Choice Points  with Center Director Mark Berends

A year (almost) in review

Finding time away from daily demands to reflect on the bigger picture of our professional lives—it’s an all-too-familiar challenge for most of us. Leaders of independent and charter schools are no exception. This is one reason the NCSC and the Peabody Professional Institutes (PPI), which offer professional development experiences for educators across the nation, have designed two Summer Institutes for independent and charter school leaders.

In June, we will welcome a select group of these leaders to Peabody to guide them through a week of considering the big picture of what they do.

Under the tutelage of NCSC faculty, participants will explore the foundations and fundamentals of school development.

Independent school leaders will consider a range of issues, from learning theories to finance and communications. Charter school leaders will cover topics such as fund raising and governance, management, and strategic planning.

In other words, these leaders will develop what the Institutes aim to provide: “knowledge grounded in theory and supported by data.”

At the end of the week, participants will earn the title “Summer Fellow of Peabody College,” joining the ranks of other Vanderbilt alumni who are leaders in education and human development throughout the world.

To learn more, go to peabody.vanderbilt.edu/x3332.xml.
Choice Connections

Fall conference: Considering charter school outcomes

Over two autumnal days in late September, more than 100 charter school experts gathered on Vanderbilt’s Peabody campus for the first National Conference on Charter School Research.

The event featured a national panel of interdisciplinary scholars who spoke on teaching and learning in charter schools, governance and finance, and charter school effects on student achievement.

Dr. Mark Schneider, commissioner of the U.S. Department of Education’s National Center for Educational Statistics, gave the keynote address. Conference guests included charter school leaders of every stripe, from principals and teachers to researchers and policymakers.

From all accounts, the conference was a great success. Said NCSC Director Mark Berends, “What a privilege to bring to one place so many people who care about the education of our nation’s children.”

Charter School Outcomes will be published later this year.

Getting the word out: Birth of a handbook

Phase 1—lining up authors—of the upcoming Handbook of Research on School Choice is complete. The Handbook will be the second in the Center’s planned series of volumes on school choice research. As of February, all authors were on board to submit manuscripts by the end of this year.

The time is ripe for such a book. Over the last fifteen years, the number of school-based options to parents has increased. More systems are open to children attending low performing schools, especially in response to No Child Left Behind.

In this context, the Handbook’s purpose is to compile the most rigorous and policy-relevant research available on all forms of K-12 school choice—from magnets and charters to private and home schools. Its aim is to define the current state of this evolving field of research, policy, and practice.

Handbook editors are Mark Berends, Matthew G. Springer, and Dale Ballou, all of Vanderbilt’s Peabody College, and Herbert J. Walberg, of Stanford University.

Getting the word out: Peabody Journal of Education

This summer a special edition of the Peabody Journal of Education will be published in coordination with the National Center on School Choice.

The journal, whose guest editors are Mark Berends, Matthew G. Springer, and Warren Langevin, highlights current research on the effects of school choice and competition in public and private education both here and abroad. Specifically, it presents new empirical and theoretical studies on the policy environment for school choice. Contributing authors include political scientists, economists, policy analysts and legal scholars.

Articles cover a range of topics, such as the politics of school choice in charter schools and interest-groups; homeschooling; a DC scholarship program; teacher mobility; district competition in Wisconsin and across the U.S.; and international perspectives on school choice.

According to the editors, “We believe this special issue provides helpful information with practical relevance to policy leaders and practitioners interested in school choice.”

To learn more about selections from this journal, visit vanderbilt.edu/schoolchoice/peabodyjournal2007.html.
How does open enrollment—the ability to send children to any public school in their district—impact students’ socioeconomic and achievement status in magnet or neighborhood schools? This is the question researchers Michael Flicek (Wyoming public schools) and Ron Houser (Northwest Evaluations Association) set out to answer in their recent study.

