Choice Points

As another school year nears an end, so too does the National Center on School Choice’s (NCSC) federal grant period. Since 2003, NCSC has been committed to conducting quality research and outreach to scholars and policymakers as well as the general public.

In this issue of the newsletter, NCSC’s newest book is highlighted below. School Choice and School Improvement was featured recently in Jay Mathews’ Washington Post blog about the need for facts in debates about school choice. It compiles papers from multiple researchers on various types of choice using differing research methods. Check out the book to see how your opinions on school choice stack up against the research findings!

As the NCSC grant period ends, research projects have begun to wind down. On page 2, there is an article that highlights some of the major findings in various areas of choice that have emerged from the studies over the years. Also inside, there are updates on recently released research briefs and conference participation to inform you about the work that has been happening at NCSC.

The last page points out current trends around the country in school choice. The recent Supreme Court decision on the Arizona tuition tax credit has led to a resurgence of interest in tuition vouchers and tax credits. Charter schools continue to be encouraged through federal grant programs and advocacy groups’ initiatives.

School choice continues to be one of the most debated issues in education reform. The hope is that the research done by NCSC over the years will help inform policy and debates about options for providing a quality education and generally show, as School Choice and School Improvement concludes, context matters.

The Center Releases Book: School Choice and School Improvement

In March 2011, the National Center on School Choice (NCSC) released its latest book, School Choice and School Improvement. The new book from Harvard Education Press and the National Center on School Choice introduces exciting new research by national experts on school choice.

Designed to address common concerns of parents, policymakers, and the broader public the book examines how communities, districts, and states use choice as a strategy for improving schools and student learning. Their investigations into the effects and effectiveness of school choice—including charter schools, private school vouchers, and within-district transfers—build on debates about the thorniest issues arising from school choice: Why do parents decide to switch schools? How good is the information provided by districts to guide those decisions? How do traditional public schools respond to competition from charters?

Do choice options exacerbate segregation by skimming off the best students? And do vouchers, charter schools, and within-district choice plans appear to improve student achievement?

One lesson that has emerged from school choice research in recent years is that location is important. This book specifically notes the importance of local political and social conditions, and focuses on cities and states with some of the country’s most interesting school choice scenarios, including Washington, D.C., New York, Indianapolis, Chicago, and Michigan. A chapter on the Netherlands, with its long history of parental choice and school autonomy, provides international context on socio-economic segregation, an issue of ongoing importance in U.S. schools.

For selected excerpts from the book, visit the webpage: http://www.vanderbilt.edu/schoolchoice/research.publications_choiceimprovement.html
Choice Connections

Project Findings

Over the years, projects conducted by research partners of the National Center on School Choice (NCSC) have contributed to the growing body of research about school choice. Projects were conducted to study various impacts as well as types of choice focusing on magnet schools, vouchers, and charter schools. Some projects explore the types of choice together while others have isolated one type of choice to isolate the independent impact.

Magnet Schools
In Public School Choice: Magnet Schools, Peer Effects, and Student Achievement, an experimental design study of magnet and regular public school students, Dale Ballou examined peer effects and student achievement. This project found that peers have a significant positive impact on middle school student achievement and this peer effect explains some but not all of the magnet school effect. Peer effects were estimated to differ by more than half a year’s normal growth in math between a school where the student body is 75% black versus a school in which 25% of students are black. This finding shows that peer effects can have a strong impact on student performance.

School Vouchers
William Howell and Paul Peterson led multiple studies for NCSC over the past several years. One, the Advanced Analyses of Randomized School Voucher experiments, was an experimental design study of voucher effects. Positive effects in reading and math achievement were found solely for African-American students who used a voucher to move from public to a private school. Peterson and Howell also conducted a research project in Florida about the generalizability of gains on state tests. This study found that Florida’s A+ ranking system provided better information about the school than the federal adequate yearly progress qualification. Findings in Impacts of Choice and Competition in Milwaukee show that increased competition facilitated by more relaxed barriers for choice schools led to higher student achievement in traditional public schools.

Charter Schools
Much of the continuing research at the NCSC examines charter schools. In the project, Longitudinal Analysis on Student Choice Patterns, researchers Dale Ballou, Mark Berends, and John Cronin explored choice patterns in the context of NCLB, charter legislation, and student achievement. In Best Practice in High-Achieving Charter Schools, Principal Investigator Tom Loveless found that both conversion and start-up charter schools have an overall positive impact on achievement but conversion charter schools are still generally performing below the state average. In separate studies, researchers Mark Berends and Michael Kamil found reading instruction varied between choice schools and traditional public schools. The Chicago International Charter School (CICS) is studied by Kenneth Wong in the project Culture, Organization, Practices, and Cost of Choice in Urban schools. CICS is unique in that it has eleven campuses and partners with four Education Management Organizations (EMOs) to run them. Student performance is found to vary significantly between schools but the distribution of achievement mirrors that of traditional public schools. The study also finds that spending patterns differ between charter and traditional public schools, but there is mixed evidence on whether this corresponds with differences in achievement.

These are just some of the findings from the research projects conducted by NCSC researchers. For more information on these projects, as well as others in areas such as inter- and intra-district school choice and the impacts of No Child Left Behind, check out the website!


