

# Clarifying the Complexity of MNPS Student Departure

## Who Leaves, When, & Why?

Eric G. Johnson  
Tara E. Nattrass  
Jack W. Phillips



Vanderbilt University

May 2013



# Table of Contents

Tables and Figures .....	3
Executive Summary .....	5
Introduction .....	9
Background and Context .....	10
Project Design and Methodology .....	16
Data Analysis and Findings .....	20
❖ Who Is Leaving MNPS? .....	20
❖ Why Are They Leaving? .....	26
❖ Where Are They Going? .....	35
❖ How Does Attrition Impact Achievement and Diversity? .....	38
Discussion and Interpretation .....	43
Recommendations and Conclusion .....	52
References .....	55
Appendices .....	58
❖ Appendix A: Interview Participants and Protocols .....	58
❖ Appendix B: Elementary School Attrition, 2011-12 .....	63
❖ Appendix C: Marketshare of MNPS and Comparable Districts .....	67



# Tables & Figures

## Tables

1. Attrition Statistics for School Levels .....	24
2. Correlation for Elementary School Attrition, 2011-12.....	24
3. OLS Regression for Percent Attrition of Elementary Schools, 2011-12.....	26
4. Change in Number of White Children by County .....	36
5. Original Members of the Cohort of 2020, 2007-08 to 2012-13.....	38
6. Hypothetical Impact on MNPS of 0% Attrition after 2010-11 .....	41

## Figures

1. MNPS Total Enrollment, 2007-08 to 2011-12.....	10
2. MNPS Grade Enrollment, 2007-08 & 2011-12 .....	10
3. County Total Population Growth, 1990 to 2010 .....	11
4. Population Growth, ages 0-17, 2000 to 2010 .....	11
5. Davidson County Demographics, 2010.....	11
6. Davidson County, Percent Black.....	11
7. Davidson County, Percent Hispanic.....	11
8. Percent MNPS Enrollment by Race, 2007-08 to 2011-12.....	12
9. Davidson County Median Household Income.....	12
10. Percent Receiving FRL, 2001-02 to 2011-12 .....	13
11. MNPS White Enrollment, 1971 and 1979.....	13
12. MNPS Attrition, by Student and by Percent, 2007-08 to 2012-13 .....	20
13. Average Percent Within-Year Attrition by Grade, 2007-08 to 2011-12 .....	21
14. Average Percent Year-to-Year Attrition, by Grade, 2007-08 to 2011-12 .....	22
15. Comparison of District & Leavers, Year-to-Year, 2007-08 to 2011-12 .....	23
16. Percent Attrition of School Enrollment by Elementary School, 2011-12.....	25
17. Change in Number of All Children, 0 to 14.....	36
18. Change in Number of White Children, 0 to 14 .....	36
19. Change in Number of Black Children, 0 to 14 .....	36

20. MNPS Exit Codes, K-12, 2008-13 .....37

21. Original Members of the K Cohort of 2020 by Race, 2007-08 to 2012-13 .....38

22. Original Members of the K Cohort of 2020 by FRL Status, 2007-08 to 2012-13 .....39

23. Composition of Class of 2020 by Race and FRL, 2007-08 to 2012-13 .....40

24. Hypothetical Percentage of White Students in the Class of 2020, 2008-13 .....40

25. Hypothetical Percentage of Non-FRL Students in the Class of 2020, 2008-13 .....40

26. Hypothetical Impact of 0% Attrition on the Class of 2020 and 2019 by 2013 .....42

27. Davidson County, by Attrition, Percent White, and Median Household Income.....51



# Executive Summary

Metropolitan Nashville Public Schools (MNPS) seeks to support families in choosing a school that is the best fit for their children. In fact, as part of their vision and mission, MNPS states, “Metropolitan Nashville Public Schools will be the first choice for families.” Why then, once a child is enrolled in and attending a school in MNPS, does the family decide to leave? When do they make that decision and where do they go? Who are the families that are leaving the district?

Local media has no shortage of explanation. According to an article in *The Tennessean*, “Saving Nashville Schools,” (Jaime Sarrio, May 11, 2008), “Metro’s dismal reputation” causes families and businesses to move to Williamson and Rutherford Counties. If they do not move across county lines, then they opt for private schools within Davidson County “to escape the public school system.” In a story that aired on NPR, “The Choice: A School Fight Over Middle Class Families,” (Blake Farmer, November 30, 2012), the principal of a Nashville middle school explained that at the beginning of seventh grade, his school begins losing students to private schools because parents are unsure of the quality of their zoned high school.



With the focus in the community on school choice and on keeping families in the school system, we need to

better understand those factors that keep some families within MNPS and those factors that may cause others to leave. Is it the reputation of the school district? Is it the quality of the schools? Or is it something else? This study begins to answer some of these questions.

## *Summary of Findings*

### **Who Is Leaving MNPS?**

An analysis of MNPS data from the 2007-08 school year through the 2011-12 school year reveals that elementary schools lost the greatest number of students, averaging over 3,000 students per year. However, this is the lowest percentage of enrollment when compared to middle and high schools, roughly 8% over the last five years. There was a steady rate of attrition in kindergarten through eighth grades with peaks at kindergarten, fourth, and eighth grades.

The characteristics of elementary students who left the district did not reflect the composition of the district as a whole. On average:

- ❖ A higher percentage of leavers were males.
- ❖ Leavers were disproportionately White.
- ❖ A smaller proportion of leavers received free or reduced lunch.
- ❖ A larger proportion of leavers received special education services.
- ❖ A smaller proportion of leavers were designated as having limited English proficiency.
- ❖ A greater proportion of leavers were proficient or advanced in math and reading on TCAP.

Along with the district-level analysis, a school-level analysis of the elementary schools in MNPS also revealed some key patterns and trends. The school-level factors most associated with attrition reflected the characteristics of the leavers themselves. Those school-level factors that were correlated with attrition included the distance of the school from the center of Davidson County, the percentage of male students and White students (positively correlated), the percentage of Black students and those students who received free and reduced lunch (negatively correlated), and the Tennessee Department of Education scores for reading and math (positively correlated).

### Why Are They Leaving?

To better understand some of the reasons why MNPS families decided to leave the district, we interviewed current elementary principals and parents from both high-attrition and low-attrition elementary schools. The following are the key themes that emerged from these interviews.

*The Resources to Choose; the Resources to Manage*  
Parents rely on their peers, neighbors, and social networks to navigate the educational decisions facing their children. When asked how they learned about their current elementary school, parents nearly always mentioned “word of mouth,” or as one parent put it, “the mom network.” These social networks prove important when considering the transition to middle school. In several focus groups, parents reflected on the potential for having a good middle school experience at their neighborhood school, “If the entire school would move over there, we’d all be happy.” Once parents have determined the school of choice, they then have the necessary financial means, their own educational backgrounds, and other resources

like transportation to navigate the sometimes complex process of school research, choice, and enrollment.

### *Safety and the Middle School Transition*

Many of the safety concerns voiced by parents relate to the transition from elementary to middle school, overall safety of the community, or the safety of the neighborhood. One concern was the apprehension parents face when sending their fifth-grader to school with eighth-graders. Many of these fears are based on stories that parents have heard, though very few of the concerns are from parents’ own experiences.



### *Academic Quality*

To determine the level of quality of the schools, parents rely on their social networks and the general reputation of the schools, as well as their perceptions of teacher quality, the amount of testing, and the variety of school programs. When planning for middle and high school, test scores and schools rankings seem to play a greater role. Therefore, some consideration of the level of quality has to do with whether the school is an elementary, middle, or high school. Parents

also are looking for schools that do not have a “one size fits all” curriculum and that have high levels of personalization.

#### *Uncertainty: Lottery for Quality*

While many parents are skeptical of MNPS middle schools, the academic magnet schools are held in very high regard, considered by many to be “private” schools for public school parents. The allure of these academic magnets often keeps families in MNPS until the middle school lottery results, at which time, if families do not get into one of their preferred magnets, they may choose to leave the system.

#### *Diversity: Appeal versus Fear*

One of the benefits that many MNPS parents cite regarding neighborhood schools is diversity. However, there is also a sense that families feel torn between wanting diversity and being able to “manage” it successfully. Finally, while there is a sense that some families value diversity and others are grappling with what diversity means for their child, other MNPS parents are unafraid to express their concerns about too much diversity.

#### *Housing: Prices, Property Taxes, and Proximity*

Housing plays a role in which school parents choose initially and whether they remain in the school once there. Families are moving to surrounding counties where they feel they can get more property and more space for the money. Proximity from home to school also matters.

### **Where Are They Going?**

An analysis of 2010 census data shows a possible trend of White families moving from Davidson to surrounding counties as their children become school age, through the age of about 14.

### **How Does Attrition Impact Achievement and Diversity?**

Because the composition of the body of leavers is not representative of the district as a whole, one might assume that attrition reduces the racial and socioeconomic diversity of the district. However, if the district were to retain all leavers, it appears that the change in the composition of the district would be minimal. For example, if the district had retained every student who left MNPS after the 2012 school year, the percentage of the district receiving FRL would have been reduced by 0.1%. Looking at the effect over time on the class of 2020, if the district had retained every student who left from 2007-08 to 2012-13, the percentage of the class of 2020 receiving FRL would have been reduced by just over 1%.

#### *Recommendations*

MNPS is continuing to work toward its goal of being the “first choice for families.” To that end, the following recommendations may support MNPS in meeting that goal.

### **More Data and Information**

- ❖ Develop and consistently administer exit surveys that reveal which students are leaving, where they are going, and why they are leaving.
- ❖ Analyze the exit survey results annually at the school and district level to better understand why, when, and where families leave.
- ❖ Conduct focus groups with current MNPS middle and high school parents to determine the reasons why they have chosen to remain in MNPS.

### **Increase Quality**

- ❖ Continue efforts to increase the number of high quality academic programs in middle

schools. Use parent advocates, school leaders, marketing materials, and recruiting strategies to promote such efforts.

- ❖ Develop a K-12 pipeline for schools that provides families and students with the sense of belonging and accomplishment that occurs from attending a system of schools for kindergarten through twelfth grade.
- ❖ Use parent advocates, school leaders, marketing materials, and recruiting strategies to address negative perceptions of middle schools, particularly around safety.

### Address School Choice

- ❖ Increase the stability of district policies and school leadership.
- ❖ Increase the simplicity of school choice.
- ❖ Encourage local schools to better market themselves to potential families looking to make the best choice for their children.

### Housing Policy is School Policy

- ❖ Work with the local housing authority, chamber of commerce, and government officials when determining the location of new schools or redrawn attendance zones.





# Introduction

At the end of the 2007-08 school year, 6,603 students had completed kindergarten in Metropolitan Nashville Public Schools (MNPS). By the spring of 2013, when these students were in fifth grade, only 68%, or 4,520 students, of this original cohort remained. Who left? Why did they leave? How does their departure impact achievement and diversity? This study explores these and other questions related to the impact of student attrition within Metropolitan Nashville Public Schools.

The question of why families decide to remain in a school, or alternatively, move to another school outside of the system, raises other important questions and has direct implications for MNPS.

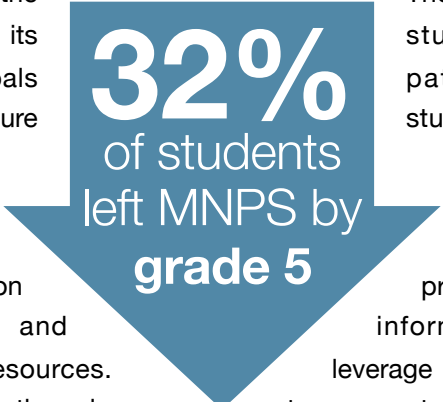
The resources deployed and the ability of the district to meet its achievement and diversity goals may be impacted by the departure of students from the system. Additionally, the ability of schools to keep students within their system has an impact on economics, social structures and systems, demography, and resources. Therefore, this project is nested in these larger social and policy contexts.

When considering the impact of student attrition within MNPS, we focused on several key questions regarding students who have enrolled in and attended MNPS for at least a portion of their school careers:

- ❖ Who is leaving MNPS?
- ❖ When are they leaving?
- ❖ Why are they leaving?
- ❖ Where are they going?
- ❖ How does this departure impact achievement and diversity within MNPS?

Furthermore, we seek to better understand the implications of student attrition in a larger context by exploring the following question:

- ❖ How does the attrition of students impact the greater Nashville community? In other words, what are the implications of this departure beyond the school district?



**32%**  
of students  
left MNPS by  
**grade 5**

The information explored in this study provide MNPS with the patterns and trends of those students who leave the system, when they leave, why they leave, and where they go once they have departed. The findings provide school systems with the information needed to determine leverage points and implement strategies to support schools in retaining students throughout their school career.

2

# Background & Context

In seeking to understand the reasons why families chose to leave MNPS and where they go upon their departure, it is helpful first to explore the greater contexts of MNPS and Davidson County. We examine three interrelated components important to understanding the current state of MNPS and Davidson County: the demographic portrait of MNPS and Davidson County, including the racial and socio-economic composition of neighborhoods; the history of MNPS, including court-ordered desegregation policies and cross-town busing; and the role of school choice policies.

### *A Demographic Portrait: MNPS and Davidson County*

Metropolitan Nashville Public Schools has seen steady growth in student population over the last five years. According to the Tennessee Department of Education Report Card, in 2007-2008, the district enrolled 70,140 students (Figure 1). That number grew to 74,680 in 2011-2012, a gain of nearly 7%.<sup>1</sup>

According to data provided by MNPS (Figure 2), the largest growth occurred in the lowest grades with pre-kindergarten and kindergarten experiencing 33% and 15% growth respectively over the last five years.<sup>2</sup>

Figure 1: MNPS Total Enrollment, 2007-08 to 2011-12

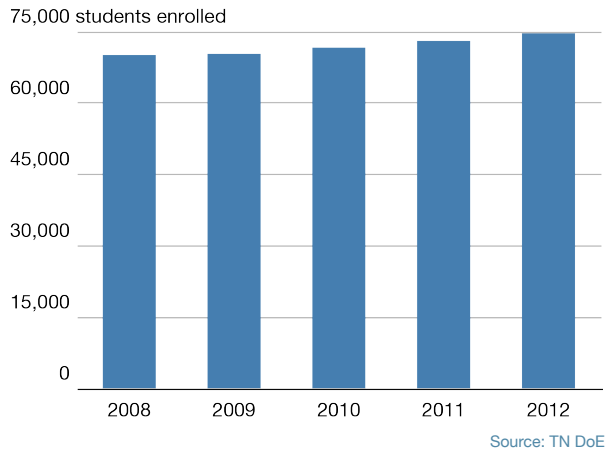
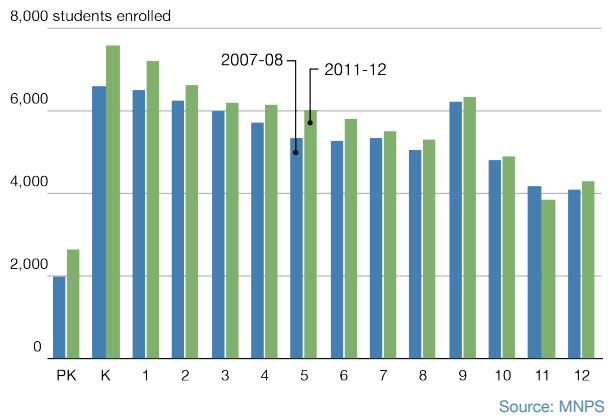


Figure 2: MNPS Grade Enrollment, 2007-08 & 2011-12



Similarly, both Davidson and surrounding counties have experienced population growth. Figures 3 and 4 show the overall growth within Davidson County as compared to the surrounding counties. Note that the counties surrounding Davidson have seen considerably more growth over the last ten years.

<sup>1</sup> Our analysis primarily includes data from the 2007-08 to the 2011-12 school years. These are the school years for which we had complete data from MNPS. Where appropriate we include data from the current, partial 2012-13 school year and earlier data from other sources, e.g., U.S. Census.

<sup>2</sup> These numbers were calculated using the year-to-year method described in the Project Design and Methodology section below.

Figure 3: County Total Population Growth, 1990 to 2010

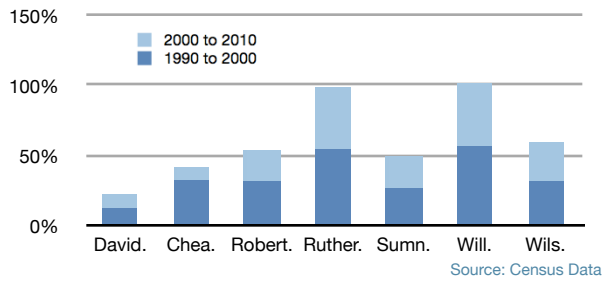
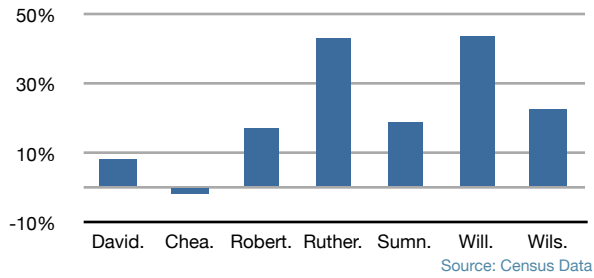


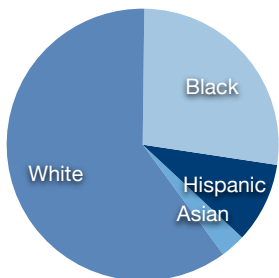
Figure 4: Population Growth, ages 0-17, 2000 to 2010



### Race in Davidson County and MNPS

In addition to increased enrollment, the demographic profile of students enrolling in MNPS has changed over the last several years. These trends may be partly explained by changes in immigration patterns. Immigration mobility patterns have been shifting throughout the United States, including within Davidson County. Many immigrants are moving to locations that formerly were almost exclusively native-born (Baird, 2008). Whites are the majority, but their relative numbers have been shrinking. Roughly 10% of residents identify as Hispanic (Figure 5). This shift may be

Figure 5: Davidson Co. Demographics, 2010



due to Nashville's relatively low cost of living (Baird) as well as economic opportunities (Harper, 2013). Nashville is one of the top 25 U.S. metropolitan areas with the highest percentage change of foreign-born population between

1990 and 2000, with a net change of 219%.

When reviewing the changing demographics of the greater Nashville area, we also considered the distribution and concentration of ethnic and racial groups within neighborhoods. This distribution is evident in Figures 7 and 8.

