GIVEN THE CHOICE

Four families, four decisions

What parents have to say about the schools

HELEN VALENTINE
right, with daughters Neleh, 2, and DeLisa, 16
north Minneapolis; day-care operator in north Minneapolis
➤ First- and second-grade sons go to a Robbinsdale public school and 10th-grade daughter attends Wayzata High School under a desegregation program.

"I just didn't see that my kids were catching on very well at school, so I wanted to put them someplace where they would get a better education."

DARLYNN BENJAMIN
south Minneapolis; contractor with Minneapolis public schools
➤ Tenth- and eighth-grade sons attend South High School and Barton Open School, two of the city's most popular schools.

"My husband and I have decided that we're going to make the best of public schools. We would not let our children fall through the cracks. If it got to a point where we felt they weren't getting what they should be getting, we would pull them out, no doubt."

DARRELL GILLESPIE
south Minneapolis; children-and-family therapist
➤ Kindergarten daughter and second-grade boy go to WISE charter school in north Minneapolis. He shied away from Minneapolis public schools in part because teachers are challenged by students' behavior.

"They're more stressed. They're frustrated. They do more behavior management."

KARLA BLOCK
with daughter Madeline, 5, and husband, Bill
Minneapolis; medical librarian
➤ Kindergarten daughter attends Seward Montessori in south Minneapolis. Her daughter was able to attend a Seward preschool class that mixed special-education and other students, but budget cuts now limit it to special-ed kids.

"I am a big proponent of public schools. I want my children to stay in the Minneapolis public schools. It's depressing to see how government is treating the public schools in Minneapolis. It's almost like they want them to fail so they can justify vouchers. We feel our daughter is getting a quality education, but there are obvious areas where the school is struggling to make ends meet."

Star Tribune photographs by Stormi Greener

Mixed marks for public schools

Stories by Steve Brandt • *Star Tribune Staff Writer*

The good: A variety of classes and cultures; some test success

If David Jennings is right, the word of mouth from families like the Conways will help keep Minneapolis families coming to the city's public schools. Lars and Jane Conway have shifted five kids from a private Montessori school to Burroughs Community School just south of Lake Harriet. So far this year, Burroughs has gained 28 children from private schools.

"We were so happy. I couldn't believe all the work that came home," Jane Conway said. "They had really nice, experienced teachers who knew what they were doing."

And despite a spate of bad news for city schools, a check of other vital signs shows that Minneapolis still has a lot of things going for it.

Minneapolis schools and their peers

This chart compares Minneapolis public schools to districts that had comparable enrollments in 2001-02, the most recent year for which federal statistics are available. Minneapolis had a higher share of minority students and students in poverty than its peers.

	Enrollment	Percent change since 1990-91	Percent minority	Percent subsidized lunch	Percent special education	Percent English language learners
Oakland	53,545	2.8	93.5	51.5	10.6	36.2
Sacramento	53,418	7.8	65.3	63.1	12.2	28.8
Portland	52,908	-0.3	38.2	41.2	12.3	11.0
Anchorage	49,767	18.5	38.3	19.5	14.6	10.2
Minneapolis	**48,155**	**17.3**	**73.5**	**66.6**	**13.9**	**24.0**
Seattle	47,449	16.0	59.9	39.6	12.6	11.7
Omaha	45,782	9.8	49.3	49.6	15.6	8.8
St. Paul	44,194	23.0	68.1	65.0	15.1	32.4
Council of the Great City Schools	7,274,284	12.6	76.7	62.4	12.9	17
Minneapolis rank	**5th**	**3rd**	**2nd**	**1st**	**4th**	**4th**

Source: Council of the Great City Schools — Star Tribune

Good reviews

When deciding where to send their children to school, Jennings thinks, parents rely more on what they hear from their neighbors with kids in school than they do on news reports. And that feedback is mostly positive for Minneapolis public schools.

More than half — 59 percent — of public-school parents rated the system as good or excellent in a survey the district conducted last fall. Adults in southwest Minneapolis rate the school district higher than do adults elsewhere in the city, even though they enroll their kids at a lower rate. And Latinos give the school system the highest marks of any ethnic bloc, the poll found. That's important because Latino immigrants have been the district's main growth sector.

Lots of options

If you're looking for program choices, Minneapolis has lots of them: Spanish immersion, International Baccalaureate, environmental and performing arts schools, Montessoris, American Indian and Afrocentric academies.

Magnet programs are a crucial element in retaining some families. About a third of parents opt for magnet programs, whites more than others, according to a district poll. The return to a system of neighborhood schools in the mid-1990s also is seen as helping retain more middle-class families.

A quick look would say that Minneapolis schools don't do so well on state tests. But look closer: That's not true for white middle-class kids. Last year, they consistently outperformed state averages for students of similar income on third-, fifth- and eighth-grade tests. On some tests, middle-class American Indian students also outperformed their statewide peers.

And while the district test scores overall compare poorly with other districts, administrators say they fare far better on "value-added" measures — not how a student scores on a test but how much they have improved since the last test.

The district also is working to improve by identifying teachers who get the best results and figuring out how their success can be spread to other teachers.

National status

Minneapolis enjoys a national image as a progressive, successful urban district. Based on interviews, part of that good reputation appears to be based on a lack of infighting among school board members and a perceived lack of corruption, political influence and domination by special interests. The teaching staff has a reputation for being well trained, with its union progressive on issues such as a pay-for-performance plan.

