# When the Living Room becomes the Classroom: Examining Inequities and Choices in Education during COVID-19
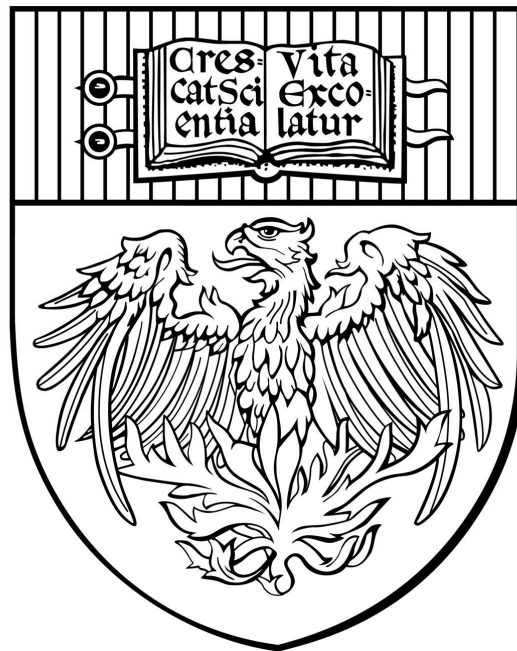
By: Rebecca Grayzel-Ward

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**Abstract**

In the 2020-2021 academic year, schools across the United States were forced to adjust to the COVID-19 pandemic. Much research has explored how the relationship between schools and families interacts with equity, especially related to school choice. Less is known about what happens when schools exist remotely, requiring families to make new choices as they face unique constraints. In this paper, I examine how two school contexts, Chicago Public Schools in Illinois and Lafayette Public Schools in Mississippi, responded to COVID-19 through policies of remote-only learning and hybrid learning respectively. Using interviews conducted with 44 parents and teachers from both locations, I find that while COVID-19 challenges families, teachers, and students in new ways, the major obstacles these groups faced were based on pre-existing inequalities in society. I analyzed my interviews and observations with attention both to the choices schools provided and to what factors contributed to decisions made by parents and families. Here, I noticed that parents are engaging in opportunity hoarding; however, I suggest that opportunity hoarding exists in response to something I term "choice framing." I find that schools creating and expanding choice contributed to the deepening of existing social inequalities. In light of these findings, I offer recommendations to education policy makers and school administrators. I hope these findings can help those in the education field understand how school policies can deepen inequalities beyond the physical school building.

## Acknowledgements

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**Introduction**

Where one lives is a significant determinant of where one goes to school. Schools affect what resources one can access, which in turn affects a child's life course trajectory (Klugman 2012; Vernon and Sinclair 1998; Sharkey et al. 2012). In the United States, the majority of students attend their local public school (Wang, Rathbun, and Musu 2019). Because of the localized nature of education, segregation in communities, towns, and cities infiltrates the school building (Dupriez and Dunmay 2006). In addition to racial segregation, inequities are also produced and reproduced through various avenues, including school choice, social structures, and childcare (Laurin et al. 2015; Lareau et al. 2014; Bourdieu 1973). Previous scholarship centers these disparities around the school building as the space from which resources are distributed. While some research examines what happens to communities when schools close (Ewing 2018), less is known about what happens when the physical space of school becomes divorced, in all or in part, from its functions of education and resource provision.

In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic suddenly caused schools across the country to close their physical doors and open virtually. The home replaced the school building as the location where schooling took place. Questions about equitable resource distribution shifted to focus on access to technology; school choice has become, in part, a question of whether students attended school in person or virtually. These choices became internal to the school rather than external between schools. Some previous research has shown how parents make advantageous decisions for their children within school; however, less attention is paid to how institutions allow these choices to be made (Lewis & Diamond 2015; Lewis-McCoy 2014). While the pandemic has changed how one may think of school choice, these COVID-specific observations relate to

broader themes in the study of schooling: the function of schools, school choice, and larger concerns of equity.

In order to evaluate these issues, I conducted interviews with key stakeholders in two different school contexts with two different COVID response policies: Chicago Public Schools (CPS) in Illinois and Lafayette Public Schools (LPS) in Mississippi. I interviewed approximately 10 parents and 10 teachers in each location about their experiences with school and COVID, for a total of 44 interviews. In conjunction with these interviews, I also examined the evolving policies and procedures of both school contexts for schooling during the pandemic, and observed conversations on social media with parents and teachers. I find that schools provided distinct sets of options to families, who in turn made choices that were constrained by a set of external factors. Families' agency was enabled or limited due to existing societal structures including race, class, and gender. I find there to be a mismatch between the services schools offered and the needs of families. The inequalities families and students experienced during COVID are not new, but the pandemic exposed and in some cases increased existing inequities in schools.

## Inequalities in American Public Schools

*Physical, Social, and Cultural Inequalities Across Schools*

Schools' physical and social compositions shape what they can provide to their students. First, students attend schools based on geographic location, so residential segregation contributes to school segregation. For example, in the American South, public schooling for Black children was not universal until the beginning of the twentieth century, while common schools had been universal for most other American children beginning around 1830 (Anderson 1988). Not until *Brown v Board*, or as another scholar argues, until the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was passed, did

the United States legally express that education for all children should be equal (Rosenberg 2008). Derrick Bell complicates what *Brown v Board* actually achieved, arguing that the occurrence of this landmark case was not simply to benefit black people or alleviate inequality (Bell 2004). While school inequity based explicitly on race is no longer permitted, "American public education depends heavily on local property taxes, and inequalities in tax revenues among school districts produce inequalities in educational resources, facilities, programs, and opportunities" (Walters 2001, 44). Such inequalities continue to exist today across American public schools, spanning multiple dimensions, including physical resources, intangible notions of cultural capital, and "choice."

However, it is not only the case that communities shape schools, as schools also impact the communities where they are located. In analyzing recent social-emotional learning programs within schools, researchers suggest that such programs if implemented correctly can have positive public health effects by reducing stress (Greenberg et al. 2017). Additionally, first person accounts from residents in communities suggest that schools exist in collective memories of students and closing schools can have harmful effects on communities (Ewing 2018). Beyond their physical locations, schools' interior physical characteristics also affect students' experiences (Grosvenor and Rasmussen 2018). For example, school architecture can be designed with certain pedagogy and disciplinary ideas in mind such as windows and open space in schools (Grosvenor and Rasmussen 2018). Broadly, this literature underscores the significance of schools' physical characteristics, but it is important to note that their social and cultural features also have significant influence on their relationships to inequality.

Traditionally, much literature surrounding inequalities in schools has focused on the way school reproduces cultural and social capital (Bourdieu 1973; Bowles and Gintis 1976; Carter

2003; Yosso 2006). Most notably and inspiring much contemporary research, Bourdieu argues that schools work to reproduce the structures of class inequality by bestowing greater rewards upon students who possess greater cultural capital (Bourdieu 1973). As Bourdieu explains, "those sections which are richest in economic capital set aside cultural and educational investments to the benefit of economic investments" (Bourdieu 1973, 502). In a capitalist system, the educational system helps to reproduce economic inequities in the labor force (Bowles and Gintis 1976). However, cultural capital alone cannot account for differences in race. More recent work has helped to address this shortcoming, establishing a distinction between dominant and nondominant cultural capital (Carter 2003). Further, there may be forms of capital that exist and are not valued in schools, especially forms of capital not valued by those of higher classes but commonly shared among members of nondominant social groups (Yosso 2006).

*Schools and Families*

Outside of the physical space schools occupy, there is also important literature about the role of parents' work, parental engagement, and how these affect children. Parents who believe they can impact their children's education are more likely to be engaged in their children's school (Hoover-Dempsey 1992). There are further significant connections between parent's work and engagement, as researchers have found that parental employment was the strongest predictor of parental involvement (Castro et. al. 2004). Further, there exists a relationship between parents' waged work and children. On the one hand, parents's work can serve as a model for their children, but on the other hand, it can lead to strained relationships when parents become stressed about work (Heinrich 2014). Data from the National Child Care Survey in 1990 shows that a father's role in child care depends on the schedule of work and that fathers are more likely

to care for their children when they work different hours from their wives (Brayfield 1995). This suggests that work stress and the flexibility of work impact relationships between parents and children at home.

