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.