-rearing (Christopher 2012; Coltrane 2000; Daminger 2019; Gerson 2002). Intensive mothering also frames expectations for mothers' involvement in school decision-making (Parcel, Hendrix, and Taylor 2016), so much so that a "good" school assignment is implicitly a reflection of good mothering (Reay and Ball 1998). Because gender expectations require mothers to absorb household labor and child-rearing, this literature predicts that educational policies that increase labor for families will disproportionately fall on mothers.

In this article, I draw on 102 interviews with 90 mothers and 12 fathers to examine how parents manage the labor of school decision-making. Across class, racial, and ethnic background, I find that mothers, whether partnered or unpartnered, take primary responsibility for the school search. Mothers' school decision-making labor involves searching for schools, identifying school options, and monitoring racial climates within schools. Partnered fathers take a secondary role, and primary-caregiver fathers invest less time and energy in the search for schools than do single mothers. How mothers engage in school decision-making labor varies by class and race. Working-class mothers emphasize self-sacrifice and seek schools that will protect their children from harmful neighborhood conditions. Middle-class mothers invest time and energy in the search for school information and seek niche schools that align with their educational philosophies. Both working-class and middle-class black and Latinx mothers engage

in continued labor even after matriculation to monitor the school's racial climate. The increased complexity of school decision-making in large city districts has contributed to the escalation in mothers' labor.

## SCHOOL DECISION-MAKING AND INTENSIVE MOTHERING IDEOLOGIES

Current research on school-choice policies indicates that socioeconomic disparities shape parents' participation in and navigation of school-choice programs (Beal and Hendry 2012; Chubb and Moe 2011; Denice and Gross 2016; Schneider et al. 2000). Families from different backgrounds vary in the amount of time and cognitive and emotional energy they can devote to school decision-making (Cucchiara 2013; Fong and Faude 2018). Participation in school-choice programs also varies across families because high-income and highly educated parents have greater access to school information through their social networks (Ball and Vincent 1998; Dougherty et al. 2013; Horvat et al. 2003; Neild 2005; Pattillo 2015).

Overwhelming attention has centered on differences *between* families rather than drawing attention to the *within-family* dynamics of the choice process across class, racial, and ethnic background. This scholarship tends to focus on children's education and the family more broadly. Yet school choice is an underexplored case for studying the expectations of motherhood. To better evaluate the effect of school-choice policies on families, we need to understand how the school-search burden is absorbed by parents. The literature on intensive mothering and gendered expectations for child-rearing provides important theoretical insights.

Intensive mothering conceptualizes the long-standing ideologies that mothers must invest extensive time and energy in raising children (Christopher 2012; Hays 1998; Hochschild and Machung 1989; Stone 2008). Mothers are expected to research, prioritize, and monitor their children's lives (Daming 2019). In recent years, mothers must also navigate conflicting ideologies around motherhood expectations and occupational responsibilities. For instance, highly educated mothers and mothers from high-income households are expected to keep up with the same job responsibilities as their male counterparts or face

pressure to forgo motherhood altogether (Blair-Loy 2009; Crittenden 2002; Hays 1998; Williams 2001). Mothers are expected to spend more time with their children than in past decades, but they are also expected to spend time working outside the home (Sayer, Bianchi, and Robinson 2004; Spain and Bianchi 1996).

Mothers across racial, ethnic, and class backgrounds experience these intensive mothering standards (Collins 1998, 2016; Cooper 2007; Dow 2019). Mothers of color have long had to reconcile motherhood with employment and advocacy out of economic necessity; as such, they have integrated work as part of their identities as mothers (Collins 2005; A. Nelson 2016; Vespa 2009). Black middle-class mothers go to great lengths to supervise their children's educational experiences (Dow 2016, 2019; Lareau 2011; Saporito and Lareau 1999). Mothers of color intensively protect their children from discriminatory experiences during childhood and adolescence (Dow 2016; Elliott and Asetline 2013). Moreover, low-income mothers of color face dominant ideologies that represent them as unfit and inadequate, yet they still engage in practices of intensive mothering (Elliott, Powell, and Brenton 2015; McCormack 2005). For example, Pattillo (2015) and Posey-Maddox and colleagues (2021) find that black working-class mothers invest considerable time and energy in the school-choice process. In recent decades, low-income mothers have faced even greater economic uncertainty yet shoulder expectations to sacrifice for their children (Edin and Kefalas 2011; Hays 2004).

The literature on intensive mothering traditionally focuses on how mothers' child-rearing expectations in the home conflict with employment expectations (Blair-Loy 2009; Bobel 2010; Garey 1999; Hays 1998; Stone 2008; Walzer 2010). More recent scholarship identifies the additional "cognitive labor" women take on in the home and in school matters (Cooper 2007; Daminger 2019). Mothers are expected to balance child-rearing and employment while also overseeing household logistics. However, research tends to neglect the increased cognitive labor mothers have taken on as school-choice policies have expanded. The past several decades have seen a decline in enrollment by catchment zone and an increase in charter school enrollment (Berends 2015). Expectations that mothers become informed about schools, search for schools, and monitor their children's well-being in schools extend traditional notions of caregiving in the home (Parcel et al.

2016; Reay and Ball 1998). The literature on intensive mothering gives insight into how families absorb the demands of the school-choice process and how educational processes are framed by inequalities across gender, race, and class.

Relative to men, women invest more time and energy to anticipate needs, identify options, and make decisions in the home (Bianchi, Robinson, and Milke 2006). Ideologies of masculinity deemphasize equal responsibility for child-rearing (Christiansen and Palkovitz 2001; Connell and Messerschmidt 2005; Wall and Arnold 2007). Gendered aspects of parental involvement construct expectations for partnered fathers to be less involved in school matters and school decision-making (Townsend 2010). Compared to mothers, partnered fathers and primary-caregiving fathers take on fewer domestic and child-rearing responsibilities (Bianchi et al. 2006; Craig 2006; Doucet 2011).

Limited research on how mothers and fathers absorb the school-search burden narrows our understanding of how gender inequality is reproduced through educational policies. Family dynamics have long been structured by the constraints and opportunities provided through educational policies, yet we know little about the specific institutional linkages between household labor and school-choice policy. For instance, although Dow (2019) examines caregiving expectations for black middle-class mothers, we still know very little about the gender division of labor and the role of fathers in the context of school choice. In the present study, I examine how mothers and fathers across race and class manage the increased labor of school decision-making. I find that mothers engage in more school decision-making labor than do fathers and that how mothers engage in this labor varies by social class and race.