Additionally, the family structure shapes caregiving responsibilities. As Stack and Burton's interview-based work suggests, kinscripts, or relationships between extended family members, may pose certain obligations for family members to have (Stack and Burton 1993). These obligations may result in an expectation that a certain family member will be responsible for watching younger nieces and nephews or responsible for caring for aging members of the family. Further, these extended family relationships are more likely to occur in Black and low-income families where family contribution expectations exist outside of the nuclear family (Stack and Burton 1993; Gerstel 2011). These care-giving responsibilities fall overwhelmingly on the hands of women. Hochschild's seminal work *The Second Shift*, reported on the experience of working women who worked one shift in the labor market and a second shift in a caregiving capacity (Hochschild 1989). Despite more women working in the formal workforce, men did not engage in more of the caregiving responsibilities (Hochschild 1989). Updated work continues to find similar trends (Blair-Loy 2015). During COVID-19, when some parents began working from home, this meant the first and second shift occurred simultaneously. It is yet unclear how this new interaction with parent's work and care responsibilities affect children's educational experiences. This is a topic I explore in this paper.

Another domain in which families shape children's educational experiences is in school choice. Parents can choose to send their child to a private school, public school, home school, or engage with other options. Typically, school choice connotes choices that families and students make about what school to attend (Witte 1998). The ability of parents and families to make

choices about school depends in part on the type of schools available to them (Witte and Thorn 1996). Sorting students into different types of schools, especially between charter schools and public schools, can lead to greater "racial isolation" (Stein 2015). Parents often rely on their social networks and word of mouth, rather than other metrics, when making choices about the schools that their children attend (Lareau et al. 2014). However, school choice is more complicated than simply parent agency. As Kimbelberg argues, "the extent to which parents can exercise school choice is thus not simply a function of their individual capital, but also a product of their ability to deploy those resources within the boundaries of a specific social structure" (Kimelberg 2014, 209). This suggests that there are additional constraints that control how certain parents are able to exercise choice. Interview data in CPS finds that parents make decisions first through identifying what options they deem to be most important, and then how external factors constrain their options (Pattillo et. al. 2014). This provides insight into how parents engage with making decisions about their children's schooling.

Parents do not only make choices *between* schools; they also make choices about their children's educational experiences *within* them. Ong-Dean defines "privileged parents," as those who are equipped to use resources to advocate on behalf of their children (Ong-Dean 2009). Further, as observational and interview based research shows, parents can coach their children on how to interact and behave in classrooms (Calarco 2018). Lewis and Diamond's work focuses on honors courses and advanced courses within high schools (Lewis and Diamond 2015). In racially diverse areas, Lewis and Diamond observe how white parents use their knowledge of the school system to put their children in advanced courses, regardless of their child's academic ability (Lewis and Diamond 2015). They describe opportunity hoarding, a concept first introduced by Charles Tilly, as "not only efforts to control access to the good in question but also the

development of legitimating narratives that explain and justify limiting access" (Lewis and Diamond 2015, 156). Here, Lewis and Diamond use opportunity hoarding to explain how white parents seek out honors courses and use the school system in ways that enable their own children to receive the "best education." However, the school also has some reasonability in allowing opportunities to be hoarded. As Lewis-McCoy's qualitative research finds, "local schools and staff determine what is acceptable engagement, which of the desired outcomes are feasible, and which parents are desirable participants" (Lewis-McCoy 2014, 70). This shows the school's role in allowing opportunity hoarding.

Typically, opportunity hoarding relates to how parents assert themselves in advantageous ways to seek opportunities on behalf of their children. These opportunities relate to different classes, extracurricular resources, and other distinctions to advance learning opportunities (Lewis and Diamond 2015; Lewis-McCoy 2014). Left unknown, however, is how school choice is affected within school not based on levels of coursework but by mode of instruction (e.g. in-person or virtual). While researchers acknowledge the importance of face-to-face interaction, online learning can be successful if there is frequent contact with teachers (Azis, Suharyati, and Susanti 2020; Journell 2013), professional development around a unique set of pedagogical tools, and smaller group sizes (Seifert, Feliks, and Kritz 2020). These challenges constitute significant new domains in which inequalities can be heightened, as students experience varied modes of schooling during the COVID-19 pandemic.

I suggest that rather than focusing on the way actors take advantage of opportunities to benefit themselves and others, attention should be paid to how institutions enable this type of behavior. I call this process *choice framing*. Before any decision is made on the part of the actor, institutions provide options. Through doing so, institutions frame the area where choices are

made. If they allow for a greater variety of choices, greater inequity may result. Below, I explore how districts' provision or restriction of parents' choice in terms of mode of schooling contributed to deepening inequality across two school contexts.

**<u>Local and Historical Context</u>**

Chicago Public Schools (CPS) is the third largest school district in the United States (following New York City and Los Angeles School Districts) and is responsible for educating 355,156 students across 642 school buildings (Bureau 2019; "CPS: At-a-Glance: CPS Stats and Facts"). CPS contains four primary types of schools: neighborhood schools (traditional schools), choice schools (magnet schools), selective enrollment schools (gifted schools and/or those with testing requirements), and charter schools ("GoCPS" 2020). While neighborhood schools are determined by the physical location of the student and their family, selective enrollment and magnet schools require applications and certain tests to attend. The majority of CPS students are Hispanic (46.6%) followed closely by African Americans (35.9%), categories that collectively comprise the vast majority of students in the district (82.5%) (CPS Stats and Facts). CPS schools, reflecting Chicago's social geography, are deeply racially and socioeconomically segregated (Street 2005).

Geographic segregation is only one factor impacting inequality in CPS. The emphasis on high-stakes testing, for example, is greater in low-income predominantly Black and Latinx schools, including a greater percentage of these students being retained in summer school programs compared to their white peers (Lipman 2002). White students are 2.3 times more likely than Black students to be enrolled in at least one AP class, and Black students are 4.3 times more likely to be suspended as white students (Eads). While CPS schools are increasingly racially

segregated in Chicago, "instead of a focus on integration, CPS currently promotes segregated charter schools and continues to destabilize Black neighborhoods through school closings and other actions" (Jankov and Caref 2017, 7). In Chicago, students are allowed to "attend schools outside of their designated attendance areas" (Pattillo et. al 2014, 239). Different schools also have International Baccalaureate (IB) and Advanced Placement (AP) programs ("GO" CPS 2020). This means that parents and students may be making choices within a given school about whether or not the student will participate in this programming. Because there are so many different types of schools and there are so many schools, it can be difficult for parents to make schooling decisions (Pattillo et. al 2014).

In Mississippi, I focus on the Oxford School District and Lafayette County School District. Both school districts exist in the same county and had similar policies during COVID-19. Oxford School District (OSD) is substantially smaller than CPS, responsible for educating 4,528 students ("State Data Export" 2020). OSD has 52.05% White students and 32.46% Black students. While OSD is the only school district in the city limits, there is a counterpart school, the county school district of Lafayette County School District (LCSD), serving the remainder of the country. LCSD has a larger percentage of white students compared to OSD; 72.71% of its students were White and 22.37% of its students were African American in 2020. At OSD, white students are 5.9 times as likely to be enrolled in at least one AP class as Black students, and Black students are 6.5 times as likely to be suspended than white students (Eads). At LCSD, white students are 14.2 times as likely to be enrolled in at least one AP class than Black students, and Black students are 2.6 times more likely to be suspended than white students (Eads). Together, I refer to these two districts as Lafayette Public Schools (LPS). As in CPS, LPS students face deeply inequitable schooling experiences.

