



The Tapestry of American Public Education

How Can We Create a System of Schools Worth Choosing for All?

Peter W. Cookson, Jr., Linda Darling-Hammond,
Robert Rothman, and Patrick M. Shields

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Executive Summary

Reimagining School Choice

School choice is a hotly debated issue in today’s press, politics, and public discourse. In principle, the idea of families being able to choose the public school that is best for their children has widespread appeal. Interest in choice has been fueled in part by distinctive views about educational approaches and in part by the fact that disparities in school funding and quality result in unequal learning opportunities across schools and districts. In practice, though, efforts to create greater choice for families through privately controlled options have also raised questions about the nature of the social contract to provide education to all children and about the efficacy of markets to provide good schools for all. In addition, states and school districts struggle to provide school options that are universally high-quality, publicly accountable, and equitably available.

The central question for our public education system is not whether school options exist, but whether they are good ones that are available to all children. School choice is a means to an end and not an end itself. Simply creating options does not automatically result in greater access to better schools that improve student learning—that depends on how those options are designed and managed.

In this report, we describe the many forms of public school choice currently available in the United States and examine evidence about equitable access, student outcomes, and diversity and inclusion. Based on that analysis, we present key lessons and recommendations to inform policies to create, manage, and lead systems of choice that provide all students with access to high-quality schools.

The Tapestry of Public School Options

Although “choice” is often associated with private and charter schools, the vast majority of schools of choice in the United States are operated by public school districts. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, in 2012, the most recent year for which data are available, 37.3% of parents said public school choice was available in their district, and 30.5% said they considered other schools beyond those their children were slated to attend. More than three fourths of parents said their children’s current school was their first choice, including 78% of those whose children attend their assigned school, confirming that, for the vast majority of parents, the neighborhood school is the preferred option. Among other forms of choice are the following:

Open Enrollment

Open enrollment policies allow students to attend a public school of their choice in their district or state of residence. This is the most popular form of school choice. There are two forms of open enrollment: intradistrict choice and interdistrict choice.

Currently, 22 states provide for **intradistrict choice**, which allows students to attend a nonassigned public school in their district. The quality of schools in this system depends heavily on the amount of support districts provide to ensure students have access to high-quality teaching and curricula and the resources they need for academic success. Equitable access to school choices under intradistrict open enrollment varies depending on how districts manage the enrollment process.

Twenty-five states currently offer **interdistrict choice**, allowing students to attend a public school outside of the district in which they live. Studies find that students from disadvantaged backgrounds showed improvements in achievement and graduation rates when they participated in interdistrict choice programs that focused on desegregation. Many of these programs were created to limit segregation by encouraging voluntary integration, but recent research indicates that rollbacks of the regulations governing these programs has led to increased racial and economic segregation.

Magnet Schools

Magnet schools provide opportunities for students to select schools that focus on special academic and/or career interests, including particular subjects, themes, or learning models. Today, there are approximately 2.6 million students enrolled in 3,400 magnet schools in more than 600 districts in 34 states.

Many magnet school programs are intended to promote voluntary desegregation and have been successful in enrolling students from diverse backgrounds to their specialized programs. Recent research has shown that magnet schools typically have positive effects on achievement, graduation rates, student motivation, and satisfaction with school. Magnet schools are one strategy for creating schools that are integrated and address the learning needs of students.

Charter Schools

Charter schools are publicly funded schools governed by a non-profit (usually) or profit-making organization through a contract (or charter) with the state, district, or other entity. The charter grants the school flexibility with regulations, curriculum, and management, while still holding it accountable to a set of standards. The charter is reviewed periodically and may be revoked if standards are not met. Today, there are more than 6,700 charter schools enrolling 2.7 million students in 44 states and the District of Columbia.

Studies of charter school quality have consistently found great variation in student achievement, with some performing better than district schools and others performing similarly or worse. In certain types of charter schools—notably, virtual schools and distance-learning schools—students perform significantly worse than their counterparts in other types of charters and district public schools.

While some charters aim for and achieve racial integration, studies have found that all too often charter schools can increase segregation and socioeconomic isolation. Research also shows that students with disabilities are underrepresented in charter schools. Some districts and states are working to ensure greater diversity and representation of student populations in these schools.

Schools Based on Distinct Educational Models

The last category of schools of choice comprises schools that adhere to a particular educational design or philosophy, such as Montessori schools, community schools, or New York City's International High School model. These kinds of schools usually operate in networks, which can include both charters and non-charters.

