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Introduction to the Special Issue on Contemporary School Choice Research

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This special issue of the *Peabody Journal of Education* concerns one of the most challenging reform issues of our times—K–12 school choice. Along with school finance and accountability associated with the federal No Child Left Behind Act and state accountability systems, choice is much debated and sorely in need of both solid research and well-informed federal, state, and local policies. This issue represents some of the most recent empirical research that can inform policymakers, practitioners, and researchers.

This issue brings together a multidisciplinary group of researchers whose diverse analytical and methodological perspectives provide fresh understanding on the design, implementation, and effects of various types of school choice initiatives. Such an effort is central to the mission of the National Research Center on School Choice, Competition and Student Achievement, in which Kenneth Wong is the founding director and Herbert Walberg is a project investigator. This Institute for Education Sciences

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(IES)–funded research center (Grant R305A040043A) promotes empirical research to address a wide range of issues, among which are the following: Will school choice raise student achievement? Satisfy parents and students? Improve instructional and curricular quality? Stratify or segregate students along racial and income lines? Meet the needs of special education and disabled students? Spur traditional school districts to change their behavior? Find itself limited by political and legal constraints? And create a more satisfactory professional environment for teachers? These are the kinds of issues that our contributors address in this issue.

Setting the Stage

School choice is inherently interesting not only with respect to policy but also from the perspective of several scholarly disciplines (see Walberg & Bast, 2003, for a detailed account from the perspective of several academic disciplines).The history of school choice, for example, is much less well known than it should be. From the early American origins, choice was much more prevalent than commonly assumed. Much of it was locally funded and locally controlled, enabling small groups of citizens in their own communities to engage in policy deliberations and exert their preferences in the governance and operations of the one or few local, often one-room schools. It came as no surprise that in his description of the American democracy in the mid 19th century, Alexis de Tocqueville (1835/2000) opened his seminal treatise by referring to the local government's "rights of individuality." Observing the state–local relations in the New England townships, de Tocqueville wrote, "Thus it is true that the tax is voted by the legislature, but it is the township that apportions and collects it; the existence of a school is imposed, but the township builds it, pays for it, and directs it." (p. 63). Public education was primarily an affair of the local citizenry.

Demographers, sociologists, and political scientists join historians in bringing forward illuminating perspectives on school choice. With urbanization, for example, ever larger schools and school districts led to centralized governance over ever larger geographic areas (Berry, 2005). State legislators increasingly paid for and exerted control over schools and districts, which often led to state–local tensions. Even further, because of federal testing and other requirements, the No Child Left Behind Act has caused further complications and may lead to litigation among districts, states, and the federal government.

For these and other reasons, local citizens felt alienated and less influential on local school policies. Religious tensions also arose, exemplified in

Boston's Horace Mann during the period 1827 and 1848, in which the "one best system" with its Protestant leanings led recent immigrant Catholic groups to begin and choose their own schools in Boston. Later Catholics and other religious groups founded parochial schools throughout the nation.

Psychologists have noted that people tend to like the choices they make themselves. Some experts, however, believe that people may have insufficient information and experience to make complex choices and even that they may be unhappy with too many choices. Do such contentions suggest that parents, the electorate, school boards, or legislators decide what is best for students?

Choice, of course, is also in the domain of economics. Larger schools, larger districts, and increasingly dominant state finance and control of schools may achieve economies of scale in avoiding duplication of, say, principals, school boards, and superintendents. It may also afford specialized expertise and insights at the state level to transfer to local schools. But at what cost? Are state and large local boards as well informed about local conditions and distinctive preferences as citizens and leaders near each school that are used to making their own consumer decisions?

All these are provocative questions that remain to be answered more consensually over the coming decades. The articles in this issue and the citations provide good starting points not only for further research, but also for providing some beginning answers to these and other policy questions.

Current Choice Issues

Although school choice has a considerable history and many precedents around the nation and throughout the world, today's choices are distinctive and poorly understood. Before turning to the articles, consider the principal forms of choice increasingly debated and offered.

Private schools are, of course, privately funded and privately governed. Private schools take two forms: religious (or parochial) and independent. None of these distinctions are crisp, because private schools may be regulated to varying degrees and may receive varying amounts of public funds. Worth pointing out are some 1 million students that are homeschooled by parents who believe they can better educate their children than can public or private schools—and choose to do so.

Largely urban magnet schools were formed in response to desegregation decrees to create "m-to-m" transfers; that is, majority to minority and minority to majority student transfers. They usually had distinctive identities in an effort to draw students out of their racially concentrated

neighborhoods to take advantages of their offerings. With federal court approval, the hope was that they would avoid "White flight" and middle--class transfers by parents who wanted to avoid seemingly arbitrary "forced bussing."