Beginning in 2019, a pandemic swept the world, significantly altering operations for school districts across the nation, including CPS and LPS. In the fall of 2020, CPS began all schools virtually. Prior to this decision, the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) was instrumental in fighting for schooling to occur at home, citing health concerns (Kenney 2020). CPS provided internet and technology (such as computers) for students who qualified, as well as free meals for families and students to pick up at 450 sites ("Reopening Home | Chicago Public Schools" 2020). For the second quarter of the fall semester, CPS began to transition to offering in-person schooling for pre-K students ("Reopening Home | Chicago Public Schools" 2020). During the fall of 2020-2021, LPS began school with a hybrid model. This meant families could choose to send their children to school in-person or virtually. OSD created a website with resources students and families could access about online learning, including a section on "Netiquette" or how a student should behave in virtual school ("COVID-19 Information/Overview" 2020). Additionally, the district partnered with North Mississippi Primary Health Clinics to create a school-based clinic for all students and staff in part to provide COVID testing.

The differences in CPS' and LPS' responses to the pandemic reflected great divergences in school districts' approaches to the pandemic across the nation. "School officials [had] discretion to make education decisions based on the local and health needs and concerns," which left it to individual schools and school districts' discretion to determine what new procedures to implement in response (US Department of Education 2020). Some schools chose to conduct school solely virtually. This increased concerns around access to technology. An estimated 15% of families with school-aged students do not have access to the internet (Anderson 2017). As reported in 2013, only half of students with internet access in CPS schools typically use technology for school (Ehrlich, Sporte, and Sebring 2013). While limited research has been

conducted during the pandemic, some research exists describing school response to emergencies such as Hurricane Katrina. Schooling in reaction to this natural disaster required more attention on mental health resources for students and community-based services for families and school members (Lee, Danna, and Walker 2017; Hansel et al. 2019). As a result of the disaster, places with lower socioeconomic status suffered from a lack of resources at home and fewer resources in their schools (Alzahrani 2018). Immediately after Hurricane Katrina, there was pressure for Mississippi to reopen schools in part due to their possibility of providing a sense of stability and familiarity during chaos (Bowman 2007). While these scholars emphasize various resources that were needed for supporting disaster response and can provide insight into what might be needed, COVID-19 has affected people and institutions on a much larger scale across the country, and has required more long-term solutions because of its duration. Understanding how long-term solutions have been created, implemented, and adapted is one goal of this project.

**Data and Methods**

*Data Sources and "Sites"*

The data in this study come from 44 semi-structured interviews (see Table 1) with 18 teachers, 17 parents, 3 people who were both parents and teachers, and 6 educational nonprofit workers or adults otherwise connected to Chicago Public Schools (CPS) and Lafayette Public Schools (LPS, an umbrella category under which I include both Lafayette County School District [LCSD] and Oxford School District [OSD]). I began my research in Chicago because it is home to a vast school district with which I have familiarity, and is situated in a context in which I understood general questions of equity. I first conducted interviews with parents and teachers in Chicago Public Schools (CPS). As I conducted interviews, I began to learn of the challenges

parents and teachers were having keeping students engaged and academically on track. I wondered if the challenges that I was seeing reported would have occurred if school was in person.

In search of this answer, I became interested in conducting interviews with a school district that was hybrid, allowing families to decide whether their children would remain online or in person for the 2020-2021 school year. Following the tenets of abduction (Timmermans and Tavory 2012), I expanded my data site to include Lafayette Public Schools (LPS). This is a school district with which I am personally familiar, and it also educates a diverse group of students both in terms of race and socioeconomic status. This not only added the opportunity to speak with people with multiple experiences related to COVID, but it also made for an important comparative analysis alongside CPS.

In total, I interviewed 9 CPS teachers, 9 CPS parents, 2 people who were both CPS parents and teachers, 4 non-profit workers related to CPS, 9 LPS teachers, 8 LPS parents, one person who was a Mississippi parent and teacher, and 2 non-profit workers related to LPS (see Table 2). The majority of the people I interviewed were white women. In order to contact parents in Chicago, I utilized snowball sampling with multiple start-points from two parent contacts and posting in parent-oriented Facebook groups. To contact teachers, I used snowball sampling from one teacher in my personal network as well as directly reaching out to teachers from their school webpages to target geographic areas and types of schools I did not already have in my sample population. In Mississippi I relied on my personal networks to contact parents and teachers, and I then used snowball sampling. I also monitored the CPS Facebook group called "CPS Parents" as well as an Oxford Facebook group called "Oxford Parents" to gather information about whether what I was learning in my one-on-one interviews was unique or experienced by other parents as

well. The interviews lasted between 30 and 80 minutes and were recorded on Zoom. Because of the differences in when interviews were conducted, I reinterviewed a few CPS teachers to see how the year had been evolving. Additionally, as COVID and school policies were rapidly evolving, I limited the scope of data collection to only the fall semester of 2020. For the purposes of this study, names of teachers and parents, as well as names of schools, have been replaced with pseudonyms.

Importantly, 82% of the people I interviewed identified as female and 66% of the people I interviewed identified as White. This is perhaps unsurprising since about 76% of all teachers are female and about 80% of all teachers are white. The small proportion of respondents of color is one limitation of this study.

Additionally, as discussed previously, caregiving responsibilities are gendered, falling more heavily on women; this meant that my interviews were often interrupted by kids or included other disruptions. However, such experiences offered me a glimpse into the day-to-day realities of my respondents' lives during the pandemic.

*Data Analysis*

Prior to each interview, I reviewed my interview guide to familiarize myself with questions. During each interview, I took typed notes of key themes and interesting ideas. Because the interviews took place on Zoom, I was able to mute myself and take typed notes while maintaining eye contact and actively listening. I then transcribed all the interviews first through using Otter.ai for a rough transcription. I then cleaned the rough transcriptions by hand. Based on my previously typed notes, I had some idea of the main ideas and relevant information that occurred during each interview. I used NVIVO, a qualitative coding software, to code all

interviews. I first utilized the holistic coding method, organizing and coding almost all parts of an interview (Saldaña 2015). During this first cycle of coding, I also made comments and highlighted quotes that were memorable to me. Then, I started to combine ideas of codes, becoming more interested in how parents were making decisions about schooling. Because the facts impacting these choices were distinct across respondents, I combined codes to find a more generalizable theory of what I was seeing across the data. I used the social media observation notes to help guide these broader categories.

*Researcher Positionality*

The two places I have lived are Chicago, IL and Oxford, MS. This meant that I understood these places on a personal level. As a Chicago resident and student at a university in Chicago, parents and teachers seemed comfortable discussing matters of the city with me. I was able to use my connections in Chicago to begin snowballing with teachers and parents, including interviewing a parent whose child I tutor. However, I also utilized social media and my contacts' networks in an effort to also speak with people whom I did not know personally. Oxford School District was the school district where I grew up and which I attended. This allowed me to understand town-related details of the location. Here, I also utilized my social network to interview teachers and parents. However, I was careful not exclusively to interview teachers who had taught me, and instead to use the school directory to find other teachers. There are three teachers in the pool of Oxford teachers who were my personal teachers. Because of my experience in both of these locations, I felt participants were comfortable speaking with me. I also felt that parents and teachers found it cathartic to speak with me about their experiences.

**Findings**

During COVID-19, a variety of structures impacted how families were able to make decisions about their children's schooling. First, parents could only make choices with respect to how their school district framed choices. Families then made decisions based on two home life factors: family features and social structures. Finally, I examine how the school acted in response to their policies and families. While these family features and social structures existed in both locations, their effects became more apparent in LPS, where hybrid instruction allowed for greater parent choice. Overall, my findings underscore how institutions' *choice framing* affect the extent to which inequities beyond the school door shape students' educational experiences.

*Framing Choices*

Here, I examine the choices schools offered to parents and therefore what parents were making choices about. During the pandemic, schools provided different learning options. In Chicago, during the fall semester of 2020, CPS provided education in a remote capacity to all students. In Mississippi, the schools offered a hybrid model of learning. This allowed parents to decide whether their children would attend school in person or virtually. Parents could renew or change their selection every nine weeks. These different framings of choice provided parents different degrees of subsequent choice.

