Understanding Satisfaction with Schools: The Role of Expectations

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ABSTRACT

Using a nationally representative survey, this article examines how citizen satisfaction with one public institution, public schools, is shaped by normative expectations regarding what goals schools ought to pursue. We expand extant literature on the role of expectations in shaping satisfaction, which typically focuses on performance expectations, by exploring goal expectations. Using a constant sum allocation exercise, we find that individuals typically express one of two distinct preferences for what goals schools ought to pursue—an academic focus versus a well-rounded focus. We then show that individuals holding these different goal expectations express different levels of satisfaction when viewing the same school performance data. Our results suggest that policies disproportionately focusing on a single goal or expectation may alter public satisfaction, which could negatively influence ongoing support.

INTRODUCTION

Many express concerns about the low level of satisfaction citizens report for public institutions, and low satisfaction is especially acute in public education (Jacobsen 2009; Loveless 1997; Newton and Norris 2000; Van Ryzin et al. 2004). In 2013, only 41% of respondents reported that they were “satisfied” with the quality of education students receive in kindergarten through 12th grade in the United States (Gallup 2013). As our largest public institution, schools require broad financial and political support, and low satisfaction may threaten the needed support for ongoing reforms and improvements. Although the lack of public support for public education today concerns onlookers (Howell et al. 2008), little empirical work investigates satisfaction with public education more deeply to understand how citizens arrive at their assessments.

As recent work on public views of public services documents, expectations are key to understanding satisfaction (James 2009; Morgeson 2013; Poister and Thomas 2011; Roch and Poister 2006; Van Ryzin 2004a, 2007, 2013). However, this extant research often characterizes expectations as the frequency or proportion of “excellent” services expected (James 2009, 2011). These are performance expectations. Yet
for complex public organizations, like public schools, where the goals are multiple and sometimes even competing (Jacobsen 2009; Rothstein et al. 2008), expectations may vary not only by the level of performance expected by citizens but also by the goals citizens expect the institution to accomplish. We call these goal expectations. In education, for example, some parents and members of the public may want schools to focus almost exclusively on the development of academic skills, whereas others may expect the development of arts appreciation and citizenship skills to be treated as equally important as academics (Jacobsen 2009). Due to the complex set of goals many public institutions are expected to accomplish, we hypothesize that goal expectations may also significantly shape satisfaction.

Using a nationally representative survey, this article examines how citizen satisfaction with one public institution, public schools, is shaped by normative expectations regarding what goals schools ought to pursue. We review extant literature on satisfaction paying particular attention to ways in which expectations were conceptualized. Then we outline expectations for public education historically to understand how the expected goals for education may vary across citizens. We organize this around two prevailing education priorities: a heavy emphasis on academic performance (what we label “strong academics”) and “well-rounded” expectations, or a balance between academics, the arts, and noncognitive skills like citizenship and community responsibility. We then examine whether the public expresses these different goal expectations using a constant sum allocation exercise. Finally, using these different goal expectations, we examine variation in satisfaction with the performance of three fictitious schools. To conclude, we discuss the implications for our findings for policy makers and leaders of public institutions like public education.

BACKGROUND

Borrowing from extensive research on customer satisfaction (Johnson et al. 1996; Oliver 1980; Parasuraman et al. 1988), public administration scholars examine how satisfaction shapes commitments to and perceptions of public institutions (Morgeson 2013; Roch and Poister 2006; Van Ryzin 2004b, 2007, 2013). We examine work that uses the expectancy disconfirmation theory to explain satisfaction with institutions. In our review of extant research, we pay special attention to the conceptualization of expectations.

Conceptualizing Satisfaction and Expectations

Many of today’s education policies view declining satisfaction as proof of poor institutional performance, ignoring the role expectations may play. This simplified conception of satisfaction, sometimes referred to as the institutional performance model, assumes public institutions that perform well are likely to generate increased satisfaction, whereas poorly performing institutions will foster dissatisfaction (Newton and Norris 2000). An asymmetry of information becomes the culprit should dissatisfaction remain even though institutions perform well (Kelly 2002). Working from this point of view, education policy makers and researchers today focus their policy efforts...
on the need to publicize school performance data to more accurately inform public perception of school quality (Chingos et al. 2012; No Child Left Behind 2002), while ignoring the important role that expectations play in shaping satisfaction with school performance.

