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What do parents look for in their child's school?

- When choosing a school for their child, parents in all participating countries value academic achievement highly; but they are often even more concerned about the safety and environment of the school and the school's reputation.
- The children of parents who consider academic achievement very important score 46 points higher in mathematics than the children of parents who consider it not important.

The "right" school builds children's academic, social and emotional skills, gathers a diverse group of classmates and potential friends, and helps to prepare children for the world of work later on. It is thus hardly surprising that many parents want to have a say in which school their child attends and are prepared to invest time and resources in choosing a school. From talking to family, friends and neighbours and surfing the Internet for reviews and rankings, to visiting schools and even moving home, many parents are ready to go the extra mile to see their children placed in the best school possible.

Schools, too, want to know what parents are looking for so they can become more attractive options, since PISA reveals that many schools compete for students. Information on parents' preferences is also vital for education systems as a whole. It helps systems to accommodate family expectations, get parents involved in school matters, and ensure that teachers, students and parents are all working towards the same goals.

Parents who care about one criterion tend to care about most others.

In PISA 2012, students in 11 countries and economies took home a questionnaire for their parents to complete. Among other things, parents were asked about what criteria they considered important when choosing a school for their child. They were asked to report how much importance they gave, from "not important" to "very important", to 11 criteria mainly related to school quality, financial constraints, the school's philosophy or mission, and geographical distance between their home and the school.

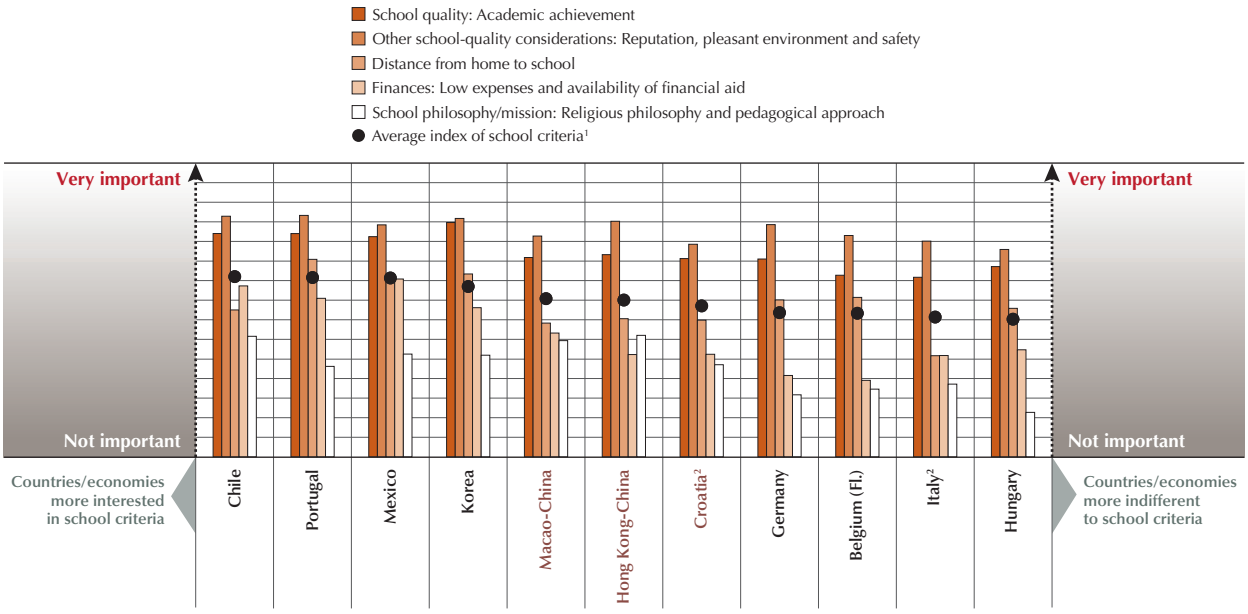
As a rule, parents who reported that they care about one criterion tend to care more about all other criteria, while parents who reported that no criterion is "very important" tend not to think that any of the other criteria are important, either.