Several of these networks have grown quite extensive. EL Education, for example, has more than 150 schools in 33 states serving 53,000 students. New Tech Network now serves 72,000 students in 114 high schools, 47 middle schools, and 28 elementary schools in 115 districts.

As with the other forms of school choice, the impact of these schools on student outcomes can vary depending on the model and the quality of implementation. In general, the schools that had positive effects on student achievement have some common features, such as small size and personalized structures; a commitment to forging a positive relationship between students, faculty, and school leadership; and a culture of educator collaboration and professional development.

Recommendations

The goal and challenge of school choice is to create a system in which all children choose and are chosen by a good school that serves them well and is easily accessible. The central lesson from decades of experience and research is that choice alone does not accomplish this goal. Simply creating new options does not lead automatically to greater access, quality, or equity. This report cites examples in which the introduction of choice variously expanded or restricted access, increased or decreased segregation, and led to positive or negative impacts on student achievement, depending on how it was designed and managed.

An additional consideration is that, by a large margin, parents' preferred choice is their neighborhood public school. Thus, systems of choice must equally attend to quality and access to such schools as well as to those offering novel orientations or innovations. A number of states and districts have developed means to address the challenges of choice through school authorization and review approaches that pay close attention to quality and access, as well as student diversity; centralized enrollment systems that help ensure fairness in student recruitment and retention; and strategies for supporting instructional improvement across all schools, rather than relying primarily on school closures to address school failure. The research we have reviewed suggests the following recommendations for building equitable systems of school choice:

- **Focus on high-quality learning for children, not the preferences of adults.** Too often, questions related to school and program design get debated and decided in terms of the preferences of adults, not the needs of children. The key questions should be: How do we create high-quality learning environments for all children? Are there some schools or programs that are oversubscribed and could be replicated or expanded rather than setting a fixed number of slots and rationing access? Are there some groups of students who are not receiving adequate and equitable learning opportunities? Are there groups of students or schools that are underperforming? Are there certain neighborhoods in which families do not have high-quality choices? Subsequent questions should help determine how those needs might best be met. Answers to these questions surface strategies that can improve educational opportunities, such as redesigning schools, adding wraparound services, increasing bilingual services, improving training and recruitment of special education teachers, or investing in new curriculum approaches.
- **Work to ensure equity and access for all.** Expanding choice can increase opportunities, or it can complicate or restrict access to convenient and appropriate opportunities, most often for the neediest students. Creating systems and communication methods that truly provide equal access to all students can be challenging. Simply opening up the “market” to allow for

parental choice tends to favor families who already have access to a range of options rather than increasing options for those families who lack high-quality choices. The focus must be on ensuring all students have access to high-quality schools—not simply creating options with the hope that they will be accessible to all students. This requires centralized efforts to ensure good schools in every neighborhood—with investments in high-quality personnel and programs—and ways to ensure all students have access to all the options.

- **Create transparency at every stage about outcomes, opportunities, and resources to inform decision making for families, communities, and policymakers.** Regardless of where they are located, for districts to maintain a healthy array of school options, parents, community members, and policymakers need up-to-date, consistent, comparable, and easily accessible information on all schools. That includes information about admission processes, recruitment and retention outcomes, enrollment patterns, finances, access to high-quality curriculum and learning opportunities, student outcomes such as achievement and graduation, and disciplinary practices and their results. It should also include the results of school quality reviews that provide qualitative evidence about school practices, programs, and climate, and that can guide diagnostic investments.
- **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.

We already have a rich tapestry of school choice in the United States. The challenge ahead is to expand quality and access within this tapestry so that every child chooses, and is chosen by, a school worth choosing.

Introduction

Hardly a day passes in which the issue of school choice is not hotly debated in the press, in public forums, and in political life. In principle, the idea of providing parents with the opportunity to choose the school that is best for their children has wide appeal. Interest in choice has been fueled in part by distinctive views about educational approaches and in part by the fact that disparities in school funding and quality result in unequal learning opportunities across schools and districts. In practice, though, efforts to create greater choice for families through privately controlled options have also raised questions about the nature of the social contract to provide education to all children and about the efficacy of markets to provide good schools for all.

While much of the discussion of choice has focused on subsidies for private schools and independently governed charter schools, the vast majority of schools of choice are operated by public school districts that offer magnets, themed schools, and a range of other innovative school models. Indeed, some districts provide an entire system of schools from which to choose.

