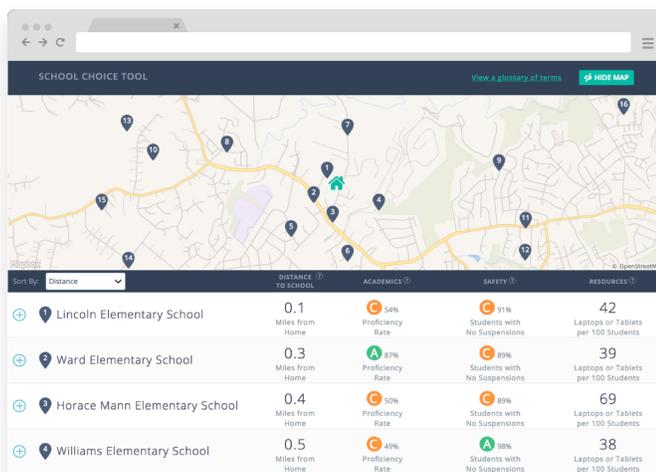


## Presenting School Choice Information to Parents: An Evidence-Based Guide

### Example school information display



School choice is expanding, providing both opportunities and challenges for parents seeking information about schools that best fit their children’s needs. Federal law now calls for every school to have “understandable” and “user-friendly” report cards. However, there is little evidence-based guidance to help design effective school report cards, school directories, and school choice websites.

To address this gap, the Institute of Education Sciences commissioned an online experiment with 3,500 low-income parents. Each parent was assigned to see one of 72 different web pages displaying information for a hypothetical district (see example). All displays included profiles for 16 schools with information about distance from the parent’s home, academics, safety, and resources. The study tested how parents’ understanding, satisfaction, and choice were affected by differences in the visual representation, amount, and organization of the information.

## KEY FINDINGS

- **Parents were most satisfied with school data showing graphs in addition to numbers, but displays using only numbers were most understandable.** Research indicates that visual representations such as graphs and icons (e.g., a color coded grade of A-F) can help people organize and interpret information. Parents preferred displays that included graphs, though not icons, but they better understood the information without additional visual representations.
- **Parents generally preferred displays that included more information.** Parents were more satisfied with displays showing multiple indicators to describe distance, academics, safety, and resources compared to displays showing one indicator for each. They were also more satisfied with data displays that added ratings from parent surveys. But more information was not always better: displays with district averages — meant to provide context for each school’s profile — were less preferred.
- **Parents chose higher performing schools when schools were ordered by academic quality but were most satisfied with displays that ordered schools by distance from home.** The study compared displays that ordered schools from closest to farthest from home to those that ordered schools from highest to lowest academic quality. Parents were most satisfied and best understood information when schools were ordered by distance from home. But when schools were ordered by academic quality, parents chose schools with higher academic quality.

Parents’ understanding, ease of use, and satisfaction differed across individual display strategies by 0.5 to 3.0 points on a 0-100 point-scale. However, information providers make presentation decisions over multiple options and these can add up.