As school choice becomes a reality in communities throughout America, the question remains as to whether parents feel they have a real choice of education approaches that truly fit their children's needs, potential and learning style. Recent motivation research commissioned by James Walton through the Walton Family Foundation looked at the aspirations parents from all walks of life have for their children and whether they had enough choices of different education approaches to accomplish their goal as both parents and citizens.
Giving parents a choice in the schools their children attend is an acknowledgement that parents know what is best for their children. It also creates a new dynamic of the parent as an empowered consumer of education. The idea of schools serving a wider social function for the good of all certainly holds true, but it functions through actualizing comprehensive skills in each child. Today, schools ideally serve the dual role of helping each parent, regardless of socio-economic status, achieve their personal goal of raising the ideal young adult they aspire to see while fulfilling their social responsibility to raise a productive member of society.

Real Choices research with parents sought to answer important questions in the age of school choice: what do parents see as the ideal person, are their aspirations in alignment with what society needs from education, and does our present education system help parents achieve their personal and social goals for their children? The results are illuminating:

- **Parents are more balanced in their ideal approach to education than the system that serves them.** They see academics and preparation for college and career as the floor, not the ceiling, and focus more on the development of holistic skills that make individuals truly capable of self-sufficiency, social connection and productivity.

- **Parent aspirations and preferences are consistent across race, ethnicity and socio-economic status.** The research shows that parents share common aspirations, values and the desire for solutions. African-Americans place slightly more emphasis on social skills than whites; Hispanics place slightly more emphasis on civic and social skills; and Asians place slightly more emphasis on adaptive and social skills. However, the differences are minor relative to the overall alignment of all demographic groups.

- **Education isn’t just academic achievement.** Parents are most interested in a combination of intellectual, emotional and moral development, where critical thinking and problem-solving meet self-worth, independence, empathy and knowing right from wrong. Only 7% of parents identify academics as the primary pathway to success, and all want more intentional teaching of social and emotional skills, including those parents who are satisfied with traditional education.

- **Education should fit the child; the child shouldn’t have to fit the education.** Parents believe that children learn in different ways, and not every education approach works for each child at any given stage of their education. Most want children to be able to adapt to education settings, but they are most concerned that the education truly fits the learning style and interests of the child. They strongly favor having distinctly different types of education approaches available to all children.

- **Parents feel they have choice but not necessarily real choices.** Many feel their choices are limited by the availability, cost and convenience of programs. Those in urban and rural areas tend to see a distinct lack of choices, or alternatives that are limited by lotteries or transportation needs. Those who have more choices available feel that they are variations on the traditional approach to education, not distinctly different approaches.
• **Real choice is defined by distinct choices.** Choice is having a selection of different education approaches that fit the student. Nearly all parents supported a school district model where children have access to three different types of education approaches throughout K–12: traditional education that focuses primarily on academics; blended education that combines academics with the intentional teaching of social and emotional skills; and student-centered learning where children learn by pursuing their interests inside and outside the classroom. Ideally, these programs would be offered in equal weight and number throughout school districts.

• **More choices don’t divide the marketplace—they unite it.** Nearly all parents become dramatically more enthusiastic about education when they have different education approaches to fit the needs, interests and learning styles of their children. Satisfaction with what they have now is not synonymous with satisfaction in what they want and feel that every child needs.

**These findings help us understand what parents want, align education with their goals, drive higher satisfaction with the education system and fully maximize the talent this country has in young people.**
RESEARCH HIGHLIGHTS

INTELLECTUAL, EMOTIONAL AND MORAL DEVELOPMENT RANK AS THE MOST IMPORTANT ELEMENTS SCHOOLS SHOULD BE PROVIDING IN ADDITION TO HIGH-QUALITY ACADEMIC PREPARATION TO PREPARE CHILDREN FOR FUTURE SUCCESS.

1. Intellectual development, as defined by critical thinking, problem-solving and setting and pursuing goals, ranks the highest.

2. Emotional development, as defined by self-worth, identity, responsible, motivated, independent and empathy, ranks second overall.

3. Moral development, as defined by knowing right from wrong, making good choices and selecting good friends, ranks third.

PARENTS SELF-IDENTIFIED THEIR MOST IMPORTANT GOALS FOR RAISING A COMPLETE AND CAPABLE ADULT.

31% want to develop children into balanced, well-rounded adults.

30% want to be successful in preparing children for the real world.

26% seek to develop children into responsible adults who are self-sufficient.

12% are focused on producing children who will achieve great things.
PARENTS SEE THEMSELVES AS FULFILLING A CORE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY, AND IDENTIFIED THE MOST IMPORTANT OUTCOMES OF K-12 EDUCATION TO COMMUNITY AND SOCIETY.

- **39%** see their participation in education as fulfilling a core responsibility of the community to its children and citizens.
- **25%** see value in creating a capable workforce that sustains successful businesses.
- **15%** see education as helping to create a more pleasant community in which to live.

A MAJORITY OF PARENTS SEEK THE TEACHING OF LIFE-SKILLS AS A PATHWAY TO THE HIGHER VALUES OF CONNECTION, CONTRIBUTION AND INDEPENDENCE.

- **54%** of parents want to start with building comprehensive life-skills that incorporate personality traits such as honesty and respect with hard work, motivation, goal-setting, concentration, communication and executive functioning.
- **46%** of parents follow different pathways to different goals.
  - **16%** focus on building social skills as a path to great connection with oneself and others.
  - **15%** start with building civic skills that help them self-actualize, form healthy relationships and positively contribute to the community and world.
  - **8%** emphasize the need for adaptive skills that lead to real-world aptitude and core capabilities that help one lead a personally purposeful life.
  - **7%** favor academic skills that lead to higher academic achievement and professional success.

