

In search of opportunity: Can families use education choice to secure more of what they want?

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The education landscape is rapidly evolving as state policymakers enact and significantly expand private education choice initiatives. These initiatives, currently operating in 29 states and counting, provide public dollars directly to families to support approved educational purchases, including, but not always limited to, private school tuition.¹

These initiatives have ignited heated controversy, with critics and proponents alike weaponizing evidence and advocacy to advance their own narratives about whether education choice “works.” But much of this conversation largely sidesteps the most important question for judging the success of any education choice initiative, publicly or privately operated: Does it enable families to secure more of what they want?

This question is critical to today’s debate because a key rationale for increasing access to education choice is that doing so will enable families to secure educational opportunities that better meet their needs. Under what conditions this occurs is essential to understanding whether choice “works” and positioning policymakers to design programs that enable more families to use choice to their advantage.

This report fills this gap by providing an up-to-date account of families’ experiences in education choice programs. Our aim is practical: we hope to position policymakers to design education choice initiatives in ways that meaningfully improve families’ access to educational opportunities that meet their and their children’s needs, however defined.

Families made choices about education before policymakers advanced initiatives that sought to increase opportunities to do so, and they will continue to make choices even if those policies go away, which seems unlikely to happen anytime soon. Given that choice has been and will continue to be firmly rooted in the public education system, it is incumbent on policymakers and those that influence them to take stock of families’ experiences and address the obstacles they confront along the way.

We draw upon a comprehensive review of the evidence to illuminate the on-the-ground realities and real-world results of education choice in all of its many varieties: public, charter, and private with diverse program designs, aims, and results. We considered the constraints families encounter using education choice and the supports that show promise in addressing these constraints. We considered both qualitative and quantitative evidence, academic research and research designed with policymakers in mind, traditional evaluations designed to measure “impact,” and more exploratory inquiries that illuminate perceptions, experiences, and feelings.

Existing evidence makes clear that while education choice can be life-changing for families who find success with it, this outcome is far from guaranteed (see “What We Learned” on the following page). Information gaps, competitive admissions, and weaknesses in the supply of educational alternatives constrain what families can secure from the marketplace. These constraints affect all families—rich and poor, rural, suburban and urban, white and nonwhite, immigrant and native born. While it is not straightforward for policymakers and philanthropists to address families’ obstacles, each group has an essential role to play in helping families secure more of what they want from education choice programs.

WHAT WE LEARNED

Obstacles limit families' success in education choice

Education choice can help families secure educational opportunities that work for them and their children, but whether this occurs depends on several factors:

- **Are desirable options available?** Education marketplaces are characterized by a seemingly universal truth: there aren't enough good educational opportunities to go around.
- **Can families find reliable information?** While families' desires for schooling are mostly uncomplicated, identifying the educational opportunities that meet their needs is complicated by the lack of high-quality information systems. These gaps are especially acute in private education choice programs, where high rates of "churn" in the market for schooling and the lack of publicly reported data leave families to play a high-stakes guessing game.
- **Can families "win" the admissions lottery?** The most desirable educational opportunities use a competitive admissions cycle characterized by early application deadlines, burdensome application requirements, and opaque admissions criteria. These systematically limit families' access.

These obstacles replicate the very inequities education choice is designed to address

Low-income families, families of color, and those with children who have disabilities have fewer desirable options in education choice programs and must make larger compromises than affluent families, white families, and those whose children do not have a disability. These inequities are present in all varieties of publicly-funded choice, whether district, charter, or private but contemporary private education choice programs may amplify them thanks to low per-pupil expenditures that leave the most price-sensitive families to make do with the lowest-cost educational alternatives.

Families suffer negative consequences when education choice fails to deliver

For too many families, the search for educational opportunity yields disappointment, landing them right back where they started: in traditional public schools that do not meet their needs. Families' failure to secure what they need from education choice carries significant risk of harm, including wasted time, lost learning, and disrupted relationships—harms that may durably alter children's educational trajectories.

Addressing families' challenges is essential and difficult

Policymakers have long experimented with interventions to improve fairness, access, and families' success with education choice. While some of these strategies show promise, none have closed the gap between the educational haves and have-nots.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Focus on results for children and families.** State policymakers should go beyond participation data to assess whether programs are delivering benefits to children and families. As this review shows, participation in choice does not, on its own, answer this question. Families who are disappointed with what private education choice has offered them may participate only to find themselves back in the traditional public schools they left just a short time later. Exit data is the “canary in the coal mine” for education choice programs—illuminating whether families secure something of value from the private education marketplace. State policymakers should build data systems capable of tracking publicly funded students’ entry and exit from private, charter, and public schools and monitor these data at the school and program levels to identify challenges that need to be addressed. Policymakers could also survey participating and exiting families’ about their experiences to inform understanding of the drivers and potential solutions to high rates of exit.
- **Invest in improving the supply side of choice.** While much of the policy debate around education choice focuses on what, if any, legal requirements producers of private schooling should meet, lessons from charter schooling suggest that weaknesses in the supply of desirable options can be addressed through other mechanisms, including grants to catalyze the creation and expansion of high-quality educational options, support for existing providers via technical assistance and professional development, and investment in organizational networks that can help schools overcome diseconomies of scale. State policymakers and philanthropies should invest in targeted assistance to support new and existing schools with the aim of addressing unmet needs and strengthening the number of good educational options families can choose.
- **Support families in navigating the education ecosystem.** Policymakers, philanthropies, and advocates have key roles to play in addressing information gaps and obstacles related to admissions, which are likely to fall hardest on the families most underserved in traditional public schools, including students with disabilities, students of color, and low-income students. Policymakers and philanthropies should invest in accessible information about private educational options, including student outcome data where available. They should support the work of navigators, using funds dedicated for this work (rather than requiring families to use their limited education dollars to secure support). They should also explore utilizing the private school accreditation system, which operates independent of regulators, to provide more meaningful signals about the quality of private education options.
- **Offer incentives to high-quality providers that commit to addressing the needs of underserved students.** Policymakers and philanthropies should incentivize the creation of educational options that meet the needs of underserved students. Policymakers can do this by adequately weighting per-pupil allotments to counteract incentives for private producers of schooling to avoid students perceived as more difficult or expensive to educate; sponsoring special demonstration programs that provide start-up capital or other resources to providers that commit to building new, high-quality educational options;

and offering rewards to providers that meet the needs of underserved families. Philanthropies, acting alone or as part of a citywide effort, could use grant-making initiatives to encourage more providers to consider the needs of underserved families and catalyze purpose-built schools that uniquely address the needs of specific students or families. Giving like this in the context of charter schooling has resulted in specialized schools for children with autism, those impacted by the child welfare system, and others whose needs have been neglected in more traditional district and charter schools.

- **Explore new regulatory architectures.** Regulation has become a “dirty” word in the context of private education choice programs. But history and experience suggest that how policymakers design education choice programs—including the requirements producers of education must meet—can have enormous impacts on whether choice delivers on its promise to children and families. We believe the field urgently needs more thoughtful, robust, and evidence-based discussions of how publicly funded private education alternatives are regulated. These discussions should be grounded in data and fair assessments of the costs and benefits of new requirements for families and taxpayers. While history and experience can inform these conversations, the choice in front of policymakers today is not limited to the regulatory regimes of yesteryear. Policymakers could, for example, reject high-stakes, sanctions-driven accountability systems while exploring ways to empower families with information about the academic results of private education alternatives. They could also work to protect taxpayers and families from fraud and abuse in a much more open education marketplace while avoiding cumbersome compliance requirements that limit experimentation and innovation.

