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New Report Urges Shift in School Choice Debate to Focus on Quality, Access, and Equity

Researchers examine the "tapestry" of public education options in the United States and how local, state, and federal policy can help ensure all schools are worth choosing and accessible to all students.

[*The Tapestry of American Public Education: How Can We Create a System of Schools Worth Choosing for All?*](#)

In recent years, the country has been rocked by debates about school choice. For some, school choice, in and of itself, is viewed as a major goal of policy. For others, the term raises concerns about privatization of public schools. Often forgotten in the policy debates are the fundamental questions of whether and how choice influences access to high-quality schools for all students, and whether, in our diverse democracy that requires common ground, choices promote or undermine integration.

Rather than debate school choice as an end, a new research report shifts the focus to choice as a means to an end. The report recommends that choice be viewed—and evaluated—as a means to higher quality, more accessible, and more inclusive and integrated schools. The report, *The Tapestry of American Public Education: How Can We Create a System of Schools Worth Choosing for All?*, was released today by the Learning Policy Institute (LPI) at a Washington, D.C., forum co-hosted with the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund.

The new report looks at the range of public school choices currently available in the United States—open enrollment, magnet schools, charter schools, and schools based on distinct educational models—and examines the degree to which, under varying circumstances, each is equitably accessible, improves student outcomes, and promotes diversity and inclusion. The report also provides examples of how states and districts are developing school choice policies to address these goals and shares key lessons and recommendations.

"The key question in a democratic society is whether every child has genuine choices among high-quality options—including their neighborhood public school—and whether all school choices are good ones that bring young people together, not divide them further," said co-author and LPI President and CEO Linda Darling-Hammond. "Research shows that the design and management of choice can lead to strikingly different results, ranging from preserving racial and ethnic segregation through vouchers for all-White academies, such as the so-called "freedom of choice" plans, to voluntary desegregation through magnet schools and controlled transfer plans within and beyond district lines. At the heart of the challenge is creating a system that ensures every child has good choices and all school choices are accessible."

In examining the policies and practices that promote a wide range of quality schools with equitable access and integrative outcomes, authors Peter Cookson, Darling-Hammond, Robert Rothman, and Patrick Shields developed the following recommendations:

- 1. Focus on educational opportunities for children, not governance structures for adults.**
Rather than responding to adult preferences for school governance approaches, focus on creating high-quality learning environments for all children. For example: Look at ways to replicate oversubscribed and successful approaches or programs rather than rationing access. Focus on supports for underserved or underperforming groups, schools, or neighborhoods.
- 2. Work to ensure equity and access for all.**
Simply opening up the "market" to parental choice tends to favor those families with the most social capital, rather than those whose children lack quality choices. Centralize efforts to ensure good schools in every neighborhood—with investments in high-quality personnel and programs—and means to protect access for the full range of students to all schools.
- 3. Create transparency at every stage about outcomes, opportunities, and resources.**
Districts that maintain a healthy portfolio of school options provide parents, community members, and policymakers with consistent, comparable, and easily accessible information on all schools. Such information includes, among other things, admission processes, recruitment and retention outcomes, enrollment patterns, finances, access to high-quality curriculum and learning opportunities, and student outcomes.
- 4. Build a system of schools that meets all students' needs.**
For a system to work effectively, all students need access to high-quality schools, and all schools must be of high quality. No neighborhood should lack an effective school for parents to choose. Creating such a system requires a laser-like focus on understanding student and school needs and then investing in program resources as well as teachers and leaders, individually and in professional learning networks, to build their capacities

to create strong schools and serve all students. It also means investing in the wraparound services and supports that students need to be healthy and ready to learn each day.

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About the Learning Policy Institute

The Learning Policy Institute conducts and communicates independent, high-quality research to improve education policy and practice. Working with policymakers, researchers, educators, community groups, and others, the Institute seeks to advance evidence-based policies that support empowering and equitable learning for each and every child. Nonprofit and nonpartisan, the Institute connects policymakers and stakeholders at the local, state, and federal levels with the evidence, ideas, and actions needed to strengthen the education system from preschool through college and career readiness.

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