In contrast to the institutional performance satisfaction model underlying many education policies today, decades of marketing and consumer satisfaction research utilize expectancy disconfirmation theory, which includes expectations as a key component to satisfaction (Anderson 1973; Morgeson 2013; Oliver 1980; Riccucci et al. 2013; Van Ryzin 2004a, 2013). Individuals “create a frame of reference about which one makes a comparative judgment” (Oliver 1980, 460). This frame of reference, or one’s expectation, is then used to evaluate experiences with a good or service. Expectations are exogenous to the experience with a good or service and come from “prior experience, word of mouth, or communications such as advertising and the media” (Van Ryzin 2006, 600). When experiences do not meet one’s expectations, the negative gap (or negative disconfirmation) leads to dissatisfaction whereas individuals report higher levels of satisfaction if experiences exceed expectations (a positive disconfirmation).

As this literature suggests, satisfaction is a complex interaction between one’s expectations of a particular good or service and one’s experiences with the actual good or service (Oliver 1980). To illustrate how these two factors interact, imagine a common experience: two friends decide to try a new restaurant. Friend 1 had the restaurant recommended by another patron who described her meal as “the best meal she had ever had.” This information set high expectations for Friend 1. On the other hand, Friend 2 had not heard anything about the new restaurant in town, but the décor reminded her of a place where she had eaten previously where she did not enjoy her meal. Unlike Friend 1, her expectations for the dining experience were quite low. Both friends order the same chef’s special and they dine together. At the end of the meal, Friend 2 raves about the new restaurant, whereas Friend 1 leaves disappointed. Even though both friends ostensibly shared the same experience (same food, service, ambiance, etc.), their resulting satisfaction with the new restaurant differed significantly due to prior expectations. Although Friend 1’s high hopes were not met, thus leaving her dissatisfied, Friend 2 was satisfied because her meal exceeded her initial low expectations. Consumer behavior and repatronage literature has a long history examining the role of expectations (Oliver, 1980), and research in the field of public administration and management has applied this theory to citizen satisfaction with government services (Morgeson 2013; Roch and Poister 2006; Van Ryzin 2004b, 2013; Van Ryzin et al. 2004).

Extant research in public administration typically emphasizes performance expectations or the frequency with which individuals expect “excellent” performance from their institution or service (James 2009). However, rarely are public institutions one dimensional (Jung 2013; Moynihan et al. 2011; Smith 1995; Swindell and Kelly 2000). Often, institutions are expected to pursue multiple goals, and thus, research on expectations requires examining how individuals prioritize the multiple dimensions of the institution of service. These goal expectations are less considered in the public administration literature, but marketing and psychology scholars have documented the role these types of expectations play in shaping satisfaction (Garbarino and Johnson 2001).
To examine performance expectations, James (2009) asks respondents “what proportion of services should be of ‘excellent’ quality?” In a slight variation, James (2011) uses a five-point scale to assess normative expectations for performance quality taking into account the amount of other resources available, where a 5 connotes “should be excellent all the time” and a 1 “should never be excellent.” Although these examples consider the performance expectations individuals hold, it does not consider in which areas individuals expect excellent performance. Poister and Thomas (2011) in their study of motorists’ satisfaction with state highways did ask respondents to consider three dimensions of highway quality: condition and ride quality, safety, and traffic flow. This work clearly considers the multiple goals that individuals hold for their public highway system. When analyzing their data, however, the authors consider each goal expectation separately. Yet it is likely that individuals hold different weighted combinations for these three goals. Some motorists may, because of their smooth riding car and long commute, expect high levels of safety and little congestion while expecting less from the ride quality. Others, who have short commutes, may hold high expectations for safety and ride quality but express less concern for congestion levels. Ignoring different goals of a public institution or service or by considering them only in isolation may result in misinterpretation the underlying cause for declining satisfaction.

Research in marketing and psychology further suggests that considering the goals one expects a public service or institution to offer is key to understanding satisfaction. For example, work by Garbarino and Johnson (2001) explores how the reasons, or goals, customers of a NYC theatre attended a performance shaped their satisfaction level with their theatre experience. Some customers attend for cultural enrichment, whereas others were seeking relaxation. Garbarino and Johnson find that customers whose goals matched the organization’s orientation gave their theatre experience a higher evaluation and were more likely to attend. Similarly, in work by Orsingher and colleagues (2011), findings show goal expectations play an important role in determining the satisfaction level expressed by customers of a hotel. The authors characterize some customers as “socializers,” or being driven by a focus on well-being, whereas they label others as “achievers” who seek efficiency in their experience. They find that these goal expectations significantly influence customer satisfaction evaluations of their stay in the hotel.

