Choice Center Focus

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Choice Points

Most of this edition of Choice Center Focus is devoted to the school choice conference the NCSC held at Vanderbilt in October. It was exciting to hear the presentations of so many eminent scholars who have spent years researching various aspects of choice. It was also rewarding to welcome practitioners who came to hear the latest findings about their chosen line of work.

With papers looking at a wide range of topics, from the competition effects that choice has on traditional public schools to close examinations of how parents choose schools, it’s clear that research is moving into fresh and more nuanced directions. It’s also clear that context matters if we are to understand how choice works.

The timing for a serious discussion on new findings about school choice couldn’t have been better. President Obama has listed education as one of the country’s top priorities and emphasized choice as a possible strategy for reform. Since Secretary Duncan’s endorsements of charter schools in speeches and the Education Department’s inclusion of them in criteria that will be viewed favorably for grants from the $4 billion Race to the Top program, several states have announced plans to expand charter offerings and some of the remaining states without charter laws have aired proposals to allow them. (See News on page 4.) In addition, the Department has announced a new round of grants to support innovative and evidence-based reforms.

In other NCSC news, the Institute of Education Sciences has granted the center a one-year no-cost extension, so the research of our partners and dissemination of their work will continue until September 2010.

Conference Brings Together Scholars and Practitioners

School Choice & School Improvement: Research into State, District and Community Contexts

October 25-27, 2009

At Vanderbilt University

The NCSC’s national invitational conference 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 program focused on the importance of understanding context in assessing the effects of choice. One recurrent theme of the NCSC’s research findings has been that understanding context is essential. Locations of particular focus in conference sessions were New York, Chicago, Indianapolis, Washington, D.C., Milwaukee, New Orleans and districts in Michigan and Florida. In addition, one session presented research into aspects of school choice in The Netherlands and Australia. Papers looked at many aspects of choice, including magnet schools, charter schools, vouchers and intra-district choice plans. Examples of research topics explored in the papers include:

- Assessments of student achievement
- Various aspects of increased segregation with choice
- How and why parents use school choice
- Whether choice schools cream skim the best teachers and students.

Copies of the papers, PowerPoint presentations and videos of sessions are available on the NCSC Conference Web site under “Conference Materials.” (See Web site address in the left-hand menu on this page.) Several pa-
The Conference: New Insights, New Perspectives

Digging into Family Decisions About School Choice

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?

Several papers at the NCSC conference examined how and why parents choose to change schools. One theme was that parents’ know-how and experience affected their approach to the choice process.

A paper by a group led by Marc Stein of Johns Hopkins University found inconsistencies between the reasons Indianapolis parents gave for switching to charter schools and the actual characteristics of schools they chose. While a majority of families said they wanted academic quality – and indeed they 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.

Another paper, however, found that academic considerations do seem to influence choices by families in Chicago. That study, by W. David Stevens and others from the University of Chicago, found that students who left their assigned neighborhood schools 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 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.”

Some papers looked at the quality of information available to parents. Carolyn Sattin-Bajaj of New York University examined materials and services provided to immigrant families in New York City, where all students must select a high school, and found that publications often failed to advise parents to consider academic quality in choosing a school and that the quality of translation services varied greatly.

Amy Stuart Wells and a co-author from Teachers College interviewed affluent white parents in New York about what they were seeking in schools and compared the responses to choices they actually made. Most parents said they valued racial diversity, but the chosen schools – or programs within schools – often were majority white. The reasons for those choices ranged from a shortage of diverse schools to anxieties about getting into schools considered “good” within their social network.

Student Achievement Studied from Several Angles

Several papers measured the achievement of students in various kinds of choice programs. The mixed findings in these papers underscore the importance of considering context when conducting research into school choice.

For example, a study of elementary school students participating in an urban intra-district transfer program found that transfer itself does not affect student achievement, but that students who moved from low-performing schools to ones with higher scores had achievement gains in both language arts and mathematics. This raises questions about the choice processes families use and about whether these findings can be generalized to students who transfer from schools under No Child Left Behind, wrote the team led by Kristie Phillips of Brigham Young University.