## DATA AND METHODS

### *The School-Choice Context: Elementary School Enrollment in New York City*

In New York City, 40 percent of public school students do not attend their zoned school (Mader, Hemphill, and Abbas 2018). Parents of elementary-age children have a range of school options, including nonzoned schools, gifted and talented (G&T) programs,<sup>1</sup> and charter schools. New York City, like Boston and Philadelphia, offers

a number of alternatives to traditional public schools; Miami and Dallas offer even more alternatives (Whitehurst 2017).

To enroll their children in New York City elementary schools, parents apply online and rank up to 12 schools. Similar to New Orleans and Chicago, New York City offers a centralized assignment process for enrollment and makes performance data available (Whitehurst 2017). The elementary application period opens from November to January for the next academic year, and parents hear back from schools in March. Acceptance rates vary based on different schools' admissions policies.<sup>2</sup> Children have the greatest chance of being accepted to their neighborhood zoned school and schools within their community school districts. However, parents can list any school—within or outside their district—on the application.<sup>3</sup>

In March, if children do not gain admission to any of the 12 schools listed on their applications, they are guaranteed a spot at their neighborhood school. In most circumstances, the neighborhood school is the school closest to the child's home address. Parents are notified if they are wait-listed at any of their 12 chosen schools. Parents can pre-register at a school that admitted their child or wait to hear from schools that may have openings for wait-listed students.

Outside of New York City Department of Education schools, parents can apply separately to charter schools.<sup>4</sup> Charter schools send admission and wait-list information on a rolling basis after April. New York City offers public school choice through two open enrollment systems. The longer waiting periods, uncertainty of school waiting lists, and separate application procedures for G&T programs and charter schools add greater complexity.

### Recruitment

At the onset of the study, I aimed to recruit parents and guardians of elementary-age children and did not intentionally target mothers. I used a variety of strategies to recruit a socioeconomically diverse group of parents. I attended school district meetings, distributed fliers on the street and at community events, and posted information in online forums and at public libraries, grocery stores, food banks, after-school programs, and community organizations.

Recruiting parents from the same neighborhoods and districts may have created more sample

uniformity, but I aimed to capture parents' school-choice experiences across New York City. Relatedly, interviews with both parents may have provided a more comprehensive take on the school-choice process, but social class differences in household makeup might limit the number of working-class two-parent households and favor middle-class families. To be inclusive of all household structures, and given the logistical constraints of interviewing both parents, I recruited one parent (mother or father) per household.<sup>5</sup>

Following recruitment, I conducted interviews in public and private settings, including coffee shops, homes, libraries, parks, and workplaces. Interviews ranged from 60 to 90 minutes and were recorded. Each parent received a \$20.00 gift card as a token of appreciation. At the end of each interview, parents completed a brief survey to collect demographic information.

### Sample Characteristics

Table 1 displays the characteristics of the 90 mothers and 12 fathers in my sample. Among the parents, 13 were Asian, 43 were black, 28 were Latinx, and 18 were white.<sup>6</sup> I intentionally sampled more black, Latinx, and Asian middle-class parents because prior research on school choice overwhelmingly focuses on white middle-class families (Cucchiara 2013; Cucchiara and Horvat 2014; Posey-Maddox 2014).

I determined social class using a combination of parents' educational backgrounds, household incomes, and employment information. Following past categorizations of class groups (Lareau 2000b; Lareau et al. 2016), I classified 43 parents who were employed in positions that rely on educationally certified skills, had positions with managerial authority, had obtained a bachelor's degree at minimum, and indicated household incomes over \$50,000 as middle-class. I also classified five mothers who were in the process of obtaining their bachelor's degree and who had high household incomes from their partners' earnings as middle-class. I classified 44 parents who were employed in positions with little to no managerial authority, with household incomes less than \$50,000, and who had not earned a bachelor's degree as working-class. I use \$50,000 as the income marker because it is just below \$60,000, the median household income in New York City during the time of data collection.<sup>7</sup>

**Table 1.** Demographic Characteristics of Sample.

Sample characteristics (N = 102)		Mothers (n = 90)		Fathers (n = 12)	
		Middle-Class (n = 44)	Working-Class (n = 46)	Middle-Class (n = 4)	Working-Class (n = 8)
Race/ethnicity	Asian	10	1	1	0
	Black	10	22	3	6
	Latinx	11	19	0	2
	White	13	4	0	0
Partnership status	Married	27	12	2	4
	Separated or divorced	5	3	0	0
	Single	9	29	2	4
	Single with live-in partner	3	2	0	0
Education	No high school degree	0	5	0	1
	High school degree or GED	1	14	0	3
	Trade school or some college	4	19	0	2
	College degree or higher	39	8	4	2
Age of child	≤ 6	19	19	3	5
	> 6	25	27	1	3
Household income	< \$50,000	38	0	4	0
	> \$50,000	6	46	0	8
Interviewee employment status	Employed	35	25	3	6
	Unemployed	9	21	1	2
Neighborhood poverty level <sup>a</sup>	> 21% poverty	18	38	1	7
	< 20% poverty	26	8	3	1
Type of school	Not zoned by address	33	25	2	3
	Zoned by address	11	21	2	5

<sup>a</sup>Neighborhood poverty levels retrieved from New York City Community Health Profiles. 2018. "Community Health Profiles – NYC Health." <https://www1.nyc.gov/site/doh/data/data-publications/profiles.page>.

Although a college degree shapes key aspects of family–school relationships and parenting styles, I classified eight mothers and two fathers who had incomes below \$24,000, had employment challenges, and resided in low-income housing in high-poverty neighborhoods as working-class even though they had obtained bachelor's degrees. These parents' level of economic hardship severely limited their school decision-making capabilities. I carefully read through the interview transcripts for all of the parents and found no evidence that classifying these parents as working-class shaped the results of the study.

I sampled without the intention of targeting mothers, but the number of fathers included in the sample is lower than the number of mothers. The gender imbalance can be partially attributed

to the absence of fathers in a substantial number of the working-class households. Across the sample, 46 of the 90 mothers in the study were single, separated, or divorced. The single-headed household structure for just over half of the mothers in the sample is a strong indicator of the fathers' limited involvement in the school-choice process.