Public education provides an ideal context to study the role of goal expectations in public institutions because there are multiple, and at times, competing goals. Previous studies on parental school choice already point to ways that parents vary in what they seek in a new school for their child (Kleitz et al. 2000; Schneider et al. 2000). Further, education historians document shifts in education goals across US history, indicating that variation in goal expectations likely exist amongst the public for their public schools (Labaree 1997). Nationally representative survey data further support differing goals amongst the public for education (Jacobsen 2009).

### Educational Expectations

There is a long history of competing views on the expected goals of American public education (Labaree 1997; Rothstein et al. 2008). Although we expect our schools to
accomplish many goals, two competing views of schooling emerge throughout history: the traditional or “strong academics” model and the progressive or “well-rounded” model of education. Throughout the history of public education in the United States, each model of schooling emerges at specific times (Rothstein et al. 2008). Further, key historical events often spur public education to shift between these competing views. Below we describe these two expectations for schooling in greater detail and provide a few historical examples to further characterize each goal category.

**Strong Academic Expectations for Public Education**

The phrase traditional schooling, or classical education, refers to an emphasis on academic rigor, high standards, and a focus on core academic subjects such as reading, writing, mathematics, and science (Reese 2005). Fundamental to the endorsement of the strong academics philosophy is the belief that the educational system should produce students with predictable and reliable academic knowledge upon their exit (Hirsch 1996; Labaree 2010; Reese 2005). American schools, originally serving just a small segment of the population, began with this focus on academics alone. As society rapidly changed through immigration and urbanization in the late 19th century, this focus on academics alone fell out of favor (Cohen and Moffitt 2009; Labaree 2010; Reese 2005). A push for academic rigor again emerged following the Soviet launch of Sputnik in 1957 (Cohen and Moffitt 2009; Reese 2005). This Soviet accomplishment raised alarm amongst US citizens who feared that public education had strayed too far from preparing students with strong math and science skills. As a result, expectations for schooling shifted (Cohen and Moffitt 2009; Labaree 2010; Reese 2005; Vinovskis 2009). During this time, schools across the country shifted their curricular focus to increase math, science, and technology in efforts to enhance rigor and win the Cold War.

In 1983, *A Nation At Risk* again refocused the American public on the need to improve the academic performance of students in order to compete globally (Reese 2005; Vinovskis 2009). The report famously states, “the educational foundations of our society are presently being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a Nation and a people” (National Commission on Excellence in Education 1983). The report stressed the lackluster state of American public education and again raised fears that American students’ academic performance was falling behind that of other countries. As a result, expectations for American public education again emphasized the need for schools to spend more time on academic content and develop high standards for these areas.

The No Child Left Behind Act (2001) is the most recent emphasis on strong academic goals. By requiring that all students in grades 3 through 8 be tested annually in reading and mathematics and tying academic test outcomes to federal funds, NCLB shifted the curricular focus of schools across the country in dramatic ways (Sunderman and Kim 2007). In the decade since NCLB’s passage, schools increased the amount of time spent on reading and mathematics instruction (Ravitch 2010; Zhao 2009) with 62% of districts reporting that they increased time for math and/or English Language Arts (ELA) in elementary schools since 2001 (McMurrer 2007). Consequently, many schools reduced or entirely eliminated courses such as music and the arts (Ravitch 2010; Zhao 2009). Thus, we currently find ourselves in an era where schools pursue academic goals almost exclusively.
Well-Rounded Expectations for Public Education

In contrast to the academic focus discussed above, others express a desire to see public education develop knowledge and skills across a wider range of domains, including the arts, vocational skills, and noncognitive (social and emotional) goals. We use the term “well rounded” to refer to this set of expectations. Emphasis on a broad range of knowledge and skills emerged as the United States entered the 20th century. Leading education scholars became critical of what they saw as a rigid public education system solely focused on academic content. Led by John Dewey, this group called for a “new education” that moved beyond merely transferring academic content to the next generation (Dewey 1902, 1916; Reese 2005). Progressive education, as the movement came to be called, emphasized a child-centered curriculum that de-emphasized lecturing and memorization and incorporated deeper exploration of nonacademic areas. In particular, this era stressed building citizens as many immigrant families enrolled their children in public schools (Labaree 1997). Throughout the early 20th century, American public education moved away from traditional schooling and toward a curriculum that included a wider variety of courses, less standardization, and more concern for the social needs of children (Powell et al. 1985).