PART I: BACKGROUND AND METHODS

Access to education choice in the United States has always existed for families willing and able to pay for it. Affluent families exercise choice by buying their way into neighborhoods with desirable schools and educational programs or paying to enroll their children in private schools and enrichment programs.² But these choices are not available to all who might be dissatisfied with their children's schools and desire alternatives.³ While the particulars can vary dramatically, all publicly funded education choice initiatives seek to address this challenge by committing public dollars to subsidizing the education options that families choose rather than the ones assigned to them based on their home address.

Proponents of education choice believe expanding access to education choice will generate benefits not only for individual families who take advantage of the opportunity to choose but also for the system of public education at large. Choosing a school, proponents assert, enables families to secure more of what they want and their children need from public education while incentivizing providers of schooling (via competition and power shifts) to be responsive to families' priorities.⁴ This theory of action, which has diverse intellectual roots,⁵ suggests that education choice will address much of what ails public education—including poor educational outcomes,⁶ interest group capture,⁷ entrenched income- and race-based inequalities,⁸ political conflicts over schooling,⁹ and outdated education delivery models that suffocate educators and limit innovation.¹⁰

These arguments have long attracted the attention and support of advocates and policymakers, on both the left and the right.¹¹ Perhaps as a result, cities and states have a long history of implementing publicly funded education choice programs.¹² Education choice in the United States is offered through multiple means, including magnet schools, intradistrict choice, interdistrict choice, charter schools, private school vouchers (vouchers),¹³ and most recently, education savings accounts (ESAs). While all education choice initiatives seek to empower families to make decisions about where, when, and how their children are educated, the particulars vary dramatically across different types of choice, as well as based on how states and localities design and implement them (see Table 1, following page).

Table 1. Many varieties of education choice

TYPE OF CHOICE	WHAT CHOICE PROVIDES	COMMON REGULATORY ELEMENTS
Magnet Schools	Access to specialized and/or thematic, district-sponsored school-based programs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Race- or income-based admission priorities • Single district or multi-district enrollment zone • Use of merit-based admissions criteria
Intradistrict Choice	Access to district-sponsored schools outside of attendance boundaries on a space-available basis	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Universal participation versus opt-in • Use of admission priorities (e.g., merit) or exclusions (e.g., students with disabilities) • Lottery-based assignment mechanism
Interdistrict Choice	Access to schools in other nearby districts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use of admission priorities (e.g., merit) or exclusions (e.g., students with disabilities) • District criteria for acceptance of transfer requests
Charter Schools	Access to privately managed schools overseen by public or quasi-public entities based on meeting legal, operational, and academic benchmarks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Eligibility of nonprofit and/or for-profit management organizations • Number of and type of entities responsible for sponsoring, overseeing, and closing schools • Legal, operational, and academic expectations for schools
Vouchers	Access to privately managed schools	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Income- or disability-based participation criteria • Participation requirements for private schools, including testing, admission criteria, and/or whether tuition can exceed voucher amount • Legal requirements all private schools—both voucher-accepting and not—must meet
ESAs	Access to approved educational products and experiences, including but not limited to private schooling	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Income- or disability-based participation criteria • Requirements for approved vendors • Restrictions on what participants may purchase • Testing requirements for participating students

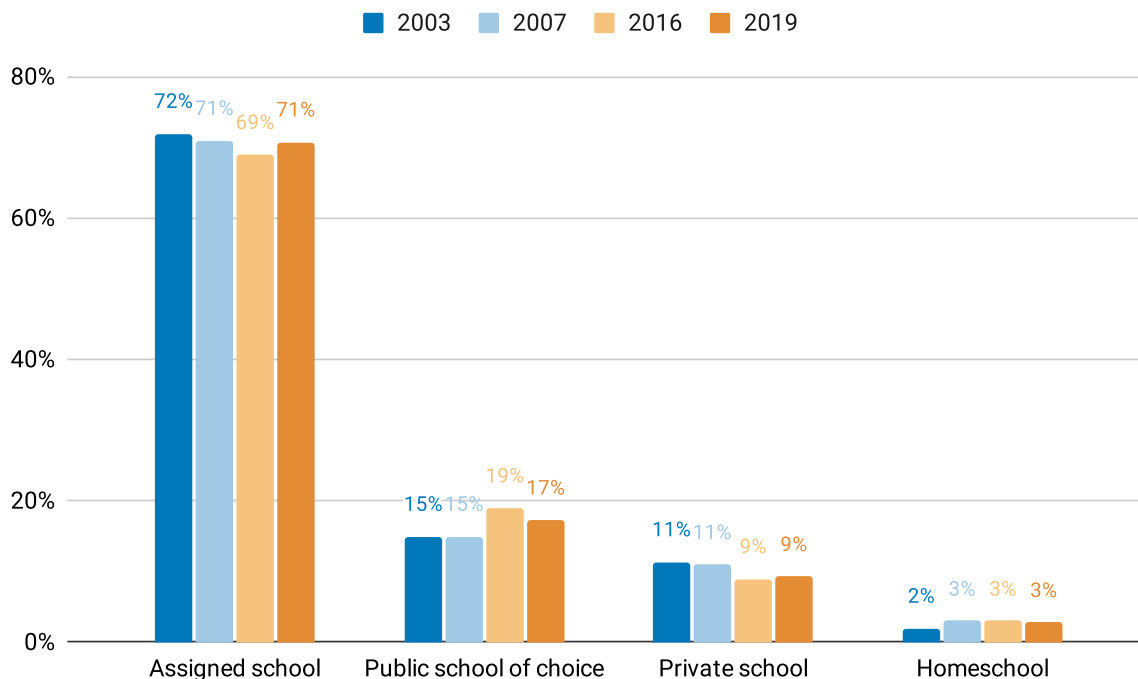
Source: Author literature review and analysis of state and local education initiatives

While vouchers and ESAs are often understood as less-regulated forms of choice compared to others, this is not necessarily the case. Louisiana’s original voucher initiative, for example, was heavily regulated: requiring participating private schools to administer the state achievement test to voucher students, publicly report on those results, practice open admissions, and limit tuition charges greater than the voucher allotment (a provision sometimes referred to as “no topping up”).¹⁴ Other states, such as Arizona, loosely regulate private education choice programs. Likewise, enabling legislation and administrative practices for charter schools vary dramatically from state-to-state, with some states using practices that create high barriers to entry and expectations for organizational performance while others use approaches with few entry or exit criteria.¹⁵

According to national data, the number of families with children enrolled in a school of choice (public school of choice, private school, or homeschool) held relatively steady between 2007 and 2019, with about three out of ten students (29 to 31%) in grades

K through 12 enrolled in a school of choice (Figure 1).¹⁶ These data, the most recent available from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), do not capture what happened in the years after the Covid-19 pandemic, when media reports amplified stories of enrollment shifts out of traditional public schools toward privately managed alternatives. Administrative data from states that report enrollments across sectors suggest that private school and homeschooling enrollment increased in the 2021-22 school year though these increases were modest, with the enrollment share of private schools and homeschooling increasing just 0.5% and 0.7% relative to baselines.¹⁷

Figure 1. Rate of enrollment in schools of choice nearly unchanged between 2007 and 2019



Source: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, *Table 206.20. Percentage distribution of students ages 5 through 17 attending kindergarten through 12th grade, by school type or participation in homeschooling, selected years 1999 through 2019*