Quite often, though, even when there are ostensible choices—whether provided through districts, charters, or private school vouchers—not all schools offered are worth choosing, and not all students are chosen by the schools they would like to attend. Genuine choice is often available only to an advantaged few, while at the same time, lack of choice options may leave some students trapped in substandard schools.

As a result, Americans are debating how to offer education that is universally high quality, publicly accountable, equitably available, and supportive of democratic goals for an educated populace with shared values.

Even when there are ostensible choices, not all schools offered are worth choosing, and not all students are chosen by the schools they would like to attend.

The current debates occur in the context of a long-standing commitment to the common public school, which has deep roots in American history. For more than a century, Americans have put their faith in a simple but profound principle: Every child is entitled to an education that is free and accessible. Over recent decades, the law has clarified that this right includes a level of school quality that is equitably provided to all, irrespective of race, gender, social class, sexual orientation, religion, first language, nature of abilities, country of origin, or place of residence.

Of course, through much of American history, racial and economic segregation have undermined the concepts of common schools and equality of educational opportunity. Even after *Brown v. Board of Education* made the long-standing practice of isolating students of color in under-resourced schools no longer legal, resistance to integration was widespread and, in some places, violent. In some states and counties, White parents formed their own private schools, sometimes resourced by publicly funded vouchers, or moved out of cities to White suburbs, leading to residential racial segregation by zip code. Resegregation of schools over the last 30 years has exacerbated the existing divides, and the current choice movement exists within this complicated context.

The central question for a public education system in a democratic society is not whether school options exist, but whether they are good ones and whether high-quality schools are available to all children. The fact that choice does not guarantee quality should be clear each time we flick through

hundreds of cable TV channels without finding a single good viewing option. In public education, this kind of choice is not an acceptable outcome.

In this paper, we start from the assumption that school choice policy is a means to an end and not an end itself. The goals of our education system include improving student learning opportunities, strengthening educational attainment, providing alternatives that fit student needs, and integrating our diverse citizenry, all while preparing young people for their civic roles in a democracy.

It is clear from the research we present here that choice alone is no magic bullet. Simply creating options does not automatically result in greater access to better schools—or to more equitable opportunities, stronger learning, or greater integration. School choice is a means that can lead to different ends depending on how it is designed and managed. For example, while parental choice in education has been used to maintain racial and ethnic segregation through vouchers for all-White segregation academies or so-called “freedom of choice” plans, choice has also been used to foster voluntary desegregation through magnet schools and transfer plans within and beyond district lines.

Similarly, choice can be seen as a mechanism to advance greater competition among schools on the assumption that competition will improve quality, or it can be seen as a means to sponsor innovative practices and more diverse options that fit students’ distinctive interests and learning needs as part of a more comprehensive school improvement plan. Thus, our analysis does not frame the problem as one of school choice versus no school choice, but as one concerned with what kind of school choice and to what ends.

This report is designed to give the reader a sense of the rich tapestry of American public schools and to examine which policies and practices appear to promote a wider range of quality schools offering equitable access and integrative outcomes.

Our approach is straightforward. We begin by describing the many forms of choice currently available to parents, including open enrollment plans, magnets, charters, and various model schools and school networks. We then describe the nature and extent of these choice options with a focus on the degree of access and quality. We explore the extent to which and the conditions under which choice expands high-quality options for all families; ensures access; and supports social, racial, and economic integration.

We conclude with some key lessons gleaned from these analyses. We look at the school choice options discussed in the paper and highlight evidence-based policies needed to create, manage, and lead systems of choice that provide access to high-quality schools for all students. The goal is to examine whether and how choice programs—when implemented well and fairly—may result in expanded learning opportunities for all students while strengthening communities through equal opportunity and integration—and in the end, protecting and deepening democratic values.

The Tapestry of Public Education

Most schools of choice in the United States are operated by or within public school districts, and public school choice is increasingly widespread. Private school enrollments, now about 9% of all students, account for a declining share of the school population,¹ and vouchers to private schools affect less than 0.4% of students (see Table 1).

According to the National Center for Education Statistics, in 2012, the most recent year for which data are available, 37.3% of parents said public school choice was available in their district, and 30.5% said they considered other schools beyond those their children were slated to attend. More than three fourths of parents said their children’s current school was their first choice, including 77.5% with children in assigned schools, confirming that, for the vast majority of parents, the neighborhood school is the preferred option.²

About one half of parents who live in cities said choice was available, as compared to one third of those in suburbs and a third of those in rural areas. Forty-three percent of Black parents said choice was available, compared with 34.2% of White families and 38.9% of Hispanic families.

