Choice Points with Center Director Mark Berends

A Season of Firsts

Fall is a time for fresh starts—
for newly sharpened pencils and
shiny new books, for fresh ideas
and creative innovations.

Of course, not everything at the
Center is new. In the midst of
change, we are continuing to do
what we have done since we
received our first U.S. Depart-
ment of Education dollars: to
pull together multiple disciplines
and methodologies in the study
of charter, magnet, and private
schools; vouchers; teacher re-
cruitment; school management;
and state policymaking. And we
remain committed to our out-
reach goal to get the word out.
We want scholars, officials,
practitioners and citizens to
know about new developments
in the school choice debate.
And we want to communicate
policy recommendations for
future generations of America’s
children.

So we are bringing you this
newsletter. Here we hope to
provide you with everything you
want to know about happenings
in the school choice world,
from research to events to peo-
ple in the news.

We are also hosting our first
national conference. Later this
month we will gather research-
ers and policymakers from
around the nation to talk about
charter schools, specifically
considering what fosters gains
and growth.

Read on to learn more.

NCSC Announces Charter Schools Conference

The National Center on School
Choice (NCSC) is pleased to
announce that we are hosting a
national conference on charter
school research.

Geared to academic researchers
and policymakers, the confer-
ence will be held at the Wyatt
Center on the Peabody campus
of Vanderbilt University on
September 28 and 29, 2006.
Conference speakers are top
experts in the fields of econom-
ics, law, political science, psy-
chology, public finance, and
sociology. In three panel discus-
sions, they will cover teaching
and learning in charter schools,
governance and finance, and
charter school effects on stu-
dent achievement.

We invite you to
join us. No regis-
tration fees are
required, but we
do request that
you submit a regis-
tration form be-
forehand so we
know you’re com-
ing.

Turn the page to
learn more about
our program, pan-
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for registering. Then visit our
website at www.vanderbilt.edu/
schoolchoice/confERENCE.

Choice Centers
A newsletter of the national center on school choice

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Choice, too. With the publica-
tion of this, our first newsletter,
we are beginning our third year
of a federally funded grant to
study school choice. We are
also announcing our first fall
conference; rolling out new
research updates; and introduc-
ing three additions to our staff.

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Choice Connections
National Conference on Charter Schools

Registration How-To’s

Registration is easy for this month’s conference on charter schools. No fees are required. Simply follow one of the options below.

1. Use the online registration system by September 21, 2006: vanderbilt.edu/schoolchoice/conference/register.html.
2. Download, complete, and fax your registration form by September 18, 2006 to: Conference Registrar, (615)322-4488.
3. Download, complete, and mail your registration form by September 21, 2006 to: Conference Registrar, National Center on School Choice, Peabody #152, 230 Appleton Place, Nashville, TN 37203.

Questions? Contact Susie Jackson at (615) 322-8107 (between 9AM and 5PM CST) or susanne.jackson@vanderbilt.edu.

Charter School Experts Share: What Fosters Growth and Outcomes?

We will be welcoming a distinguished set of speakers to the conference from the nation’s leading universities and research centers.

Dr. Mark Schneider will deliver the keynote address, Shaping a National Research Agenda, on Thursday evening. As Commissioner of the National Center for Education Statistics at the U.S. Department of Education, he will discuss future opportunities in federal data collections for the next generation of education research.

Previously Dr. Schneider served as Distinguished Professor of political science at the State University of New York at Stony Brook. He has written widely in the areas of urban politics and public policy. His articles have appeared in all the major political science, sociology, and policy journals. His 1989 book, The Competitive City, won special recognition by the American Political Science Association’s Urban Politics Section for its theoretical contribution to the study of urban politics.


tion. His new book, Charter Schools: Hope or Hype? will be published by Princeton University Press in 2007. We are honored to have him.

Among our conference panelists will be Dale Ballou, Mark Berends, Ellen Goldring, James Guthrie and Claire Smrekar (Vanderbilt University); Robert Bifulco (University of Connecticut); Dominic Brewer (University of Southern California); Richard Buddin and Ron Zimmer (RAND); Paul Hill (University of Washington); Helen Ladd (Duke University); Joe Nathan (University of Minnesota); Paul Peterson (Harvard University); Michael Podgursky (University of Missouri); Sheree Speakman (WCLS Group Limited); Herbert Walberg (Stanford University); and Kenneth Wong (Brown University).

In a panel discussion format, these scholars will present first versions of their research papers. After the conference, they will have an opportunity to revise their preliminary analyses. The revised papers will be published in an edited volume, Charter Schools: Their Growth and Outcomes, by Lawrence Erlbaum Associates next year. You may view the latest news on this publication at the National Center on School Choice website.
Choice Cases

Studying Charter Schools: A Question of Fixed Effects

The population of students served by charter schools in Idaho is growing at a modest pace. Charter schools tend to attract students with better than average test scores. Newer charter schools appear to be more effective than those that have been around longer.

