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School Choice: Evidence and Recommendations





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Over the past decade, school choice has been examined by a number of books and other publications. This scholarly work typically examines only a single form of school choice. Looking at specific forms of choice, these efforts have provided valuable insights and information. Vouchers, magnet schools, and tax credit policies have each received appropriate attention, as have home schooling and, most recently, charter schools. Other forms of public school choice, as well as “virtual schools,” have also been examined. Each type of choice carries with it different rules and different empirical effects, yet they unquestionably share commonalities.

School Choice: Evidence and Recommendations is a collection of 10 policy briefs, each of which comprehensively considers school choice. The briefs probe key choice issues, mustering evidence and developing cross-choice themes and insights.

School choice is a reform ideal that consistently has been debated and contested. This contentious debate arises, in part, because choice means so many different things to different people. But the debate often overlooks the diversity within the broad realm of school choice and the differences in how specific types of school choice are legislated and implemented.

For instance, these reforms can be designed to pursue a range of outcomes. Choice rules can be written to reduce isolation by race, class, or special needs status; alternatively, choice can have the unintended consequence of becoming a vehicle for accelerating resegregation of our public school systems. Depending on the design and funding incentives, school choice reforms can promote innovation and the development of a diversity of options from which parents can choose; or, they can result in a stratified marketplace that appeals to conservative consumers who eschew innovation. Finally, school choice reforms have the potential to promote accountability or—if the oversight mechanisms are not in place—choice plans can facilitate the circumvention or avoidance of oversight.

Common themes and issues. A key goal of this set of policy briefs is to facilitate a more nuanced understanding of school choice. Each contributor was asked to look broadly at school choice, and the contributors have integrated and summarized the evidence spanning a wide range of choice models. Another common thread in these policy briefs is that they make an effort to consider what impact each approach has on the traditional public school system. Based on this evidence and analysis, each contributor has offered recommendations.

The briefs generally encompass the following six choice models: vouchers/tuition tax credits, charter schools, homeschooling, interdistrict choice, intradistrict choice (including magnet schools and open enrollment plans), and virtual schools. We asked each contributor to address all these choice forms, although—as we discovered—the scope of evidence on homeschooling, cyber schools, and varied forms of inter- and intradistrict choice programs is surprisingly limited.

The six-form typology is useful but it should also be understood to be flexible, since the models overlap considerably. For instance, most virtual or cyber schools are actually charter schools, and a large portion of these schools cater to students that otherwise would have been homeschooled. Similarly, policies promoting inter- and intradistrict choice often intersect.

The process of creating this set of policy briefs has spanned more than a year and has benefited from a rich exchange among the four editors and 16 contributors. Although the universities we hail from are distributed across the country, regular communication by e-mail and telephone made it possible to create a highly interactive study group. Aside from the structure and guidance provided by the editors, each brief was sent to at least three blind reviewers with known strengths in the particular content of the brief. The reviewers provided feedback and guidance to our authors.

Although each brief reached conclusions and recommendations, we do not attempt here to summarize them. We do not want to risk damage to the care our authors have taken in crafting their work. We instead direct the readers to the briefs themselves.

Finally, we wish to extend our appreciation to The Great Lakes Center for Education Research and Practice for providing financial support for the work with no strings attached. The autonomy provided allowed us to find talented contributors and to modify the structure and scope of the project as we determined necessary.

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School Choice and Accountability, Gregg Garn, University of Oklahoma; Casey Cobb, University of Connecticut

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