The sample's gender imbalance reflects the methodological difficulties of recruiting fathers and the increasing number of low-income households with nonresident fathers (Lareau 2000b; Manning 2015). Developing a more balanced sample would have required an intentional focus on gender imbalance from the onset of the study and interviews with nonresident fathers. Because within-household and gender differences emerged through later stages of data analysis and because

a majority of working-class mothers in the sample were single parents, the sample of mothers outnumbered the sample of fathers. My findings also suggest fathers played a minimal role in school decision-making whether or not they were in the same household as their child. Yet the sample of fathers I recruited provides unique methodological benefits. Whereas many studies on parent involvement intentionally exclude fathers or include only married fathers, my sample of fathers includes six partnered fathers and six single primary-caregiver fathers.<sup>8</sup>

### *Interviews with Parents*

My interviews capture parents' experiences within a few years of making an elementary school decision for their children. Interviewing parents a few academic years after enrollment may result in retrospective bias. I carefully compared interviews with parents who had just completed the process and parents who had done so earlier. I designed interview questions to be flexible and conversational and to allow parents to share their experiences of school decision-making alongside other aspects of their daily lives (Cooper 2007; Merriam 1998).

As a young black woman, I perceived that my age and racial/ethnic background and being a former New York City public school student encouraged participants to address their decision-making in greater detail. At the time of the study, I did not have children and was relatively younger than many of the parents I interviewed. Many parents saw me as a less knowledgeable outsider and openly shared their experiences. As a woman of color, I found that parents of color were willing to address their concerns of racial marginalization in schools. Moreover, when parents learned I went to public school in New York City as a child, they felt I had a vested interest in the subject matter and were more comfortable sharing their experiences.

### *Data Analysis*

I transcribed interviews verbatim and used an iterative process to identify repeated patterns and themes across the data (Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña 2014). Parents' descriptions of the school-choice process centered around three stages of the decision-making process—navigating the

search for schools, identifying school options, and monitoring school outcomes. The findings sections are framed according to these three themes that emerged from the data.

In the final round of analysis, I zeroed in on gender, class, and race and compared interviews with mothers and fathers across class and racial and ethnic background. I also rigorously searched for disconfirming evidence as I read through the transcripts and reviewed the results of the coding process.<sup>9</sup> Given that intensive mothering ideologies may have compelled mothers to perform "good mothering" during the interview, I repeatedly compared interviews with fathers and reviewed interview field notes and research memos in search of conflicting accounts. Through this analysis, I found that whereas middle-class mothers went to great lengths to describe their resource-seeking activities, working-class mothers were less likely to specify the extent of their decision-making labor verbally and instead indicated their search activities through hand movements and changes in their tone of voice. Aside from these differences, I did not find conflicting discourses, and I found that fathers' accounts were consistent with the mothers' accounts.

## INTENSIVE MOTHERING AND SCHOOL SEARCHES

Across class and racial backgrounds, mothers adhere to the tenets of intensive mothering by engaging in time-consuming and self-sacrificing work to search for schools, evaluate school options, and monitor school racial climates. School decision-making is not central to how fathers see their parenting roles, whether the fathers are partnered or unpartnered or living or not living in the same household as their children. Middle-class and working-class partnered fathers take less responsibility over school decision-making, relying on their spouses to search for schools and identify school options. Single primary-caregiver fathers spend significantly less time engaged in school decision-making.

School decision-making labor is tied to mothers' conceptions of good parenting and salient to their sense of identity. Facing economic constraints and poor neighborhood conditions, working-class mothers sacrifice time and energy

searching for schools, and they prioritize safety when evaluating their school options. Middle-class mothers also explain that school choice involves a lot of work; they engage in intensive resource-seeking to find schools, and they prioritize niche environments for enrollment. Black and Latinx mothers and mothers in multicultural families engage in additional “diversity work.” Even after enrollment, mothers of color continue to monitor their children’s experiences in schools to protect them from potentially marginalizing school settings.

### *Do I Have to Sell a Kidney?*

Intensive-mothering ideologies that encourage mothers to invest energy and time in raising children shape how mothers search for schools. The 46 working-class mothers I interviewed felt school decision-making required them to make personal sacrifices for their children’s benefit (for supplemental interview material, see the Appendix in the online Supplemental Material). Ann<sup>10</sup> (B, WC, S)<sup>11</sup> said it “was hard to find” a school and that the process was “very competitive.” She attended four orientations, researched programs, and spoke to teachers in a variety of schools across the city:

Right off the bat, I was working on it. It didn’t matter where he was going to go, how far away it was, or how quick I could get to him. I had to make the sacrifice. When it comes to my kids and their education, I have to make whatever sacrifice, minimal or large. I found as a parent trying to put my kids in a quality school was hard to find. Nowadays, it is very competitive, I feel like I am competing with the majority of parents.

Ann believed the level of competition for quality schools in New York City required her to individually research schools for each of her three children. She juggled the research for different schools in between her work obligations and childcare responsibilities.

To ensure her three children, ranging from age 5 to 12, had a customized experience, Ann emphasized the “sacrifice” it required given that they ended up in two nonzoned elementary schools and a magnet middle school across Manhattan:

I could have easily put them in the same school, but I always like to see what school would work for them. Although it’s convenient to keep everyone in one place, they might not adapt to that. . . . I had to make the sacrifice. When it comes to my kids and their education, I have to make whatever sacrifice, minimal or large. I had to figure out how to do that because the schools were in two different directions. One was uptown and one was downtown.

Working-class mothers in the sample performed self-sacrificial and time-consuming work through the school-choice process. As common criteria for good mothering suggests, mothers are expected to put their children’s needs first and commit to what is best for their children at all costs (Elliott et al. 2015; McCormack 2005). Olivia (L, WC, S) noted the challenges of seeking out services and school options for her son, who is now enrolled in a nonzoned school outside her neighborhood. She wished resources were “more transparent for kids with special needs.” As a health care worker living in Washington Heights, a neighborhood in Manhattan, Olivia struggled to access services for her 8-year-old son when she had to travel over 45 minutes by subway and bus:

It’s hard to be a parent in New York because resources are not always available. Like, if you’re applying for any single service for your child, you have to give up a day’s work. You have to go to this office first to get this letter. And then you have to go this office all the way in Brooklyn. And you have to go here, and it’s a lot of running around back and forth. It’s not really set up to help you.

