It wasn’t long after I arrived in the islands that I started to hear what one private school parent calls the “incessant conversation” about school choice in Hawai’i. It came up in the classes I was teaching at the University of Hawai’i. It came up in the corridors of my workplace. It came up at social events. It came up when I was exercising at the gym. It was everywhere, constant, and negative toward the public schools. And I was told many times that professionals send their children to private schools, especially to the elite private schools, so a “class” issue seemed to exist as well.

I couldn’t figure it out. As part of my work as a professor, I visited or conducted workshops in a number of the 284 public schools and a few of the 135 private schools. I soon learned of problems related to the state school system bureaucracy and the poor conditions of some of the public schools, but I also observed many well-maintained and highly successful, functioning public schools.

I remained surprised and confused about the extent of the negativity toward public schools. This attitude was not part of my personal experience on the mainland, where I taught in middle schools in several states over a twelve-year period. And the notion that professionals in Hawai’i wouldn’t choose public schools didn’t seem accurate to me. After all, 180,000 of Hawai’i’s children attend public schools versus the approximately 35,000 who attend private, mostly small, religious schools. Surely middle- and upper middle-class families were represented in that public school population.

So I set out to find some of these families. I was looking for professionals who had the option (in terms of finances and children who via tests, interviews, etc., could qualify) of sending their children to private or public schools and for those who chose the latter. I used a technique called “snowballing” to select these parents (Bertaux 1981; Seidman 2006): This is the case when a parent in the study referred me to other parents or when colleagues who heard I was conducting this study referred me to possible participants. I attempted to include as much variation among the participants as possible. I considered gender, occupation, ethnicity, and geographical locations.
2 Going Against the Grain

I interviewed fifty-one parents, forty-two of whom were identified by colleagues as professionals who sent their children to public schools. I also included five parents identified as having chosen private schools for their children. Since the public “incessant conversation,” or narrative, is so widespread and viewed as an accepted community-held belief, I didn’t believe I needed to have an equal number of private school parents in the study. The reasons for private school choice are repeated over and over in the community narrative. But I did want to hear from these parents to see if their reasons for choosing private schools confirmed the typical reasons given in the “incessant conversation.” And I hoped to elicit a deeper understanding.

I also interviewed parents from the mainland, representing three urban areas, because I wanted to compare school choice in Hawai‘i and the mainland. The number of mainland parents interviewed is small; however, they are all active in school choice coalitions, so I thought their perspectives would be knowledgeable and representative.

The occupations of all of the parents comprised physicians (including one dentist), professors, attorneys, military officers, teachers, legislators, business executives, business entrepreneurs, bankers, administrators, media management, and nonprofit executives.

In Hawai‘i I interviewed twenty-seven men and twenty women, typically at their places of business. Their ethnicities included twenty-eight Asian Americans (Japanese, Chinese, Filipino, and Okinawan), seventeen European Americans (Irish, German, Scottish, French, Scandinavian, and English), one Native American, and one Latino. On the mainland, I interviewed one man and three women. Three of these parents are of European American ancestry, one of Latino ancestry.

The majority of Hawai‘i’s participants live on the island of O‘ahu, which has the densest population, including the urban area of Honolulu. Five of the parents, however, live on three of the neighbor islands. All four mainland parents live in or near urban cities.

The children of these parents attended sixty-five public schools, located throughout the geographic locations indicated on the map.

This book is the parents’ story. I have told their story more or less in the sequence of questions asked during the individual interviews.

Chapter 2 provides discussions with professionals in Hawai‘i who talked about why they chose public schools over private schools. These parents saw public schools as a means of providing “the best for their children.” The phrase is the same used by parents who chose private schools.

Chapter 3 reports the findings related to the children’s experiences—both
positive and negative — while attending public schools. From the parents’ conversations emerged a concept of a “good public school”; parents also talked about opportunities available at the public high schools. Several mentioned that their children were accepted into the same colleges as the private school graduates. This chapter also includes a list of these colleges and universities.

Chapter 4 discusses what I discovered about the reactions these parents received regarding their decisions to send their children to public schools. In general, many others expected them to choose private schools. I wanted to know what the parents’ professional colleagues, as well as their neighbors, families, and friends, had said. The parents talked about the type of feedback they received, including from their children’s public school teachers.

Chapter 5 examines more closely the community-held belief regarding public and private schools in Hawai’i, and the negative impact that this pre-
vailing opinion has on parents. It is important to understand this belief system and how both newcomers and local residents are exposed to it, because the system works to constrain or facilitate parental decisions about schooling. I asked public and private school parents how newcomers to Hawai‘i come to learn about this perception of Hawai‘i’s schools. It was during these conversations that I also found out how this belief is reinforced among local residents.

In chapter 6, I stepped back from the parents’ interviews in order to examine the possible interconnections among the typical reasons given for the existence and acceptance of the community-held belief regarding public schools in Hawai‘i. This analysis included an examination of the role of Hawai‘i’s history, the role that the “incessant conversation” plays as a means by which this historical belief is passed from one generation to another and to newcomers to the islands, and the role of the headlines related to public schools in the two mainstream newspapers and one local magazine.

After unpacking some of the reasons the citizens of Hawai‘i have become predisposed to favor private schools, chapter 7 returns to the parents’ conversations. Specifically, this chapter includes their suggestions for changes they believe would make the public schools stronger. I added changes that are presently occurring in the public school system.

The final chapter addresses the question, “Why should we care whether a community’s or state’s public school system is well respected?” The parents’ responses to this question were connected to issues of our democracy and our economic well-being. The parents are concerned that two-tiered schooling fragments the community and contributes to an apathetic and unengaged public, as well as a lack of identity with a cohesive community in which a populace works toward common goals, both civic and economic.

In the past two decades this pulling away from support of public education has also occurred on the mainland. In his well-known and defining work *Bowling Alone* (2000), Robert D. Putnam documents the broader change in America from the civic behavior of its citizens during the first two-thirds of the twentieth century, when Americans became increasingly connected to each other and to community activities, to the continuing reversal of this behavior beginning in the last third of the twentieth century.

What to do? The last section of the final chapter includes a discussion of what Putnam and others refer to as the social capital needed for healthy communities and strong public schools, as well as how to increase that social capital. Communities with high social capital usually have strong support for public education, whereas, as David Matthews explains, “Schools are seen
quite differently where public life is failing. People talk about them as being detached from the community. The dominant concern is ‘taking care of my child’ rather than educating every child. In this atmosphere, public schools find it virtually impossible to garner the support they need to be successful” (quoted in The Harwood Group 1995b, 4).

This book is about passion, advocacy, and the parents’ willingness to “go against the grain” of one’s professional peers. It is about professionals choosing public education for their children in a state that adheres to the commonly held belief that “Public schools are failing. Private schools are succeeding. Send your children to private schools.” The results of this study suggest that this belief is inaccurate. A more accurate narrative would acknowledge that both public and private schools vary. There are excellent choices in both types of institutions.