Vanderbilt scholar Dale Ballou, with Bettie Teasley and Tim Zeidner, investigated the effectiveness of Idaho charter schools compared to traditional public schools. They used two estimators: a comparison of average test score gains in both types of schools, controlling for a limited number of student characteristics; and a student fixed effects estimator. Their findings, unlike other studies of charter school performance, were sensitive to the choice of estimator. When student fixed effects were included, elementary charter schools appeared more effective than traditional public schools. But when student fixed effects were omitted, this was no longer true. Charter school effects were negative or statistically insignificant at every grade.

Literature has favored the fixed effects estimator as a way of removing selection bias. But according to Ballou et al., the fixed effects estimator can exacerbate biases stemming from heterogeneity in schools and school-student matches. Why? Because it uses only students who move between regular public and charter schools. These students may not represent all charter school students, so there should be no presumption that the fixed effects estimator provides a more accurate answer to the effectiveness question.

To read the full version of this paper, go to vanderbilt.edu/schoolchoice/conference/papers.html.

The Public School/Private School Debate

This summer, the U. S. Department of Education released a study that compared the reading and math performance of 4th and 8th-graders in private and public schools. The study reported that the performance of private school students was superior to that of public school students until statistical adjustments were made for student characteristics. At that point, the comparison rates shifted. The private school advantage among 4th-graders gave way to a public school advantage of 4.5 points in both reading in math. After the same adjustments were made for 8th-graders, private schools retained a 7 point advantage in reading but achieved only parity in math.

In response to this study, Center researcher Paul Peterson and Elena Llaudet of Harvard wrote a paper showing the severe limitations of the Department of Education’s work. In their paper, the Harvard researchers point out that the study’s measures of student characteristics are flawed by inconsistent classification across the public and private sectors and by the inclusion of factors open to school influence.

Using improved Alternative Models to look at the same data as the original study but substituting better measures of student characteristics, Paul Peterson and Elena Llaudet identified a private school advantage in 11 out of 12 public-private comparisons. In 8th-grade math, the private school advantage varied between 3 and 7 test points; in reading, it varied between 9 and 13 points. Among 4th graders in math, private schools outperformed public schools by 2 to 4 points. In 4th-grade reading, private schools showed advantage ranging from 6 to 10 points. Except when parity is observed, all differences were statistically significant.

According to Dr. Peterson, the results from the Alternative Models should not be understood as showing that private schools outperform public schools. Without information on prior student achievement, one cannot answer questions about schools’ efficacy in raising student test scores.

For a full version of the paper, go to ksg.harvard.edu/pepg.
Choice News
Center Adds Three New Members

The NCSC is happy to welcome three new additions to our staff. Roberto Penaloza is our statistician who comes to us from the Washington and Lee University, where he served as Visiting Professor of Economics. Dr. Penaloza completed his undergraduate studies in Ecuador and received his master of arts and doctor of philosophy degrees from the Department of Economics at Vanderbilt University. His Center research focuses on statistical methodology and data analysis techniques for exploring student achievement patterns in traditional public and schools of choice.

Genevieve Zottola joins the Center as project manager, after recently completing her Master’s of Public Policy degree at Vanderbilt. Previously, Jenny taught for four years at the middle school level after earning a bachelor’s degree in Secondary Education from Western Connecticut State University. Currently she is researching student achievement patterns in public and private city high schools, drawing upon a nationally representative sample for empirical analysis.

Ann Primus has also joined the Center as project manager. Prior to coming to the Center, she worked for several years as a writer and editor in both the public and private sectors. Additionally, she served in a variety of capacities at schools in both Nashville and the Washington, DC area. Most recently, she was school coordinator for Everybody Wins, a Washington, DC-based literacy and mentoring program for children in Title I schools. Her work at the Center includes communications, reporting, and serving as the Center’s managing editor for publications such as the Handbook of Research on School Choice.

Center Lands New Grant from the Department of Education

The National Center on School Choice is pleased to announce that it has received a new grant from the U.S. Department of Education’s Institute of Education Services. The $3.3 million grant will fund a three year study comparing achievement gains and growth in schools of choice to regular public schools. The study will also look at differences among these schools in curriculum, instruction, and organizational conditions that promote achievement.

In the spring of 2007 and 2008, NCSC researchers will administer principal and teacher surveys in about 280 schools of choice (charter, magnet, Catholic, and other religious and independent schools) and matched regular public schools. The data collected will allow for multi-leveling modeling strategies to estimate student achievement growth nested in students nested in teachers nested in schools—a rare quasi-experimental design across districts and school types.

There have been many calls for understanding what is going on inside schools of choice. But never before has a study gathered the same measures across a wide range of organizational, curricular and instructional conditions to examine differences among schools of choice and regular public schools. In addition, no study has been able to link measures for these conditions to student achievement growth in reading, Language Arts and mathematics across a number of school years.

According to Center Director Mark Berends, “The findings from this study will advance our understanding of the conditions inside schools that promote student achievement growth.” Thus, the study will provide vital information for policymakers, educators, and practitioners to pursue effective choice reforms.