*Chicago*

In Chicago, where the decision to engage in virtual learning was determined by the school district, parents still made important decisions about whether or not to supplement the education provided by their children's school. Moreover, differences in the resources individual

schools offered for virtual learning affected how students experienced this mode of instruction. For example, CPS teacher Christina discussed what resources looked like for her specific middle school: "We're a magnet school, so we get a lot of private funding, as well as public funding… so we have one to one iPads." Extra funding can mean schools can offer additional resources for students. Not all schools are so well-resourced; as CPS teacher Jade noted, "there may be some schools that...internet's a problem." Thus, even without parent choices about the mode of schooling, CPS students faced different experiences despite sharing a common mode of schooling.

Based on the resources a school provides, some parents then also make academic decisions to support their students' learning. When I spoke to Dania, the parent of a kindergartener, it was clear she had a lot on her plate. One of the first things she told me when we spoke in September of 2020 was that it felt like she had been juggling since March of 2020. She was trying to balance working from home full time and caregiving. Based on CPS being remote and Dania's understanding of the importance of early years of education, she made the choice to hire a tutor for her daughter.

> I ended up hiring a tutor who works with her independently, not during school hours. So, she's not here to provide, you know, support during the regular school hours, but she will meet with her after school hours. Just to kind of, you know, ensure that she's still getting that instruction, you know --it's difficult on me, for her to really focus on what the teacher is asking her to do.

Here, in response to CPS offering virtual learning, and knowing her daughter does not focus well, Dania made the decision to provide supplemental support. However, not all parents were able to make these choices; financial, familial, and social constraints all limited parents' ability to provide external educational support. This is a topic I explore further in the next section. Here, I simply note that even in a district in which the mode of schooling was framed by the district,

parents were still making choices. Distinctions between individual schools and parent ability to support their children meant that students still experienced differences in how schooling was provided.

*Mississippi*

In Mississippi where the district framed choice in a different way, families could make decisions about the mode of schooling and ultimately, they made decisions in different ways for various reasons. In LPS, it was fairly common for students to have to engage in virtual learning at different points, for example during the prior spring and/or as they quarantined after being in contact with a person who tested positive for coronavirus. Teachers and many parents shared a clear sense that virtual schooling was a less-desirable option than in-person schooling. For example, Sue – an LPS teacher – explained in October of 2020 that "my new exhaustion is trying to catch those [virtual] kids up, because they didn't really learn anything when they're virtual." Similarly, Lawrence, an extracurricular teacher, felt that this class would be "pretty much...back at the beginning" following a stint of virtual learning. Virtual learning here was seen as impeding making progress with student learning. Another mom of an LPS first grader sent her son to school in person based on their experience with virtual learning in the spring of 2020: "he was not good at paying attention when they do virtual calls and stuff, and so we wanted him to be in person." This mom was able to consider her son's learning abilities and preferences when choosing his mode of schooling.

Of the LPS parents I interviewed, 5 of them choose to keep their children at home and 4 of them choose to send their students to school in person. As I will discuss in more detail later, similar to in Chicago, parents used their own resources to help them make decisions. A survey

conducted from the Oxford School District of parents found an overall satisfaction score of 3.68 out of 5 during the first quarter of school (Board of Trustees). Based on discussions with parents and teachers, after the first nine weeks of learning, students who could do so or were falling behind academically were strongly encouraged to return to in-person learning. Once a family decided to attend school in person, they could not make the decision to switch to virtual learning.

**Factors contributing to parents' choices**

In the process of making decisions about schooling for their children, a variety of factors shaped and constrained how parents were ultimately able to act. I find two major factors that contributed to parent's decisions regarding COVID. First, family features affected who was available and home to support learning. COVID acted on existing family features in specific ways regarding age and pre-existing health conditions, which posed limitations for what families could do regarding their children's education. Secondly, existing social inequalities resulting from race, class, and gender impacted how parents made decisions. I examine how all of these factors contributed to decision making first in Chicago and then in Mississippi.

*Chicago*

a) *Family Features*

Family features relate to how the family is organized and how work in the family affects schooling. For example, work type (essential or non-essential; work-from-home or in-person) and the timing of work shape who can take part in caretaking and assisting with virtual learning. When the home became the location of schooling, parents/guardians became responsible for facilitating academic learning. As CPS first grade teacher Bhakti noted, "I feel like I'm assigning

homework to the parents." As Bhakti told me, she often relies on parents to take pictures of the work she assigns to her students because first graders are too young to understand how to operate the technology required for online learning. As Bhakti explained, "if you have a kid that can't read, they also can't type." This emphasizes the limited capacity of teachers and, thus additional reliance on the family for educational assistance. In one family I was able to speak to both the father Deonte and the mother Jasmine. They have an eight-year old son who lives with Jasmine, primarily during the week; he sees Deonte on the weekend. During school hours, Jasmine had to go into work, so they paid their son's older sister -- a sophomore in high school-- to sit with their 8 year-old son and monitor him.

As Deonte describes, "I think… what my son needed was like someone to be there with them, like the school setting him sitting alone by himself. [After] 30 minutes he lose interest and start doing some other stuff. So when you see her [the sister] doing her work, he doing his work. So that's kind of like motivating him and encouraging him to do his work." Jasmine and Deonte were not alone in relying on an older child to assist with virtual learning. As CPS middle school teacher Christina observed,

> [students say] 'hey...sorry, I couldn't come on time, I had to help my sister. She's in preschool. And she didn't know how to log into her Google meet'... there are a lot of kids who are taking these roles like adult roles in their home. And in that and in turn, they neglect their schoolwork. And when you reach out to the parents, the parents are just like, 'well… I need that person. I can't be there. I'm working all day. I can't leave like I just what am I supposed to do?' And I'm with them because... what are they supposed to do?

Christina highlights the limitations of options families felt they had available because of their family structures. Some parents had to rely on older children or other kin to assist with younger children. Other parents did not have the option to rely on family for help, and as a result, some students missed out on school altogether. As CPS kindergarten teacher Isabelle explained,

"There's one child who can't [come]... the timing doesn't work because of the parent's work schedule." This means a child could not learn synchronously with the rest of their class at all.

During the pandemic, some COVID specific concerns made elements of family features even more challenging. In particular, children's ages and the presence of risk factors for contracting serious/deadly cases of COVID-19 posed additional challenges to families. These features shaped what options seemed to be available to families. For example, Deonte explained, "My son is asthmatic.. And… even his doctor said if they'd say go back to school he's not to go back to school. So we don't have a choice in that matter." Here, Deonte acknowledges the constrained nature of their choices, even if more options were available. Moreover, students' ages determined what they could be expected to do in terms of schooling.

A mother of 3 CPS children, Fatima, explained how she had to provide different support to her children based on their age. For her youngest, who is in first grade, she explained that it was difficult for him to stay focused on the computer. During class, she noted, "I have to stay with him" and that "it's so hard for [him] to keep up because it's a long time." However, she had to spend less time sitting with her 14 year old and her 11 year old, who could mostly take their virtual classes on their own. The age of the student, something parents have no control over, can dramatically impact the decisions that parents make about their children's education. Age can dictate how much time and additional caregiving these students require, and greatly constrain options that parents have for doing their own work or meeting their other needs.

b)  *Social Structures*

In Chicago, parents made choices both about how to facilitate their students' engagement in virtual learning and whether to supplement the school-provided learning opportunities; these choices were enabled or constrained based on existing social inequalities.

For example, some parents had greater financial ability to provide external support for their children's learning than others. For example, CPS mother of a high schooler Jen commented that for her son, "he's always had his own computer because my husband felt that it was very important for them to have that access to that technology early on." Here, Jen supplemented the school's provided technology options because her family had the ability to provide a computer for her son themselves; not all parents had this option. Other parents were able to make accommodations in their own home to support virtual learning. For instance, when I talked with CPS parents Jennifer and Isabelle, they were renovating their home. As Jennifer moved into a different room to avoid the construction work, she explained, "the idea is that we're trying to free up some more space so that we have additional, like, closed-door workspaces in our home." This meant their children would have more quiet space to engage in virtual learning. As making home renovations are an adaptation financially unavailable to many, this serves as an example of how a family is able to use their financial abilities to supplement their children's learning.

