



REVIEW OF *SCHOOL CHOICE AND SCHOOL PERFORMANCE IN THE NEW YORK CITY PUBLIC SCHOOLS*

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Summary of Review

Over the past decade, big city school systems have scaled-up choice initiatives with remarkable speed. In *School Choice and School Performance in the New York City Public Schools*, Brookings contends that school choice and competition contributed to improved test scores and graduation rates in New York City since the universal high school choice reform began in 2004. However, after the report's lengthy introduction describing and extolling choice and competition, only four pages are dedicated to discussing results, and many of those contentions are problematic. Brookings uses data from several recent reports to conclude that Bloomberg's school reform strategy has paid off academically for the district's students, including low-income and historically disadvantaged students. However, these conclusions are mainly based on causal interpretations of correlational data, and the findings are presented selectively. Similarly, the report's recommendations section, based on Brookings' Education Choice and Competition Index, promotes the expansion and development of Bloomberg's programs, without a logical link to the evidence presented. Consequently, the paper belongs more in the genre of weakly supported advocacy pieces rather than research.

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REVIEW OF *SCHOOL CHOICE AND SCHOOL PERFORMANCE IN THE NEW YORK CITY PUBLIC SCHOOLS*

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I. Introduction

School Choice and School Performance in the New York City Public Schools: Will the Past be Prologue authored by Grover J. Whitehurst and Sarah Whitfield,¹ aggregate findings across a few recent studies to make the case that the expansion of school choice and school competition in New York City (NYC) schools, spearheaded by Mayor Michael Bloomberg, is a major driving factor in increased graduation rates and enhanced performance on state tests of academic achievement. New York City along with Chicago, New Orleans, and Los Angeles are a few of the growing number of cities with policies mandating increased parental choice in school selection, the closure of neighborhood schools not meeting test score targets, and the expansion of charter schools.

New York City is particularly important in the school choice debate: In 2003-2004, there were 22 charter schools in New York City, but by 2012-2013, there were 159 charter schools. Alongside these changes, there have been massive closures of schools due to low performance on standardized tests and the opening of smaller non-selective (unscreened)² high schools in neighborhoods with the highest poverty rates. The explosion of these new schools has been accompanied by policy changes (e.g., a single student application encompassing all public high schools). The large number of schools involved and the significant public and private resources invested in these schools (including at least \$51 million from the Gates Foundation³) make New York City's current choice and competition initiative of national significance.

II. Findings and Conclusions of the Report

The report bases its conclusions on the findings of a few empirical studies that measured test scores and graduation rates in New York City at a time of expansion of choice.⁴ The report concludes, based on these analyses of test scores and graduation statistics, that

some elements of the recent choice initiatives may have contributed to student increases in achievement and retention. Despite their implicit and explicit claims, the authors do admit that they cannot definitely attribute the gains to choice. The authors identify removal of “economic, educational, and residential advantages” (p. 22) as the overarching policy recommendation needing further development in the design of the choice reform. Based on their own pro-choice rating scale, the authors recommend further expanding and improving the NYC choice system by including charter and private schools in the centralized application process; removing any unnecessary admissions screening procedures; replacing low-performing schools with charter schools, especially in low-income or low-performing areas, or both; and improving the web-based application process (pp. 21-22). The authors’ recommendations include calls for more general improvements in instruction, teacher quality, and accountability systems; these recommendations diverge sharply from the overarching pro-choice and pro-competition arguments that characterize the bulk of the paper.

III. The Report’s Rationale for Its Findings and Conclusions

The purpose of the report is to present data linking increased student achievement to the NYC choice model. According to the authors, such causal links provide the rationale for expanding the district’s existing choice system (pp. 2-3). Unsurprisingly, the fundamental finding is that NYC should continue moving full steam ahead with the expansion of competition, choice, and charter schools. However, as the report itself notes, causality cannot be established by the existing studies (pp. 14-17)—but such causal inferences are at the core of the report’s rationale.

