

Evaluation Report

Parental Satisfaction and Experiences Regarding the Hope Scholarship Program 2018-19

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Executive Summary

Beginning with the 2018-19 school year, families were eligible to participate in the Hope Scholarship Program enacted by the Florida Legislature (2019 Florida Statutes, s. 1002.40), which provides a scholarship to a participating private school for any K-12 student enrolled in a Florida public school who has been subjected to one of the following incidents: battery; harassment; hazing; bullying; kidnapping; physical attack; robbery; sexual offenses, harassment, assault, or battery; threat or intimidation; or fighting at school.

This evaluation is the first to examine the outcomes of Florida's new Hope Scholarship Program in its initial year. The goal of the evaluation was to collect information on parents' satisfaction and opinions regarding their experiences with the Hope Scholarship application process, the incident that led to accepting a scholarship, and the school climate at their child's former public school and new private school.

There were a total of 127 students who received a scholarship; five parents received a scholarship for more than one child. All 122 parents were contacted to participate in the study. From these 122 parents, 49 completed the survey and four of those who completed the survey also participated in a brief interview. Hope Scholarship recipients were nearly evenly divided among males (48%) and females (52%). Most recipients were white (48%) and in the middle school grades 6 – 8 (47.2%). The most common type of incident reported was bullying (34.0%) while the incident(s) most often took place in the classroom (31.2%). Some examples of other locations that were reported were the gym, locker room, social media, campus wide, courtyard, and parking lot.

Application Process

We find that most parents either found out about the Hope Scholarship program from another source not affiliated with the school (36.7%) or found out about it on their own (34.7%). Most of the parents surveyed did not experience any problems receiving the Hope Notification Form (70.8%). However, of the parents who experienced problems receiving the Hope Notification Form, the most frequently cited reasons were that the school did not provide any information about the form or the scholarship, the school was uncooperative, and the school lacked knowledge about the form or the scholarship.

Regarding the application process for the Hope Scholarship, most parents reported that they did not experience any challenges (70.8%). However, 29.2% of parents reported facing challenges during the Hope Scholarship application process. The most frequent challenges that these parents reported were that forms were filled out incorrectly or missing information, the school was uncooperative, the school lacked knowledge about the scholarship, and that there was a waiting process for receiving the scholarship after the application was accepted.

Most parents either agreed or strongly agreed that they were informed of the Hope Scholarship in a timely manner (61.2%). Additionally, most parents reported that they agreed or strongly agreed that applying for the Hope Scholarship was an easy process (83.7%). Next, most parents either

agreed or strongly agreed that if they had questions about the application, they knew who to ask (69.4%). Similarly, most parents agreed or strongly agreed that if they had questions about the application process they were usually answered in a timely manner (73.5%). Regarding moving the application process forward, most parents disagreed or strongly disagreed that at times they had to push to move the application process forward (55.1%). Additionally, most parents either disagreed or strongly disagreed that the application process took too long (75.5%). Finally, most parents either disagreed or strongly disagreed that finding a new school was challenging (73.5%). Instead, most parents reported that finding a new school for their child was very easy (46.9%) or somewhat easy (26.5%).

Incident(s) Leading to Applying for the Hope Scholarship

A qualitative analysis of responses to an open-ended question asking participants to provide a description of the incident found that physical attack was the most frequently reported type of incident. This was followed by bullying, verbal abuse, threats or intimidation, bullying due to race or ethnicity, sexual offense, destruction or theft of personal belongings, ostracization from peers, cyberbullying, and bullying due to sexual orientation. Most parents responded that the incident that led them to enroll their child in the scholarship was not an isolated incident (67.3%). A follow-up open-ended question asked parents to describe the length and frequency of the incident(s). Again, most parents reported that the incident had been ongoing. Regarding the frequency of occurrence, the most commonly reported frequency was daily. Most respondents reported that the incident involved 2 to 5 students (53.1%).

The majority of parents disagreed or strongly disagreed that the incident was investigated in a timely manner (66.0%). Additionally, most parents disagreed or strongly disagreed that the incident was taken seriously by the public school (66.7%). Additionally, slightly more parents either disagreed or strongly disagreed that reporting the incident to the school was an easy process (52.1%). Next, the majority of parents strongly agreed that even before the incident they had been worried about safety at their child's school (67.4%). Regarding whether parents were kept informed about further steps following the report of the incident, most parents disagreed or strongly disagreed that they were kept informed about further steps (74.5%). Next, most parents disagreed or strongly disagreed that steps have been taken by the school to prevent further incidents from happening (88.9%). Most parents also agreed or strongly agreed that the school did not have a process in place to handle an investigation of the incident (59.0%). Along those lines, most parents either disagreed or strongly disagreed that the school was proactive about investigating the incident (69.6%). Finally, most parents disagreed or strongly disagreed that they were provided with information about their options following the report of the incident (75.5%).

School Climate – Former Public School and New Private School

We examined whether there were significant differences in mean ratings between the prior and new school climate on the three school climate subscales: engagement, safety, and environment and the overall school climate mean. We found significant differences for all three subscales and

the overall scale (all significant at $p < .001$). Specifically, the mean ratings for the prior school climate were significantly lower than the mean ratings for the new school climate, including all three subscales and the overall scale. We also examined whether there were any differences between subgroups on the overall prior school climate and new school climate scale. The subgroups included gender (male/female), race/ethnicity (white/non-white), and grade level (elementary, middle, high). Similar trends were found for each subgroup on the overall school climate scale; that is, we found similar lower ratings for the prior school climate and similar higher ratings for the new school climate between each subgroup on the overall climate scale.

Parent interviews revealed additional details about how parents handled the Hope Scholarship application process, how the incident(s) was handled at their former public school, and the school climate of the prior and new schools.

Introduction

School climate issues have been studied in education for several decades. However, school climate issues, including school safety, have started to gain greater national attention. The government has been increasingly focused on school climate; for example, the Every Student Succeeds Act includes school climate and safety as an indicator that states can opt to include (U.S. Department of Education, 2019) while the U.S. Department of Education's Safe and Supportive Schools project provides \$42.4 million to 69 school districts to improve school climate (U.S. Department of Education, 2019). Furthermore, all 50 states, including the District of Columbia, have implemented some form of anti-bullying laws or policy (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2018). According to the National Center for Education Statistics (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2019), 20% of students ages 12 to 18 reported that they were bullied during the 2016-17 school year.

Although there is no consistent definition of school climate in the literature, the U.S. Department of Education's Safe and Supportive Schools model of school climate includes three related domains: safety, student engagement, and school environment (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Safe and Healthy Students, 2019). There is a multitude of evidence linking school climate with both school and student outcomes, including academic achievement, school quality, dropout prevention, school connectedness, healthy relationships, and safety, among others (Thapa, Cohen, Guffey, & Higgins-D'Allessandro, 2013).

The Hope Scholarship Program

Beginning with the 2018-19 school year, families were eligible to participate in the Hope Scholarship Program enacted by the Florida Legislature (2019 Florida Statutes, s. 1002.40) in order to address these issues in Florida. The statute provided a scholarship to attend a participating private school for any K-12 student enrolled in a Florida public school who has been subjected one of the following incidents: battery; harassment; hazing; bullying; kidnapping; physical attack; robbery; sexual offenses, harassment, assault, or battery; threat or intimidation; or fighting at school, 2019 Florida Statutes, s. 1002.40(3). The scholarship also allows the student to transfer to another public school with capacity through a transportation scholarship as specified in 1002.40(6)(a), F.S.

The Florida Department of Education (FLDOE) was tasked with contracting with an independent entity for the purposes of program evaluation. The FLDOE contracted with the Learning Systems Institute (LSI) in order to complete the following tasks as specified in the Statute: "Surveying the parents of participating students to determine academic, safety, and school climate satisfaction and to identify any challenges to or obstacles in addressing the incident or relating to the use of the scholarship" (1002.40(8)(d)(4), F.S.).

LSI requested Step Up for Student's parent application data to obtain the contact information of parents who received the Hope Scholarship for their child in 2018-19.

The Hope Scholarship Program is one way that Florida is attempting to address the issues of bullying and school climate. This exploratory study is the first to evaluate the effects of the Hope Scholarship program in its first year, 2018-19.

Evaluation Questions

The goal of this evaluation was to collect information on parents' satisfaction and opinions regarding their experiences with the Hope Scholarship application process, the incident that led to accepting a scholarship, and the school climate at their child's former public school and new private school. The evaluation questions that guided the study are:

- What were the challenges and affordances that parents faced in applying for, obtaining, or using the Hope Scholarship?
- What were the challenges and affordances that parents faced in addressing the incident at their child's former public school?
- What are parents' perceptions of the school climate of their child's former public school and their child's new private school?

Methods

We used a descriptive, correlational research design for this exploratory study. The following sections detail the participants, measures, procedures, and analyses.

Participants

We obtained the contact information of parents who had a child who participated in the Hope Scholarship program in the 2018-19 school year from the Scholarship Funding Organization, Step Up for Students. There were a total of 127 students who received a scholarship; five parents received a scholarship for more than one child. Although Hope Scholarship recipients could select a transportation scholarship to attend another public school, the data that we report here are from parents who accepted a Hope Scholarship for their child to attend a private school.

All 122 parents were contacted to participate in the study. From these 122 parents, 49 completed the survey and an additional four declined to participate. We also selected a purposeful sample of four participants to participate in a brief interview. Interviewees were selected based on their responses to the survey question about whether they agreed to be contacted for a possible interview as well as based on the diversity of their responses to the type of incident and their experience with the Hope Scholarship application process. Specifically, we selected interviewees based on the following criteria:

- A mix of demographics: Race/ethnicity, grade (elementary, middle, high), gender
- A mix of incident types
- Had challenges receiving the Hope Form
- If the school handled the incident poorly
- Highest overall prior school climate score
- Lowest overall prior school climate score
- Cyberbullying in prior school
- Racial/ethnic conflict is a problem in prior school
- Said yes to participating in a follow-up interview

Measures

The survey was developed to collect information from “the parents of participating students to determine academic, safety, and school climate satisfaction and to identify any challenges to or obstacles in addressing the incident or relating to the use of the scholarship,” as specified in the 2019 Florida Statutes, s.1002.40(8)(d)(4).

The parent survey consisted of a mix of researcher-developed and previously validated items from a published survey. There were three parts to the survey: Hope Scholarship application-related items, incident-related items, and school climate items.

The application-related items were developed by the researchers to measure parents' experiences with the Hope Scholarship application process. These items consisted of five open response items, one item that asked parents to select all responses that applied, four multiple-choice items for which parents selected the best response that applied, and eight items that asked parents to rate their agreement with the item on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree) with another option for "I don't know/Not applicable."

The incident-related items were also researcher-developed. These items were developed to better understand the incident(s) that led to applying for the Hope Scholarship as well as how the public school handled the incident(s). There were four open response items, two multiple-choice items for which parents selected the best response that applied, and nine items that asked parents to rate their agreement with the item on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree) with another option for "I don't know/Not applicable."

The items used for the school climate sections of the survey were adapted from the published and widely-used survey, the ED School Climate Surveys (EDSCLS), parent version (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Safe and Healthy Students, 2019). The EDSCLS is made up of three domains measuring school climate: Engagement, Safety, and Environment. The Engagement domain consists of topics covering cultural and linguistic competence, relationships, and school participation. The Safety domain includes topics of emotional safety, physical safety, bullying/cyberbullying, substance abuse, and emergency readiness/management. Finally, the Environment domain includes items about the physical environment, instructional environment, physical health, mental health, and discipline.

After eliminating questions that were not relevant to our goals, the survey contained four Engagement items, seven Safety items, and three Environment items, all measured on a 4-point scale from Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree with the option for a Not Applicable/I don't know response. There was one open-ended question included after each domain where participants could optionally expand on any of their responses. These items were administered for both the prior public school and the new private school that a child attended. For both prior and new school climate items, internal consistency reliability using Cronbach's α ranged from 0.69 to 0.94. The Appendix contains a table listing the Cronbach's α values for each scale.

Procedures

To contact parents, we first sent an email with information about the survey and a link to the online survey. We then sent a follow-up reminder about the survey a week later to parents who had not yet filled out the survey. Next, we called parents on the phone to remind them about the survey. Finally, for parents who did not respond to the phone call and had not yet filled out the survey, we mailed a hard copy of the survey along with a pre-addressed, postage-paid envelope for returning the completed survey. A gift card of \$25 was offered to any parent who completed the survey. For those who were selected for an interview, parents received an additional \$25 gift card for participating in the interview. The response rate for completing the survey was 40%.