This brief explores the policy context surrounding the development of the charter school law in Indiana by conducting in-depth interviews with key stakeholders as well as analyzing documents related to the period of adoption. The report describes how diverse elements can come together to create a unique policy environment, focusing on issues of public collective action, trust between institutions, and investment from entities outside the city government. The charter school law in Indiana was unique in that it gave not only local school boards and public state universities the ability to charter schools, but it also gave the mayor of Indianapolis this authority in the 11 districts within the city limits. The key findings from this research were that civic capacity came together after the establishment of the Mayor’s Office of Charter Schools and that the change in education policy was driven by the public, outside the city government.

To read the brief, go to www.vanderbilt.edu/schoolchoice/documents/briefs/brief_Smrekar_COMPLETE.pdf
The latest research brief released by the NCSC examines the factors that contribute to principals’ (including traditional public school, private school, and magnet school leaders) perceptions of competition from charter schools and the effect this perception has on leadership behavior. The sample was comprised of a matched convenience sample of 101 traditional public schools, 22 magnet schools, and 15 private schools. Multiple areas of principals’ perceptions and practices were analyzed.

Overall, the principals perceived few impacts of competition from charter schools. Proximity of charter schools, the number of charter schools in a given area, and the proportion of students in an area or district that are attending charter schools were used to measure actual competition. The proximity of a charter school to a traditional public school was found to impact a principal’s perception of competition for teachers and students. As might be expected, more charter schools in an area led to greater perceptions of negative effects on other schools in the area. However, how principals reported spending their time was not related to their perception of charter school competition. This brief is based on a paper by Marisa Cannata which is included in our book, School Choice and School Improvement, released in March by Harvard Education Press.

Choice Connections

Research Brief—How Do Principals Respond to Charter School Competition

The roundtable session at AERA included a robust discussion about the implication of charter school laws and context and how these things might impact the findings of studies. Also at AERA, Claire Smrekar and Madeline Mavrorganato presented Taking Charge of Choice: How Charter School Policy Contexts Matter in a separate session. Mark Berends presented a second paper at a session that featured current rigorous research on charter schools and vouchers. This paper was called School Choice Options, Instructional Conditions, and Student Achievement Gains and was co-authored by Berends, Cannata, Cravens, Goldring, Penaloz, and Stein. “it is always a great opportunity to get feedback on your work and learn from researchers working in the same area,” Cannata said while reflecting on the center’s busy conference schedule. “Our work is improved by the feedback and new insights learned during these presentations.”

These papers are available on our website by conducting an author search on our Research Publications page at http://www.vanderbilt.edu/schoolchoice/research.publications.php

Conference Presentations of New Research Findings

National Center on School Choice researchers have continued to share their research findings through participation in multiple conferences including the Spring 2011 Conference of the Society for Research on Educational Effectiveness (SREE), the Annual Conference of the Association for Education Finance and Policy (AEFP), and American Educational Research Association (AERA) Annual Meeting.

At AERA in April, NCSC Associate Director Marisa Cannata chaired a roundtable session on School Choice and Innovations: What’s Different About Charter Schools? Multiple NCSC researchers papers were also featured in this session including Choosing More School: Extended Time Policies and Student Achievement Across Seasons in Charter and Traditional Public Schools by Marc L. Stein and Bess A. Rose of Johns Hopkins University, Ability Grouping, Classroom Instruction, and Students’ Mathematics Gains in Charter and Traditional Public Schools by Center Director Mark Berends and Kristi Donaldson of the University of Notre Dame, and Much Ado About Nothing? Innovation in Charter Schools by Courtney Preston, NCSC Principal Investigator Ellen Goldring, Mark Berends, and Marisa Cannata. An additional paper, Does Charter Status Determine Preferences? Comparing the Hiring Preferences of Charter and Traditional Public School Principals, coauthored by Marisa Cannata and Mimi Engel was featured in the session at AERA as well as presented at the AEFP Annual Conference. Each of these papers was also featured at the SREE conference in Washington, DC.

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Choice in the News

Renewed Interest in School Vouchers
Earlier this year, the U.S. Supreme Court upheld an Arizona tax credit given to parents who pay tuition for their children to attend private schools. Since this ruling, multiple states including Indiana and Wisconsin among others, have proposed creating tuition vouchers or tax credits in order to expand school choice. Wisconsin’s proposed legislation would expand the Milwaukee Parental Choice Voucher Program statewide. An Indiana bill was signed into law May 5th establishing both a tuition voucher program and a tax deduction. The D.C. Opportunity Scholarship, a school voucher program in Washington, D.C., received renewed funding through the recent federal budget compromise. These are just a few examples of increased interest in vouchers as a method of promoting school choice.

Federal Grant Programs Encourage School Choice
Many federal education programs in the past year have included grantees focused on an expansion of school choice in various forms. Race to the Top selection criteria included points for the state’s school choice environment, focusing on charter schools. 14% of Investing in Innovation fund grants awarded in August 2010 went to organizations promoting, supporting, or creating schools of choice. New Schools for New Orleans, a non-profit working with the Recovery School District to turn around academically failing schools, is one of those grantees and intends to use its grant to partner with three charter management organizations set to manage three of the nine remaining failing schools in Fall 2011. As these programs mature, more information on the impact of choice schools will be available for study to help shape future federal education grant programs and policies.

School Choice Week
School Choice Week was observed the week of January 24th. Throughout this week, the National Center on School Choice highlighted different aspects of research into school choice through the blog on our website. These areas included such important topics as student achievement, teachers, policy, and charter and magnet school student body composition.

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.