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The School Choice Experience:

Findings of the Children First: School Choice Trust Parent Survey

by Virginia Gentles

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The Fraser Institute, 4th Floor, 1770 Burrard Street, Vancouver, B.C., V6J 3G7

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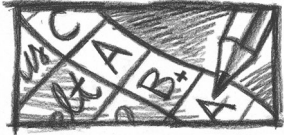
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Executive Summary

In January 2004, Children First: School Choice Trust conducted a survey of the program's tuition assistance grant recipient families. The parents who responded to the survey reported on several topics, including:

- **Income:** Participating families had a lower than expected average income of \$27,553, which is 66 percent below the \$81,845 Ontario average for families with two or more individuals. Of the participating families, 71 percent had an annual income \$40,000 or less in 2002. Average family income for each household size was almost half of the income eligibility criteria for the program.
- **Ethnicity:** At least 43 percent of families in the program are visible minorities, as compared to 19.1 percent of the total Ontario population.
- **Academic Quality of Public and Independent School:** 82 percent of parents marked their new independent school with an "A," while only 2 percent of public schools received an "A."
- **Criteria for Choosing a School:** Academic quality was the top criterion for selecting an independent school with 87 percent of surveyed parents indicating it was a deciding factor for them. Parents also reported that values taught at the independent school (78%), class sizes (65%) and religious reasons (56%) influenced their decision.
- **Student Improvement:** 93 percent of parents witnessed some or significant improvement in their child's academic performance.
- **Student Happiness:** 91 percent of parents believe their child is happier in his or her independent school.
- **Financial Need:** 90 percent of surveyed parents indicated that they would not be able to send their child to independent school without financial assistance.



Introduction

Children First: School Choice Trust is Canada's first privately-funded program that helps Ontario parents in financial need send their children to the independent school of their choice. Children First was launched by The Fraser Institute in January 2003 with the financial support of the W. Garfield Weston Foundation, a private family foundation.

The tuition assistance grants pay 50 percent of the tuition at any independent school in Ontario, to a maximum of \$3,500. Participating parents partner with Children First and cover the remaining tuition costs. Grant recipients are supported by Children First from

junior kindergarten through Grade 8, provided they continue to meet the program's age and financial eligibility requirements.

In order to assess the program's effectiveness and learn more about the demographics of the program and parents' experiences with public and independent schools, Children First mailed surveys to participating parents in January 2004 (Appendix A).

Eighty percent, or 82 of 102 grant recipient families receiving tuition assistance grants in the 2003-04 school year completed and returned the survey.



Survey Results

Income

To qualify for the Children First program, families' household income must not exceed twice the poverty line, as defined by the Basic Needs Index. In Ontario, 26 percent of families with children fall within the income eligibility guidelines.¹ The income eligibility criteria vary by household size and are adjusted annually using the Consumer Price Index. Additional program information can be found in Appendix B.

As the top line in figure 1 shows, for the 2003-04 school year, pre-tax total household income for a family of four had to fall below \$46,401. The average income of participating families for each household size, the bot-

tom line in figure 1, was around half of the income eligibility limit, or very close to the poverty line.

Families participating in the survey had an average income of \$27,553. This is 66 percent below the \$81,845 Ontario average for all families with two or more individuals.² Children First data on the household income of the survey participants, shown in figure 2, reveal that 71 percent of families had an annual income of \$40,000 or less in 2002.

Ethnicity

According to the survey responses, at least 43 percent of families in the program are visible minorities, as