Expecting schools to broadly focus on a child’s development again emerged in the 1960s and 1970s as the country struggled to make sense of assassinations, war, and racial integration. As a result, many education leaders expanded curricula to include a more diverse set of offerings including courses in philosophy, current events, and a wider breadth of literature (Hirsch 1996; Labaree 1997). For example, the 1960s saw an effort for open classrooms, alternative high schools, and the introduction of electives (Labaree 1997; Reese 2005). These efforts viewed public education as more than simply academic preparation and called for the development of a wider range of skills and knowledge.

Although not an exhaustive account of shifting goals for public education, these few examples demonstrate that US education often wavers between two competing goals for public education: focusing heavily on academic content versus developing well-rounded individuals with skills and knowledge across a range of domains. At no time has there been universal agreement. In fact, public opinion polls frequently demonstrate that citizens hold a mix of goals for public education. Although current educational policies focus almost exclusively on academic goals, the public continues to express the desire to see a range of goals pursued by public education. For example, when asking a nationally representative sample of adults in the United States to allocate 100 possible points among eight common goals, the public places the greatest emphasis on academic skills (basic and critical thinking), but not to the degree where academics outweighs all other areas combined; on average, respondents allocate about 19 points to basic academic skills and 15 points to more advanced academic skills including problem solving and critical thinking. Thus, the public places only about one third of their emphasis on academic-related educational goals. Overall, as these results demonstrate, the public desires a range of goals pursued (Rothstein et al. 2008). However, when analyzing for individual differences, this study further demonstrates a range of goal expectations for public education by finding that some respondents place all their emphasis (100%) on basic academic skills, whereas others actually place no emphasis (0%) in the basic academic category.
In a more recent study by the Fordham Foundation and focusing only on parents, Zeehandelaar and Winkler (2013) find that the “must have” list did not vary much across parents; all parents wanted schools to have a strong core curriculum that developed students’ ability to communicate (written and verbal) and think critically. However, once these basics were satisfied, they identify “parents who prioritized individual school attributes of student goals that most other parents viewed as less important. From this, six market niches surfaced” (5). The market niches included parents who prioritized: (1) workplace preparation, (2) citizenship and democracy, (3) high test scores, (4) multicultural experiences, (5) arts and music, and (6) acceptance at a “top-tier college.” Their analysis found that only 23% of parents ranked a focus on high-test scores as most important. Thus, as these recent survey results show, goal preferences in education vary a good deal and, therefore, likely influence satisfaction levels with public education performance.

**DATA AND METHODS**

To explore whether distinct goal expectations groups emerge and, if so, how these normative goal expectations influence satisfaction with school performance, we use data from a population-based survey (Mutz 2011) fielded by Knowledge Networks. Their KnowledgePanel™ is the only nationally representative online panel recruited via both random digit dialing and address-based sampling. Such population-based survey experiments enable researchers to test theories “on samples that are representative of the populations to which they are said to apply,” thereby providing stronger external validity (Mutz 2011, 3).

Respondents were randomly drawn from the Knowledge Networks panel. In total, 1,111 panelists of the 1,833 invited participated. This represents a final stage response rate of 60.6%. The sample is representative of the larger US population and we utilize postsurvey weights to correct for minor imbalances (For more detailed information, see Supplementary Materials A for our sample comparison to the December 2011 Current Population Survey).

**Survey Instrument**

The survey unfolded in two parts. First, a constant sum allocation exercise assessed respondents’ goal expectations. Then, each respondent viewed school performance data for three fictitious schools. The data presented test our hypothesis that goal expectations shape satisfaction with the schools’ performance. Below we further describe this manipulation. After viewing data about each school, respondents indicated their satisfaction with the school’s performance.

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1 In December 2011, The GfK Group (Gesellschaft für Konsumforschung—Society for Consumer Research) acquired Knowledge Networks and now goes by GfK KN.

