



# Drivers of school choice:

The role of behavioural science in parental decision making



## Contents

Overview	3
Parents' perception of Independent school education	5
Factors influencing school choice	8
Unpacking school choice behaviour	11
Understanding what parents want	14
Tapping into behavioural science	17
Conclusion	20
Endnotes	21

# Overview

When Victoria became an independent colony in 1851, it inherited a dual system consisting of church-based schools and secular schools from New South Wales. The Education Act (VIC) was then passed in 1872, making schooling free and compulsory for all. Today, schools are broadly categorised as government or non-government, with the latter distinguished as Catholic or Independent. School choice has globalised over the last few decades and Australia now has one of the largest non-government school sectors (by enrolments) in the OECD – particularly in secondary schools.<sup>1</sup>

Some of the strongest arguments in favour of school choice include greater diversity, autonomy and competition among schools, which can create incentives for innovation and improvement. While parents are able to make their own decisions, finding a suitable school is no easy task. As more Australian parents subscribe their child to a school enrolment list at birth, the search for a school is increasingly beginning prior to birth – particularly among those considering Independent schools<sup>2</sup>. Likewise, almost half of Australian parents are exploring secondary school options prior to their children commencing primary school.<sup>3</sup>

What parents value in education, and their opinions and experiences of schools, is changing. Recent research on parents' perception of schools conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic found that needs and expectations are changing, particularly among younger parents. Intergenerational difference of opinion also seems to be emerging and children have a growing voice on what they want from their education.

---

The ever-changing environment in education may warrant a different approach to understanding how parents make their initial decisions and continue to evaluate school choice along their child's education journey.

---

Changing societal attitudes, beliefs and perceptions have shaped parental experiences and behaviour in school choice decisions and schooling.<sup>4</sup> The ever-changing environment in education may warrant a different approach to understanding how parents make their initial decisions and continue to evaluate school choice along their child's education journey.

While research in school choice continues to advance, a coherent understanding of the links between school choice, parental decision-making and their changing needs and motivations is still lacking.

This research aims to explore school choice and parents' changing perception and experiences of Independent schools using a behavioural science lens (i.e. what makes people act and react in the ways that they do).



This research aims to explore school choice and parents' changing perception and experiences of Independent schools using a behavioural science lens (i.e. what makes people act and react in the ways that they do).

# Parents' perception of Independent school education

The most common reasons for parents choosing a government school are convenience, location, family reasons (i.e. other family members also attend or have attended the school), followed by school performance, facilities and cost.

Educational excellence, good facilities and religious values were most often cited as main reasons for choosing a Catholic school.<sup>5</sup> Meanwhile, factors driving school choice in Independent schools typically include school facilities, academic performance and education standards.

The table below summarises the most important factors driving Independent school choice using recent research findings among Australian parents.

## The common thread across surveys is that Independent schools:

- deliver quality education that aligns with the child's needs
- foster excellent academic performance
- provide good facilities, a supportive culture and quality teachers.

## Most important factors driving Independent school choice



	1	2	3	4
ISV LEAD Parent Survey 2021 <sup>6</sup>	Suited child's needs	The quality of educational programs	The atmosphere of the school	The reputation of the school
ISA School Choice Report 2021 <sup>7</sup>	Educational excellence	Good teachers	Good facilities	Supportive and caring environment
ISQ What Parents Want Survey 2021 <sup>8</sup>	Preparation to fulfill potential in later life	Child's individual needs	The high-quality of teachers	Encouragement of attitude to schoolwork
Real Education Report 2022 <sup>9</sup>	Standard of facilities	Education standards	Level of discipline	Academic results
NAB Education Insight Report 2021 <sup>10</sup>	Quality of facilities	Quality of teachers	Level of discipline	Better academic results

\* Note: Varying sample sizes and demographic variables in research sample between surveys.

### Acronym Guide:

ISV – Independent Schools Victoria

ISA – Independent Schools Australia

ISQ – Independent Schools Queensland

While the main reasons for choosing Independent schools are similar across surveys, there were some differences observed over time and across demographics. For example, the Independent Schools Australia (ISA) School Choice Report found that five years ago, parents were more concerned about having a safe environment and affordability. They also placed a higher importance on extra-curricular activities and networking than when choosing a school today.<sup>11</sup> NAB's Education Insight Report also revealed intergenerational differences of opinion. Younger parents were more likely to place importance on a school's educational philosophy, open days, school ranking tables, website and social media, but less likely to consider quality of facilities and shared religious/value systems.<sup>12</sup> Findings from school choice surveys have been popularly reported in mainstream and social media, with the aim to help parents choose the right school.

While education excellence and academic performance appear as the top reasons, there are many issues parents consider when choosing an Independent school. Parents are increasingly choosing schools based on values that align with their family and that they believe could help provide children with moral and/or religious values to build their moral character.<sup>13</sup> Many parents tend to seek a school where their children's peers have the same expectations, beliefs, norms and values that could foster a strong sense of belonging.<sup>14</sup> As much as parents believe it is their responsibility to nurture their child, they are looking for schools that can assist them in this task.<sup>15</sup> There is also a growing propensity among non-government school parents for an experience focused on wellbeing. Unsurprisingly, this is also the top motivation for parents to move or consider moving their child to non-government schools.<sup>16</sup>



---

While education excellence and academic performance appear as the top reasons, there are many issues parents consider when choosing an Independent school.

---

Surveys conducted during the pandemic found that parents appreciated that Independent schools had the autonomy to make decisions quickly, adapted well to the changing environment and maintained good communication.<sup>17</sup> In fact, a national survey by the ABC in 2021 revealed that, across school sectors, Independent school parents were most satisfied with the education their children were receiving.<sup>18</sup>

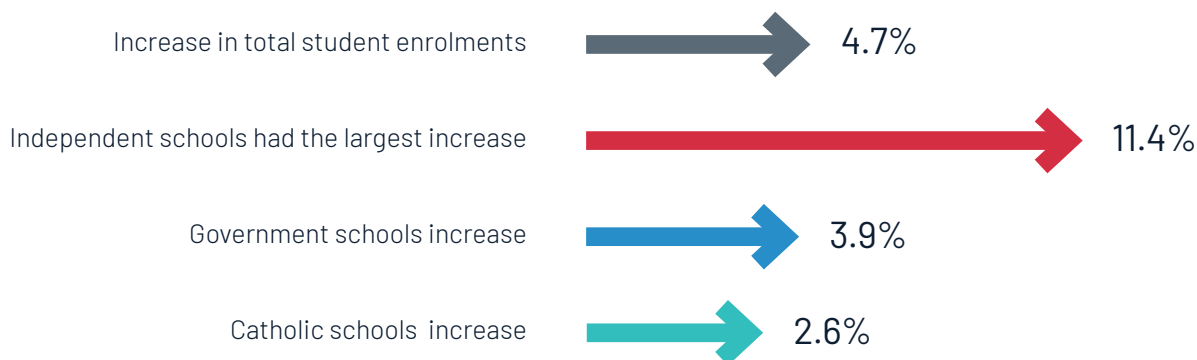
Over the last few years, we have observed a growing appetite among Australian parents towards school choice and an overall trend towards Independent education. The latest Australian Bureau of Statistics figures show a continued increase in total student enrolments in the five years to 2021, with a 4.7% increase. By school affiliation, Independent schools had the largest increase with 11.4%, followed by government schools with 3.9% and Catholic schools with 2.6%.<sup>19</sup> Predictions that many parents would withdraw their children from non-government schools due to financial pressures caused by COVID-19 have dwindled, with enrolments increasing by 2.3% in Victorian Independent schools in 2021 compared to the previous year.