Although choice may be available, not all families exercise an option other than their neighborhood or assigned school. Overall, 15.4% of public school students were enrolled in a school of their choice other than their assigned school.³ The number of these students (6.5 million) swamps the number of students in charter schools (2.7 million). Magnet school enrollments accounted for about 40% of this 6.5 million (2.6 million students) and a wide range of other schools of choice—theme schools, career academies, open enrollment options—accounted for the remainder.⁴

Table 1
Students Enrolled in School Choice Options Other Than Their Assigned Schools

Type of choice	Number of States	Number of Schools	Number of Students
Public school choice options*	22 intradistrict 25 interdistrict	NA	18.7 million
District-run schools of choice*	At least 22	NA	6.5 million
Magnet schools**	NA	3,285	2.6 million
Charter schools**	44, plus DC	6,747	2.7 million
Private schools ⁺	50, plus DC	34,576	4.9 million
Vouchers for private schools ⁺⁺	14, plus DC	NA	179,000

* National Center for Education Statistics. (2016). *Digest of education statistics: 2015*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education.

** National Center for Education Statistics. *Digest of education statistics: 2016*. Data for 2014–15. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education.

⁺ Broughman, S. P., Rettig, A., & Peterson, J. (2017). *Characteristics of private schools in the United States: Results from the 2015–16 Private School Universe Survey*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education National Center for Education Statistics. <https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2017/2017073.pdf>.

⁺⁺ EdChoice. (n.d.) Resource hub: Fast facts. <http://www.edchoice.org/our-resources/fast-facts>.

Open Enrollment

The most popular form of school choice is open enrollment, which enables students to attend a public school of choice in their district or state of residence. Currently, 22 states allow students to attend a nonassigned public school within their district (intradistrict choice), and 25 states allow students to attend public schools outside of their neighborhood district (interdistrict choice). A majority of those states allow both forms of choice.⁵

Intradistrict Choice

The idea of open enrollment emerged at scale in the 1970s with New York City as a pioneer. The long history of experimentation with intradistrict school choice in New York City began as early as 1921 with the founding of the Little Red School House (then a public school) in Manhattan.⁶ Through many eras of reform, innovative schools were founded in the city and attended by choice. By the 1970s, a substantial set of alternative schools existed, and in 1983, an Alternative High Schools Superintendency was established as the oversight agency for these nontraditional schools of choice, which operated under more flexible rules than other district schools. The underlying philosophy of this movement was innovation to spark better teaching and better schools, not competition.⁷

In addition, New York City had a history of successful career magnet schools, known as Educational Option High Schools, that provided convincing evidence to alternative school advocates that open enrollment was an approach that held real promise for positive student outcomes. These high schools took students from the top, middle, and bottom of the test score hierarchy, and, as a result, they were more racially and ethnically diverse than most New York City high schools. An in-depth study of these schools found that “career magnet programs promote positive outcomes, and do so by increasing positive student behaviors and decreasing negative ones.”⁸ Students in these schools drank and smoked less, studied more, were less likely to become pregnant than a comparison group in traditional high schools, and were more likely to succeed in the initial years of college.

In the 1970s, Community District 4 in East Harlem, one of 32 community school districts in the city, adopted a policy that eliminated attendance zones for the district’s 24 junior high schools. (The elementary schools in the district were largely assigned as neighborhood schools, although many of them, too, could be chosen; community school districts, at the time, did not operate high schools.) Under this system, each 6th-grader applied to up to six junior high schools, indicating in a statement why he or she wanted to attend the school; the student’s teacher also submitted a statement about the student, and students were often interviewed. It was up to the junior high school to decide whether to admit the student.

The District 4 policy was aimed, in part, at spurring innovation and allowing students to choose schools based on their interests and abilities. Many schools adopted a curricular theme, such as computer science, performing arts, or humanities; others advertised a distinct educational philosophy. Two schools were alternative schools for students who had struggled in traditional settings, and one, the

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Harlem School for Health and Bio-Medical Studies, admitted only students with excellent academic records. The policy aimed in part to spur competition among the schools. At least two schools were closed because they attracted few applicants.⁹

A choice system expanded to New York City as a whole by 1992, when the city created roughly 150 new small schools of choice by invitation from then-Chancellor Joe Fernandez. A process was developed that allowed parents to rank their choices of schools, including and beyond their zoned neighborhood school. The system allocated choices by seeking to balance race and ethnicity, economic background, achievement status, and disability status so that schools would remain integrated along a number of dimensions. Efforts were also made to expand access to the selective high schools by broadening the diversity of selection criteria.