IV. The Report’s Use of Research Literature

Although there is a plethora of relevant research in the area of school choice and competition, the authors do not draw on this research. There are also significant methodological issues with the studies that the report does reference. For example, one of the cited studies utilizes an exploratory methodology for analysis and has come under scrutiny for methodological error.⁵ Specifically, there has been concern that there is a lack of randomization and that the study does not account for biases in the variables of comparison. Another cited study shows positive outcomes but has not been peer-reviewed.⁶ This study has methodological issues as well; it is not clear if the new small schools being studied are serving the same students served by the schools that had been shut down. If the students are not the same, then the study has no control group. In addition, the study does not account for selection bias, as evidenced by low levels of English Language learners and students with disabilities, which may cause the results to be overestimated. The final study used heavily by the authors to demonstrate evidence of choice effectiveness uses lottery-based assignment,⁷ which is a consistent and reliable

methodology for determining effects. However, the author of this paper relies on questionable statistical models, one of which includes a test score estimation that is complicated by its proximity to the lottery selection. Since the testing occurs after the lottery, the scores may be affected by whether or not the student decides to attend, consequently causing a loss of the benefit of randomization.⁸

In addition to the weaknesses of the supporting studies, the authors selectively present the data, which has the effect of creating an overly positive picture of the reports referenced. For example, the authors fail to show demographic breakdowns on student gains as demonstrated in the NYC CREDO study. The CREDO study showed how difficult it was to determine gains for marginal groups such as English Language learners, explicitly stating that these groups showed no distinguishable difference in performance between traditional schools and small schools.⁹

The report also argues that the current choice system prevents “cream-skimming,” or the selective acceptance of students into schools of choice based on certain characteristics; however, researchers have published detailed evidence on the inequitable access to schools, particularly for students with disabilities, under the expanded choice systems both in NYC and nationally.¹⁰ The authors of this report do not refer to any of this research. Further, the report contends that the school–student matching system for “unscreened” schools is completely mathematical and immune to school-level selection (pp. 6-7). However, recent qualitative research clearly establishes that the matching design is not solely mathematical and can be weakened by principal manipulation and the lack of enforcement at the district level.¹¹

V. Review of the Report’s Methods

Brookings uses data from several recent reports to conclude that Bloomberg’s school reform strategy pays off for students academically, including low-income and historically disadvantaged students. The report does not present or evaluate the methodological strengths and weaknesses of the research used to support their arguments, and therefore the report’s readers cannot understand the credibility of that evidence without doing further research. In addition, the report selects only a few, non-peer-reviewed studies on the overarching topic. The findings would be strengthened by a clear discussion of the rationale that they used for selecting and analyzing certain studies over others.

VI. Review of the Validity of the Findings and Conclusions

The authors make significant claims regarding the NYC choice system, stating, “equity has also been achieved in the activity of choosing” (p. 8.). However, these conclusions are based on others’ mainly correlational data analyses, and these findings are presented selectively. The Brookings report is essentially an advocacy piece with selective supporting

points. The authors raise important questions about how to capitalize on certain school reforms' past performance in order to produce future success. However, the importance of context is overlooked, and other vital factors such as the roles of socioeconomic status and home language are not addressed. Most importantly, the authors downplay their finding that charter schools have led to increased segregation (pp. 3, 9-10), blaming these outcomes on individual student preferences rather than a problem with the system itself. These omissions in the discussion are curious given the authors' claim that choice equals equity.

The conclusions stemming from another section of the report—"Characteristics of the Present Choice System" (p. 17 and following)—are disconnected from the paper's stated

The majority of the report's recommendations are not linked in any way to the analyses presented in the paper.

purpose, which is attempting to show a causal relationship between choice, competition, and achievement. The purpose of this section appears to be to demonstrate that New York City is taking actions to improve "the quality of choice and competition" (p. 17). The analysis for this demonstration relies on a rating system created by the report's publishing organization, the Brown Center for Education Policy at Brookings, but there is no evidence to support the relationship between the quality-of-choice ratings and student achievement or any other educational factors. As it stands, this is can be more appropriately categorized as an analysis of the openness and public support of the educational market in New York. Considering that causality between choice and student achievement is the primary purpose of the larger paper, this section seems unrelated—better suited for a separate paper.

The report offers recommendations for closing traditional public schools and increasing the number of charter schools. These recommendations are only tied by correlation, when they are linked at all. For example, there is no empirical evidence offered that the district is using preference information to close or improve unpopular schools: On page 19, the report says that the New York City Education Department has a regulation regarding the process of closing unpopular schools, as well as a history of doing it, but there is no source cited. There is also no evidence given that popular schools correlate with effective schools, regarding achievement and graduation, or that the district's pattern of school closings has had any effect on achievement in the district as a whole or for students in particular areas. Especially since school closings are often contested decisions, the lack of evidence and rationale in this area are crucial omissions.