Despite the common misconception that all Independent schools are expensive, and that Government schools involve no cost to families, the recent growth in Independent schools is attributed to schools serving families on low to middle incomes.<sup>20</sup> The ABC reported that the Independent sector is Australia's fastest growing school sector. Australia is also an international outlier, with 'about twice as many children going to non-governmental schools as the average'.<sup>21</sup>

Australian parents are now more likely to plan ahead to pay for school fees than they did five years ago.<sup>22</sup> They are also more willing to make financial sacrifices to pay for their child's private tuition or school fees.<sup>23</sup> This suggests that parents have confidence in the Independent sector to shape and develop the skills and competencies of their child to thrive in their school years and beyond.

The pandemic has challenged assumptions underpinning school choice, encouraging parents to reconsider what they value and want for their child. The remote learning experience has no doubt changed parents' attitudes towards parenting, increased their engagement in their child's education and created a new level of relationship, trust and communication with schools and their communities. The demand for digital technology, hybrid learning and personalised learning have also shifted parents' focus in their efforts and resources so that their child can thrive in school. As education and the future of work is changing,<sup>24</sup> how we study school choice behaviour will also need to change.

## Enrolment increase in the five years to 2021



Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics.

# Factors influencing school choice

Marketised schooling requires parents to act as ‘consumers’ and to be strategic about selecting the right school for their child. Accessing relevant information is important, as is being able to sift through the plethora of information available – such as the MySchool website (myschool.edu.au) which provides systematic comparisons of school test results.<sup>25</sup> Parents typically refer to publicly available information as they define their consideration set (a final list of schools they seriously consider and evaluate) in the decision-making process. Although MySchool.edu.au provides important information about various schools, the primary source of information for parents remains their social networks. Word-of-mouth from friends or other parents is the most common source of information, followed by personal experience and interaction with school staff, school open days and school websites.<sup>26</sup> Word-of-mouth remains the greatest influence in seeking information as it provides unique insights into a school’s life from an insider’s perspective.

While these information channels offer a good indication of the quality of a school and serve as an effective tool for parents when considering a school, the extent to which parents rely on this knowledge varies across demographic and social strata. Not all parents search extensively or can make sense of the available information to make informed decisions. For example, parents with a higher level of education are observed to undertake more extensive research for their child compared to parents with lower level of education.<sup>27</sup> A study on school choice architecture also revealed that social circles of highly educated parents are more likely to include professionals who know about the system that contributes to the information gap between lower and higher income parents. On average, parents from lower socio-economic backgrounds have less objective knowledge about schools than parents from higher socio-economic backgrounds.

They are also more likely to be influenced by present bias and attention limitations.<sup>28</sup> Attention limitations for example could mean that parents do not acquire the relevant information when making decisions, even if it is publicly available. Additionally, people may have limited attention and cognitive ability to consider other options and are uncertain about the advantages of alternatives, which often leads to a default bias because the default serves as a reference point.<sup>29</sup>

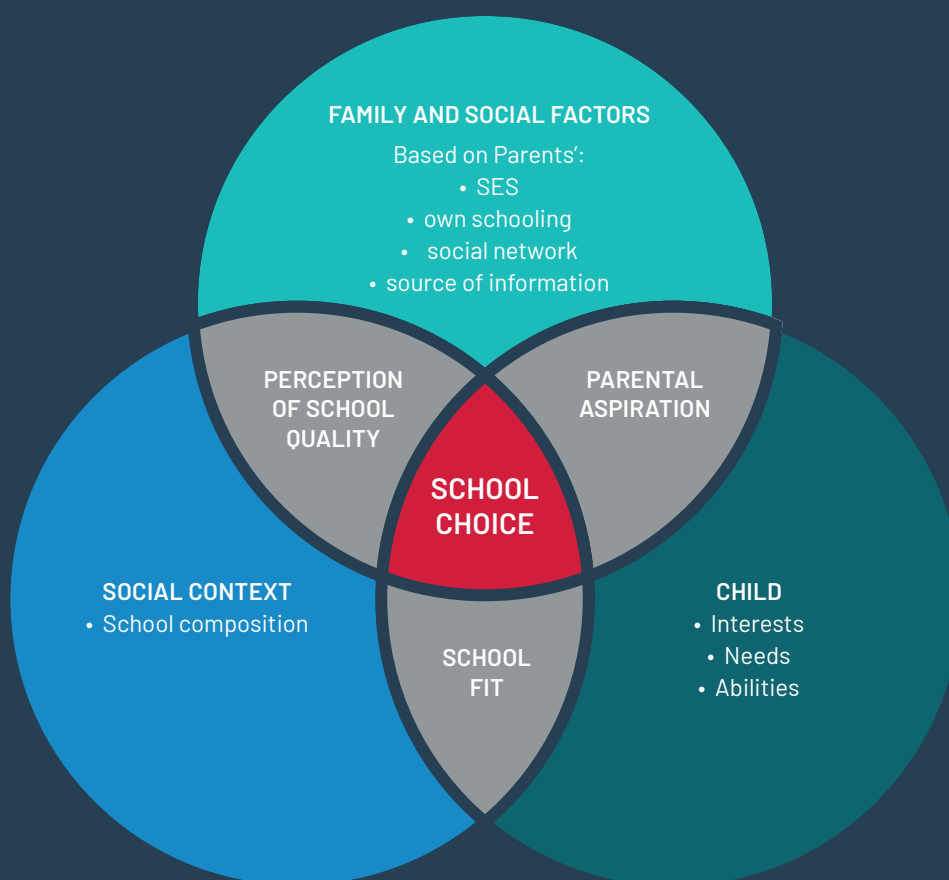
Cultural and social capital also appear to be strongly related to school choice. Cultural capital is attained through knowledge and skills acquired over time, socialisation and education. Social capital is generally linked to having a durable network or less formal relationships of mutual acquaintance.<sup>30</sup> From a social class perspective, middle-class families tend to be more predisposed than working class families to engage in education to maintain effective social and cultural capital. Education has traditionally provided these parents a ladder to ‘climb out of one class into another’ and therefore they tend to be more active in an open school system.<sup>31</sup> As such, parents differ in their ability to activate cultural and social capital effectively and are likely to have different school awareness and information seeking behaviours.<sup>32</sup>





## Conceptual diagram showing school choice process

Parents rely on various strategies to position and maximise the chances of their child being enrolled into preferred schools.



This Venn diagram provides an overview of the components of the school choice process.<sup>33</sup>

Parents make decisions based on:

- **family and social factors**  
(i.e. income, education, housing and socioeconomic positions, along with values, beliefs and attitudes espoused at home)
- **child's needs**  
(i.e. their abilities and needs)
- **school context**  
(i.e. school ethos, location, academic and student care characteristics).