Figure 6: Davidson County, Percent Black

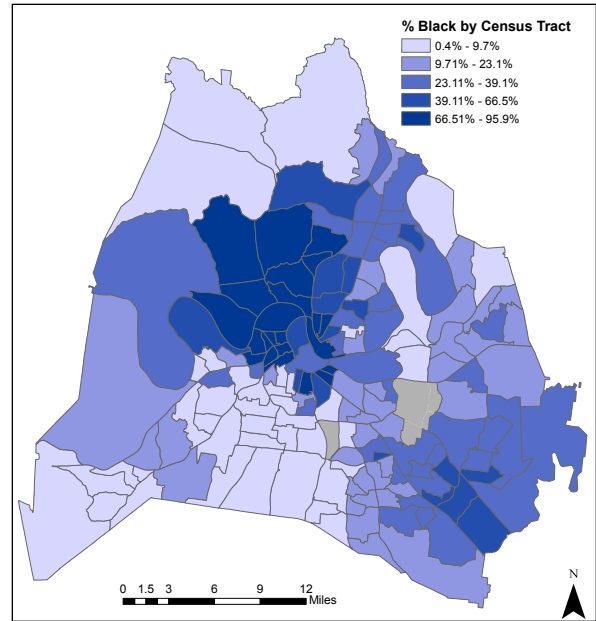
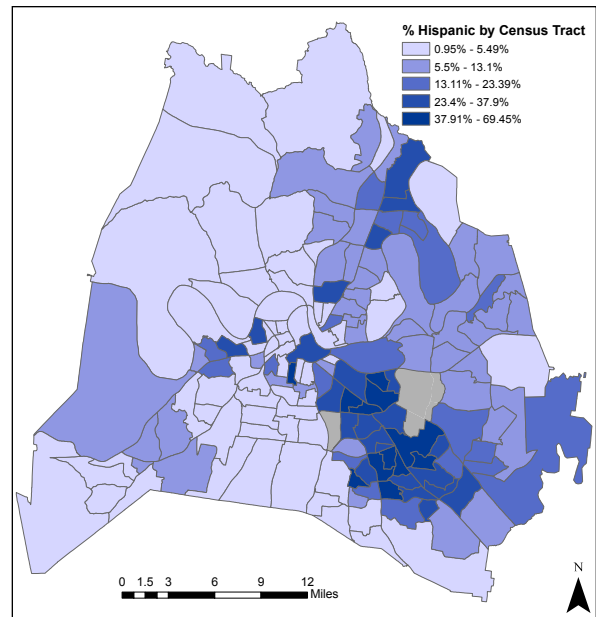
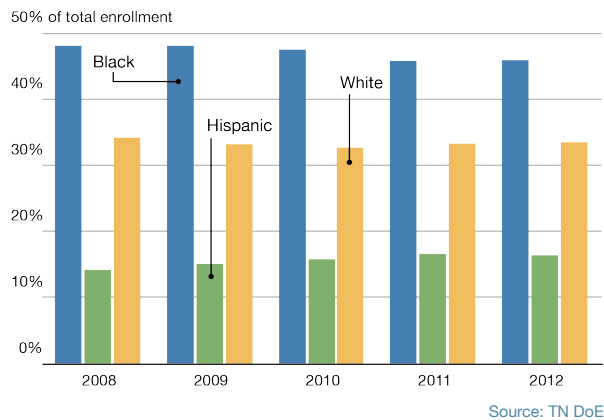


Figure 7: Davidson County, Percent Hispanic



Similar to Davidson County, MNPS is a racially and ethnically diverse district. But, the racial composition of the district varies from the racial composition of the county. The relative proportion of races does not reflect Davidson County’s racial distribution as a whole; the percentage of Hispanic and Black students is higher within the school district than within Davidson County. Additionally, the racial makeup of the district has seen a pronounced change over the last five years with the greatest change occurring in the Hispanic population. In 2001-2002, Hispanic students made up approximately 6% of the district population. By 2011-2012, that number was more than 16%. This resulted from a 308% increase of Hispanic students over that period. The percentages of students of other races have also grown, but they make up only 4% of total enrollment. Conversely, there has been a decrease in the number of Black and White students in the district over that same time period (Figure 8).

**Figure 8: Percent MNPS Enrollment by Race, 2007-08 to 2011-12**

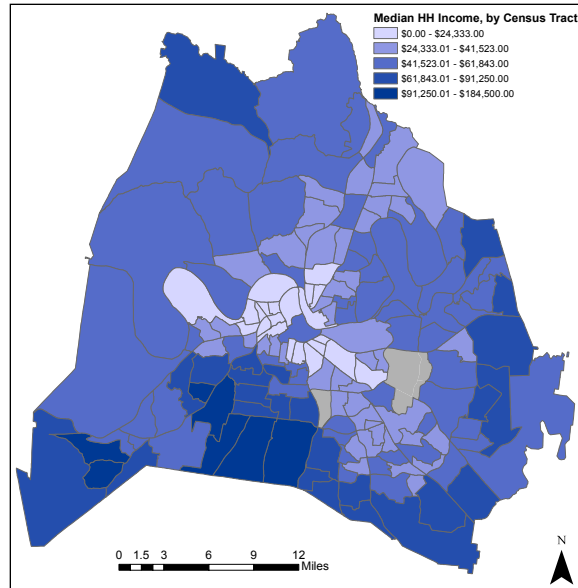


**Poverty in Davidson County and MNPS**

In addition to distribution patterns by ethnicity, Davidson County also includes identifiable neighborhood patterns by wealth, with the wealthier sections of the county located in areas closest to surrounding counties, particularly in the southern section of the county (Figure 9).

Furthermore, poverty rates in Davidson County have increased over the last ten years, from 13% of all people living at or below the poverty line in 2000 to 20% in 2010. Increases were also evident for all age groups (under age 18, age 18 and over, 65 and over) and all families (Community Needs Evaluation, 2011).

**Figure 9: Davidson County Median Household Income**

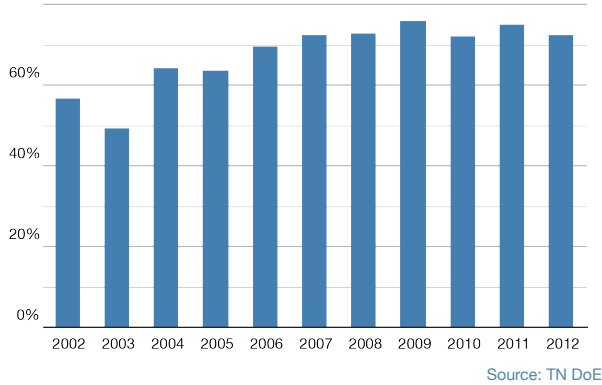


Source: Census Data

MNPS, on the other hand, has seen steady rates of low-income families over the last five years (but a large increase over the last ten). The district has held fairly constant in the percentage of students eligible to receive free or reduced lunch (FRL), a proxy for poverty. In 2007-2008, almost 73% of MNPS students were eligible to receive free or reduced lunch. In 2011-2012, that number was approximately 72% (Figure 10).

It is important to note that while poverty levels used by the United States Census Bureau and the system used to determine eligibility for free or reduced lunch are not the same, there is a discrepancy in the level of poverty in the overall population of Davidson County and the level of poverty in MNPS. According to the 2010 Census,

**Figure 10: Percent Receiving FRL, 2001-02 to 2011-12**  
80% of MNPS receiving FRL



28% of people under age 18 were living at or below the poverty line in Davidson County. However, 72% of students in MNPS were eligible for free or reduced lunch. This may be an indication that a greater number of low-income families send their children to MNPS schools than do higher-income families.

### A Brief History of MNPS

In 1821, the first public school opened in the city of Nashville. Davidson County began operating its own system in 1907 as a district separate from that of the city of Nashville. In 1964, Nashville and Davidson County Schools began operations as a consolidated school district known as Metropolitan Nashville Public Schools. Several years later, MNPS sought to racially integrate the schools within the system.

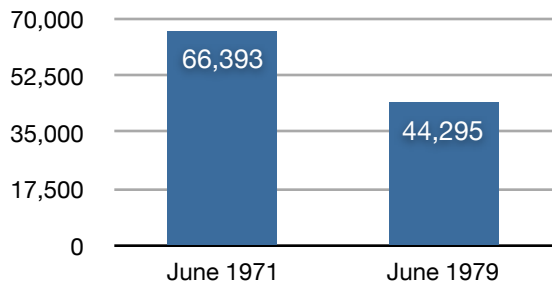
### The Role of Busing

Beginning in 1971, the efforts of MNPS to desegregate schools by mandatory busing contributed to current divisions facing Davidson County. With the goal for enrollment of Black students at most schools to fall between 15% and 35%, Black, urban students were bused into White, suburban schools for first through fourth grades. The opposite occurred for students in fifth and sixth grades. The

integration plan also included building new high schools in the middle of the urban and suburban ring with attendance zones drawing from both (Pride & Woodward, 1985).

Many Davidson County residents actively avoided these integration requirements by either moving to a neighboring county or enrolling in a private school. This active opposition by White families was felt almost immediately with 18% of White students leaving MNPS in 1971. This was particularly true for fifth and sixth graders, who otherwise would have been bused into urban middle schools; 26% of these students never showed up for the first day of school in 1971. These trends continued through the decade, and by the end of the 1970s, MNPS had lost 33% of its White students (Figure 11) (Pride & Woodward, 1985).

**Figure 11: MNPS White Enrollment, 1971 and 1979**



Continuing and expanding throughout the 1980s, busing began to fall out of favor in the early 1990s. By 1996, Mayor Phil Bredesen's Advisory Committee on Excellence and Equity unanimously recommended a plan that focused on school choice and reduced cross-town busing while maintaining racial balance as a central goal. With this plan in place, MNPS was granted unitary status by the courts in 1998, effectively ending the court-ordered busing plan put in place in 1971 (Goldring & Smrekar, 2002).

Even with the legal end of busing in 1998, its

long-term effects are still being felt by MNPS, particularly through the increased competition from private schools, the poor perception of MNPS in general, and the prevailing wisdom that neighboring counties have better school systems. As a result, private school enrollment in Davidson County is over twice the national average at about 23% (Tennessee Advisory Committee, 2008), and recent population growth in the surrounding counties has far outpaced Davidson (Figure 4, page 11).

### *School Choice*

Distribution by race and poverty level are evident in both neighborhood clusters as well as within schools. There are multiple schools in MNPS in which over 90% of the student population is Black and many others in which less than 10% of the student population is Black. Yet, in Davidson County, only 25% of the overall population is Black. These differences also hold true when looking at concentrations of poverty within schools and neighborhoods. As described previously, only 28% of Davidson County residents under age 18 are living at or below the poverty line, but over 70% of students attending MNPS are eligible for free or reduced lunch. Furthermore, in 57% of the schools in MNPS, over 75% of the students qualify for free or reduced lunch (Tennessee Department of Education, 2012).

This matters because the composition of the schools impacts students' academic success. Students in high-poverty schools have a higher risk of academic failure (Duncan & Murnane, 2011). Those in low-poverty schools have a greater chance of engaging with peers who are academically successful and being taught by highly qualified teachers (Kahlenberg, 2012). Therefore, it is worth considering the ways in which school choice may provide for, or inhibit,

the creation of socioeconomically diverse schools.

Some of the levels of concentration may be explained by housing patterns and students' attendance at neighborhood schools. However, the number of schools parents are able to choose, particularly at the elementary level, may also play a role. School choices available to families include traditional neighborhood schools, magnet schools, enhanced option schools, design centers, and charter schools. Race and income levels may also predict if families even consider schools outside of their neighborhood schools for their children. Additionally, it is possible that these demographic factors play a role in whether families decide to remain in a school once their children are attending. We refer to the school choice literature to explore some of these factors while keeping in mind that they may not be the same factors families use to determine whether to remain in their current schools.

### **Factors Influencing School Choice**

The school choice literature addresses several key elements considered by parents when selecting a school for their child, including factors such as proximity, levels of diversity, academic quality, social capital, cultural capital, and safety. Smrekar (2009a) refers to both "push" (reasons for exit) and "pull" (reasons for entry, such as teacher quality, safety, and school location) factors that influence parents' school choice decisions. Parents who are not satisfied with their school may be more likely to seek out a different school for their children.

Findings indicate that White parents in particular consider the proximity between home and school when making school choice decisions (Smrekar, 2009a). Additionally, multiple studies indicate that parents consider a school's demographic profile

and choose schools where their children will have similar peers. White families look for schools with predominately White children, and minority families look for schools with cultural familiarity (Schneider & Buckley, 2002; Henig, 1996). This is clearly evident in that home buyers are willing to pay \$7,468 more for a home if the school has a lower minority student composition (Dougherty, et al., 2009). These findings are particularly important to note when considering the level of racial concentration in Davidson County neighborhoods. If proximity between home and school matters, if parents choose schools in which the demographic makeup of the school reflects their family, and if many parents choose where they live based on the schools (Maddaus, 1990), then the cycle of racially concentrated neighborhoods may continue.

Along with proximity and levels of diversity, academic quality, as measured by test scores, is also important to families making school choice decisions (Schneider and Buckley, 2002). Regardless of race, income, or educational background, parents consider academic attributes (Smrekar, 2009a). Dougherty, et al. (2009) found that home buyers were willing to pay \$1,054 more for a home in a neighborhood with a school that had test scores one standard deviation higher than the mean.

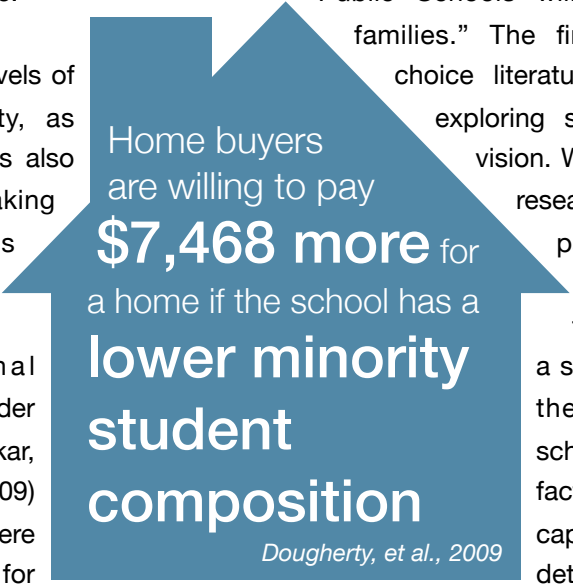
Finally, parents who engage in school choice are disproportionately White and wealthy when compared to non-choice parents. These high-income families tend to rely on social networks for information, whereas low-income families

tend to rely on school-based resources (Smrekar, 2009a). The reliance of low-income families on school-based resources may be due to lower levels of cultural and social capital, each of which play a major role in determining student success in schools (Bourdieu, 1977; Lareau, 1987; Coleman, 1988). Social capital plays a role in how families choose schools and cultural capital influences why they choose particular schools.

These forces that contribute to how and whether families engage in school choice may also play a role in families' decisions to remain in or leave a particular school. MNPS seeks to support families in choosing a school that is the best fit for each child. In fact, as part of their vision and mission, MNPS states, "Metropolitan Nashville Public Schools will be the first choice for

families." The findings within the school choice literature can support MNPS in exploring strategies for realizing this vision. While there is a great deal of research on why families choose particular schools, there is a gap in the literature on why families choose to remain at a school once they have made their selection. Along with school choice, we know that factors such as housing, social capital, poverty, and race also determine the schools that a

child attends. Once a child is enrolled in and attending a school, in this case, a school in MNPS, why do they choose to remain? Or, why do they choose to leave? The rest of this report explores this and related questions.



Home buyers are willing to pay **\$7,468 more** for a home if the school has a **lower minority student composition**

*Dougherty, et al., 2009*

## 3

## Project Design & Methodology

This study includes an analysis of student and school-level data from MNPS, as well as qualitative data collected from focus groups and one-on-one interviews with school administrators, parents, and community member groups.

### *MNPS Student Data*

The data provided by MNPS for this study consisted of student-level information from the 2007-08 to the 2012-13 school years. We felt that an analysis over this period would provide an accurate depiction of the current state of the district and any middle-length trends. The data included student information on:

- ❖ Race
- ❖ Free or Reduced Lunch Status
- ❖ Special Education Status
- ❖ Limited English Proficiency
- ❖ Achievement Level on State Assessments

This data was matched with masked student identifiers so that we could follow students year after year. Because the data did not include withdrawal dates, only that a student did withdraw, the issue of defining when a student left the district was difficult. But, using this information, we were able to determine the characteristics of individual students who left or remained in the district.

Through the MNPS data analysis, we focused on answering two key questions: who is leaving the district and when do they leave? A more specific question guiding the analysis targets those

students who enrolled in and attended school within the district, and “gave it a try” for at least one year: who are they and when do they leave? Because we wanted to answer these questions for all students in MNPS as well as those who had tried MNPS for at least a year, we used two different methods for analyzing the data. Each provided us with different perspectives of the attrition phenomenon.

### **Within-Year Method:**

#### **A Macro-Level Perspective**

To analyze the data using this method, we considered all students in prekindergarten through eleventh grade who were enrolled in MNPS at any point in the school year and who were assigned a student ID. We then considered students who were not enrolled in the following school year as having left the district. These students are known as **within-year leavers**. This method provided a clear way of defining and determining which students were in the district one year and gone the next. There were, however, a few important limitations with this method, including:

- ❖ If a student completes the year in MNPS and does not officially withdraw from the district, he will automatically be enrolled the following school year. Only after a specified number of absences would the student then be un-enrolled by the district. For example, if a student completes third grade in MNPS in the spring of 2011 and then his family moves to another county that summer but does not



notify the district, he will show up as enrolled in the fall of the 2011-12 school year even though he has, in fact, left the district. The within-year analysis would not include this student as a 2011 leaver even though he did not attend an MNPS school in the 2011-12 school year.

- ❖ If a student withdraws early in a school year, he would be considered enrolled, even if only for a few days. It would be more reasonable to consider this student as having left the district already. For example, if a student enrolls in fifth grade in the fall of 2010 for only two weeks and then decides to leave the district to attend a private school, it is more accurate to consider him as having left the district at the end of the 2009-10 school year, but the within-year analysis would include this student as having left after the 2010-11 school year.
- ❖ Because the within-year analysis includes students who are enrolled, even for only part of the year, much data about the students who leave midyear are incomplete. For example, if an eighth grader leaves the district in early September of 2011, she may not have time or the inclination to fill out the application for receiving free or reduced lunch even though she may qualify. That student would also not take the end-of-year TCAP achievement tests. This missing data distort the conclusions we can draw from the analysis.

These limitations stem from the fact that this analysis includes all students, whether they were enrolled in the district for one week, one month, or the entire school year. Any student who enrolled at any time during the school year and received a student number is included in this

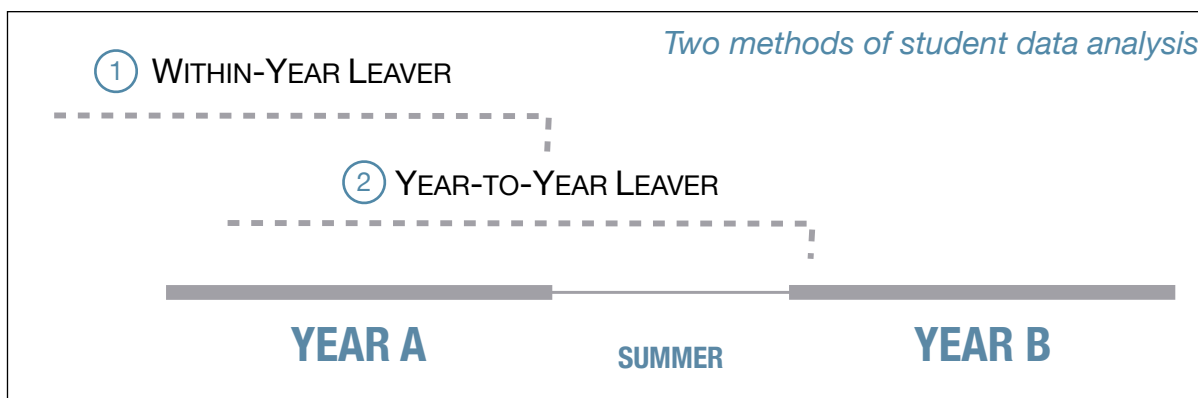
analysis. Therefore, all the students who may have left the district, whether for reasons of mobility (due to homelessness, migrant workers, moves due to financial stress, etc.) or outward migration are included.

### Year-to-Year Method: A More Precise Perspective

To analyze the data using this method, we considered all students who were enrolled in MNPS for a given year but did not have an exit code. These students are assumed to have finished the school year in MNPS. We then considered a student as leaving the district if they had an exit code the following year. These students are known as **year-to-year leavers**. The strength of this approach is that it addresses all the issues present in the within-year method. For example,

- ❖ A student who leaves in the summer but is not officially withdrawn until August of 2010 would not be included in the 2010-11 enrollment.
- ❖ Because all included students finish the school year using this method, they are much more likely to have complete data like achievement and FRL status.

The chief limitation of this method is that a student could withdraw from the district late in a year, and might be considered as having left. For example, a student completes second grade in 2009. He then enrolls in third grade the following year and remains in the district until May 2010. This student completed approximately 90% of the 2009-10 school year, but he would be considered as having left the district after 2009. Perhaps it would be more accurate to consider this student as having completed the 2009-10 school year and then left the district after 2010.