Figure 1: Income Eligibility Limits vs. Average Income of Participating Families

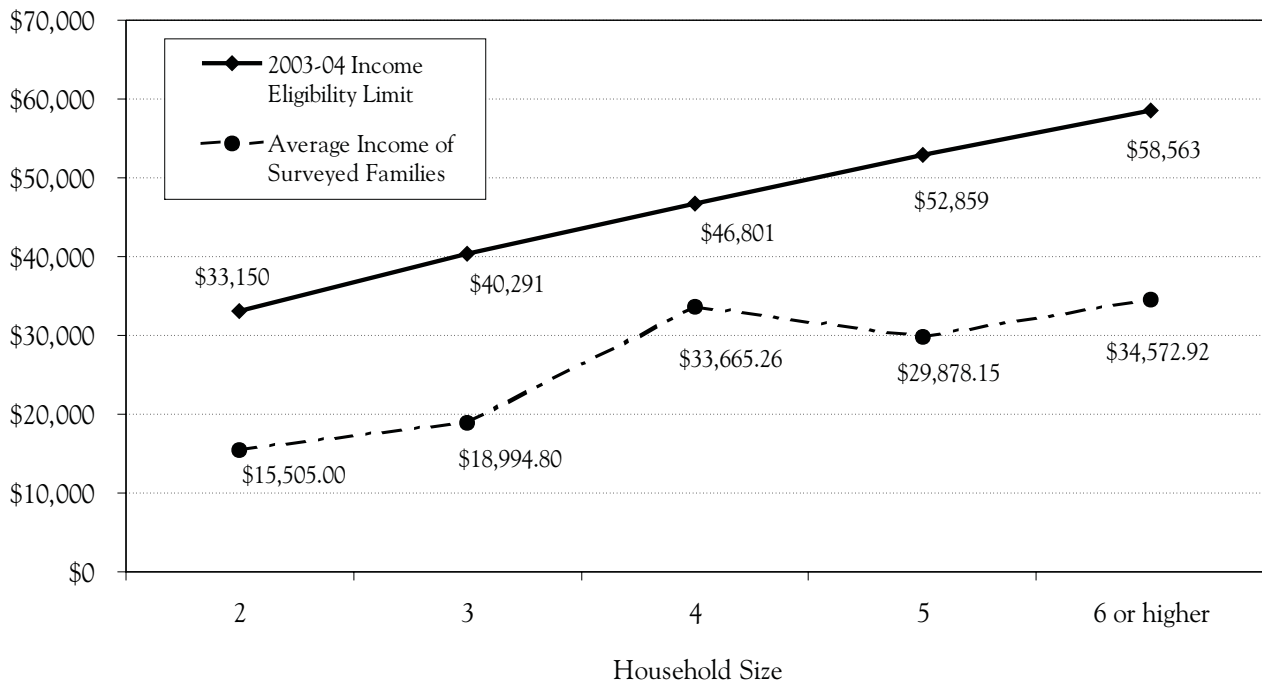
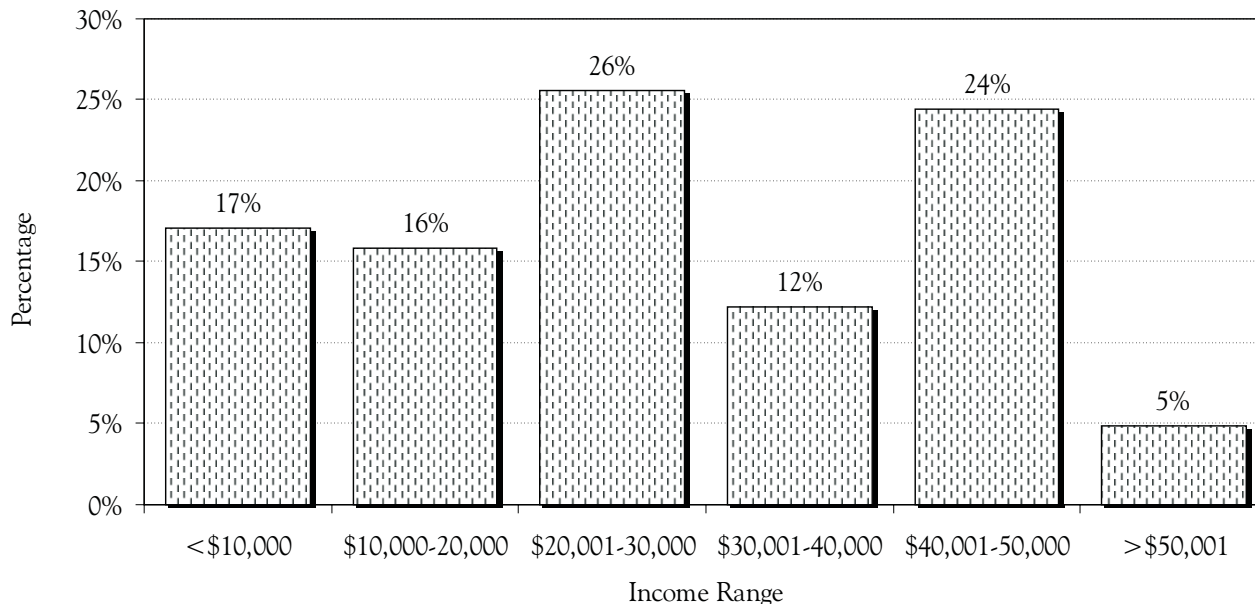