These national trends disguise substantial geographic variability in the education choice landscape, which has evolved markedly in recent years thanks to city and state initiatives to expand access. Denver, Chicago, San Francisco, New Orleans, New York City, and Washington, D.C. have all moved away from residential assignment and toward universal or near universal choice-based assignments system-wide, or for certain grade segments (e.g., high school). In some states, such as Arizona, choice is widely accessible even as attendance zones continue to be used. According to 2022-23 Arizona data on enrollments at schools that accept public dollars, approximately 19% of publicly-funded students are enrolled in charter schools, 10% of students are enrolled via intra- or inter-district choice programs, and 6% of students participate in nonpublic options via an Empowerment Scholarship Account, a private education choice program.¹⁸

How choice is provided in the localities that offer it varies. For some cities, education choice is primarily offered through non-district options like charter schools. The city of New Orleans assigns students to independent charter schools exclusively through a choice-based, common lottery. In contrast, Washington, D.C. operates a mix of open-enrollment schools operated by both the district and local charter schools and neighborhood-based, district schools for which assignment is based on students' home address. Other city school systems have moved away from residential assignment without diversifying the operators that run publicly funded schools. Enrollment in San Francisco schools, for example, is based on the district-sponsored lottery, which makes assignments based on families' rank-ordered school preferences. As we discuss below, these variations in design and implementation have meaningful effects on families' experiences with education choice.

Benchmarking “success” in education choice

The debate over education choice in the United States has traditionally focused on the extent to which it improves students' educational opportunities, including academic, nonacademic, and longer-term outcomes like enrollment and persistence in postsecondary degree programs. Given the wide variation in how publicly funded education choice has been operationalized in the United States, it should come as no surprise that the effects of these initiatives on students' outcomes are highly varied. Some studies identify positive effects for students who enroll in charter schools,¹⁹ vouchers,²⁰ magnet schools,²¹ and other schools of choice.²² Others identify null or even negative effects for these same programs.²³ Research is also clear that the mixed results from education choice initiatives are in part a function of variations in design and implementation. For example, researchers attribute charter schools' highly varied record of impact on student achievement to differences in the characteristics of schools and the practices they utilize, which in turn are shaped by authorizing practices and the state policy environments they operate within.²⁴

For many advocates of education choice, however, how choice influences students' educational outcomes is beside the point.²⁵ As Jack Buckley and Mark Schneider wrote, “[E]ducation is a complex, multifaceted ‘good,’ and choice allows parents to select schools that emphasize the kind of education they want for their children.”²⁶ The value of education choice, in this view, is a function of how it enables families to get more of what they want—however defined—from taxpayers' investments in education.²⁷

Whether education choice delivers on the aspirations of its proponents has received surprisingly little direct empirical testing. Families who self-select into a school of choice (public, charter, or private) often report higher levels of satisfaction than those assigned to a school based on their address.²⁸ But these data are difficult to interpret for two reasons. First, those who invest time, effort, and money into the process of choosing a school may view their choices through “rose-colored glasses” in their efforts to avoid decision-making regret, a trend that inflates satisfaction rates.²⁹ Second, satisfaction data do not typically tell us anything about the families who leave a school of choice, whose opinions may vary dramatically from those who choose to stay.

Some advocates have pointed to participation data as evidence that education choice programs are working as intended. But this, too, provides a faulty measure of success. Participation rates can be increasing even as exit rates remain startlingly high. If large numbers of families enter education choice programs only to return to traditional public schools a short time later, we probably shouldn’t conclude that they have successfully secured what they were looking for.

Our review takes stock of what families secure in education choice programs by considering the obstacles they confront that limit their access to things they want as well as evidence on exit rates from schools of choice. Obstacles limit or constrain what families are able to secure with education choice, while exit rates tell us whether choice has provided them something they want to keep. Together, this body of evidence provides a key window into how policymakers can design education choice programs in ways that enable more families, especially those underserved by traditional public schools, to benefit from them.

Review methods

Given the variation in how publicly funded education choice initiatives have been operationalized as well as the variety of topics education choice research considers, we did not utilize a traditional literature review strategy deploying a narrow set of search terms to identify a fixed “width” body of literature. We began our review by searching Google Scholar for terms like “school choice” and “education choice.” We then turned to more focused topical searches that directly connect to obstacles identified in the larger literature, including acquiring information about schools, enrollment or admissions practices, and transportation and the geography of families’ “choice sets.” Within each focused topic, we also considered interventions that aim to address specific challenges. For example, we reviewed evaluations of common enrollment systems, which seek to address obstacles families confront in the admissions process for schools of choice. Across these topics, we engaged in additional focused searches to understand how historically marginalized families experience choice, with a focus on Black and Hispanic families, low-income families, and families who have a child with special needs.

Table 2. Examples of search terms used in the literature review

General: school choice, education choice, parent choice
Varieties of choice: magnet schools, private schools, interdistrict choice, intradistrict choice, vouchers
Topical: information, transportation, enrollment, admissions, common enrollment, attrition, mobility, satisfaction, navigators, students with disabilities, Black students/families, Latino students/families, English language learners
Programmatic: DC Opportunity Scholarship, Milwaukee Parental Choice Program, Florida Tax Credit Scholarship Program, McKay Scholarship Program, Indiana Choice Scholarship Program, Louisiana Scholarship Program, New York School Choice Scholarship Foundation Program
Local education choice systems: Chicago, Detroit, New York City, New Orleans, Washington, D.C.

We sought out studies using qualitative or quantitative methods as well as studies that were evaluative (i.e., identifying impacts of education choice initiatives) or more exploratory and focused on illuminating causal mechanisms. We considered studies published in academic journals as well as those produced by government entities, think tanks, and other nonacademic education research centers. We did not seek to undertake a “meta-analysis,” nor did we include citations for every study relevant to a particular issue or question. Where relevant, we identified areas of divergence in the literature.

By design, our inquiry takes families’ aspirations for schooling as a given. We do not, for example, presume that families who prioritize proximity over academics are making a mistake. We aim to honor families’ aspirations while probing deeply on the systemic and individual factors that shape whether they were able to use education choice to get more of what they want out of the public education system.

PART II: FINDINGS

In theory, education choice programs create opportunities for families to escape traditional public schools that are not working for them and secure something better. Evidence and real-world experience makes clear, however, that whether this occurs depends on many things: where families live, the characteristics of their children, the resources they can bring to bear on education choice, the constraints they operate under, and what producers of schooling choose to make available (including what, where, and for whom). While families can take steps to increase their likelihood of success, their results are largely shaped by factors that they do not directly control.

As a result, education choice programs do not provide equivalent choices to all who participate in them. Rural families and those whose ethnic, racial, or religious identities make them a minority in their community have fewer options than those who live in urban areas or whose identities reflect majority interests. Similarly, low-income families, families of color, and those who have a child with a disability have fewer desirable options, struggle more to navigate education choice systems, and face starker trade-offs than affluent families, white families, and those whose children do not have a disability.

These realities exist in “mature” education choice systems of varying design, regulation, and governance, and have proven resistant to intervention, though as we discuss, attention to issues of market design and implementation can improve families’ experiences and reduce inequities.

Education choice does not resolve the biggest limit on educational opportunity: A shortage of desirable schools

“It’s kind of hopeless. The way the system is set up, if you don’t have money or you don’t live in a certain neighborhood, your child might not be ... educated appropriately.” —Washington, D.C. parent³⁰

Education marketplaces are characterized by a seemingly universal truth: many consumers of education want the same thing, and there is not enough of it to go around. For families seeking to use education choice to secure better educational opportunities, the mismatch between supply and demand has some predictable consequences: some families do not get what they want.