The extent of mothers’ sacrifices was also evident in respondents’ descriptions of the emotional toll of searching for schools. Cindy (B, WC, S), who works full-time as an office assistant, emphasized how hard it was to find a school and her confusion and isolation in the process:

There was this 2-week period, where I was like “Do I have to sell a kidney or something to get him into the school?” So, when I had parent-teacher meetings, I would talk with the parents. You kind of

feel alone until you have those meetings with other people.

Like other mothers, Cindy followed the principle of maternal sacrifice to guide her search: "One person said, 'You have to find the school that fits your child, it's not what's convenient for you, just one that fits for you child.' So, I took that to heart."

Cindy ended up placing her 5-year-old son in a school outside her neighborhood that required her to catch a subway and a bus from her home and added an extra 45 minutes to her work commute. Many single working-class mothers like Cindy made school decisions while also balancing work obligations and household responsibilities. In her exasperated statement suggesting she sell a kidney, Cindy revealed the frustration and toll the search process took on mothers.

The 12 married working-class mothers also described taking primary responsibility for the school search with only minimal help from partners. Patricia (W, WC, M), a mother of a 6-year-old and 8-month-old, explained how she searched for schools for her daughter on her own:

When we moved into the neighborhood, she was about 4 or 4 and a half, so it was about time for me to scout. So, I went into schools and talked to the principals and did the legwork. I started doing the legwork and walking around and also talking to some parents on the playground. I asked them for advice.

Patricia lives in Washington Heights and leaves every morning at 5 a.m., with an infant to drop off at daycare. She commutes 47 minutes each way to her job as a fitness instructor in East Harlem. She returns each evening at 5 p.m. to make meals for her two children. The time spent visiting schools presented a sacrifice because any extra time is scarce. Despite her limited time, Patricia spent months investigating school options and decided to enroll her daughter in a globally oriented magnet school.

Patricia chuckled wryly, her voice rising in frustration, as she explained how her husband intervened and suggested they consider different school options just a few days before the start of the school year:

My experiences choosing schools was totally crazy, it was totally stressful. I

suggested she go with the magnet school, which I thought was a good choice. So, we were pretty much set on that, but when my husband went to register her, he said, "All those teachers look like typical teachers from New York schools." But the choice was already made, and it was almost the beginning of September. Thankfully we got a call from Uptown Village Academy almost 2 days before the school year started, and we switched at the last moment. But it was stressful because we had to make a choice and make a choice for somebody else and you want to make a good choice to make this little person feel comfortable.

Compared to Patricia, who spent many months researching school options, Patricia's husband was only minimally involved and assisted in the school search just before school enrollment.

Similar to Patricia, Jennifer (L, WC, M), a mother of a 6-year-old and 8-year-old, explained how she struggled to consider multiple factors on her own:

It's stressful because you have to be on top of it because of the deadlines. And then you have to narrow it down to what's best. You know, is this a safe neighborhood? Or a clean neighborhood? There's a lot of things you have to factor in and a lot of things you have to consider.

Jennifer reported that her husband was not involved in the school search; she attended multiple school orientations and parent seminars alone. Whether partnered or unpartnered, working-class mothers believed good mothering centered on sacrificing time and energy to navigate a complex school-choice process. They performed sacrificial labor to figure out application procedures, seek advice from other parents and teachers, and attend school tours; and they absorbed far more of the school decision-making burden than did fathers.

### *You Can Wheedle Your Way in*

Middle-class mothers similarly believed school decision-making required an intensive investment of time and energy. Jaime (W, MC, S), a part-time teacher who lives with her 5-year-old son and her son's father, described how she engaged in



a school search by seeking specialized information from other mothers:

I learned from other mothers that you can really wheedle your way into a school by going to the principal and being like, “I really want to come to your school.” Once you’re on the waiting list, the principal has control of who comes in off the waiting list. You really can to some extent work your way in. And you hear through word of mouth which principals you can influence by calling them a lot.

Jaime found herself reaching out to complete strangers, and she eventually used this information to decide between two schools in her district. She explained, “When you’re on the playground and your kid is three or four, that’s the first or second question, where do you live? Where do you go to school? Where are you thinking about going to school? It’s constant and it’s stressful.” Like working-class mothers, middle-class mothers consistently emphasized how they researched information.

A number of the 44 middle-class mothers believed that investment in resource-seeking activities reflected their total commitment as mothers. Past research finds that middle-class families use stores of social and cultural capital to engage with schools and provide opportunities for their children (Ball and Vincent 1998; Horvat et al. 2003; Lareau 2011; Lareau et al. 2016).

With access to more resources and slightly more job flexibility, middle-class mothers also negotiated early and persistent contact with schools. Sally (L, MC, M), a remote IT specialist, described how she repeatedly contacted a school to see if her twin 7-year-old sons could be removed from a wait-list and considered for enrollment:

We had to list the schools in the application by order, but we still ended up on the wait-list. So, I just became very persistent with the school. I kept going to the school and inquiring to see what number we were on the wait-list. And so, I was just very persistent until my persistence paid off. So that’s how we got in the door—me being very pushy and persistent.

Sally and her husband were both concerned about their sons’ enrollment, but only Sally persistently

reached out to school administration at their desired nonzoned school outside of their district. Sally’s persistence reflects middle-class standards of good mothering, which often emphasize strenuous investment of time and energy in their children’s well-being (Gerson 2002; Hays 1998; Hochschild and Machung 1989).

Middle-class mothers also emphasized how they extensively researched school information. Yolanda (B, MC, S), a full-time nurse, explained that her 5-year-old daughter’s father was not in her life, and she researched schools on her own. In anticipation of her daughter’s enrollment, Yolanda gathered a “whole notebook full” of school information:

I looked up all these schools early for my daughter. I’ve been thinking about it for a long time. It really got tough when she was getting out of preschool. And so, I looked at different kinds of schools. It was hard for me. I was very anxious. I was very scared and had all these expectations and all these fears. It can be overwhelming.

In addition to searching for online information, Yolanda went to open houses and felt like she got an honest opinion from talking to parents at her neighborhood playground.

