



National Center on School Choice

School Choice Conference Explores Cutting-Edge Topics

With the Obama administration highlighting school choice as a likely reform strategy, interest in how parents choose a school is more intense than ever. What are the primary motivations of families for switching schools? How good is their information? And what are the broader – and often unintended – consequences of these kitchen-table decisions about education?

A conference held by the National Center on School Choice on October 25-27 put issues like these under the microscope as top researchers from across the country discussed school choice in its expanding array of forms, including charter schools, magnet schools and vouchers and inter- and intra-district choice programs. Conference papers explored such questions as:

- What leads parents to choose charter or private schools over the nearby public school, and how do they make those decisions?
- What can be done when family choices or district policies increase segregation at both traditional public schools and schools of choice?
- Do charter schools skim the best students away from neighborhood public schools? How about the best teachers?
- What's the role of the central administration as districts offer more and different kinds of schools of choice, which often promise educational creativity and operational independence?
- What are the latest findings about the effects of different kinds of choice programs on student achievement?
- How is the growing popularity of school choice forcing researchers to look at new questions and change the way they work?
- How is school choice playing out in countries other than the United States?

The conference, "School Choice and School Improvement: Research into State, District and Community Contexts," brought together 130 scholars, graduate students and practitioners from 22 states as well as Australia, Ecuador and The Netherlands. Practitioners included teachers, school administrators, state education officials, foundation officers and representatives of advocacy groups.

The discussions focused on how place matters in the world of school choice. Choice programs vary greatly across different communities, districts and states and so do their effects on schools, families and expectations about education. Places of particular focus at the conference were New York, Chicago, Indianapolis, Washington, D.C., Milwaukee and districts in Michigan and Florida. In addition, one session presented research into aspects of school choice in The Netherlands and Australia.

HOW PARENTS CHOOSE

Several papers examined how and why parents decide to switch schools. Several papers examined how parents choose schools. The findings of these papers raise questions about the



National Center on School Choice

implications of choice processes on the effects of choice schools. One author, for example, surveyed immigrant parents about the usefulness and appropriateness of choice materials provided by the New York City public schools. Another evaluated the extent to which parents appear to use Florida's highly accessible school report cards when deciding whether to leave a public school or when choosing a new school. A number of papers presented research results indicating that parents do not necessarily switch from low-performing schools to higher performing schools when making educational choices for their children. There is often a gap between espoused academic reasons for choosing a school and actual school switching behavior. Here are some examples of papers examining this broad topic:

Helpfulness of materials

- One paper examined materials given to immigrant parents in New York City, where all students are required to select a high school -- an unfamiliar concept for many of these newcomers. What the paper found was that publications often failed to advise parents to consider academic quality in choosing a school, translation services varied greatly, and information sometimes was available only on the Internet, creating obstacles for families with limited computer access. (Author is Carolyn Sattin-Bajaj of New York University.)

Why parents switch schools

- Another paper, based in Indianapolis, found inconsistencies between the reasons parents gave for switching to charter schools and the actual characteristics of schools they chose. While a majority of families said they were seeking academic quality – and indeed had left schools that failed to make Adequate Yearly Progress under No Child Left Behind – only about one-third on average moved to charter schools that had passed AYP. (Authors are Marc Stein of Johns Hopkins University and Ellen Goldring and Xiu Cravens of Vanderbilt.)

Playing the school application game

- A third paper, however, found that academic considerations do seem to influence families in Chicago. Students there who left their assigned neighborhood school tended to choose new schools with better graduation rates and test scores. However, many students who applied to move were not accepted by another school. The researchers found that some students had applied to highly selective schools for which they weren't qualified while others had applied to only one or two schools, limiting their options. "In short," the authors wrote, "students simply did not know how to play the school application game." (Authors are W. David Stevens, Marisa de la Torre, David Johnson, and Alissa Bolz, all of the University of Chicago.)

Low use of accountability ratings

- A fourth paper looked at the degree to which parents were influenced by state ratings of school success when deciding whether to move from traditional public schools. The author used Florida's school report cards, which assign a letter grade of A, B, C, D or F based on scores within a 600-point index and are often praised as easy for parents to understand. The paper examined schools within a narrow range around the cut score for each letter grade and found that receiving the higher or lower grade – A instead of B, for example – had little impact on parents' decisions. (Author is Michael Henderson of Harvard University.)



National Center on School Choice

SEGREGATION

Choosing a school can be a complicated, anxiety-laced process. Several papers looked at ways in which parents' choices – or policies guiding choice programs – wind up contributing to segregation within school choice programs. The findings raise questions about future directions of research into school choice. For example, should the research and policy communities be equally concerned with voluntary segregation as with forced segregation? Forced segregation occurs when policies do not give all families equal access to choose or when schools are able to cream skim students through selective marketing or admission practices. Voluntary segregation occurs when the choices parents make in the best interest of their children lead to segregation (racial, socioeconomic, or academic) in the schools they leave and/or the ones they choose. Each exposes potential challenges and has implications for educational outcomes. Here are summaries of some papers exploring aspects of the topic:

Good intentions vs. reality

- One research group interviewed affluent white parents in New York City about what they were looking for in schools, then compared the responses to the school choices they actually made. Most parents said they valued racial diversity, but the chosen schools – or programs within schools – often were predominantly white. What actually drove those decisions? The authors parsed out several factors, including the low number of racially diverse schools in the district, a desire for their children to have a critical mass of white peers, and anxiety about choosing a school or program considered “good” within their social network. (Authors are Amy Stuart Wells and Allison Roda of Teachers College, Columbia University.)

