



Negotiating Public and Private: Philosophical Frameworks for School Choice

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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Beneath controversies about whether school choice “works” are deep philosophical and moral commitments about how choice advances different educational values, purposes and aims. This policy brief takes a step back from practical debates about such issues as efficiency and effectiveness to examine the underlying philosophical debate. In particular, this brief examines how different claims for and against school choice pose different understandings of “public” and “private” educational goals and priorities.

While many scholars, researchers and advocates frequently use the terms “public” and “private,” the meaning assigned to these terms varies widely. Philosophy offers resources for clarifying these terms. In particular, different philosophical frameworks allow for the clearer understanding and evaluation of various choice proposals, especially in terms of their implications for the “public” purposes of American education.

The brief begins by describing how school choice policies have shifted commonly accepted definitions of public and private education. This section is followed by a summary of five philosophical frameworks that might provide a basis for clarifying the “public” and “private”: liberty, equity, justice, pluralism and democracy. Each of these frameworks construes the relationship between the public and private in different ways. Some arguments, for example, equate the public good with many satisfied individuals, each pursuing their self-interests. Others argue that the public good is synonymous with an active citizenry that creates the schools it thinks best through the processes of democratic deliberation.

Because debates about choice are muddled by imprecise terms and unarticulated philosophies, this brief calls for greater integration between conceptual studies of school choice and educational policy and practice. In particular, it recommends that policy analysts, policymakers and other stakeholders:

- Employ philosophical frameworks, especially those of liberty, equity, justice, pluralism and democracy, to help interpret how various school choice policies affect what is considered desirable in and for schools.

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- Employ philosophical frameworks to clarify the assumptions that various empirical studies make about what is desirable in schools.
- Employ and articulate philosophical concepts to frame efforts to direct policy and practice, in order to make assumptions about what is desirable explicit and to better align policy and goals.