2 KnowledgePanel™ respondents are recruited to join the panel through a random-digit-dial technique, which has a recruitment rate of 15.2%. To calculate the cumulative response rate, the final stage response rate must be multiplied by the recruitment response rate. Thus, the cumulative response rate for this study is 9.2%.
Assessing Normative Goal Expectations

To assess an individual’s goal expectations for public education, respondents completed a constant sum allocation exercise where they divided 10 points across three educational goals: academic skills, the arts, and citizenship and community responsibility. These goals were presented in random order to prevent bias. Unlike typical ratings or rankings scales, constant sum exercises provide a relative importance rating for each goal (Krosnick and Alwin 1988). Because school administrators and policy makers must make trade-offs on what material ought to be covered and which skills ought to be developed due to time and budgetary constraints, this method enables us to capture more accurately how respondents expect school leaders and policy makers to make these trade-offs (Netzer and Srinivasan 2011). Although we recognize that these are not the only three goals for public education, this diverse set of goals allowed us to capture different goal expectations based on our historical review without overburdening respondents with an exhaustive list of education goals.

Providing Experiences with School Performance Data

Respondents viewed school performance data in the same three areas (academics, arts, and citizenship) for three schools (strong performance, average performance, and weak performance) in random order. We hypothesize that those who expect schools to pursue academics exclusively will heavily focus on only the academic performance data. Further, we anticipate that those who expect schools to pursue a more well-rounded set of goals will consider a school’s performance data across the three goal categories to inform his/her satisfaction level. We test these hypotheses by providing academic performance data that are consistently lower than the performance data for citizenship and the arts. For example, in our strong school, an “A” grade was assigned to the arts and citizenship goals, but a “B” grade was assigned to the academics category. For all three schools (strong, average, and weak), the academic performance was always one “unit” below the performance of arts and citizenship. (See supplementary material B for an example of this.)

Assessing Satisfaction with School Performance

After viewing a school’s data, respondents answered three questions modeled on the American Customer Satisfaction Index (ACSI) (Fornell et al. 1996; see also http://www.theacsi.org/). Unlike ACSI questions, we use a seven-point rating scale to measure satisfaction. Research finds that respondents are better able to discriminate consistently between five and nine items with seven being the most often recommended number of points in a scale (Alwin and Krosnick 1991; Schaeffer and Presser 2003). Thus, we slightly modified the scale used by previous researchers.

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3 In order to ensure ecological validity, the data used in this survey were modeled on existing school report cards. However, school performance data vary in format across states. Therefore, four different data formats were used, and respondents were assigned randomly to a data format condition. The four conditions presented data as a letter grade, performance index, percent meeting goal, and performance rating. Because the four conditions behaved in the same manner, we combine the conditions here to simplify the analysis and presentation of results. For more detail regarding the way format influenced perception of school quality, see Jacobsen et al. (forthcoming).
To assess satisfaction, surveys asked respondents (1) to assess overall performance, (2) to evaluate whether the school meets their expectations, and (3) to consider how the school compares to their ideal school (See Supplemental Material B for question wording and survey excerpt). As Van Ryzin (2004b) notes, “the rationale for these three indicators relies on the notion that an overall satisfaction judgment depends not just on a sensed degree of satisfaction but on a process of comparison to certain referents, with the consumers’ prior expectations and their ideals identified as the most important and universal referents” (15). Thus, when examining measures of overall satisfaction, Van Ryzin (2004b) concludes that compared with other single- and multi-item satisfaction measures, this trio of questions provides the strongest construct validity and has very good internal and retest reliability. Although ACSI measures are common in studies of consumer satisfaction and purchasing behavior, more recent public administration research also uses these measures to understand public satisfaction with and support for public services (Van Ryzin 2004a, 2004b; Van Ryzin et al. 2004). Because internal consistency (as measured by Cronbach’s alpha) for the set of three satisfaction items was 0.9 or higher for each school, we computed a simple average by combining the responses to the three questions discussed above for each school.4

**Empirical Strategy**

**Examining Goal Expectations Groups**

To explore whether respondents reflect the two expectations identified by our historical review, we analyze responses to the constant sum allocation exercise. We created five expectations groups: strong academics, strong citizenship, strong arts, strong well rounded, and weak well rounded. Ninety-two percent of the respondents in our sample fell into these five categories. The remaining 8% (or 92 individuals) did not fit these categories and thus are listed as “other expectations” and are excluded from our analysis.