Who gets the best and the brightest

- One paper investigated the longstanding charge that charter schools skim off the best students leaving concentrations of lower-achieving students in traditional public schools. This, critics say, can worsen existing racial and economic segregation in schools. The authors found that students who transferred to charter schools generally had similar or lower test scores than those of peers in traditional public schools and they generally moved to schools with similar racial make-ups, although there was some tendency for black students to choose schools with higher black percentages. (Authors are Ron Zimmer of Michigan State University, Brian Gill and Kevin Booker of Mathematica Policy Research, and Stéphane Lavertu and John Witte of the University of Wisconsin.)

Gender differences in charter schools

- Although many researchers have shown intense interest in the racial, socioeconomic and academic characteristics of charter school students, few projects have focused on enrollment trends by gender. One paper documented that charter schools enroll a higher percentage of girls than similar schools in the same cities and that the gap has grown over time. The authors offer several speculations about the cause, including parents seeking a safer environment for daughters and more tolerance among girls for the tighter discipline found in some charters. (Authors are Sean P. Corcoran of New York University, Jennifer L. Jennings of New York University and Harvard University, and Juli Simon Thomas of the University of California – Los Angeles.)



National Center on School Choice

Lessons from the Dutch

- Another paper documented socioeconomic segregation in schools in The Netherlands, a country where parental choice and school autonomy are well established and where schools have absorbed waves of immigration by non-Westerners since the 1960s and 1970s. The study found levels of segregation that were high in absolute terms and in comparison to schools in U.S. cities, and noted the complications of addressing the problem in a country with a longstanding commitment to educational freedom. (Authors are Helen F. Ladd of Duke University; Edward B. Fiske, an Education Writer, Editor, and Consultant; and Nienke Ruijs of the University of Amsterdam.)

Papers examined many other topics, including whether charter schools pull the best teachers away from public schools and whether competition from a nearby charter school worried principals and spurred them to change their leadership behavior. Other papers measured the achievement of students in a variety of choice contexts, including charter schools, vouchers, magnet schools, an inter-district transfer arrangement and private schools selected through choice programs in The Netherlands and Australia. The mixed findings on achievement in these papers underscore the importance of context in choice research and often point to the importance of studying achievement within the broader context.

Two keynote speakers, New Orleans superintendent Paul Vallas and education economist Henry Levin, discussed the changing role of the central administration when districts offer many choice schools and a variety of choice options, as is the case in New Orleans. Should the central office become more a manager of a portfolio of schools than a bureaucracy for setting policies and issuing orders?

The growing array of choice options also raises interesting questions about the best ways to measure whether a program is working. If researchers are studying the effects of charter schools what should be their point of comparison for students not participating in the program? Should it be the students in traditional public schools or the ones using vouchers to attend private schools or those who chose a magnet school? What is the “default” option in cities like Milwaukee, New York City, Chicago, Washington, D.C., Indianapolis and New Orleans that offer a range of choice schools and options? The question becomes less a distinction between students who attend choice schools or neighborhood public schools, and more about what types of choices families are making.

Chat on school choice

Education Week will host a chat on Tuesday, November 17, 2 p.m. Eastern Standard Time that will continue the conversation about school choice and school improvement begun at the conference. Planned topics include the effectiveness of vouchers and scholarships, parent choice, urban district choice, the competition effects of choice, and choice in international contexts, and other topics.



National Center on School Choice

Experts leading the chat will be:

David Figlio, the Orrington Lunt Professor of Education, Social Policy and Economics at Northwestern University and Research Associate at the National Bureau of Economic Research

Helen F. Ladd, the Edgar Thompson Professor of Public Policy Studies and Professor of Economics at Duke University

Kristie J. R. Phillips, Assistant Professor of Sociology at Brigham Young University

Marisa Cannata, Associate Director, National Center on School Choice, Vanderbilt University, will be the moderator.

Questions can be sent in advance to schoolchoiceconference@vanderbilt.edu.

Conference papers and PowerPoint presentations are available at <http://www.vanderbilt.edu/schoolchoice/conference/materials.html>

General information about the conference is available at <http://www.vanderbilt.edu/schoolchoice/conference/index.html>

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The center's programs of research have engaged a range of nationally known scholars from prominent universities and research organizations. This collaboration partners NCSC's lead research institution, Peabody College of Vanderbilt University, with the Brookings Institution, Brown University, CEEP at Indiana University, Harvard University, National Bureau of Economic Research, Northwest Evaluation Association (NWEA), Stanford University and the University of Notre Dame.