The 27 partnered and 17 unpartnered middle-class mothers sought insider information and researched school options similarly to working-class mothers. To be sure, middle-class mothers often had jobs that provided the time and flexibility to attend open houses and spend hours researching options. Less constraining schedules allowed middle-class mothers to obtain more specialized information from other mothers. Middle-class mothers also benefited from connections to principals and teachers—social ties that were often less accessible to working-class mothers. As prior research would suggest, I also found that middle-class mothers were more comfortable interfacing with school staff during the school-search process (Ball and Vincent 1998; Lareau 2011; Lareau et al. 2016; Reay and Ball 1998).

Yet like working-class mothers, middle-class mothers described taking primary responsibility for communicating with schools. Among the 27 middle-class respondents who were married, the mothers took primary responsibility for the school search in all of these families. Margaret (A, MC, M), a mother of a 3-year-old and 6-year-old and

a full-time development associate at a national nonprofit, explained how she delegated tasks for her partner to complete: "We went to an open house. We kind of tag teamed on all the open houses because there were so many." Throughout the process, though, Margaret felt primary responsibility for the school search:

It was very stressful. We live in the most overcrowded district in New York City. So, we had very limited options. I started looking at other districts. But it was a lot of time. I signed up for all the, DOE updates, but that's still really confusing. I would also just put out feelers on this mom's list. I remember one or two moms who had older kids that were more experienced were like, "Let's have coffee, and I'll walk you through my experience." So that was helpful.

When describing the work involved to search for schools, Margaret rapidly switched to "I," demonstrating the limited work her husband did. Middle-class mothers described the secondary role their partners played in the school search and how they more often relied on other mothers, teachers, or principals. Similar to working-class mothers, middle-class mothers, whether partnered or unpartnered, absorbed more of the school decision-making labor.

### *My Wife Was the One Who Looked*

Findings from the mothers in the sample offer only a partial view of how school decision-making labor is divided within families. I turn to the interviews with fathers to provide additional evidence of fathers' limited involvement. Across class and racial and ethnic background, both partnered and single primary-caregiver fathers were overwhelmingly less burdened by school decision-making. Whereas mothers emphasized self-sacrifice and extensive resource-seeking, fathers approached school decision-making less intensively. Partnered fathers relied heavily on spouses to identify schools for enrollment, and single primary-caregiver fathers invested minimal time and energy in the search for schools.

I interviewed four working-class and eight middle-class fathers; six of these fathers were

married.<sup>12</sup> Partnered fathers repeatedly emphasized their spouse's role when describing their school search and school decision-making. Erwin (L, WC, M), an administrative coordinator, explained how deciding between a few district schools for his 5-year-old son depended primarily on his wife's opinion of the school:

My wife fears for my son's safety every second of the day. So, if she's not confident or comfortable with it she just doesn't go for it. So, when we toured that school, she was immediately comfortable and confident. So, at that point I took that as a yes and we moved for it. So, I would say it depends on the comfort level that my wife had in leaving him at that school.

William (B, WC, M), a sanitation worker, similarly described how his wife took primary responsibility of school decision-making for his 6-year-old daughter. When asked how he came to a school decision for his daughter, he explained: "I'm not sure. My wife was the one who was on the websites. She wanted to make sure that when she was at work, she didn't have to worry. She was the one who was looking." William continued, "Mothers are very protective. So, she wanted to make sure that when she was at work, she didn't have to worry, and that's why it was difficult finding the right place. She wanted to be able to work and not be concerned about anything." William connected his wife's primary leadership over the school search to her role as a mother. Although he assisted in the school-search process, he believed all decision-making was his wife's responsibility. William noted how his wife's involvement extended beyond school decision-making, describing her regular involvement in school fundraising and her contact with other mothers, "All the mothers, they have each other's phone numbers so that they can text."

Both of the middle-class partnered fathers primarily relied on their wives to absorb the school-search burden. Jean Baptiste (B, MC, M), a social worker for a local nonprofit organization, described how his wife identified the school his children now attend:

When I came to the neighborhood, we were walking and looking at signs. My wife is the one who found out. She said, "Oh I found

one, it looks clean. Everything looks very nice from the outside.” And she said that it might be very good for our children.

Like the four partnered working-class fathers, Jean Baptiste relied on his wife to research and identify schools for enrollment. He played only a minimal role in school decision-making.

On occasion, middle-class fathers provided more assistance on final school enrollment decisions, but they rarely helped with investigating available schools. Noah (A, MC, M), a financial consultant, described his wife’s primary role in researching and applying to schools and how, at the end of the process, he encouraged his wife to consider a different nonzoned school for his now 7-year-old son:

In kindergarten, my son got into one of the citywide schools, but I guess I wasn’t paying attention to the application as much. And my wife applied for several of the citywide schools, and she also included one in Queens. And, they ended up selecting him for that one. And I said, “There’s no way we’re sending him to school in Queens.” It just didn’t make sense.

Noah’s description of his intervention is consistent with Patricia’s earlier account of her husband’s involvement at the end of the school search. Whereas mothers invest significant labor to search for schools and identify school options, research finds that fathers often wield more decision-making power (Daminger 2019). Noah could alter school decisions even though he spent little time investigating options. Noah also explained how his wife’s involvement in the school-search process extended after enrollment, “This year my wife is the class mother. In the past we didn’t get as involved, but I guess she felt compelled to get involved this year.” In this role, his wife regularly volunteers at the school, assisting the teacher and organizing events for other parents.

Single primary-caregiver fathers took primary responsibility over school matters, but similar to married fathers, they devoted minimal time and energy toward the school search. Relative to mothers, these fathers were less burdened by the school search and saw school decision-making as a straightforward enrollment procedure. Robert (B, WC, S), who works in custodial services,

explained how he reached out to a few neighbors for school information:

First, I found out about the school by word of mouth, people that I know locally, I see the parents coming home from school and I say, “Where does you son go? Where does your daughter go?” And that was that. Everything was accessible.

Robert described a relatively effortless decision-making process. Unlike working-class mothers who believed school decision-making required great sacrifice, Robert invested far less time and energy in the process. When I asked Robert if he sought advice or resources from anyone, he said, “I did my own research. I thought about where I needed to live as far as work and what’s going to be good for him.” Unlike the single working-class mothers who spent months researching school options, Robert described a short and straightforward school-search process for his 6-year-old son.