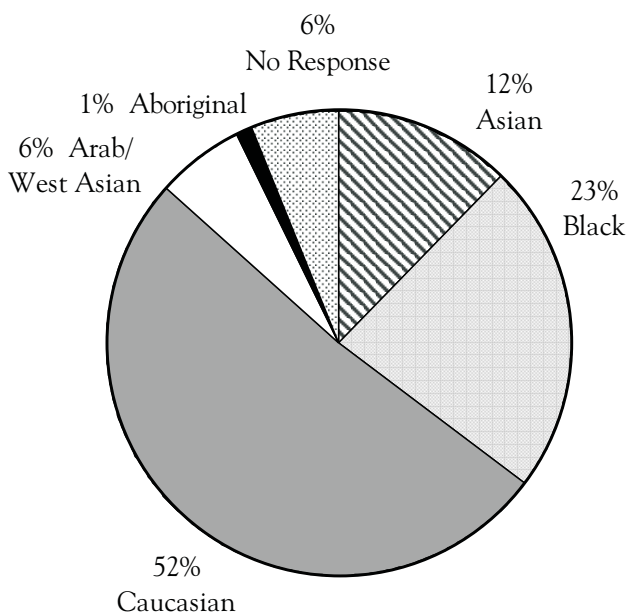
Figure 2: Annual Household Income of Survey Participants



compared to 19.1 percent of the total Ontario population.³ About 51 percent of parents who responded to the survey indicated that they were Caucasian, while 23 percent reported that they are Black, 12 percent Asian, 6 percent Arab/West Asian, and 1 percent Ab-

original (figure 3). Of the families who completed the survey, 23 percent reported that English was not their first language. These families spoke Chinese (10%), Arabic (4%), Somali (4%), Amharic (2%) or other (4%) as a first language.

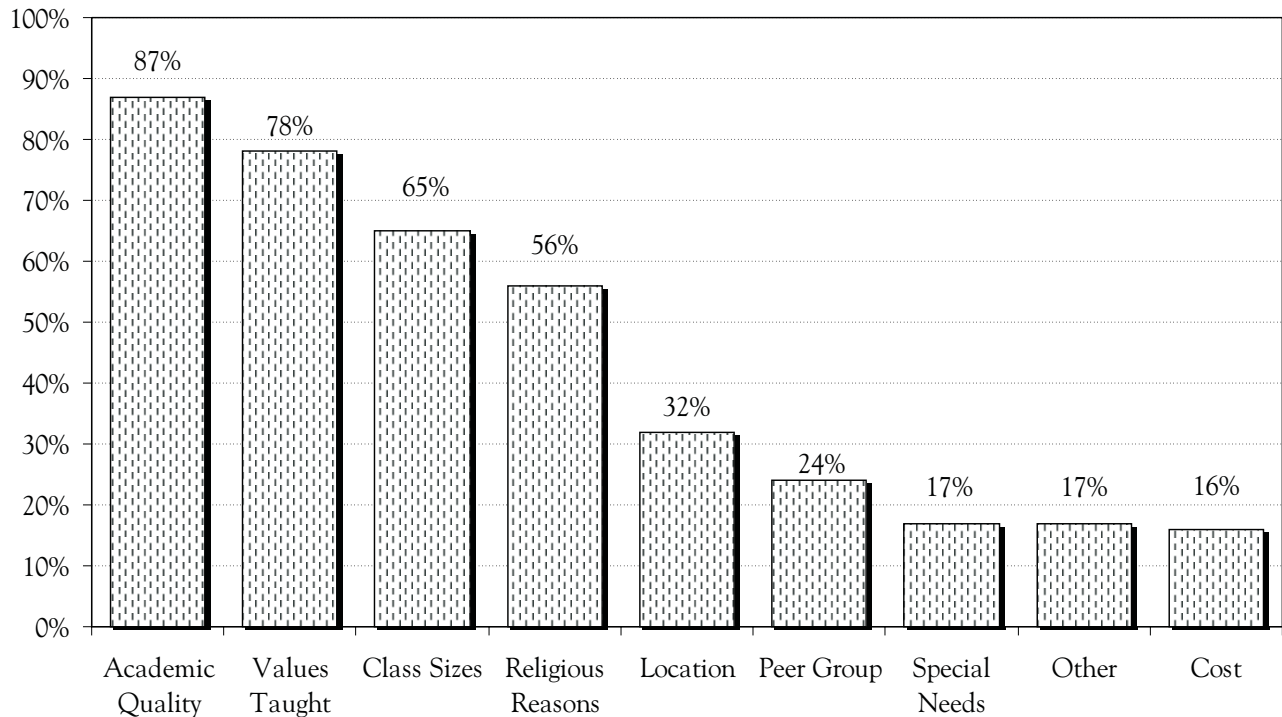
Figure 3: Race of the 2003-04 Grant Recipients



Types of independent schools chosen

Children First tuition assistance grant recipients may enroll in any of the over 800 Ontario independent schools registered with the Ministry of Education. Two-thirds of participating students (65%) chose to attend religiously affiliated schools in 2003-04, primarily Christian schools but also Muslim and Jewish.⁴ The rest of the grant recipient families chose non-religious schools. Nearly 17 percent of parents chose Montessori schools for their children. Unaffiliated independent schools accounted for almost 15 percent of grant recipients, and 3 percent chose Waldorf schools (Appendix C).