For example, parents who consider school reputation to be very important are about six times more likely to consider academic achievement very important too, three times more likely to give high importance to the school's distance from their home and the school's religious philosophy, and even twice more likely to be concerned about financial constraints than parents who consider school reputation to be not as important. Parents in Chile, Mexico and Portugal, out of the 11 countries/economies that participated in the survey, ascribed the highest importance, on average, to all 11 criteria.

The recipe for an ideal school has many ingredients.

While parents cite several criteria as important when choosing a school, they overwhelmingly indicate that academic achievement and other indicators of school quality rank first. The average of the responses to the three survey questions that are unambiguously related to quality considerations – reputation, pleasant environment and safety – shows that parents care much more about quality than financial considerations, the school's distance from home or the school's philosophy/mission.

School quality is important to all parents everywhere



1. The "average index of school criteria" is the average response of parents to the 11 questions about the importance of certain criteria for choosing a school. Croatia has no information on "particular teaching approach" and Italy has no information on "financial aid available".

2. Information on school orientation for Croatia only includes religious philosophy. Information on finances for Italy only includes low expenses.

Countries and economies are ranked in descending order of the average index of school criteria.

Source: OECD, PISA 2009 Database.

StatLink http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/888932957498

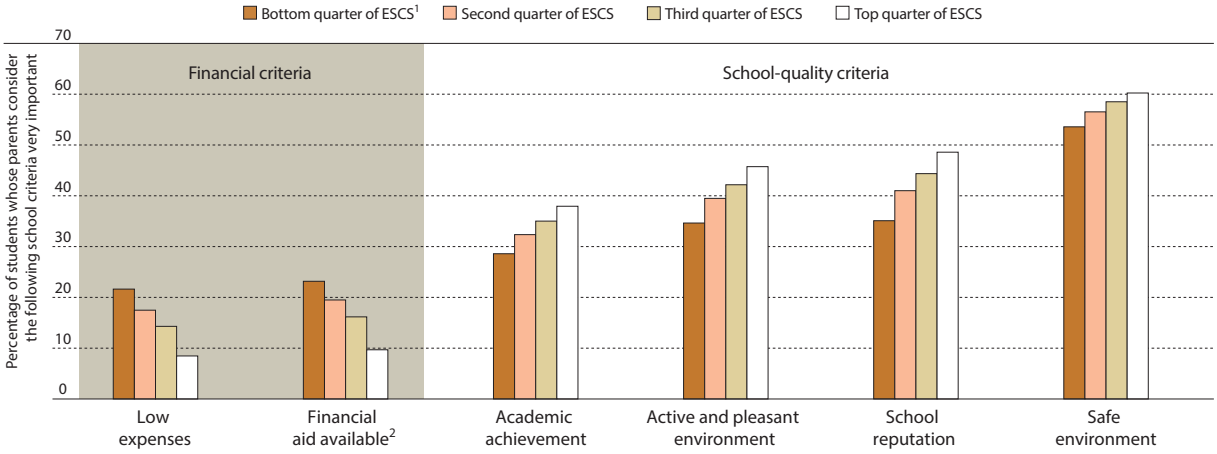
Interestingly, many parents appear to care more about a pleasant environment and a school's reputation than about academic achievement. Parents ascribe less importance to academic achievement than they do to school reputation, having a pleasant school climate or having a safe school environment – the latter of which is by far the most important factor for parents in every school system, except that in Belgium. The fact that many parents consider safety as their number one concern when choosing a school for their child may reflect parents' growing anxiety about bullying and violence in and around schools.

Parents' preferences may explain why policies fostering school choice may not necessarily deliver better learning outcomes, as families appear to prize quality considerations other than academic achievement. The school's distance from home is also an important consideration for parents, followed by financial issues and school orientation. This ranking of preferences is fairly stable across countries and economies. Only in Hong Kong-China does school orientation carry more weight than financial considerations. In Chile, parents cite financial criteria as more important than distance from home, and Italian parents give equal weight to the school's distance from home and financial constraints.

When finances are a concern, the importance of school quality recedes – and student performance suffers.