Middle-class single primary-caregiver fathers similarly took less extensive efforts to search for schools. Jermaine (B, MC, S), who works in tutoring services, explained his swift approach to learning about the zoned school for his daughter: “Well, my daughter came to live with me 2 years ago, so a lot of things had to change. So, I just asked a couple of my neighbors that lived on my floor about the school.” Like Robert, Jermaine’s school decision-making process required minimal effort. Relative to middle-class mothers who conducted extensive research and persistently contacted school administrators, middle-class primary-caregiver fathers invested considerably less time and energy in the school search.

To be sure, some fathers worried about how their children would fare in the schools they decided on for enrollment. However, unlike mothers, primary-caregiver fathers did not heavily monitor their children’s experiences in schools even as they held these concerns. José (L, WC, S), who recently immigrated to the United States, struggled to find school information and worried about his 5-year-old and 8-year-old daughters’ experiences at their zoned schools:

Well immediately upon arriving to the United States I thought about locating schools of the best quality. Nevertheless,

because I am here alone with my two daughters, I focused on the distance of the schools from home. . . . I would have liked another school, but I am not in any condition to change them.

Like many black and Latinx mothers, José was concerned for his children's experiences in schools. However, unlike the mothers, José lamented his inability to take action; although he felt responsible for their experience, he did not seek alternative school environments. Whereas intensive standards of mothering encourage mothers to take multiple steps to protect their children from harm and monitor their children's experiences in schools, fathers devote less time, attention, and energy to these concerns.

Overall, the experiences of fathers in the sample further support the mothers' descriptions of taking primary responsibility for school decision-making. Research finds that even when fathers are single and the child's primary caregiver, they often feel less responsible for domestic duties (Doucet 2011). Investment in school decision-making is still seen as primarily women's work, and aspects of masculinity often shape how men approach child-rearing expectations (Parcel et al. 2016; Randles 2021; Reay and Ball 1998; Townsend 2010).

I find that compared to mothers, both partnered and primary-caregiver fathers generally do not investigate and research schools as extensively and do not feel encouraged to self-sacrifice as they make school decisions. Unlike mothers, fathers do not connect their parenting identities to their ability to find and secure schools for their children. Consistent with mothers' accounts, partnered fathers rely heavily on their spouses for assistance, and primary-caregiver fathers invest minimal effort in the search for a school.

## INTENSIVE MOTHERING AND DIFFERENCES ACROSS CLASS AND RACE

Working-class and middle-class mothers engaged in extensive labor to evaluate their school options and determine which schools would meet their children's needs, but their options were influenced by structural constraints and opportunities. Only 18 of the 44 middle-class mothers lived in neighborhoods with poverty rates above 20 percent,

whereas nearly all of the working-class mothers lived in higher poverty areas.<sup>13</sup> Working-class mothers evaluated if schools would shelter their children from harm, whereas middle-class mothers searched for niche schools that would nurture their children's individuality. Across social class, black and Latinx mothers monitored school diversity before and after enrollment to protect their children from potentially marginalizing experiences.

### *I Didn't Want My Kids to Grow Up in That Environment*

Working-class mothers invested time and energy to evaluate school safety. Past research finds that low-income mothers engage in protective care work to keep their children safe (Elliott and Aseltine 2013; Elliott and Reid 2019) and cognitive labor to calculate needs given economic constraints (Randles 2021). Black mothers, in particular, calibrate their parenting strategies given concerns of neighborhood crime and violence. Working-class respondents, who often lived in neighborhoods with higher poverty rates, engaged in similar mothering strategies through the school search. Amiya (B, WC, S), who works as a part-time housekeeper, described her calculated decision to remove her daughter from a local zoned school:

The first year was okay, but after a year, there was a lot of police activity, like drugs and shooting in the area. I thought my daughter was going to a good school, but I kept getting notices. So, I called the police station and took my daughter out of the school.

Seeking a safer school environment, Amiya also repeatedly called the Department of Education in attempts to transfer her 7-year-old daughter to a nonzoned school.

Concerned about neighborhood crime and violence, working-class mothers engaged in time-consuming labor to seek options outside of the neighborhood. For Yamili (L, WC, S), an office assistant, evaluating available schools based on her home and work addresses created additional work. After gaining some advice from her boss, a mom of a middle schooler, Yamili applied for a child exemption that would allow her 6-year-old daughter to attend a school outside her

neighborhood. Yamili explained that seeking other schools required additional time-consuming labor, “I wouldn’t say it’s hidden but it’s something that you have to really search for. For a lot of the things within the school system it’s a matter of speaking out and finding an answer. So, there’s not really a way of knowing what’s going on.”

After applying for the child exemption, Yamili sent her daughter to an out-of-neighborhood school in Harlem, about 45 minutes by bus and two subway trains from her home:

My area was out of the question. It was not something that I wanted for her, because of an incident that happened at her school that was in my neighborhood. If she was by my house and there was an emergency, it would take me an hour to get to her. So, from there I tried to find schools near my job. I felt like I could be more involved and there would be more communication between me and the staff and the teachers.

A number of working-class mothers also worried about how environments within schools would shape their children’s academic performance. Helen (L, WC, S), a head cook at a local school, anticipated that schools close by would have a negative influence:

I didn’t want my kids to grow up with the same kids from the neighborhood. I didn’t want that because when you go to school with the same kids that live in your neighborhood, you get in trouble with them. You either become a bully and pick on other kids or you start cutting, and I didn’t want that. I didn’t want my kids to grow up in that environment. I wanted my kids to see out of the box.

Helen explained that searching for better schools outside her neighborhood for her 8-year-old felt like a constant fight. Fearing for how her children would experience the neighborhood schools, Helen repeatedly called schools that had wait-listed her children.

Working-class mothers believed that pursuing alternative environments reflected their total commitment to ensuring their children’s safety and well-being. Married working-class mothers often took on this burden singlehandedly, and single working-class mothers also evaluated their school

options on their own. Although married working-class mothers noted that their spouses were also concerned about safety, the mothers were still primarily responsible for identifying options.

Important structural constraints also shaped options available to working-class mothers. Of the 46 working-class mothers in the study, 38 were living in neighborhoods with poverty rates higher than the New York City average (see Table 1). These neighborhood conditions led working-class mothers to actively seek schools in safer environments and required them to take on the mental load of identifying safe school options. Working-class mothers had to balance the convenience of local schools with the hope for safer environments in different neighborhoods.