In most localities, admission to the most desirable schools of choice is competitive, and as a result, many families are turned away at the starting gate. These supply-side constraints exist in both publicly funded and privately funded schools of choice. For example, in Washington, D.C., just 38% of families secured their top choice in the city’s common lottery for district and charter schools.³¹ Privately funded and operated schools of choice exhibit similar challenges, with the most desirable private schools declining to admit many eligible students by simple virtue of the fact that they are out of room and have no desire to expand.³²

Practical constraints shape families' access, with predictable results

Existing evidence suggests that while this shortage of desirable options affects all families, it falls hardest on families most underserved by traditional public schools, including low-income families and families of color. Shortages also affect rural communities more than urban communities,³³ as well as families whose racial, ethnic, or religious identities mark them as different from the majority of others in their communities.³⁴

These gaps are in large part a function of differing constraints. While families are remarkably consistent in what they want out of education (safe schools, close to home, with good academics),³⁵ practical constraints (where families live, their access to transportation, and, in the case of private schools, the affordability of tuition) have dramatic impacts on whether families can secure these things. In most localities, for example, low-income families are much more likely to have to leave their neighborhoods to secure a school with good academics.³⁶ The end result is a two-tiered system of education choice: some families get access to all that they want while others must make do with schools that do not provide what they need.

Perhaps as a result, research suggests low-income families and families of color are more likely to face difficult trade-offs in the school choice process. Research in Kansas City, for example, suggests that low-income parents, parents of color, and those with fewer years of post-high school education reported making larger compromises and were less satisfied with the schools their children attended.³⁷

Improving access to desired options is not straightforward

In light of concerns about differential access, policymakers, pundits, and philanthropists have invested considerable effort into developing strategies to improve access and alignment between what families want and what the market provides. One set of approaches has focused on removing practical constraints that limit access, primarily through subsidized transportation. Existing evidence suggests subsidized transportation can help families secure educational options outside of their neighborhoods.³⁸ But subsidized transportation does little to address the time costs associated with commuting. Families who rely on public transit have significantly fewer schools they can reach within reasonable commuting times than those who use a car.³⁹ Longer commutes also impose unexpected costs, including earlier start times, less sleep, and increased exposure to violent crime.⁴⁰ Perhaps as a result, long commutes are associated with higher rates of mid-year and between-year transfers and reduced attendance.⁴¹

A second set of strategies has focused on addressing the constraints that are believed to limit the expansion of in-demand schools through regulation (more or less) and subsidies. Milton Friedman, whose economic philosophy was at the heart of the school choice movement from its founding, predicted that competition between schools would induce those with the best reputations to expand and gain market share.⁴² The fact that this hasn't occurred is taken by some as evidence that government regulation has constrained the virtuous, competition-induced cycle.

Others have argued that competition, on its own, is unlikely to spur a robust supply of desirable schools.⁴³ This perspective suggests the unique features of schooling, including the incentives suppliers have to turn away willing customers rather than

expand to serve them, undermines the pressures that ordinarily induce positive returns from competition.⁴⁴ In this view, government intervention is necessary to spur a robust education marketplace.

While evidence exists to support both of these claims, little of it is conclusive. Variation in the supply and quality of charter schools across states suggests that the conditions that yield a larger number of schools—diverse authorizers, lower barriers to entry, lower standards for exit—are not the same as those that produce the highest quality schools, which are concentrated in sectors with relatively small footprints and rigorous gatekeeping.⁴⁵

Nor is it clear that systems that produce large numbers of charter schools are optimized based on families' actual priorities for schools. Supply-side difficulties reported by parents in an eight-city survey, for example, were similar despite wildly varying approaches to market regulation.⁴⁶ For example, 43% of families in New Orleans and Washington, D.C., which both operate tightly regulated charter school systems, reported difficulty finding a desired school, compared to 44% in Detroit and 39% in Cleveland, which both operate more loosely regulated systems.

Evidence from the charter sector suggests that oversight by regulators, including authorization and closure decisions, can increase the quality of charter schools as measured by student learning gains. In New Orleans, for example, researchers attributed 25 to 50% of student learning gains after Hurricane Katrina to the closure and replacement of low-performing charter schools, though closure had more negative effects in nearby Baton Rouge.⁴⁷ In a similar vein, researchers attributed 62% of learning gains in Newark to actions taken by the district to close low-performing schools and expand high-performing schools.⁴⁸ Whether these results improved families' experience with education choice, though, is not known.

The impacts of regulation on the supply of education alternatives is far from straightforward, with different design elements—from rules around admissions to accountability for results—presenting distinct trade-offs. Survey research on publicly funded private school choice programs suggests that efforts to strengthen regulatory oversight can backfire by inducing the strongest private schools to opt out of participating.⁴⁹ Private schools in Florida, New York, and California were less likely to say they would participate in a private school choice program when participation required them to alter their admissions process or administer state tests.⁵⁰ Some have argued that higher levels of regulation induce the highest priced and most sought after private schools to opt out of publicly funded private school choice programs, though critics point out that these schools will never admit the economically disadvantaged students that these programs are designed to help.⁵¹

The Milwaukee Parental Choice Program (MPCP) provides an instructive example of how regulations shape the supply-side of education choice. Beginning in the 2010-11 school year, private schools participating in the voucher program were required to administer the state's standards-aligned test to voucher students and publicly report the results. Prior to this, participating private schools administered their choice of norm-referenced assessments, a policy common in many private school choice programs. The testing requirement, alongside tighter regulatory oversight of voucher-accepting private schools, dramatically reduced the number of applications the state received from individuals proposing private schools purpose-built to serve MPCP students and

decreased the number of such schools that failed.⁵² The efforts to exercise greater gatekeeping and oversight of voucher-accepting schools did not, however, result in the mass exit of established private schools from the program, as some critics of regulation suggest.

Beyond regulation and government oversight of education choice programs, common sense suggests that money may be both a constraint and enabling condition to expanding the number of desirable schools.⁵³ Money is essential for schools to invest in things that are popular among school-choosing parents, like improved facilities, lower class sizes, and a high-quality, low-turnover teacher workforce.

Publicly funded private education choice programs, however, typically have low rates of per-pupil investment, both compared to public funding in traditional public schools and direct expenditures by families on private education.⁵⁴ This is a function of both the broader K-12 education funding environment (states that spend less than average are the same ones that are most likely to adopt private education choice programs)⁵⁵ and the fact that private education choice programs do not typically have access to local and federal education dollars. In programs that allow private schools to charge tuition above and beyond what taxpayers provide, these funding constraints present few difficulties for affluent families, who can simply “top up” to close the gap between what the state provides and what it costs to obtain a private education. But the vast majority of private schools operating in private education choice programs are catering to price-sensitive families, and low voucher amounts effectively cap investment in the things that families want but are expensive to provide.

While increasing families’ purchasing power may be an important lever for improving the supply of desirable schools, it too provides few guarantees. Much has been written about school districts that benefit from luxury-level per-pupil investments but fail to use those resources effectively.⁵⁶ The same could be expected in private education choice programs where higher levels of per-pupil funding allow private actors to enrich themselves without investing in the very things that families want education systems to produce: children prepared for the rigors of postsecondary life.