The program was expanded to all schools in 2002, and a system allowing students to apply to elementary and middle schools within their community school district of residence, and to high schools as well as some middle schools across districts, continues to this day. Under the current policy for high school choice, about 80,000 8th-graders can apply to any of 700 programs in 400 high schools. The district provides information about the programs by publishing a 600-page directory, holding choice fairs, and conducting open houses. Students may apply to up to 12 schools each; they are matched to schools with an algorithm developed by the Nobel Prize-winning economist Alvin Roth. About 300 of the 700 available programs are selective and admit students based on test scores, grades, or auditions. A small number—fewer than 50—give preference to students from the school’s neighborhood. All students have access to a neighborhood school.

Students now have choices of schools at the elementary, middle, and high school levels, and there has been an ongoing effort to improve, close, or redesign schools with failing records and few choosers. Generally, large buildings have been reopened housing a set of newly designed, smaller schools.

Other districts created modified open-enrollment plans to foster both innovation and integration. Cambridge, MA, and Montclair, NJ, for example, adopted “controlled choice” plans that allow students to apply to schools outside of their neighborhood, but only if they do not disrupt racial balance. Cambridge’s program was modified in 2001 to take into account socioeconomic status. Under the revised plan, the district sought to ensure that schools maintained a balance of students from low-income and higher income families. In 2011–12, 84% of Cambridge k–8 students attended racially balanced schools, and 67% attended socioeconomically balanced schools.¹⁰

Boston, the site of a highly contentious desegregation battle in the 1970s, developed a controlled choice plan in 1989. Under the plan, the district was divided into three zones for elementary and middle schools, each of which reflected the racial and ethnic proportions of the district as a whole. (High schools were in a single citywide zone.) Students could make up to three choices of schools within their zone. Districts such as Denver, CO; Milwaukee, WI; and San Francisco, CA, have also pioneered choice systems in which all parents choose schools, most of which are district-run, while students are guaranteed access to a neighborhood school. To varying degrees and in different ways, they have sought to support racial, economic, and linguistic integration, and to work to improve all the schools in the system so that more schools are worth choosing.

Access to choices. The extent to which choice plans have provided families with their first choices has varied depending on how districts have managed both the choice process and the process of supporting school improvement.

According to a study of the District 4 program by the Manhattan Institute for Policy Research, 60% of students were admitted to their first-choice school, 30% were admitted to their second-choice school, and 5% were admitted to their third-choice school. The remaining students were placed in a school considered appropriate for them, after consultations with parents and teachers.¹¹

A study of New York City’s choice program from 2007 to 2011 found that, despite the availability of choices throughout the city, students tended to choose schools in their own neighborhoods.¹² Studies of the current program found that just over one half of all students received their first choice, and three fourths received one of their top three choices. However, 10% did not receive any of their top 12 choices, usually because the schools were already filled by their admissions priorities. In some cases, students applied only to schools that admitted students with higher test scores and grades.¹³ These students then applied in a supplemental round and were sometimes matched to a school they did not choose.¹⁴

In Boston, meanwhile, a study by Bain and Company found that most students attained their first choice, and that more than half of students attended a school outside their immediate neighborhood.¹⁵

While intradistrict choice grew in popularity after the 1970s, it became a feature of federal law in 2002 with the passage of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). Under that law, schools that failed to make adequate yearly progress on state tests for 2 years in a row were required to provide their students the option of transferring to a higher performing school within the same district. The federal choice program under NCLB was rarely used, however. Only about 1% of eligible students—or 38,000—took advantage of that option. In many cases, districts had few high-performing schools to which the students could transfer; in other cases, districts already had options through existing open-enrollment programs.¹⁶

Access to quality. After developing a well-known choice system in New York City’s District 4, Superintendent Tony Alvarado moved to District 2 in New York City, where he took a somewhat different approach. Alvarado was concerned that, with choice alone as a strategy, the goal of “a thousand flowers blooming” is elusive, and only some flowers bloom. However, with a strong instructional improvement strategy enabling teachers and principals to intensively improve their skills, he demonstrated that all schools can become higher quality, and good choices can become commonplace. Thus, District 2 became an exemplar of a system of innovative and high-quality schools of choice. While providing for innovation in school types, the district leadership built a strong infrastructure of professional development and financial and curricular resources to ensure that all students had access to strong schools.