Of the families surveyed, 65 percent previously sent their children to public school. Most students from the

Figure 4: Reasons for Choosing Independent School

remaining 35 percent of surveyed families were not of school age before entering the program, and a small number had previously attended private school.⁵

Factors influencing parents' choice of schools

As figure 4 shows, the top criterion for selecting an independent school was academic quality: 87 percent of surveyed parents indicated it was a deciding factor in their choice of school. Parents also reported that values taught at the independent school (78%), class sizes (65%) and religious reasons (56%) influenced their decision. Cost was a minor factor, with only 16 percent of parents citing it as a reason for choosing a school.

When asked to explain why the families left their former public schools, families previously enrolled in public school listed religious reasons (83%), academic quality (72%) and the values taught at the school (64%).

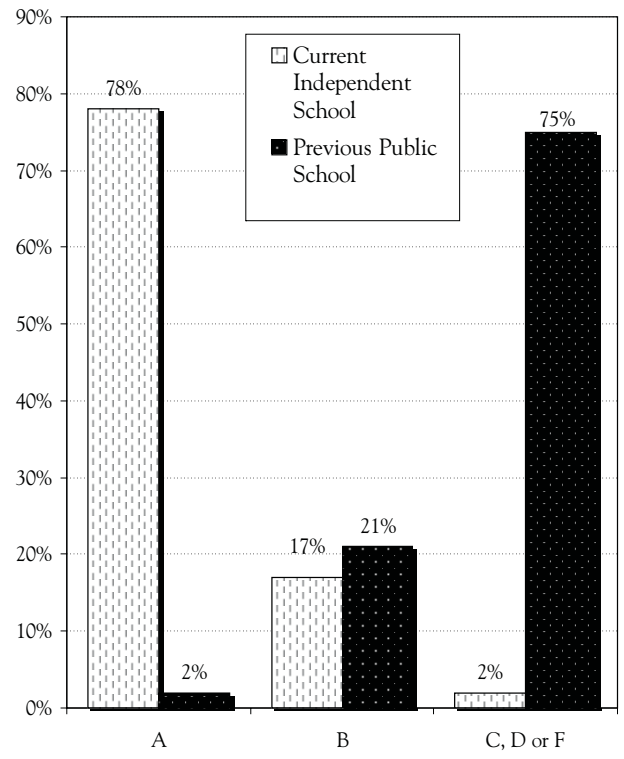
In the survey, parents identified particular problems at their child's former public schools. Bullying (58%) and fighting (51%) were frequently mentioned. Parents also indicated that stealing (28%), cheating (25%) and racial conflict (17%) were problems at their child's previous public elementary school. Only 6 percent of surveyed parents mentioned drugs as a significant problem.

Parental satisfaction

When parents were asked to identify areas of concern with their child's new independent school, the most frequently mentioned problems were: fighting and bullying (4%), cheating (2%) and racial conflict (1%).

The survey suggests that parents were much more satisfied with their child's new independent school than with their previous public school. As shown in figure 5, when asked to provide a mark for their child's overall independent school experience, 78 percent of surveyed parents gave the schools an "A." Only 2 percent of parents with children previously enrolled in public school

Figure 5: Overall Marks in Independent versus Public School



marked their prior public school experience as an “A,” whereas 75 percent of parents gave the prior public school a “C” or below.

Responses regarding specific educational areas, shown in figures 6 and 7, were consistent with the overall marks for the independent and public schools. For example, 82 percent of parents marked their school with an “A” for academic quality, while only 2 percent of public schools received an “A” in this category. For each category (Curriculum Reflects Values, Teacher Attention, Academic Quality, Discipline, Fosters Parental Involvement, and Interaction with School), the vast majority of parents gave their independent schools an “A.”

In each category where parents rated their children’s former public schools, the majority (60 to 94 percent in the six different categories) rated those schools “C,” “D” or “F.” The poorest marks were given for their pub-

lic schools’ Curriculum Reflecting Values, Discipline, and Teacher Attention to the Child (figure 7).

Parental involvement

The survey also asked parents about their child’s previous public and current independent schools’ climate for parental involvement. As figure 7 shows, when asked to grade the public schools on their attempts at fostering parental involvement, 8 percent of parents gave them an “A,” followed by 19 percent who gave them a “B.” The independent schools’ culture of parental involvement received an “A” from 67 percent of parents and a “B” from 21 percent.