Once participants were selected for an interview, we sent them an email asking if they would still be interested in participating in a brief interview. If there was no response to the email, we sent a reminder email a week later. We then moved down the list of eligible interviewees according to our criteria. A total of four participants were interviewed. While we attempted to solicit additional interviews, we did not receive any more responses; however, the additional interviewees that were selected were similar in demographics to those whom we interviewed.

Analyses

Quantitative data were analyzed using frequencies, descriptive statistics, and *t*-tests. Qualitative data, including open-ended questions and interview transcripts, were analyzed using qualitative content analysis. The researchers went through an iterative process of identifying themes or patterns (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) using an inductive category development approach (Mayring, 2000). First, key concepts or variables were identified as initial coding categories and new codes were developed for those that did not fit (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Axial coding was then used to develop categories around the core. Inter-rater reliability was checked through a second rater who rated 25% of each of the responses for each open-ended item and each interview transcript. Inter-rater agreement was high at over 80%.

Results

The results are presented in the following sections: demographic and incident information, the Hope Scholarship application process, the incident(s) leading to applying for the scholarship, and school climate at the prior and new school. Parents' written responses were slightly edited for typographical errors or spelling in order to facilitate clarity, while care was taken not to alter any content.

Demographic and Incident Information

We describe the application data by summarizing students' grade level, sex, race/ethnicity, the type of incident, and the place where the incident occurred.

The total number of scholarship recipients was 127. Recipients were nearly evenly divided among males (48%) and females (52%). Most recipients were white (48%) and in the middle school grades 6 – 8 (47.2%). The most common type of incident reported was bullying (34.0%) while the classroom was the most commonly reported location where the incident took place (31.2%). Some examples of other locations that were reported were the gym, locker room, social media, campus wide, courtyard, and parking lot. Details are presented in Table 1.

Table 1

Scholarship recipient demographic and incident information (n = 127)

Demographic and Incident Information	Number and Percent
Sex	
Female	66 (52.0%)
Male	61 (48.0%)
Race/ethnicity	
African American/Black (non-Hispanic)	23 (18.1%)
Asian	4 (3.1%)
Hispanic/Latino	31 (24.4%)
Multi-racial	7 (5.6%)
Native American/Pacific Islander	1 (.8%)
White (non-Hispanic)	61 (48.0%)
Grade	
K – 5	45 (35.4%)
6 – 8	60 (47.2%)
9 – 11	22 (17.3%)
Type of incident	
Battery	8 (5.4%)
Bullying	50 (34.0%)
Fighting	13 (8.8%)
Harassment	28 (19.0%)
Physical attack	17 (11.6%)
Robbery	2 (1.4%)
Sexual offense	6 (4.1%)
Threat or intimidation	23 (15.6%)
Location of incident	
Bus stop	7 (4.5%)
Bus	12 (7.8%)
Cafeteria	15 (9.7%)
Classroom	48 (31.2%)
Hallway	21 (13.6%)
Playground	11 (7.1%)
Restroom	5 (3.2%)
Other	35 (22.7%)

Note. There were 30 (20.4%) incidents that were more than one incident and 23 (14.9%) incidents that occurred in more than one place; these were separated for this table. For example, if one child experienced both battery and fighting, then battery and fighting were reported separately in the table.

We also examined the demographic information of the Hope Scholarship recipients excluding any parents who did not fill out the Hope Scholarship Evaluation Survey (see Table 2).

Of the 49 participants who completed the survey, there were slightly more scholarship recipients who were males (52%) than females (48%). Similar to the larger sample, most scholarship recipients were white (58%) and in the middle school grades 6 – 8 (58%). The most

common type of incident reported was bullying (32.8%) while the classroom was the most commonly reported location where the incident took place (37.5%).

Table 2

Demographic and incident information for students whose parents completed the Hope Scholarship evaluation survey (*n* = 50)

Demographic and Incident Information	Number and Percent
Sex	
Female	24 (48.0%)
Male	26 (52.0%)
Race/ethnicity	
African American/Black (non-Hispanic)	6 (12.0%)
Asian	1 (2.0%)
Hispanic/Latino	12 (24.0%)
Multi-racial	2 (4.0%)
Native American/Pacific Islander	0 --
White (non-Hispanic)	29 (58.0%)
Grade	
1 – 5	14 (28.0%)
6 – 8	29 (58.0%)
9 – 10	7 (14.0%)
Type of incident	
Battery	5 (7.8%)
Bullying	21 (32.8%)
Fighting	2 (3.1%)
Harassment	15 (23.4%)
Physical attack	7 (10.9%)
Sexual offense	2 (3.1%)
Threat or intimidation	12 (18.8%)
Location of incident	
Bus stop	3 (4.7%)
Bus	5 (7.8%)
Cafeteria	4 (6.2%)
Classroom	24 (37.5%)
Hallway	8 (12.5%)
Playground	7 (10.9%)
Restroom	1 (1.6%)
Other	12 (18.8%)

Note 1. One parent filled out the application for two children.

Note 2. There were 11 (17.2%) incidents that were more than one incident and 14 (21.9%) incidents that occurred in more than one place; these were separated for this table. For example, if one child experienced both battery and fighting, then battery and fighting were reported separately in the table.

Hope Scholarship Application Process

The school district of a school where a student has experienced an incident is required to provide documentation to the students' parents regarding the Hope Scholarship Program (1002.40(6)(a), F.S.). The survey asked parents to report how they found out about the Hope Scholarship program. Most parents either found out about the program from another source not affiliated with the school ($n = 18$; 36.7%) or found out about it on their own ($n = 17$; 34.7%). Nine (18.4%) parents found out from the principal of the school where the incident happened and five (10.2%) parents found out from a teacher or staff person in the school where the incident happened. Parents who reported that they found out about the program through another source most commonly listed that they found out from a private school or from their new private school ($n = 7$; 38.9%). For parents who found out about the program through their own research, the majority found out through online sources or social media ($n = 9$; 52.9%). Other sources mentioned included via billboard, email from Step Up for Students, or newspaper article.

Receiving the Hope Notification Form

Most of the parents surveyed did not experience any problems receiving the Hope Notification Form ($n = 34$; 70.8%). However, 29.2% ($n = 14$) of parents indicated that they had some challenges receiving the Hope Notification Form.

An open-ended question asked parents who had challenges receiving the Hope Notification Form to elaborate in their own words. Three main challenges emerged: 1) the school was uncooperative, 2) the school did not provide any information about the form or the scholarship, and 3) the school lacked knowledge about the form or the scholarship. Table 3 provides the most frequent themes that were found, the number of occurrences of each theme, a description of the theme, and an example quote that illustrates each theme.

Table 3

Challenges receiving the Hope Notification Form

Theme	Number of occurrences (percent)	Description	Relevant quotes
School was uncooperative	10 (35.7%)	The school was hesitant or unwilling to provide parents with the form.	<i>"So I was being challenged and it took a very long time to have them fill it out and get it back to me to be submitted."</i>
School did not provide information about the form or scholarship	9 (32.1%)	Various challenges were described regarding being able to obtain the form from the school.	<i>"I was never provided this [or] anything from public school, I had to call the school board."</i>
School lacked knowledge about the form or scholarship	9 (32.1%)	The school lacked the appropriate knowledge about the scholarship or form which often resulted in challenges for the parents to obtain the required information.	<i>"We never received it. The school didn't even know what it was. Then it took 9 months from the start of the process to when she finally received the scholarship."</i>

One challenge that was reported was that the school was uncooperative in providing the form or information about the scholarship. For example, one parent reported: *“The school seemed very hesitant to give me the form. I had to go the office and basically demand it and make them sign it.”* Another parent reported on the amount of time that it took to receive the form after multiple attempts: *“She [administrator] never did. I followed up with her via email twice and once by phone and never received a reply. I finally contacted the superintendent of [school district redacted for privacy] and forwarded all emails and communication. I was then given the form within 24 hours. It took over three months since the initial incident to be given the form.”* Another example that was reported more than once by parents was that the school did not acknowledge that any bullying took place, which made it difficult to obtain the form. For example, one parent stated: *“The HOPE notification form was a challenge because the Principal and Dean at [school name redacted for privacy] refused to acknowledge that the bullying was taking place. They refused to communicate with me in a timely manner. I had to make threats to go to the school board commissioner in order to get them to respond to the bullying issues going on at [school name redacted for privacy].”* Finally, another parent stated: *“It took me 3 to 4 months to finally get the form... That only was because I had to reach out to the Board of Education numerous times as well as research my child’s rights here in the state of Florida.”*

Another challenge was that the school did not provide any information about the scholarship. For example, one parent wrote: *“The challenge was that the school, the public school in which the incident or incident occurred, never told me about the scholarship. Never informed me of what was going on.”* Similarly, another parent stated: *“Nobody at the public school told us anything about it even after repeated instances of bullying and us complaining about it.”* Finally, one parent said: *“I had to find the form myself and provide it to the school.”*

The third challenge that emerged in the open-ended responses was that the school lacked knowledge about the form or scholarship. One parent wrote: *“It was the first time that anyone we worked with at the public school, the school district, and the new school had dealt with the Hope Scholarship. So, each step of the process was a learning opportunity for everyone involved.”* Another parent wrote that the school sent the incorrect form: *“They sent me the wrong form and I missed the first application deadline.”* Finally, another parent said that the school had no awareness of the form: *“No one had heard about the form at the school I was trying to get my kids out of.”*

Hope Scholarship Application Process

Regarding the application process for the Hope Scholarship, most parents reported that they did not experience any challenges ($n = 34$; 70.8%). However, 29.2% ($n = 14$) of parents reported facing challenges during the Hope Scholarship application process. To better understand the nature of these challenges, an open-ended question was asked of the parents who had reported facing challenges in the scholarship application process. Table 4 provides information about the main themes found for the open-ended question asking parents about challenges they faced during the scholarship application process.

Table 4

Challenges during the Hope Scholarship application process

Theme	Number of occurrences (percent)	Description	Relevant quotes
Forms filled out incorrectly or missing information	8 (38.1%)	Information was missing or incorrect resulting in needing to redo the application.	<i>“Understandably, the school which supplied the application did not fill in the forms correctly which made the process difficult and time consuming when having to redo it.”</i>
School uncooperative	7 (33.3%)	Parents experienced difficulty in the application process due to the public school.	<i>“The public school held back the application knowledge.”</i>
School lacked knowledge about scholarship	3 (14.3%)	The schools’ lack of knowledge about the scholarship created difficulties for parents in the application process.	<i>“In fact, at first, no one at the school even knew what it was!!!! I ended up having to speak with Tallahassee and almost DC to get her approved.”</i>
Waiting process	3 (14.3%)	There was a waiting period for receiving the scholarship after the application was accepted.	<i>“We had to wait for the Scholarship funds to be released in order for our son to be able to move to a new school.”</i>

The most common challenge reported on the open-ended question was that the forms were filled out incorrectly or were missing information. In most cases, parents reported that the school did not provide the correct information for the application to be accepted. For example: *“There were issues with the original paper work from the school, then when I had it corrected they said they couldn't accept it because the date of signature was different than the original papers. It was a nightmare to deal with at first but someone was able to straighten it all out.”* Other instances were when the parents filled out the information. For example, a parent wrote: *“The application asks for a time that the incident happened - this was hard to nail down so we left it blank and the form was kicked back.”*

The second most common challenge reported was that the school was uncooperative. Several parent’s quotes illustrate this challenge. One parent said: *“The school that the incident happened at was extremely difficult to work with. While I do think my son was the first student they had to fill this form out with they did everything they could to not help my son with this form. They refused to sign the incident form and I actually ended up having to get in touch with someone in the district [name redacted for privacy] for the [school district redacted for privacy] to get the principal to sign the form just to submit the application. I had to go back and get a small adjustment. I sent the form to the principal three times and left three voicemails and NEVER heard back from him. I ended up going to the school in person to get him to initial it. It was disappointing for the school to be so unwilling to help.”* Another parent’s quote expresses a

similar frustration, writing: *“Also we had difficulty getting cooperation from the school to sign the form. I had to educate the school on the statute and the school’s obligation. Many meetings occurred with staff before the principal (who seemed to be the only one aware of Hope). Staff seemed to view the completion of the form as admitting their own guilt in some way. There was resistance to signing at first until I produced the statute and accompanying memo from the DOE.”* Finally, one parent said: *“The public school I was trying to remove my daughter from refused me the form and then purposely made errors to the form that required me to return to the school several times to be corrected.”*

Two additional challenges were mentioned by parents who responded to the open-ended question about challenges in the Hope Scholarship application process. These challenges were mentioned an equal number of times: 1) the school lacked knowledge about the scholarship and 2) there was a waiting process. Illustrating the issue of the school’s lack of knowledge, one parent wrote: *“It was also very troubling trying to get someone on the school board to contact me and assist or answer questions when the school itself did not know.”* The waiting process challenges that parents listed were: waiting for scholarship funds to be released, the amount of time between the application and approval, and delays by the new school. For example: *“The other frustration was the lag time between application and approval. The bullying at the school had become severe and the signing of the HOPE notification form by the school meant that my child had to report the perpetrators -this resulted in making it unsafe for my child to return to the school as we waited to hear if we had been awarded Hope. The psychology of bullying needs to be better understood and accommodated for the victims during the waiting period.”*

Finally, parents were asked how strongly they agreed or disagreed with several statements regarding the scholarship application process (Table 5). Most parents either agreed or strongly agreed that they were informed of the Hope Scholarship in a timely manner (61.2%). Additionally, most parents reported that they agreed or strongly agreed that applying for the Hope Scholarship was an easy process (83.7%). Regarding how easy the application process was to understand, most parents disagreed or strongly disagreed that the application process was *not* easy to understand (85.7%). Next, most parents either agreed or strongly agreed that if they had questions about the application, they knew who to ask (69.4%). Similarly, most parents agreed or strongly agreed that if they had questions about the application process they were usually answered in a timely manner (73.5%). Regarding moving the application process forward, most parents disagreed or strongly disagreed that at times they had to push to move the application process forward (55.1%). Additionally, most parents either disagreed or strongly disagreed that the application process took too long (75.5%). Finally, most parents either disagreed or strongly disagreed that finding a new school was challenging (73.5%).