Outside of supporting school-provided learning opportunities, some parents also used financial means to provide additional support and educational instruction to their children. One person I spoke to, Aaron, was working as a private tutor for a family with 3 young children. As Aaron described his job,

> I am like a nanny and also like a tutor. I don't think a lot of nannies do that…
> basically, I help the four year old with school, because he's the one who needs the

most help. He's four. And if the other two need anything, I'm there. But I also just, like, do whatever they need me to do around the house and like, help out and like, take them to the park. You know, when they're not in school.

Aaron goes in person to help this family every school day while the parents work from home. Here, these parents were able to hire someone to support their children's learning.

However, other parents faced financial difficulties during COVID. I spoke with one CPS mom of a high schooler, Rene, who lost her job due to COVID. When I spoke to her in September of 2020, she had just become able to work again. As Rene explains, "I was laid off from March… I felt helpless… I was hired on a full time basis with like health benefits with all benefits and then all of a sudden, it was just like gone. So having to deal with that…[trails off]." Rene's daughter used a computer that was delivered "personally by the vice principal" of the high school; because of financial constraints, Rene had to rely on the resources provided by the school, limiting her ability to make other decisions.

In Chicago, race was not as prominent of a topic of conversation as it was in Mississippi. Perhaps this is due to the fact that school segregation in CPS happens more directly between schools than within schools. When I asked CPS teacher Bhakti if she had concerns about equity, she responded stating, "am I surprised that at a school on the south side, in a predominantly Black neighborhood doesn't have the necessary devices and resources to ensure that every one of its kids is able to get online? No." However, because all except one of the students who she taught was Black, it was difficult for her to make observations about how race was acting on an individual level.

While economic inequalities were most apparent in my interview data, on a city-wide level parents were also very concerned about racial equity. Towards the end of the fall semester, as the district was discussing their plans to reopen, many parents expressed these concerns on

social media. I first began following the conversations on the CPS Parents Facebook group in September of 2020 because I was interested in observing how parents were providing information to one another. Sometimes parents would rant about how challenging it was for their young children to stay on the computer for so long, and other times they would offer information about what desks they purchased for their children to use at home. In December of 2020, parents in the Facebook group began discussing CPS's plan to reopen. Members would often share news articles reporting school reopening updates.

One post that shared a blog from Dave Stieber called, "White CPS Parent to White CPS Parent, What Are You Thinking" written December 20, 2020. In this article, Stieber, who states he is a CPS educator, urges white CPS parents not to send their students to school in person. He states, "of course, in-person learning is ideal," but goes on to explain that "the choice you [white CPS parents] are making is selfish and beyond offensive" (Stieber 2020). Stieber uses the way COVID has negatively impacted Black and Brown communities compared to white communities to encourage from "white parent to white parent, use your privilege for good… vocally tell CPS and the media that you [white parent] made a choice because you wanted options and didn't realize the consequences others would face across the city, because of your choice to have options" (Stieber 2020).

This blog was posted into the Facebook Group and inspired 254 comments from members. Conversations quickly became very polarized and sometimes led to name calling in the comments. As one member commented in direction towards the moderator of the group, "you repeatedly allow people on here [to] call others racist. In the last 24 hours, another woman was told that her belief that her multi-racial children should go back to school is racist, and I was told I'm a white supremacist and devoid of empathy because I presented facts from millions of

non-white and low income children." Eventually the posts became so toxic that the group

dissolved. The group was archived on December 27, 2020 and no one has posted in the group

since. While I did not engage in posting or speak directly to these parents, many parents called

on their own race in justifying their opinions, particularly in terms of how race impacted their

choices.

In Chicago, while parents during the fall semester did not have the option to decide

whether or not their children would attend school in person, they were making choices about

enabling and/or supplementing virtual learning; however, parents' capacity to make these

decisions was limited based on family structure and existing social inequalities.


*Mississippi*

In Mississippi, where schools allowed parents to choose to send their children to

school in person, there was more variation in the decisions parents made, as they were

enabled or constrained based on these same factors but in the context of an increased

universe of choice.


a)  *Family Features*

Family structure played an important role in parents' choice of whether or not their

children would attend school virtually or at home. Some parents' options were highly constrained

based on their jobs, while others had more flexibility when making this decision.

One mother I spoke with, Christy, has two children who are 10 and 12 and were engaged in

virtual learning at the time we spoke. Christy felt that parenting decisions were very complicated

at the time. She discussed,

Talking with other parents and focusing on parenting is such a unique parenting challenge that -- I have not talked with any parent who isn't overwhelmed, and struggling to make the right decisions, struggling to support their kids and themselves and all the other responsibilities. A lot of parents are really, really burnt out. And for some that's leading to good parenting, or assignments leading to mediocre for some it's leading to bad, but I'm also trying to really be kind to ourselves, like, this isn't going to be the time that you're supermom or super dad. And we just need to do the best that we can with all of these unique challenges.

Here, Christy explains the additional pressure that parents are facing and how parents are becoming tired, overwhelmed, and exhausted; she frames the challenge of making "the right decisions" as central to this pressure.

Some mothers were able to build a routine and begin to manage this new role. Myra is a mom whose job allowed her to work from home prior to COVID. However, after she chose for her children to engage in virtual learning, she became actively engaged with making sure her 10 and 11 year olds were participating in school at home. When describing the balance between working at home while helping her 2 children, she commented, "It has been interesting. It [monitoring virtual learning] is my second full time job. It took us, I would say, from the time we started in August, probably two weeks to get into a workable return routine, getting up in the morning, learning when they had to be in their classes, learning when they should do their work for those classes." Here, Mayra was able to adapt over time to this new role and schedule. Her work expectations allowed her to be at home and also help with her children's learning, but the situation was exhausting.

Other parents, based on the nature of their work, had less agency when making decisions about their children's schooling. When I first spoke with Jada, a Black mother in Mississippi, she had just tested positive for COVID and was beginning a 14 day quarantine. This meant that her 8 year old son who until then was attending school in person, was also about to start 2 weeks of

learning at home. When I asked Jada about her initial decision for her son to go to school in person, she stated, "Well, I wanted him to go virtually, but of course I had to work." This suggests that her work schedule and flexibility constrained the option she would have maybe otherwise made.

To help her with caregiving for her one year-old, Jada relied on her kin network. Jada's mother-law helps to watch the youngest child. As Jada explained to me, "she [Jada's youngest] is the family baby. So she does not go to school yet. My mother-in-law taught in a daycare for like 25 years… so she stays at home with my mother in law." Perhaps of note, both of the families (one in Mississippi and one in Chicago) who mentioned relying on family relationships for support were Black families.[1]

Parents had little to no control over whether their work place allowed them to work from home, which in turn shaped the decisions they felt were (or were not) viable regarding their children's mode of schooling. In Mississippi, COVID specific features including age and health played a more prominent role in impacting parent's decisions. The age of the student affected whether they could stay home by themselves. As Mississippi mom Talia explained when discussing her two younger children, "they're not old enough to be left alone yet. Once they are that, I think they'll have a greater choice." This expression of a greater choice with older age children emphasizes the importance of these features in shaping options.

Elizabeth, the mom of a 6 year-old, discussed how the age of her child contributed to why she decided for him to attend school in person. When her son is home, he requires constant child care because of his age. When I asked further about her decision for him to attend school in person, she said, "On a very selfish level, I can't work when he's around." The difficulty of both

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[1] This is consistent with literature on reliance on kin networks to support work for Black parents (Gerstel 2011).

caring for her son and working greatly influenced the decision Elizabeth made. This is in contrast with moms like Christy, whose children are just a few years older at 10 and 12, and thus were able to have their children engage in virtual learning without the need for constant monitoring or worrying about disruptions. As Christy noted that during the day her 10 year old is "on her own" and does not require constant monitoring. This allows Christy and her husband to continue to do their work from home as well, as their children are older and more independent.

Another family feature that pertained directly to COVID that I observed parents and teachers discussing was related to health concerns. For example, as Leslie explains, "I have an autoimmune disease, which puts me at risk." Leslie also described to me her constant active role in making sure her children could attend school virtually, even as more students returned to the school. When the school district was trying to make students who were doing poorly academically return to in-person learning unless the student had a pre-existing health concern, Leslie fought to make sure that children living with someone with a health concern could also stay home. The presence of Leslie's autoimmune disease essentially made the decision about education of her children for her.