A team led by Patrick Wolf of the University of Arkansas studied the Washington, D.C., Opportunity Scholarship Program and found that three years into the program, students who were offered vouchers were scoring higher in reading than students not offered vouchers. They found no differences in math.

On the other hand, the second-year analysis of the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program led by John Witte of the University of Wisconsin found no overall statistically significant difference between achievement growth of voucher students and traditional public school students in reading or math.

Finally, a team led by Anna Nicotera of Vanderbilt looked at student achievement gains over several years in Indianapolis and found that students who switched to charter schools from traditional public schools experienced positive gains in math and reading compared with their gains in traditional public schools.
The Conference: Keynote Speakers

Vallas, Levin Discuss New Approaches to Governance as Choice Options

Paul Vallas, superintendent of the Recovery School District of Louisiana based in New Orleans, talked about creative management tactics in a district that will soon include only schools of choice.

Vallas was brought in after Hurricane Katrina to rebuild the system and turn around underperforming schools. School choice and outreach to parents have been key parts of his strategy, and New Orleans now has more charter schools than traditional public schools. His speech described a central office that gives a lot of freedom to schools and relegates to itself primarily responsibility for monitoring compliance with regulations, assuring fairness for students, and enforcing accountability. A goal, Vallas said, is to provide “macro-support.” For example, his administration contracts with a nonprofit to screen proposals for new charter schools and is about to convert its special education office into a 501(c)(3).

Henry Levin, a professor of economics and education at Teachers College, talked about the challenging job of running districts like New Orleans that are dominated by schools of choice. It requires finding a balance among four criteria—freedom of choice, productive efficiency, equity and social cohesion—since schools must live with economic constraints while preparing all students to become contributing citizens. Avoiding terms like “district administration,” he talked about the need for a “central unit” to handle duties like overseeing compliance with federal rules, providing economies of scale for expensive services like transportation and ensuring efficiency in services transcripts needed by students to switch schools. Such a central unit, he said, would still leave many decisions up to schools.

His inspiration came from the central processing unit in computers because “it has networking possibilities.”

After the Conference: A Chat on Choice

NCSC Teams Up With Education Week for a Chat With the Experts

Sitting at computers hundreds of miles apart, David Figlio of Northwestern University, Helen Ladd of Duke University and Kristie Phillips of Brigham Young University spent an hour on November 17 fielding questions about school choice.

The event was the NCSC’s first-ever live chat, held in conjunction with Education Week as a way to continue conversations begun at the conference and to open up the discussions to people who couldn’t travel to Vanderbilt in October. More than 250 people tuned in for some portion of the chat and 46 viewers sent in questions.

Viewers asked about a range of issues, including whether socioeconomic status affected the likelihood a family would use school choice, what features parents look for when choosing schools and how to draw conclusions about choice when studies produce contradictory findings.

One overarching message from the scholars was that choice programs vary greatly from one to another, making context—laws, availability of services like transportation, specific features of the choice plan and the full array of local educational offerings—important when creating a choice program or assessing the effects of one. Context, they noted, is important in understanding the different findings about charter schools in two recent highly publicized studies. (See “High Achievement Found,” page 4.)

Another take-away point was that school choice is not a magic bullet. It won’t help children if voucher amounts aren’t large enough for them to participate or their parents don’t have access to information to make good choices. Adding choice won’t improve student performance unless the essentials of good education are in place.

Said Ladd: “My advice to policy makers is not to expect that governance changes alone (e.g. parental choice, small schools, autonomous schools) will lead to good outcomes. To promote success, we need to make sure kids come to school ready to learn, that there are good principals and strong teachers, and a supportive environment.”

Figlio and Phillips wound up the chat on a similar cautionary note.

Figlio wrote: “School choice cannot be the only intervention. We need to make sure that a child comes to school ready to learn and that there are enrichment opportunities that are appropriate and available.”