Grant-making, both public and philanthropic, could also help prospective founders secure the capital needed to deliver on their aspirations or fill gaps in the market left unaddressed by traditional competitive incentives.⁵⁷ Philanthropic dollars can support the pre-opening costs of planning and expansion⁵⁸ as well help prospective school leaders secure facilities.⁵⁹ Philanthropic giving has also been critical to seeding unique charter schools, such as Haven Academy, a New York-based charter school founded to serve the needs of children affected by the child welfare system, and the Emerge School of Autism in Louisiana. This work is not without controversy, and critics allege that philanthropic giving can distort the local education marketplace in unproductive ways or subvert the will of local community members.⁶⁰

The implications of this admittedly mixed and varied body of evidence for how policymakers can improve the supply of desirable schools is not entirely clear. Existing research suggests there are trade-offs between different regulatory approaches, with lighter-touch regimes having an advantage in terms of scale but at risk of sacrificing quality. Whether new regulatory regimes could find a balance between scale and quality, and how increased education funding may help, is a topic we return to in the conclusion.

“Shopping” for education presents unique difficulties

“You never really know about a school until you attend it, so stuff comes out.” —Milwaukee Parental Choice Program parent⁶¹

All families begin their search for educational opportunity with a seemingly straightforward task that presents enormous challenges in practice: evaluating educational options in light of their needs and priorities. Existing evidence suggests that most families use education choice to secure what most people would consider the basics: good academics, proximity to home, and a safe school environment.⁶² While their aspirations are clear and their desires for schooling uncomplicated, assessing whether a given option checks all the boxes is not straightforward.

Education is an “experience good,” meaning that it may best be evaluated only after it has been used.⁶³ Lacking information on what they really want to know, families turn to proxies. They utilize their social networks to evaluate the reputations of local schools,⁶⁴ consider information available on school websites,⁶⁵ visit schools to talk with staff,⁶⁶ and where available, consider data on student achievement and information in parent guides.⁶⁷

But families vary in the amount of and quality of information they are able to secure using these methods. For example, research suggests that more affluent families, families who attend church, and white families can take advantage of larger social networks than their low-income, non-churchgoing, and Black and Latine peers.⁶⁸ Families who have a child with a disability are often left to guess whether schools are well positioned to serve children like theirs or if a school’s legal commitment to provide individualized instruction and support will translate into reality.⁶⁹

Even valued sources of information can present reliability problems. Social networks, which research consistently finds among the most influential informational resources in education choice, are geographically situated.⁷⁰ As a result, families’ awareness of educational options can be systematically circumscribed in ways that limit consideration of alternatives outside of those that others in their community are using.

While families in numerous studies suggest that school visits can be an especially valuable way to assess whether educational alternatives measure up,⁷¹ they too can provide false impressions.⁷² As one parent who participated in the DC Opportunity Scholarship Program shared with researchers, “They always seemed like they’re [good schools] with their open house, but after you get your child there, it’s not the same. Everything is just totally different, just totally different.”⁷³

There are good reasons to believe that today’s private education choice programs, which are less likely to publicly report data on student achievement, graduation rates, and other metrics that families use to evaluate schools, have significantly amplified these information gaps. States with private education choice programs exhibit a remarkable amount of “churn” in the education marketplace. Florida, for example, added more than 1,700 new private schools to its voucher program for low-income families between 2010 and 2020,⁷⁴ while Arizona has added thousands of “vendors” to its education savings account program.⁷⁵ As a result, families making choices in contemporary education choice programs are not choosing among a fixed set of

education alternatives known to community members and with reputational signals in the forms of parent reviews on consumer information websites like GreatSchools.

Navigating this rapidly evolving landscape without reliable information increases the risks that families will make high-cost mistakes. The search for a “good” school can be time consuming, and when the chosen school disappoints, families must begin their search again.⁷⁶ Disappointment also fuels higher rates of mobility, sometimes landing families back where they started.⁷⁷ While leaving a school of choice in the wake of disappointment reflects the types of strategic behavior school choice advocates praise, it carries a heavy cost: students who exit schools of choice tend to be lower achieving than their peers who stay and lower achieving than they would have been if they had never attended a school of choice.⁷⁸

Information, support can help families evaluate their options

With up to one in three families exiting private education choice programs each year,⁷⁹ giving families information that helps them evaluate their options before enrolling their children is a priority. Policymakers could take inspiration from interventions designed to help families navigate public and charter schools to improve families’ access to and use of information in private education choice programs.⁸⁰

Informational guides to schools have become widely available in most urban and suburban environments. These typically aggregate data from multiple publicly available sources in ways that improve access and increase usability. These guides may include information on private schools, but whether families can compare private and public schools based on common measures like student test scores or graduation rates depends on whether states require private schools to report such data.⁸¹

Families make use of these tools when they are provided, with large shares of parents citing them as influential and behavioral evidence suggesting that their indicators (like school-level student achievement) drive families’ enrollment and exit decisions.⁸² Qualitative studies provide confirmatory evidence to these observational trends and suggest that parent guides complement, rather than substitute, other sources of information on schools.⁸³

Details, however, matter. Parents’ understanding of school information, prioritization of preferred schools, and satisfaction with information resources are shaped by elements of interface design—such as whether school performance data is based on letter grades or displayed graphically.⁸⁴ For example, a study conducted by GreatSchools found that parents were 87% more likely to identify a school rated “8 out of 10” as high quality than a school rated as a “B.”⁸⁵ Home language and computer access can also shape families’ use of information, with the absence of print materials in languages other than English creating obstacles for Spanish-speaking immigrant families, for example.⁸⁶

In many education choice settings, the information challenge is as much about simplification as about maximizing access to information. In New York City, families of eighth graders are tasked with choosing among 750 high school programs across 440 schools citywide, a daunting challenge for anyone but one that falls especially hard on families unfamiliar with the available options.⁸⁷ To address this challenge, researchers tested an intervention they called “Fast Facts,” which provided families a list of 26 proximate high schools with above average graduation rates as a starting point for families’ school search.⁸⁸ The aim: to reduce the number of students assigned

to high schools with low graduation rates and increase the number who secure seats at desired schools. This study along with others in a similar vein suggest that these types of interventions increase the likelihood that students will secure a seat at schools with stronger academic outcomes, though the effects are modest.⁸⁹

Some observers have expressed worry over whether information interventions may undermine a key promise of education choice: enabling families to act on their own priorities, rather than those imposed on them by others.⁹⁰ However, studies that explicitly test different types of informational interventions suggest that they don't work when the information presented is unconnected to families' priorities for schooling. For example, a study conducted in New Orleans tested two informational interventions—one that provided a list of schools closest to families' homes and a second that listed the highest-performing schools available.⁹¹ While the performance-based intervention increased high school students' probability of enrolling in a high-performing school by 16.5%, the neighborhood-based intervention did not have any impact on the schools students enrolled in.

As informational guides have become more common, their limits have also become clearer. For families, education choice is personal, and generic information is necessarily limited. Families often want information that is not regularly included, such as special education programming or extracurricular activities.

Recognizing this challenge, “navigators” have emerged in multiple locales with the aim of helping families search for and evaluate education alternatives. Fashioned after more familiar trades like guidance and college admissions counselors, navigators work with families to refine their priorities, identify schools and other resources that may address their needs, and provide support with the application process.⁹² Some navigators operate as private businesses on a fee-for-service basis, primarily serving the affluent.⁹³ Others operate as nonprofits, with the explicit aim of leveling the playing field for low-income families most underserved by traditional public schools. In either case, navigators work with families to help them compete in the local education market and secure a seat at a desired school.