Similarly, Talia made the decision to keep her children at home for reasons based on health status. As she explained, "We have too many health risks in our household. So instead this year, I'm actually homeschooling my girls." Talia's decision to homeschool her children shows nuance in the decisions Mississippi parents were making. Making the first decision to keep her children at home due to health concerns, she then made a secondary decision to withdraw them from virtual schooling and instead participate in homeschooling based on her family structure. Since her husband works and Talia is in graduate school, she was able to facilitate this homeschooling.

Sara discussed how both the family features of age and COVID related health concerns contributed to her decisions about schooling. As Sara addresses her decision to send her 3 young children to school in person she explains,

> Well, I think the first reason is that back in March, [my partner] and I both definitely got COVID. .. So because of that, we would have been more relaxed about our vulnerability. Obviously, we don't know for sure you can get [COVID] again… But from everything that we read, we're probably in a safer position than others. So that helped us make the decision for sure. And then the other issue is that, at their age, their ages, we just feel like it's very hard to teach them all at home… it is a full time job for both parents as far as we were concerned.

Here, because there were few health concerns, Sara and her family made the decision about in-person schooling based on their children's ages. Because of the difficulty in facilitating learning for her young children, she made the decision to send them to school in person.

b)  *Social Structures*

Similar to Chicago, existing inequalities related to gender, class, and race impacted family choices. While my analysis of gender is limited in part because 81% of my participants were female, I utilize other research conducted during COVID to show how the increased caregiving responsibility fell on the shoulders of women.

Mississippi mother Elizabeth finds that attempting to balance working from home and facilitating her child's learning led her to feel ineffective at both roles. As she explains,

> I don't know what else to do so that I think it's making it even harder to separate work and family time. And then I end up feeling like a bad parent and bad professor. This summer when I wasn't, um, when I was basically just homeschooling [and ] not really doing any work. At that point, I just kind of accepted like, work is not going to happen. So, I'm just gonna do this. I'm schooling. And once I mentally did that, I was like, Okay, fine. Like, I didn't feel bad about not working or I felt less bad about not working.

In attempts not to feel mediocre at both roles, she fully stopped her professional responsibilities. For her, when the first and second shift had to exist at the same time, the immediate needs of her child were forced to be prioritized (Hochschild 1989). This is consistent with larger trends reflected in data from Pew Research, which show that mothers are less likely to participate in the labor force during COVID, especially unpartnered mothers (Barroso and Kochhar 2020).

The result is a delicate dance between balancing caregiving responsibilities and work responsibilities. What happens with the first and second shift that Hochschild describes happen at the same time? What is forced to be prioritized? The role gender plays can affect the choices particularly working mothers have. If they must balance work and home life responsibilities, they are limited in the decisions they can make. For instance, if it becomes too hard to balance responsibilities, this can lead mothers to working untraditional hours to juggle responsibilities or fully to leave the workforce.

As with Chicago, parents in Mississippi had varying degrees of monetary ability to supplement their children's educational experience. This ability to provide supplemental resources impacted how parents responded to the choices the school provided. For example, Christy had an extra computer at home and thus did not have to rely on resources from the school. On the other hand, some students not only had to rely on school-provided resources, but they also had to generate income for their families. One teacher, Julie, noticed that, "we have a lot of Hispanic kids that are working, you know, they saw it as a great opportunity to go do construction, and then just do what [school] work they could at night, you know are working construction during the day." This pattern is reflective of larger trends nationwide during COVID (Cardona-Maguigad 2020). Broadly, lower-income students in LPS were more likely to experience virtual learning than higher-income students. As LPS Clare noted,

It's our underserved students, our underprivileged students, our students from lower income homes that are at home. And we were a bit surprised by that. We thought that perhaps some students with parents who were very concerned that it might be a different demographic, we were just a bit surprised that those were our students that overwhelmingly opted for virtual instruction.

Intertwined with class-based inequalities were racial inequalities. In Mississippi, teachers were quick to switch language calling attention to low-income or underprivileged students, when in reality, they were discussing primarily Black and Latinx students. As teacher Lawrence noted, "It was a very high number of students… that were from lower income families that were staying home. Of course, you know, that. It kind of makes sense, because African American community and minorities have been hit harder, I suppose by COVID, at least at the beginning."

Understanding why Black students were staying home required reverse engineering the problem. As Vice Principal Jamar explains,

I mean, you know, in Oxford, the majority of our minorities are raised by their older grandparents or grandparents are at least in the home. And so they didn't want to risk their child coming to school, contracted the virus, and then possibly taking it home in spreading it to their grandparents, who would have a harder time, you know, trying to bounce back from the virus. So that was definitely challenging and definitely eye-opening for us.

Here, the decision for Black families to choose to learn from home was connected to family structures. While the decision made was individual on a case-by-case basis, the reality of all of these decisions was that systematically more white children were at school and more Black students were at home – a new, and seemingly unforeseen, dimension of school segregation.

### Choice Framing Effects - Schools and Family Decisions

Schools did not explicitly address the factors that contributed to parents' decisions. Rather, schools responded to COVID-19 following CDC guidelines and working with the best

information that they had available to frame choices. Some of the frames led the living room to become the classroom. However, the school and the home are very different contexts, and these discrepancies led to a fundamental mismatch in how effective at-home education during COVID was. This is not to suggest that schools were not doing absolutely all they thought they could to respond to the unprecedented nature of COVID. However, they were not acting on the same set of information that ultimately determined parents' choices.

In Chicago, there was a limit to the ability of school mode choices to make a difference in education during COVID. As a parent of a kindergartener Dania responded when I asked her what resources the school was providing for her daughter she responded, "Not a whole lot to be honest. They have resources for students as far as like, internet." This suggests that internet and technological resources are not meeting the needs of what this parent would like for her child in order to have a more successful educational experience. Chicago mom of a high schooler Rene commented that the systems in place do not always allow for parents to take advantage of the resources that schools are providing. "There were school lunches that were available for pickup that we really weren't able to utilize because my husband and I share a car, so with me not working, obviously had I let him use the car to go to work." Because of policy implementation problems, even if parents wanted to make choices to take advantage of certain opportunities, they were sometimes inaccessible. This meant that although there may have been help available, it was not always able to be used.

Even if policies were implemented better, schools remained limited in what resources they could provide. As CPS teacher Kelly commented, "It was alarming though, because 100% of our students, you know, we gave them all their Chromebooks, we had given them everything we could every tool to get WiFi access or hotspot, what not, and if that point, it was in their [the

family and children's] hands." This quote epitomizes the fundamental limitations of school level resources in addressing COVID related concerns.

One example of this mismatch between what schools provided and what parents need is explained by Deonte's suggestion of what else schools could do. He suggests giving parents a supplement to support having children at home, expressing the difficulties of having to spend more money having students at home and supporting their eating needs, stating, " I didn't know these kids eat that much. *Wow*, I didn't know kids eat that much at home." Deonte's suggestion of providing parents with a subsidy for having to feed students at home is an example of how the school could address the factors parents are making decisions about, something that would actually help the expanding inequities in decision making ability.

In Mississippi, two initiatives proved helpful. First, the district started a clinic where any faculty, staff, or students could get COVID tested for free. Additionally, the clinic provided certain health and wellness benefits to students free of charge.  Secondly, the Family Resources Center Director, Latonya was aware of the needs of students and their families. When I spoke with Latonya, she told me she was acting in a new position that had been created in the latter part of the summer. She visited the homes of students who had struggled with virtual learning in March. She estimates that she visited about 25 homes during June and July. As she explained what she learned,

> And I wanted to talk to them and find out you know, why, and what was a true eye opener for me, even though I am a woman of color, and I do understand many of them, many of the hardships that they face, some of their responses ranged from grandparents raising their grandchildren, and they had their own pre-existing conditions. And they said, I just can't take a chance. I cannot take a chance on my child, or my grandchild going to school and get infected. And I… think you're a nice lady. You're sweet. And I love the school. However, I just don't want to take a chance with that. And then there were some of them. Some parents who were very educated, who were as knowledgeable about COVID as me or anyone else in the

district. But they're... some of the fear says, I'm just not going to do it ... COVID
is still new… Some of the Hispanics, and more particularly some of the African
American students, are some of the ones who were, who were at risk and said,
'our health care is not going to take care of us.' She says, 'I don't have insurance.
And I'm just not going; I don't feel confident in our healthcare system.'