Most parents would like their children to attend the best school, but not everyone can afford to consider only the quality of the school. Results from PISA 2012 show that, compared to more advantaged parents, socio-economically disadvantaged parents assign higher importance to financial considerations when choosing a school for their child – often to the detriment of criteria that focus on school quality. For example, the difference in the proportion of disadvantaged parents who consider a school's reputation to be very important and the proportion of advantaged parents who do is 16 percentage points, on average across the 11 countries that distributed the questionnaire to parents. Differences between these two groups of parents are also notable when other criteria are considered, such as the quality and safety of a school's environment and academic achievement at the school.

Too often, disadvantaged parents have to choose between financial and school-quality considerations

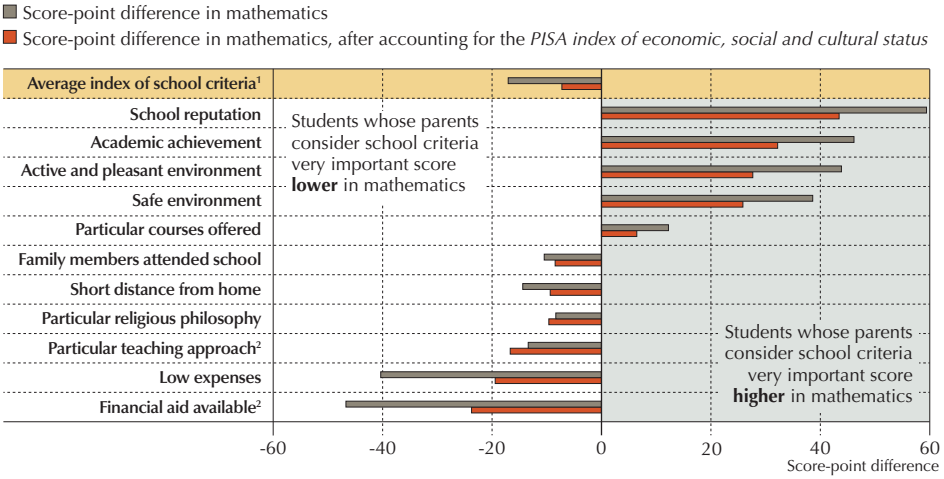


Note: Results are the average across the 11 countries and economies that participated in the parent questionnaire.
1. ESCS refers to the PISA index of economic, social and cultural status.
2. Data for "financial aid available" not available for Italy.
Source: OECD, PISA 2012 Database.
StatLink http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/888932957498

Unfortunately, it is the students who may pay the highest price: on average across the 11 countries that distributed the questionnaire to parents, the children of parents who consider academic achievement very important score 46 points higher in mathematics than the children of parents who consider it not important. While the score-point difference drops to 32 points after students' socio-economic status is taken into account, that difference is still equivalent to almost an entire year of schooling. Students whose parents reported that financial considerations are very important to them scored lower, on average, than students whose parents indicated that financial considerations are not important.

When school quality is very important to parents, their children tend to do better at school

Score-point difference in mathematics associated with a change in the importance given to school criteria by parents ("not important" versus "very important")



Note: All score-point differences are statistically significant. Results are the average across the 11 countries and economies that participated in the parent questionnaire.
1. The "average index of school criteria" is the average response of parents to the 11 questions about the importance of certain criteria for choosing a school. The index for Croatia was built without information on "particular teaching approach" and for Italy without information on "financial aid available".
2. Data for "particular teaching approach" not available for Croatia. Data for "financial aid available" not available for Italy.
School criteria are ranked in descending order of the related score-point difference in mathematics, after accounting for the PISA index of economic, social and cultural status *of students.*
Source: OECD, PISA 2012 Database.

The bottom line: Most parents care deeply about their children's education. But when parents are offered a choice of school, do all children benefit equally? If the end result of school choice is greater segregation between rich and poor, then the school system as a whole loses. Only when policy makers ensure that parents do not have to sacrifice academic achievement for financial or other reasons will every child reap the potential benefits of school choice.

For more information

Contact Alfonso Echazarra (*Alfonso.Echazarra@oecd.org*)

See OECD (2013), *PISA 2012 Results: What Makes Schools Successful? (Volume IV) Resources, Policies and Practices*, PISA, OECD Publishing, Paris.
OECD (2014), "When is competition between schools beneficial?" *PISA in Focus*, no. 42, OECD Publishing, Paris.

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