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# Smart Choice School Policy: Lessons from Research

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It is an interesting time to talk about choice policy because there has been a good bit of activity in these policies in the last year. Thirty states introduced voucher or tax credit legislation in 2011 (six have already passed) and charter schools continue to grow across the public school landscape.

I've been brought here as a researcher to give you a summary of the evidence we have on the effects of these policies. Because this policy is so politically charged every study that comes out faces some degree of contest. But there are many impact studies that hold up to a very high standard of rigor. Today I'm going to report on evidence that comes from these studies. In areas where we don't have strong evidence, which is primarily the case for evidence on policy differences (for example how to structure accountability), I'll let you know about the emerging hypotheses. I will, however, make it clear when we need to get a better handle on this evidence.

# Overview

- Types of choice
- Evidence on student outcomes and equity
- Evidence on policy design

Today I'll start with a brief overview of the different types of choice policies. I'll then describe the evidence we have on student outcomes and concerns about equity. Then I'll conclude with what we know about the importance of policy design.

# Many Forms of School Choice

## Capitalize on existing options

- Inter-district and open public school choice
- Vouchers or tax credits for public and private school choice

## Create new options

- Charter schools

There are primarily two kinds of choice policies. Those that capitalize on existing options and policies that create new school options. The first type of policies include inter-district and open public school choice, and vouchers or tax credits for private school tuition. The second kind of choice creates new school options – this involves charter school. Lately most of the action has been in the area of vouchers and charter schools so I'll keep my comments focused on these two forms of choice.

# Student Achievement

- Positive benefits for some kids
  - Better for low income and minority students
  - Charters in some jurisdictions and by some operators are better
- More consistent effects in math than reading
  - Don't know about other subjects (e.g. science, social studies, etc.)

A fundamental goal for any choice program is to improve achievement for students accessing the choice. Choice benefits do not seem to be universal. Across voucher and charter programs evidence shows that low income and minority students see the greatest and most consistent benefits. For charter schools some jurisdictions for example, New York City and Boston, and certain operators, for example KIPP schools, are more consistently better than their traditional district school counterparts.

We also know that the effects are greater and more consistently positive for math than reading. We know little about subjects such as science or social studies.

# Graduation and Beyond

- Vouchers and charters increase the odds of high school graduation
- Charters increased odds college attendance
- Know little about success of students once in college

We are also seeing some evidence on high school graduation and college going. Rigorous studies of both vouchers and charters have shown that students in these programs showed greater odds of earning a diploma relative to similar students not enrolled in these program. A study from RAND further found that charter school students also enrolled in college at higher rates than their non-charter counterparts.

We still know little about college completion, however, a study of KIPP charter schools, has seen that only about 33% of their students are completing college.



# Equal Access

- No evidence of creaming in charters and means tested vouchers
- Creaming and segregation evident in open (unfettered) choice
- Charters serve high concentrations of low income and minority students
- Don't know much about the service of students with special needs

Choice policies were promoted to ensure students equal access to high quality schools but choice critics have been concerned that the opposite would happen. There is no evidence that students are creamed by charter schools or with means tested vouchers – programs that target low income students.

Although creaming and further economic and racial isolation has been seen in cases of open and unfettered choice, which allows all students to access any school of their choice in state. It is also evident that charter schools are serving high concentrations of low income and minority students – a fact that concerns some.

One aspect of equal access that needs more attention, however, is the access enjoyed but students with special needs. Some voucher programs specifically target these students providing them with access to programs that might not be available locally through public schools. But there has been increasing concern over program availability and access to charter schools for these students.

# Reading the Evidence

- Different results  $\neq$  Inconclusive results
- Policy design and context matter

Even among the rigorous studies I've just described it is clear that effects differ across students, subjects, and jurisdictions. There is a tendency to view results like these as inconclusive. These studies are actually quite robust and conclusive of what they find. The variation we see is not because choice effects are wishy-washy it is because context and policy design matters. When debating choice, it will be important to also consider the evidence we have on policy design.

# Ensuring Better Achievement: School Selection

- Selective school eligibility
  - Charters: Screening school applicants for traits of high quality schools (e.g. core instructional approach, staffing strategy, governing board quality)
  - Vouchers: Eligibility requirements for voucher receiving schools

Policy to support better school options is of particular import in charter policy where new schools are being established. While the evidence on the impact of specific policy designs to ensure outcomes is still very formative and largely based on case study research, some hypotheses are starting to form.

Choice benefits kids the most when they opt out of low performing schools for better performing schools. Jurisdictions need to ensure that students are going to better performing schools.

This means first restricting eligible schools to high quality programs. For charters that means screening schools for the traits we know to be associated with better school performance. For vouchers, that may mean placing parameters around which schools are eligible to receive voucher students.



# Ensuring Better Achievement: Accountability

- Accountability for results
  - Charters: Authority to close charter schools for low performance
  - Vouchers: Consider more than the market accountability mechanisms.

If screening schools' entry into the choice market is first line of defense, the second line of defense is accountability.

For charters this means regular assessment of school performance and giving authorizers the power to close low performing schools.

In vouchers it's a little trickier. Vouchers have tended to rely on market mechanism for accountability. Parents simply don't elect to send their children to low performing schools. However, research has shown that parents don't always prioritize school performance in their selections. Voucher jurisdictions may need to consider more than just market accountability. Unfortunately, in this area we know very little about what works.

# Ensuring Equal Access to Choice

- Transportation can be a significant barrier to accessing choice
- Unequal information about choice creates inequality in choice systems
- Serving students with special needs requires specialized information and access

We know a lot more about ensuring equal access to choice. When initiating choice systems, be they charter or voucher, jurisdictions will need to find ways to provide low- or no-cost transportation to families, especially low income families, develop comprehensive and strategic information systems that target low income, language minority, and new families, and, finally, they will need recognize that families of students with special needs will need more stewardship to understand and navigate the choices as they will likely face unique constraints on programs that will work for them.

## Bottom Line:

Choice programs can't run on auto-pilot

Choice programs can have the desired effects but how you structure and oversee the program has important implications for the program's success.

The evidence we have on choice policies tells us that these policies can achieve our goals but how you oversee and structure the policy matter.

# Want More Information?

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