She noted more recently that her home visits have addressed making sure students have access

to hotspots to connect to the internet. This is because ultimately, as she explained to me, some

parents are fearful, and it is not her responsibility to make students attend school in person.

Rather, she utilizes the resources she has to support families in the district. For example, she was

involved in supporting a network of local churches who "adopted" 35 families in Oxford and

purchased clothing and toys for children during Christmas. She has sat down with parents and

helped them organize a schedule for themselves and their children. Yet, as much as she tries,

Latonya can not fundamentally address the factors shaping how parents are making their

decisions about schools. She cannot change if a family member has a preexisting health

condition or if grandparents live at home.

However, despite these programs, choice framing in Mississippi ultimately had the

unintended consequence of deepening school segregation. As LPS high school teacher Clare

reflected in hindsight,

Now, of course, everybody is looking at the demographics and realizing that our
students of color have been hardest hit in our -- communities of color have been
hardest hit by COVID. And many of those students are living with extended
family members. And so that should have been something that we anticipated as a
district, but I don't, they didn't, they didn't anticipate that as a district.

Echoing Clare's observations, Vice Principal Jamar comments,

You know, I think we realized how many times.. what we thought was wrong,
[from] thinking that the pandemic wasn't going to happen, [then] thinking that the
majority of our students that would be home would be white students… and then

even when we started back school, we were like, 'we'll be in school for two weeks.'

This speaks to how schools, while acting based on information and conceptions they knew, failed to predict outcomes accurately.

Importantly, in both locations, parents were engaging in opportunity hoarding in ways the schools themselves enabled. During COVID, the opportunity hoarding that I observed was passive. Parents did not intentionally seek a resource because it was limited, rather they acted based on their family's individual concerns. In Mississippi, where institutions allowed for greater choices, this led to greater opportunity for expanded inequity than in Chicago. This underscores how schools' *choice framing* helped shape the dimensions of inequality that developed during the pandemic.

While most parents did not seem to acknowledge or understand how their own decisions were part of a systemic problem, one parent, in particular, did seem aware of this. Sue, who is both a teacher and a parent in Mississippi, discussed her decision to send her children to school in person. When we were discussing the racial and class difference between virtual learning and in-person learning, Sue commented, "I remember hearing that statistic from Oxford in the beginning and wishing it hadn't been that way." In explaining this occurrence, Sue noted, "the mortality in the minority populations is more significant, and I think they were more worried about infection and a lot of the upper middle-class white people weren't." Then Sue spoke further about her own experience,

> I've said this as a parent, if Oxford had said, 'we need to keep in-house numbers low so that kids in need can be in-house,' I would have said fine, my kids could stay home and would have been perfectly fine learning virtually, and they're the kind of kids that don't need to be there. If their [her kids] not being there would have made other people feel safer coming, I would have been happy to do that as a parent, but unless the school made that kind of policy, it wouldn't have

happened. I don't think any school district had the, I don't know, if it was the strength to do that, or was willing to take because they would have gotten a whole lot of blowback if they tried to do that. It would be something like, well, if I was a superintendent that didn't care about losing my job, I might have tried to set that policy.

Sue's observation is very interesting in considering opportunity hoarding. It suggests that while most parents are making choices in isolation, only considering their own family, they may in fact be using a limited resource. For instance, she is suggesting that low-income Black families might have sent their children to school in person had there been fewer in-person students from whom they would risk exposure. Further, she is also pointing to the power the school has in making sure that opportunity hoarding does not expand inequalities further, but notes that it is also unpopular to constrain parents' agency. Therefore, schools enable opportunity hoarding to happen when they frame choice in an expansive way.

Undoubtedly, in Chicago, virtual learning was creating and perpetuating inequity. Parents with younger children who were having to balance work and school requirements had particularly difficult situations. However, in Mississippi, where there were more options, there was more opportunity for inequity. As one teacher Autumn explains:

For their educational purposes, it is better for them [students] to be at school…
but I feel like if everyone was online, if everyone was learning virtually, there
would be more equity, it still wouldn't really, you know, [be the same] across the
board, but everybody's getting the same options.

This comment speaks to my finding that where choices in Chicago were the same, parents were struggling, but there seemed to be less opportunity for drastic gaps between learning to form. All students were having a difficult time with virtual learning, but they were all learning from the same platform. Teachers weren't balancing their in person and virtual learning students, like they were in Mississippi. By providing a larger set of choices for parents to make – under varying

degrees of constraint – LPS unintentionally contributed to the deepening of multiple dimensions of inequality.

**Policy Implications**

*Immediate Recommendations*

At the time of writing this paper, Chicago Public Schools are in the process of reopening. Many of the concerns of parents and teachers around reopening are based on how this increased dimension of choice opens the opportunity for additional inequalities. In Chicago, there are concerns that a large percentage of Black students would not choose to learn in person, something I hypothesize would be similar to the reasons given by the Black parents with whom I spoke with in Mississippi. That being said, I do think there are ways to make steps towards reopening schools, which if done safely, would benefit working parents, teachers, and students. The only way to ensure reopening schools is done so safely is to vaccinate teachers and parents as quickly as possible. I would suggest that the city and state government work hard to roll out vaccines as efficiently as possible. There are steps in the meantime to make remote learning better and provide more support for families.

While this paper does not explicitly address the health and other concerns with reopening schools during COVID, I recommend school districts not opt for a hybrid model of learning. Instead, I recommend focusing resources on making remote learning as effective as possible. Sending workers from the school to speak directly with parents and address their needs. If possible, as some people with whom I spoke suggested, creating smaller scale pods where teachers could meet individually with a few students would be beneficial. Additionally, schools should continue to help students gain access to the internet and computers is essential for virtual

learning. I would also recommend scheduling time for students to chat with peers during the day so that their entire time on zoom is not solely academic.

As far as immediately helping families, in addition to providing school lunches, which some schools are doing, I would recommend that the federal government provide a specific stipend to families with children, based in part on the age of the child. Parents with younger children are doing unpaid work currently that is crucial to society. With this additional money parents would be able to hire care-giving help or be able to afford to take time off of work while they help with their children's at home learning.


*Intermediate Recommendations*

Hopefully, the COVID-19 pandemic will end and schooling will return to "normal." Without a doubt, children will be "behind" academically and many may also experience trauma from losing loved ones during the pandemic. I recommend and hope that schools are understanding of such setbacks and begin thinking of equitable ways to ensure that all students learn what they should while being mindful of their social and emotional needs as well.

I recommend at the school level, administrators and teachers work hard to provide individualized learning needs. Perhaps some children did well and self-studied during virtual learning, but others will not have done so. Quickly assessing students' mastery of information and skills and specifically targeting gaps in these would be useful. Further, schools should harness their new knowledge and relationship to families and their children. While school will no longer be occurring from the home, family and home life factors can still contribute to what a child is experiencing and feeling.

Based on this expanded understanding of students, I recommend that schools focus on helping students with their social and emotional needs as well as their academic ones. Many children may know someone who has been sick or died because of COVID. Other children may be living with family members who lost their jobs during the pandemic and are facing difficult financial situations. Schools should be accommodating to students and create a gradual transition back to intense or standard academic rigor.

There should also be efforts to help the inequalities that expanded during COVID. More after school tutoring programs, perhaps in communities or otherwise made accessible to particularly low income and minority students who were attending school at home during a hybrid model. Additionally, schools should continue to provide resources, such as food and school materials, particularly to low-income students.

At a federal level, I recommend strategic thinking about standardized testing. I hope that there is an understanding that test scores may be even less accurate measures of what knowledge or capacity students have given these new circumstances.