For the above reasons, we used the within-year method as a starting point to get a general idea of attrition in MNPS. However, we needed to try to distinguish between those students leaving the district because of factors common to urban mobility (the movement between schools due to issues of necessity, such as housing, poverty, etc.) and those experiencing outmigration (the movement between schools as a conscious choice). Therefore, the bulk of our analysis was done using the year-to-year method. The year-to-year method provides us with the opportunity to better understand those families who enrolled in MNPS, attended the school for at least one year, “gave it a try,” and then made the decision to leave. If MNPS can better understand those families engaged in outmigration, then strategies may be implemented to keep these students within the school system.

Both methods revealed that the greatest number of students left the district during their elementary years.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, we aggregated the student information by elementary school to understand attrition at the school level. We were able to categorize elementary schools by the average level of attrition over the last several years: those with

high levels of attrition (greater than one standard deviation above the mean), medium levels of attrition (within one standard deviation of the mean), and low levels of attrition (greater than one standard deviation below the mean). We used these categories to select three elementary schools from the high attrition group and three elementary schools from the low attrition group for onsite interviews. We chose schools on these two ends of the attrition continuum expecting that they would be particularly “information rich” (Patton, 2002, p. 231) for understanding why some schools were better able to retain students and why some schools were not. This also provided an opportunity to look for patterns and trends that may indicate differences among these schools.

### *Interviews*

To better understand why families chose to remain in their school or leave a school, we conducted interviews with a variety of stakeholders. We worked with MNPS to set up interviews with building administrators. We also used a variety of strategies to arrange parent interviews at each of these schools. Along with MNPS administrator and parent interviews, we spoke with admissions officers of private schools, enrollment officials from

<sup>3</sup> In fact, the largest number of leavers as a percent of enrollment occurred in high school. Because there are many more possible reasons why students leave the district in the high school years (e.g., dropping out, early graduation, GED completion), we felt the greater raw number of students leaving the district at the elementary levels provided sufficient reason to focus our primary analysis at that level.

neighboring districts, and community leaders and representatives, such as the Chamber of Commerce and the Greater Nashville Association of Realtors (Appendix A includes both a list of interview participants by category and the interview protocols used for each).

Because most of our interviews took place with parents whose children are still attending MNPS schools, we created questions that probed why their children are attending their current school, those factors that might encourage them to stay, and their experience with those who have left the district. We focused primarily on three areas: how parents gather information, their reasons for leaving or staying, and their general satisfaction with MNPS. In addition, we conducted interviews with the principals of these targeted (high attrition and low attrition) schools where the children of the parents we interviewed were enrolled. The key elements of focus for these interviews were similar to those for the parents: how parents gather information, why families may choose to remain in or leave a school, and perceptions of general satisfaction with MNPS. We also explored whether staff members gather any information about parents who leave the school or the district and what information is gathered.

Along with the interview protocols for those representatives currently connected to MNPS, we developed interview protocols for enrollment officials from receiving private schools and public school districts in the surrounding counties. The interview protocols for the schools receiving students from MNPS were not unlike those for staff and parents still within the district. The focus of this protocol was again school choice and provided the surrounding county representatives and private school officials with an opportunity to speak about who is leaving MNPS by asking

questions such as:

- ❖ Are there particular schools, areas, or districts from which you draw many of your students?
- ❖ Is there a typical age or grade-level when students enroll in your school?
- ❖ How close do these families typically live to your school?
- ❖ Do families move into a new home to attend your school?

We used the responses to these questions to inform our quantitative findings. These questions, as well as those focused on the perceived family motivations for selecting a public school in a surrounding county or a private school instead of MNPS, also provide information about families who are choosing to leave schools in MNPS.

Finally, the interview protocol for community members probed perceptions of MNPS and the impact of the quality of schools on housing and economic issues. Some of the questions in this protocol explored the ways in which the departure of some students from MNPS impacts the community beyond the school district. Specific questions regarding how the reputation of MNPS schools impacts the local economy and the housing market were asked, as were questions regarding families' home buying decisions, the impact of immigration on MNPS, and what the impact on Nashville would be if the reputation of MNPS improved.

4

# Data Analysis & Findings

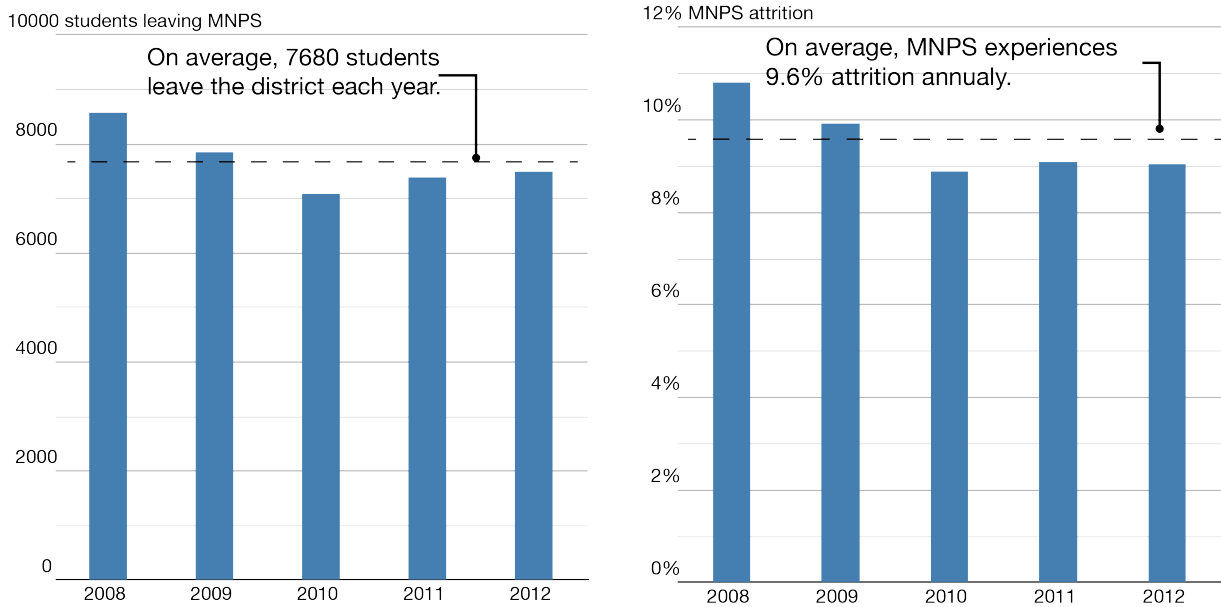
## Who is Leaving MNPS?

Using the within-year method, MNPS has lost, on average, over 7,600 students each year over the last five years.<sup>4</sup> This amounts to roughly 10% of the district's total enrollment. There is no obvious year-over-year trend in the number of leavers, but the percent attrition has remained steady over the last few years (Figure 12).

## When Do They Leave the District?

Disaggregating the number of leavers by level and grade reveals some clear patterns about the departure points. While elementary schools lose the greatest number of students, averaging over 3,000 students a year, they lose the smallest as a percent of enrollment, roughly an average of 8% over the last five years.<sup>5</sup> High school loses the greatest number of students as a percent of enrollment, averaging nearly 14% over that time.

Figure 12: MNPS Attrition, by Student and by Percent, 2007-08 to 2012-13



Source: MNPS

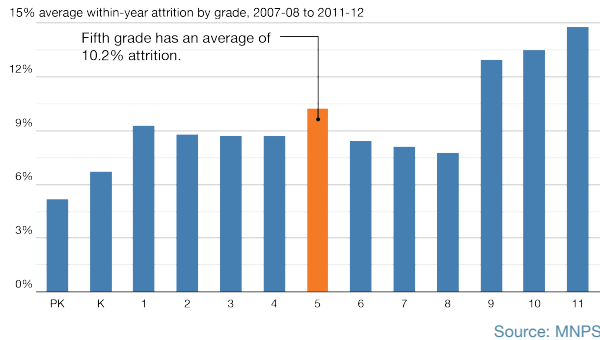
<sup>4</sup> Unless otherwise stated, all averages are calculated over the last five school years, beginning with the 2007-08 year and concluding with the 2011-12 year. Note, however, that 2012-13 enrollment data was used to calculate who left the district after the 2012 school year. With either method of counting leavers (within year or year-to-year) used in this analysis, it is possible that a leaver could leave the district for a single year only to return to the district the following year; he would still be considered a leaver.

<sup>5</sup> A student is counted as leaving elementary schools if he is enrolled in grades PK through grade four in a given year and then leaves the district the following year. Likewise for *middle*, grades five through eight, and *high*, grades nine through eleven. Students who are seniors (12th grade) are not included in the analysis because we assume that nearly all leave the district because they have graduated.

This could be inflated because of the greater number of exit options that high school students have to leave school altogether (e.g., dropping out and early graduation).

Prekindergarten and kindergarten experience the smallest attrition<sup>6</sup> of any grades as a percent of enrollment.<sup>7</sup> The percent of attrition jumps after first grade and remains steady around 9% of enrollment for the next several grades. There is a spike to 10.2% attrition after fifth grade and then a substantial drop during the rest of middle school. High school years have the highest percent attrition of any levels (Figure 13).

**Figure 13: Average Percent Within-Year Attrition by Grade, 2007-08 to 2011-12**



One thing to note is that the natural transition points—the transition to middle school after fourth grade and the transition to high school after eighth grade—do not appear to experience distinctively high levels of attrition, despite the fact that they may be viewed as natural departure points in a child’s school career for parents to relocate to another district. Using the within-year method, it appears that it is more likely for students to experience a single year at the new level (fifth grade and ninth grade

respectively) and then leave the district than in other grades. In one of our focus groups, the mother of two MNPS fourth graders reinforced this idea about middle school, saying, “We’ll try it for a year and see what happens.”

But this seems counterintuitive, given that it is likely that most families who can leave the school district by moving out of the county or enrolling in private school would choose to do so after the completion of a grade, not in the middle of the school year. This suggests that the within-year method of analysis may be inadequate, because it may be capturing students who do leave the district during the summer but are automatically enrolled in the following school year, therefore giving the appearance in the analysis that they are “trying” the different level.

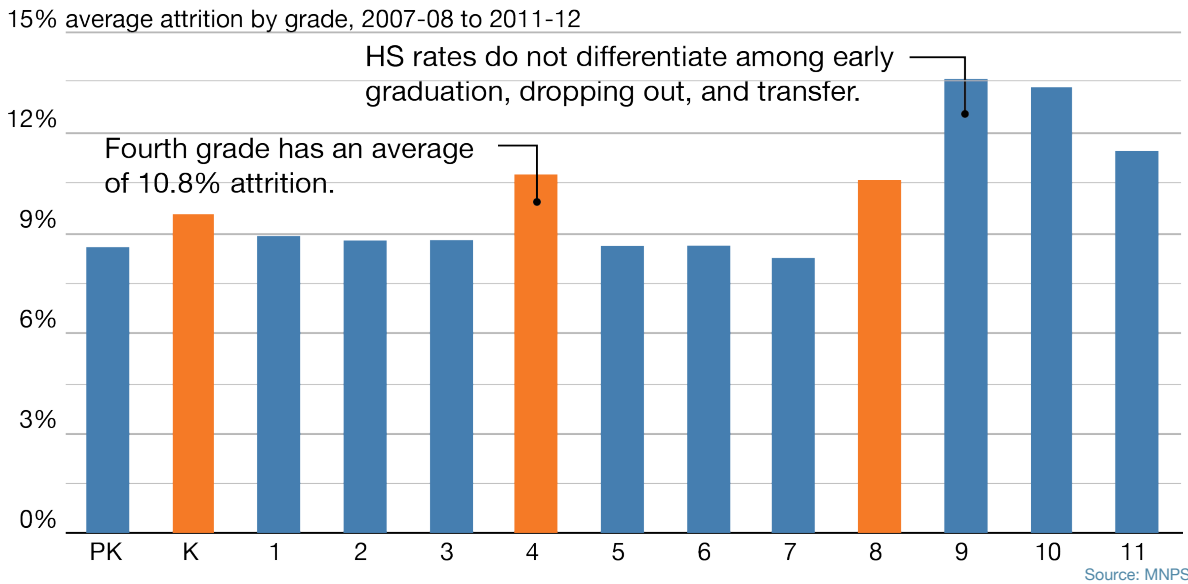
Using the year-to-year method (Figure 14), we see a different picture. The high school years remain the largest in terms of percent attrition. But with this analysis, there is a steady rate of attrition in the earlier grades except kindergarten, fourth grade, and eighth grade—the transition years. The higher rate of attrition after kindergarten may suggest the practice of “red-shirting,” or enrolling a student in kindergarten for a year in MNPS, free of charge, and then repeating the year in a private school, giving a student the competitive advantage of being a little older throughout the rest of his academic career. We did not, however, hear about this practice during our qualitative interviews.

The year-to-year method includes students who complete the school year and then withdraw the

<sup>6</sup> Attrition is the phenomenon of those students who leave an MNPS school to attend an elementary or secondary school outside of the district. Attrition is the sum effect of individual leavers.

<sup>7</sup> A student leaves kindergarten (or any other grade) if he is enrolled in kindergarten in a given year and then leaves the district after that year.

Figure 14: Average Percent Year-to-Year Attrition, by Grade, 2007-08 to 2011-12



following year at some point. This analysis captures the most stable families who choose to leave the district after “giving it a try” for at least one year. These families have the means to control when and how they move out of the district and we expect they are more likely to make this transition at the completion of the school year as opposed to midyear. Because this indicates that we will have more accurate information regarding those families involved in outmigration as opposed to mobility and because of the intuitive results of the year-to-year analysis of grade-level attrition, the remaining findings focus solely on the year-to-year analysis.

### How do Leavers Compare to the District as a Whole?

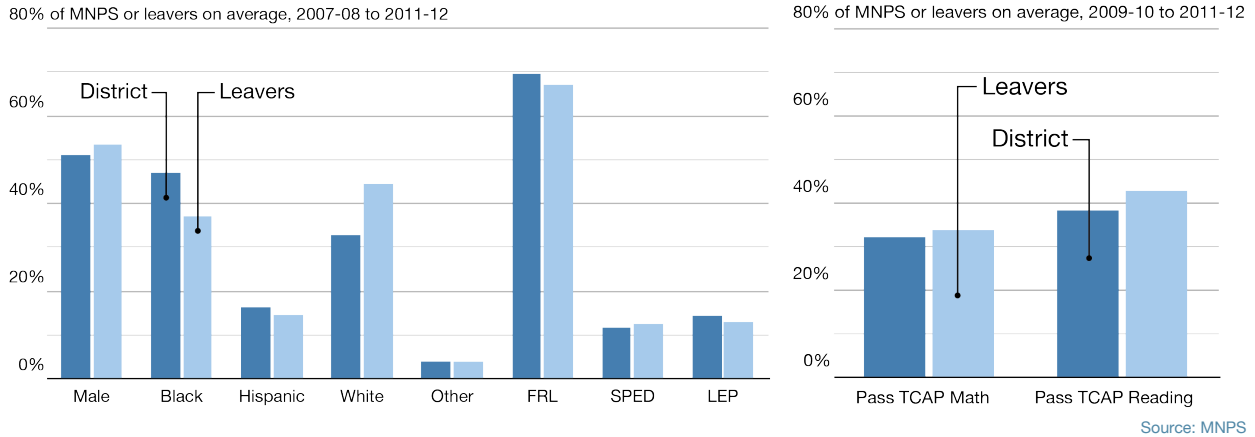
It is apparent when looking at the characteristics of students who leave the district that leavers do not reflect the composition of the district as a whole. This suggests that attrition is not a

random phenomenon that affects all demographic categories equally (Figure 15).<sup>8</sup> On average:

- ❖ **A higher percentage of leavers are males** when compared to the district as a whole. On average, males make up 53.5% of the leavers. This is higher than the 51.1% they comprise in the district.
- ❖ **Leavers are disproportionately White.** Black students comprise 47.0% of the district. This is higher than the 37.1% that make up the leavers. Hispanic students comprise 16.3% of the district while they comprise 14.5% of the leavers. Finally, White students make up 32.8% of the district while they make up 44.5% of the leavers.
- ❖ **A smaller proportion of leavers receive FRL** compared to the district as a whole. On average, 67.1% of leavers received free or

<sup>8</sup> All district numbers in the following analysis are calculated using the year-to-year method described in the Project Design and Methodology section. These numbers differ from those published by the Tennessee Department of Education because their methodology for determining student counts is different. The year-to-year method was used to create a meaningful comparison between the composition of the district and the composition of the leavers.

Figure 15: Comparison of District and Leavers, Year-to-Year, 2007-08 to 2011-12 and 2009-10 to 2011-12



reduced priced lunch (FRL). This is slightly lower than 69.6% of the district that had similar status.

- ❖ **A larger proportion of leavers received special education (SPED) services** compared to the district as a whole. On average, 12.5% of leavers received special education services. This is slightly higher than 11.7% of the district that had similar status.
- ❖ **A smaller proportion of leavers were designated as having limited English proficiency (LEP)** compared to the district as a whole. On average, 12.9% of leavers are considered limited English proficient. This is lower than 14.4% of the district that had similar status.
- ❖ **A greater proportion of leavers passed the math and reading TCAP tests** compared to the district as a whole. Those students who leave the district passed the math and reading achievement tests at rates of 33.9% and 42.9% respectively. The pass rates for the district were 32.2% for math and 38.4% for reading.

### Patterns of Departure

From the analysis above, clearly those who leave the district are not representative of the district as a whole. To better understand who these leavers are, it is helpful to consider the schools from which they leave.

We began our analysis by looking at the attrition rates of each MNPS schools for the 2012 school year. We limited our analysis to this school year because it was the most current for which we had complete data from both the district and the Tennessee Department of Education.

After the 2011-12 year, the attrition rate for all 135 MNPS schools<sup>9</sup> was approximately 6.6%. Despite the fact that high school students are the most likely to leave the district or that the greatest number of leavers is at the elementary level, there was no statistical difference between the attrition rates at elementary, middle, or high schools (Table 1).

<sup>9</sup> We exclude alternative and exceptional education schools from our analysis because the forces that determine attrition at these schools are beyond the scope of this project.

**Table 1: Attrition Statistics for School Levels<sup>10</sup>**

Level	Minimum Attrition	Maximum Attrition	Mean Attrition	N
Elem.	1.87%	18.08%	6.84%	75
Middle	1.37%	12.12%	6.47%	40
High	0.60%	10.93%	6.48%	16
All	0.60%	18.08%	6.57%	135

Source: MNPS

Below is an analysis that focuses specifically on elementary schools. We decided to bring a closer lens to the elementary level because 1) the greatest number of students leave the district during the elementary years, 2) the greater number of elementary schools compared to middle and high schools allows for a finer level of analysis, and 3) the decision to leave the district during the elementary years is likely solely the decision of parents, thus allowing us to target parents in our interviews in order to understand why families choose to leave the district.

We included 75 elementary schools in our analysis and looked at attrition over the last five years. After the 2011-12 year, elementary schools lost on average 6.8% of their students from the district. The school with the lowest attrition rate had 1.87%, while the highest experienced over 18% attrition. Figure 16 on the following page is a map of each school’s attrition for the 2011-12 year.<sup>11</sup>

**Which School Characteristics Relate to School-Level Attrition?**

Using data from MNPS and published data from the Tennessee Department of Education, we were

able to look at the strength of correlation between school-level factors and school-level attrition (Table 2). Not surprisingly, given the individual analysis above, the school-level factors most associated with attrition reflect the characteristics of leavers themselves. For example, schools with a higher percentage of Black students or students who receive FRL have lower attrition rates. Conversely, schools that have a higher percentage of White students or a higher math or reading grade have higher levels of attrition. School size and percentage of Hispanic students were not correlated with school-level attrition.