Table 5

Parents’ ratings of agreement/disagreement with statements about the scholarship application process

	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Don’t Know/ Not applicable
We were informed of the Hope scholarship in a timely manner.	24 (49.0%)	6 (12.2%)	4 (8.2%)	13 (26.5%)	2 (4.1%)
Applying for the Hope scholarship was an easy process.	21 (42.9%)	20 (40.8%)	4 (8.2%)	4 (8.2%)	0 (0%)
The application process was <i>not</i> easy to understand.	2 (4.1%)	5 (10.2%)	18(36.7%)	24 (49.0%)	0 (0%)
If we had questions about the application, we knew who to ask.	17 (34.7%)	17 (34.7%)	9 (18.4%)	4 (8.2%)	2 (4.1%)
Our questions about the application were usually answered in a timely manner.	22 (44.9%)	14 (28.6%)	6 (12.2%)	2 (4.1%)	5 (10.2%)
At times we had to push to move the application forward.	7 (14.93%)	9 (18.4%)	10 (20.4%)	17 (34.7%)	6 (12.2%)
The application process took too long.	2 (4.1%)	6 (12.2%)	18 (36.7%)	19 (38.8%)	4 (8.2%)
Finding a new school was challenging.	5 (10.2%)	7 (14.3%)	13 (26.5%)	23 (46.9%)	1 (2.0%)

Reasons for Enrolling in the Hope Scholarship Program

Parents were asked to describe, in their own words, the reasons why enrolling their child in the Hope Scholarship program was the best option after the incident. Table 6 lists the themes and information about each theme for the open-ended question asking parents about the reasons for enrolling their child in the scholarship program.

Table 6

Reasons for enrolling in the Hope Scholarship program

Theme	Number of occurrences (percent)	Description	Relevant quotes
Unsafe	18 (25.0%)	The school environment was described as unsafe.	<i>“Removing my child from an unsafe environment was the only option. The school staff advised removing my child was the best option.”</i>
Incident was ongoing	9 (12.5%)	The incident happened more than once or on an ongoing basis.	<i>“My daughter was harassed for years, in school, on the bus, outside of school. This program was the only way to remove her from daily verbal abuse.”</i>
Negative effect emotionally	9 (12.5%)	The incident(s) negatively affected the victims’ emotional state.	<i>“My son was deeply affected by all the incidents that took place prior to applying and moving him out of the public school. As soon as he moved to the private school he strived. He became more calm, happy, enjoying the environment, and feeling safe.”</i>
Negative effect on learning	8 (11.1%)	The incident(s) negatively affected academic learning.	<i>“My son’s grades were also falling as a result of the bullying he experienced.”</i>
School/staff did not do enough	8 (11.1%)	School or school staff did not do enough to effectively prevent or stop the incident(s) from occurring.	<i>“None of these incidents were reported to us, except by our daughter. When addressed with the school, they admitted that the events occurred, but there was not much they could do.”</i>
School unable to monitor/control environment	7 (9.7%)	The school was unable to monitor or control the environment in order to prevent or stop the incident(s) from occurring.	<i>“To remove my child from the large school environment where it is difficult for staff to monitor everything.”</i>
Financial reasons	6 (8.3%)	The scholarship made the private school tuition affordable.	<i>“Private school is expensive and the scholarship brought the tuition within reach.”</i>
Get away from perpetrator(s) or repercussions	5 (6.9%)	The scholarship allowed the victims to get away from the perpetrator(s) or to avoid any repercussions from reporting the incident(s).	<i>“We live in a small town and I didn’t want her to have to deal with any fallout that could come from the incident.”</i>

The most common theme that emerged was that the public school their child attended was an unsafe environment. One parent explained how their child was not safe by stating: *“My child was bullied and injured multiple times during the school year last year. He was in 2nd grade and was being “hit” by the same student. I need other options to ensure my child was not going to be harmed anymore and be able to be in a safe and comfortable environment.”* Additionally, another parent reported that: *“After months of threats to [child’s name redacted for privacy], the girl threatened to get a gun and shoot [child’s name redacted for privacy]. We needed to be out of the school totally. Immediately.”*

Another common theme was that the incident was ongoing. Parents described how their child experienced incidents on an ongoing basis. For example, one parent wrote: *“The HOPE scholarship saved him from that daily torture.”* Along those lines, another parent said: *“My son and his brother were both bullied at the school and after multiple events the bullying did not stop so I received a letter stating my son was referred to the HOPE scholarship program.”*

Next, the other most common theme was that the school was having a negative effect emotionally on the child. One parent wrote: *“...but my daughter suffered from anxiety after the ordeal. Her grades were plummeting as well.”* Another example of how the school had a negative emotional effect was reported by a parent who said: *“My son became very depressed and I was scared that he might hurt himself. My son suffers from psychiatric conditions to begin with and this just worsened his depression. I believe that my son needed this scholarship to be able to feel safe again in school.”*

Finally, two themes were only mentioned once: 1) other options not available and 2) believed private schools to be better.

Selecting a New Private School

Most parents reported that finding a new school for their child was very easy ($n = 23$; 46.9%) or somewhat easy ($n = 13$; 26.5%). Only 16.3% ($n = 8$) of parents reported that finding a new school was somewhat challenging; only 10.2% ($n = 5$) of parents reported that finding a new school was very challenging. If parents reported that finding a new school was challenging, they were asked to indicate the challenges that they encountered. Reasons selected were: there was no suitable school close to their house/apartment, it was difficult to find a school meeting academic expectations, it was difficult to find a school with which they felt comfortable, and other reason.

Finally, parents were asked to describe the reasons why they selected the private school that they did. The following themes were found: smaller school or class sizes, academics or reputation, safer environment, location, stricter policies or rules, supportive teachers or staff, private schools had more knowledge of scholarship, school environment, ethics or morals, found after research, and other bullied children were attending the school. Table 7 displays information about the most frequently occurring themes.

Table 7

Reasons for selecting the new private school

Theme	Number of occurrences (percent)	Description	Relevant quotes
Smaller school or class sizes	17 (19.1%)	The new school is small or has small class sizes.	<i>“Small number of students and high teacher to student ratio.”</i>
Academics or reputation	13 (14.6%)	Good reputation or academic opportunities.	<i>“I like the teaching style and curriculum.”</i>
Safer environment	13 (14.6%)	The environment at the new school is safer.	<i>“The private school we decided to transfer to made my child feel safe and understood.”</i>
Location	12 (13.5%)	The location of the new school is convenient or nearby.	<i>“We chose the nearest private school which was about 15 to 20 minutes away. There were other choices that now I see would have been better choices but a 30 minute or more commute did not appeal to us.”</i>
Stricter policies or rules	7 (7.9%)	The new school has stricter policies or rules, particularly with regards to bullying.	<i>“Zero tolerance for any form of bullying.”</i>
Supportive teachers or staff	7 (7.9%)	Staff or teachers are more caring or attentive toward students or parents.	<i>“Teachers are attentive with the learning needs of all of my children who attend here. Office staff communicates with me quickly and in a personalized way. I know that my children are safe at school.”</i>
School environment	4 (4.5%)	The new private school had a better overall environment.	<i>“The school he attends focuses on teaching children in a way they learn. Every child is different in how they grasp concepts and his school is absolutely wonderful and understands that.”</i>
Private schools had more knowledge of scholarship	3 (3.4%)	Compared to the prior public school, the private schools had more knowledge about the scholarship.	<i>“When searching for a school to help me with funding [school name redacted for privacy] is the one private school that told me about the HOPE scholarship program and helped me with getting it turned in.”</i>
Ethics or morals	2 (2.2%)	There was an emphasis on ethics or morals at the new school.	<i>“For the morals.”</i>

Found after research	2 (2.2%)	The parent found the new private school after doing their own research.	<i>“Honestly, I found the school after a lot of research and phone calls. I did not receive any help from anyone in finding a school which made the process more difficult, especially as a new resident with no knowledge of the schools.”</i>
Other bullied children attending	2 (2.2%)	Other children who were bullying victims attended the new private school.	<i>“...children that have suffered bullying are attending.”</i>

The theme that occurred most frequently was that the new school was smaller or had smaller class sizes. For example, a parent wrote: *“I chose his current private school because of the class sizes. His current private school only has 10-15 students per class allowing the teacher to spend more one on one time with each student and also monitor the behavior and treatment of each student better.”* Similarly, another parent reported: *“It is a small environment, the student teacher ratio is smaller which allows the student to be challenged academically, and students are supervised by an adult at all times.”*

Academics or reputation was another common theme mentioned for why parents chose the new private school. Some parents mentioned that the school had a good reputation overall for academics while others mentioned the types of opportunities available academically at the new school. One parent reported: *“Higher education, college startup, opportunities in music, art, drama. They work to rebuild the student's self-esteem and their parents' faith in our educators. My daughter's average raised to above her grade level and she is back to being the amazing child I had been missing.”* Another parent said: *“The school is very expensive out of pocket but one of the county's best schools.”*

Finally, another frequently mentioned theme was that the new private school provided a safer environment. For example, one parent mentioned that: *“The school offered my daughter a chance for an environment where she could learn, grow, and thrive. Without having to worry each day who she was going to encounter and what the next situation will be.”* Another parent selected the school based on recommendations as a safe place, saying: *“It came highly recommended by my community as a safe place for children that were victims of bullying.”*

Other themes that were only listed once were: 1) caters to special needs, 2) has dual enrollment, 3) familiarity with school, 4) more diverse student body, 5) no longer at the private school, 6) price, and 7) teaches life skills.

Recommendations for Applying to the Hope Scholarship Program

Lastly, an additional open-ended question asked parents to provide any recommendations to help make it easier for families to apply for the scholarship. See Table 8 for the number of statements that were found for each theme, a description of the theme, and an illustrative quote. The theme “fill out the forms in person” was only mentioned once so is not included in the table.

Table 8

Recommendations for an easier application process

Theme	Number of occurrences (percent)	Description	Relevant quotes
None or easy process	20 (35.1%)	Parents either stated that they had no recommendations or that applying for the scholarship was an easy process.	<i>“I think the process was excellent. The principal of the school where my son was bullied, was extremely helpful in the HOPE application process. Once starting the application, it was truly simple for me.”</i>
Inform public schools about the process	11 (19.3%)	Schools that are aware of the application process can enable a smoother application process for parents.	<i>“Our school administrators did not have any knowledge of the process since it was a new program.”</i>
More awareness needed	9 (15.8%)	Parents and schools, including principals and staff, are often unaware of the scholarship or the requirements of the program.	<i>“The public school where the bullying took place should have sent home a letter about the Hope scholarship (from what I understand). If they had done so, I would have looked at private school options a lot sooner.”</i>
Simplify the process	8 (14.0%)	More information can be provided to parents to help them with the process.	<i>“Process flow chart for parents.”</i>
Parents should do their own research	4 (7.0%)	Parents should reach out to the help line or look for other information about the scholarship because the school may not provide the correct information.	<i>“Be persistent. Many administrators do not fully understand the scholarship. Do your research.”</i>
Communication	4 (7.0%)	Provide a help line for the program or speak to other parents.	<i>“I feel that the biggest obstacle was the faculty at the school where he was being bullied trying to hide the truth of the matter at hand so maybe a liaison program or hotline that may start the intervention for said student.”</i>

The most common response was that parents had no recommendations or that it was already an easy process to apply. For example, a parent wrote: *“I don’t. For a parent searching for scholarships and help for other school options I know this new hope scholarship is added to*

the previous information that was on the FLDOE website. The principle was very informative and had the information I needed to move forward to help my son.”