*Long Term Considerations*

As we emerge from the COVID-19 pandemic, the issues relating to education and equity that have come to the forefront will not go away. Rather, it is a time for policy makers, schools, educators, and families to look at the challenges and problems that have emerged in order to create meaningful change. Regarding schools, I recommend that schools look more holistically at questions of equity in a multi-dimensional way. Schools should ask themselves how a child's family and housing situation can impact their life in school even when students are no longer taking classes from their home. Schools also must have an understanding of the role that they as

institutions play in creating room for expanded inequity through choice framing. With this knowledge, they can think more critically and holistically when providing specific resources to students in the future or allowing for parents to make certain choices. I also recommend more study of the longer effects of the family/school relationship and the particular role of women in caregiving for children.

In light of these findings, I also raise the question of the role of choice in education fundamentally. As Pattillo et al. discuss in the conclusion of their chapter regarding choice in CPS, perhaps one should look towards a rights-based approach to education (Pattillo et al. 2014, 263). As they explain, "choice always depends entirely on the circumstances of individuals… rights are ideally granted without respect for individual circumstances… in the case of schools, a rights paradigm would require uniformly good public schools" (Pattillo et al. 2014,. 263). I therefore recommend that policy makers focus on a rights-based approach to schooling. This would be beneficial to implement as schools are moving out of the pandemic as it would help to ensure that universally all schools met the needs of all students and families.

**<u>Discussion and Conclusion</u>**

In this paper, I have analyzed how COVID-19 impacted education. During the pandemic, where school existed from home, families had to make decisions based on the options their school districts presented. Based on these options, internal family factors contributed to what choices and decisions parents made. These factors included family structure and social structures. The social structures, I find, are where COVID acted on existing inequalities. Critically, home life can impact how children experience school, and this was especially pronounced during the COVID-19 pandemic. I argue that there was also a mismatch between

what resources the school provided and what families needed. This is not simply the fault of the school; however, as the actor responsible for framing choice, the school played a role in how parents made decisions and engaged in opportunity hoarding.

While much prior research has focused on how cultural capital is reproduced in schools, this study examines a new circumstance, where the home and school merge together, thus making this harder to see. This study follows from existing literature on school choice, particularly studies that explore how families make decisions within the school. Stemming from Lewis and Diamond and Lewis-McCoy's work, I also find instances of opportunity hoarding. Most notably, the instances of opportunity hoarding I observed were more passive and rested on familial constraints. However, as I observed in LPS, white parents were able to utilize their resources to respond better to COVID. In some instances, these parents used what could be seen as a limited resource: engaging in in-person learning.

There are limitations to my study. Importantly, the comparison only utilizes two locations, and while the school districts are both diverse, they are not perfect comparisons. Among other differences including size, one is an expansive urban school district, and the other is rural. Further, I mostly spoke with people who identified as female and 66% of people who identified as white. Most critically, I was unable to speak directly with students. Thus, I cannot write about their experiences or directly address their immediate concerns. As I was conducting this research, responses to the pandemic evolved and changed rapidly. I am certain that in contemporary research, many educational scholars will be interested in examining the impacts of COVID. I am hopeful that my research capturing how parents and teachers were understanding changes as they occurred will be beneficial to future scholars.

Importantly, this paper should not be considered an analysis of the school district's decision to reopen or engage in hybrid methods of learning. Certainly, this work speaks to the experiences of parents and teachers immersed in two different types of learning during COVID, but this study does not include any additional access to information that schools had when making decisions about their individual schools. This paper is more concerned with issues of equity in schools long term.

I hope future policy and research continues to explore the complex and critical relationship between the home and the school. It will be interesting to have more data and know how children experienced learning during COVID-19. I further suggest that schools consider and understand the limitations of the resources they provide directly to address family needs. This leaves room for policy actors at the larger government level to explore solutions that help families where they need it most. I also encourage future research to explore whether choice framing exists outside of the educational field. I suspect that other institutions by framing choice in certain ways can impact inequalities.

My research builds from existing education literature on school inequalities. It ties together this research with literature on family/home life and school choice. I find the choices that families were able to make regarding education were constrained due to family structure and social structures. However, school district's choice framing worked to expand or constrain choice in different ways. The effects of choice framing led to a perpetuation of existing inequalities.

**Appendix**

*Table 1: Interview Guide*

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For Teachers:
- What school do you teach at and could you describe the atmosphere of your school?
  - How long have you taught at this school?
- How did your school respond to COVID-19?
  - What materials and resources did your school provide to students?
  - Do these materials differ from school typically?
- How did you communicate with:
  - Parents
  - Students
  - Other Teachers
  - Your school and administrators
- How did your role as a teacher change?
  - Did you have more flexibility without state testing?
- How is your school preparing for the 2020-2021 school year?
  - What resources are you providing to families and students?
  - Do you think these resources will be sufficient?
- How do you think your school could prepare for 2020-2021?
  - What could they do differently?

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For Parents:
- How did school for your child change during COVID-19?
- Did you have resources for your child to adequately participate in school?
  - What resources did the school provide?
- Were you able to teach or help your child with work?
- Do you think your child was engaged in remote learning?
- What do you think schools should do differently?

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For Non-profit organizations:
- What is your role in your organization and what does your organization do?
- How did your organization adapt during COVID-19?
- What resources was your organization able to provide for students/families?
  - How do you think this supplemented the other resources CPS was providing?
- How did CPS policies impact your organizations work (if at all)?
- What policies do you think should have been in place and which actors should have implemented these policies?

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For other actors:
- What is your relationship to CPS?
- How did your role change with COVID-19?
  - What actions were you able to provide in response?
- Do you think these actions were sufficient/What if anything would you do differently going into the 2020-2021 school year?

*Table 2: Interviewees*

| Pseudonym | Role | Race | Gender | Location |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Aaron | Education Non-Profit | White | Male | Chicago |
| Allie | School Nurse | White | Female | MS |
| Ally | Teacher | White | Female | Chicago |
| Anna | Teacher | White | Female | Chicago |
| Autumn | Teacher | White | Female | MS |
| Bhakti | Teacher | Indian | Female | Chicago |
| Carly | Teacher | White | Female | Chicago |
| Carol | Teacher | White | Female | Chicago |
| Christina | Teacher | Guatemalan and Creole | Female | Chicago |
| Christy | Parent | White | Female | MS |
| Clare | Teacher | White | Female | MS |
| Dania | Parent | Black/Latina | Female | Chicago |
| David | Education Non-Profit | White | Male | Chicago |

| Deonte | Parent | Black | Male | Chicago |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Elizabeth | Parent | White | Female | MS |
| Emma | Teacher | White | Female | Chicago |
| Fatima | Parent | Syrian | Female | Chicago |
| Isabelle | Parent/Teacher | White | Female | Chicago |
| Jade | Teacher | Black | Female | Chicago |
| Jamar | Administrator | Black | Male | MS |
| Jameson | Teacher | White | Male | Chicago |
| Jada | Parent | Black | Female | MS |
| Jasmine | Parent | Black | Female | Chicago |
| Jen | Parent | White | Female | Chicago |
| Jennifer | Parent | Arab-American | Female | Chicago |
| Jessica | Teacher | White | Female | MS |
| Julie | Teacher | White | Female | MS |
| Justine | Education Non-Profit | Black | Female | MS |
| Kelly | Teacher | White | Female | Chicago |
| Latonya | Teacher | Black | Female | MS |
| Lawrence | Teacher | White | Male | MS |
| Margaret | Parent | White | Female | Chicago |
| Mayra | Parent | Black | Female | MS |
| Meg | Teacher | White | Female | Chicago |
| Michelle | Parent | White | Female | MS |
| Rachel | Parent | White | Female | MS |

| Rashawn | Teacher | Black | Male | MS |
|---------|---------|-------|------|-----|
| Rene | Parent | Filipino | Female | Chicago |
| Samatha | Parent | White | Female | Chicago |
| Sara | Parent | White | Female | MS |
| Shiori | Case Manager | Asian/White | Female | Chicago |
| Sue | Parent | Filipino | Female | MS |
| Talia | Parent | White | Female | MS |
| Travis | Teacher | Black | Male | MS |

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