39%

25%

15%

54%

46%

16%

15%

8%

7%
Parents want a combination of academic and social and emotional development; far fewer want a primary focus on academics.

91% favor the combination of academic and social and emotional development.

51% complete agreement
9% overall negative

Education that focuses specifically on academics or social and emotional development has less support and higher negative ratings.

75% overall positive, sole focus on academic achievement.

30% complete agreement
25% overall negative

73% overall positive, sole focus on social and emotional development.

27% complete agreement
27% overall negative
PARENTS STRONGLY BELIEVE THE EDUCATION APPROACH SHOULD FIT THE CHILD BUT ACKNOWLEDGE THAT THE CHILD SHOULD BE ABLE TO ADAPT.

89% want an approach where the education fits their child rather than requiring the child to fit the education.

76% still want their child to meet the demands of an education program, even if it doesn’t fit their natural learning style.

ONLY THREE IN TEN PARENTS SAY THEY HAVE A REAL CHOICE IN EDUCATION APPROACHES.

33% say they had no choice of education approaches.

38% claim to have had some choice, but all the realistic options were very similar.

17% say they had at least two realistic and different options.

12% feel they had a great deal of choice with many options available.

74% agree that having a choice of schools offering the same thing is no choice at all for children.

When asked if most school districts offer only one approach to education even if they offer a choice of schools, 77% agree and 23% disagree.
SEVEN IN TEN PARENTS IDENTIFY AT LEAST ONE FACTOR RESTRICTING THEIR OPPORTUNITY TO ENROLL THEIR CHILD IN A SCHOOL.

37% identify cost (defined as more than they can afford or more than it is worth).

31% identify distance and transportation considerations.

20% identify selectivity of the school or a lottery process.

PARENTS STRONGLY SUPPORT A REAL CHOICES SCHOOL DISTRICT MODEL THAT HAS DIFFERENT EDUCATION APPROACHES THAT FIT THEIR CHILD’S NEEDS AND LEARNING STYLE.

95% of parents see the Real Choices model as appealing, with 50% finding it extremely appealing.

5% of parents see the Real Choices model as unappealing.

75% of parents see the current education model as appealing, with 25% finding it extremely appealing.

25% of parents see the current education model as unappealing.
When offered three distinct education choices, parents welcomed the approaches, with the majority favoring an approach that balanced academics with social and emotional development.

**Traditional**
Prioritizes academic education with social and emotional development taking place through academic work and interaction with teachers and peers.

78% of parents find this approach appealing

- 32% find it extremely appealing
- 21% say it would be the right fit for their child at present
- 22% find it unappealing
- 77% say it is available in the community

**Blended**
Prioritizes traditional academic preparation along with intentional activities that teach and support social and emotional development.

92% of parents find this approach appealing

- 50% find it extremely appealing
- 42% say it would be the right fit for their child at present
- 8% find it unappealing
- 46% say it is available in the community

**Student-Centered**
Prioritizes social and emotional development, with academic strength built through student interests and knowledge acquired through experiences in the classroom and the community.

83% of parents find this approach appealing

- 43% find it extremely appealing
- 33% say it would be the right fit for their child at present
- 17% find it unappealing
- 37% say it is available in the community
Parents see the Real Choices model as ideal for their communities.

90% of parents say the Real Choices model is important toward achieving the most important outcomes of K–12 education.

48% EXTREMELY IMPORTANT

44% SOMEWHAT IMPORTANT

8% UNIMPORTANT

The appeal of having these three distinct learning approaches available in school districts cuts across all parents, regardless of their preferred pathway to actualizing their goals for children.

Parents find appeal in the approaches, regardless of whether they might select them for their children.

Parents see an ideal school district as offering an even distribution of the three approaches across elementary, middle and high school offerings.
THE REAL CHOICES MODEL HAS STRONG SUPPORT AMONG PARENTS AND WOULD INCREASE THEIR SATISFACTION WITH SCHOOLS.

95% of parents **positively rate** the overall appeal for students, with 50% finding it extremely appealing.

87% of parents say they would take part in at least one activity to **advocate** for the model.

75% of parents say they would support model **implementation**.

95% of parents who currently have something similar in place support **keeping it**.

Visit [realschoolchoices.org](http://realschoolchoices.org) for the latest materials and updates related to this research.
This research was conducted by Artemis Strategy Group, a consumer research company specializing in motivation research, in conjunction with Neimand Collaborative, a social impact marketing firm. Motivation research uses qualitative and quantitative surveys to determine what individuals and groups value on four levels: attributes, benefits, emotions and values.

Focus group respondents were asked open-ended questions as to what they perceived to be the important elements of an ideal young adult, an ideal education system and their ideal outcomes as parents. The answers in their own words were then tested quantitatively and organized into factors or nodes that mirrored common thoughts and constructions in each of four levels of motivation. These nodes are then rated as to how they are ranked by all respondents, finding areas of aggregate agreement and establishing pathways from one node to another, going up from attributes to benefits, emotions and ultimately values.

From December 2016 through January 2017, 16 parent and voter focus groups were held in four cities—Washington, DC; Denver, CO; Grand Rapids, MI; and Oakland, CA. Additionally, certain locations also included groups targeting parent sub-populations including African Americans and Latinos (Washington, DC, Denver and Oakland) and rural parents (Grand Rapids).

An online survey among a cross section of 2,823 parents and voters was conducted in September 2017. An oversample among an additional 283 African-American and 169 Latino parents was then conducted in December 2017 to result in a total of 500 Latino parents and 500 African-American parents. This report is based primarily on the representative sample of parents (n=2,021). Observations by Latino and African-American parents are based on the combined sample for those populations.