Parents estimated their monthly interactions with school by identifying the average number of times per month they talk to their child’s teacher and the average times they volunteer at the school. The responses correspond with the schools’ marks for fostering parental involvement: parents interact with their child’s teacher an average of 3.7 times per month in the public schools and 18.3 times per month in independent schools. Parents volunteered 1.3 times per month at their child’s former public schools, but 15 times per month at the independent schools.

Student improvement

Parents claim significant improvement in their children’s academic performance, social skills, and behavior since entering independent school. An impressive 93 percent of parents responding to the survey witnessed some or significant improvement in their child’s academic performance, while 88 percent observed an improvement in social skills, and 85 percent saw improvement in their behaviour (figure 8).

Student Happiness

When asked if their child showed any improvement in his or her happiness and enjoyment of school, 91 percent of parents responded that their child is happier in the independent school.

Figure 6: Parents Rate their Children's Current Independent Schools

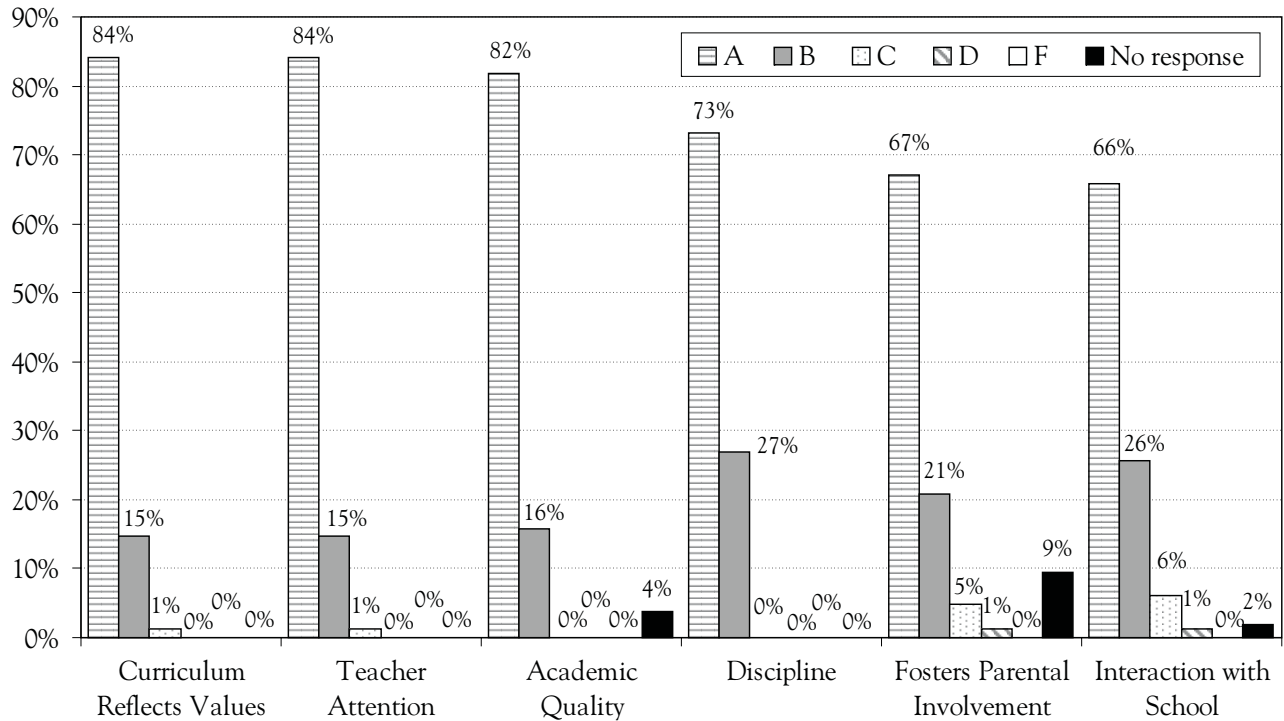


Figure 7: Parents Rate their Children's Former Public Schools

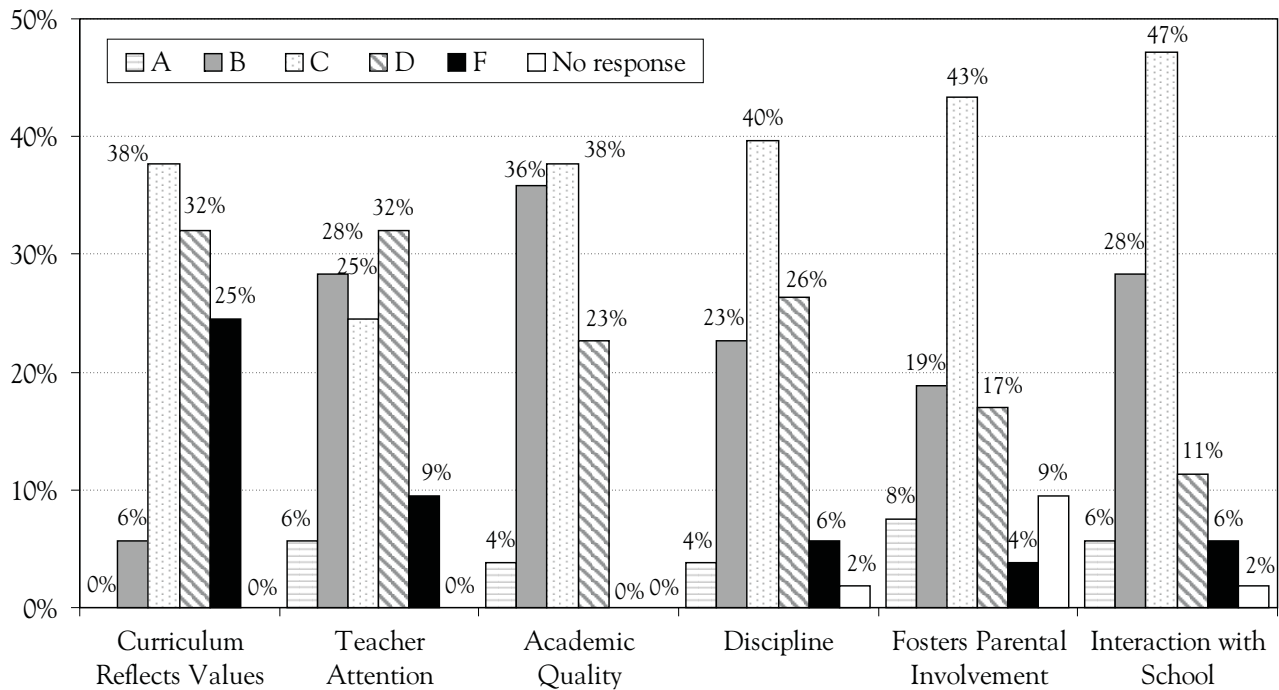
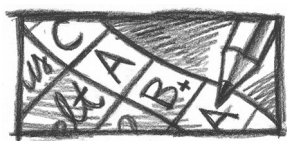
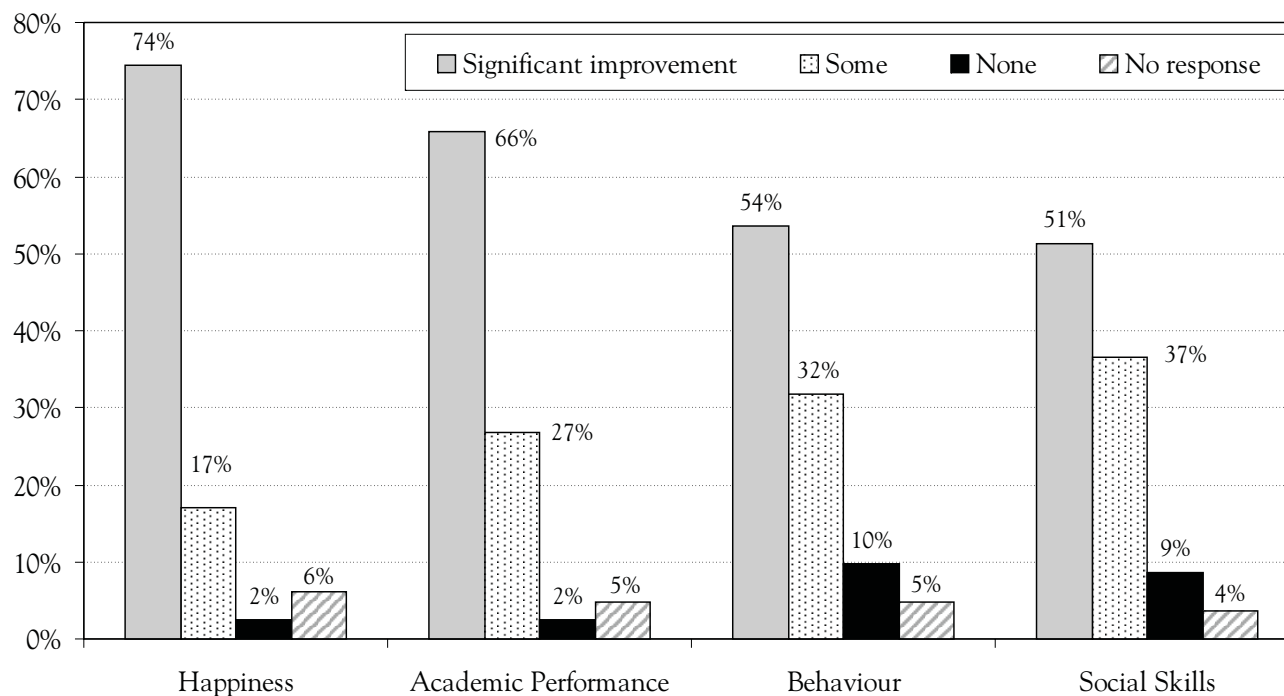


