Choice Points with Center Director Mark Berends

These days we’re all wondering what’s in store for school choice with the Obama administration and the new Congress.

The president listed education as one of the country’s top priorities during his February speech to Congress and he mentioned charter schools specifically. But how will voucher programs, magnet schools and charter schools fit into his broader reform agenda?

For example, will they have a role in his call for the United States to have the world’s highest college graduation rate by the end of the next decade? And how much of the $100 billion-plus in stimulus money tabbed for education will wind up in schools of choice? On Congress’s end, what will happen with No Child Left Behind reauthorization?

Several bills were filed in 2007, but all died, and now it’s hard to imagine that lawmakers have much appetite for undertaking this big—and inevitably contentious—task in the midst of the financial crisis and other pressing national problems. Events are moving fast, so it may not take long for a clear picture of winners and losers to emerge—and for another round of political battles to begin.

Meantime, the wheels of NCSC research keep turning; this issue of our newsletter offers you updates on our latest work. Without a doubt, it’s an exciting time to be working in the field of school choice.

The Center Gears Up for Second National Conference

Why does school choice thrive in some places and struggle in others?

That question will be the core issue behind our second national research conference, October 25-27 at Vanderbilt University. Speakers will be top researchers and experienced practitioners, including:

- Paul Vallas, head of the Recovery School District in New Orleans, which was created after Hurricane Katrina to build a better school system
- Henry Levin, a leading economics of education authority from Teachers College
- John Witte, politics and education expert from the University of Wisconsin-Madison
- Amy Stuart Wells of Teachers College, whose research focuses on issues such as school desegregation, and education and race
- Patrick Wolf of the University of Arkansas, head of research on the Opportunity Scholarships program in Washington, D.C. (see page 4)

The conference program will explore how different choice options—charter and magnet schools, vouchers, transfer options under No Child Left Behind—fare in different places and under different definitions and policies.

Session topics will include Choice in Three Cities (New York, Chicago, and Indianapolis), Urban District Choice, International Perspectives on Choice, Charter School Effects in Various Contexts, and Effectiveness of Vouchers and Scholarships. Some papers from the conference will be reviewed for an edited book to come out in 2010.

To learn more and register for the conference, go to www.vanderbilt.edu/schoolchoice/conference/index.html.
Choice Connections
(Mis)understanding Charter Schools

Think you know something about charter schools in your state? Don’t be so sure. According to a recent study from Indiana University’s Center for Evaluation and Education Policy (CEEP), misinformation about charter schools—even among charter advocates—is widespread.

And that’s not all. The report, Evaluation of Indiana Charter Schools Effectiveness and Efficiency, looks at a host of charter school issues—enrollment and funding patterns, innovations, competition, accountability and student performance—and reveals some compelling findings. Among them: Indiana charter schools are either over-funded or under-funded, depending on which line item you’re counting. There are no practical differences in student performance in Indiana’s charter and traditional public schools, though limited data on high-schoolers casts some doubt on that finding. And, there is a lack of coordination and support among charter schools across the state, especially where special education and advocacy are concerned.

Choice Connections

Does your state allow charter schools? Orange states depict those that do; gray states do not.

Find the full report at www.ceep.indiana.edu.

Black Box Study Capitalizes on Cutting-Edge Teacher Survey

With the help of a new survey, NCSC researchers are digging more deeply into America’s classrooms this year to learn what makes schools work.

The center is partnering with UW-Madison’s Wisconsin Center on Education Research to bring its Survey of Enacted Curriculum (SEC) to teachers across the nation. Dubbed “Opening the Black Box,” the project seeks to reach inside schools of choice and regular public schools to understand which policies and practices are most effective for helping students learn.

This year’s survey is a confidential, online questionnaire that collects information about what and how teachers teach, and then generates reports so they can see how their teaching patterns compare with state standards and assessment results. In effect, this unique research tool accomplishes what most do not, providing meaningful data to researchers and teachers alike.

“It’s a win-win,” said the project’s principal investigator, Mark Berends. “As we learn more about what teachers are doing and how they’re doing it, teachers get SEC reports that help them do it better.”

The study is in its third and final year of data collection. To learn more, go to www.vanderbilt.edu/schoolchoice/schoolsclassrooms1.html.

Peabody Professional Institutes Prepare for Robust Summer Schedule

“If your actions inspire others to dream more, learn more, do more and become more, you are a leader,” wrote John Quincy Adams. In that spirit Peabody Professional Institutes (PPI) were created, summer programs designed to inspire school leaders to dream, learn, do, and become more.

Last summer, marking its fourth year of programs, PPI gathered 93 participants from across the country for four institutes, and welcomed faculty from 35 universities, schools, and institutions such as the National Center for Public Policy and Education and the Tennessee Department of Education.

Now PPI is busy preparing for next summer, which will include new institutes for advancement professionals, charter school leaders, school superintendents, and college and university registrars.

With the addition of these programs, the robust schedule for 2009 includes nine weeks of programming! PPI will also go on the road this year, with scheduled stops in Chicago, Washington, D.C., and San Francisco.