While organizations providing navigator services share similar goals, how they engage families varies, with some organizations operating call centers that provide on-demand support while others leverage direct outreach to families via partnerships with housing and social service agencies, schools, and early childhood providers.⁹⁴ While on-demand navigation support can help families already on the education choice journey, direct outreach is essential for those who may lack awareness of their educational options or the early deadlines that accompany admissions applications.⁹⁵

Evidence on the work of navigators and their effectiveness is in short supply. A set of studies led by the Center on Reinventing Public Education suggest that navigators show promise in helping families take advantage of education choice programs, make sense of information on school quality, evaluate fit, and complete required enrollment paperwork.⁹⁶ This work was necessarily personal, spanning both routine tasks (e.g., sending application due date reminders) to unexpected ones (e.g., accompanying a family to an enrollment appointment to ensure the required paperwork is completed and turned in on time).⁹⁷

Whether navigator support helps families accrue more benefits from choice and bear fewer costs is not clear. Navigators cannot guarantee that families will gain admission to an in-demand school nor can they address practical constraints that limit families’ access to desired schools, such as those stemming from geography and housing instability.

Importantly, navigators primarily operate as grant-funded programs, with scale and sustainability hinging upon private philanthropy. We do not currently understand what it costs to sustain quality navigation services at scale or how costs might vary across families with different needs for support. Similar services provided to families with Section 8 vouchers as part of the Moving to Opportunity program identified a program cost of \$1,500 per family, an amount that could be difficult to sustain on public dollars.

In competitive education marketplaces, high-stakes admissions practices present enormous challenges

“It’s like a ... raffle. It’s like a lottery you’re trying to win [while] trying to just get a kid into school.” —Parent participant in Boston’s school choice lottery⁹⁸

Once families identify the right school, securing a seat can hinge on their ability to navigate a competitive admissions process. This process is characterized by what sociologist Jennifer Jennings describes as “administrative complexity.”⁹⁹

Given the varieties of ways in which states and localities offer education choice, the process of applying to schools of choice varies dramatically from place to place and across district, charter, and private school sectors. While the specifics vary, the obstacles families confront are remarkably similar across education choice contexts. Table 3 identifies common challenges related to admissions that can negatively impact families’ results with education choice.

Table 3. Examples of search terms used in the literature review

CHALLENGE	FAMILY IMPACT
Early application deadlines	Families who are less knowledgeable about local schools, including newcomers, those with children entering school for the first time, and families with lower informational resources, are less likely to make key application windows and, as a result, less likely to access the most in-demand schools.
Burdensome application requirements	Families who have less time or resources to devote to application requirements are less likely to apply to schools with more extensive application requirements, such as required attendance at pre-application information sessions or written personal narratives.
Confusing, opaque admissions criteria	Families’ lack of understanding of admissions criteria and chances of admission results in nonstrategic behavior.

Source: Author analysis of literature

Early application deadlines

It goes without saying that securing a seat at a desired school requires families to successfully complete an application within the school's enrollment window. This is complicated by the fact that many schools, including all of those with competitive admissions cycles, have early application deadlines.¹⁰⁰ Arriving six months or more before the start of the school year, when schooling decisions are less salient, early application deadlines can disadvantage families less in the know about local educational options—either because they're new to the area, lack connections with other school-choosing families, do not speak English, or simply don't have the luxury or time to plan so far in advance.

Missed application deadlines, no matter the cause, can serve to compound disadvantages along the lines of race, ethnicity, and income by foreclosing opportunities for families to secure access to in-demand schools. In New York City, students who did not participate in the centralized lottery, locally known as “over-the-counter” students, were more likely to attend high schools with high dropout rates and more low-achieving students as well as schools that were targeted for closure.¹⁰¹ In a similar vein, a study of universal choice in Boston found that nearly half of Black families and those living in low-income neighborhoods failed to submit an application to kindergarten in the first round of the city's school lottery—a result that meant they were shut out from 50 of the city's 80 elementary schools, including all those in the top quartile.¹⁰² Late enrollees were not indifferent to the question of which schools their children would attend, but migration, housing instability, and changing child custody arrangements made it difficult for some families to plan for the future about school attendance.

Burdensome application requirements

Some, though not all, schools of choice operating competitive admissions cycles require time-consuming applications. These demands can include paperwork requirements, testing or audition requirements, and participation in an open-house or tour prior to applying. In cities with many different types of school choice and decentralized enrollment, families considering a mix of public, private, and charter schools are expected to navigate each set of admission requirements in parallel. Larger application burdens fall heaviest on low-income and immigrant families, who research suggests struggle to navigate competitive admissions compared to more affluent and native-born families.¹⁰³

While data is in short supply, anecdotal evidence suggests the application burdens are greatest in private schools that operate a competitive admission cycle. These typically have multiple requirements including application fees, parent- and/or student-written narratives, admission tests, interviews, and prior school transcripts.¹⁰⁴ The numerous requirements, which are duplicated for each school a family is applying to, can become expensive and time consuming to navigate. These demands have created a cottage industry of consultants who earn hundreds of dollars an hour to help families compete for a limited number of seats.¹⁰⁵

While application fees and personal narratives may be less common among district-managed schools of choice and charter schools,¹⁰⁶ public-sector schools can also use admissions requirements that create burdens for families, such as required attendance at an open house, auditions, or test score submissions.¹⁰⁷ Some New York City public

high schools, for example, require families to participate in a school tour, but these are highly limited, leaving families to compete simply to secure the opportunity to apply.¹⁰⁸

In private education choice programs, families face added administrative complexity as a result of the layered nature of the programs for which families must first apply to the state agency or scholarship granting agency and then secure admission to the educational program of their choice, which may or may not require paying the provider first to seek reimbursement later. While most states offer direct payment to tuition-charging schools, newer educational models like microschoools may not be registered as private schools, preferring designations like “tutoring provider” that necessitate private pay and reimbursement.

Confusing, opaque admissions criteria

Families exercising education choice in a competitive admissions cycle are expected to become knowledgeable about admissions criteria and optimal application strategies. Existing evidence suggests families frequently misunderstand how admissions’ decisions are made or how they can increase the likelihood of securing a seat at an in-demand school. Among the 4,000 parents surveyed in eight “high choice” cities, difficulty understanding schools’ eligibility rules was noted by 33% of all parents and 40% of those who had fewer years of education.¹⁰⁹

Optimal application strategies hinge on understanding the admissions rules and the odds of admission for preferred schools. To use an example familiar to most readers, a middling high school student would not want to put all their proverbial eggs in the Ivy League basket because their chance of admission at those schools is low. Hence, college applicants typically apply to a mix of schools, submitting at least some applications to preferred colleges that are likely to admit them.

Research consistently finds that families misestimate their odds of admissions and/or engage in strategies that reflect misunderstanding about the decision criteria. Most enrollment lotteries managed for traditional and charter schools are designed to be “strategy proof,” meaning that families should list their preferred schools in the order they prefer them and list all schools they prefer over a random placement. Despite this design, some families make strategic errors. They might, for example, list fewer schools in the hopes that doing so will increase their chances of admission with their most-preferred school or overestimate their chance of admission at in-demand schools.¹¹⁰ This behavior, often shaped by misinformation that travels in social networks, decreases the likelihood that families will secure a seat at a desired school. Similarly, misunderstanding of admissions criteria may result in families listing schools out of their preferred order, increasing the likelihood that they will be matched to a less-preferred option.¹¹¹ These misunderstandings can decrease the likelihood that families secure a desired school, either by dissuading them from applying in the first place or by reducing the chance they will secure a desired placement in a common lottery.¹¹²

Leveling the enrollment playing field is difficult

Addressing the challenges families experience at the point of admissions has historically focused on reducing the paperwork burden related to applying to a school of choice. This has involved shifts toward a more coordinated admission system, utilizing common timelines, applications, and/or centralized admission lotteries (known as common or unified enrollment).

