



The Impact of School Choice Reforms on Student Achievement

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Gary Miron, Stephanie Evergreen, and Jessica Urschel

The Evaluation Center, Western Michigan University

The Great Lakes Center for Education Research & Practice

PO Box 1263

East Lansing, MI 48826

Phone: (517) 203-2940

Email: greatlakescenter@greatlakescenter.org

Web Site: <http://www.greatlakescenter.org>

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This policy brief closely examines and summarizes the evidence regarding school choice and its impact on student achievement. After surveying studies across various choice forms, we selected 87 based on specific criteria. Each of these has been analyzed and assigned impact and quality ratings. Impact ratings indicate whether the choice schools' student performance was better or worse than comparison groups'; quality ratings reflect a study's score on a weighted scale that assesses six dimensions of research design. Results for both impact and quality ratings are summarized and mapped to facilitate reference and comparisons.

Key questions addressed in this policy brief were: What is the relative scope and quality of empirical research on school choice and student achievement? What are the overall conclusions that can be drawn from empirical research on school choice and student achievement?

Overall, the existing body of research on school choice reveals a mixed picture, with some studies suggesting positive impacts, and others indicating negative impacts. Large differences appear across school choice types in terms of the amount of research available, the overall quality of the research, and the conclusions the research supports. Voucher studies, generally of high quality, indicate a slightly positive impact, particularly for African American students. Studies of home schooling are few and fairly weak, with mixed or positive impact findings. There are also few studies of inter-, intradistrict choice and magnet programs, with mixed quality and impact scores. Charters school studies are most numerous, but their quality is also mixed; they indicate that charters generally perform similarly to traditional public schools, a finding that has not changed with time or with the addition of newer, higher-quality studies in recent years.

Aggregate findings across types of school choice hide considerable differences. Within all school choice models, there are certainly successful schools or cases as well seriously flawed ones. At a macro level this policy brief can tell us what the body of research says and whether these models are worth replicating. Nevertheless, all forms of school choice could benefit from a better understanding of factors leading to success within particular schools or groups of schools.

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Recommendations

The mixed findings and quality of the studies analyzed leads to the following recommendations, which may help generate a better informed context for future research and policy design.

- **Improve research on school choice.** Attention to methods should include care in using lottery lists to stimulate random assignment, more matched student designs as state assessment systems improve and expand, and more longitudinal studies. More research is also needed on home schooling and on differences within and among forms of school choice. All researchers should be sure to articulate research design and limitations clearly, and they should offer appropriate cautions to readers about interpreting findings.
- **Improve the interpretation of research on school choice.** Policymakers and other research consumers should not evaluate school choice solely on the basis of outcomes from standardized tests. They should also be skeptical of sweeping conclusions and of press releases with no technical report to back them up. Instead, readers need to consider and reach their own conclusions about such methodological considerations as the population studied, sample size, and relevance of comparison groups. Studies weak in such areas, or that don't offer such detail, cannot be considered reliable. Research consumers should also consider whether the source of a study is an advocacy group—one that never sponsored a study with findings contrary to its position.
- **Reject any claims that research has produced definitive answers on school choice questions.** There are no definitive studies.