Similarly, in Milwaukee, one of the nation’s first districts offering choices of vouchers and charters as well as district-run schools of choice, the initial decades of widespread choice options showed no gains in achievement. It was not until Superintendent William Andrekopoulos decided to launch an instructional improvement initiative for the district-run schools that gains in achievement began to occur. As with the work in District 2, these efforts involved intensive, content-based professional development for teachers and principals, classroom walkthroughs with rubrics to calibrate a sense of instructional quality, and supports for curriculum improvements.¹⁷

New Orleans provided a contrasting case: As choice was introduced through charter schools across nearly the entire system, central district support for schools was severely cut back. The result was a very uneven set of schools, with some stellar performers and many failing schools; the latter became landing places but not genuine choices for the most academically vulnerable students and those from the lowest-income families.¹⁸ Without a support system to help schools improve, the only recourse for school failure was closure, which left many students moving from one failing school to another.

As these issues have been recognized, a number of districts have been trying to develop strategies for school choice that also expand quality, which we discuss later in this report.

Interdistrict Choice

In addition to authorizing intradistrict choice, states have also adopted policies allowing students to transfer to schools outside of their district. In 1988, Minnesota became the first state to open enrollment statewide. Arkansas, Iowa, Nebraska, and Ohio followed in 1989, and Idaho, Utah, and Washington state did so in 1990. Currently, 25 states provide some form of interdistrict choice.¹⁹

State policies for interdistrict choice. In most interdistrict choice programs, per-pupil funding follows the student from the sending to the receiving district; however, most states have restrictions on the process. For example, districts can opt out from receiving new students if they lack space. In some cases, such as in Texas, districts must conduct a lottery if more students apply than space allows.

Some states also allow or require districts to give priority to certain students, such as siblings of enrolled students, children of teachers in the district, or students moving from low-performing or “persistently dangerous” schools. Typically, districts can bar transfers if they interfere with desegregation remedies. However, most court oversight of desegregation plans has ended in the past two decades.²⁰ In nearly all cases, parents are responsible for providing transportation, which can prove another limitation on choice.

Nonetheless, a study of open-enrollment plans in Minnesota and Colorado found that they are quite popular. In Minnesota, 38,000 students, or 5% of total enrollment, enrolled in a nonresident district in 2006–07. That was more than the number of students enrolled in charter schools in Minnesota that year. In Colorado, 51,000 students, or 6% of total enrollment, enrolled in a nonresident district in 2006–07.²¹

Using choice for desegregation. Beginning in the 1960s, many school districts and states experimented with desegregation plans aimed at ending racial isolation for African-American and White students. Generally, interdistrict desegregation plans are voluntary. Examples include Hartford, CT, which works with nearby school districts on student assignment plans. The Omaha Learning Community, forged by the Nebraska state legislature in 2006, enables the City of Omaha and its surrounding school districts to cooperatively share resources and use transfer policies aimed at reducing segregation.

The Omaha Learning Community, forged by the Nebraska state legislature in 2006, enables the City of Omaha and its surrounding school districts to cooperatively share resources and use transfer policies aimed at reducing segregation.

Since 1966, Massachusetts has voluntarily operated the Metropolitan Council for Educational Opportunity (METCO), which allows students from Boston and Springfield, who are primarily students of color, to transfer to suburban districts. Approximately 3,300 students take part in the program—which serves to integrate suburban schools (about 75% of METCO students are Black and Hispanic) and provide inner-city families access to typically good schools. However, the program is voluntary, and some of the participating suburban districts have reduced the number of METCO students they accept as state funding for the program has been cut back over the last decade. In 2011, there were 10,000 students on a waiting list for the program, including 900 students on a waiting list for kindergarten placement.²²

The much larger open enrollment program in Minnesota, in which 38,000 students participate, was meant to open up choice while encouraging integration. From the outset of the program, the state adopted a policy prohibiting school choice that resulted in increased segregation.²³ However, in the late 1990s, that policy was changed when a new attorney general exempted both open enrollment and charters from racial segregation rules. From 2000 on, the schools in the Minneapolis-St. Paul area have become increasingly segregated: In 2000, there were 11 schools with enrollments of at least 90% non-White students; by 2010, the number of such schools had risen to 83. Studies have found that 36% of transfers in 2010 were segregative—that is, moves that reduced rather than adding to diversity in the receiving districts. That proportion was substantially higher than the proportion of segregative transfers in 2000, and the increase was due almost entirely to an increase in White transfers.²⁴ Clearly, the policy framework that governs choice programs influences the extent to which they contribute to integration or segregation.