The second most common recommendation was to inform public schools about the process. Some parents recommended informing other members of the school staff as they were most likely to become aware of the incident first. One parent wrote: *“Informing the schools and keeping dialogue so they know when to and who to offer the application to is very important as well. School nurses are a great resource to keep dialog with as many bullied children end up in the health office for either real ailments/injuries or as an escape from the classes/peers.”* Similarly, another parent recommended: *“Guidance counselors and Asst. principals need to be made aware of the existence and purpose of this scholarship as they often know about bullying far in advance of the principal. They need to understand the history and that a child's death due to bullying is what prompted his mother to get the Act and subsequent statute and scholarship in place. Suicide is easy to picture for some parents who have children who are bullied. Schools need to view this as not an admission of guilt but rather a way to assist families who do not have financial means to gain access to private school.”*

Other recommendations to inform public schools about the process included providing more information about requirements and all steps of the process. One parent wrote: *“- Better education to the county personnel that will be completing the Notification Forms. - Process flow chart for admissions personnel at new school.”* Another parent suggested: *“Educate principals with more than an email so they educate parents correctly and provide this option. I felt they were saying no right off the bat without knowledge to make that decision.”* Finally, one parent reported: *“The principal at the old elementary school was not happy about having to fill the form out stating that my child had been abused and physically hurt at her school multiple times this school year. I left her office crying due to how terrible she treated me. The school we were leaving was a D graded school and the principal was very upset with me that I had contacted the superintendent of our county. This part of the process I feel like is a little harsh. If there was a way to bypass this step considering what us parents have to fight against with some of these school districts is hard enough already.”*

Another common theme found in the recommendations parents provided was to simplify the process. These recommendations for simplifying the process included: providing parents with a list of information about participating schools, a process flow chart for parents, move the entire process online, have immediate access to the new school once withdrawn from the prior one, and discuss financial responsibilities from the beginning.

Finally, other recommendations fell under the topics of 1) creating more awareness of the program and process, 2) better communication, 3) parents should do their own research on the program, 4) provide schools with more awareness of the requirements, and 5) fill out the forms in person.

Incident(s) Leading to Participation in the Hope Scholarship Program

The survey asked parents to provide a description of the incident that led them to enroll their child in the Hope Scholarship program. Physical attack was cited most frequently, followed by bullying, verbal abuse, threats or intimidation, bullied due to race or ethnicity, sexual offense, destruction or theft of personal belongings, ostracized from peers, cyberbullying, and bullied due to sexual orientation. Table 9 provides information about each theme for the descriptions that parents provided of the incident(s) that led to participation in the scholarship program.

Table 9

Description of the incident leading to participation in the Hope Scholarship Program

Theme	Number of occurrences (percent)	Description	Relevant quotes
Physical attack	28 (30.4%)	Bodily contact with the victim, particularly in a way that causes harm.	<i>“In a science class, my son was slapped in the head 20 times. The teacher never saw and when he went to leave class the boy continued to taunt him by knocking him down and punching him in the face.”</i>
Bullied	18 (19.6%)	General label that could refer to any type of incident that took place.	<i>“Bullying for the past two years, as the girls get older the bullying became more serious. My child was uncomfortable and nervous and not too fond of getting up to go to school in the morning. Each afternoon/evening she came home she had a new story of the bullying.”</i>
Verbal abuse	15 (16.3%)	Negative communication with the victim; for example, insulting or verbally harassing.	<i>“My son was on the football team and one child who played the same position as him would constantly call him names and tell him how horrible he was. He would do it in front of other kids to try to get them to join in; some did and it was every day for months.”</i>
Threats or intimidation	12 (13.0%)	Behavior towards the victim that caused the victim to fear injury or harm.	<i>“A certain girl kept threatening our child. It went on for months. Threats of a gang of girls planning to trap her in the bathroom and beat her up. Then the final threat to get a gun and shoot her.”</i>
Bullied due to race or ethnicity	4 (4.3%)	The cause of the bullying was specifically mentioned as due to the victim’s race or ethnicity.	<i>“They specifically targeted our son due to racial and ethnic differences. They teased him because of his name, and continually berated him by intentionally mispronouncing his name in a derogatory manner. This was done openly and loudly in a public manner in the classrooms and hallways at the school.”</i>

Sexual offense	4 (4.3%)	Inappropriate sexual behavior towards the victim, including physical or verbal.	<i>"A boy pulled down her pants and panties in the court yard in front of many other students."</i>
Destruction or theft of personal belongings	3 (3.3%)	The victim's personal belongings were stolen or damaged by the perpetrator(s).	<i>"My child's lunch was being stolen almost daily; the other kids would eat some of it, throw it in the garbage or step on it in front of him. He didn't get to eat and came home hungry every day. Staff did nothing to address it until it was already out of control."</i>
Ostracized from peers	3 (3.3%)	The perpetrator(s) would try to isolate the victim from peers; for example, by ruining the victim's reputation or by threatening peers.	<i>"He was ostracized from his peers and when kids would hang out with him, they would get bullied as well or told to watch out, if he touches you he'll make you gay too."</i>
Cyberbullying	3 (3.3%)	The bullying occurred online.	<i>"The bullying escalated to social media and the school could do nothing about it."</i>
Bullied due to sexual orientation	2 (2.2%)	The cause of the bullying was specifically mentioned as due to the victim's actual or perceived sexual orientation.	<i>"My son was repeatedly called names such as faggot, gay boy, loser, etc. along with adult language."</i>

Physical attack was reported the most commonly. Instances of physical attacks included stabbing, hair pulling, slapping, attacking, punching, kicking, and others. One parent described the physical attack by writing: *"Girls she didn't even know calling her into the restroom to beat her up. One girl grabbed a hand full of my daughter's hair and pulled her head back. This happened twice."* Another parent wrote: *"He was bullied in school from the same kid for 3 years, hitting him and fighting in the bathroom, with police report."* Another parent explained the physical attack by saying: *"The final incident was when my daughter was grabbed by the collar and punched with a closed fist twice across the jaw, resulting in a bruise."*

The next most frequently reported incident was that of bullying in general. Some examples described by parents on the survey included: *"My daughter was bullied at her old school for 2 years straight. I had to go to the school daily; the other kids never got in trouble. My daughter is a straight student and never bothers anybody so the principal recommended to remove my daughter since we had the issue."* Another parent wrote: *"It is a very long story...there was a family at my son's school that also rode the bus with him and was tormenting*

him. I went to the school for over a year to get help with the problem and was never taken seriously and the bullies were never forced to face their actions. It got so bad I actually had to file a restraining order and the judge granted it.”

Verbal abuse was another frequently reported incident on the open-ended question asking parents to describe the incident leading to participation in the Hope Scholarship program. Verbal abuse could include calling the victim names, insults, verbal harassment, and making fun of the victim. One parent described the verbal abuse of their child at school, saying: *“They again began to verbally abuse him, making fun of his accent and publicly humiliating him. When the [classroom subject redacted for privacy] teacher, [teacher’s name redacted for privacy], scolded the bullies for their actions, they continued even more aggressively because they were angry for being called out by the teacher.”* Another parent described the abuse, saying: *“My daughter’s class was in the library unattended by an adult because they had no teacher. Her iPhone was in the front pocket of her backpack. One of the girls in the class started going into the backpack, my daughter pulled her backpack toward her; when she did so the girl called her a racist and several other kids jumped in and started insulting her as well.”*

Finally, threats or intimidation was a frequently occurring incident reported by parents on the survey. One parent reported that: *“A student told my son he had a knife on his backpack but not to worry as he would not kill anyone. The student asked my son not to tattletale. My son felt intimidated and scared all day.”* Another example is provided by a parent who wrote: *“One of these two students repeatedly threatened to jump him after class, would tell other students to tell my son that he would be jumped between class or after school, and that he would be at the bus stop ready to fight him after school. Other students showed my son videos of the bullying child fighting other people to intimidate him.”*

Most parents responded that the incident that led them to enroll their child in the scholarship was not an isolated incident ($n = 33$; 67.3%). A follow-up open-ended question asked parents to describe the length and frequency of the incident(s). Table 10 provides more details about the length and frequency of the incident(s), including the number of occurrences found in the parents’ responses to the open-ended question, a description, and relevant quotes.

Table 10

Length and frequency of the incident(s)

Length	Number of occurrences (percent)	Description	Relevant quotes
Ongoing	29 (56.9%)	The incidents occurred more than once.	<i>“The school would not give me exact details but my son says that this child had been bullying him for months and he was in his history class so my son could not escape seeing this other child.”</i>
Frequency			
Daily	14 (27.5%)	The incidents occurred on a daily basis.	<i>“These incidents were nearly daily in PE class.”</i>
More than once/week	2 (3.9%)	The incidents occurred more than once per week.	<i>“At least three times a week.”</i>
More than one isolated incident	2 (3.9%)	There was more than one incident that took place.	<i>“There were two incidents of sexual harassment: one in September and one in February.”</i>

Again, most parents reported that the incident had been ongoing. This means that the incident occurred more than once and most often occurred over a time span of weeks to years. For example, one parent wrote: *“The bullying went on up until the last day she attended the school.”* In another example, a parent stated that: *“The final bullying incident that led to the scholarship occurred in the 7th grade. The bullying started while my son was in the 4th grade.”*

Regarding the frequency of occurrence, the most commonly reported frequency was daily. One parent wrote: *“Bullying on the bus took place on a daily basis.”* Similarly, another parent reported: *“I pulled him out in March and by then it was almost every day.”*

Other responses that were only mentioned once were: 1) isolated incident, 2) frequency - weekly, 3) frequency - monthly, and 4) length - a month.

Most respondents reported that the incident involved 2 to 5 students ($n = 26$; 53.1%). Other responses were that the incident involved one specific student ($n = 13$; 26.5%), a larger group of students ($n = 5$; 10.2%), and both students and teachers/staff ($n = 5$; 10.2%).

Next, an open-ended question asked parents to describe how the incident was reported. Table 11 displays the themes that were reported with at least two occurrences as well as relevant details for each.

Table 11

How the incident was reported

Theme	Number of occurrences (percent)	Description	Relevant quotes
Parents contacted administrator or staff	21 (34.4%)	Parents contacted an administrator or staff member to report the incident.	<i>“I called and talked to the counselor. Then that didn't work so I called and talked to the Asst. Principal. That didn't work. Then I emailed the Principal.”</i>
Child informed administrator or staff	16 (26.2%)	The child informed an administrator or staff person to report the incident.	<i>“The incident was first reported by my daughter to the assistant principal at the time.”</i>
Staff or administrator reported incident	8 (13.1%)	A staff or administrator who witnessed the incident reported it.	<i>“The incident was reported right away by the teacher who was present at the scene of the incident. The counselor recorded it the same day of the incident. The principal of the school also found out about it.”</i>
First reported to parents by child then by parents to school	7 (11.5%)	The child first reported the incident to their parents who then reported it to the school.	<i>“My daughter told me because she said that she had grown tired of dealing with it. We then contacted the school dean and set up a meeting.”</i>
Other students reported to administrators or staff	3 (4.9%)	Students who had witnessed the incident reported it to administrators or staff.	<i>“Another child came in the bathroom and went and got the teacher.”</i>
Parent found out from others	3 (4.9%)	Parents found out about the incident from people other than the school or their child.	<i>“I did not find out about what was going on until I received a phone call from a stranger who helped my daughter from being chased by a group of kids.”</i>
School did not document incidents or contact parents	2 (3.3%)	School did not contact parents about the incident or document it.	<i>“I never once was called by the school to let me know what had been happening. My daughter was scared to even talk about it.”</i>

The most frequent theme was that parents contacted an administrator or staff person to report the incident. One parent said: *“I immediately called the principal after the bus incident and spoke with her the same day. After that, I followed up via email so I had records of our conversations. I also spoke with the 7th grade assistant principal and the school guidance counselor for subsequent altercations. I informed the principal about the explicit Instagram account and nothing was done.”* In another example, a parent reported that: *“I called*

transportation the day it began and contacted the guidance counselor and the dean of the school and they communicated between the students and the bus driver.”