**Table 2: Correlation for Elementary School Attrition, 2011-12**

School-Level Characteristics	R	Sig. (2-tailed)	N
Student Enrollment	0.165	0.175	73
Distance from center of the county	0.595	<0.001	75
Male (%)	.244	0.037	73
Black (%)	-.576	<0.001	73
Hispanic (%)	-0.090	0.452	72
White (%)	.693	<0.001	73
Free/Reduced Lunch (%)	-.569	<0.001	74
TN DoE Math Grade	.620	<0.001	73
TN DoE Read. Grade	.599	<0.001	73

Source: MNPS, TN DoE

**A Model for Predicting Attrition?**

Using some of the characteristics that might impact school attrition, we constructed an OLS linear regression model to predict the level of attrition in elementary schools and to see which schools might be over- or underperforming their

<sup>10</sup> There are four schools not included in the elementary, middle, and high numbers above, but that are included in the total. These schools served grades that included both middle school and high school years.

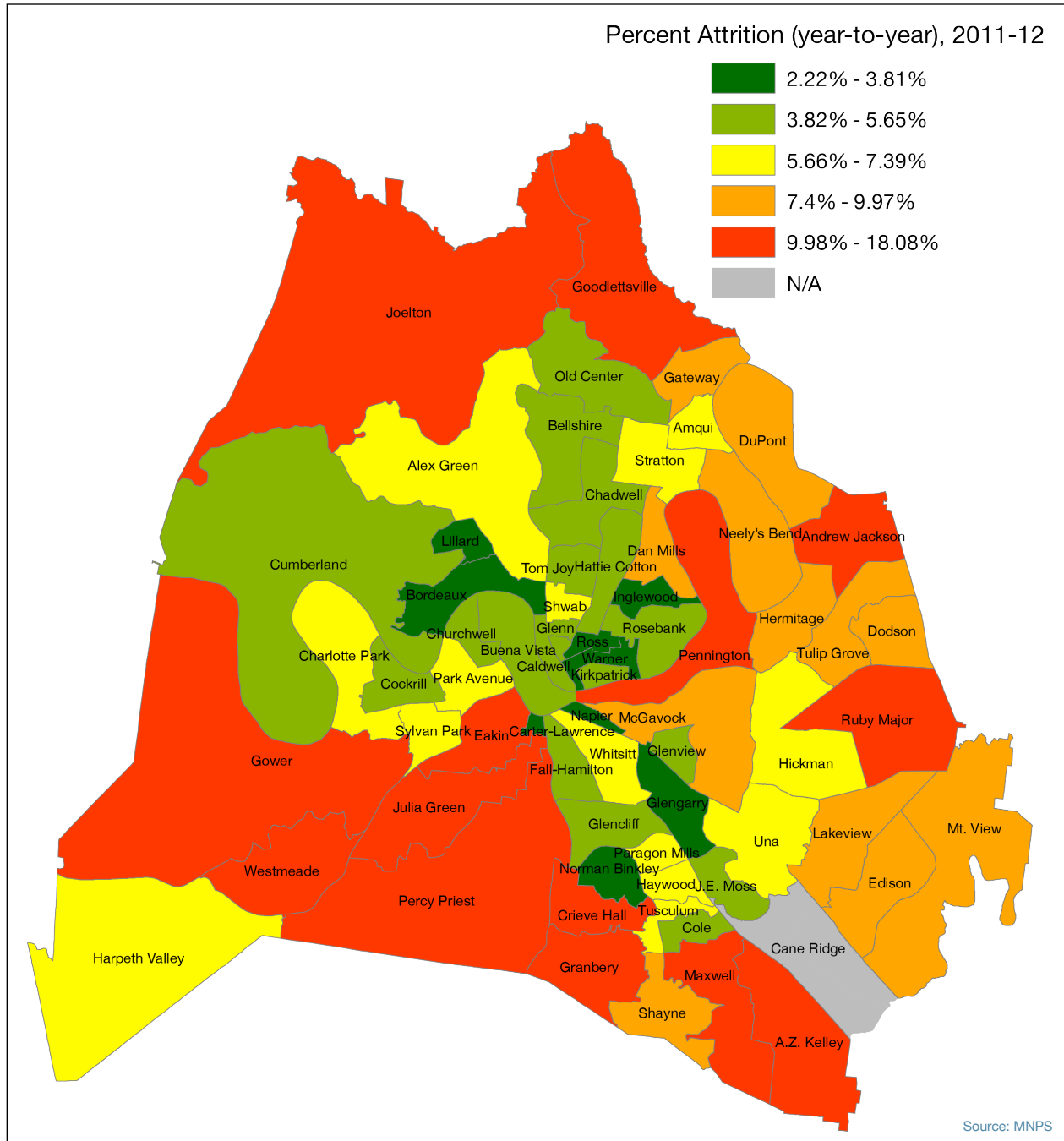
<sup>11</sup> Figure 16 only includes schools with defined geographical attendance zones, which is why the minimum attrition is different than what is listed in Table 1.



predicted attrition rates. Perhaps by carefully studying these over- and underperforming schools, the district may be able to reduce attrition. Appendix B includes a full list of predicted and actual attrition values for elementary schools after 2011-12.

Because many of the characteristics of schools that are statistically significantly correlated with attrition are correlated with each other, our model only includes a few of the variables identified above to reduce multicollinearity. They are distance from the center of Nashville, the

Figure 16: Percent Attrition of School Enrollment by Elementary School, 2011-12



percentage of male students, the percentage of White students, and the TCAP reading grade assigned by the Tennessee Department of Education. The independent variable is percent attrition after the 2011-12 school year (Table 3).

**Table 3: OLS Regression for Percent Attrition of Elementary Schools, 2011-12**

	Coefficient	Std Error	Sig.	VIF
Constant	-8.185	3.916	0.040	
Miles from the center of county	0.257	0.081	0.002	1.385
Male students (%)	0.212	0.077	0.008	1.142
White students (%)	0.048	0.015	0.001	2.407
TN DoE Reading Grade	0.560	0.269	0.041	2.394
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	0.624			

Source: MNPS, TN DoE

### *Why Are They Leaving?*

The data provided by MNPS and the subsequent statistical analysis helped to determine who is leaving MNPS. The interviews conducted with many constituents helped reveal why families may be leaving. In our interviews with MNPS parents and administrators, as well as other educational stakeholders such as private school admission officers and neighboring school district enrollment officials, several key themes emerged as to why families seem to be choosing educational options outside of their local MNPS schools.

#### FINDING 1

### **The Resources to Choose; the Resources to Manage**

As previously discussed, parents rely on their peers, neighbors, and social networks to navigate

the educational decisions facing their children. When asked how they learned about their current elementary school, parents nearly always mentioned “word of mouth,” or as one parent put it, “the mom network.” Social capital impacts how families choose schools.

These social networks prove important when considering the transition to middle school. In several focus groups, parents reflected on the potential of having a good middle school experience at their neighborhood school: “If the entire school would move over there, we’d all be happy.” An MNPS elementary principal also commented on the importance of having a “group” move up together:

If one family will step up and decide they’re going, sometimes, even if they may never see that kid in that school environment, their child may not be in the same class or whatever, just the idea that there may be two or three families that are going, then it balloons into 10 or 15 families that will go, because somebody is going that they know.

An MNPS parent of two fourth graders spoke of the importance of having families from her school already having made the transition to their neighborhood middle school, “They’ve paved the way for us. All the good families decided to go, and now all the good families have [gone], and I hear it’s a great school now.” After saying this, another mom agreed, “If we all stay together, it will stay good.”

At the same time, a group of parents have to take the initial leap of faith, and as one parent asked, “Who wants to be the guinea pig?” Still, several parents who had heard good things from those who had gone before them were more willing to

***“There is a lot of pressure from friends who attend [an elite private school], social pressure. Almost always when they apply, our families have friends and neighbors who already attend.”***

Elite Private School Admissions Officer

“try it for a year and see what happens,” as one parent put it.

Additionally, many parents expressed issues of peer pressure among their friends who had opted to either move to a neighboring county or send their children to private schools. In nearly every focus group, the phrase “keeping up with the Joneses” was referenced, which highlights the importance that parents place on their social networks for school referrals.

One MNPS elementary parent, who could afford private school but wanted her children to attend public school, expressed her frustrations with having to justify her decision to her friends who have chosen private schools:

I’m tired of having to explain why public school is good. And I’m tired of having to say, ‘Did you look at the test scores?’ And I’m tired of saying, ‘We use the same books. Oh, by the way, your teacher got her masters at Vanderbilt? So did mine.’...You just get tired of saying, ‘Oh, really? And you never walked in. You just have some ridiculous notion that nonsense goes on in [public schools].’

Once parents have determined the school of choice, they then have the financial resources, educational backgrounds, transportation, etc. to navigate the necessary process for enrollment within a new school, whether that school is a private school in Davidson County or a public school in a surrounding county. In many instances,

they begin this process long before their child is entering the fourth or ninth grades. As one principal explained, “It’s always thinking toward the future, that middle school is down the road.”

Many parents make decisions years earlier in preparation for the transition to middle school. An elementary principal noticed the trends:

Going into third grade, we begin to see an exodus of kids. More moving to Williamson County in third grade, and then the fourth grade families that leave our district, those are the folks going to private schools normally...Usually, if we have them past third grade, we’ve got them. If they will do third grade with us, they’ll usually be here for fourth grade as well.

Similarly, another principal observed:

I don’t lose very many in kindergarten and first grade. We start to lose them around second grade. The reason for that is, they have to get openings, and so if they’re trying to get into one of the [private] schools then...An opening will come up, so they’ll go ahead and move in.

Elementary parents also spoke about the planning that takes place in preparation for middle school: “I have a couple of friends who have moved right across the county line, and it’s not for the elementary schools. It’s for the middle and high schools, and to be honest, we’re saving up our money now, because we know it may come to that.” After this, another parent in the focus group agreed, “We’ve already been

planning for that, too.” The planning that takes place may have students leaving MNPS earlier than predicted as parents seek to ensure that their child gets into a preferred middle school.

Many of the parents who spoke to planning several years in advance for their child’s education are in middle class or upper-middle class schools surrounded by families with high levels of both cultural and social capital. However, when we spoke to a parent from a school with a free and reduced lunch rate of over 90%, we learned that not all parents felt as though they needed to plan ahead. When speaking about her second-grade grandson and the middle school that he is zoned to attend, one respondent affirmed, “When he gets to fifth grade, he will not go there because it is just not a good school.” The parent went on to list several other schools that she would try to get him into but stated that they didn’t need to worry about that until later on in fourth grade. This point of view is different from that of families planning several years ahead for middle school and even high school.

Similarly, for many families in MNPS, going to any other school besides their neighborhood school is never even considered. One MNPS elementary principal commented on this:

There’s going to be a core group of kids who are going [to the zoned school] no matter what, because the parents don’t really have the means to investigate other options. They trust that the school system is going to do the best to take

care of their kids and educate their children as best as they can. That is more, honestly, [the situation with] our families whose kids are learning English. They’re so happy to have the opportunity for their children to be educated; they’re not as critical in looking at the schools and the options that the schools offer.

## FINDING 2

### Safety and the Middle School Transition

When determining whether to remain in MNPS, the issue of safety was referenced multiple times by parents as well as administrators within and outside of the district. Many of the safety concerns related to the transition from elementary to middle school. Additional parent concerns were related to the overall safety of the community or a specific neighborhood. Many of these fears were based on stories that parents had heard, though very few of the concerns were based on the parents’ own experiences. The perception of violence and chaos was referenced multiple times, even though many families had not visited an MNPS middle school.

#### *Middle School Transition*

When asked why families decide to leave MNPS, several respondents referenced the middle schools. One MNPS elementary parent observed, “Most of the parents I know who have left, it happens right around fourth grade. They move in preparation for middle school.” A private school admissions officer also found this to be true: “It’s not so much coming toward as running away from somewhere else...It’s middle school... It’s insane.” Within this larger discussion of the concerns about middle school, several trends related specifically to safety surfaced over the course of our interviews including: parents’ fears of fifth graders going to school with eighth graders, an overall feeling of chaos and lack of



►.....  
**“Am I gonna put my 10 year old in school with a 13 or 16 year old?”**

MNPS Elementary Parent

control in middle schools, and the importance of perception.

*Fear of Fifth Graders with Eighth Graders*

One of the fears surrounding middle school is the age difference that exists between fifth grade and eighth grade students, as the elementary parent referenced. Several neighboring counties, such as Williamson, extend elementary school through fifth grade, which serves as a draw for some families. Several MNPS principals spoke of the

before entering middle school, “The concern is never a question of a school’s [academic] performance. It is always the behavior that is the concern.” Another MNPS elementary principal echoed the same sentiment, “When families come in and tour, if they heard a horror story, it’s about safety. It’s not about the rigor.”

The idea that MNPS middle (and high) schools are “chaotic” is often solidified for parents by a single story or experience, such as this MNPS elementary parent who recalled friends who had been considering a neighborhood MNPS high school for their daughter:

.....◀  
**“There is a sense that public middle school is chaotic. I hear that word a lot.”**

Private School Admissions Officer

fear that many parents feel before their child’s transition to fifth grade. One MNPS elementary principal, whose school is on the southern edge of Davidson County, specifically mentioned this phenomenon when explaining why families move to Williamson instead of remaining in MNPS: “Their reason is 100% fear of middle schools. They’re worried, since we send our kids to middle school at such a young age, there is a huge fear of our middle schools...there’s a general fear about moving a nine year old into middle school.” This fear became more prevalent as parents and administrators referenced concerns about chaos and a lack of control at middle schools.

*Chaos and Lack of Control*

Parents’ concerns about middle school were generally focused on student behavior and discipline. An elementary principal expressed this concern when asked why families leave MNPS

The student who gave them the tour was a pregnant teen who was six months pregnant. And I’m going to tell you, that was it. It died there, and that was never an option. That was a decision that school made, and that was bad, because that person talks. You just closed the door to that family, and who knows how many others.

“Horror stories” like these often confirm in parents’ minds that public middle schools and high schools are not even an option for their child, leaving them to consider other alternatives as their child approaches fifth grade. An MNPS principal explained that there may not even be a specific story that a parent has heard as there is a general perception that middle schools are violent. “They hear about violence, violence in middle school.” The concern about chaos, violence, and overall safety issues may be one of the reasons that many families leave MNPS before their children are old enough to attend a middle school.

### *Perception of Safety*

Because of the power of social networks, word of mouth, and general perceptions, many satisfied MNPS elementary families may never consider MNPS middle schools because of the negative perception that seems to pervade conversations about schools. As one MNPS elementary principal put it, “The school is the first line of the perception for the whole school district. If parents have a negative perception of their school, that translates to the whole district.” Therefore, if parents have a negative perception of their elementary school, their chances of enrolling in the middle school may be less likely, even though they have not interacted with or been in the middle school.

Some middle schools are seeking to change this perception through more outreach and connection to the elementary schools. One MNPS elementary principal spoke about the middle school tours he takes with some of his parents:

What they’ve heard is, there’s some horror story about kids bringing knives or guns, they’re hearing the stories that are totally false, that there are kids fighting in the halls every day, just crazy stuff. And they come tour, and you take them down the hallway, and everybody’s in straight, quiet lines. All the kids are in the rooms learning... Everything’s just flowing really smooth, and they’re like, ‘Wow.’

Another MNPS elementary principal described the full-day visit to the middle school that her fourth graders do each spring and the effort that is put into changing the mindset of students and parents about middle school. Even with these efforts, schools seem to have a hard time overcoming the general perceptions that parents

have built up over the years. As one parent considering an MNPS middle school exclaimed, “I need it to be okay now!”

*Many prospective parents have never stepped foot in the middle schools.*

Along with safety concerns brought up when considering their child’s transition to middle school, several parents voiced concerns about general safety within the community. One of the parents interviewed, who was considering moving to a surrounding county, discussed her concern about the higher crime rate in Davidson County as opposed to surrounding counties.

### FINDING 3

#### **Academic Quality Matters**

Academic quality came up multiple times in our interviews with both parents and administrators. One principal even stated that the “academics [are] not strong enough.”

When determining the quality of schools, several parents relied on their social networks. When considering elementary schools, few parents reported consulting state test scores, instead relying on the general reputation of schools shared through peer conversations. In thinking toward middle and high school, however, test scores and school rankings seemed to play more of a role. Several parents referenced online websites when thinking beyond elementary school, as one parent illustrated, “If you do your research online, and go to GreatSchools.org, they rate Hillsboro [High School], and it has a 3, and you go to Williamson County and all the high schools have a 10. There’s a lot of jump between a 3 and a 10 that four to five years won’t fix.”

► .....  
***“I’ll get a lot of families that come in and say, ‘We’re going to go private because they offer a foreign language.’”***

MNPS Elementary Principal

Some of the consideration for the level of quality had to do with whether the school was an elementary, middle, or high school. In this case, the parent was referencing state test scores and explained:

There’s some very good elementary schools in the system, but besides the magnets, just looking at the numbers, there seems to be a drop-off in the quality of middle school education, and especially high school. There’s basically two good high schools, and they’re both competitive to get into.

So again, the transition to middle school, this time related to school quality, seems to be a factor in parents’ decisions to remain in or leave schools within MNPS.

Additionally, parents considered teacher quality when reviewing the quality of the academic program. One parent compared the teachers in MNPS with teachers from private schools and explained what she found after looking into the qualifications of teachers in the schools: “Often, some private schools...they [have] very young teachers who don’t have a lot of experience. I came to realize that some of the public schools... can do a better job, in terms of the experience of the teachers.”

Parents also expressed frustration with the frequent testing at the elementary level. Speaking to some of the concerns about “one size fits all” curriculum, a parent vented:

My third grader has to take a typing test...At what point do you stop teaching kids to be kids, and start teaching them clerical work, so that they can type faster? I realize we’re in a technological age, but if you don’t let these kids be kids, they’re never going to learn to think for themselves.

Finally, some parents spoke of expectations as a reason for considering a non-MNPS school. One MNPS parent, who is also a teacher at her child’s school, explained, “In [the neighboring counties]... you have an understanding, a higher expectation.” Yet, she went on to say that the parents within her low-income school, “want their kids to go to college, they want the best for their child, [but] they are not always able to understand what it means to get there. We are educating parents as well as children.”

For many parents, school quality didn’t have to do only with test scores, school rankings, and reputation, but also on the variety of programs offered, the resources available, and the level of personalization offered for their child.

#### *Variety of Programs*

While considerations about middle school often dominated elementary parent concerns about continuing with MNPS, another commonly referenced complaint about school quality is the lack of academic offerings in public schools. Both parents and principals expressed a desire for an increased variety of academic programs, as one MNPS elementary principal explained:

► .....  
***“It always goes back to how much an individual child is cared for, how many people really know them at a deeper level.”***

Private School Admissions Officer

All schools...offer pretty much exactly the same thing. I have virtually no freedom to offer anything extra in my building unless I get my PTO to pay for it and of course I can't... Being able to sell yourself is offering Chinese, or [being] a technology school... but you get it in and you can't support it because there's no budget for it...I'll get a lot of families that come in and say 'We're going to go private because they offer a foreign language'...And I wish I could offer a foreign language, but I can't.

Foreign language was a common desire for many parents, particularly at the elementary level. When asked what MNPS could do to improve, one parent commented, "I do think that foreign language aspect is something...Akiva teaches Hebrew. Some of the other private schools teach Chinese and Mandarin, and we do have a couple of those schools here [in MNPS], but we don't have anything teaching Spanish."

This same parent, who has children in both MNPS elementary and middle schools, also commented on the importance of other academic programs, like music: "One of the things that hasn't made me pull my kid out...is that she's in strings, and she goes to strings every day, every single day...each school needs to have something like that...That's why I haven't pulled her out."

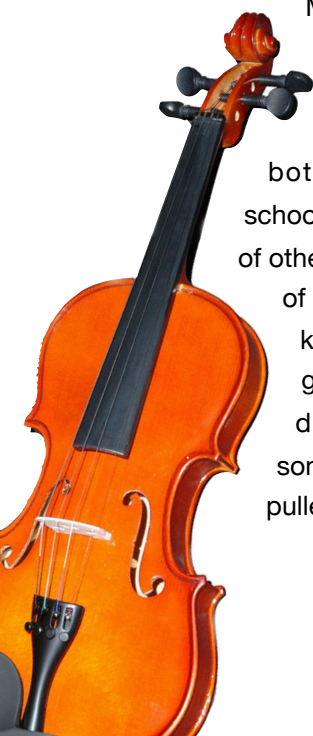
This access to a variety of academic programs influenced parents' opinions about the quality of the schools in MNPS.

