



Educational Innovation and Diversification in School Choice Plans

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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The concept of innovation has been closely tied to the push for school choice, serving as a key rationale for such choice plans as charter schools, vouchers and other alternatives to neighborhood-based school assignment.

While innovation continually occurs to varying degrees throughout American education, some versions of school choice are specifically designed to accelerate the pace of innovation, not only in how education is organized, but more importantly in teaching and learning, where substantive innovation is thought to have the greatest and most direct impact for students. While some choice reforms are specifically designed to force innovation by generating competition, questions remain as to what extent and how these reforms actually do so.

This review points to several considerations for encouraging substantive educational innovations:

- As with innovations in other sectors, educational improvement entails directing considerable resources into particular schools to develop and pilot specific new approaches to teaching and learning with different populations, rather than trying to do it on the cheap through the relatively simple restructuring of choice models.
- The development of innovations involves nurturing and shielding such efforts from immediate mandates and competitive pressures, rather than forcing schools representing new ideas to sink or swim in the educational marketplace.
- As noted, there are unique qualities around education that defy the easy application of basic market models. If markets are to be used effectively for organizing the production and distribution of education, more thought has to be given to the type of market reflected in education, such as the specific conditions that can best encourage innovation.
- Inability to routinely provide good information about school quality can motivate schools to choose symbolic action rather than substantive innovation; for markets to work effectively, informational “asymmetries” between producers and consumers need to be addressed.

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We cannot rely on competition alone to generate quality information for families. While many point to value-added modeling or parent information centers, non-market efforts such as rigorous school inspections (as in the United Kingdom) that provide parents with information on multiple dimensions of school quality can also be useful.

- Furthermore, governments are often better suited than independent market actors to provide a range of options for families. We know that professional activity in the state sector has often been more successful at generating innovations. It could also be that innovation will flow more from government-guaranteed choice plans such as magnet schools, where efforts are made to establish and sustain a range of options.