Outcomes of interdistrict desegregation programs. Researchers reviewed the educational and social benefits of eight interdistrict school desegregation programs that enabled disadvantaged Black and Hispanic students to cross school district boundary lines and attend far more affluent, predominantly White and privileged suburban public schools.²⁵

All of the programs were oversubscribed and had waiting lists. In the three programs that offered long-term outcome data (Hartford, CT; Milwaukee, WI; and St. Louis, MO), benefits were found for both achievement and graduation rates, with stronger outcomes the longer the students remained in the more affluent, suburban schools. Benefits were also found across districts for interracial attitudes and relationships, as perceived by White students and students of color, as well as adults.

The policy framework that governs choice programs influences the extent to which they contribute to integration or segregation.

Magnet Schools

Magnet schools are another common form of choice that provides options for students to select school environments that meet their needs. As noted earlier, magnets have their roots in the alternative school movement and were explicitly designed to bring about voluntary desegregation while fostering innovative school models. Districts chose to open schools that drew students from outside zoned school boundaries in order to reduce racial isolation without resorting to busing or other mandatory measures. Houston's School of Visual and Performing Arts, which opened in the early 1970s, was the first to call itself a magnet.

Today, there are roughly 3,400 magnet schools nationwide across more than 600 school districts, with 34 states enrolling 2.6 million students, which is about the same total number as in charter schools.²⁶ The states with the most magnet schools are California, Florida, Illinois, New York, North Carolina, and Texas.²⁷

Magnets as sparks for integration, innovation, and choice. The “magnets” that draw students are programs that appeal to various academic and career interests. They focus on specific subjects, follow specific themes, or operate according to certain models. Magnets are found at the elementary, middle, and high school levels and are designed to attract students from diverse social, economic, ethnic, and racial backgrounds.

This policy has opened the door to a great deal of experimentation. Drawing from the British Open Schools movement of the 1970s, magnet schools expanded the range of choice options for students and families, including schools without walls, multicultural schools, Montessori schools, and schools with specialized curricula ranging from science and engineering and the health professions to design and architecture, the arts, international studies, and early college.

The U.S. Department of Education provides grants to local educational agencies to establish and operate magnet schools that are part of a desegregation order. The law states: “Magnet schools are a significant part of the Nation’s effort to achieve voluntary desegregation in our Nation’s schools.”²⁸ Federal support for magnet schools began in 1976 under section 5301 of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, which provides for the Magnet Schools Assistance program and is currently funded at \$92 million annually.²⁹

Policy contexts for magnets. Most magnet schools are established by school districts, while others are founded on a statewide basis. For example, Connecticut has established more than 50 interdistrict magnet schools in metropolitan Hartford, New Haven, and Waterford, in order to comply with a statewide desegregation case. The schools draw from multiple districts to provide racially diverse educational settings.³⁰ While most magnet schools have their own buildings, many are part of a larger comprehensive school with a number of schools under one roof. Requirements for admission to a magnet school can include lotteries or first-come, first-served rules subject to racial diversity criteria; auditions for arts academies; grades or test scores; and/or percentage set-asides for various groups or neighborhood residents.

Syntheses of the research on magnet schools have generally found positive effects on achievement, graduation rates, student motivation and satisfaction with school, teacher motivation and morale, parent satisfaction, intergroup relationships, and integration.³¹ These findings cut across large-scale national studies,³² studies of statewide programs,³³ and rigorous local analyses.³⁴

However, these overall trends mask wide variation in the degree and nature of student integration within and across districts, based on districts’ demographics as well as how they structure magnet school admissions and attendance. For example, one district study found that magnets reduced segregation by race, ethnicity, and parental education but not by test scores or language status.³⁵ Another study found greater integration in magnet schools that previously had been low performing but no greater integration in previously high-performing magnets.³⁶

Most studies are not designed to identify the reasons for variations in schools’ outcomes. An exception is a particularly in-depth analysis of high-performing STEM academies. In that study, researchers found that successful magnets consistently had four features: a flexible and autonomous

administrative structure; a college-preparatory, STEM-focused curriculum for all; well-prepared STEM teachers and professionalized teaching staffs; and supports for students from underrepresented groups.³⁷ This finding reprises that of studies noted earlier that investments in teaching capacity are as important for creating quality school options as is the fact of choice itself.