#### *Personalization*

This desire for high quality academic programs was expressed more specifically as a desire to have a high degree of personalization and individual attention for their children. Private school admissions officers acknowledged hearing this a lot from entering parents: "They're concerned that their child is not getting any kind of differentiated instruction. There's the sense that it's one size fits all [in public school]." Another private school admissions officer echoed this, "Parents want their child to be known. They get a more personalized approach so that when their child walks in the hallway, someone knows who they are."

An MNPS elementary parent also touched on the difficulty of public schools to individualize instruction:

This is the problem with private versus public. You have a state book, and everyone teaches from the state book, whereas the private school is much more able to look at their student body and try things that are new and different. It's less regimented, and less bureaucracy. You have a school of 100 kids; it's all about that group, that 100. It's not about 84,000 in the district.





***“We’re waiting for the lottery day, and [if we don’t get chosen], then we’re putting our house on the market that day, and we know where we’ll move to.”***

MNPS Elementary Parent

Along with individualizing instruction, parents want additional resources that are available to support their child. As a private school admissions officer explained, “When you have a very active honor council and school counselors, you’ve got a lot more sets of eyes on the students that help them get over the hump to become teenagers. Public schools can’t do this, they just don’t have the resources.”

Still, many MNPS elementary parents commented on how involved and connected they felt with their neighborhood schools, suggesting it is possible to achieve the degree of personalization that families desire.

#### FINDING 4

##### **Uncertainty: Lottery for Quality**

While many parents are skeptical of MNPS middle schools, the academic magnet middle and high schools are held in very high regard. Many consider them a “private” school for public school parents. As one parent said about one magnet school, “It’s better than what you can pay for.” The allure of these academic magnets (option schools that have academic requirements for student admission), often keeps families in MNPS until the middle school lottery results. One MNPS elementary principal noted, “If their child is selected to go to Meigs, they are staying with Metro. But if they’re going to a zoned school, it’s a harder sell.”

As long-term planners, many parents are actively weighing their choices very early into their child’s

education. After a parent listed his top three magnet choices for his fourth grader, one parent commented, “Wow. We’re so alike,” and another added, “That’s our list, and we’re in first grade.” Another parent of a first-grader also demonstrated this capacity for long-term planning, “We were weighing out high schools, and trying to figure out if she gets into the magnet program, that’s great, and if she doesn’t, we’ll go private. Hume Fogg would be a better fit.” Many parents are betting on the magnet school lottery.

This heavy reliance on academic magnets can also take a toll on parents who want more certainty. One parent mentioned the benefit of attending Williamson County schools, because you can go K-12 and have good schools without a lottery. Other parents mentioned a similar attraction to private schools, where there is a predictable consistency offered over multiple grade levels. One private school admissions officer discussed the frustrations that some parents have when trying to plan long-term in MNPS:

The options change every year and it makes it hard for parents to plan...It’s frustrating for parents because parents will move to neighborhoods, but the options change too much. Stop moving the successful schools around. There is a sense that they take the good people and move them around. There is a lot of unfounded fear because it seems to be like a moving target. Parents can’t plan because they don’t know what the options are going to be.

***“I want my daughter to learn how to function with everybody, but at the same time, I don't want her to lag behind because she's having a good social studies experiment. I want her to be pushed academically.”***

MNPS Elementary Parent

#### FINDING 5

##### **Diversity: Appeal versus Fear**

One of the benefits of neighborhood schools that many MNPS parents cited is diversity. One parent mentioned the value she placed on diversity, explaining, “If you want extraordinary people, you know, to help solve the world's problems, they need to be among everybody.” Principals also saw this value, as one stated:

[Diversity is] important to me, because we have a growing [English Learner] population, and I think we have good success with those children because we have good models for them, and if we could have and maintain a balance of children, essentially a diverse population...we stand a better chance to maintain our level of effectiveness for all kids, and achievement as a school.

There was also a sense that families felt torn between wanting diversity and trusting schools to “manage” it successfully. One MNPS parent's question sums up this fear, “How do you create diversity without ruining the school and have everyone run away?” Another parent, who had chosen an MNPS elementary school because of its diversity, echoes this concern when talking about transitioning to middle school:

See, there's a mix, then, of other schools, just a different pool of children and parents. For me that's so challenging, because I always want those who are less fortunate, those who are on the margin, to receive the same

opportunities. But once you're there, how do you elevate them? So that's a very hard thing for me to reconcile.

Finally, while there was a sense that some families valued diversity and others were grappling with what that diversity means for their child, other MNPS parents were unafraid to express their concerns about too much diversity. Some parents were forceful in this regard. One parent stated that academically diverse public schools “are not good for the kids at either end.” Additionally, one (White, middle class) parent specifically referenced diversity: “I do believe in diversity, but diversity can also not exist if every single parent that used to send their kids there is now gone...diversity also means me. I'm also supposed to be welcome.”

MNPS parents often described families who had opted to leave the district (for either another district or a private school) as running away from diversity. As one parent put it, “Parents want their kids to be with certain other kids. It's a social issue.” Many parents perceived Williamson County to be safer and less diverse than Davidson County. One MNPS parent noted that in Williamson County, “The schools aren't any better, but the kids are different.” Perhaps most colorfully, one parent summed it up this way: “To go from a private school to a public school is like going to see the symphony and going to see the roller derby.”

▶ .....  
***“To go from a private school to a public school is like going to see the symphony and going to see the roller derby.”***

MNPS Elementary Parent

#### FINDING 6

##### **Housing: Prices, Property Taxes, & Proximity**

Finally, housing plays a role in where parents initially choose to send their children to school and whether they remain in the school once they are there. One principal stated that families decide where they are going to school based on where they are able to get the best rent. Additionally, one of the principals discussed property taxes in Davidson County, explaining that they continue to go up and therefore people are looking to buy homes in the surrounding counties. Specifically, people are moving to Rutherford, Wilson, and Williamson counties where they feel they can get more property and more space for the money. Many parents raised another question that illustrated the dilemma they felt when deciding where to buy a home, “Do you put the money in the house, or do you put the money in the private school? The private school ends when they graduate. The house will be around for 30 years.”

Proximity of home to school also mattered to several families. Principals noted that when considering a move from one school to another, families often looked for other schools within their current cluster. One explained, “Parents are looking for community. They want to see people they know from their neighborhood.” Another parent stated that she wanted to be involved in her child’s school but it was difficult to do so in a magnet school that was across town. As a result she decided to keep her child in the neighborhood school.

##### *Where Are They Going?*

Families who opt to leave MNPS have two options: move to another school district or enroll in private school. The first option forces parents to leave Davidson County. The other allows them to either stay in or leave the county depending upon the private school they choose.

Once families have a child, the clock starts on their decision process to either stay with their current zoned school or find other options. For some parents, this decision process involves moving to a different MNPS school zone, or more drastically, to another school district. In speaking with current MNPS elementary parents, very few of them considered the quality of the school zone when choosing where to live before having children, with nearly all responding that they were “pleasantly surprised” with the quality of their school once they had school-aged children.

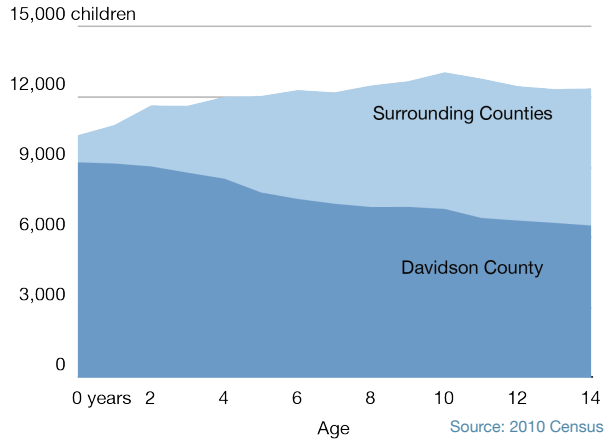
Because we were unable to analyze student enrollment data for surrounding counties like we did for MNPS, we were left with three options for exploring this question: Census Data, Interview Data, and MNPS Exit Codes. While each method has its limitations, the following is a good first step in beginning to understand where families go when opting out of MNPS.

##### **Census Data**

For some parents the decision to leave Davidson County happens before their child ever enrolls in MNPS, making this difficult to track using MNPS data. However, if families are deciding to move to a suburban county before their children hit

school-age, then census data might capture this movement. In looking at 2010 Census data, there is a decline in the number of children as their age increases, from birth through age 14 (Figure 17).

Figure 17: Change in Number of All Children, 0 to 14



As can be seen, the number of children in Davidson County drops steadily as they increase in age, with an average of 210 fewer children in each age group. Conversely, the total in the surrounding counties increases, with an average of 131 children in each age group.

When this is broken down by race, for both White and Black children, the differences are noticeable (Figures 18 and 19).

Figure 18: Change in Number of White Children, 0 to 14

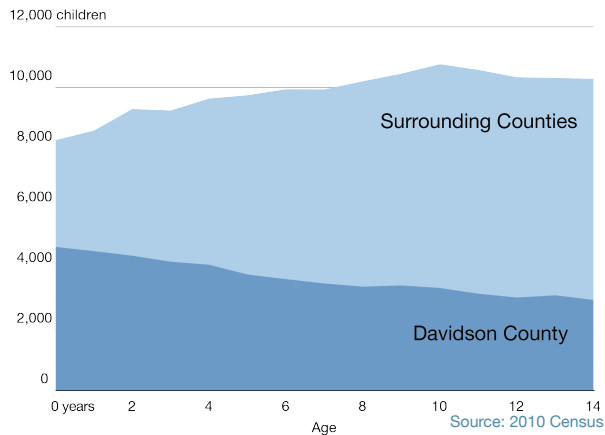
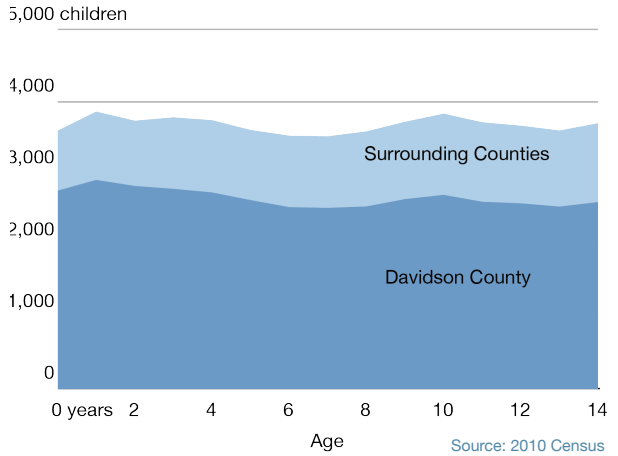


Figure 19: Change in Number of Black Children, 0 to 14



Whereas White children, from birth to age 14, steadily decline in Davidson County, at a rate of 126 children per year of age, the opposite occurs in the surrounding counties, at the rate of 144 White children more per age group. These trends were not found in a statewide analysis. Conversely, there is little change from year to year for Black children, with an average of only 19 children fewer per age group in Davidson and 16 more per age group in the surrounding counties.

For the specific percentage of White children gained or lost for each county, the table below shows the total change from birth to 14, along with the Pearson’s correlation coefficient for each.

Table 4: Change in Number of White Children by County

	White, Age 0	White, Age 14	White, % Change	R
Davidson	4,729	2,980	-37.0%	-0.977
Williamson	1,814	2,749	51.5%	0.862
Wilson	1,116	1,399	25.4%	0.838
Rutherford	2,557	2,721	6.4%	0.304
Robertson	738	803	8.8%	0.663
Sumner	1,624	2,058	26.7%	0.935
Cheatham	404	548	35.6%	0.869

Source: 2010 Census

As Table 4 shows, Davidson County has 37% fewer 14-year-olds than children less than a year old (age 0). Conversely, Williamson County experiences the largest gain, with 52% more 14-year-olds than children less than a year old. Wilson, Sumner, and Cheatham also experience statistically significant increases, whereas Rutherford and Robertson remain essentially flat.

**Interview Data**

The decision to leave Davidson County was reflected in our interviews with both MNPS parents and administrators, who estimated that among those who leave MNPS, about half of families choose to move and half opt for private school. Many parents mentioned their inability to afford private school tuition, such as this MNPS elementary parent whose children had previously attended a private school:

It's very expensive to send a kid to private school. And that tuition. We started, and the tuition was \$9,000 a year, and then it went to \$11,000 the next year, and then in two years it was \$15,000. They're almost out-pricing themselves. What you have is people on scholarship and the very wealthy, but there's really nobody in between represented.

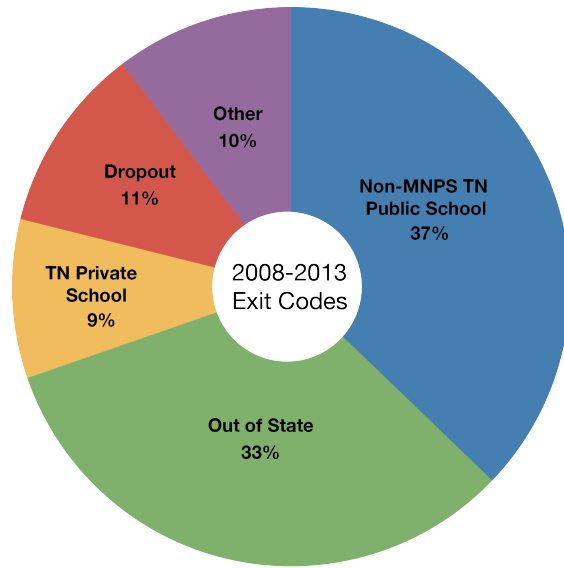
For those families seeking to move to another county, several interview participants mentioned how people have been helped by low mortgage rates and the recent drop in home prices. However, for those families whose own homes dropped in values, they had fewer options. Multiple interviewees also spoke to the recession and how it had limited the number of options families had when considering schools.

**MNPS Exit Codes**

For those students who do enroll in MNPS and

then decide to leave, local schools do collect exit codes that signify where they went (Figure 20).

Figure 20: MNPS Exit Codes, K-12, 2008-13



Source: MNPS

While these codes are a helpful start, there are several reasons to question their accuracy. First, this is a low-stakes data point for schools, so the accuracy of entry is worrisome. Second, if we look at a single school year (2011-12), 4.3% of leavers had no exit code. Another 6.1% of leavers had exit codes, but these students attended fewer than 10 school days the following year. This suggests that these students most likely left over the summer, leaving the school with little information as to their reasons for leaving. In sum, while MNPS data on where students go does exist, we are hesitant to draw any firm conclusions from them at this time.

*How Does Attrition Impact Achievement and Diversity?*

**The 2020 Cohort: A Longitudinal Analysis**

This report opened with a description of those students who were enrolled in MNPS for their kindergarten year, the class of 2020. Because attrition is a districtwide phenomenon, this

cohort has been impacted by the movement of students out of the district. A careful analysis of the 2020 cohort, using the year-to-year method and following them through the first five years of their education, provides an interesting look at the longitudinal effects of attrition.

The class of 2020 included 6,603 students in the 2007-08 school year. Racially and ethnically, they roughly represented the current composition of the district: 42% of them were Black students, 18% of them were Hispanic students, and 36% were White students. The majority of these students came from low-income families, as 69% of them received free or reduced price lunch.

As one might expect, the number of original members of the cohort began to diminish over time. After the first year, the cohort lost nearly 11% of students, and then lost between 5-7% per year for the next several years. Cumulatively, this resulted in a reduction to 4,520 students for the 2012-13 school year—a net loss of 32% (Table 5).

**Table 5: Original Members of the Cohort of 2020, 2007-08 to 2012-13**

Grade	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013
K	6,603	260	1			
1		5,635	401	1		
2		2	5,081	430	1	
3			4	4,723	427	1
4				6	4,437	425
5					6	4,087
6						7
<b>Total Students</b>	<b>6,603</b>	<b>5,897</b>	<b>5,487</b>	<b>5,160</b>	<b>4,871</b>	<b>4,520</b>
<b>Total Percent</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>89.3%</b>	<b>83.1%</b>	<b>78.1%</b>	<b>73.8%</b>	<b>68.5%</b>

Source: MNPS

As the previous analysis suggested, attrition does not affect all subgroups in the same way. This plays out when looking at both race and ethnicity (Figure 21), and FRL status (Figure 22).

**Figure 21: Original Members of the K Cohort of 2020 by Race, 2007-08 to 2012-13**



Source: MNPS

As seen in Figure 21, original Black, Hispanic, and White students of the 2020 cohort were all impacted by attrition. What is apparent is that the White students left the district at a much greater rate than either Black or Hispanic students. By 2012-13, only 54% of the original White students remained in the district compared to 79% of the original Black students and 73% of the Hispanic students. Both Black and Hispanic students left the district at lower rates than the cohort as a whole.

**Figure 22: Original Members of the K Cohort of 2020 by FRL Status, 2007-08 to 2012-13**



A similar discrepancy exists between students who receive FRL and those who do not. Here, we look at those students who received or did not receive FRL in 2007-08, the first year of the analysis. We then follow those students over time to see how many of them remain. The results are similar. Of those who received FRL in 2007-08, 72.1% remained in the district by 2012-13. Of those who did not, only 60.3% remained in the district. Note that this figure includes the 2012-13 data, for one does not need to apply for enrollment in the same way one applies for FRL.

And what about achievement? The cohort of 2020 proves unsuitable for this analysis because they did not take the achievement tests until their third-grade year, 2010-11. So to look at achievement, we considered the cohort of 2019 who were third-graders in 2009-10, the year that Tennessee changed the math and reading assessments. Students who passed the math and reading tests in 2010, 79.3% of the math

passers and 78.0% of the reading passers remained in the district in 2012-13. This is slightly lower than the cohort as a whole, of whom 82.7% remained in the district. So students who passed the tests in their third-grade year left the district at a higher rate than the cohort itself.

### What if the District Could Reduce Attrition?

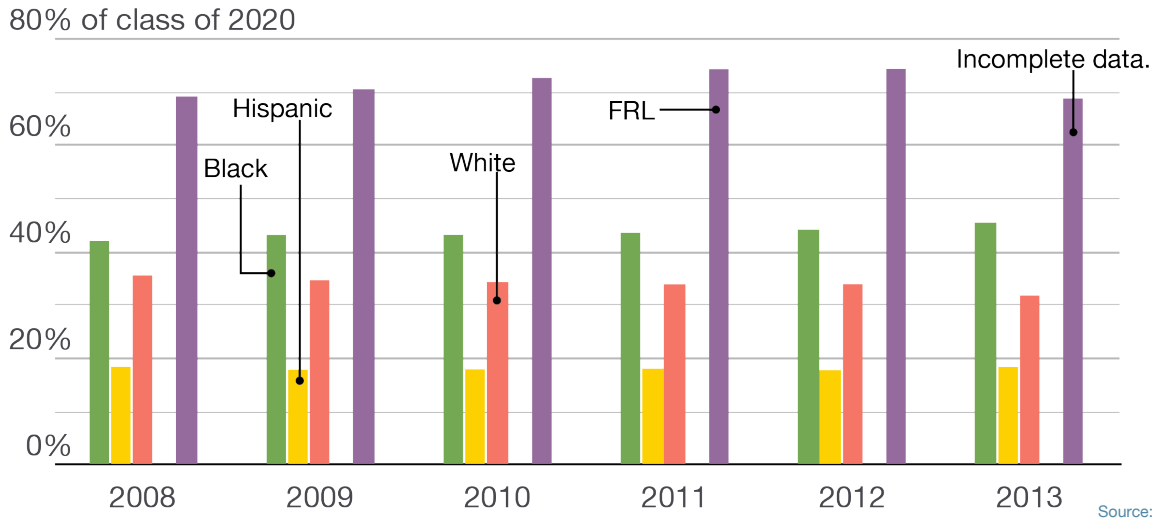
Given the previous conclusion, it makes sense to ask: What would happen if the district was able to keep those students who ultimately left MNPS? Would the achievement levels of the district change? If so, to what degree? Would the diversity of the district change? We offer two ways of looking at this scenario.