We identify all respondents who allocated six or more points to a single educational goal. Although such distinctions are difficult to impose—any cut point can seem somewhat arbitrary—we believe that by assigning a value of “6,” respondents send a clear message that the goal is significantly more important. By allocating more than half of the total points to a single goal, respondents signal this goal as most important and should receive the majority of the school's time and/or attention. What's more, not only is that goal most important, it is at least 50% more important than the other two goals combined (which must sum to four). These “strong” expectations groups

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4 We also ran principal component analyses (PCA) to operationalize latent variables from our survey questions. Once extracted, eigenvalues for first principal components ranged between 2.55 and 2.72 (explaining between 85.1% and 90.7% of variance, respectively). Further, individual factor loadings within these components had a narrow range (0.5682 representing the smallest possible load and 0.5886 the largest). We ran our analyses using both PCA-generated variables and averaged variables, finding extremely similar results. When comparing analyses using averages versus the newly generated variables, standardized effects were virtually identical. This is perhaps unsurprising given correlations between PCA-generated variables, and simple average variables never fell below 0.98. Therefore, we report our findings based on analyses using the simple averages because we feel it more intuitive for a broader audience.
include strong citizenship, strong arts, and strong academic expectations for public education.

We then classify those respondents who allocate at least two but not more than four points to each goal as “strong well rounded.” The allocation requirements we set for this category mean that respondents in this expectations group ascribe relatively equal weight to each goal indicating that they expect schools to emphasize each of these goals in proportions such that no single goal dominates.

Finally, we group those who allocate at least two points to each group and exactly five points to one goal as “weak well rounded.” Like the strong well rounded, this group of respondents expressed that each goal was significant by allocating at least two points to each goal. However, unlike the strong well rounded, the relative balance between the goals was more skewed as this group of respondents allocated exactly half of the points to one goal indicating that this goal was more important than the other goals. Although not as focused on a single goal (like the strong academics group), this group of respondents did express that one goal was more important than the others.

Analyzing Expectations Influence on School Satisfaction

Analyses use adjusted Wald $F$-tests to compare each expectation group’s mean satisfaction within each school type. Resultant data highlight how average satisfaction for each school varied as hypothesized and show goal expectations significantly influencing satisfaction levels.

RESULTS

Do Goal Expectation Groups Emerge Amongst the Public?

We find that citizens hold different expectations for the goals schools ought to pursue. Table 1 details our variations in goal expectations for our population sample. In general, as expected, most respondents (almost 90%) fell into the strong academic or well-rounded categories and very few respondents express strong citizenship and strong arts expectations (less than 2%). Just over one third (38.7%) of respondents allocate six or more points to the academic goal, thus expressing a strong desire for a strong academic approach to public education. This aligns with previous the previously mentioned studies that find academics is either a “must have” or a main goal for public education for many parents and members of the public.

Because our data intentionally rated academics lower than the other goals, we expect that the data differentially influenced those respondents who rated academics most highly compared with those who rated one of the other goals most highly. Therefore, we omit those within our well-rounded groups who did not rank academics as their highest goal to avoid any influence on our findings stemming from our study design. Within our weak well-rounded group, this means respondents must have allocated five points to academics. Overwhelmingly, 88% of those respondents originally in this group did so. We omit the 35 who did not have academics highest, leaving the weak well-rounded group at $n = 261$. For the strong well-rounded group, we required respondents to allocate either three or four points to academics. We find distinctions between three and four hard to make, and therefore do not attempt to do so. Within this group, only two respondents did not allocate three or four points to academics and are therefore omitted, resulting in a final strong well-rounded group of 263. Table 1 reflects these rules.
Just over half our sample (51%) expresses a desire for a well-rounded education (either strong or weak). Those respondents stating a strong desire to see a balance between the goals account for just under half of the well-rounded category (approximately 24% of the total sample population). Further, within this strong well-rounded category, nearly 70% of respondents in this category (approximately 17% of the total sample) select the most even distribution of points possible (a combination of 3-3-4 as opposed to a combination of 2-4-4). The weak well-rounded category represents those individuals who allocated at least two points to each category but did not have the same relatively equal balance as those in the strong well-rounded group because they distribute half of their points (5) to a single category. This group accounts for approximately 27% of the total population sample. Within this group, the vast majority (88%) allocates half its points to academics.

Do Goal Expectations Influence Satisfaction?