School choice is complex and multifaceted involving an interplay of economic, social, capital and institutional factors. As the selection of schools is a high-stakes process, it is important that parents have a sound understanding of choices and better access to resources to enable confident decision making and to mitigate intergenerational educational disadvantage.<sup>34</sup> Additionally, confident decision making is imperative as parents who make more informed choices for schools are more likely to be satisfied with their choice and are more involved in their child's education.<sup>35</sup>

# Unpacking school choice behaviour

There is a vast number of studies relating to school choice. These studies tend to deploy a range of quantitative and qualitative methods such as interviews, focus groups and surveys to understand school preferences among prospective parents; as well as factors influencing school choice among parents who already have a child in school through retrospective surveys or retrospective interviews. Factor-based research is commonly used to differentiate parents' attitudes towards government versus non-government schools in Australia. It typically provides a pre-categorisation or common list of factors influencing parental school decision-making which includes location, facilities, cost, academic outcomes, child's happiness, safety and attitudes towards school, preparation for college, preparation for life, religion and values, school reputation, teacher quality and individual factors relating to the child. These surveys provide a common language for understanding decision-making and allow for comparative cross analysis between choice factors and demographic characteristics such as location, sector, stage of schooling, parental education, occupation and income.<sup>36</sup>

While factor-based research provides some useful insights, it has several limitations. The built-in, pre-categorisation factors reduce the ability to gain a nuanced understanding of parents' reasons for school choices. Moreover, parents' demographic characteristics alone are not sufficient in explaining the variation in the factors chosen. The design of choice-factor research also relies on the assumption that most human behaviour can be explained as a result of individuals making rational choices, and it relies on parents' ability to remember and report their preferences and decisions accurately.

While parents may explain why they chose the school they did, their descriptions and recounted actions may vary. This suggests they may have different understandings of what this meant in practice and the varying capacities to achieve it. For instance, some parents emphasised academic achievement and explicitly pursued it, while others described it as important but did not take action to achieve it.<sup>37</sup>

---

These surveys provide a common language for understanding decision-making and allow for comparative cross analysis between choice factors and demographic characteristics such as location, sector, stage of schooling, parental education, occupation and income.

---

Results from factor-based research have also been inconsistent across studies due to differing research samples and the varying theoretical framework used to explain the intersecting factors, institutions and discourses that inform school choice decision. As cited in Ball, Bowe and Gewirtz (1996, p.89) in Aris (2020)<sup>38</sup>:

Parental choice of school is not susceptible to one definitive analysis. Different kinds of analyses bring out and highlight different aspects and patterns of choice. There are recurring themes and patterns... But even these can be written about in different ways. Attempts to reduce choice making to one simple formula or metaphor will only lead to dangerous over-simplification and misrepresentation. (p. 8)

School choice studies typically ask parents to think about the time they start seeking information to when they make the decision to determine the underlying reasons for choosing a school, and whether they have made the right choice. However, this assumes that parents experience choice only once in the lead up to school enrolment. A unique problem in educational decision-making is the length of time between a choice being made and the completion of the choice (i.e. from when the child enrolls in the school until they graduate many years later). Choices in education are more complicated than those normally associated with experience goods (i.e. a product or service) or credence goods (post-experience goods such as legal services with longer lead times).<sup>39</sup>

Unlike experience and credence goods that assume stable preferences over time, parents remain immersed in decision-making over long time frames and are continually re-evaluating whether they have made the 'right choice'. In other words, parents move from 'making the choice' to 'managing the choice' throughout their child's education.<sup>40</sup> As time progresses, their experiences change their preferences, perceptions and beliefs. Additionally, their priorities change as they support their child through challenges they may face in school. Therefore, an initial choice that was 'right' at the time could transform into the 'wrong' school choice (even though the outcomes from their initial choice have materialised). It is unsurprising to find that a considerable proportion of parents regretted their choice of school in a 2019 national survey, wherein two in five said they would not choose the same school or are unsure if they would regardless of cost or location.<sup>41</sup>

This conceptual diagram (page 13) by behavioural economist Leaver (2017) depicts how choice is governed by perceptions, information processing,

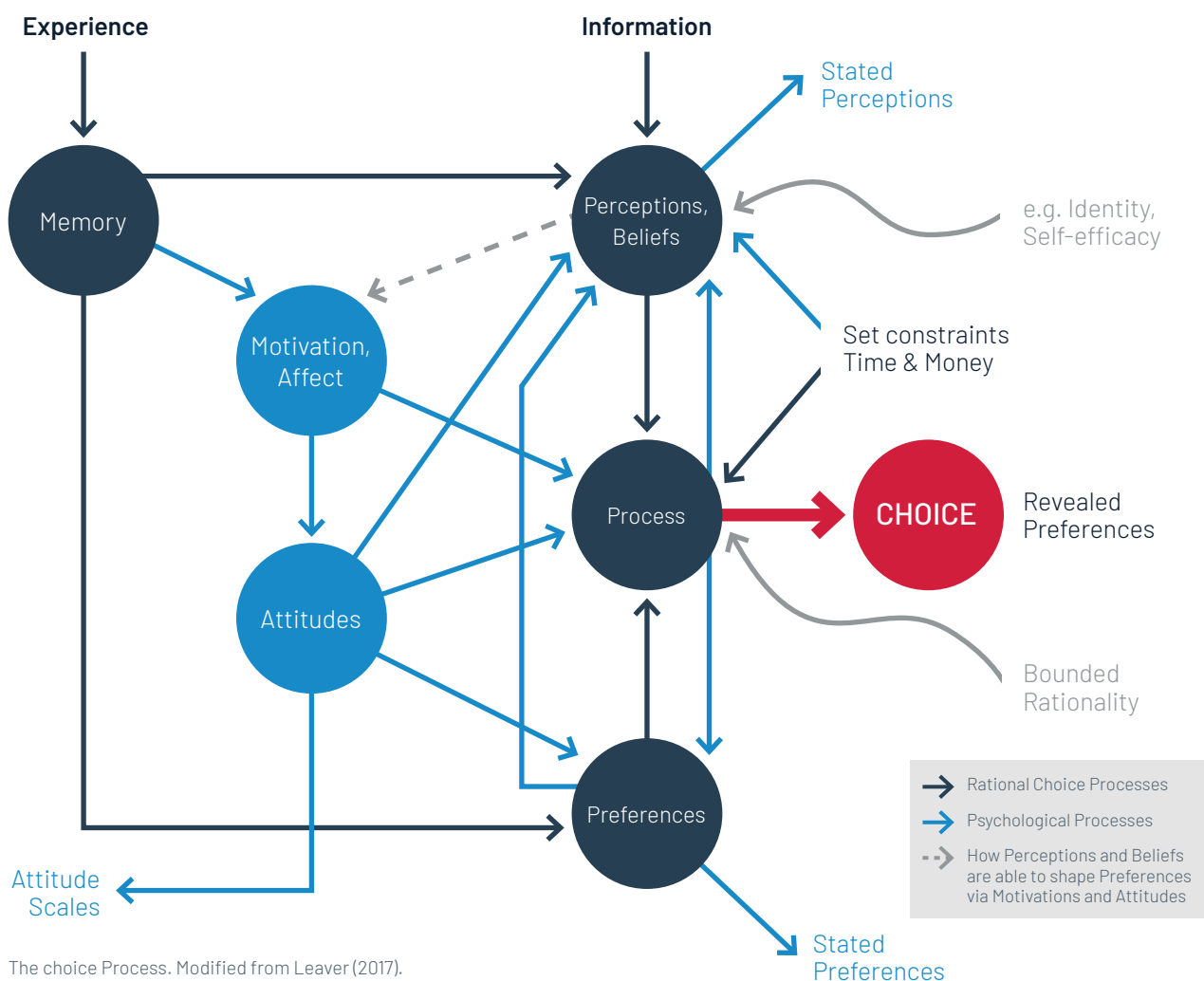
cognitive processes, psychological factors and external constraints. He argued that preferences could evolve over time "not from the simple updating of newly acquired information but from the simple act of experiencing the choice".