### The Cohort of 2020

As demonstrated above, the cohort of 2020 lost a disproportionate number of White students relative to Black students. This suggests that the class of 2020, including the original members of those in kindergarten in 2007-08 and those who joined this group of students as they advanced through the grade, would become less diverse. That is, in fact, the case. Figure 23 shows that the class of 2020 has become less diverse with a greater percentage of Black students—from 42.1% in 2008 to 45.5% in 2013—and a smaller percentage of White students—35.6% in 2008 to 31.9% in 2013.

What would be the percentage of White students in the class of 2020 if those who left from the original 2020 cohort had remained? Thinking about the problem this way reveals how the demographic makeup of the class would have changed. Over the course of these years, the class would have retained an additional 1,073 White students. Assuming the number of students of other races and ethnicities had stayed as it actually is, the class of 2020 would have been 40.4% White by 2012-13 (Figure 24).

Figure 23: Composition of Class of 2020 by Race and FRL, 2007-08 to 2012-13



A similar exercise can be conducted with the percentage of the class of 2020 who do not receive FRL. If the district were able to retain all of the students of the original cohort who did not receive FRL in their kindergarten year, they would have an additional 807 non-FRL students by 2013. This increases the proportion of the class of 2020 who do not receive FRL in 2013 to 39.4% compared to the actual value of 31.1% (Figure 25).

Again, if the district had been able to hold onto all members of the class of 2019 who took and passed the state math test in 2010, they would have had an additional 872 students—all of whom passed the math test as third graders. By the time they were in fifth grade in 2012, they would have helped raise the percent of the class who passed the math test to 51.7%, up from the actual value of 44.5%.

Figure 24: Hypothetical Percentage of White Students in the Class of 2020, 2008-13

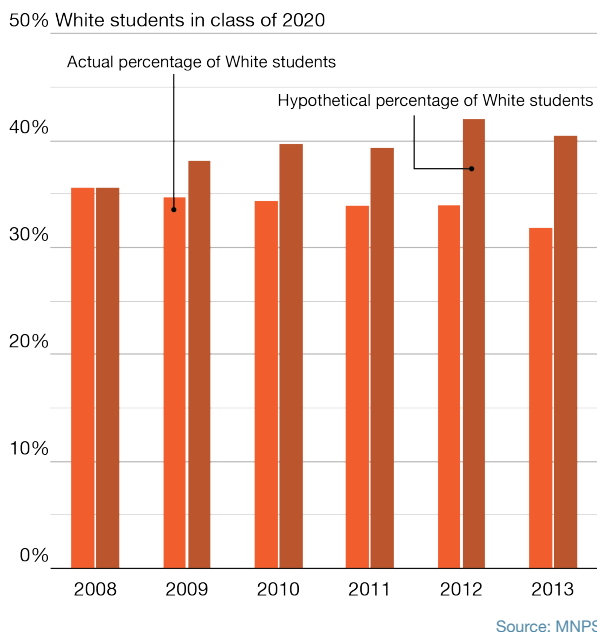
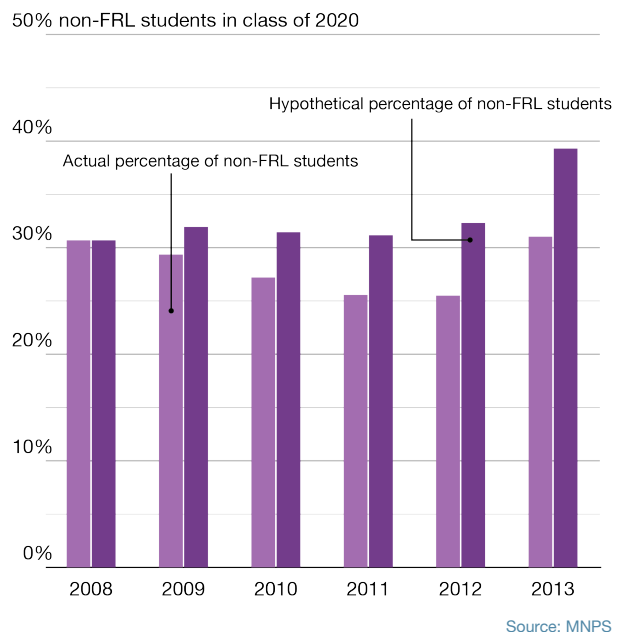


Figure 25: Hypothetical Percentage of Non-FRL Students in the Class of 2020, 2008-13





But this analysis is a bit misleading. It assumes that the populations discussed above, White students, non-FRL students, and those who pass the state math test, are the only ones who would be retained by the district. It is unrealistic to assume that any efforts the district made to reduce attrition would only impact White students. Likely, increased numbers of Black and Hispanic students would also remain in the district, therefore not changing the demographic makeup of the district to the extent described above.

Perhaps a more meaningful way of looking at the impact of reducing attrition is to imagine the scenario of reducing attrition by 100%—what would happen to the composition of the district if every student who currently left instead remained? This kind of analysis is helpful because it makes explicit the maximum impact for any initiative aimed at reducing attrition.

*What if the district could reduce attrition by 100% for a single year?*

To see the impact of attrition of a single year, we consider the 2011-12 school year. Table 6 shows

the makeup of the 7,043 students who departed the district after the 2011 school year. If those students all remain in the district, the change in composition of the district in 2012 is minimal. For example, the FRL population reduces by only a tenth of a percent. This is a result of the fact that although non-FRL students comprise a greater percentage of those who leave compared to the district as a whole, more leavers than not received FRL in 2011. The largest impact is on the percentage of White students in the district; they hypothetically would comprise 1% more of the district if all of the 2011 leavers remained.

*What if the district could reduce attrition by 100% for several years?*

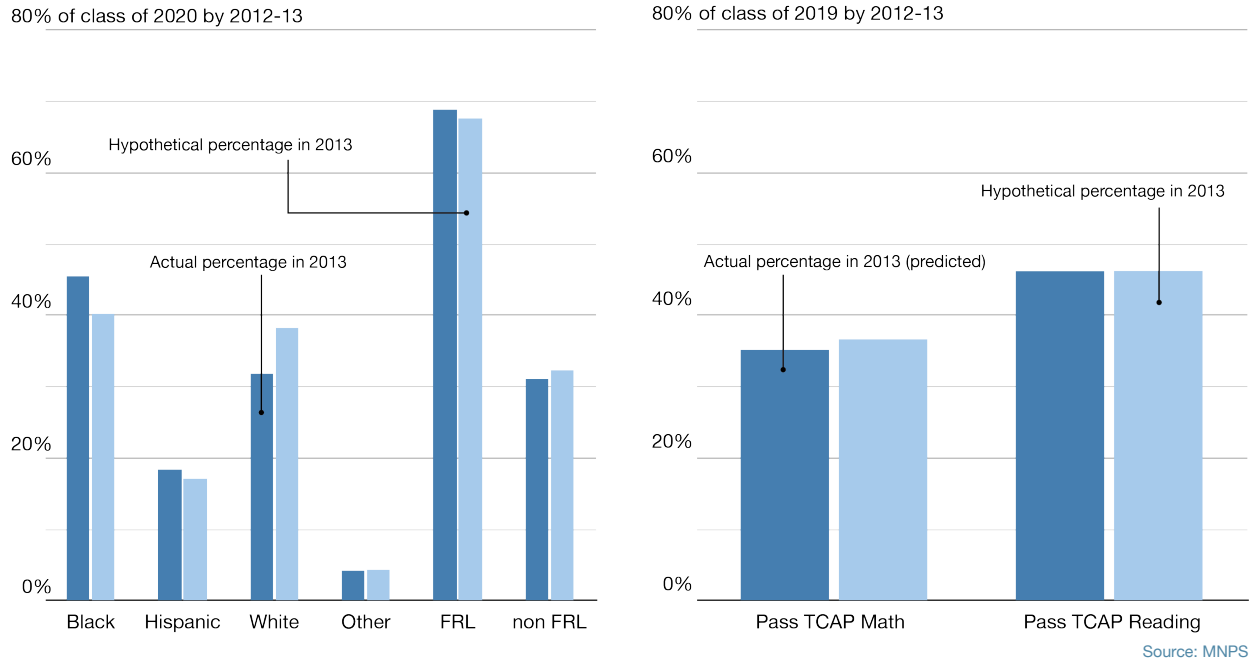
While the impact of eliminating attrition is minimal in a single year, it seems reasonable to believe that the impact would be larger over the span of several years. To determine the long-term effect of reducing attrition, we return to the class of 2020. We have already shown that the class of 2020 has become less socioeconomically and racially diverse over time as they have disproportionately lost both White students and those who do not

Table 6: Hypothetical Impact on MNPS of 0% Attrition after 2010-11

	2011 Leavers	2012 Actual	2012 Hypothetical	2012 Actual %	2012 Hypothetical %	Difference
Total Population	7,043	78,534	85,577			
Black	2,557	36,224	38,781	46.1%	45.3%	-0.8%
Hispanic	1,038	13,696	14,734	17.4%	17.2%	-0.2%
White	3,136	25,297	28,433	32.2%	33.2%	1.0%
Other	312	3,317	3,629	4.2%	4.2%	0.0%
FRL	5,014	57,017	62,031	72.6%	72.5%	-0.1%
Pass Math	951	12,885	13,836	38.5%	38.4%	-0.1%
Pass Read	1,117	14,334	15,451	42.2%	42.3%	0.1%

Source: MNPS

Figure 26: Hypothetical Impact of 0% Attrition on the Class of 2020 and 2019 by 2013



receive FRL. Figure 26 shows the impact of holding onto all leavers from 2007-08 to 2011-12 on the class of 2020 in 2012-13. The greatest change is in percentage of Black and White students in the class. The percentage of Black students in the class of 2020 is reduced by 5.3%; the percentage of White students has increased by 6.4%. The percentage of FRL students has been reduced by only 1.2%.

In order to look at the impact of achievement, we considered the class of 2019, who took the TCAP tests (as third graders) for the first time in 2009-10, the year that Tennessee changed the tests. (This gives us one more year of data than if we used the class of 2020.) Assuming that a student who passed either the TCAP math or TCAP reading test and then left the district would have continued to pass the tests in subsequent years, and assuming the pass rates for the class of 2019 as sixth-graders in 2012-13 were the same as the pass rates of sixth-graders in

2011-12, we again see that the impact is minimal (Figure 26). If the class of 2019 held onto all leavers from 2009-10 to 2011-12, the pass rates on the TCAP math test would increase by 1.5% and on the TCAP reading test by 0.03%.

We discuss the implications of addressing attrition below; however, it appears that the effort to keep students in the district would have little payoff in the areas of diversity and achievement.

## 5

## Discussion &amp; Interpretation

*Who is Leaving?*

As revealed in our analysis, the students who leave MNPS (leavers) have a different profile than the district as a whole and from those who enter the district in the middle of their education careers (replacers). Leavers account for roughly 9.5% of the district's total enrollment each year. While this seems like a substantial portion of the district, the district has continued to grow due largely to ever-increasing numbers in kindergarten and prekindergarten. Due to the limitations in the data available, our analysis did not go back far enough to determine whether or not there are long-term trends in the number of leavers.

Figure 15 (page 23) reveals the differences between leavers and the district in several important categories. While the difference is small, a disproportionate number of leavers were poor compared to the district on the whole—67.1% of leavers received FRL year-to-year compared to 69.6% of MNPS on average from 2007-08 to 2011-12. So leavers were still more likely to receive FRL than not, but the difference between the compositions of the leavers and the district is not practically significant. As the earlier analysis showed, if the FRL rate of leavers were the same as the district, the district would have held onto an additional 179 students or 0.3%. Similar statements can be made about special education students, LEP students, and the proportion of students who pass the math and reading tests.

There is a more prevalent discrepancy between the proportion of Black students who leave and White students who leave, compared to the proportions of those students in the district. Black students comprise 37.1% of the leavers whereas they make up 47.0% of the district. White students comprise 44.5% of the leavers compared to 32.8% of the district.

Interviews with district administrators as well as parents revealed that parents of elementary school children have considerable apprehension about the middle school years. This suggested that the analysis might reveal increased attrition between students' fourth- and fifth-grade years, the transition between elementary and middle schools. This was, in fact, the case. Excluding high school, when students may leave the district due to dropping out or early graduation, the greatest portion of enrolled students left the district after fourth grade, 10.8% attrition. There were similarly high attrition rates after kindergarten and eighth grade. This may suggest several scenarios taking students out of the district:

- ❖ Students' families may leave the district because of factors wholly unrelated to the district (e.g., a new job).
- ❖ Leaving the district might be a cumulative, complex decision rather than a single event in the final year of elementary school. Our interviews revealed that parents were often thinking about and planning their child's education over an extended number of years.

If a family decided several years in advance that they were not going to enroll their child in middle school, they may have left the district at the first available opportunity. If these opportunities are randomly distributed, then it makes sense to see similar attrition across all elementary grades—roughly what we see after first through third grades.

- ❖ The bump in attrition after kindergarten may suggest that some parents are “red-shirting” their child, i.e., they enroll their child in MNPS for kindergarten and then re-enroll in kindergarten at private school. There was, however, no evidence of this from our qualitative analysis.
- ❖ Some parents may decide that the next level of MNPS schools (e.g., middle after elementary or high after middle) is not a good fit for their child. This could explain the 2% elevation of attrition after fourth and eighth grades. Of further interest is that some surrounding counties, like Williamson County, begin their middle schools in sixth grade. Because there is not an increase in attrition after fifth grade, the increased attrition after fourth grade may be an indication of students going to private schools.

Because the greatest number of students leave from elementary schools, we felt that it was important to look at school-level factors that may contribute to a student’s departure from the district. Our analysis showed that a school’s distance from the center of Nashville was highly correlated with a school’s attrition. Given the large degree of socioeconomic concentration that exists between the city’s urban center and its outer rings, this may not be surprising and requires further investigation focusing on reasons and resources.

### *Why are they Leaving?*

When reviewing our findings, it is important to consider several characteristics of the schools from which we conducted our interviews. Many of the families we interviewed for this study were from schools with low levels of students eligible for free and reduced lunch (from a low of 13% to a high of 43%), with the exception of parents from two option elementary schools with FRL rates of 69% and 68%, respectively, and the grandparent of a child from a neighborhood school with an FRL rate of 91%. Of the 29 interviews we completed with parents, 23 of those interviews were with parents attending schools with FRL rates of 41% or less. Additionally, the racial makeup of these three schools from which most of our parent interviews were completed are majority White (from a low of 59% to a high of 79%). Finally, another key component to consider is that two of the schools were neighborhood schools and one was a Spanish immersion option school. Many of the families we interviewed were White and middle- or upper-middle class. We also completed interviews with a handful of parents whose race is non-White and who are working class. So, while our parent sample is not representative of MNPS as a whole, it does reflect the perspective of those families most likely to leave the district. Likewise, the majority of parents we interviewed were chosen by the principal, and nearly all were involved in some level of parent leadership, most typically PTO or school volunteers. In sum, our qualitative findings reflect a certain segment of MNPS parents, not the district as a whole.

### **School Choice**

Many of the responses of the families and administrators interviewed align with the research findings on school choice, indicating that there may be some connection with the literature on school choice and why families choose to remain

▶ .....  
***High-status White families want to attend school with other high-status White families because they attribute “academics” and “safety” to social class.***

Holme (2002)

in a school. It is unclear whether the factors considered when making the decision are what drew parents to a school in the first place and that is why they choose to remain, or if some of these factors presented themselves after their children had attended the school for a period of time. Nevertheless, factors such as school safety, the quality of academic programs, proximity, social capital, cultural capital, and diversity mattered. In addition to these areas, which are aligned with the school choice literature, two other components also seemed to matter: the stability of the school and a family’s housing situation and neighborhood.

Many of the families interviewed discussed their concerns regarding school safety, particularly when considering a transition to middle school. High-status White families want to attend school with other high-status White families because they attribute “academics” and “safety” to social class (Holme, 2002). Additionally, Holme explains that the values and behaviors of the students at the school were also important considerations of the parents. These trends held true in our interviews as well, in that parents often referenced safety and academics in their reasons for selecting and then remaining in their particular school.

The decision to remain in a school also related to the perceived quality of the school and its program. Again, parents specifically referenced the transition to middle school and their concerns with the quality of the middle school programs.

Parents as well as principals also spoke to the importance of having a variety of programs for students and their families. An example of this may be found when considering the results of one of the schools that we studied. The Spanish immersion school, one of the six schools on which we focused, is a choice school that lost an average of 6% of its students between 2008 and 2010, compared to a district average of 7.9%. Several questions that may need further consideration include: Does this school lose fewer of its students each year because the initial school choice creates a stronger commitment for families than if no choice had been made (and they were attending their neighborhood school)? Is it because the language offering is distinctive from the “typical” elementary school? Or is it something else?

Parents and private school admissions officers also spoke to the fact that the level of personalization within a school was important when considering the quality of the program. The importance of high-quality academic programs and personalization referenced by parents is supported by Murphy’s (2009) work on school improvement and closing achievement gaps. Murphy explains the importance of developing a school culture of high academic press and high personalization. Students need to be known and cared for, trust the school and the staff, have opportunities to be part of the community, have nurturing and supporting relationships with the educators, and be in an environment that reflects their culture and community. Parents and

administrators both within and outside of MNPS reflected these same sentiments.

The ways in which families define school quality differ. Smrekar (2009a) explains that teacher quality is more important to White parents with a college education, whereas test scores are more important to parents without a college degree and those who are Hispanic, Black, or Asian. Some of the White parents who had a college education did mention test scores as criteria for deciding whether or not to remain in schools in MNPS, but we are unable to conclude the level of importance of these criteria.

Finally, the level of safety and quality of academic programs may be more related to perception than actual data for many of the families within MNPS. Aligned with our finding that perception may matter more than actual experience or data, Bell (2009) found that parents' own experiences with schools as they were growing up may impact their perceptions of schools. This perception seems to impact whether a parent chooses a particular school initially and then decides whether or not their child should remain in that school in subsequent years. For instance, many parents who themselves attended private or public school as students seemed to rely on their own experiences to inform where they wanted their children to attend.

In addition to school safety and the quality of academic programs, the MNPS parents and administrators that we interviewed also spoke about the importance of proximity of school and home. This finding is consistent with Bell's (2009) research on school choice, in which it was found that parents consider both geographic distance and impressions of the neighborhood, student body, and fit for their child when selecting a

school. When considering geography, families either included or excluded particular schools saying, "We'll look here. We won't look there."

Social and cultural capital contribute to families' ability to leave a school once they are in attendance. The families who had the means to do so constantly referenced their choices and how their social networks impacted their choice of school. These parents spoke fluidly about the variety of options available, including charter schools, magnet schools, school districts in surrounding counties, and private schools. Additionally, parents spoke of the need to stay on top of the process for applying to any of these schools, sometimes making multiple trips to the central office to complete the application process. As one parent explained, "There have been years where I've had to go to the Metro office several times to get the paperwork correct." Parents who spoke of these choices and their ability to navigate the application process were able to do so because of their levels of social and cultural capital. As Smrekar (2009a) explained in her research on magnet schools, "Lack of cultural capital and social capital limits the choice options for lower income parents and diminishes their capacity to function in the same or equitable way as other citizen-consumers" (p. 394). Therefore, a lack of cultural and social capital may also limit the ability of some families to leave a particular school once they have started attending. Or, in the case of the grandmother and her second-grade grandson, they may lack the cultural and social capital to change the K-12 pipeline prior to the start of middle school.