The second most frequently occurring response was that the child informed an administrator or staff person about the incident. These reports were made to a variety of different staff or administrators, including guidance counselors, teachers, lunch room staff, resource officers, or the assistant principal. One parent explained that the incident was reported: “By my daughter, to the teacher each time it occurred.” Another parent said: “My child told his Dean after months of ongoing treatment.” Finally, another parent provided a different example, stating: “My son, who had been reporting the behavior to staff in the lunchroom, finally just started yelling at the other kids until a teacher intervened.”

Other occurrences that were mentioned only once included: child informed parent.

Next, an open-ended question asked parents about how the incident was addressed once it was reported. Table 12 lists the themes with relevant details about how the incident was addressed once it was reported.

Table 12
How the incident was addressed once reported

Theme	Number of occurrences (percent)	Description	Relevant quotes
School investigated and/or addressed the incident	16 (25.4%)	The school investigated the incident and/or took action to address it.	<i>“Once the principal was involved, he immediately began an investigation, including talking with all the students involved.”</i>
School did not take the incident seriously	10 (15.9)	The incident was minimized by the school or not taken seriously.	<i>“It was not addressed when I first reported it to the teacher. Things got much worse. The teacher and guidance counselor treated it as “girl drama” and as if my child was contributing to the aggressive and ugly behavior of the students.”</i>
No disciplinary action was taken	7 (11.1%)	The school took no disciplinary action against the perpetrator(s).	<i>“Despite the events, the other student was still permitted to ride the bus.”</i>
Disciplinary action taken or incident investigated with little effect	7 (11.1%)	Although disciplinary action was taken or the incident was investigated, it had little effect on preventing further incidents.	<i>“They switched my daughter’s home room/schedule around, but she’d still see the girl while going to other classes and was still being threatened by her and her friends.”</i>
Administrator or staff discussed incident with parents	5 (7.9%)	An administrator or staff person discussed the incident with the victim’s parents.	<i>“The dean met with us and she said that she would address it with the other student and his parents.”</i>

Victim removed from classroom	4 (6.3%)	The victim was removed from the classroom as a means of separation from the perpetrator(s).	<i>“The dean then called and said that they had moved the other child into another classroom and that the allegations were found to be with merit.”</i>
School would not discuss due to privacy concerns	4 (6.3%)	The school would not discuss any actions taken as a result of the incident(s) due to concerns with privacy.	<i>“Schools are not able to discuss what they do to another child with me, that’s what I’ve been told many times when my son was bullied at that school when I would ask what the punishment was.”</i>
No incident reports were filed	3 (4.8%)	The school did not file any incident reports.	<i>“I reported the incident twice. The school did not document anything down. So there was no evidence.”</i>
Parent was never notified by the school	3 (4.8%)	The school did not notify the parents of the incident(s).	<i>“The guidance counselor spoke to the young lady, had her apologize to my daughter. He said he called the young lady’s grandmother-her guardian but never called me. I found out about it that night; I had to call him a few times and leave messages. He never called me. I finally called and he answered. I should have immediately received a call.”</i>
School informed parents about the scholarship	2 (3.2%)	The public school informed the victim’s parents about the Hope Scholarship.	<i>“We received a call from the principal explaining the scholarship.”</i>

The most common theme was that the school investigated and/or addressed the incident. Various ways of addressing the incident or investigating it were cited, including documenting the incident, meeting with the perpetrator(s), investigating what happened, or punishing/reprimanding the perpetrator(s). For example, one parent wrote: *“They suspended the kid first and then after it kept going on informed the child’s family and after it continued I received the paper about the Hope scholarship.”* Another example of how the incident was handled was provided by a parent who stated: *“The principal called the parents of the kid, we filed a police report, and we received a call from the principal explaining the scholarship.”* Finally, another parent said that: *“They had my daughter fill out a stack of incident reports for anything that had happened in the past.”*

Another frequently occurring theme was that the school did not take the incident seriously. For example, one parent explained that: *“The public school brushed the incident off even refusing to move my son to another class until I told them I was coming to remove my son from public school.”* Other parents said that the school did not classify the incident as something serious. For example, one parent said: *“It was determined by the principal to be horse play.”*

Similarly, another parent reported: *“The school felt it was just jealousy on the other kids’ part, but did not feel my son was being bullied.”*

Other occurrences that were reported only once were: 1) the school was new to completing the paperwork and 2) the victim was punished.

Finally, parents were asked how strongly they agreed or disagreed with several statements regarding how the public school handled the incident (Table 13). The majority of parents disagreed or strongly disagreed that the incident was investigated in a timely manner (66.0%). Additionally, most parents disagreed or strongly disagreed that the incident was taken seriously by the public school (66.7%). Additionally, slightly more parents either disagreed or strongly disagreed that reporting the incident to the school was an easy process (52.1%). Next, the majority of parents strongly agreed that even before the incident they had been worried about safety at their child’s school (67.4%). Regarding whether parents were kept informed about further steps following the report of the incident, most parents disagreed or strongly disagreed that they were kept informed about further steps (74.5%). Next, most parents disagreed or strongly disagreed that steps have been taken by the school to prevent further incidents from happening (88.9%). Most parents also agreed or strongly agreed that the school did not have a process in place to handle an investigation of the incident (59.0%). Along those lines, most parents either disagreed or strongly disagreed that the school was proactive about investigating the incident (69.6%). Finally, most parents disagreed or strongly disagreed that they were provided with information about their options following the report of the incident (75.5%).

Table 13

Parents' ratings of agreement/disagreement with statements about how their child's former school handled the incident

	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Don't Know/ Not applicable
The incident was investigated in a timely manner.	4 (8.5%)	12 (25.5%)	13 (27.7%)	18 (38.3%)	0 (0%)
The incident was taken seriously by the school.	9 (18.8%)	7 (14.6%)	12 (25.0%)	20 (41.7%)	0 (0%)
Reporting the incident to the school was an easy process.	8 (16.7%)	14 (29.2%)	10 (20.8%)	15 (31.3%)	1 (2.1%)
Even before the incident we had been worried about safety at this school.	23 (50.0%)	8 (17.4%)	9 (19.6%)	5 (10.9%)	1 (2.2%)
We were kept informed about further steps following the report of the incident.	5 (10.6%)	7 (14.9%)	13 (27.7%)	22 (46.8%)	0 (0%)
Steps have been taken by the school to prevent further incidents from happening.	0 (0%)	2 (7.4%)	6 (22.2%)	18 (66.7%)	1 (3.7%)
The school did not have a process in place to handle an investigation of the incident.	13 (33.3%)	10 (25.6%)	11 (28.2%)	2 (5.1%)	3 (7.7%)
The school was proactive about investigating the incident.	4 (8.7%)	9 (19.6%)	16 (34.8%)	16 (34.8%)	1 (2.2%)
We were provided with information about our options following the report of the incident.	3 (6.1%)	9 (18.4%)	12 (24.5%)	25 (51.0%)	0 (0%)

Note: Totals might be less than 49 due to missing data.

School Climate – Prior School and New School

The school climate survey consists of three interrelated domains: school engagement, school safety, and school environment. The survey asked parents to report on each of the climate domains for both the prior public school and the new private school that they selected, where higher ratings indicate a better school climate rating (from 1 to 4). We examined whether there were significant differences in mean ratings between the prior and new school climate on the three school climate subscales and the overall school climate mean. We found significant differences for all three subscales and the overall scale (all significant at $p < .001$). Specifically, the mean ratings for the prior school climate were significantly lower than the mean ratings for the new school climate, including all three subscales and the overall scale. See Figure 1 for the mean ratings for the prior and new school climate subscales and the overall climate scale.

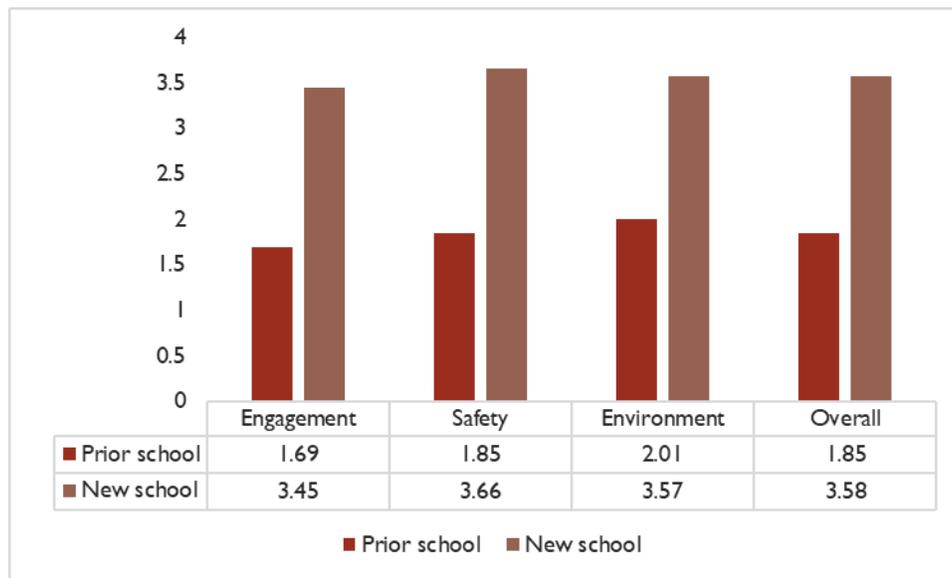


Figure 1. School Climate Means for Prior and New Schools

We also examined whether there were any differences between subgroups on the prior school climate and new school climate subscales. The subgroups included gender (male/female), race/ethnicity (white/non-white), and grade level (elementary, middle, high). Similar trends were found for each subgroup on the overall school climate scale; that is, we found similar lower ratings for the prior school climate and similar higher ratings for the new school climate between each subgroup on the overall climate scale (see Appendix Figure 1).

School Climate – Engagement

To better understand the level of engagement reported for the prior school, an optional open-ended question asked parents to add or expand on anything regarding the school engagement questions that they answered. The two most commonly cited themes were: 1) the school does not care/does not take any action and 2) the school has an unsafe, negative environment. Table 14 shows the most commonly occurring themes along with relevant details.

Table 14

School climate (engagement) in the former public school

Theme	Number of occurrences (percent)	Description	Relevant quotes
School does not care/does not take any action	6 (25.0%)	Incidents continue to take place even when the school is aware.	<i>“They need to be stricter. Just writing referrals every time something happens doesn't change a problem student's behavior. Even though they said they were overstaffed they were never present when the incidents happened.”</i>
Unsafe, negative environment	6 (25.0%)	The parents and/or child feels unsafe at school and/or the environment at school is negative.	<i>“It's so disheartening that children don't feel safe at school. How can they learn if they are afraid? Way too much gang activity and bullying / threatening.”</i>
Happy in new school	2 (8.3%)	Parents are satisfied with the new private school.	<i>“I am grateful for this scholarship. My son is very happy at his new school and has excelled academically and emotionally. His confidence has blossomed.”</i>
School does not communicate with parents	2 (8.3%)	The school does not communicate regarding incidents or the child.	<i>“The public school doesn't communicate anything, I was completely cut off from my child while he was in school.”</i>
Teachers not respected by administration/ unable to control students	2 (8.3%)	Teachers were not treated with respect and/or teachers could not control students in their classrooms.	<i>“The teachers are not in control in a number of classrooms and that adds to the likelihood of misbehavior in those classrooms.”</i>

The theme, the school does not care/does not take any action, was mentioned six times. This could mean that the school took action but the action was not successful or the school did not take any action against the perpetrator(s), both of which allowed the incidents to continue occurring. For example, one parent wrote: *“The school he was at claimed to be a no bullying zone but every time I would call about an incident or my son would report an incident it would supposedly be investigated and I would get a call saying the child was punished for it but it would continue to happen over and over.”* Additionally, another parent reported: *“The sad fact of the matter is that my daughter was able to get away but the parties in question still were able to bully other students who were too afraid to say anything.”*

Next, the theme of unsafe, negative environment was also cited a total of six times. Parents reported that the public school their child was in made them feel unsafe or had a negative environment. For example, one parent said: *“All public schools are having difficulty with safety and diversity.”* Another parent stated that: *“I do not feel like my child is safe at school. The school feels like a prison more than an elementary school.”*

Other reasons listed only once included: 1) difficult to be involved in school functions, 2) education needed on scholarship and/or bullying, 3) in theory the school embraced different cultures, 4) low SES school, 5) no issues with other children who attended school, and 6) the school was not forthcoming about reporting or the scholarship.