Figure 8: Student Improvement In Independent School

Conclusions

Children First: School Choice Trust tuition assistance grants help Ontario families afford the school of their choice. The grants create opportunities for families who could not otherwise afford independent school education. Of the surveyed parents, 90 per cent indicated that they could not send their child to independent school without the tuition assistance grants.

The survey findings suggest that the program provides a valuable educational choice to a diverse cross-section

of Ontario families with real financial need. The findings suggest that families have used the grants to choose a wide variety of independent schools for their academic merit, school environment, and other educationally valid reasons. Crucially, these parents report in the vast majority of cases that their children are happier, learning more, better behaved, and have better social skills than in their previous public schools. This survey suggests that the tuition assistance grants are an important tool for the families using them.



Appendix A: Survey of Parents, January 2004

Please complete this form to help us learn more about your experience with Children First: School Choice Trust and your child's school experience. Return the completed survey by JANUARY 23, 2004 to Children First by fax or using the stamped, addressed envelope.

1. Number of your children receiving Children First grants who are girls (please circle): 1 2 3 4 5
2. Number of your children receiving Children First grants who are boys (please circle): 1 2 3 4 5
3. Race (please circle): Asian Black Caucasian Latin American Arab/West Asian Aboriginal
Other: _____
4. Religion (please circle): Christian Muslim Jewish No religion Other: _____
5. What is your first language (please circle)? English Other: _____
6. Did your child attend public school before receiving a grant (please circle)? YES NO
7. If you answered "NO" to Question 6, please skip to Question 12. If you answered "YES" to Question 6, please circle the mark you would give your child's most recent public school on the following factors:

Academic quality	A	B	C	D	F
Quality of teacher attention to your child	A	B	C	D	F
Your interaction with teachers and administrators at the school	A	B	C	D	F
Discipline	A	B	C	D	F
Curriculum reflects your values	A	B	C	D	F
School fosters parental involvement	A	B	C	D	F
Overall school experience	A	B	C	D	F
8. How many times on average per month did you talk to your child's teacher? Please specify: _____ times per month.
9. How many times on average per month did you volunteer at your child's school? Please specify: _____ times per month.

10. Were any of the following things a problem at your child's public school?

Fighting:	YES	NO	Stealing:	YES	NO
Cheating:	YES	NO	Bullying:	YES	NO
Racial Conflict:	YES	NO	Drugs:	YES	NO

11. Why did you want your child to leave this school? (Circle all that apply)

Peer group	Academic quality	Location
Social problems	Values Taught	My child's special needs
Religious reasons	Class sizes	Other (please specify): _____

12. Name of child's current independent school: _____

13. What made you choose this school for your child? (Circle all that apply)

Peer group	Academic quality	Location
Cost	Values Taught	My child's special needs
Religious reasons	Class Sizes	Other (please specify): _____

14. Please circle the mark you would give your child's **current school** on the following factors:

Academic quality	A	B	C	D	F
Quality of teacher attention to your child	A	B	C	D	F
Your interaction with teachers and administrators at the school	A	B	C	D	F
Discipline	A	B	C	D	F
Curriculum reflects your values	A	B	C	D	F
School fosters parental involvement	A	B	C	D	F
Overall school experience	A	B	C	D	F

15. How many times on average per month do you talk to your child's teacher?

Please specify: _____ times per month.

16. How many times on average per month do you volunteer at your child's school?

Please specify: _____ times per month.

17. Are any of the following things a problem at your child's current school?

Fighting:	YES	NO	Stealing:	YES	NO
Cheating:	YES	NO	Bullying:	YES	NO
Racial Conflict:	YES	NO	Drugs:	YES	NO

18. Since your child started at his/her **current school**, have you seen any improvement in him/her in the following areas?