When determining whether or not to remain in MNPS, many families talked about diversity. Some stated that they remained in their school because of its level of diversity, while others

***High-status Whites first consider the racial and socioeconomic makeup of the school before considering safety and academics.***

Saporito and Lareau (1999)

expressed a concern if the percentage of students who did not look like their child was too high at a particular school. As Smrekar (2009b) noted, the “tipping point” for White parents is about 40% or greater minority student population – the level at which White parents may exit a school. This sentiment is consistent with the findings of Saporito and Lareau (1999) when exploring the factors families consider when selecting a school. They found that race plays a big part for White families (but not as much for Blacks) even when majority White schools had worse school criteria such as test scores, safety concerns, levels of poverty, etc. They found that high-status Whites first considered the racial and socioeconomic makeup of the school before considering safety and academics. Additionally, Sohoni and Saporito (2009) found that private, charter, and magnet schools in San Diego had less diversity than nearby public schools. This increased level of segregation may be caused by the factors previously discussed, particularly the levels of cultural and social capital needed to navigate the world of school choice.

a couple of ways. First, many parents expressed frustration at not knowing which schools may be available from year to year with the creation of new magnets and changing attendance zones. Second, there were concerns about the movement of strong principals and school leaders. Parents wanted to know who might be the principal of their school and that the district was committed to keeping him or her at their school. They did not feel that just because a principal was doing well, he or she should be moved to another school so that it could have the same level of success.

***Where Are They Going?***

Once families have decided to leave MNPS, there are two main avenues they consider: moving to another county or enrolling in a private school. MNPS parents and principals did not feel that one option was more popular than the other. What seems to matter for these parents is often the demographic and socioeconomic makeup of their children’s school, which is corroborated in the school choice literature (Holme, 2002; Saporito & Lareau, 1999). Few parents referenced a school’s test scores, rather relying on their social networks and a school’s general reputation to inform their decisions. For many parents, both neighboring school districts and private schools have similarly positive status, making the choice often interchangeable.

***The “tipping point” for White parents is when a school is about 40% or more minority student population.***

Smrekar (2009b)

Finally, the degree of school choice available to families may actually be causing them to leave MNPS as opposed to staying within the district. Several families talked about the lack of stability in

Baker and LeTendre (2005), in looking at the global similarities of schooling, note this evolution of education as a means of obtaining status and success:

***“We decided to send our youngest [child to our neighborhood public school] for kindergarten and have been blown away, have had a phenomenal experience.”***

#### Parent of both MNPS and Private School

If schooling as an institution becomes more widespread and holds more control over how we make sense out of rearing children and defining individual merit, then academic achievement takes on even greater importance in the daily lives of children and parents...[will compete] by way of the institution of schooling to pass on advantage to children.

For middle class families who have the social and cultural capital to choose their child's school, they see it as a longterm investment and one worth making. Decisions on schooling are largely economic choices, ones they see reverberating into their child's college admission and career successes. Parents treat these decisions as a high-stakes competition, particularly with the academic magnet process, so that when many bright and talented students “lose” the lottery, their parents have multiple backup options to ensure their continued educational success. Families talked of applying to elite private schools in the same breath as the academic magnets, and they were ready to pay the tuition or mortgage to ensure that their child got the best education available.

Still, recent economic factors have played heavily into the decisions families make. One principal explained, when asked if parents were more likely to move or choose private schools:

In years past, I would have said it's more private schools. With the economy the way it has been the past few years, I think it's more

moving. And the reason for that is, private school is very expensive, and a lot of families' budgets have really tightened up, and they just can't afford it. But they can afford housing. [It] is so cheap, they can sell one house and buy another house with a very low interest rate.

Due to the recent economic recession, many families have had their options reduced. Both falling incomes and falling equity either kept parents in MNPS or saw them return from private schools. Many respondents mentioned that this was a great opportunity for MNPS to make a second impression on these families who had left, with one parent stating, “The economic downturn was the best thing that could have happened to Metro, because a lot of people could no longer afford private schools, and they were forced to look at their local schools and recognize, ‘Oh, they're not that bad.’”

Similarly, one MNPS father recounted his positive experience with his neighborhood elementary school, which they chose because they could not afford private school for their third child:

We decided to send our youngest here for kindergarten and have been blown away, have had a phenomenal experience. If we had thought or known that this school was like this when our first two kids went through elementary school, they would have come here for sure...My son's teachers have been amazing and the PTO is great, and the fact



▶ ***While more than 7,500 students leave the district every year, the effect of attrition on the district is actually quite small.***

that it's a neighborhood school, that's what we wanted.

Nonetheless, as the economy has improved in recent years, families have once again begun to look outside MNPS for their children's educational needs, as the uptick in the attrition rate demonstrates (Figure 12, page 20).

Of course, the story is much different for those families who do not have the resources to make these school choice decisions, so even if they are unhappy, they are often locked into their zoned school. One father at a low-income MNPS school recounted an opportunity to attend a private school:

Another opportunity arose for my child to attend [a premier private elementary school]. Of course, it is a private school - out of our pay grade. We decided that what she was getting was adequate. We had a friend whose children attended [this private school] who knew they were trying to bring about some diversity at this school and were looking to do that with us.

For many low-income families, even when a better school is available, it remains out of reach. This was found to be true for a high-performing elementary magnet program in MNPS, which serves primarily low-income children and requires all families to provide their own transportation. As a result, "When gas prices really started going up, I was losing parents left and right," reported the principal. Transportation, along with affordable housing, often keeps low-income families from accessing successful schools.

In sum, for parents all along the socioeconomic spectrum, decisions about schooling often revolve around decisions about economics, in particular costs and benefits and how much "return on investment" families can earn. This is particularly true of middle- and upper-class families, who have the social and cultural capital to best situate their children for success.

*What are the Implications for Achievement and Diversity?*

While more than 7,500 students leave the district every year, the effect of attrition on the district is actually quite small. In the analysis above, we calculated that if the district could retain 100% of those who left the district—a very ambitious goal—the result would be barely noticeable. For example, the percentage of students who receive FRL would be reduced by less than 0.1%. Similarly, the number of elementary and middle school students who would pass the statewide math exam would increase by about 0.1%. The largest impact on attrition is on the percentage of White and Black students in the district. Keeping those who leave will increase the percentage of White students and decrease the percentage of Black students in the district by about 5% in a single year.

Ultimately, even when considering the impact of reducing attrition over time, our analysis suggests that it would be hardly worth the effort to retain the leavers, at least when using these metrics.

This may seem counterintuitive given that nearly 10% of the district leaves before

graduation every year, but it is important to remember that even though leavers, on average, receive FRL at a lower rate and pass the state achievement tests at a higher rate than the district as a whole, they are still poor and do not achieve with overwhelmingly better results. If the district were able to hold onto a substantial number of those who leave every year, they would be adding to their already large number of poor and underachieving students.

### *What are the Implications beyond the School District?*

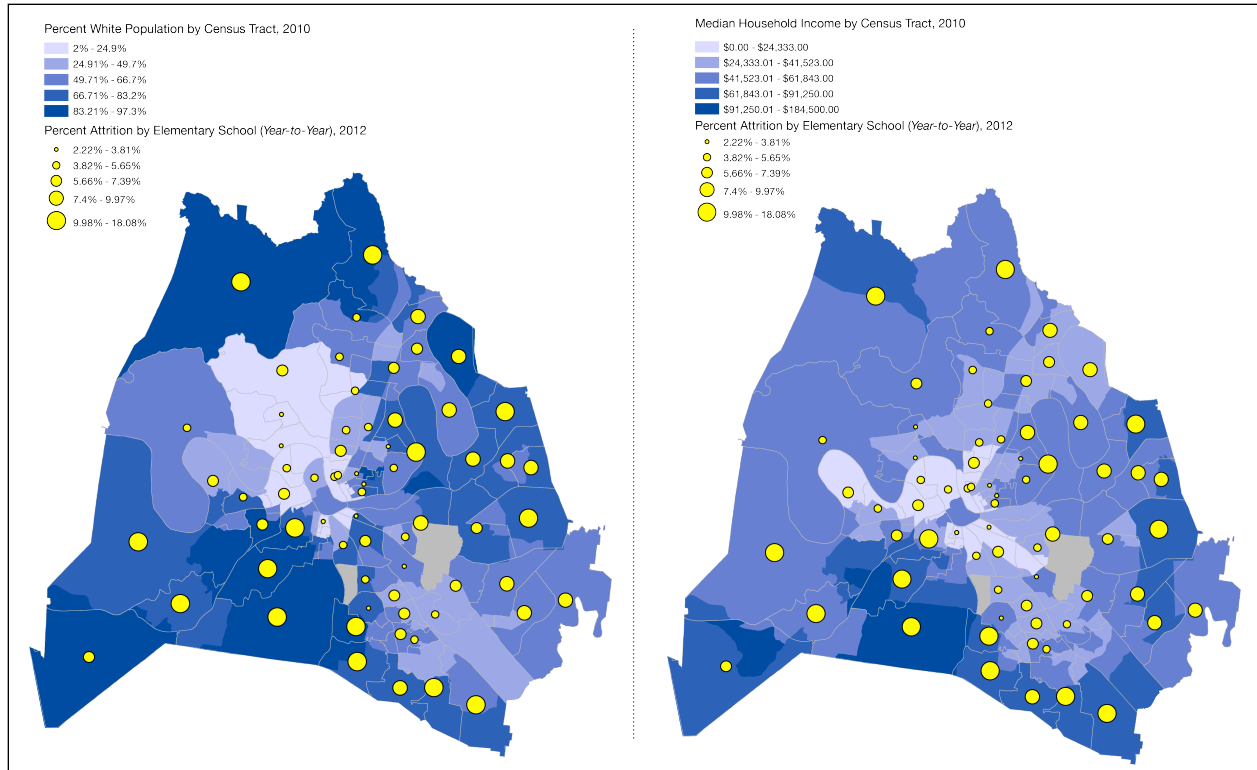
The loss of students from MNPS to surrounding counties or private schools has implications for not only the school district, but for housing, neighborhoods, and businesses. In particular, both the findings from our interviews as well as the research literature indicate that the loss of particular families from MNPS may impact the housing market and the racial concentration of neighborhoods.

The perception of the school system by both parents and the greater Nashville community has an impact on the housing market. School quality matters to individuals who are making the decision to relocate. When a real estate agent talked about new families moving in, she explained, “We have missed out in the past because we haven’t had good schools to compete with surrounding counties...we have to be able to compete with other schools in the surrounding area.” In order for the housing market in Davidson County to improve, the perception and quality of MNPS must improve. Put succinctly by a real estate agent, “It is easier to sell houses if you have great schools.” Some of these implications are evident in Figure 27. When we refer back to these maps

previously referenced, but this time look at the percentage of students lost each year for a particular school, we notice that those neighborhoods with the highest percentages of non-Whites and people in poverty are most likely to hold onto their students, whereas the neighborhoods with the highest percentages of Whites and higher income levels are more likely to lose students.

According to Iceland (2004), “residential segregation refers to the unequal distribution of groups across space” (p. 250). When reviewing levels of residential segregation, Iceland found that Blacks are most segregated with a dissimilarity index of 64 in the year 2000 (0 indicating perfect integration, 100 indicating complete segregation). This trend is evident in Davidson County as depicted in Figure 27. If families seek out schools that are close to where they live and that have students that look most like their children, and Nashville neighborhoods are as segregated as shown on these maps, then it will be difficult to change the racial makeup of both schools and neighborhoods. This segregation is explained by Cashin (2004) when she describes the “cognitive dissonance” of integration within the United States. She references a New York Times poll on racial attitudes in which 85% of Whites said they did not care whether they lived in a neighborhood where most of their neighbors were White or where most were Black, yet 85% of Whites lived in neighborhoods where they had no or few Black neighbors. This trend also holds true for schools in MNPS. Parents placed a value on diversity, but at the same time were fearful of too much diversity. Unfortunately, this segregation negatively impacts the social and economic well-being of minority groups (Massey & Denton, 1993).

Figure 27: Davidson County, by Attrition, Percent White, and Median Household Income



Source: MNPS, 2010 Census

The importance of this concentration of neighborhoods by race and poverty levels can be found in the research on neighborhood effects. We know that “the longer children live in disadvantaged neighborhoods, the less likely they are to graduate from high school” (Community Needs Evaluation, 2011, p. 8). This means that if MNPS is unable to attract or retain a diverse population both within schools as well as within neighborhoods, then students may be less likely to graduate from high school. Therefore, the district must strive to change the community perception about the quality of its schools, particularly the middle and high schools. This will be a challenge for MNPS because as Saporito (2003) found, when neighborhoods see an increase in non-White families, Whites will move to private schools. This transition was evident in our interviews with parents. Again, parents stated that they valued diversity, but at the same time

spoke to their fear of too much diversity. As one parent explained when asked why parents chose to attend a non-MNPS school, “It’s taught differently because the kids are different.”

Finally, having high-quality schools matters. According to a member of the Nashville Chamber of Commerce, “The perception of the public school system brands the community to some extent...people, companies, families make decisions based on that perception.”

## 6

## Recommendations & Conclusion

MNPS is understandably concerned with increasing the quality of the education it provides for all of its students. Key to this is making sure that all families feel that MNPS is their first choice when they live in or move to Davidson County. To that end, these are our recommendations based on the findings of this report.

### *More Data & Information*

- ❖ Develop and consistently administer exit surveys that reveal which students are leaving, where they are going, and why they are leaving. Our ability to determine why families left the district and where they were headed was limited by the data available to us. The problem of attrition is important to monitor in future years, and a consistent, reliable instrument for obtaining this information would be invaluable. The district should develop an exit survey that school or district officials could administer to families when they leave.
- ❖ Analyze the exit survey results annually at the school and district level to better understand why, when, and where families leave. This analysis could be integrated with the needs assessments and data analysis already being completed for school and district improvement planning. This would be another set of data to guide conversations around future action steps.
- ❖ Conduct focus groups with middle and high school parents to determine the reasons they

have chosen to remain in MNPS. The analysis provided includes information from elementary families. It may be helpful to find out from secondary families their reasons for staying in the district.

### *Increase Academic Quality*

- ❖ Continue efforts to increase the number of high-quality academic programs in middle schools. Use parent advocates, school leaders, marketing materials, and recruiting strategies to promote such efforts. In the end, parents want the best educational program for their child. We heard from parents that they desperately wanted to stay in the district, but found only one or two schools that were academically acceptable. By providing a greater number of high-quality middle schools, fewer parents will look outside of the district to satisfy the needs of their child. Additionally, parents need to know and believe that the quality of the middle schools is high. This will require similar strategies to those mentioned above.
- ❖ Develop a K-12 pipeline for schools that provides families and students with the sense of belonging and accomplishment that occurs from attending a system of schools from kindergarten through twelfth grade. Our findings revealed that some MNPS parents who are able to leave the district are thinking about their child's education not just in the coming year but several years down the road. If the district were able to communicate a

holistic vision of a kindergarten through twelfth-grade education—a “Picture of an MNPS Graduate”—parents may be more reluctant to jeopardize their child’s completion of an MNPS education by moving to another school or school system. Put another way, when a family decides to enroll their child in MNPS, they are not just enrolling for the education they will get that year, but are enrolling their child for what they will become at the end of a complete MNPS education.

- ❖ Use parent advocates, school leaders, marketing materials, and recruiting strategies to address negative perceptions of middle schools, particularly around safety. Both the research literature and our study have found that parents make decisions based on the information they have and the information provided to them by peers. MNPS should use multiple strategies to influence networks of parents through outreach programs, parent volunteer opportunities, school tours, and marketing events and materials to let families know that MNPS schools are quality. This may include sharing the many successes of MNPS, such as the amount of scholarship dollars awarded to MNPS students or which colleges are being attended by MNPS graduates. Middle (and high) schools may also decide to host their feeder elementary schools’ music programs or a variety of community events to bring people into their schools. The implementation of some of these strategies may begin to change parent (mis)perceptions at the ground level. This change in perception is imperative because parents need to feel that (middle) school is a safe place for their child, a place where their child will be known, cared for, and academically challenged.

### *Address School Choice*

- ❖ Increase the stability of district policies and school leadership. The parents we interviewed were planners; they were thinking two, five, and even ten years in the future when considering educational options for their child. There was a sense that it was incredibly hard to plan ahead when parents did not know what choice policies, attendance zones, district policies, and school leaders would be in place in the coming years. Parents desired a stable and predictable context so that they could make the best possible decision for their child.
- ❖ Increase the simplicity of school choice. In line with the previous recommendation, parents found the system for choosing schools complicated. With magnet schools, option schools, enhanced option schools, and charter schools, parents were confused and frustrated by the various choices available to their child. The options and procedures for choosing schools should be clear, simple, and readily available.
- ❖ Encourage local schools to better market themselves to potential families looking to make the best choice for their children. MNPS is no longer the only school option for families in Nashville. Additionally, many parents see themselves as school consumers. Therefore, placing an increased focus on customer service at schools by ensuring a welcoming and friendly office staff eager to give parents tours and answer questions may increase positive perceptions of parents.. We spoke to several parent-savvy principals who are giving over 80 parent tours a year and facilitating the visits of fourth grade classes to the neighborhood middle school. These

efforts should be encouraged and supported across the district to help families make well-informed decisions about MNPS.

importantly, it will certainly improve the perceived and actual value of an MNPS education by making sure the district will be the first choice for families.

### *Housing Policy is School Policy*

- ❖ Work with the local housing authority, chamber of commerce, and government officials when determining the location of new schools or redrawn attendance zones in order to increase the socioeconomic diversity within schools and neighborhoods. The affordability, availability, and condition of housing determine who will live where, and therefore, which school they will attend. To achieve fully integrated schools and to avoid concentrations of poverty, housing and school officials must work together to create neighborhoods and schools that are integrated, safe, and desirable.

### *Conclusion*

This report has explored the effects of attrition on attaining the goals of increased diversity and academic achievement. Our findings show that attrition does work against the district's efforts to achieve both goals. Many parents have deeply held concerns and beliefs about their child's education, particularly in the middle school years. While not all families choose to exit the district, some do. Of equal importance to the finding that families are leaving MNPS is the realization that the impact is minimal. District leaders should not be focused solely on holding onto these departing families. After all, our findings suggest that decreasing attrition is not the most effective way to address issues of diversity and achievement.

This conclusion does not mean that the district does not have something to learn from those who are leaving or considering leaving. Addressing these concerns might reduce attrition, but more



# References

## Article Citations

- Baird, J., Adelman, R.M., Reid, L.W., Jaret, C (2008). Immigrant settlement patterns: The role of metropolitan characteristics. *Sociological Inquiry*, 78 (3), 310-334.
- Baker, D.P. and LeTendre, G.K. (2005). *National differences, global similarities: World culture and the future of schooling*. Stanford, CA: University Press.
- Bell, C. (2009). Mapping educational opportunity. *American Journal of Education*, 115 (4), 493-521.
- Bourdieu, P. (1977). Cultural reproduction and social reproduction. In J. Karabel & A. H. Halsey (Eds). *Power and Ideology*. Oxford: Oxford Press.
- Cashin, S. (2004). *The failures of integration: How race and class are undermining the American dream*. New York: Public Affairs.
- Coleman, J. (1988). Social capital in the creation of human capital. *American Journal of Sociology*, 94, 95-120.
- Dougherty, J., Harrelson, J., Maloney, L., Murphy, D., Snow, M., & Zannoni, D. (2009). School choice in suburbia: Test scores, race, and housing markets. *American Journal of Education*, 115 (4), 523-548.
- Duncan, G. J. & Murnane, R.J. (Eds.). (2011). *Whither opportunity: Rising inequality, schools, and children's life chances*. New York, NY: Russell Sage Foundation.
- Farmer, B. (Producer). (2012, November 30). The choice: A school fight over middle class families. Nashville: National Public Radio
- Goldring, E.B. & Smrekar, C. (2002). Shifting from Court-Ordered to Court-Ended Desegregation in Nashville. University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill: UNC Center for Civil Rights.
- Harper, G. (2013). Nashville MSA leads the U.S. in job creation. Retrieved from [http://www.nashvillechamber.com/homepage/newsevents/blog/garrett\\_harper/13-05-02/Nashville\\_MSA\\_Leads\\_the\\_U\\_S\\_in\\_Job\\_Creation.aspx](http://www.nashvillechamber.com/homepage/newsevents/blog/garrett_harper/13-05-02/Nashville_MSA_Leads_the_U_S_in_Job_Creation.aspx).
- Henig, J. R. (1996). The local dynamics of choice: Ethnic preferences and institutional responses. In B. Fuller & R. F. Elmore (Eds.), *Who chooses? Who loses?* (pp. 95-117). New York: Teachers College Press.
- Holme, J. J. (2002). Buying homes, buying schools: School choice and the social construction of school quality. *Harvard Educational Review*, 72 (2), 177-205.
- Iceland, J. (2004). Beyond Black and White: Metropolitan residential segregation in multi-ethnic America. *Social Science Research*, 33 (2004), 248-271.
- Kahlenberg, R.D. (Ed.). (2012). *The future of school integration*. New York, NY: Century Foundation.