Added Phillips: “Agreed. Sometimes I think we expect too much from school choice.”

The chat appeared on Ed Week’s Web site. NCSC associate director Marisa Cannata served as the moderator. Read the transcript at http://www.vanderbilt.edu/schoolchoice/conference/chat.html
Choice in the News

High Achievement Found in NYC Charters; Research Sparks Debate

NCSC partner Caroline Hoxby’s research attracted national press attention when she reported findings that students attending New York City charter schools score higher on state tests than peers who applied to charter schools but did not win lotteries to attend. Academic gains accumulate with each year in charter schools so students who consistently attend charters in grades K-8 would narrow the difference in scores with more affluent suburban peers in English and mathematics. Hoxby, who is an economics professor at Stanford University and director of the Economics of Education Program at the National Bureau of Economic Research. She has studied charter schools in New York for several years and issued a previous report in 2007.

Her 2009 report appeared a couple of months after another group of Stanford researchers, at the Center for Research on Education Outcomes (CREDO), reported that their national study had found uneven quality among charter schools and that, on balance, students had better results in traditional public schools. The contradictory findings between the two studies led to debate about which study was right — and sparked a question during the NCSC’s post-conference chat (Page 3). The three scholars answering chat questions — David Figlio of Northwestern, Helen Ladd of Duke and Kristie Phillips of Brigham Young — reiterated the importance of context when comparing studies. “It’s important to pay attention to the question the researcher is asking,” said Ladd. “One question refers to the average effects of all the charter schools in a state, some of which are likely to be strong and others weak. Another question refers to outcomes for students in over-subscribed charter schools. The different questions will often generate different answers.”

Gates Supports Charters in California and Texas

The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation announced two big grants in November to help charter schools. One, for $60 million, will go to a coalition of five charter management organizations in California to improve teaching. The goal is for more low-income students to graduate from high school ready to succeed in college.

Efforts to be funded by the grant include higher pay for top teachers, a year-long training academy for new teachers and new teacher evaluation approaches. The second grant is designed to help successful charter schools in the Houston area expand. The grant will finance a $30 million credit support agreement to help access $300 million in tax-exempt facilities bonds.

Many States Focusing on Charter Provisions

Education Week has reported that many states are reviewing their charter school laws in response to the Obama Administration’s encouragement for states to expand charter capacity. Several states, including Illinois and Tennessee, raised caps on the number of charters allowed, while other states, such as Minnesota, tightened accountability. The Texas House voted against expanding the number of charters, but Education Commissioner Robert Scott has since proposed allowing existing charter schools to open more campuses, the Texas Tribune wrote. Charter fever has also hit some of the 10 states without charter laws. Maine lawmakers voted against allowing charters this year, according to Ed Week, while Kentucky and Alabama are debating proposals to allow them, local newspapers reported. The (Louisville) Courier-Journal wrote that two bills to authorize charter schools have been filed for the upcoming legislative session and that supporters and opponents have begun lining up their arguments. In Alabama, The Mobile Press-Register reported that legislators were split on whether to support an announcement by Republican Gov. Bob Riley that he planned to push for charter schools. Supporters in Kentucky and Alabama cited federal Race to the Top grants as an incentive.

The National Center on School Choice conducts scientific, comprehensive, and timely studies on school choice to inform policy and practice. The Center neither advocates nor opposes school choice. Rather it exercises national leadership in coordinating multiple disciplines, research methodologies, and substantive issues associated with the design, implementation, and effects of school choice.

The National Center on School Choice is funded by a grant from the Department of Education’s Institute of Education Sciences. The federal grant provides $13.3 million dollars in research support over five years. According to a cooperative agreement, the lead institution is Vanderbilt University. Partners are the Brookings Institution, Brown University, Harvard University, Indiana University, the National Bureau of Economic Research, the Northwest Evaluation Association, Stanford University, and the University of Notre Dame.