The survey also contained an optional open-ended question asking parents about the level of engagement/school climate at the new private school. Several themes emerged that were mentioned two or more times included: Inclusive or welcoming, religious-based, happy with new school, and the child is no longer attending the new school. Table 15 shows the most common themes with relevant details for each.

Table 15
School climate (engagement) in the new private school

Theme	Number of occurrences (percent)	Description	Relevant quotes
Inclusive or welcoming	5 (25.0%)	Respect for all students; welcoming environment.	<i>“Inclusion is amazing at his new school, he was welcome immediately; he was integrated and felt part of a group.”</i>
Religious-based	5 (25.0%)	The new private school is religious-based.	<i>“It’s a Christian Private school.”</i>
Happy with new school	4 (20.0%)	Parents commented positively about the new private school.	<i>“Great school-we are so grateful that Hope allows us to have our child there. She is thriving! The principal at [school name redacted for privacy] is incredible. Really runs that school impressively.”</i>
No longer attending new school	2 (10.0%)	The child is no longer attending the new private school.	<i>“She’s attending another public school this year.”</i>

A common theme was that the new private school was inclusive or welcoming toward parents and students. Respect for all students was mentioned more than once in parents’ responses. For example, one parent wrote: *“They focus on respect and being kind to one another.”* Another parent wrote that: *“[School name redacted for privacy] is amazing-all races get along and there is peace!”*

Another common theme was that parents chose a school that was religious-based. For example, a parent wrote: *“Beginning with a prayer and a Bible study each morning.”*

Finally, other themes that were only mentioned once were: 1) more difficult transition since transferred mid-year, 2) negative experience at new school, 3) school addresses any questions or concerns, and 4) zero tolerance for bullying or violence.

School Climate – Safety

Next, the survey asked parents an optional question about elaborating on their responses to the school climate safety survey items for the prior public school in an open-response question. Several themes emerged, including: School did nothing about the incident or did not take the incident seriously, school is unsafe, principal or administrators care about incidents, and lack of supervision. Table 16 provides the most frequently occurring themes with relevant details including the number of occurrences, a description of the theme, and relevant quotes.

Table 16

School climate (safety) in the former public school

Theme	Number of occurrences (percent)	Description	Relevant quotes
School did nothing about incident or did not take incident seriously	8 (34.8%)	School did not take action even when knowing about the incident.	<i>“Kids would get into fights and go to the next class, no discipline or consequences.”</i>
School unsafe	6 (26.1%)	School is not safe for children.	<i>“Fights were so common in the bathrooms at this school that my son was afraid to use them. He would hold it and only go before and after school.”</i>
Principal or administrators care about incidents	2 (8.7%)	Principals or administrators care; suggested the scholarship to parents.	<i>“My child's experience may not be reflective of the school climate. The principal [name redacted for privacy] seems like he truly understands and cares about the bullying and fighting issues. Not sure if his support staff are in this with him.”</i>
Lack of supervision	2 (8.7%)	Children are not adequately supervised at school.	<i>“While I was at the school to talk to the dean, a mother was there to report that her son's two front teeth had been broken during lunch when he rested his head on the table. No staff saw [it] occurring and had no idea that it had happened. The mother was furious.”</i>

The most frequent comments were regarding how the school responded to the incident; specifically, that the school did nothing about the incident or did not take the incident seriously. One parent commented: *“It is an EXTREMELY toxic school environment where staff has allowed students to do whatever without any repercussions for their actions.”* Another parent wrote: *“My child experienced the worst bullying by both students and staff at [school name redacted for privacy]. The dean and principal at the time of the incident did nothing to try and protect my child. They were more worried about covering the incident up.”*

Another frequent theme was that the prior public school that their child attended was unsafe. Comments included frequent police presence at the school, children fighting or bullied with no repercussions, or the school overlooked the incidents. For example, a parent wrote: *“So many things for safety can be improved; many things are overlooked and dismissed.”* Another parent said: *“I have known other children who have been bullied or gotten into fights without the teachers or principals knowing. They just feel too intimidated that they won’t report it.”*

Other themes that were only mentioned once were: 1) parents should be informed of the scholarship at the beginning of the school year, 2) principal or administrators are not well informed, 3) scholarship saved the child, 4) the school needs to enforce anti-bullying, and 4) parent/child wanted to avoid any repercussions or gossip around the incident.

Again, an optional open-ended question about safety in the new private school was asked of parents. The most common themes included: satisfied with new school, school does not tolerate violence or bullying, more supervision or control of students, negative experience at new school, the response from school has been better than prior school, and the new private school provides a safe environment. Table 17 provides each theme with relevant details.

Table 17

School climate (safety) in the new private school

Theme	Number of occurrences (percent)	Description	Relevant quotes
Satisfied with new school	3 (17.6%)	Parents reported satisfaction with their child’s new private school.	<i>“All children have been well educated to not only have a high grade but to have respect to each other and the teachers.”</i>
School does not tolerate violence or bullying	3 (17.6%)	The new school takes corrective or preventative action against any violence or bullying.	<i>“Fighting and major behaviors are not tolerated at this school. My daughter has complete confidence that problems will be handled by an adult.”</i>
More supervision or control of students	2 (11.8%)	The new school has more control or supervision of the students who attend.	<i>“It’s a very small school so the administration has better control of the students.”</i>
Negative experience at new school	2 (11.8%)	The child had a negative experience at their new private school.	<i>“It needs to be closed!”</i>
Response from school has been better	2 (11.8%)	School responds or takes action immediately following any problems.	<i>“Impressive job in teacher selection and getting on top of problems that come up immediately.”</i>
Safe environment	2 (11.8%)	The new school is a safe environment for students.	<i>“The school director has a meeting with you and your child upon enrollment. My son says everyone is treated the same there.”</i>

One of the most common themes was that parents were satisfied with their child’s new school. This theme includes positive comments that parents made when writing about the new private school. For example, a parent wrote: *“This school is a blessing for my son.”* Another common theme was that the new private school does not tolerate violence or bullying. For example, one parent stated: *“There is 0 tolerance for bullying.”*

Other themes mentioned only once included: 1) could not afford to keep child in private school this year, 2) good communication between school and parents, and 3) the new school still has bullying problems.

School Climate – Environment

Next, parents were asked to respond to an optional open-ended question after responding to the school climate environment items regarding their child’s prior public school. This question asked parents to elaborate on any of their responses to the school climate environment items for the former public school. Three main themes were found, including: No discipline or punishment for perpetrators, environment is negative/negative incidents occurred, and the school would not

share corrective action. Table 18 shows the themes found for the open-ended question asking parents to elaborate on their responses to the school climate – environment items in their child’s prior public school.

Table 18

School climate (environment) in the former public school

Theme	Number of occurrences (percent)	Description	Relevant quotes
No discipline or punishment for perpetrators	6 (50.0%)	School ignored the incident or did not discipline the perpetrator(s).	<i>“Why wasn’t this bad girl removed from the school?? She is the one causing the problems and she wasn’t even disciplined.”</i>
Environment is negative/negative incidents occurred	3 (25.0%)	The school environment is negative.	<i>“The environment is built like it’s a punishment for the kids.”</i>
School would not share corrective action	2 (16.7%)	The school would not share what action was taken after the incident(s).	<i>“Principal would not share discipline or corrective plan after my son’s attack.”</i>

The most frequently occurring theme was that there was no discipline or punishment for perpetrators. Parents stated that the school either did not punish the perpetrator(s) or that no action was taken. For example, a parent wrote: *“In the case of our child the bullies were not disciplined in any way.”* Additionally, another parent stated: *“Two of the girls involved in the bullying had family who worked in the school. So everything was pretty much swept under the rug.”*

An additional theme that was mentioned only once was: too many incidents to be able to enforce discipline.

Finally, parents were asked to respond to an optional open-ended question regarding the school climate - environment at the new private school. Only four themes were found that were each mentioned one time: good communication, the new school does not allow electronic devices, no bullying permitted, and the new school did not discipline a bully.

Participant Interviews

Four survey respondents were interviewed based on purposeful selection according to a combination of factors including demographic information and survey responses. The results of the qualitative analysis of the interviews are presented here. The information and themes from the interviews are organized according to the three evaluation questions.

What were the challenges and affordances that parents faced in applying for, obtaining, or using the Hope Scholarship?

The interviews revealed several themes about the challenges and affordances that parents faced in applying for, obtaining, or using the Hope Scholarship. These themes included: parent researched the scholarship, reasons for transferring to a private school, time to receive scholarship (once all paperwork was collected), school was not aware of scholarship or had incorrect information, school did/did not inform parents about the scholarship, school provided incorrect information for the Hope Scholarship application, and advice or potential issues with the scholarship.

In the majority of cases for the parents who were interviewed, the parents had to research information about the Hope Scholarship themselves to find information about it. In some cases, parents found out about the scholarship from searching online.

“I started researching online what I could do, because I started looking into private schools because, I mean, I couldn't really afford it. But, I can't leave my child in a situation where he's being hurt almost daily. And that's when I found that there was a new statute and that included the Hope Scholarship, and I did some research on it and contacted the Hope Scholarship people through chat. Talked to them, and found out, hey, this is something that might get your child qualified for because he's being bullied.”

In another case, the parent found out about the scholarship through a private school and that led to researching more about the scholarship.

“I had to go ahead and call the Hope Scholarship people and get more information. And with that, go online again. And then I went ahead and I know I have some legal, matter to her to tell her about, you know, by law, I have this right, and that right, and that right. And at that point, she went ahead and she called the school.”

One reason that parents had to do their own research was because the public school that their child was attending did not inform parents about the scholarship. One parent found out from a source other than the school, saying:

“We just wanted our kid out of school and we wanted Hope. So I contacted [pause] when we weren't getting anywhere and you know we're sitting in the emergency room and we found out about everything. I made some calls and contacted a pretty prominent attorney who works with these kind of educational issues in Florida, through a referral

from another family. And the attorney said I would love to help you. I will be glad to help you, it will be really expensive. But here's what I'm going to do instead. I'm going to give you a tip. There is something called the Hope Scholarship, and it was just put into [pause] active this school year, beginning of the school year, and you need to look into that. And I have since gone back and thanked her profusely, because no we didn't she didn't charge us for this or anything.”

At times, even when the school district told parents about the scholarship, it did not come from the school where the incident took place. The parents of one of the children had to call the school district who then informed them about the scholarship.

“So I call [school district redacted for privacy], and they told me about the Hope Scholarship. And for me, that was...I cannot express how grateful I am.”

Another theme that emerged in the application process was that the school provided incorrect information for the Hope Scholarship application. This often caused delays in processing the application until the correct information could be obtained and submitted.

“The other thing that was a hiccup and continues to be a hiccup with people trying to get Hope is the schools don't know what the FL ID number is. They think it's the student ID number. And so the scholarship applications are getting kicked back because the FL ID number isn't the student ID number. And the schools don't know that. So the parents have to go back in and say, I need the FL ID number. Then they have to find somebody in the building, who actually knows what that means and the MS ID number as well.”

An additional challenge that parents faced in applying for the Hope Scholarship was obtaining incident reports from the school. All of the interviewees expressed having challenges obtaining the incident reports from the school. For example, one parent described how the school refused to give the incident reports to her, saying:

“I never was able to get the incident to this day. I ended up, I basically had to tell the principal either you will give me the Hope Scholarship Notification Form or I will contact the school board Commissioner, [pause] because she refused. She kept telling me she has to check with legal before she could give me the incident reports.”

Another parent described a similar experience trying to obtain the incident reports from the school.

“So I'm calling them. I'm going to, I'm going back and forth to the school. And at this point, we're arguing, because they're not wanting to give me anything. No information. No written statement. I mean, because they didn't have anything. It was a he said, she said. And my daughter was even put into the office with the dean, who was a man, with no one there. So there were a couple of things. And then finally, I went ahead, and I even went to the office of the principal, and she tells me you and I both know what's going on, but I'm not going to give you any information. And they even asked for redacted copies and everything was no, no, no.”

Another parent described the experience with trying to obtain the incident reports, saying that the school refused because they did not consider what happened an incident.

“You need to have something that tells you that you report the incident and if something happens, you told them in advance. So they didn't want to give me any type of the report. Any type of incident report or nothing...They refused to give it to me because it was normal. That was middle school. That was not considered an incident. That's normal middle school. And that was kids being kids. According to the principal and the security, the police that was there.”

Lastly, parents provided their reasons for transferring their child to a private school. These included academic motivations; for example:

“Other than, like I said, because of the bullying and that the incidents that were occurring he was falling further and further behind. So the only other reason why we would have even maybe considered was to try to get him on his grade level and to a school where he's in a smaller class.”