### *How My Kids Would Fit In*

Middle-class mothers invested energy in identifying school options that would nurture their children’s individuality and academic interests. Renata (A, MC, M), a mother of four children ranging in age from 5 to 12, described how she evaluated several nonzoned and charter schools for each child:

Definitely, the most important thing is that a good school reflects the same values that you do in terms of what kind of education you want for your child, and what kind of environment you want your child to be in. Each child is different, so I’ve learned. . . . I have four children at four different schools, because I realize that not one school is the best fit for each child.

Renata absorbed the mental load of identifying school options that would meet each of her children’s unique identities, but she faced resistance from her husband, who felt they should move to the suburbs:

I told him, “There’s a lot of great schools in Manhattan, you just have to do your research.” So, I did my research. I read books, read reviews online, and then actually went in and visited the schools. I can tell you that choosing a school for your child in New York City is stressful, because you just want to make sure that your child gets the best education possible. In terms of the process, it’s stressful, ranking the

schools, and just praying and hoping that they get into the one that you want.

Taking primary responsibility for managing the school process, the 44 middle-class mothers prioritized their children's individuality through the school search. Kimberly (W, MC, M), a digital project manager, sought niche charter and dual-language schools that would nurture her children's creativity and expose them to diversity:

I wanted a school that was diverse in the people who went there but also encouraged creativity and more curiosity because going to a Catholic school, I didn't like the rigidity of it. And you weren't taught to question. That's one thing that I really wanted for my kids because I didn't have that.

Kimberly, like a number of other middle-class mothers, used the school-choice process to seek distinct school environments that mirrored her own parenting philosophy.

Even when gaining specialized information about schools was challenging, middle-class mothers absorbed this responsibility on their own. Deidre (B, MC, S), a divorced real estate agent with a 6-year-old and an 11-year-old, noted that her ex-husband grew up in New York City but she was not from the area, and distinguishing between zoned and nonzoned schools when she first moved to the city was challenging. Her ex-husband did not attend the tours, and she navigated the school search alone: "It's scary in the beginning especially not coming from here. I'm not from here, so I don't even know neighborhoods. I don't know the reputations of any schools. It was a lot to have to figure out on my own. I always looked around and asked questions, but it wasn't easy." Deidre disliked the rigidity of charter schools and attended multiple school tours in search of a more open curriculum.

Similar to the 14 single and divorced middle-class mothers, the 27 married middle-class mothers also evaluated school factors on their own. Susan (A, MC, M), a financial analyst, explained how she carefully compared schools for her 7-year-old:

I researched all the schools that my child potentially could get into. And to figure it out, I made my little pro-con list. I thought about how my kids would fit into that

school. Does it give the things that I want in a school? I don't think there's a school out there that gives me everything that I want, but I have to pick and choose those important things that matter to me and my kid, and how my kid learns. I was crazy about that. I really panicked.

Susan conducted extensive research to evaluate available school options and ultimately decided on a dual-language school, but her husband was far less involved in the process. She explained, "I went through and I researched everything in our district. I had a list of all the schools and scheduled every tour you could possibly imagine. And my husband looked at me and was like, 'You're insane. You're totally insane.'"

Middle-class mothers identified school options that would appeal to their children's individuality and academic interests. To be sure, middle-class mothers' pursuit of niche schools and working-class mothers' pursuit of safe schools reflect broader structural differences in school availability across neighborhoods. Still, despite important social class differences in the types of school features working- and middle-class mothers sought, both groups of mothers engaged in extensive labor to identify schools that would meet their children's needs.

### *You Don't Really Feel the Diversity*

Intensive mothering expectations also shaped how the 62 black and Latinx mothers across social class evaluated their children's experiences in schools. Black and Latinx mothers invested time and energy in monitoring how schools supported their children's racial and ethnic identities. White working- and middle-class mothers also evaluated their children's school experiences. For instance, after retesting for New York City's G&T program, four white middle-class mothers in the sample transferred their children in hopes of an academic environment that offered more rigor.

Black and Latinx mothers' evaluations, however, centered on concerns about a school's racial dynamics and their children's experiences of inclusion. Ariana (L, WC, S) explained how she attended multiple school tours in her district to evaluate their diversity for her 4-year-old daughter:

Some of the schools are not as diverse as the other ones, and I wanted her to

experience every culture not just one. . . . I toured [name removed] and it was nice, but it's more one-sided, more of just one kind. I wanted her to see more diversity and more culture.

Black and Latinx mothers were compelled to invest time and energy in evaluating schools' racial composition out of concern for their children's well-being. Taking the racial environment of two school settings into account, Fumi (B, MC, S), a divorced mother of a 7-year-old and an administrator for a law school, described how she monitored and reevaluated her decisions before and after her son was enrolled in a G&T school:

A lot of Caucasian schools have better infrastructure and better-quality schools. A lot of black kids don't have that except to go to charter schools. And I did consider it. It was either a charter school or the Gifted and Talented exam. And we went with the Gifted and Talented program instead. But I don't think that's fair. With the amount of black and Hispanic kids that I see in the city, how can it be that in class with 20 kids, my son is the only black one and there are no other black and Hispanic kids? That just doesn't seem right to me.

Even after enrolling their children, black and Latinx mothers absorbed an additional school-search burden that required them to reevaluate the racial climate at schools. In some instances, mothers like Deja (B, WC, S), a part-time childcare provider who enrolled her daughter in a nonzoned school, confronted racism after matriculation:

I've had struggles because the ignorance runs so deep. It's unfortunate that parents don't teach their children about racism. . . .

I was concerned that if the school is doing this, how is this going to affect my child in the long run? I wasn't going to allow my child to be subjected to that. I saw that it was getting out of line and nobody wanted to address it, so I had to take her out of the school.

Deja's school search extended an additional academic year as she sought a charter school that she hoped would protect her 6-year-old

daughter from discriminatory experiences. Even when black and Latinx mothers intensively researched schools for diverse environments, many found the schools they chose lacked the racial and ethnic makeup they desired for their children. Lisa (B, MC, M), a chief information officer and mother of a 6-year-old and 9-year-old, described her dissatisfaction with a dual-language school that was more racially divided than she anticipated:

The school is diverse because there is a French program and a Spanish program. But when you look at the class, it doesn't look diverse. So in reality when you're a black person walking in there, you don't really feel that diversity. . . . And it becomes really hard to figure out that point in time when you have to tell your kid that they are a minority and they could be treated differently.