Their investigation took place in one school system of about 11,500 students. Of these, they divided about 5,000 into two groups based on where they lived. “Near attenders” were attending one of the two schools closest to their homes. Far attenders were not. Here is what the research found.

At magnet schools, open enrollment was associated with higher socioeconomic and achievement status. At neighborhood schools, the opposite was true.

However, students in magnet schools—as opposed to those in neighborhood schools—showed low achievement growth in reading and math.

In the study summary, authors wrote, “Overall attender status did not predict reading or math initial status or growth. Within several school types by socioeconomic status subgroups, however, far attenders had lower achievement growth than near attenders.”

Meta-Analysis: Seeking apples-to-apples

It’s no secret that charter school research findings on student achievement are as varied as the schools themselves.

The reasons for this are connected to the variety of the schools and the methods used to study them. So the NCSC is devoting one project to “meta-analysis”: examining not a school or group of schools, but the research on the schools’ effects on student achievement.

According to researcher Bettie Teasley, “this is a time when the lack of apples-to-apples comparisons is a common refrain” in charter school research.

To address it, she and fellow researchers Anna Nicotera, Caroline Watral, Jenny Zottola, and Professor Mark Berends are systematically synthesizing the effects of many research studies to understand why they are mixed, to create a framework for standardizing charter school analysis, and to shed a brighter light on the impacts of charter schools on student achievement.

Inside schools: Opening the black box

The idea behind charter schools is that when schools are free to operate and instruct the way they want, they will provide a quality education for America’s students. The question is, is it true?

So far, research has been mixed. Thus, Vanderbilt professors Mark Berends, Ellen Goldring, and Claire Smrekar, with project manager Jenny Zottola, University of Indianapolis researchers Ruth Green and Zora Ziazi , and John Smithson from the University of Wisconsin-Madison are taking the question to Indianapolis charter and regular public schools.

Few studies have looked at what is going on inside schools that affects student outcomes. So in Indianapolis, our researchers are comparing the achievement gains of students in charter schools with those in regular public schools.

They are also looking at how these schools are organized: at how they align curriculum and teaching with content standards and assessments; and how that seems to affect student achievement.

Finally, they are providing schools with reports that link what the schools are doing with student outcomes. This way, they can gauge the impact of their practices on student achievement and effectively direct school improvement efforts.

Principal, teacher, parent, and student surveys are underway for this study.
Choice News
NCSC researchers’ work cited in Supreme Court cases

In a rare legal move, the U.S. Supreme Court cited social science research for recent cases on school integration—research that included the work of NCSC faculty Mark Berends, Ellen Goldring, Claire Smrekar, and James Guthrie. It also included the work of Vanderbilt professor Pearl Sims and former graduate student Debra Owens.

According to Smrekar, “We are pleased that Peabody research on magnet schools, student achievement and Department of Defense-sponsored schools will contribute to the court’s deliberations in what could be two of the most significant racial integration cases since Brown v. Board of Education.”

To read the amicus brief, which was filed by the American Educational Research Association, go to aera.net/default.aspx?id=1456.

Center scholars prepare for AERA

Next month a number of researchers affiliated with the NCSC will head to the annual conference of the American Educational Research Association (AERA) in Chicago, Illinois.

The theme of this year’s meeting is The World of Educational Quality. AERA President Eva L. Baker has written that this theme “points to both an expanded range of inquiry and an intensified focus on the meaning of quality in education research and practice.”

Americans are not the only ones calling for educational reform; it’s a cry heard around the world. And educational reform is not the only change being championed. So, too, are the causes of equal access to and opportunity in schools; and of improved learning within schools.

All of which raise questions this spring’s AERA meeting intends to address—namely, what reform efforts are taking place in other countries? What factors define quality in education? What research contributions are coming in from disciplines outside education research? And what criteria characterize quality in research?

As panel chairs, presenters, or discussants, NCSC researchers will cover topics including the instructional and policy contexts of charter schools, and the intended and unintended consequences of NCLB on student achievement.

For more information, go to www.aera.net.