Another parent expressed running out of practical options for putting their child in another school, saying:

“At that point, I was like, look, my only option is Florida Virtual or keep her at the homeschool or she has an IEP so she could go to another school but this closest school was at 95% capacity, but she couldn't get in there. So we just didn't have any options.”

Finally, one parent mentioned that they were interested in their child attending a private school even before the incident(s) took place.

“I wanted her in a private school before, just for the fact that I'm, we're Christian and I wanted her to have more of a Christian background, the education.”

A challenge that the interviewees faced when attempting to obtain the scholarship for their child was the public school's lack of knowledge about the requirements for obtaining the scholarship. Some parents were told that the incident their child experienced did not qualify them for the scholarship.

“And I even got told by the dean that this situation that my daughter was having does not qualify me for that scholarship. And I almost gave up...He, he just said basically, what you're explaining to me, that happened with [child's name redacted for privacy], with the verbal, and the texting, and the following, there wasn't actually touching and physical, does not on qualify, that does not, it's not defined as harassment.”

Another parent reported similarly, saying:

“So finally I sent, you know, provided a paper trail and sent an email with to several people that could have some influence to the principal and said, here's the statute. Here's what it says, highlighted, the parts of it that contradicted what they had told us,

which is then they needed some time to investigate to see if it was valid. And that we weren't eligible for the Hope Scholarship.”

Parents had mixed experiences with the time it took to receive the scholarship once all paperwork was collected. While one parent had to wait a few weeks to hear about whether their child received the scholarship, others were able to enroll right away in the new school.

“Yeah, we didn't, we did not hear back from Step Up for Students for, for what I felt like was a lengthy time. It was probably a couple of weeks or so before we heard back. Now since that time, I've helped another, there's been somebody else I've been involved in that to get the scholarship, and Step Up for Students got back to them in 48 hours. So I think that has changed.”

Another parent reported that it was a fast process to enroll their child in the new school, saying:

“And then I pulled them out that day when they said to them, and so that was on Wednesday, I know that was on a Thursday I believe. So I re-enroll, enrolled him in the new school on the following Monday.”

Finally, the interviewees were asked if they had any advice for other parents who were interested in applying for the scholarship. This advice was categorized as general advice or potential issues with the scholarship, including: a) advice for other parents, b) smooth application process, c) thankful for scholarship, d) need more awareness of anonymous hotline, e) issues with the Hope Scholarship application, and f) potential issues with the scholarship.

General advice for other parents included to go straight to the principal since they are the ones most likely to know about the scholarship, do not wait until your child is at their breaking point to leave, know about what information to fill out on the application, and educate yourself on the scholarship. For example, one parent said:

“Go right to the principal. The principals at the school seem to know this. Like they went to the meeting or got the memo about Hope Scholarship, but it hasn't been successfully communicated to the rest of the staff. Because when kids have problems, they don't go to the principal. It's usually to their guidance counselor is the first one to find out, or maybe a vice principal, or assistant principal or, you know, teachers, either. The principal's not the first one to find out, usually the last one. And so that would be my other advice to parents is go directly to the top.”

A few parents emphasized the importance of filling out the application correctly or it will be sent back. One of the issues that a parent had with the application is entering the specific date that the incident occurred, particularly if the incident was ongoing.

“Also, you have to put the specific time that the incident occurred or the form gets kicked back. That's what happened with us. And for us, it was sort of a, you know, there was a time of the fight, but the bullying that occurred went on over a period of I think

10 days so it was hard to nail down that time. And so you just, I mean, just kind of going to make up a time and put it in there. But ours got kicked back because we didn't have the exact time it occurred. Because it isn't really like bullying isn't a one-time incident. It's kind of this ongoing thing until you finally say enough is enough."

Some interviewees provided positive feedback about the scholarship process, saying that the application process was smooth and they are thankful for the scholarship. For example, one parent said:

"But I didn't have any options. You know the other charters have a waiting list. He was in the middle of the school year. I was devastated. And you know, I think that doing that for kids, like my son, that really wants to succeed, it's amazing. Amazing. It's like, I mean it's a blessing. I swear. For me, I mean what the government is doing for kids that are being bothered and intimidated, it is amazing. And we shouldn't remain quiet, you know? We shouldn't think is normal and that is part of the problem. They want us to think it's normal. And it is not normal. Nobody should push you or torture without your consent."

Another interviewee pointed out that more awareness of the anonymous hotline is needed, saying:

"And one of the things that we learned about that I was hoping would be changed at the school was the advertisement of the anonymous hotline for bullying or whatever, the one that goes right to the school department. We learned about that through the statute as well. And that would have been nice to have because we could have anonymously, because part of the problem is that kids don't want to report that they're being bullied because then the school says, well, who is it? And they say I don't want to tell you. And then they're like, okay, well then, you know, forget it. I mean it's you're just sort of a catch 22. Whereas the hotline allows them to, you know, maybe, give them another option, I guess."

What were the challenges and affordances that parents faced in addressing the incident at their child's former public school?

A recurring theme in all of the participants' interviews were challenges in addressing the incident(s) at their child's public school. One of the main reasons given for this is that the school did not take the threat seriously.

"I went in. I complained. I complained, and they pretty much just kind of shook it off, as if, you know, this is teenage girls and it's just, it's nothing at all. And just, you know, get over it."

Similarly, another parent explained:

“And I had to work really hard to get his attention, to get the proper attention. Let me put it that way. We went, first we went through guidance; we went to the assistant principal, an assistant principal who said, oh, you know, just basically blew it off and said, go back to class. Actually, before, I take that back, [inaudible] [child’s name redacted for privacy] did find out about the letters, the invitations being sent out so she, the day before the fight, she did go down to the assistant principal and the assistant principal said, go, go back to classes.”

Another parent reported that the school administration did not take the incident seriously, saying:

“Because this was the last incident. But they pushed him in the past. They tried to make him kiss with another student. Calling him gay. I mean, and he said, all those incidents were kids being kids.”

One parent described the mentality of the school, saying:

“And, they have this stigma that if someone’s not getting physically hit it’s not harassment.”

Next, some parents noted that the school did not take any action even after the incident was reported, including disciplining the perpetrator(s). One parent explained that nothing changed after reporting the incident, saying:

“So, um, I went ahead and I called the dean, let them know what’s happening. And he says, okay, we’re going to keep an eye on [student’s name redacted for privacy] and see what’s going on, you know, at the bus stop. And, so, a couple of more days passed. We’re like on week two and things are still going on. Nothing’s changed.”

Another parent said that the school investigated and found the perpetrator to not have bad intentions, therefore not undergoing discipline:

“So he didn’t, he didn’t have any consequence of his act because he didn’t have any bad intentions.”

Another way that the perpetrators avoided discipline was to act as a group. As explained by the parent:

“It was the same group of kids, but it was not the same kid. Because when I read, every time I reported something...go to talk to the principal and all that. So they were smart enough to change the kids that were bothering him, but it was the same group of kids.”

Parents also expressed frustration at the school’s lack of communication regarding the incident or disciplinary action taken. One parent said:

“The school never made me aware of it. My son, let me know two days after it happened because he said he had a really bad headache. And so when I asked the school what

happened or what they were going to do about it and about this issue, they refused to give me any information or let me know if they were going to do anything about it. They, I mean, they just completely shut me out; wouldn't do anything."

Regarding communication about disciplinary action, another parent said:

"I never could get any information on if they were disciplined, going to discipline the other children or anything."

Finally, another major challenge that parents reported was that the school did not take notes or record complaints about the incident(s).

"And it was a back and forth process and there was no need for that. There was nothing written and I know that for a fact, when anyone calls, cries for any kind of harassment, it has to go through everyone from the counselor, the dean, the principal, the superintendent, and that was never done."

Another parent expressed similar thoughts, saying:

"They didn't document anything that I've said. They didn't document [child's name redacted for privacy] with the dean. Nothing was written."

Although not necessarily effective, some parents reported that action was taken at their child's former school to address the incident(s). One parent stated that:

"The parents of the girls who were harassing my daughter had to come in and sign statements because I know for a fact, those girls were also bullying and harassing a lot of other girls."

Another parent said:

"I'm not sure, I know the principal is not there anymore, and I'm sure because of what happened with me, because I spoke to corporate. They changed the principal and I was worried about the rest of the students."

What are parents' perceptions of the school climate of their child's former public school and their child's new private school?

One of the main themes that emerged from the interviews was that the prior public school provided an unsafe environment and in general had a poor school climate. Parents expressed that their child was afraid to go back to school and it was not a comfortable environment to be at. For example, a parent described the negative school climate by saying:

"Um, well, the whole year he said that he didn't feel comfortable at school. He was picked on, off and on, and nothing was ever done to rectify that either. The climate, I felt was very poor. Almost like, I kind of felt like it was thinking of a, I know, poor, poor

description, but like a slaughterhouse. They just push them and push them out. I mean, they're just trying to get those kids to the FSA test and out."

Other parents expressed that their child did not want to return to the school. One parent said:

"So I wanted another option. I was desperate. And you know it was in the middle of the school year, because it was January. And I have my suitcase, and I was crying in the car and, and [child's name redacted for privacy] is like, please mama. I don't want to go back to that school."

Another parent said:

"And it just got to the point where my son was scared to go to school."

Another reason that the interviewees said contributed to the poor school climate at the prior public schools was that the schools were not effective at preventing the bullying/incidents. Several parents explained this in the interviews, with one saying:

"And that was for eighth grade. I put her back in the school, and, I kid you not, that within the first week of her going to school, she already had issues with the same girls..."

Another parent explained that the school attempted to address the behaviors, but that their methods were unsuccessful, saying:

"But like I said, we didn't know that there, we kept being reassured it was going to be taken care of. You know, oh well you know they have mediation that they do at the schools and that just doesn't really appeal to the psychology of bullying you know they say, it's, it's a lovely idea. But, so we had been through that. So yeah, there were other incidents. There are others they said gone on and on and on."

Similarly, another parent pointed out the school's unsuccessful attempt to address the bullying:

"And she just went ahead as she pointed at the no harassment and no bullying sign on the wall and said, oh, we do talk about the no bullying. And I go, oh, just the poster? Is that all you have there? And I'm like, okay, good luck with that."

Some parents also explained that their child's learning was impacted at the prior public school that their child attended. For example, one parent said:

"So what happened was that, honestly, I, I didn't know what to do. I mean, the house was stressful. Her grades were down. You know, you think about a child going to college and, you know, what are we going to be doing?"

The type of incidents that happened to the children of the interviewees included physical attack, harassment/threat/intimidation, racial/ethnic/sexual orientation abuse, verbal abuse, and

cyberbullying. The most commonly reported incident was physical attack. As one parent explained:

“Um, at the time, my son was a second grader, and a fifth grader, I believe it was in lunch, I'm not sure, slammed my son's head against a concrete block wall so hard that he said it made him dizzy and he had to sit down because he couldn't keep his bearings.”

Another parent reported that the physical attack was because of the school's lack of supervision.

“So they spent time in the hallway and I realized there was no supervision. So some incidents start to happen. You know, like keep pushing him.”

Another theme was that the victim was disciplined or not treated fairly. In at least one instance, a parent reported that their child was punished because of defending himself from the attack. The parent said:

“When he finally reacted to the kids and PE cornering him and, you know, physically assaulting him and I told him. I said, look, if you have nowhere to go, you fight back. If they're hitting you, you fight back. And when he gave another kid a black eye, because he wouldn't stop hitting him, that's [when] my son got disciplined. And that was the end. I was done with it.”

Another parent expressed becoming frustrated with the school's response to the incident, explaining that their child was the one being taken out of class. The parent said:

“As I am driving to my work, I am like, why is my kid in the office while the other kid is in the class? Of course he's going to know my kid was the one to [laughs] to say that it was a problem with him, you know? So it didn't make sense to me.”

Finally, interviewees had several positive things to say about the new private school, falling into the categories of: academic improvements, improved communication, better fit for scholarship recipients, smaller school or class size, zero tolerance for bullying, and more supervision. One parent explained the contrast in her child's academic progress at the new school, saying:

“You know, whenever he left because of all the issues he was constantly in the office. He was behind his grade level in reading and he's now in third grade, when he started, he was reading on a first grade level. He's reading on a fifth grade level now. They take the time to make sure each student is comfortable and they know what they need to be doing and how to continue advancing. It's the best experience I could have ever hoped for. You know, my son is comfortable at school. He's happy. He enjoys his work.”