Lisa experienced ongoing uncertainty about her enrollment decision upon confronting unexpectedly stratified racial and ethnic classes at her children's schools. Black and Latinx mothers feared for how segregated school environments would shape their children's experiences. These mothers' efforts to protect their children were embedded in their knowledge of race-based discrimination in schools (Posey-Maddox et al. 2021).

The six black and 11 Latinx mothers who were married uniformly reported that their husbands played a scant role; in some cases, their husbands actively criticized them for being "insane" or going overboard. Lisa, who dealt with unexpected racial segregation in her child's school, and Tamar, an Asian middle-class mother in a multiracial family, mentioned that their partners were also concerned about racial marginalization, but for most black and Latinx mothers, this joint concern did not translate into a shared responsibility for the school search. Despite important racial differences in how mothers monitored and evaluated school outcomes, similar to white working- and middle-class mothers, black and Latinx working- and middle-class mothers were primarily responsible for the school-search process. Adhering to the tenants of intensive mothering, mothers absorbed the labor of searching for schools, identifying school options, and monitoring their children's experiences in school.

## DISCUSSION

To understand how families manage new school-choice policies, it is important to consider not only the differences *between* families but also the differences *within* families. Too often, scholars of school choice do not consider the dynamics of school choice within households. My findings suggest parents' management of school-choice systems is more unequal than previous research suggests.

Across class and racial and ethnic background, whether partnered or unpartnered, mothers absorb far more of the school-choice burden than do fathers. Partnered fathers rely heavily on their spouses to make school decisions, and primary-caregiver fathers invest less effort in the school decision-making process. Working-class mothers absorb the school-search burden by emphasizing sacrifice and prioritizing school safety. Intensive mothering ideologies similarly encourage middle-class mothers to extensively research school resources and seek niche schools. Black and Latinx mothers across social class background continue to monitor their children's school experiences to protect them from racial discrimination.

Although mothers outnumber fathers in the current sample, the fact that multiple mothers and fathers from separate households provided similar accounts of gender imbalance in the school-search process suggests mothers expend far more time and energy on school choice than do fathers. Fathers' absence in a majority of the working-class households suggests fathers play a minimal role in the school decision-making process. Multiple studies over the past decade similarly note fathers' limited participation in child-rearing and fathers' inability to accurately account for their relative amount of time engaging in household work and child-rearing (Lareau 2000b; Milkie, Raley, and Bianchi 2009). It is possible, however, that interviewing both members of a partnered household might elicit unidentified information about the division of school decision-making within families. Future research should further probe issues of gender expectations and the school-choice process, especially when both parents are part of the child's life.

Still, as motherhood has become more child focused, as work demands have increased, and as school enrollment has become more complex, mothers absorb more within-household school decision-making labor, with significant costs to their workforce labor (Correll, Benard, and Paik

2007; Greenstein 2000). Because gendered expectations of caregiving fall on mothers, school-choice policies in New York City and other large urban districts mean mothers are expected to invest considerable effort in touring, researching, and rank-ordering school options.

Educational policies that allow middle-class families to strategically select nonassigned schools can increase school segregation by socioeconomic background and create structural constraints for black and Latinx parents. Families who live in higher poverty neighborhoods also face environments with limited school options, making it more difficult to search for schools. Future school-choice plans would benefit more families under a more equitable framework. Complex school enrollment procedures create more labor for low-income families relative to high-income families and for mothers relative to fathers. Simplifying the enrollment process, reducing the number of schools that can be selected and ranked, and streamlining school transitions from prekindergarten through elementary school may lessen burdens for mothers and for low-income families. Relatedly, controlled school-choice plans that balance enrollment across socioeconomic background may make the process more equitable for families and may reduce the burden families of color face as they search for diverse school options. School-choice policies give families more school options, but they require families to engage in increased labor. These policies also powerfully reinforce gender divisions in the household and social inequality more broadly. Improving our understanding of how policies may unintentionally create greater responsibilities for mothers, especially low-income mothers and mothers of color, is a critical topic for future research.

## RESEARCH ETHICS

This research protocol was reviewed and approved by a university institutional review board. The research was carried out in a way that is consistent with the American Sociological Association Code of Ethics. All human subjects gave their informed consent prior to their participation in the research. Adequate steps were taken to protect participants' confidentiality.

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## SUPPLEMENTAL MATERIAL

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

## NOTES

1. To enroll in a gifted and talented (G&T) program, students must perform within a certain percentile on an exam. Parents can elect testing for their children between prekindergarten and second grade. G&T programs operate as separate schools or as individual classes within zoned schools.
2. New York City elementary schools are organized into 32 community school districts. Each district has an elementary directory and a map search tool that can help parents determine their children's chances of being accepted at the school based on past enrollment data.
3. If parents do not complete the online application, they can apply to schools by phone or at a Family Center.
4. Parents can apply to individual charter schools or use the Common Online Charter School application.
5. Data collection also revealed that 32 of the 46 working-class mothers and 14 of the 44 middle-class mothers were caring for their children as single parents, which also limited my ability to conduct two-parent interviews per household.
6. I primarily interviewed mothers and fathers, but I also interviewed guardians who took leadership over school decision-making, including two grandmothers, one grandfather, and two foster mothers.
7. Median household income retrieved from "U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts: New York City, New York." Retrieved September 3, 2020 (<https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/newyorkcitynewyork?>).

8. In acknowledgment of the gender imbalance in the study and recognizing that partnered parents might not mention their partner directly, I asked parents to describe their partnership status and household structure. I intentionally probed mothers about the specific people who provided advice during their search for schools and collected this information in a survey at the end of the interview. Notably, without any probing, partnered fathers readily indicated their wife's primary role in the school-search process.
9. I found that working-class and middle-class single, single with a live-in-partner, and separated and divorced mothers did not mention receiving help from a partner during the school search. Working-class and middle-class married mothers mentioned their spouses, and a few described delegating school-search tasks for their partners to complete.
10. I use pseudonyms for all parent and school names.
11. A, B, L, and W, refer to Asian, black, Latinx, and white parents, respectively. WC = working-class parents; MC = middle-class parents; S = single, divorced, and separated parents; and M = married parents.
12. For more information about fathers' background characteristics, see Table 1.
13. For more information about neighborhood poverty levels for the sample participants, see Table 1.

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