The diagram (page 13) highlights that decisions made could continue to shape a person's perceptions and beliefs due to external stimuli such as information and experiences, where one uses rational processes (dark blue lines) along with psychological processes (light blue lines) to make and manage choice.<sup>42</sup> For example, a study on school choice found that as the school in question defines itself through its value-added co-curricular activities to instil cultural capital, so too did the parents define the school and their children's relationship to it through co-curricular activities.<sup>43</sup>

As the quality of a school can only be fully ascertained after an initial choice is made, it is valuable to look at what really matters from parents' perspective by considering environments that make up their experiences. For example, Strange and Banning's Environmental Model as summarised by Cantu et al. (2021) considers the following environments that play an important part in influencing parents' school choice and those who are still experiencing the choice:

- Physical environment (design and layout where learning takes place such as facility and classroom setup).
- Aggregate environment (collective characteristics of the people who inhabit the environment and how they shape the environment).
- Organisational environment (structure by which an organisation operates and achieves goals).
- Constructed environment (formation of individual/collective perception experiences through conversations, stories and symbols observed in the environment).

## Endogeneity in choice processes



In addition to understanding information seeking behaviour and factors influencing parents' decision at the time of school enrolment, it is important to recognise parents' changing experiences which continue to shape their preferences, perceptions and beliefs. Parents' experiences speak volumes about a school. When people share their experiences, they are recommending or not recommending the school on their behalf.

In this era of school choice, it is prudent for school leaders to maintain a clear understanding of what drives positive experiences and satisfaction among parents (such as through the lens of the Environmental Model described on page 12) to retain their students while attracting new ones.

# Understanding what parents want

Despite many parents being more involved in their child's education since the pandemic, research found that some may have a biased view about their child's performance, and differing opinions for what constitutes a successful school experience. For example, some parents (particularly among the middle- and upper-income group) who seek coveted spots for their children in selective schools are less focused on cultivating capabilities like empathy, self-awareness, self-regulation, gratitude and curiosity – despite persuasive research suggesting its importance.<sup>44</sup> Therefore, many schools strive to build efficient communication and strong parent-school relationships to offer better visibility and accuracy into how students are faring academically and socially, as well as tailored designs to help them succeed and shared agreement on priorities.<sup>45</sup>

Similarly, schools are seeking to better understand why parents are attracted to their school over the other possible 'competitors' and how they can align their school's environment with parents' perceived demands to enhance satisfaction and the student experience.<sup>46</sup> However, achieving this is no easy task.

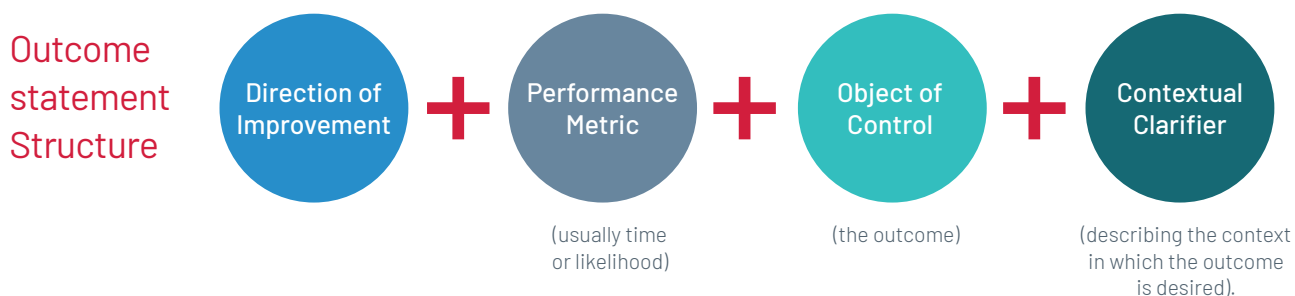
As parents have different aims for their children, research into school choice should allow for an open dialogue so that parents can elaborate the meaning and context behind their decisions. It is important to understand parents' educational priorities and aspirations for their child as well as their dispositions towards academic achievement, cultural and social capital gains.<sup>47</sup> For example, a study on school choice found that some parents value programs that aim to teach cultural capital. As cited by a parent in this study: "it's the little things that make the difference, the whole picture is brilliant but it's the little things".

Understanding what these 'little things' entail for parents could provide valuable insights for schools. It is equally important to understand why these priorities are important to parents, how they plan to realise their aims, and the key success criteria used to determine whether they have accomplished them. This would help to encourage choice that aligns with the school's environment. This includes understanding aspects that parents describe as important in their school decision making, their descriptions of past and present experiences in education, and how the social, cultural and economic contexts relate to their decisions.

## Jobs-to-be-done (JTBD) methodology

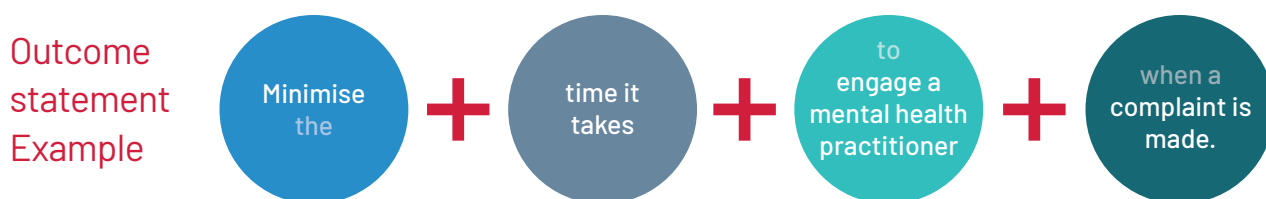
This research framework has been used to conceptualise parents' educational aims and capture how they plan to realise them. Mainly used to influence product design, JTBD is a framework based on the idea that whenever customers 'hire' (i.e. use) a product, they do it for a specific 'job' (i.e. to achieve a desired outcome). If it does an unsatisfactory job, we 'fire' it and look for an alternative. JTBD is normally defined in a sentence format, which is further broken down into users' functional and emotional success criteria. Once the 'jobs' are defined, the desired outcome statements on how users are measuring value are then formed. This statement is a customer-defined metric that instructs innovators how to help users get the job done faster and more predictably.