Read more and register at www.peabody.vanderbilt.edu/Peabody_Professional_Institutes.xml.
Choice Connections

First of Its Kind, Handbook Hit Bookstores April 3

Since the nation’s first charter school opened in the 1990s, the scope and availability of school-based options to parents have steadily expanded. So, too, have grown curiosity and debate about the difference choice makes. Is it fair? Is it effective? How does America’s version of choice compare with schooling options offered in other countries?

In response to such questions, the NCSC has compiled the most rigorous and policy-relevant research on K-12 school choice published to date. The Handbook of Research on School Choice was released on April 3.

This is the first book to provide a comprehensive review of what is known about the major forms of school choice—charters, vouchers, home schooling, magnet schools, cyber schools. Contributing authors cover the range of perspectives, from historical, political, and social to economic, legal, and international.

The Handbook is suitable for researchers, faculty and graduate students in education policy studies, politics of education, and social foundations of education. It should also be of interest to in-service administrators and policy makers. To order a copy of the book, visit www.routledge.com.

Discovering the Voucher Difference after Graduation

Does attending a private school improve the lives of students after they leave high school? Studies by our partners at Harvard University’s Program on Education Policy and Governance (PEPG) aim to provide some answers.

In their past NCSC work, PEPG researchers evaluated randomized field trials—relatively uncommon in education research at the time—of private school voucher experiments in New York City, Dayton, Ohio, and Washington, D.C. Overall, they found no systematic effect of vouchers on student test scores when comparing the performance of students who won and lost lotteries for seats. But the research was limited because it could track student performance for only three years, so impacts on substantive outcomes (e.g., college enrollment, risk of incarceration, political engagement) could not be measured.

A decade later it has become possible to identify the impact of school voucher programs on these outcomes. By linking their data to descriptive data from the College Board’s Survey of Colleges, our partners are looking at the college enrollment of students in the randomized voucher experiments. And by searching publicly available state and prison records, they are also examining whether attending a private school reduces the risk of imprisonment for voucher students. Finally, PEPG researchers are collecting data on voter registration and voting behavior to see whether voucher usage affects political engagement. Read more at www.vanderbilt.edu/schoolchoice/voucher1.html.

From Private to Public School: Why Parents Switch

Private schools and public schools, whether traditional or charter, are presumably competitors. And research findings on charter school effects are decidedly mixed. So why would parents move their children from private to charter public schools? NCSC researchers Ellen Goldring and Claire Smrekar took this question to parents in Indianapolis, Indiana.

They learned that among the students who entered their current charter schools from other schools, 76% switched from regular public schools and 16% switched from private schools. The private school students displayed higher levels of prior academic performance, family income and parental education attainment. But the average racial-ethnic composition of the private schoolswitchers was statistically identical to their peers from regular public schools.

When asked about why they chose charter schools, parents of students from private schools emphasized academic quality and focus of the school. Their perceptions and experiences varied from school to school. But as a whole these parents were less satisfied with their children’s private schools, giving lower ratings on academic rigor and social climate.

This spring, Goldring and Smrekar are expanding this research to explore more fully what drives parents’ decisions to move their children from private to charter schools. Read about it at www.vanderbilt.edu/schoolchoice/schoolclassrooms3.html.
Choice in the News

President Obama Calls for New Education Policy
An article in the New York Times (March 11) reported on the President’s recent speech calling for sweeping changes in the American education system. Among them: lifting state caps on charter schools, and linking teacher pay to performance.

More on the Stimulus Bill
Education Week has been running ongoing, detailed coverage of the federal stimulus bill. Updates appear regularly on the Web site with stories and blog posts about broad issues as well as provisions for specific programs.

Choice in NYC
A New York Times story (Feb. 28) wrote that charter schools were the star attraction at this year’s Harlem Education Fair. The piece says that 24 of New York City’s 78 charter schools are in Harlem, making it an area rich in school choice since it also includes 70 traditional public schools, 14 Catholic schools and 16 other private schools.

Washington, DC Voucher Funding in Question
Several publications reported that the mammoth annual federal spending bill that was approved in March included language putting a big asterisk on future federal funding for Washington, D.C.’s voucher program. The program, called Opportunity Scholarships, faces reauthorization by Congress and approval by the D.C. government to remain eligible for receiving federal money. Voucher supporters may now call for hearings on the program’s effectiveness. And, according to Ed Week, President Obama’s press secretary said that while Obama “doesn’t believe that vouchers are a long-term answer to our educational problems,” he does favor finding a way to allow students currently in the D.C. program to continue their schooling.

The Rise of Tuition Tax Credits
A book published last fall about neovouchers—state policies that grant tax credits for donations to private school scholarships—was the topic of an Education Week article (Jan. 7). The article quoted University of Colorado associate professor Kevin G. Welner, author of NeoVouchers: The Emergence of Tuition Tax Credits for Private Schooling, as saying the tax credits enjoy some advantages over traditional vouchers including that they appear less vulnerable to legal challenges and are “relatively unencumbered by the [political] baggage of past voucher battles.” Welner expressed concerns, however, about the increasing popularity of such policies because they are, in his words, “unproven, largely unstudied, and largely beyond the reach of solid evaluation.”