Of these, common enrollment systems go the furthest to reduce paperwork requirements and increase fairness in the admissions process. Common enrollment simplifies the process of applying to multiple schools—often across district and charter sectors—by aligning application forms and timelines and utilizing a common lottery to allocate available seats fairly based on families’ preferences (we discuss other uses of common enrollment, such as ensuring fair admissions, below).¹¹³

Evidence on common enrollment systems suggests it can improve families’ experiences with the admission process by making the process clearer and more efficient.¹¹⁴ But it does not fully resolve the challenges families experience. For example, school systems that use common enrollment continue to see significant gaps in choosing behavior between low-income families and families of color and their more affluent, white peers.¹¹⁵ Moreover, interviews with parents suggest that the shift toward common enrollment can make admissions more complicated for families who previously sought low-demand schools as well as increase parents’ perceptions of the scarcity of desirable schools.¹¹⁶ These challenges are in part a function of how common enrollment formalizes admissions and makes transparent issues that may have been present previously (e.g., demand for desirable schools outstrips supply) but were less obvious to the casual user of school choice.

Families with unique needs face unique challenges in education choice

Concerns abound about whether students who are perceived as costlier to educate will be able to meaningfully access education choice. These concerns are based on the idea that schools compete based on their reputations with parents and their academic results, which incentivizes them to control the composition of their student bodies. Schools can do this at the point of entry (“cream skimming”), by limiting admission of students perceived as less desirable, and at the point of exit (“push out”), by counseling out or dismissing students. Existing evidence presents a complicated picture of this challenge, with varying results depending on the sample, the group of students considered (e.g., students with disabilities, low-achieving students), and sector (district, charter, private).¹¹⁷

On the whole, existing research finds little evidence of selective admission practices in charter schools or private schools. Indeed, while early critics of charter schools openly worried whether the sector would grow to primarily serve affluent, white families, thereby increasing stratification between public schools and their alternatives, charter schools grew to serve a greater share of low-income students and students of color and tend to enroll a similar percentage of English language learners as traditional school districts.¹¹⁸ The sector also includes multiple examples of specialized schools that cater to the needs of marginalized students, such as students in foster care, students with autism, students impacted by the juvenile justice system, and English language learners, though most of these are purpose-built and often rely upon fundraising to support their unique and often more-intensive educational programs.¹¹⁹

There are some exceptions to this general trend. There is evidence that charter schools practice marketing and communication strategies that may dissuade families who have a child with a disability from applying. This includes failing to respond to

parental inquires,¹²⁰ actively counseling some families that the school is a poor fit,¹²¹ or simply failing to create marketing materials that would signal to these families that they are welcome.¹²² Perhaps as a result, charter schools tend to serve a lower share of students with disabilities than traditional public schools, and the students they do serve tend to require fewer and less expensive services.¹²³

At the point of exit, there is more evidence that schools of choice may engage in practices that disproportionately push out low-achieving students, students with behavioral challenges, and students with disabilities.¹²⁴ Disciplinary practices often factor prominently into considerations of push out. Disciplinary practices can directly result in exit, as when a student is expelled from school, but can also fuel voluntary separations, as when families are frustrated by punitive discipline practices and opt to find an alternative school that better meets their needs. Regardless of whether exit is forced or induced, families can find themselves shut out from a school they chose by virtue of decisions made by school administrators.

Strengthening access to choice for families with unique needs

Supporters of the charter sector have used school-based compliance and technical assistance to reduce the potential for discriminatory behavior and improve the experiences of students with disabilities and those with behavioral challenges in charter schools. Compliance-focused efforts include practices at the authorization and renewal phase to prioritize students with disabilities as well as ongoing monitoring and audits of enrollment and educational practices.¹²⁵ Technical assistance efforts, in contrast, focus on strengthening charter schools' capacity to serve students with disabilities by building leaders' and teachers' understanding of students' educational needs and addressing difficulties securing access to student support services.¹²⁶ Little evidence exists on the efficacy of these approaches, though formative feedback from schools suggests they can be influential in strengthening practices.¹²⁷

As noted above, common enrollment is another strategy for reducing discrimination at the point of admission. In New Orleans, common enrollment was adopted due to evidence that disadvantaged students, especially students with disabilities, were more likely to face discrimination in admissions—a finding that led to a federal lawsuit and consent decree. Since implementation of common enrollment, researchers have found that the percentage of Black students enrolled in schools that previously enrolled disproportionate numbers of white students increased significantly though gaps in special education across the city's charter schools continue to loom large.¹²⁸

But because common enrollment requires schools to give up something important—namely, control over admissions—it can be politically difficult to operationalize and comes with unintended consequences. When common enrollment is voluntary, as is common in multi-sector systems, schools may choose to opt out of the system. In New Orleans, it took an act of the legislature to force the remaining hold outs, which included a handful of selective admissions schools, to participate. In 2024, several large charter management organizations opted-out of the district-managed common enrollment lottery in Newark, following frustration with rule changes that advocates felt disadvantaged charter schools and the families who chose them.¹²⁹

Overcoming incentives for schools to opt-out, especially those that are oversubscribed, is not straightforward absent a mandate from government officials requiring participation.¹³⁰ But mandates inducing schools to participate may be ineffective if,

as is true with private schools, participation in publicly funded education choice is voluntary. In Louisiana, state policymakers initially required schools participating in the state's means-tested private school voucher program to admit students based on the results of a common lottery. According to research by Patrick Wolf and his colleagues, this requirement may have induced many of the highest-quality private schools to opt-out of the voucher program, unintentionally limiting participating families' options.¹³¹

Theoretically, the highest-leverage opportunity to incentivize schools of choice to enroll students with disabilities and other disadvantaged students that may be perceived as more costly to educate is one that has yet to be empirically evaluated: weighting per-pupil funding enough that schools find it to their advantage to serve them and serve them well. Several states, such as Arizona, Florida, Indiana, and North Carolina, provide an increased voucher amount for students with a qualifying disability.¹³² Whether these weights are sufficient to eliminate discriminatory admissions' behavior or spur the development of high-quality educational options for students with disabilities is not clear. There is at least some evidence that Florida's McKay scholarship has boosted the supply of schools that enroll students with disabilities, though whether these programs effectively serve students, or are simply reaping the rewards of higher per-pupil funding, is not known.¹³³

At the point of exit, debate abounds about whether and how schools of choice should reduce the impact of disciplinary practices. Some argue that schools have a responsibility to preserve order in classrooms as well as select "mission fit" students who will thrive in the setting schools are prepared to offer. But this perspective often neglects the externalities that this system may produce, through which no school of choice wants to serve the most academically or behaviorally challenged students and/or these students are left segregated from peers in traditional public schools.