It is important to note that the outcome statement is created by users themselves in the research process so they can define the metrics they use to measure success when getting a job done in their own language. The outcome statement uses the following structure:



In this case, an example of a job when parents 'hire' a school and its outcome statement might look like this:

**Job (example):** I want my child to gain access to mental and wellbeing support in school when needed.



JTBD's uniqueness is driven by its focus on the desired outcomes and questions whether existing activities are the best way of reaching the outcomes that users really seek. However, while JTBD considers the emotional and social context of a user's goal, it tends to generalise the jobs among the entire user base (research sample base) and makes it harder for the design team to empathise and prioritise among different users. Additionally, the research approach is somewhat restricted in an education setting as it is mainly designed for improving products. As important as it is to uncover parents' needs (core jobs) and their desired outcomes, it is equally important to understand their experience and outline what it should look like for different parent groups (i.e. not only by demographic details, but also attitudinal, motivational and behavioural details).

### Journey mapping

Mapping parent journeys in a particular context – such as during school enrolment or involvement in a particular school's initiative – is another research method that could be used to understand experience and go beyond demographics. Journey mapping highlights the flow of an individual experience and breaks it down into separate interactions, bringing to light their needs and emotions. Journey maps are documents that visually illustrate an individual or a group's needs, the series of interactions fulfilling those needs and the resulting emotional stages throughout the process.

Mapping the journey that parents take is valuable to gaining an insight of their experience in each aspect of the school's initiatives. This can be achieved by outlining what they see, hear, do, say, feel and think; their fears, frustrations and obstacles; and their needs and goals. For example, schools could use parents' narratives to map their enrolment journeys by outlining behind-the-scenes considerations and activities, such as the school's digital touchpoints and parents' experience with each of these in making the school selection, which could reveal any gaps and highlight new opportunities.

Using a collection of these stories, personas could then be developed to represent the real parent community who share similar demographic, values and behavioural traits. Well-executed personas are based on rich behavioural characteristics, attitudinal data and insights about mental models to uncover the 'whys' behind an individual's behaviour. Insights from journey maps often promote empathy among decision makers and create dialogue and collaboration as they are already in a narrative format. This is unsurprising given the fact that, as humans, our brains are hard wired for narratives. We think and respond most strongly to stories rather than facts because our brain detects patterns in information.

While outcomes from journey mapping provide valuable insights, it is common to have competing interests, needs and priorities among personas or parent groups. Therefore, it is important to reflect on the key differentiating factors between personas to design a roadmap of prioritised actions for each group, while making sure that they do not compromise the experience of another. It is also important to continually map parents' experiences as their child moves through the education system to capture changes in experiences and aspiration. Parents are more likely to select and continue at a school where they feel the people in the school care for their children and are attentive to their needs.

As children now have a growing voice in school selection, and because students are in fact the 'users' of the school's services, mapping the student journey can also be useful to gain a holistic view. By mapping experiences in an ongoing basis, schools can get beneath the surface of parents' priorities and aspirations for their child and find the best way to connect with prospective and current parents and students to improve their overall experience and discover new opportunities. Once experiences are mapped, it is important to validate, use and connect the maps to internal processes (i.e. the people, culture, data, technology, and organisational systems and processes) to enable effective interventions.





# Tapping into behavioural science

Behavioural science and behavioural economics (particularly cost-effective 'nudges') have been increasingly used to gently push parents towards better education decisions and higher educational attainment for their child. The nudge theory is a concept that describes the behaviour and decision making of a group or individuals – especially for decisions that are difficult and rare, when people do not receive prompt feedback, or when they have trouble translating aspects of a situation into terms they can easily understand. Those who determine how information is presented, also labelled as 'choice architects' by Thaler and Sunstein (2008), have the ability to 'nudge' decision-makers to make wiser choices without restricting any options.

School choice is an active decision-making activity that requires an individual to have sufficient information, capacity, skills and motivation to make decisions. Therefore, choice architects could structure choice in a way that supports parents to seek information and make better choices. For example, a study investigating the design of online school profiles and websites found that subtle changes to the presentation of information – such as the order in which school profiles appear by default, school performance, the source and amount of information – can lead parents to choose one type of school over another. The way information is displayed and what is presented could attract people's attention (increasing the likelihood of a brand coming to mind) and influence their attitudes and behaviours. This is important for schools to note because parents' perception of a school and experience in their enrolment journey typically occur even before their first contact with the school.

As parents continue to evaluate their choice throughout their child's education, it is important for schools to go beyond their vision and mission statement and continue to highlight the school's

core values and ensure parents feel that they and their child are genuinely cared for and feel a sense of belonging. 'Person-environment congruence' refers to the degree of fit between someone's values and their surroundings. This can predict people's attraction towards, satisfaction with and stability in their preferences with a given environment. On the other hand, 'cognitive dissonance' refers to inconsistencies between a person's thoughts and their environment. This can result in dissatisfaction as people feel discomfort when their attitudes and beliefs do not match their behaviour. Schools can promote a better person-environment congruence by employing continual information nudges and making this salient, such as by communicating the school's core values, innovative initiatives and performances to reinforce alignment and strengthen parents' rationalisation that they have made the right school choice.

Values are the guiding principles behind every decision a school makes, and they influence attitudes, beliefs, traits and norms. While there may be an increase in school competition due to the recent growth in Independent education and emerging factors in school choice, schools should not waver in the core values they hold strongly which sets them apart from other schools. Instead of focusing on being better than their neighbouring schools, they would do well to focus on establishing a high-quality educational environment that maximises student outcomes in their own context.

Effective communication strategy is critical in building solid community engagement. Along with students' connectedness to schools, the level of connection parents feel about their child's school has emerged as a key factor in building positive educational outcomes. Schools can encourage a stronger level of connection and experience by identifying any behavioural barriers or pain points such as excessive enrolment procedures or paperwork.

Additionally, to align prospective and current parents' needs and increase their engagement, school communicators could consider the following actions:

- 1 seek to understand the needs of their audiences and their sentiment
- 2 define the desired behavioural and emotional outcomes the communication is targeting, and
- 3 develop succinct communication and content that could aid behavioural change and action and drive emotional connection.