Academic performance:	None	Some	Significant Improvement
Social skills:	None	Some	Significant Improvement
Behavior:	None	Some	Significant Improvement
Happiness/ Enjoyment of School:	None	Some	Significant Improvement
Other (please specify): _____	None	Some	Significant Improvement

19. Is providing transportation to your child's independent school a significant challenge for you? YES NO

20. If you did not receive a grant, would you still be able to send your child to independent school? YES NO

21. Do you receive another form of financial assistance to help you pay for your child's tuition? YES NO

22. Will your child be returning to his/her current school next fall? YES NO

If not, why not?

23. Please circle the mark you would give your experience with Children First: School Choice Trust:

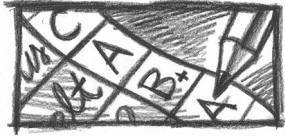
Children First program administration:	A	B	C	D	F
Communications/assistance from Children First:	A	B	C	D	F
Satisfaction with grant amount awarded:	A	B	C	D	F
Overall satisfaction with program:	A	B	C	D	F

24. What is your email address (if any)? _____

Please feel free to add any additional comments you would like to share with us: _____

We thank you for your cooperation in filling out this survey.

Individual survey answers will always remain strictly confidential and will not be given out to any third parties.



Appendix B: Program Overview

In the 2003-04 school year, the first year of the program, Children First awarded 150 tuition assistance grants to Ontario children from junior kindergarten to Grade 8. In 2004, increased funding allowed Children First to expand the program to award approximately 225 new grants each school year for the next five years.

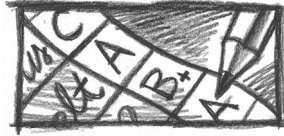
The tuition assistance grants pay 50 percent of the tuition at any registered independent school in Ontario, to a maximum of \$3,500. Participating parents partner with Children First and cover the remaining tuition costs. Grant recipients are supported by Children First up to and including Grade 8, provided they continue to meet the program's financial eligibility requirements.

In 2003, Children First received 4,263 applications from Ontario families between the late January announcement and the March 28th application deadline. A computerized lottery was conducted in April 2003 to randomly select the initial 150 grant recipients for the

2003-04 school year. Grant applicants who were not chosen in the lottery were placed on a waiting list.

To prove their financial eligibility and confirm their grants, families selected in the lottery submitted statements of net assets, proof of 2002 income, and enrolment confirmation forms to Children First. Families who did not qualify were replaced with qualified waiting list families. Several families left the program in the first few months of the school year, because they either moved or experienced financial difficulties. By January 2004, when the parental surveys were distributed, there were 144 active students from 102 families participating in the program. These students were attending 80 independent schools across Ontario.

Participating students selected schools with an average tuition of \$6,184, and received an average Children First grant of \$2,778 for the 2003-04 school year. Parents contributed on average \$3,397 for their child's tuition.



Appendix C: Affiliations of Participating Schools, 2003-04 School Year

<i>School Type</i>	<i># of Students</i>	<i># of Schools</i>
Christian (no specific denomination)	33	15
OACS (Christian Reformed)	31	12
Montessori	24	17
Other nonreligious	21	16
Islamic	11	5
Baptist	7	4
Waldorf	5	2
Jewish	5	3
Seventh-Day Adventist	2	2
Roman Catholic	2	1
Nonreligious, for special needs	1	1
Mennonite	1	1
Church of Christ	1	1



Notes

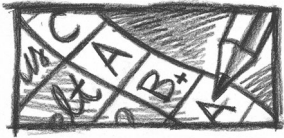
¹Calculation by Professor Chris Sarlo, based on the Basic Needs Index for Ontario.

²Niels Veldhuis and Michael Walker (2004), Table 5: Average Income and Tax for Three Different Types of Family, "Canadians Celebrate Tax Freedom Day on June 28," *Fraser Forum* (July): 7-12.

³Ministry of Finance, "Visible Minorities and Ethnicity in Ontario," *Census 2001 Highlights*, Factsheet 6.

⁴According to the Ontario Federation of Independent Schools website, two-thirds of independent schools in Ontario are affiliated with a religious organization. See <http://www.ofis.ca/main/tiki-index.php?page=FAQ>.

⁵Children First awards only 5 percent of tuition assistance grants each year to students who previously attend independent school.



About the Author

Virginia Gentles is the Program Director of Children First: School Choice Trust. Prior to joining Children First, Virginia served as a senior policy advisor at the Ontario Ministry of Education. As an education policy advisor at the Ministry, she coordinated the research, analysis and public consultations for the Education Equality Task Force, an independent review of the provincial funding formula. She also conducted a policy

and funding review of the Learning Opportunities Grant for at-risk students. Ms. Gentles has also been involved in education policy at the federal level in the US House of Representatives. She has a BA in political science from Wake Forest University and a Master of Public Administration (MPA) from the Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs at Syracuse University.



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