Also concentrated in big cities, charter schools are privately governed but publicly funded and less closely regulated than regular public schools. They are chartered for a term, often for 5 years. Their continuation is in principle determined by whether they can attract sufficient numbers of students, live within their budgets, and maintain reasonable levels of test scores. The No Child Left Behind Act promotes charter school choice because states and districts may be required to allow families to transfer their children from failing schools.

Vouchers, often referred to as "scholarships," are funded privately by citizens and firms or publicly by states and school districts. They can be used to pay all or some of a student's tuition to attend private schools. The state-funded voucher program in Cleveland was challenged on the ground that over 90% of its students enrolled in sectarian schools. In June 2002, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled 5 to 4 that the Cleveland program did not violate the First Amendment's Establishment Clause, which separates the affairs of religious institutions and the government. The U.S. Supreme Court found that students may attend parochial schools if the choice of attendance is that of their parents. There are many variations on scholarship plans, including restricting attendance to poor children or to failing districts (see Walberg & Bast, 2003, for a description of the details of such variants).

Finally, several states have "tuition tax credits." These arrangements allow a family to deduct some or all of the payments for private tuition and other school-related expenses from their state income taxes. Because these may discriminate against poor families who have little or no income on which to pay taxes, some plans reimburse them for their private school payments.

Overview of the Issue

This issue examines a variety of choice-based reform initiatives. The first two articles look at scholarship programs. In the first article "Looking Inside the Black Box: What School Factors Explain Voucher Gains in Washington, DC?" Patrick Wolf and Daniel Hoople focus on our nation's capitol, which, similar to many big cities, has long exhibited high costs and poor achievement. From a rigorous, randomized experiment, they conclude that receiving schools that do best have less extensive facilities, more con-

centrated programs, advantaged peer students, responsible teachers, and time-demanding homework.

Virginia Weidner and Carolyn Herrington, in their article "Are Parents Informed Consumers: Evidence From the Florida McKay Scholarship Program," report that more than 60% of African American and Hispanic participants chose religious schools. Parents who participated in the program were of higher socioeconomic status and were better satisfied than parents whose children participated in default programs.

The next three articles examine charter schools. Jack Buckley and Mark Schneider, in "Are Charter School Parents More Satisfied With Schools? Evidence From Washington, DC," employ sophisticated statistical methodology to explore the extent to which charter school enrollments affect parent satisfaction. As they argue, evidence of this relationship would suggest that rapid growth of the numbers of charter school parents in an area may be taken as an indication of a self-reinforcing charter school movement in which those satisfied with their charter schools inform and stimulate others to participate.

Natalie Lacireno-Paquet, in "Charter School Enrollments in Context: An Exploration of Organization and Policy Influences," employs a nationwide sample to describe charter schools. She finds that state policies have strong effects on the racial and socioeconomic composition of charter schools. The composition of schools operated by for-profit school-management firms, however, is less generally predictable and depends on the type of firm and the location of the school.

In "Cyber and Home School Charter Schools: Adopting Policy to New Forms of Public Schooling," Luis Huerta, María-Fernanda González, and Chad d'Entremont present one of the first descriptive analyses of these new and controversial charter school forms. Recent controversies and developments in California and Pennsylvania suggest to these authors new state and local financial and operational regulations.

The next two articles consider parental preferences in the marketlike environment. In "Switching Schools? A Closer Look at Parents' Initial Interest in and Knowledge About the Choice Provisions of the No Child Left Behind Act," William Howell reports that few Massachusetts parents, qualified to transfer their children from failing to successful schools, actually knew their children's schools were failing. As other surveys have shown, most of them would prefer to enroll their children in private schools. Furthermore, what is the continuing and pervasive appeal, especially among minorities of private schools? In his article, "An Analysis of Private School Mission Statements," Albert Boerema analyzes mission statements of private schools in British Columbia. He characterizes their stated distinctive beliefs, goals and objectives, environments, and services

they offer. His summary provides insights into why parents, particularly minority parents, express preferences for private schools.

The last two studies provide broad perspective on choice and the institution of public education. In "The Effect of Residential School Choice on Public High School Graduation Rates," Jay Greene and Marcus Winters analyze the effect of school geographical district sizes in Florida on public high school graduation rates. Smaller districts tend to have higher graduation rates. Contrary to the thinking behind the long and substantial trend of district consolidation, Greene and Winters find that the smaller the district, the better the graduation rate.

Jacob Adams and Paul Hill, in "Educational Accountability in a Regulated Market," see debate on choice as often centered on the relatively extreme positive and negative views of free markets. They explain their moderate view is preferred and call for a blend of government regulation, entrepreneurship, and family choice. They specify how such a regulated market could be created.

To conclude, this special issue offers a collection of fresh empirical findings on school choice issues. Given the controversial nature of the choice debate, this issue makes a timely contribution. It provides a research base for considering the design, implementation, and effects (both intended and unintended) of choice initiatives. The IES Center on School Choice will continue to encourage scholarly research on this pressing policy challenge.

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