"High Stakes Choosing: Race, Place, and School Choice in Chicago."

Contemporary school reform focuses on "choice" and the personal initiative of parents/students, who must choose from the array of resources available from the state. The model has changed from one in which cities "deliver" public services like education, health care, and protection from crime, to one in which residents "shop for" these goods in a service landscape that includes more nongovernmental, private subcontractors. This paper presents the voices of African American parents maneuvering this school choice landscape. The data come from surveys and interviews with 77 parents of teenagers entering two all-black Chicago public high schools, one a very low-performing neighborhood high school with open enrollment for students in the attendance area ("Neighborhood High"), and the other a charter school that has shown some positive early results and conducts admissions through a city-wide lottery ("Charter High"). After presenting major themes that are common across all of the interviews – namely that all parents want to educate and protect their children, all are juggling multiple responsibilities, and all are choosing with limited information – we then let parents speak for themselves in extended first-person narratives of three Neighborhood High parents and one Charter High parent. The narratives elucidate the findings that nearly half of Neighborhood High families were assigned there rather than choosing it, and that more than half were ambivalent about, resigned to, or, more strongly, angered by this outcome. The story among Charter High parents was much more uniform: they all chose and they were all satisfied. Important push factors – especially school violence – and pull factors are also illuminated in these portraits. We conclude with a challenge to the school choice model as an effective way to attain educational equity.