Minneapolis was the first district to be awarded a $6.2 million, three-year foundation grant to improve its math and literacy scores. In 1997, Minneapolis became only the second district to win a $3.2 million grant from another foundation, received to integrate arts education into other classroom disciplines. And compared with similar-sized urban school districts, Minneapolis has been doing a better job of keeping its students, according to federal data.

Embracing diversity

As a southwest Minneapolis cardiologist, Margo Tolins-Mejia has the income to send her three children to private school, as many in her area do. But she wanted the racial, religious and economic mix of Minneapolis schools.

You want diversity? Come to Minneapolis. Students speak at least 80 foreign languages at home, and those learning English make up almost one quarter of enrollment.

The district considers this diversity a selling point. A district survey last fall found that helping students to appreciate other cultures was where the district got its highest ratings.

Tolins-Mejia also likes the diversity of academic and extracurricular choices. One of her twins at Southwest High School has pursued athletics; the other is into music and theater.

"I would like to see more people in the community support the public schools," she said.

The bad: A variety of ways out; not enough test success or money

As she walked 6-year-old Diamond to the bus stop, Tasha Richardson was already sure her daughter won't be back in Minneapolis public schools next year.

It's not because kindergarten at Webster Open School isn't working out. "Her teacher is a good teacher," Richardson said.

But Richardson graduated from high school in Minneapolis just seven years ago and remembers it as chaotic — kids in the hallways, teachers showing videos in class. Being assigned to a school outside of her neighborhood after moving last summer didn't help.

She heard about charter schools from co-workers who talked about how much progress their children make. If Richardson has her way, Diamond will be attending a charter school on the North Side. Charter schools are public schools that get state funding but operate outside the control of school districts.

If a satisfied customer can leave the Minneapolis schools that easily, it's even easier for others put off by the schools' chronic academic shortcomings and money troubles.

Bad reviews

A majority of white parents abandoned the Minneapolis school system years ago. Now there are powerful signs that black parents are following them out. K-8 enrollment dropped by 1,200 students this year alone in the heavily black North Side.

In a district survey last fall, just under half of black parents rated district schools as good or excellent. That's the lowest rating of any racial group. And bad news when black students make up the schools' largest enrollment group.

So far, the district has been able to keep about 70 percent of Latino school-age children in the city, and Latino parent satisfaction is high, the survey showed.

But pressure is building. Only 20 percent of Latino students entering kindergarten had the skills they needed to have a good shot at reading by the end of first grade. And a Latino leadership group recently urged the school board to beef up its emphasis on programs for educating non-English speakers. The district's ability to serve Latino students will determine whether they stay with district schools.

Academic problems

Just 42 percent of Minneapolis' black eighth-graders passed the state's basic-skills test for reading last year. That's half the rate for whites. Although black performance on achievement tests has risen, the racial gap is still wide.

A racial gap isn't unique to Minneapolis, but it's more visible than elsewhere in the state because racial minorities form three-quarters of the district's population. The gap starts before school. Two-thirds of students are poor enough to qualify for lunch subsidies. Almost a quarter of students need to learn English.

Testing of incoming kindergartners indicates that minority students substantially lag behind white students in their grounding in the skills needed to learn to read.

"If we could close the racial achievement gap, I don't think people would be moving someplace. We need to do a better job with that," said Erin Glynn, a principal who is leading district planning efforts.

Many ways out

Between charter school and souped-up open enrollment, Minneapolis has more ways for families to opt out than any other district. And many are taking them.

Darrell Gillespie of Minneapolis sends his kindergartner and second-grader to WISE, a charter school in north Minneapolis, for its Afrocentric orientation. "I can't even tell you how happy I am with this school," Gillespie said. "They make learning extremely fun at these children's level."

Having spent time in city schools as a children-and-family therapist, Gillespie also shied away from the school district because he thinks teachers are challenged by student behavior. "They're more stressed. They're frustrated. They do more behavior management," he said.

There are 17 charter schools operating in Minneapolis, with seven more scheduled to open next fall. Minority students make up 87 percent of the 3,400 students enrolled in charter schools in the city. Almost a thousand more city kids attend charters outside the city.

Adding to the exodus is the open-enrollment option available only in Minneapolis. Low-income Minneapolis families can get free busing to suburban schools through a voluntary desegregation program negotiated between the Minneapolis NAACP and the state. Under regular open enrollment, parents must provide their own transportation.

Nearly 1,100 Minneapolis students — half of them black — attend suburban schools through open-enrollment programs. Suburban choice doesn't work for everyone. Of 1,079 students who enrolled in the first two years, only 530 returned last fall. But only 11 percent of those returned to Minneapolis public schools, while 27 percent went elsewhere. And 554 more signed up for the program last fall.

Money, money

Each student who leaves city schools costs the district in state aid and property taxes. For regular students, that ranges from $3,157 for a kindergartner to $7,370 for a secondary student. Add $950 for a student learning English, and an average of $870 to $1,740 for each low-income student. The loss of a special-education student costs many times those amounts.

Even with fewer students, some expenses — utilities, teacher salaries and health insurance premiums — have risen. Meanwhile, the state's general school aid has stayed level, and there have been cuts in the special funding for poverty, learning English, special education and desegregation that affect Minneapolis more than most other districts. The budget squeeze shows virtually everywhere: more kids per class; fewer supplies, more empty desks at district headquarters. Hundreds of teachers have been laid off in the past three years, with another 220 expected to get pink slips this spring. The school board's decision not to close 10 schools next year and build programs to attract more students — and state aid — means no financial boost there.

"I do have a worry that we are spread so thin, and by not closing schools, spread thinner," Glynn said.