School Choice and Accountability

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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This policy brief explores the intersection of school choice and accountability. Based on a review of research since 1970, we first develop a typology of four distinct models of accountability: bureaucratic, performance, market and professional. We both define these and demonstrate how they are embedded in the school choice movement. Second, we examine several school choice options—vouchers and tax credits, charter schools, virtual/cyber schools, home schools and inter- and intradistrict choice—and detail the varied accountability systems inherent in each. Third, we explore the impact of school choice programs on the accountability of traditional district schools. Finally, we provide four practical recommendations for policymakers and other interested parties:

- Consider school accountability as something more than testing performance or providing information for parents-as-consumers—the emphases reflected in the current prevalence of performance- and market-based systems. Instead, shape accountability systems to examine whether schools are directly contributing to the greater societal good.
- When creating or judging school choice policies, consider local context. Choice policies and accountability systems vary widely across the US and from one community or locale to another.
- Consider employing different types of accountability at different levels and in different combinations to hedge risk. Accountability systems that rely on a single accountability mechanism are susceptible to inefficiencies or inequities.
- When evaluating accountability systems, rely on empirical research. Possible future studies investigating the effects of various combinations of accountability types may be particularly useful.