Parents also reported some negative issues regarding the new private school. These included a lack of athletics, a lack of events like homecoming or prom, and an older building without the newer technology. As one parent explained:

“And then this year, she's played basketball all her life, and this year, she said, I don't want to play. So yeah, that's a bummer. So she isn't able to experience athletics, you know, homecoming, prom, all of those things and just, from a social experience from like from a social development experience, I mean, as great as this school is, she's only being exposed to 30 other kids. And so it's sort of prohibiting her social and emotional growth as it relates to being in the real world, as opposed to like a little bubble. But at least she's safe. So that was, that was better.”

Discussion and Conclusions

The goal of this evaluation was to collect information on parents' satisfaction and opinions regarding their experiences with the Hope Scholarship application process, the incident that led to accepting a scholarship, and the school climate at their child's former public school and new private school.

Parents whose child experienced a qualifying incident in a K-12 public school setting are eligible to apply for the Hope Scholarship. To apply, parents must fill out the online Hope Scholarship application as well as submit a completed Hope Scholarship Notification Form that is completed by the principal or his/her designee. The results of this evaluation found that overall, parents reported that applying for the Hope Scholarship was an easy process and most parents did not face any challenges when applying. Additionally, most parents reported that the application was easy to understand. Finally, most parents reported that they knew who to ask if they had questions about the application and if they had questions they were usually answered in a timely manner.

Most parents responded that they did not experience any problems receiving the Hope Notification Form and that they were informed of the Hope Scholarship in a timely manner. However, most parents also reported that they either found out about the Hope Scholarship program from another source not affiliated with the school or they found out about it on their own. This is in contrast to the statute which requires the principal or his/her designee to notify the parent of the Hope Scholarship program upon conclusion of the investigation or within 15 days after the incident was reported (1002.40(6)(a), F.S.).

Regarding the time spent on the application, most parents agreed that the application process did not take too long. Furthermore, most parents agreed that they did not have to push to move the application process forward. The results also showed that most parents found a new school for their child fairly easily and did not experience challenges in finding a new school.

As stated in the 2019 Florida Statutes, 1002.40(6)(a), the school principal or designee must provide a copy of the report to the parent and investigate the incident to determine if it must be reported. Furthermore, upon conclusion of the investigation or within 15 days after the incident was reported, the school district must notify the parent of the Hope Scholarship program. Despite this requirement, results of this evaluation found that overall parents reported that the incident was handled poorly by the school. Most of the parents surveyed either disagreed or strongly disagreed that they were provided with information about their options following the report of the incident. Parents also reported issues receiving the Hope Scholarship Notification Form from the school; in some cases even after asking the school to provide it to them. Furthermore, most parents reported that the incident was not investigated in a timely manner nor was the school proactive about investigating the incident.

An issue that could be a contributing factor to incident reporting was that the school did not take the incident(s) seriously, as most parents either disagreed or strongly disagreed that the incident was taken seriously by the public school. Another potentially contributing factor that

most parents reported was that the school did not have a process in place to handle an investigation of the incident. Along those lines, most parents disagreed or strongly disagreed that reporting the incident to the school was an easy process.

However, even before the incident(s) took place, most parents reported that they were worried about safety at their child's school. Even after the incident(s) were reported to the school, most parents stated that they disagreed or strongly disagreed that steps have been taken by the school to prevent further incidents from happening. Finally, most parents also reported that they were not kept informed about further steps following the report of the incident.

In terms of the type of incident(s) that led parents to apply for the Hope Scholarship, physical attack was cited most frequently. This was followed by bullying, verbal abuse, threats or intimidation, bullied due to race or ethnicity, sexual offense, destruction or theft of personal belongings, ostracization from peers, cyberbullying, and bullied due to sexual orientation. Additionally, parents often cited more than one of these incidents occurred and that the incidents were ongoing. Most parents reported that the incidents involved two to five students.

Research has shown the benefits of a positive school climate on a myriad of student and school outcomes (Thapa et al., 2013). Not surprisingly, the results of our evaluation find that parents reported an overall negative school climate at their child's prior public school. Regarding the three school climate domains of Engagement, Safety, and Environment, parents rated them low on each with a range of 1.69 to 2.01 out of 4.00. Parents rated the Engagement domain of school climate the lowest for their child's former public school. The Engagement domain covers items pertaining to a sense of belonging at the school as well as how well the school communicates about respecting the diversity of others, including different cultures, ethnicity, identity, or sexual orientation. Although rated higher than the Engagement domain, parents rated the Safety domain of school climate at their child's prior school low. The Safety domain includes items pertaining to conflict between students at the school, how well the school staff cares about the students, the issues of bullying and cyberbullying, and how well the school takes measures to ensure the safety of students. Finally, parents rated the Environment domain of their child's prior school climate the highest of the three domains, although still low overall. The Environment items cover issues relating to fairness in rules and discipline as well as communication of policies and procedures.

When parents were asked to rate their perceptions of the school climate at their child's new private school, the ratings were overall positive, ranging from 3.45 to 3.66 out of 4.00. Parents rated the Safety domain of school climate the highest at their child's new school, while the Engagement domain was rated the lowest.

Parents' overall school climate ratings for the new private school were found to be significantly higher than ratings for the prior public school. Significant differences were found for each of the three school climate domains, where the new private school was rated significantly higher on each domain than the former public school. Overall, this indicates that

parents perceived an improvement in school climate from their prior to their new choice of school.

Finally, similar trends were found when examining the prior and new school climate ratings across subgroups, including gender, race/ethnicity, and grade level. Finding no differences in school climate ratings, particularly by race/ethnicity, is surprising due to the fact that other research shows that bullying can occur more often against students who are of different races/ethnicities or sexual orientations (Musu-Gillette, Zhang, Wang, Zhang, & Oudekerk, 2017; U.S. Department of Education, 2015). Given that this subscale covers issues like acceptance and communication about diversity, it would not have been surprising to see differences in the school climate – Engagement domain. It may be that the sample is too small to pick up these differences in this evaluation.

There are several limitations that should be noted when interpreting the results. One limitation is that only the parents were surveyed, which leaves out the perspectives of the students who experienced the incident(s) as well as school staff and administrators at the child's former public school. Additionally, the sample did not include parents of students who experienced a qualifying incident but chose not to attend a private school using the Hope Scholarship. Finally, although the response rate is considered quite high for social science research, it is possible that results could differ if all 122 parents responded to the survey. These limitations notwithstanding, this study is the first to report on the outcomes of the first year of the Hope Scholarship program for 2018-19.

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Appendix

Scale Reliabilities

Reliability coefficients for the school climate scales as well as the overall scale are provided in the following table. Reliability is reported using the standard Cronbach's α .

Appendix Table 1

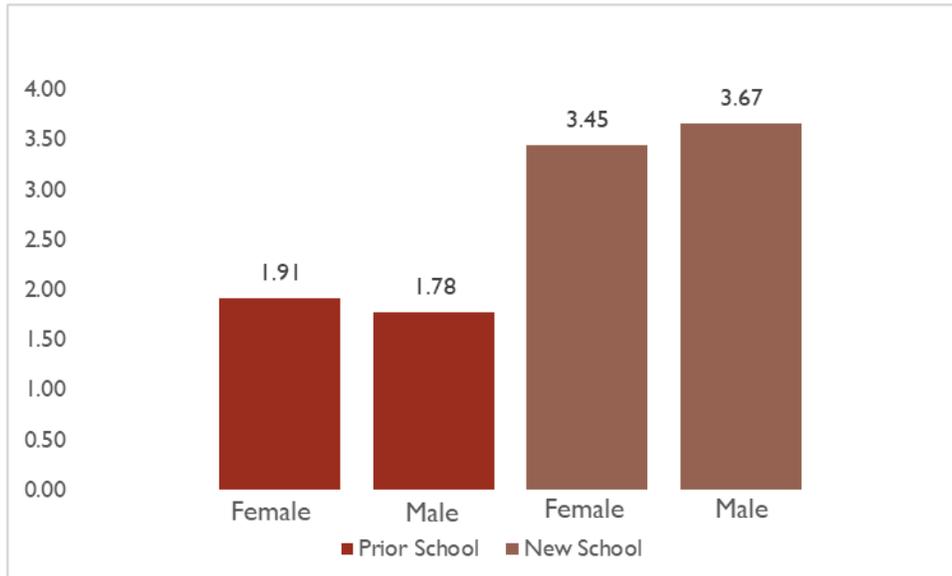
Reliability for the School Climate Survey

	Item <i>N</i>	Reliability	
		Prior school	New school
Engagement	4	0.927	0.883
Safety	7	0.739	0.885
Environment	3	0.685	0.944
Overall	14	0.840	0.952

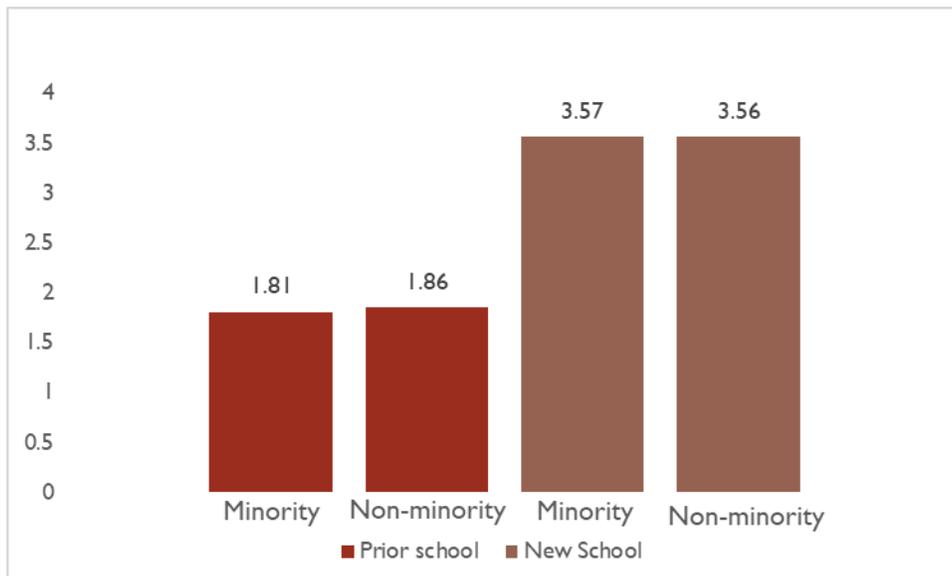
Note. Cronbach's α is reported to indicate scale reliability.
Scale: 1 (*strongly agree*) to 4 (*strongly disagree*).

Subgroup Differences on the School Climate Scales

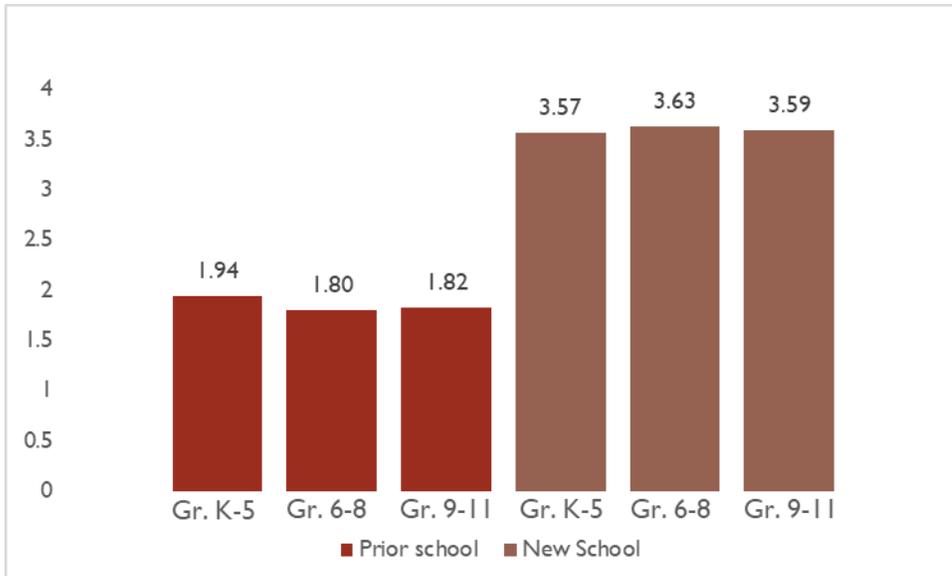
Comparison of the mean scores across subgroups for gender, race/ethnicity, and grade level followed the same patterns as seen with the larger group. That is, students of both genders, all race/ethnicities, and all grade levels showed lower mean scores on the overall school climate scale for the prior school and higher mean scores on the overall school climate scale for the new school.



Appendix Figure 1. Gender Subgroup Differences on the Overall School Climate Scale



Appendix Figure 2. Racial/ethnic Subgroup Differences on the Overall School Climate Scale



Appendix Figure 3. Grade Level Subgroup Differences on the Overall School Climate Scale