The majority of the report's recommendations are not linked in any way to the analyses presented in the paper. Furthermore, the recommendations that are somewhat linked to choice initiatives, such as centralizing application processes and improving/increasing the web-based application systems, were not specifically examined in the research cited. Therefore, it is premature to recommend them. The case of New Orleans as a "model" for using a universal application process is mentioned (p. 20), but no citations are offered

regarding this model, nor are the specific relationships between its centralized application and equity or achievement outcomes discussed. Based on our reading of available evidence, the choice system in New Orleans is highly contested and, again, a very specific context (i.e., post-Katrina rebuilding).¹²

The final section of recommendations argues that school resources must be increased if choice schemes are to work properly:

These constraints on the leverage provided by competition mean that school districts, states, and the nation have to continue to invest in approaches that are a tide that lifts all boats. These include such things as identifying effective instructional materials; designing and implementing professional development programs that work; and deploying accountability systems that motivate and inform (p. 23).

These commonly applicable capacity-oriented statements and recommendations are not exclusively related to choice and competition, and they raise questions about whether the fundamental change variables needed in the New York City schools should be increased competition or increased capacity of school inputs. Furthermore, the report's authors argue that school leaders involved in the NYC choice system don't yet know what works, or are "flying blind" (p. 23). These final statements by the authors are perplexing.

VII. Usefulness of the Report for Guidance of Policy and Practice

The usefulness of this report for both policy and practical purposes is limited by the lack of support provided for the recommendations. The report claims that the NYC choice initiative has led to positive academic outcomes, but the results presented, drawn from others' research, have significant methodological weaknesses. Although the authors assign interpretations to descriptive statistics to support some of their discussion, they neither offer sufficient evidence demonstrating that the choice system of New York City explains student gains, nor why the given recommendations will result in further improvements. Since the general consensus in the peer-reviewed literature is that choice schemes achieve about the same effects as traditional public schools, this argument that choice is itself responsible for student gains is a hard case to make.¹³ The evidence provided in the report does not demonstrate a substantial challenge to that consensus. The authors make only scant and selective use of the extensive peer-reviewed literature.¹⁴

In addition, as detailed in the above sections, the authors do not present the empirical studies cited in the report with fidelity. The report also fails to demonstrate causal links between the intervention and stated improvements. In general, the report offers little in the way of useful guidance for policymakers.

Notes and References

- 1 Whitehurst, G.R., & Whitfield, S. (2013, October). *School choice and school performance in the New York City public schools – Will the past be prologue?* Washington, D.C.: Brookings. Retrieved October 9, 2013, from <http://www.brookings.edu/research/reports/2013/10/08-school-choice-and-performance-new-york-city-whitehurst>.
- 2 “Unscreened” selection process refers to the inability of schools to select students based on characteristics such as prior achievement, placement test scores, demographics, etc. A recent study by Jennings examines how principals in NYC are able to select students even when screening is not supposed to occur. Jennings, J.L. (2010). School choice or schools’ choice? Managing in an era of accountability. *Sociology of Education*, 83(3), 227-247.
- 3 Gates Foundation. (2003, September 17). “\$51 million grant from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation to support small dynamic high schools to boost student achievement.” Retrieved October 21, 2013, from <http://www.gatesfoundation.org/Media-Center/Press-Releases/2003/09/New-York-City-Department-of-Education-Receives-Grant>.
- 4 Center for Research on Education Outcomes (CREDO). (2010, January). *Charter school performance in New York City*. Stanford, CA: CREDO, Stanford University;

Bloom, H.S., & Unterman, R. (2012, January). *Sustained positive effects on graduation rates produced by New York City’s small public high schools of choice*. New York, NY: MRDC;

Hoxby, C.M., Murarka, S., & Kang, J. (2009, September). *How New York City’s charter schools affect achievement*. Cambridge, MA: New York City Charter Schools Evaluation Project;

Nathanson, L., Corcoran, S., & Baker-Smith, C. (2013, April). *High school choice in New York City: A report on the school choices and placements of low-achieving students*. New York: The Research Alliance for New York City Schools, New York University;

Kemple, J.J. (2010, November). *Children first and student outcomes: 2003-2010*. The Research Alliance for New York City Schools, New York University.
- 5 Center for Research on Education Outcomes (CREDO). (2010, January). *Charter school performance in New York City*. Stanford, CA: CREDO, Stanford University.

