

## Special points of interest:

- A season of firsts: the Center announces new research, new people, and upcoming events.
- On September 28-29, the Center will host a conference on charter schools research at the Wyatt Center on the campus of Peabody College, Vanderbilt University.
- The Choice Center has received a \$3.3 million grant from the Department of Education to study charter schools.

## Inside this issue:

- Conference Experts Share 2
- Conference Registration How-To's 2
- Choice Cases: A Question of Fixed Effects 3
- The Public/Private School Debate
- Conference Papers Preview 3
- Choice News: Newcomers 4
- Center Lands IES Grant

## 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.



It is a season of firsts at the National Center on School

Choice, too. With the publication 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 introducing three additions to our staff.

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. Department of Education dollars: to pull together multiple disciplines and methodologies in the study of charter, magnet, and private schools; vouchers; teacher recruitment; school management; and state policymaking. And we remain committed to our outreach 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 people in the news.

We are also hosting our first national conference. Later this month we will gather researchers 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 conference 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 economics, law, political science, psychology, public finance, and sociology. In three panel discussions, they will cover teaching and learning in charter schools,

governance and finance, and charter school effects on student achievement.

We invite you to join us. No registration fees are required, but we do request that you submit a registration form beforehand so we know you're coming.

Turn the page to learn more about our program, panelists, and process

for registering. Then visit our website at [www.vanderbilt.edu/schoolchoice/conference](http://www.vanderbilt.edu/schoolchoice/conference).



The Wyatt Center on Vanderbilt's Peabody campus, where conferees will gather.

# 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](http://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](mailto:susanne.jackson@vanderbilt.edu).

**The conference will bring together top scholars from across the nation.**



**Panel papers will be published next year in an edited volume called Charter Schools: Their Growth and Outcomes.**

### 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.

His book, *Choosing Schools: Consumer Choice and the Quality of American Schools* (Princeton University Press, 2000) won the Aaron Wildavsky best book prize from the Policy Studies Organiza-

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](http://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](http://ksg.harvard.edu/pepg).

## Conference Papers

*Methods of Assessing the Achievement of Students in Charter Schools*  
Caroline Hoxby  
Harvard University

*Instructional Conditions in Charter Schools*  
Ellen Goldring  
Vanderbilt University

*Teacher Labor Markets in Charter and Regular Public Schools*  
Michael Podgursky  
University of Missouri at Columbia

*Charter School Governance*  
Paul T. Hill  
University of Washington

*Charter School Finance*  
Sheree Speakman  
WCLS Group Unlimited

*Charter School Law*  
Kenneth Wong  
Brown University

*Charter School Effects on Achievement: Where We Are and Where We're Going*  
Mark Berends  
Vanderbilt University

*Charter School Outcomes in California*  
Ron Zimmer  
Richard Buddin  
RAND

*Charter School Outcomes in North Carolina*  
Helen F. Ladd  
Duke University  
Robert BiFulco  
University of Connecticut

*Charter School Outcomes in Idaho*  
Dale Ballou  
Vanderbilt University

# National Center on School Choice

Suite 400 LSI Wyatt Center  
Suite 060 Wyatt Center  
Box 152 GPC  
1930 South Dr.  
Nashville, TN 37203-57214

Phone: 322-8107  
Fax 4th Floor: 615-322-4488  
Fax 1st Floor: 615-322-8828

[www.vanderbilt.edu/  
schoolchoice](http://www.vanderbilt.edu/schoolchoice)\*

## Director

Mark Berends: 615-322-8045  
[mark.berends@vanderbilt.edu](mailto:mark.berends@vanderbilt.edu)

## Associate Director

Dale Ballou: 615-322-8039  
[dale.ballou@vanderbilt.edu](mailto:dale.ballou@vanderbilt.edu)

## Administrative Associate

Susie Jackson: 615-322-8107  
[susanne.jackson@vanderbilt.edu](mailto:susanne.jackson@vanderbilt.edu)

## Research Associates

Roberto Penalosa: 615-322-2878  
[roberto.v.penalosa@vanderbilt.edu](mailto:roberto.v.penalosa@vanderbilt.edu)

Ann Primus: 615-936-8885  
[ann.primus@vanderbilt.edu](mailto:ann.primus@vanderbilt.edu)

Jenny Zottola: 615-936-7867  
[genevieve.c.zottola@vanderbilt.edu](mailto:genevieve.c.zottola@vanderbilt.edu)

We'd love to hear your feedback.  
Send comments to  
[ann.primus@vanderbilt.edu](mailto:ann.primus@vanderbilt.edu)

\*Special thanks to Vanderbilt senior Warren Langevin for his design and upkeep of the Choice Center's website.

## National Center on School Choice

# Choice News

## Center Adds Three New Members

The NCSC is happy to welcome three new additions to our staff. *Roberto Penalosa* is our statistician who comes to us from the Washington and Lee University, where he served as Visiting Professor of Economics. Dr. Penalosa 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*.



*New Center staff Roberto Penalosa, Ann Primus, and Jenny Zottola*

## 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 achieve-

ment 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.