- Lareau, A. (1987). Social class difference in family-school relationships: The importance of cultural capital. *Sociology of Education*, 60, 73-85.
- Maddaus, J. (1990). Parent choice of school: What parents think and do. *Review of Research in Education*, 16, 267-295.
- Massey, D.S. & Denton, N. (1993). *American apartheid*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Metropolitan Social Services, Planning and Coordination (2011). Community Needs Evaluation: 2011. Metropolitan Government of Nashville and Davidson County.
- Murphy, J. (2009). *The educator's handbook for understanding and closing achievement gaps*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.
- Patton, M.Q. (2002). *Qualitative research & evaluation methods*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Pride, R.A. & Woodward, J.D. (1985). *The Burden of Busing: The Politics of Desegregation in Nashville, Tennessee*. Knoxville, TN: The University of Tennessee Press.
- Saporito, S. (2003). Private choices, public consequences: Magnet school choice and segregation by race and poverty. *Social Problems*, 50 (2), 181-203.
- Saporito, S. & Lareau, A. (1999). School selection as a process: The multiple dimensions of race in framing educational choice. *Social Problems*, 46 (3), 418-439.
- Sarrio, J. (2008, May 11). Saving Nashville schools. *The Tennessean*. Retrieved from <http://www.tennessean.com/article/20080511/NEWS04/805110398/Saving-Nashville-schools>
- Schneider, M. & Buckley, J. (2002). What do parents want from schools? Evidence from the internet. *Education Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 24 (2), 133-144.
- Smrekar, C. (2009a). The social context of magnet schools: How and why parents choose magnets. In M. Berends, M. G. Spring, D. Ballou, & H. J. Walberg (Eds.), *The handbook of school choice* (pp. 393-408). New York: Routledge.
- Smrekar, C. (2009b). Beyond the tipping point: Issues of racial diversity in magnet schools following unitary status. *Peabody Journal of Education*, 84, 209-226.
- Sohoni, D. & Saporito, S. (2009). Mapping school segregation: Using GIS to explore racial segregation between schools and their corresponding attendance areas. *American Journal of Education*, 115 (4), 569-600.
- Tennessee Advisory Committee to the United States Commission on Civil Rights.(2008). *School Desegregation in Tennessee: 12 Districts Released from Desegregation Orders, 17 Districts Remain Under Court Jurisdiction*. Washington, DC.



*Image Citations*

**Page 1**

Davidson County. <http://www.weichertrents.com/TN/Davidson>

**Page 5**

MNPS Logo. <http://mnpsfamilies.com>

**Page 6**

Books. <http://www.readcwbooks.com/books.jpg>

**Page 8**

Student Desk. <http://bionicarrot.blogspot.com>

**Page 28**

School Crossing Sign. <http://hot-dogma.com/files/2013/01/school-sign-green-lg.jpg>

**Page 32**

Violin. <http://violinnotes.info/wp-content/uploads/2010/06/full-size-violin1.jpg>



# Appendices

## *Appendix A: Interview Participants and Protocols*

<b>INTERVIEW PARTICIPANTS</b>	
<b>MNPS Elementary Schools</b>	
<i>Parents</i>	
Lowest Attrition Level Schools	11
Highest Attrition Level Schools	18
<b>Subtotal</b>	<b>29</b>
<i>Principals</i>	
Lowest Attrition Level Schools	3
Highest Attrition Level Schools	3
<b>Subtotal</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>Non-MNPS School Representatives</b>	
Surrounding Counties Enrollment Staff	2
Private Schools Admissions Officers	6
<b>Subtotal</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>Community Representatives</b>	
Realtor	1
Chamber of Commerce	1
<b>Total Interviewees</b>	<b>45</b>

## Interview Protocol: MNPS Parents

### GENERAL BACKGROUND INFORMATION

1. Tell us your story...how did you get here?
  - ❖ How many school-aged children do you have?
  - ❖ Where do/have they attend(ed) school?
  - ❖ When did you come here? What led you to choose this particular school?
2. What type of job do you currently have or have you had in the past?

### HOW PARENTS GATHER INFORMATION

3. How did you decide on the school for your children?
4. What kinds of information were you interested in? What was most valuable?
5. Have you talked with anyone about this school or previous schools your children have attended? Who? What information did you gain from those conversations?

### REASONS FOR LEAVING/STAYING

6. Do you know people who have left this school? Do you know why they left? Where they went? Is it common for families at this school to leave?
7. Have you ever considered trying another school? If yes, why?
  - ❖ What type of school? (charter, private, other county, etc.)
  - ❖ Why have you decided to stay?
8. What factors will influence whether you decide to stay or leave?

### GENERAL MNPS SATISFACTION

9. In your opinion, what does the average person think about Metro schools?
10. How do you think Metro schools are doing in general?
  - ❖ How do you get your information concerning Metro schools?
11. What do you think Metro needs to do to improve?

## Interview Protocol: MNPS Administrators

### GENERAL BACKGROUND INFORMATION

1. What is your position?
2. How long have you worked at this school? In MNPS?

### REASONS FOR LEAVING/STAYING

3. When students enroll at your school from outside the district (private or other public), why do they choose MNPS and your school?
  - ❖ Do parents tour the school or speak with someone at the school before making the decision to enroll at your school? Do they consider private schools or moving to another district as well?
4. Do you have a sense of the percentage of students who attend your school and then leave the district every year? Attend another MNPS school and then leave the district? Does the leaving of families impact your school? In what ways?
5. If families leave this school to enroll in a private school or another district, do you know why they left? Where they went? At what age they left? Are there patterns in who's leaving?
  - ❖ If a family does leave the district, when during the school year does this happen, e.g., during summer, during the school year?
6. What do you do to keep students in the district? What does MNPS do?
7. How can the schools or MNPS do a better job holding onto students?
8. Does a staff member gather any information about parents who leave the school or the district? How are exit codes determined?

### HOW PARENTS GATHER INFORMATION

9. How do you think parents decide the school their children will attend?

### GENERAL MNPS SATISFACTION

10. In your opinion, what do you think typical parents at your school think about Metro schools?
11. In your opinion, are parents satisfied with your school?

## Interview Protocol: Receiving Schools (neighboring districts, private schools)

### GENERAL BACKGROUND INFORMATION

1. What is your position at this school? How long have you worked at this school?
2. In what ways do you interact with the families of students at this school?
3. What is your role with enrollment/transition of new students to this school?

### WHO'S LEAVING?

4. Are there particular schools, areas, or districts from which you draw many of your students?
  - ❖ Is it common for families to leave a Metro school to attend your school?
5. Is there a typical age or grade-level when students enroll in your school?
6. How close do the families typically live to your school?
  - ❖ Do families move into a new home to attend your school?
  - ❖ Does your school provide any sort of transportation?
7. Does your school have a cap or waiting list? How easy is it for a family to enroll in your school?

### FAMILY MOTIVATIONS

8. Based on your experience, why do families leave Metro schools?
9. Besides your school, what type of schools are potential families usually considering? (Metro, charter, magnet, private, etc.)
10. What do these potential families cite as reasons for being interested in your school?
11. How do potential families find out information about your school?
12. Do you ever have students who have enrolled in your school from a Metro school and then returned to Metro? Do you know why?

### SCHOOL FEATURES

13. How does your school differ from a typical Metro school?
  - ❖ What advantages do you have compared to a typical Metro school?
  - ❖ What advantages do Metro schools have compared to your school?
14. In what ways might parents get involved at this school?

### GENERAL MNPS SATISFACTION

15. In your opinion, what does the average person think about Metro schools?
16. How do you think Metro schools are doing in general?
  - ❖ How do you get your information concerning Metro schools?
17. What do you think Metro needs to do to improve?

## Interview Protocol: Community Members

### GENERAL BACKGROUND INFORMATION

1. What are some of your key responsibilities in your role?
  - ❖ How long have you been in this position?
2. Do you have partnerships with other community organizations? Who are those organizations? What kind of work do you do together?
3. In what ways are you involved with Metro schools?
4. How do you communicate with district representatives?

### PERCEPTION

5. Is the Metro School District a quality school district? Why or why not? What information do you consider when making this determination? What are key areas of improvement?
6. How does the level of quality of schools impact your work? Your interactions with other community members?
7. Do your children (if relevant) attend Metro Schools? Why or why not?
8. What does the typical Nashvillian think about Metro schools?

### IMPACT

9. In what ways does the reputation of Metro schools impact the local economy? Housing market?
10. What are those factors that seem to most influence families' home buying decisions?
11. If schools are a factor, what are people considering? What are those things that are most important to them?
12. How has immigration impacted Metro schools?
13. Are the schools in Metro of equal quality? Why or why not? Are there particular areas of the city where there are differences? What is the cause of those differences?
14. What changes would you like to see made to the school system?
15. If the reputation of the schools improved, what might the impact be on Nashville? Are there particular areas that would be impacted more than others?

*Appendix B: Elementary School Attrition, 2011-12*

MNPS Elementary School	% Actual Attrition	% Predicted Attrition	Actual-Predicted
A. Z. Kelley Elementary (PK-4)	11.4	8.0	3.4
Alex Green Elementary School (PK-4)	7.1	7.1	0.0
Amqui Elementary School (PK-4)	6.6	7.3	-0.7
Andrew Jackson Elementary School (PK-4)	10.6	10.7	-0.1
Bellshire Elementary Design Center (PK-4)	4.9	6.0	-1.1
Bordeaux Elementary Enhanced Option School (PK-4)	2.7	3.3	-0.6
Buena Vista Elementary Enhanced Option School (PK-5)	4.3	4.1	0.2
Caldwell Elementary Enhanced Option School (PK-4)	5.4	3.4	2.0
Carter-Lawrence Elementary Magnet School (PK-4)	2.4	4.3	-1.9
Chadwell Elementary School (PK-4)	4.6	6.9	-2.3
Charlotte Park Elementary School (PK-4)	6.3	8.3	-2.0
Cockrill Elementary School (PK-5)	5.5	6.9	-1.4
Cole Elementary School (PK-4)	5.5	6.7	-1.2
Crieve Hall Elementary School (K-4)	11.1	10.2	1.0
Cumberland Elementary School (PK-4)	5.6	5.5	0.1
Dan Mills Elementary School (PK-4)	8.5	8.4	0.1
Dodson Elementary School (PK-4)	9.2	7.6	1.6
Drexel Preparatory (K-4)	7.0	N/A	N/A
DuPont Elementary School (PK-4)	9.0	10.5	-1.6

MNPS Elementary School	% Actual Attrition	% Predicted Attrition	Actual-Predicted
Eakin Elementary School (K-4)	12.3	8.3	3.9
East End Preparatory (K)	3.4	N/A	N/A
Fall-Hamilton Elementary Enhanced Option School (PK-4)	4.6	4.5	0.1
Gateway Elementary School (K-4)	7.7	8.8	-1.1
Glenclyff Elementary School (PK-4)	5.3	5.6	-0.2
Glendale Elementary Spanish Immersion School (PK-4)	6.5	9.1	-2.5
Glengarry Elementary School (PK-4)	3.0	5.8	-2.9
Glenn Elementary Enhanced Option School (PK-4)	5.4	5.3	0.0
Glenview Elementary School (PK-4)	4.2	6.1	-1.9
Goodlettsville Elementary School (PK-4)	12.5	8.8	3.7
Gower Elementary School (PK-4)	11.5	11.1	0.4
Granbery Elementary School (K-4)	10.5	9.9	0.6
Harpeth Valley Elementary School (PK-4)	7.4	11.2	-3.8
Hattie Cotton STEM Magnet Elementary School (PK-4)	4.6	5.2	-0.6
Haywood Elementary School (PK-4)	6.2	5.3	0.9
Henry Maxwell Elementary School (PK-4)	10.5	7.8	2.6
Hermitage Elementary School (PK-4)	7.6	10.2	-2.6
Hickman Elementary School (PK-4)	7.0	7.6	-0.6
Hull-Jackson Montessori Magnet Elementary School (PS-4)	3.0	3.7	-0.7
Inglewood Elementary School (PK-4)	3.4	4.0	-0.6



MNPS Elementary School	% Actual Attrition	% Predicted Attrition	Actual-Predicted
J E Moss Elementary School (PK-4)	5.4	7.5	-2.1
Joelton Elementary School (PK-4)	18.1	13.1	4.9
John B Whitsitt Elementary School (PK-4)	6.5	4.8	1.7
Jones Paideia Magnet School (K-4)	1.9	2.8	-0.9
Julia Green Elementary School (K-4)	10.8	9.0	1.9
Kirkpatrick Elementary Enhanced Option School (PK-4)	4.2	2.3	2.0
Lakeview Elementary Design Center (PK-4)	7.7	8.3	-0.6
Lockeland Elementary Design Center (K-4)	6.8	8.7	-1.8
May Werthan Shayne Elementary School (PK-4)	10.0	9.5	0.5
McGavock Elementary School (PK-4)	9.5	6.4	3.2
Mt. View Elementary (K-4)	7.7	9.4	-1.7
Napier Enhanced Option School (PK-4)	2.2	3.0	-0.8
Neelys Bend Elementary School (K-4)	8.0	7.9	0.1
Norman Binkley Elementary School (PK-4)	3.8	6.6	-2.8
Old Center Elementary School (PK-4)	5.5	7.8	-2.3
Paragon Mills Elementary School (PK-4)	6.1	6.5	-0.4
Park Avenue Elementary Enhanced Option School (PK-5)	6.0	3.3	2.6
Pennington Elementary School (PK-4)	11.0	7.8	3.2
Percy Priest Elementary School (K-4)	12.6	10.0	2.6
Robert Churchwell Museum Magnet Elementary School (PK-5)	5.4	3.0	2.4

MNPS Elementary School	% Actual Attrition	% Predicted Attrition	Actual-Predicted
Robert E. Lillard Elementary (K-4)	3.5	4.6	-1.1
Rosebank Elementary School (PK-4)	4.8	6.3	-1.5
Ross Elementary School (PK-4)	3.8	3.5	0.3
Ruby Major Elementary School (K-4)	11.0	9.1	1.9
Shwab Elementary School (PK-4)	6.0	4.6	1.4
Smithson-Craighead Academy (K-4)	2.0	N/A	N/A
Stanford Montessori Elementary School (PS-4)	6.1	8.0	-1.9
Sylvan Park Elementary Paideia Design Center (PK-4)	6.5	9.7	-3.2
Taylor Stratton Elementary School (PK-4)	6.2	5.8	0.4
Thomas A. Edison Elementary School (PK-4)	8.9	8.1	0.8
Tom Joy Elementary School (PK-4)	5.7	6.0	-0.3
Tulip Grove Elementary School (PK-4)	7.6	9.0	-1.4
Tusculum Elementary School (PK-4)	6.0	6.0	0.0
Una Elementary School (PK-4)	6.1	6.7	-0.6
Warner Elementary Enhanced Option School (PK-4)	3.3	2.8	0.5
Westmeade Elementary School (K-4)	12.0	9.3	2.7

Appendix C: Marketshare of MNPS and Comparable Districts<sup>12</sup>

METRO NASHVILLE PUBLIC SCHOOLS							
Grade / Age Breakdown				Racial Breakdown			
Grade/Age	Enrolled	Census	Market Share	Race	Enrolled K-12	Census 5-18	Market Share
gr K-4 / ages 5-9	33,851	37,613	90%	Asian	3,107	3,329	93%
gr 5-8 / ages 10-14	22,747	33,904	67%	Black	36,503	37,282	98%
gr 9-12 / ages 15-18	20,172	28,683	70%	Hispanic	13,769	14,043	98%
<b>TOTALS</b>	79,117	100,200	79%	White	25,800	47,235	55%
				<b>TOTALS</b>	79,179	101,889	78%

JEFFERSON COUNTY PUBLIC SCHOOLS							
Grade / Age Breakdown				Racial Breakdown			
Grade/Age	Enrolled	Census	Market Share	Race	Enrolled K-12	Census 5-18	Market Share
gr K-5 / ages 5-10	36,829	56,941	65%	Asian	2,794	3,319	84%
gr 6-8 / ages 11-14	20,679	37,741	55%	Black	36,218	35,565	102%
gr 9-12 / ages 15-18	27,459	38,152	72%	Hispanic	5,388	7,551	71%
<b>TOTALS</b>	99,775	132,834	75%	White	50,686	84,279	60%
				<b>TOTALS</b>	95,086	130,714	73%

CHARLOTTE-MECKLENBERG SCHOOLS							
Grade / Age Breakdown				Racial Breakdown			
Grade/Age	Enrolled	Census	Market Share	Race	Enrolled K-12	Census 5-18	Market Share
gr K-5 / ages 5-10	68,276	79,327	86%	Asian	6,901	7,669	90%
gr 6-8 / ages 11-14	31,020	49,059	63%	Black	57,965	64,430	90%
gr 9-12 / ages 15-18	38,716	48,821	79%	Hispanic	24,152	27,342	88%
<b>TOTALS</b>	138,012	177,207	78%	White	44,854	82,442	54%
				<b>TOTALS</b>	133,872	181,883	74%

<sup>12</sup> Most Recent School Enrollment Data compared with 2010 Census Data, so not a perfect year to year comparison. Also, age and grade breakdowns are rough estimates, since there's not a perfect cutoff.

WAKE COUNTY PUBLIC SCHOOL SYSTEM							
Grade / Age Breakdown				Racial Breakdown			
Grade/Age	Enrolled	Census	Market Share	Race	Enrolled K-12	Census 5-18	Market Share
gr K-5 / ages 5-10	70,564	81,328	87%	Asian	9,178	9,923	92%
gr 6-8 / ages 11-14	33,750	50,883	66%	Black	36,225	42,684	85%
gr 9-12 / ages 15-18	42,373	49,224	86%	Hispanic	21,960	22,836	96%
<b>TOTALS</b>	146,687	181,435	81%	White	72,297	109,150	66%
				<b>TOTALS</b>	139,660	184,593	76%

DENVER PUBLIC SCHOOLS							
Grade / Age Breakdown				Racial Breakdown			
Grade/Age	Enrolled	Census	Market Share	Race	Enrolled K-12	Census 5-18	Market Share
gr K-5 / ages 5-10	40,470	44,101	92%	Asian	2,516	3,087	82%
gr 6-8 / ages 11-14	16,343	23,635	69%	Black	11,055	12,370	89%
gr 9-12 / ages 15-18	19,430	24,181	80%	Hispanic	44,221	48,304	92%
<b>TOTALS</b>	76,243	91,917	83%	White	15,477	25,155	62%
				<b>TOTALS</b>	76,243	88,916	86%

GREENVILLE COUNTY SCHOOLS							
Grade / Age Breakdown				Racial Breakdown			
Grade/Age	Enrolled	Census	Market Share	Race	Enrolled K-12	Census 5-18	Market Share
gr K-5 / ages 5-10	32,961	36,164	91%	Black	15,751	17,624	89%
gr 6-8 / ages 11-14	15,716	23,800	66%	Hispanic	7,909	8,662	91%
gr 9-12 / ages 15-18	19,751	24,367	81%	White	40,795	57,566	71%
<b>TOTALS</b>	68,428	84,331	81%	<b>TOTALS</b>	64,455	83,852	77%