The analytical methods used here, which had been used in a previous study (CREDO (2009). *Multiple choice: Charter school performance in 16 states*. Stanford, CA: CREDO), were scrutinized for methodological error in Hoxby, C.M. (2009, August). *A serious statistical mistake in the CREDO study of charter schools*. Retrieved November 8, 2013, from http://credo.stanford.edu/reports/memo_on_the_credo_study%20II.pdf.

However, the bigger issue with the findings in the CREDO study is in regards to magnitude; the authors of the Brookings report grossly overstate the CREDO findings, which were not of practical policy significance. Miron, G. & Applegate, B. (2009). *Review of “Multiple choice: Charter school performance in 16 states.”* Boulder and Tempe: Education and the Public Interest Center & Education Policy Research Unit. Retrieved November 8, 2013, from <http://epicpolicy.org/thinktank/review-multiple-choice>.

- 6 Bloom, H.S., & Unterman, R. (2012, January). *Sustained positive effects on graduation rates produced by New York City's small public high schools of choice*. New York, NY: MRDC. MDRC is an independent research group garnering 60% of its funding from federal, state, and international governmental contracts. This specific report is a follow up to June 2010 MDRC report, about the gains of small schools and both have been criticized for methodological issues.
- 7 Hoxby, C.M., Murarka, S., & Kang, J. (2009, September). *How New York City's charter schools affect achievement*. Cambridge, MA: New York City Charter Schools Evaluation Project.
- 8 Betts, J.R. & Tang, Y.E. (2011) *The Effect of Charter Schools on Student Achievement*. Center on Reinventing Public Education. As discussed in Reardon (2009, November), there are multiple methodological issues in this evaluation, including an "inappropriate set of statistical models" and insufficient technical description of methods. Reardon (2009, November). *Review of "How New York City's charter schools affect achievement."* Boulder, CO and Tempe, AZ: Education and the Public Interest Center & Education Policy Research Unit.
- 9 Center for Research on Education Outcomes (CREDO). (2010, January). *Charter school performance in New York City*. Stanford, CA: CREDO, Stanford University. In one instance, the report offers a breakdown by race, but this discussion is not based on the CREDO study. There are no charts or discussions in the report about differential achievement or retention of English Language learners and students with disabilities.
- 10 See, for example: Parents for Inclusive Education. (2006). *Small schools, few choices: How New York City's high school reform effort left students with disabilities behind*. New York: Author;
- Miron, G., Urschel, J.L., Mathis, W.J., & Tornquist, E. (2010, February). *Schools without diversity: Education management organizations, charter schools, and the demographic stratification of the American school system*. East Lansing, MI: Great Lakes Center for Education Research & Practice.
- 11 Jennings, J.L. (2010). School choice or schools' choice? Managing in an era of accountability. *Sociology of Education*, 83(3), 227-247.
- 12 See Akers, J.M. (2012). Separate and unequal: The consumption of public education in post-Katrina New Orleans. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 36(1), 29-48;
- Buras, K.L., & Urban South Grassroots Collective. (2013). New Orleans education reform: A guide for cities or a warning for communities? *Berkeley Review of Education*, 4(1), 123-160;
- Schwam-Baird, M., & Mogg, L. (2010). Is education reform in New Orleans working? A few facts swimming in a sea of unknowns. *Loyola Journal of Public Interest Law*, 11, 163-215;
- Dingerson, L. (2008). Unlovely: How the market is failing the children of New Orleans. In L. Dingerson, B. Miner, B. Peterson, & S. Walters, *Keeping the promise? The debate over charter schools*. Milwaukee, WI: Rethinking Schools.
- 13 See, for example:
- Imberman, S.A. (2011). Achievement and behavior in charter schools: Drawing a more complete picture. *Review of Economics and Statistics*, 93(2), 416-435;
- Toma, E., & Zimmer, R. (2012). Two decades of charter schools: Expectations, reality, and the future. *Economics of Education Review*, 31(2), 209-212.

14 See, for example:

Bifulco, R., & Ladd, H.F. (2006). The impacts of charter schools on student achievement: Evidence from North Carolina. *Education Finance and Policy*, 1(1), 50-90;

Saporito, S., & Lareau, A. (1999). School selection as a process: The multiple dimensions of race in framing educational choice. *Social Problems*, 46(3), 418-439;

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