Next, we examine whether satisfaction with school performance varied by the goal expectations we identified above. We find that satisfaction ratings differ significantly based upon goal expectations. Recall that we constructed the survey such that performance in the academic category was consistently weaker than performance in the other two areas. This weaker performance seems to be considered differently based on one’s expressed goal expectations; those with strong academics expectations report the lowest satisfaction for each school, those with strong well-rounded expectations express the highest satisfaction, and those with weak well-rounded expectations fall between the other two (See Table 2).
When evaluating the strong school, the difference in satisfaction between the strong well-rounded group and the strong academics group is nearly 0.6 of a point or roughly 0.41 of a standard deviation difference and is substantively large given the scale used in the survey. This difference might be thought of as the difference between being in the 50th percentile or the 66th percentile of the distribution. This difference increases slightly for the average school (0.7 points, 0.54 SD or 20.5 percentiles) and falls to slightly more than 0.6 of a point for the weak school (0.51 SD or 19.5 percentiles). The difference in average satisfaction between the strong academics group and the weak well-rounded group is smaller when evaluating the strong and average schools (about one third of a point or a quarter of a SD) but falls by roughly half for the weak school (slightly more than a 0.13 SD). When considering average minimum and maximum satisfaction levels expressed in our survey results (1.7 and 5.1, respectively), these average differences seem to indicate substantively different levels of satisfaction. This suggests that goal expectations play a role in shaping perceptions of school performance.

Statistical analysis confirms the descriptive analysis (see Table 3). Across all three schools, we find significant differences in satisfaction level between those expressing strong well-rounded expectations and those expressing strong academics expectations. Moreover, not only did those with strong academics preferences express the lowest level of satisfaction for each school, but the relationship strengthens as school quality decreases. This suggests that those with strong academic preferences focus more heavily (or even exclusively) on the school’s academic performance data when considering their overall satisfaction with the school’s performance. In contrast, respondents with strong well-rounded preferences are more satisfied with each school’s performance. As

<table>
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<th>School</th>
<th>Comparison</th>
<th>Mean 1</th>
<th>Mean 2</th>
<th>Wald F</th>
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<td>Strong</td>
<td>SA versus SWellR</td>
<td>4.510</td>
<td>5.104</td>
<td>19.02**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>SA versus WWellR</td>
<td>4.510</td>
<td>4.887</td>
<td>8.30**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>SWellR versus WWellR</td>
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<td>4.887</td>
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<td>34.61**</td>
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<td></td>
<td>SA versus WWellR</td>
<td>2.914</td>
<td>3.251</td>
<td>8.27**</td>
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<td>3.251</td>
<td>8.52**</td>
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<tr>
<td>Weak</td>
<td>SA versus SWellR</td>
<td>1.725</td>
<td>2.346</td>
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<td></td>
<td>SA versus WWellR</td>
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<td></td>
<td>SWellR versus WWellR</td>
<td>2.346</td>
<td>1.887</td>
<td>16.81**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: SA, strong academics expectations; SWellR, strong well-rounded expectations; WWellR, weak well-rounded expectations. *p < .05; **p < .01.
hypothesized, the higher satisfaction ratings from those who expressed strong well-rounded expectations suggests more willingness to consider and value the school’s performance data in each goal category, with stronger performance in arts and citizenship seeming to offset the lower academic performance such that their overall satisfaction with each school’s performance was higher than those emphasizing academic rating.

Next we consider the weak well-rounded group—expectations that schools pursue all three goals but with greater emphasis on academics. As briefly noted in the descriptive analysis, the emphasis this group places on the different goals resulted in satisfaction levels that fall between those of the strong well-rounded and the strong academics groups—they are slightly more satisfied with each school’s performance than the strong academic group but slightly less satisfied than the strong well-rounded group. This trend appears, descriptively, but further analysis reveals that statistical differences are only found for only the strong and average schools. Looking closely at the weak school, we find that the satisfaction levels for those in the weak well-rounded group are not statistically different from those in the strong academics group. This represents an interesting boundary condition for those with weak well-rounded expectations. Recall that those analyzed in this group allocate half of their points to academics, signaling that academics are somewhat more important than the other goals. Although their preference for slightly more balanced goal expectations lead these individuals to be significantly more satisfied with strong and weak schools than the strong academics group, our analysis suggests that an academic grade sinking too low (in this case to “D” level performance or its equivalent) eliminates differences in satisfaction between the weak well-rounded and strong academics expectations group. This suggests that their slightly higher emphasis on academics become especially important when performance in this area sinks below the “C” level threshold.