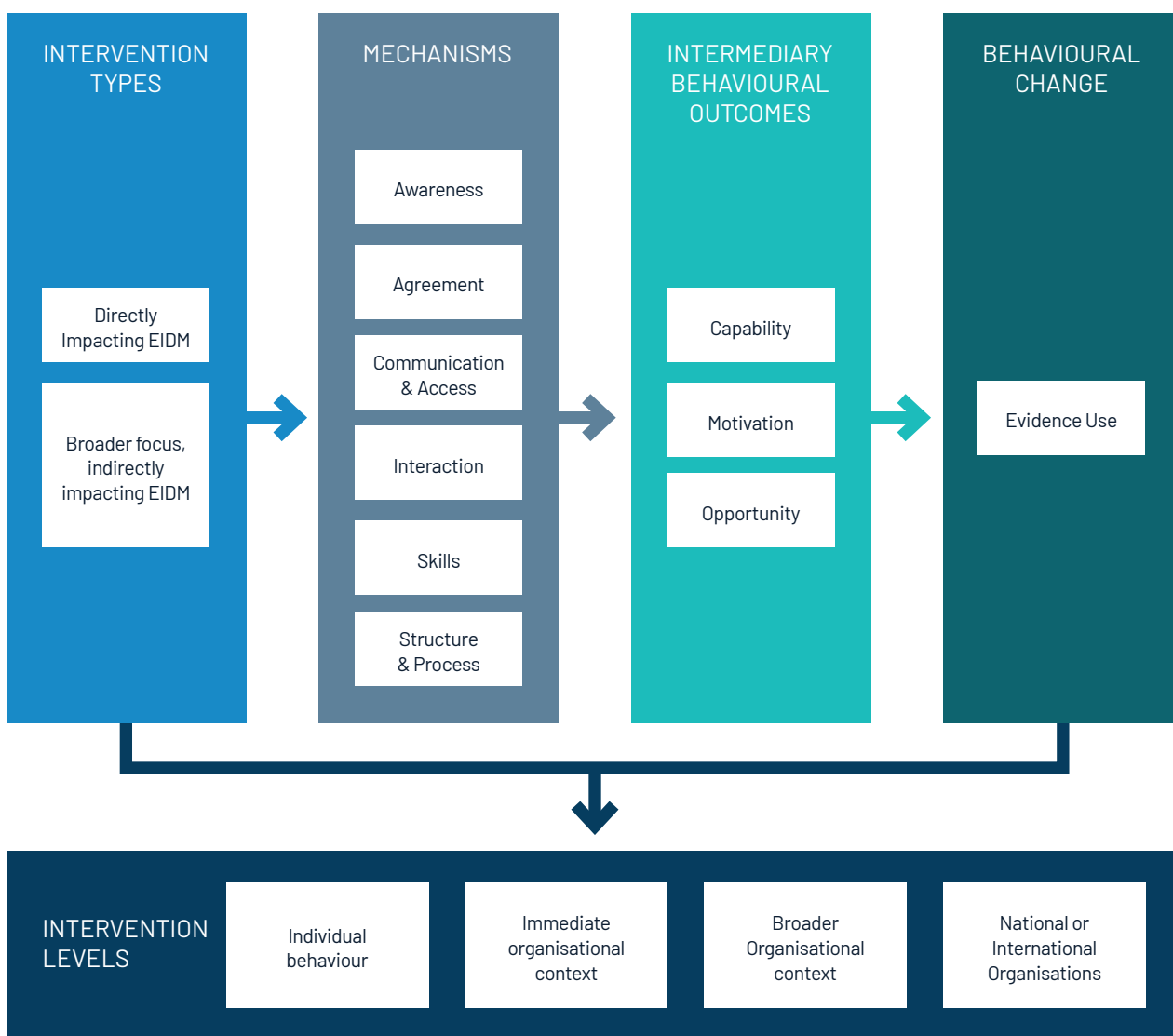
Everything prospective and current parents feel and experience in each of the school's touchpoints is indeed a reflection of the whole school. Undeniably, internal branding (i.e. experience) and the bid to win hearts and minds is as important as external branding (i.e. marketing).

Evidence-informed decision-making in education focuses on promoting and encouraging the use of research evidence in teaching practice and student learning. As students spend more than half their time outside school, it is also important to involve parents as collaborators and actors in the research process. Cumulative evidence from research points to substantial benefits in student outcomes by improving the teacher-family-student partnership. Collaborative research developed jointly by research practitioners and parents could support a better understanding of parents' aims for their child's schooling. It could also provide a more nuanced view of parents' actual behaviour and practices, rather than relying on descriptions and recounted actions. The best laid research efforts in school may fall short if parents or carers who provide support and resources outside of school are not included in research initiatives.

Lastly, research is only useful if conducted with the right intention and with rigor. It is also important that the insights can be accessed, understood and implemented appropriately. A combination of quantitative and qualitative methods can be used in the research process to gain a deeper understanding of what really matters for parents. For example, quantitative research collecting parent-level data, matching survey responses to actual behaviour, and statistical analysis that differentiates (to the extent possible) between correlation and causation can produce valuable quantitative insights. Qualitative research such as the JTBD approach or journey mapping in the form of interviews, collected stories, informal conversations and notes on observed activities can provide equally constructive insights.

The effects from research are often gradual and indirect, and therefore the culture of an organisation becomes a key driver in determining whether and how well research insights are translated into practice. Shifting the focus on *whether* evidence is used to *how* evidence is used is necessary in building a research-engaged school culture. Using evidence in decision making is complex as it needs to be supported by a combination of individual and organisational enabling components. For example, there are behavioural factors to consider such as the capacity (i.e. research capacity and skills to access and make sense of evidence), opportunity (i.e. active support from the leadership team for using research) and motivation (i.e. intrinsic or extrinsic form) that enable the use of evidence. As depicted in the evidence-informed decision-making (EIDM) conceptual framework below, the evidence-informed decision process is influenced by multiple factors such as intervention types and levels; mechanisms and intermediary behavioural outcomes.

## Evidence-Informed Decision-Making (EIDM) Conceptual Framework



One major benefit of applying behavioral science is the ability to make low-cost, easily scalable solutions within existing systems, rather than making transformational changes in the education system. Simple changes in choice architecture, messaging and framing, or providing reminders, tools and checklists could make a significant difference in improving parents' overall experience with the school. Applying behavioural science principles and strategies can enable schools to draw underlying behavioural mechanisms and develop highly tailored approach to student and parent support.

# Conclusion

As families have different experiences and an interplay of factors that influence their decisions, school choice research needs to explore parents' priorities from schooling. Ultimately, parents hope that the school they choose for their child will provide a positive experience to build their child's academic, social and emotional skills. As parents remain immersed in their choice and child's education over a long period of time, it is important to monitor their needs and emotions by considering the environments that make up their experiences. A school's culture needs to encourage empathy for parents, question norms and biases and promote curiosity to truly understand and support parents throughout their child's education.

Schools should continue investing in developing their relationships with parents (and local communities) to encourage informed school choice decisions that align with their values, perceptions, beliefs and behaviour. The benefits of school choice will only materialise in an environment where parents, students, external stakeholders and the local community can participate and engage in the school and have their voices heard and appreciated. As schools may face a future where education disruption is the norm, those that are armed with insights about trends shaping education and their community's experiences are more likely to cut through the noise and continue to engage, grow and innovate.

## Questions for school leaders

- 1 What are your students' parents trying to accomplish in sending their child to your school and what are the key success criteria they use to determine if they have accomplished their aims?
- 2 How well do you know the experiences of your school community? What drives positive experiences and satisfaction and what are the behavioural barriers?
- 3 To what extent are you reinforcing and promoting the core values of your school to your prospective and current parents? How well do the behaviours of your school community reflect the values of your school?
- 4 How well is your school engaging with parents and fostering strong parent-school relationships?
- 5 To what extent does your school encourage a research-engaged leadership and culture?
- 6 How much of your parent engagement policies and practices are based on research evidence in your school context?
- 7 Is your school considering using behavioural science (if not already) in supporting interventions?

# Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Proctor, H., & Aitchison, C. (2015). Markets in education: School choice and family capital. In G. Meagher & S. Goodwin (Eds), *Markets, rights and power in Australian social policy* (pp.321-339). Sydney University Press. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1b9s0b8.15>
- <sup>2</sup> Aris, S.M. (2020). Understanding school choice: what parents prioritise in high schools. [Doctoral Dissertation, University of Sydney]. <https://ses.library.usyd.edu.au/handle/2123/22995#>  
Futurity Investment Group. (2020). Futurity parents report card 2020: Parents perception of the state of education in Australia. [https://drive.google.com/file/d/1\\_ODxQix7faHzGHRWHdRRWf-RSdKT3m-4/view](https://drive.google.com/file/d/1_ODxQix7faHzGHRWHdRRWf-RSdKT3m-4/view)
- <sup>3</sup> Fahey, G. (2019). *What do parents want from schools?* The Centre for Independent Studies. pp26.pdf (cis.org.au)
- <sup>4</sup> Pearson, D., & De lure, R. (2022). *NAB Education Insight Report Part 1*. National Australia Bank. <https://business.nab.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/NAB-Private-Schools-Survey-2022-Part-1-1.pdf>
- <sup>5</sup> Warren, D. (2016). Parents choices of primary school. In *The Longitudinal Study of Australian Children: Annual statistical report 2015*. (pp.172). Australian Institute of Family Studies  
Fahey, G. (2019). *What do parents want from schools?* The Centre for Independent Studies. pp26.pdf (cis.org.au)  
Independent Schools Australia. (2021). *School choice: A research report*. ISA260721\_SCHOOL-CHOICE-REPORT\_08.pdf
- <sup>6</sup> Independent Schools Victoria. (n.d.). *LEAD School Effectiveness Surveys*. <https://is.vic.edu.au/research-post/lead-school-effectiveness-surveys/>
- <sup>7</sup> Independent Schools Australia. (2021). *School choice: A research report*. ISA260721\_SCHOOL-CHOICE-REPORT\_08.pdf
- <sup>8</sup> Independent Schools Queensland. (2022). *What parents want: An independent schools Queensland survey*. <https://www.isq.qld.edu.au/media/bdff1huq/what-parents-want-key-findings-2021.pdf>
- <sup>9</sup> Real Insurance. (2022). *Real education report 2022*. <https://www.realinsurance.com.au/documents/real-education-report-whitepaper.pdf>
- <sup>10</sup> Pearson, D., & De lure, R. (2022). *NAB Education Insight Report Part 1*. National Australia Bank. <https://business.nab.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/NAB-Private-Schools-Survey-2022-Part-1-1.pdf>
- <sup>11</sup> Independent Schools Australia. (2021). *School choice: A research report*. ISA260721\_SCHOOL-CHOICE-REPORT\_08.pdf
- <sup>12</sup> Pearson, D., & De lure, R. (2022). *NAB Education Insight Report Part 1*. National Australia Bank. <https://business.nab.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/NAB-Private-Schools-Survey-2022-Part-1-1.pdf>
- <sup>13</sup> Duffy, C. (2021). *Australia is an outlier on private schools – but that’s the way many parents like it*. ABC News. <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-06-30/independent-school-parents-satisfied-child-education-austalks/100252260>
- <sup>14</sup> Yu, S.C. (2021). *Secondary School Choice*. [Doctoral Dissertation, Flinders University]. Yu2021\_MasterCopy.pdf (flinders.edu.au)
- <sup>15</sup> Beamish, P., & Morey, P. (2013). School choice: What parents choose. *TEACH Journal of Christian Education*, 7(1), 26-33.
- <sup>16</sup> Pearson, D., & De lure, R. (2022). *NAB Education Insight Report Part 1*. National Australia Bank. <https://business.nab.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/NAB-Private-Schools-Survey-2022-Part-1-1.pdf>
- <sup>17</sup> Independent Schools Australia. (2021). *School choice: A research report*. ISA260721\_SCHOOL-CHOICE-REPORT\_08.pdf
- <sup>18</sup> Duffy, C. (2021). *Australia is an outlier on private schools – but that’s the way many parents like it*. ABC News. <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-06-30/independent-school-parents-satisfied-child-education-austalks/100252260>
- <sup>19</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics. (n.d.). *Schools*. Retrieved August 11, 2022, from <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/education/schools/latest-release>
- <sup>20</sup> Green, M. (2022). *Independent school numbers add up to a tale of diversity*. Independent Schools Victoria. <https://is.vic.edu.au/blog/independent-school-numbers-add-up-to-a-tale-of-diversity/>
- <sup>21</sup> Duffy, C. (2021). *Australia is an outlier on private schools – but that’s the way many parents like it*. ABC News. <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-06-30/independent-school-parents-satisfied-child-education-austalks/100252260>
- <sup>22</sup> Independent Schools Queensland. (2022). *What parents want: An independent schools Queensland survey*. <https://www.isq.qld.edu.au/media/bdff1huq/what-parents-want-key-findings-2021.pdf>
- <sup>23</sup> Real Insurance. (2022). *Real education report 2022*. <https://www.realinsurance.com.au/documents/real-education-report-whitepaper.pdf>
- <sup>24</sup> Independent Schools Victoria (2019). *Navigating the future of education*. <https://is.vic.edu.au/wpcontent/uploads/2019/12/Navigating-the-future.pdf>

Endnotes (continued)

