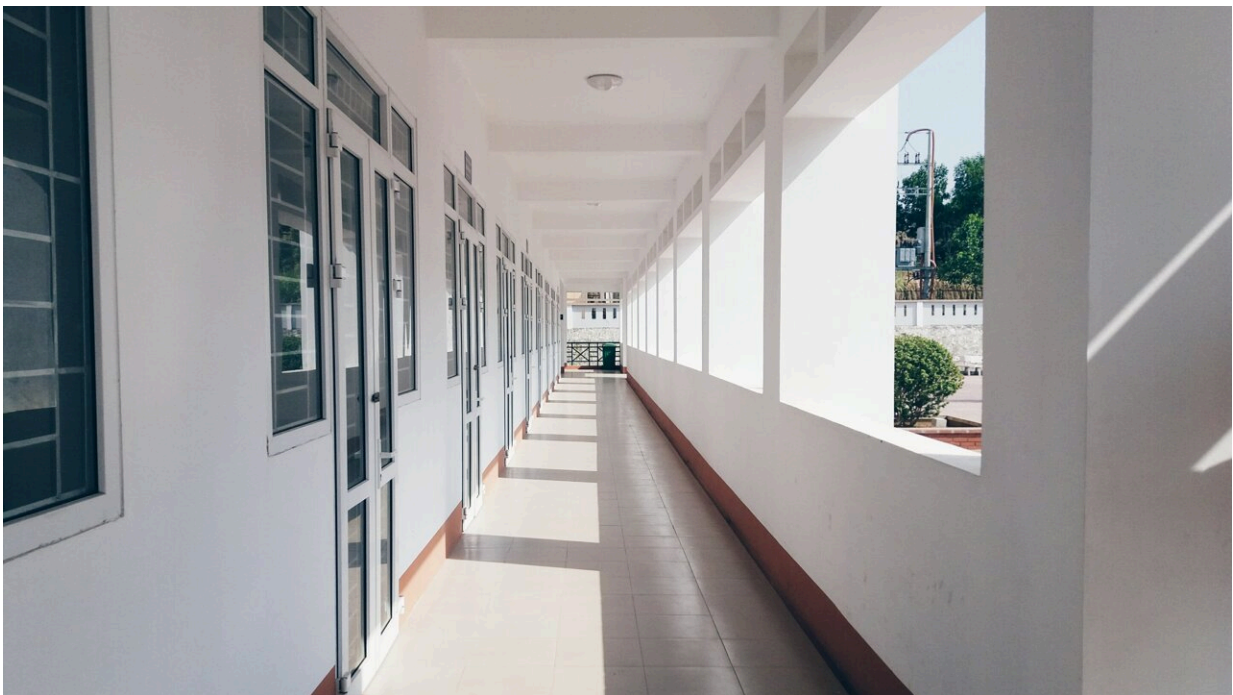


Study finds school choice not offered equitably to low-income, less-educated families, who are forced to compromise more

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Every parent wants the best possible school for their children. But as the saying goes, you can't always get what you want. A new study from the University of Kansas shows that low-income parents, those from marginalized racial and ethnic backgrounds and those with lower

educational attainment tend to compromise more on school features they prefer compared to their predominantly white, affluent peers. This difference in preference compromise correlates directly with differences in parents' degree of satisfaction with schools they choose.

There is an ongoing debate in American education about "school choice"—an increasingly popular policy of allowing public school parents to freely choose schools above and beyond those to which they are assigned. Conventionally, such choice only extended to [private schools](#), but contemporary school choice policy has expanded this to a growing body of charter and magnet schools.

In some districts, traditional neighborhood schools are also open to parental choice in varying degrees. The argument in favor of school choice goes that if people are able to choose which school their children attend based on the school's qualities, their desires will be satisfied to a greater degree, and students and families will all do better.

"The commonsense view seems to be that if you provide choice, people who choose their school will be happier with what they get," said study lead author Argun Saatcioglu, KU professor of educational leadership & [policy studies](#) and sociology. "One thing that has always bugged me about that is the question: 'Are people really able to act on their true preferences and to what degree?'"

Whether parents compromise on school features they prefer has not been thoroughly studied, an issue that goes to the heart of the "school choice" policy.

To bridge the gap, Saatcioglu and co-author Anthony Snethen, who earned his doctorate in educational leadership & policy studies from KU in 2021 and is currently at the International School of Panama, relied on data from a statistically representative sample of 436 parents in Kansas

City, Missouri.

The data were collected in 2015-2016 across multiple locations to find out what parents looked for when choosing a school, where their children attended school and how happy the parents were with their chosen school. Importantly, the parents were asked to provide information on their school preferences under ideal world conditions—where one can have anything they want, such as good teachers, diverse students, foreign language, good location, safety, good facilities and other factors—and then again provide the same information under actual, real-life conditions, where constraints may limit the preferences one may act on.

The study develops a novel methodology and related procedures to compare the two sets of responses in order to estimate the degree of "preference compromise" of each parent.

The results show that parents of all incomes, ages, education levels and various demographics look for a wide array of factors in a school. However, the lower-income and lesser-educated parents, and those from marginalized racial and [ethnic backgrounds](#), are forced to compromise more on their preferences. And greater compromise is related to lower satisfaction with a chosen school.

The study was published in the journal *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*.

The researchers chose KCMO because it is a metropolitan location with abundant school choice. Parents are allowed to choose what public, charter or private school they send their children to, regardless of their location.

"There are always capacity issues," Saatcioglu said, but technically all

schools are open to all parents. Kansas City, Missouri, is also a location with greater economic and racial variance among residents.

"The idea was to see who's more susceptible to making compromises," Saatcioglu said. "People who are most in need of choices are making the most compromises. That doesn't make sense to me. It should be the other way around."

The affluent parents in the study were shown to make less compromises between what they desired in a school in an ideal world setting and what they viewed as the most important factors in the schools their child attended. Those who were less affluent and those with lower educational attainment had to make more compromises. And the former group was more satisfied with the schools their students attended.

Saatcioglu said the results also showed that [low-income](#) and historically marginalized populations do not have "choice illiteracy" or an inability to understand what school would be best. This cynical view toward low-income populations is common, he said, but disproved by data that showed all demographics had a very wide variance of the qualities they most desired for their students.

"The question became, 'Are low-income and less-educated parents just as heterogeneous as everyone else in their preference formation?' It turns out they are," Saatcioglu said. "This shows they are just as capable of making complex choices as anyone else."

Researchers also considered geographic data. Participants reported the ZIP code in which they lived and what school their children attended. Those who lived in [lower-income](#) neighborhoods were less likely to send their children to reputable charter or private schools, because they rarely are located near such neighborhoods.

That adds credibility to the idea that low-income families face more challenges such as lack of transportation or ability to take time from work to take students farther distances to school. The population also indicated they need to focus on basic concerns like safety, less crime in the school area, and providing breakfast and lunch at school.

The study results show that if [school choice](#) is to be the model educational policy, it is necessary to ensure that current social, economic and racial inequalities in the geographic context are reduced to a significant degree in the first place.

"If you want an effective and equitable choice system, you have to make sure that not so much compromise is happening," Saatcioglu said. "Everyone has to make compromises in life, but here the disparities were such that they didn't allow all parents to make choices equitably. The system now is just tending to reproduce existing hierarchies. The affluent tend to make fewer compromises because they don't have to."

More information: Argun Saatcioglu et al, Preference Compromise and Parent Satisfaction With Schools in Choice Markets: Evidence From Kansas City, Missouri, *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis* (2022). [DOI: 10.3102/01623737221121812](https://doi.org/10.3102/01623737221121812)

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