**Limitations**

One limitation of this research is that the data on school performance presented to respondents are not “real” data. Although we structure the format and data to mimic various school performance report cards distributed across the nation, our data remain hypothetical. As a result, participants may be more emotionally or otherwise removed from the data than if the data were from their local school and community. Lacking the personal attachment that many feel for their own neighborhood schools may lead respondents to be more critical of school performance and express lower levels of satisfaction. Visiting a school, knowing community members who work at the school, and possibly having sent children to the school may lead to more positive views of the school regardless of performance data. However, we have no reason to believe that personal affiliations would impact only those with a particular set of expectations. Thus, the findings that goal expectations influence satisfaction would likely be unaffected even when respondents are presented with “real” school data.

It is also possible that we primed respondents during the initial constant sum allocation exercise, thereby leading some respondents to increase their emphasis on some
goals when reviewing the performance data than they may have done otherwise. It may be that we inflated the degree of importance of particular goals for some respondents. Although important to consider, we have no reason to believe that respondents were primed only for one goal and not for others. Nor do we have reason to believe that only some respondents were primed. Thus, we suspect that any inflation among goals is likely to be distributed randomly and therefore does not significantly influence our overall findings.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This article contributes to our understanding of the way in which expectations shape satisfaction with public institutions and services. Although other work demonstrates that performance expectations (or the degree or frequency of excellent performance) shape satisfaction, we demonstrate that goal expectations (the relative importance of areas where excellence is expected) also influence satisfaction. By examining public education, an institution long charged with pursuing multiple and often competing goals, we demonstrate that citizens do hold different goal expectations that significantly influence their expressed level of satisfaction with a school’s performance. Performance expectations remain important to understanding satisfaction. However, while knowing that many express high expectations for their schools is important, knowing this alone is not enough for policy makers and school administrators. Understanding goal expectations is also a critical component to explaining satisfaction levels.

For public institutions pursuing multiple goals, understanding that pursing policy choices to emphasize some goals (or even one) over others may shape satisfaction is critical. Through public funding mechanisms and political support, the public makes important decisions about whether and to what degree it supports public institutions. Therefore, it is not enough to understand that the public expects excellent services, but also the relative importance it places on a myriad of competing service goals. Future research should continue to explore the relationship between satisfaction and both goal expectations and performance expectations.

We demonstrate that the two broad categories of expectations found throughout the history of American public education—strong academic focus and well-rounded expectations—continue to shape the expectations individuals hold for their public schools today. Because we used a population-based survey, we are confident that these results generalize to the larger US population. Recognizing that members of the public hold different goals for their schools is especially critical for contemporary education policy debates, which often emphasize academic performance alone. Accountability policies that tie rewards and punishments to academic test scores have led some educational leaders to pursue improved academic scores by eliminating other subjects like the arts, physical education, field trips, and community service projects. Although these efforts may improve test scores, parent and public satisfaction may remain unchanged or potentially decline. If the school community reflects our sample, there would be a mix of strong academic expectations individuals who may become more satisfied with the schools performance, but the well-rounded expectations individuals
may become less satisfied. In this case, improved academic test scores may result in little to no change in overall satisfaction. Further, if the school community held strong well-rounded expectations, improved academic test scores, accomplished by eliminating other subjects, may actually result in decreased satisfaction. Thus, increasing public satisfaction with schools is a more complicated task than many education leaders currently understand.

Moreover, understanding goal expectations can assist education leaders who often express confusion when parents protest the closing of a school deemed “failing” (Ceasar and Blume 2013; Otterman 2011; Perlstein 2013). School leaders sometimes believe parents and the public must be misguided, ill-informed, or simply ignorant to defend a “failing” school. After all, how could parents and the public express high levels of satisfaction if test scores are so low? Thus, they are confused when they face tremendous backlash as they pursue school closure policies. As we demonstrate, the role of goal expectations may explain why school leaders and parents arrive at very different conclusions about the same school. Understanding this may assist school leaders so they do not simply dismiss parents and community members when they defend their schools.

Overall, understanding which issues the public views as relatively most important as well as the level of excellence expected in these areas can aid public leaders as they seek to understand and improve public satisfaction with public institutions. Performance expectations and goal expectations must both be considered if public leaders want to truly understand and respond to satisfaction with public institutions and services.

SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIAL
Supplementary material is available at the Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory online (www.jpart.oxfordjournals.org).

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