- <sup>25</sup> Proctor, H., & Aitchison, C. (2015). *Markets in education: School choice and family capital*. In G. Meagher & S. Goodwin (Eds), *Markets, rights and power in Australian social policy* (pp.321-339). Sydney University Press. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1b9s0b8.15>
- <sup>26</sup> Independent Schools Australia. (2021). *School choice: A research report*. ISA260721\_SCHOOL-CHOICE-REPORT\_08.pdf  
Fahey, G. (2019). *What do parents want from schools?* The Centre for Independent Studies. pp26.pdf (cis.org.au)  
Yu, S.C. (2021). *Secondary School Choice*. [Doctoral Dissertation, Flinders University]. Yu2021\_MasterCopy.pdf (flinders.edu.au)
- <sup>27</sup> Poikolainen, J. (2012). A case study of parents' school choice strategies in a Finnish urban context. *European Educational Research Journal* 11(1), 127-144. <http://dx.doi.org/10.2304/eej.2012.11.1.127>
- <sup>28</sup> Glazerman, S., Nichols-Barrer, I., Valant, J., Chandler, J., & Burnett, A. (2020). The choice architecture of school choice websites. *Journal of Research on Educational Effectiveness*, 13(2), 322-350. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19345747.2020.1716905>
- <sup>29</sup> Damgaard, M.T., & Nielsen, H.S. (2018). Nudging in education. *Economics of Education Review*, 64, 313-342. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.econedurev.2018.03.008>
- <sup>30</sup> Proctor, H., & Aitchison, C. (2015). *Markets in education: School choice and family capital*. In G. Meagher & S. Goodwin (Eds), *Markets, rights and power in Australian social policy* (pp.321-339). Sydney University Press. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1b9s0b8.15>
- <sup>31</sup> English, R. (2009). Selling education through culture: responses to the market by new non-government schools. *The Australian Educational researcher*, 36(1), 89-104.
- <sup>32</sup> Hartsell, J.H. (2011). *Factors affecting private school choice*. [Doctoral Dissertation, University of Southern Mississippi]. <https://aquila.usm.edu/dissertations/732>
- <sup>33</sup> Yu, S.C. (2021). *Secondary School Choice*. [Doctoral Dissertation, Flinders University]. Yu2021\_MasterCopy.pdf (flinders.edu.au)
- <sup>34</sup> Fahey, G. (2019). *What do parents want from schools?* The Centre for Independent Studies. pp26.pdf (cis.org.au)
- <sup>35</sup> Hartsell, J.H. (2011). *Factors affecting private school choice*. [Doctoral Dissertation, University of Southern Mississippi]. <https://aquila.usm.edu/dissertations/732>  
Fahey, G. (2019). *What do parents want from schools?* The Centre for Independent Studies. pp26.pdf (cis.org.au)
- <sup>36</sup> Aris, S.M. (2020). *Understanding school choice: what parents prioritise in high schools*. [Doctoral Dissertation, University of Sydney]. <https://ses.library.usyd.edu.au/handle/2123/22995#>
- <sup>37</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>38</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>39</sup> Leaver, S. (2017). *Preference stability and choices in education*. The Misbehaving Economist. <https://themisbehavingeconomist.com/2017/02/18/preference-stability-and-choices-in-education/>
- <sup>40</sup> McCarthy, A. (2007). Managing school choice. *Issues in Educational Research*, 17(2), 232-255. [https://researchonline.nd.edu.au/edu\\_article/2/](https://researchonline.nd.edu.au/edu_article/2/)
- <sup>41</sup> Fahey, G. (2019). *What do parents want from schools?* The Centre for Independent Studies. pp26.pdf (cis.org.au)
- <sup>42</sup> Leaver, S. (2017). *Preference stability and choices in education*. The Misbehaving Economist. <https://themisbehavingeconomist.com/2017/02/18/preference-stability-and-choices-in-education/>
- <sup>43</sup> English, R. (2009). Selling education through culture: responses to the market by new non-government schools. *The Australian Educational Researcher*, 36(1), 89-104.
- <sup>44</sup> Cantu, N. Varela, D.G., Jones, D., & Challoo, L. (2021). Factors that influence school choice: A look at parents' and school leaders' perceptions. *Research in Educational Policy and Management*, 3(1), 19-41. <https://doi.org/>
- <sup>45</sup> Edge Research. *Parents 2021 | Going Beyond the Headlines*. Learning Heroes. <https://r50gh2ss1ic2mww8s3uvjvq1-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/Parents-2021.pdf>  
Weissbourd, R. (2019). Turning the tide II: *How parents and high schools can cultivate ethical character and reduce distress in the college admissions process*. <https://mcc.gse.harvard.edu/>

## Endnotes (continued)

- <sup>46</sup> Christensen Institute (2021). *The untapped parent potential: How COVID has activated families and why schools should take heed*. <https://www.christenseninstitute.org/blog/the-untapped-parent-potential-how-covid-has-activated-families-and-why-schools-should-take-heed/>
- <sup>47</sup> English, R. (2009). Selling education through culture: responses to the market by new non-government schools. *The Australian Educational researcher*, 36(1), 89-104.
- <sup>48</sup> Aris, S.M. (2020). *Understanding school choice: what parents prioritise in high schools*. [Doctoral Dissertation, University of Sydney]. <https://ses.library.usyd.edu.au/handle/2123/22995#>
- <sup>49</sup> English, R. (2009). Selling education through culture: responses to the market by new non-government schools. *The Australian Educational researcher*, 36(1), 89-104.
- <sup>50</sup> Ulwick, T. (2017). *Outcome-Driven Innovation: JTBD Theory in Practice*. <https://jobs-to-be-done.com/outcome-driven-innovation-odi-is-jobs-to-be-done-theory-in-practice-2944c6ebc40e>
- <sup>51</sup> Laubheimer, P. (2017). *Personas vs. Jobs-to-Be-Done*. Nielsen Norman Group. <https://www.nngroup.com/articles/personas-jobs-be-done/>
- <sup>52</sup> Flom, J. (2011). *The Value of Customer Journey Maps: A UX Designer's Personal Journey*. <https://www.uxmatters.com/mt/archives/2011/09/the-value-of-customer-journey-maps-a-ux-designers-personal-journey.php>
- <sup>53</sup> Pearson, D., & De lure, R. (2022). *NAB Education Insight Report Part 1*. National Australia Bank. <https://business.nab.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/NAB-Private-Schools-Survey-2022-Part-1-1.pdf>
- <sup>54</sup> Damgaard, M.T., & Nielsen, H.S. (2018). Nudging in education. *Economics of Education Review*, 64, 313-342. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.econedurev.2018.03.008>
- <sup>55</sup> Thaler, R. & Sunstein, C. (2008). *Nudge* (2nd ed.). Penguin Group.
- <sup>56</sup> Glazerman, S., Nichols-Barrer, I., Valant, J., Chandler, J., & Burnett, A. (2020). The choice architecture of school choice websites. *Journal of Research on Educational Effectiveness*, 13(2), 322-350. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19345747.2020.1716905>
- <sup>57</sup> Cantu, N. Varela, D.G., Jones, D., & Challoo, L. (2021). Factors that influence school choice: A look at parents' and school leaders' perceptions. *Research in Educational Policy and Management*, 3(1), 19-41. <https://doi.org/10.46303/repam.2021.2>
- <sup>58</sup> Leaver, S. (2017). *Preference stability and choices in education*. The Misbehaving Economist. <https://themisbehavingeconomist.com/2017/02/18/preference-stability-and-choices-in-education/>
- <sup>59</sup> Beamish, P., & Morey, P. (2013). School choice: What parents choose. *TEACH Journal of Christian Education*, 7(1), 26-33.
- <sup>60</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>61</sup> The Behavioural Architects. (2020). *How to connect and communicate in these challenging times: A behavioural science toolkit*. [https://www.thebeearchitects.com/assets/uploads/How\\_to\\_Connect\\_and\\_Communicate\\_in\\_these\\_Challenging\\_Times\\_-\\_The\\_Behavioural\\_Architects\\_-\\_May\\_2020\\_-\\_Final\\_for\\_post\\_webinar.pdf](https://www.thebeearchitects.com/assets/uploads/How_to_Connect_and_Communicate_in_these_Challenging_Times_-_The_Behavioural_Architects_-_May_2020_-_Final_for_post_webinar.pdf)
- <sup>62</sup> OECD. (2022). *Who Cares about Using Education Research in Policy and Practice?: Strengthening Research Engagement, Educational Research and Innovation*, OECD Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.1787/d7ff793d-en>.
- <sup>63</sup> Ibid.

**is.vic.edu.au**

Copyright, December 2022

© Independent Schools of Victoria

This work is copyright. Apart from any use as permitted under the Copyright Act 1968 no part may be reproduced by any process without prior permission from Independent Schools Victoria. Please email [enquiries@is.vic.edu.au](mailto:enquiries@is.vic.edu.au) for requests concerning reproduction rights.

ABN 44 711 074 857



**Independent  
Schools** Victoria