New Orleans' experience is instructive in this regard. The city's schools were chartered after Hurricane Katrina in 2005, shifting responsibilities for discipline, including expulsion, from district administrators to individual schools that operated as their own local education agencies. While the citywide suspension and expulsion rate was close to the state average, advocates observed that some schools' use of punitive discipline denied students with disabilities equal access to education, spurring a class action lawsuit.¹³⁴ The resulting consent decree resulted in the state leaders moving toward a centralized expulsion system that forced schools to use common criteria and a centralized hearing process.¹³⁵ This reduced and made more transparent the expulsion process, though evidence suggests that schools simply moved toward increasing use of suspensions, which are not monitored but generate similar practical effects.¹³⁶

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

“Existing schools—and alternatives like voucher programs and charter schools—are neither good nor bad in themselves. Their value, or lack of it, comes from the purpose they serve ... Public education is a goal ... not a fixed institution.” — Paul Hill¹³⁷

The promise of education choice rests in the opportunities it provides families to secure more of what they want and their children need from taxpayers’ investments in public education. Understanding whether this happens and the factors that shape families’ success receives precious little attention in today’s debate about private education choice. Instead, support and opposition to choice increasingly reflect partisan and ideological commitments rather than a careful consideration of the facts and an orientation toward problem-solving.

We believe this is a mistake. Whether today’s education choice initiatives become seen as valid instruments for serving the goals of public education will depend on their results—the educational opportunities families and their children secure, the extent to which these reach those most underserved by traditional public schools, and ultimately, whether children secure the knowledge and skills they need to fully participate in their communities. As the evidence reviewed in this report has shown, none of this is guaranteed.

We do not yet know whether contemporary education choice programs—which rely on less government oversight and more private initiative—will produce similar or different results compared to the more established education choice programs that have been subject to extensive research. Universal, private school choice programs increasingly emphasize a hands off approach to regulating producers of education under the guise that regulation increases barriers to entry and unnecessarily limits families’ educational options. These program design elements seem likely to result in a larger, more dynamic marketplace for schooling. But whether this marketplace helps families secure what they want remains an open and empirical question.

This report suggests there are good reasons for both optimism and concern. A more open marketplace could enable many more people and organizations with good ideas to have a chance to build the educational solutions families want and children need. But it could also leave families vulnerable to the poorly thought out ideas of would-be entrepreneurs with no record of success.

In states like Arizona and Florida, there is already evidence that public funding for private education has generated a significant number of new education options, much as proponents would hope. But this market dynamism may prove to amplify the challenges documented in this report, as families go from choosing among a cadre of private schools with long histories and established reputations to one characterized by many more options with no record of or reputation for success.

Based on the experience of Milwaukee, which operates the longest-running private school choice program, it seems likely that both dynamics could play out simultaneously. Whether the benefits of a more loosely regulated system outweigh the drawbacks will hinge on how many would-be founders manage to find their footing and how much damage—to family’s support for education choice and children’s learning—failed ventures leave in their wake.

Policymakers and those that influence them, including philanthropies and advocates, have influential roles to play in shaping this balance. While there are enormous opportunities to strengthen the design and implementation of private education choice programs, we believe the following four are the most essential.

Focus on results for children and families

Given that the effects of universal private school vouchers and education savings accounts are not yet known, improvement must begin with bringing greater clarity and transparency around the results of education choice programs for the children and families who participate in them. As this review has shown, participation in choice does not, on its own, answer this question of whether private education choice produces benefits. Families who are disappointed with what private school choice has offered them may participate only to return to the traditional public schools they left, not because they provide something they want but because they have been unsuccessful at securing something better.

State policymakers should strengthen feedback mechanisms for education choice programs, including collecting and reporting data on attrition at both the school and program levels as well as surveying participating and exiting families' about their experiences. Attrition is the canary in the coal mine for education choice programs as high rates of exit signify that families have failed to secure something desirable. Understanding the extent of attrition and exiting families' experiences provides the foundation for improvement and problem-solving.

Invest in technical assistance

Policymakers, philanthropists, and advocates have key roles to play in addressing information gaps, weaknesses in the supply of quality options, and obstacles related to admissions, which are likely to meaningfully impact families' experiences in new private school choice programs. Addressing these, however, is far from straightforward. The interventions reviewed in this report produce mixed effects and were largely piloted in education choice programs that differ from those currently being implemented.

Given this, we believe there is value to experimentation with different instruments and approaches to strengthening families' capacities to navigate the system and education providers' capacities to develop the solutions that families want. State policymakers and philanthropies should invest in a technical assistance infrastructure that supports families navigating education choice programs and provides opportunities for participating private schools to improve their offerings. For families, this could include investments in accessible information about private education alternatives and navigation support. For private schools, this could include professional development opportunities designed to raise the quality of academic programming and support for vulnerable students, especially those with disabilities.

Use subsidies to strengthen supply of educational alternatives

We cannot say how much of the shortage in quality educational alternatives, especially for the highest-need students, is the result of low per-pupil funding and resource constraints. But, there are good reasons to believe that additional resources may counteract incentives for private producers of schooling to avoid students perceived as more difficult or more expensive to educate, and it is unclear whether current private school choice programs' funding is adequately weighted based on student need.

To rectify this gap, state policymakers should study the costs of educating students of varying needs and assess whether current programs adequately support marginalized students' access to desirable educational alternatives. Any effort to increase financial weights attached to student characteristics should be done carefully, given that evidence from the public sector suggests that weighting schemes can be subject to gaming and create misaligned incentives—especially when it comes to students with disabilities, for whom subjective evaluations often undergird assessments of need.

For schools, policymakers and philanthropies could consider the creation of grant programs that target start-up funding and other resources to education leaders well-positioned to address the needs of students and families most underserved in either public or private schools. Such sources of funding have been instrumental to the charter sector, where they have helped school leaders hone their ideas, find facilities, and scale to serve more families. Given the lightly regulated nature of private school choice programs, investments in promising private alternatives could provide philanthropies fertile ground for research and development programs that test new educational solutions for viability before being deployed more widely.

Explore new regulatory architectures

Finally, while regulation has become a “dirty” word in many education circles, history and experience suggest that how policymakers design education choice programs—including the requirements producers of education must meet—has enormous impacts on whether choice delivers on its promises to children, families, and taxpayers. We believe the field urgently needs more thoughtful, robust, and evidence-based discussions of how publicly funded private education alternatives are regulated. These discussions should be grounded in data and fair assessments of the costs and benefits of new requirements for families and taxpayers. While history and experience can inform these conversations, the choice in front of policymakers today is not limited to the regulatory regimes of yesteryear. Policymakers could, for example, reject high-stakes, sanctions-driven accountability systems while exploring ways to empower families with information about the academic results of private education alternatives. They could also work to protect taxpayers and families from fraud and abuse in a much more open education marketplace while avoiding cumbersome compliance requirements that limit experimentation and innovation. Republican governors and legislators are especially well-positioned to thread new needles, balancing protection of consumers' and taxpayers' interests in education while freeing entrepreneurs to break new ground.

Above all, policymakers, philanthropists, and advocates can move beyond the debate about whether or not education choice should exist and instead focus on what actions they can take to improve education choice for families. Private education choice programs are unlikely to disappear anytime soon but they can be altered in ways that improve families' experiences and their access to educational opportunities. But this can only happen if policymakers treat choice as they would any other education reform project—open to scrutiny and subject to revision in the face of evidence and real-world experience.

ENDNOTES

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The Center on Reinventing Public Education (CRPE) is a nonpartisan research organization at Arizona State University’s Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College. We rigorously examine and test transformative ideas, using our research to inform action. We are truth tellers who combine forward-thinking ideas with empirical rigor. Since 1993, we have been untethered to any one ideology but unwavering in a core belief: public education is a goal—to prepare every child for citizenship, economic independence, and personal fulfillment—and not a particular set of institutions. From that foundation, we work to inform meaningful changes in policy and practice that will drive the public education system to meet the needs of every student.

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