Charter Schools

Charter schools, the fastest growing variety of school choice, are another approach to providing a range of public school options for students and families. According to the U.S. Department of Education,

A public charter school is a publicly funded school that is typically governed by a group or organization under a legislative contract (or charter) with the state, district, or other entity. The charter exempts the school from certain state or local rules and regulations. In return for flexibility and autonomy, the charter school must meet the accountability standards outlined in its charter. A school's charter is reviewed periodically by the entity that granted it and can be revoked if guidelines on curriculum and management are not followed or if the accountability standards are not met.³⁸

History of charters. The idea of charter schools emerged in the late 1980s. The former president of the American Federation of Teachers, Albert Shanker, speaking in Minnesota in 1988 at a conference on school reform, used the term “charter” to describe a new kind of governance framework under which successful teachers would be “empowered” to create innovative programs at existing schools. In Shanker’s mind, the charter school was a teacher-centered reform strategy that would inspire positive change from the inside out.

From this perspective, public charter schools were thought of as small educational laboratories in which educational innovations could be hothoused and then transferred to other public schools. To these advocates, the flexibility afforded to charter schools can allow for greater innovation and customization, which in turn leads to greater student engagement and, hence, greater learning. They argue that charter schools can create a more equitable system of public schools, improve student performance, develop better models for school accountability, and forge stronger links between families and communities.

Another perspective views charters as essentially a market reform emphasizing family choice, school autonomy, and increased responsibility for results, thought to stimulate improvements in the system through competition. Advocates for this view claim that markets and competition will lead to higher quality educational options.³⁹ These distinctive views have led to different approaches to charter school laws and regulation across states.

The first charter school to open its doors was the City Academy on the east side of St. Paul, MN, in 1992. The idea caught on and spread to other cities and states and, in doing so, gathered political support as well as federal funding. In 1999, President Bill Clinton described charter schools this way:

Charter schools are innovative public schools started by educators, parents and communities, open to students of every background or ability. But they are freer of red tape and top-down management than most of our schools are, and in return for greater flexibility, charter schools must set and meet higher standards, and stay open only as long as they do.⁴⁰

Current status of charters. Charter schools choose their own management structure: As of 2015–16, 59% of all charter schools were independent, 26% were operated by nonprofit charter management organizations (CMOs), and 15% were managed by for-profit education management organizations (EMOs).⁴¹

An area of growth has involved CMOs, which now manage one quarter of the nation’s charters. These management organizations typically provide curriculum development, assessment design, professional development, system implementation, back-office services, teacher recruitment, and facility services. Examples include Aspire Public Schools, KIPP schools, BASIS, and Uncommon Schools. Many of these companies receive funding from private investors, foundations, and venture capitalists, but they are nonprofit entities. Another recent area of growth has been the spread of online charters in which instruction takes place over the internet; most of these are operated by for-profit chains, such as K12 Inc.

Currently, there are over 6,700 charter schools, more than twice as many as a decade ago. During that period, the number of students enrolled in charter schools tripled, from 900,000 to 2.7 million, and the proportion of students in charter schools rose from 2% to 5%.⁴² However, the proportion of students in charter schools varies among states. In Arizona, for example, 19% of students are in charter schools, while in Connecticut and New Hampshire, 1% of students are in charter schools. In some districts, charter schools make up the majority of the student population; in New Orleans, nearly all students are in charter schools, and in Detroit and Flint, MI, more than half of students are in charter schools. Los Angeles has the largest number of students in charter schools: 156,000.⁴³

State laws governing charters. Charter schools are authorized in 44 states and the District of Columbia, and state laws governing the schools vary widely. For example, states allow a variety of entities to authorize charter schools. In most cases, local districts authorize the schools. But some states, such as Michigan and New York, allow universities to do so as well. In Indianapolis, the mayor is one of the authorizers. Ohio allows for more types of organizations to become authorizers than any other state. There are more than 65 authorizers in the state, and over 50% of charter schools in Ohio have been sponsored by entities not connected with any public agency.⁴⁴

Some state laws restrict the number and location of charter schools, which can limit the number of students who can attend them. Twenty-two states and the District of Columbia place caps on the number of charters. In Arkansas, authorizers must give preference to charters located in districts with a high proportion of students who receive free and reduced-price lunches, where the district has been classified as in “academic distress,” and where the district is in improvement status.

States also vary in accountability requirements for charter schools. In all states, charter schools administer state assessments. Eleven states and the District of Columbia have established performance thresholds and require schools to close if they fail to meet them. Twenty-eight states require teachers to be certified; three states and the District of Columbia do not.

Issues of access and integration. While some charters strive for and achieve racial integration, most studies have found that charters tend to increase racial isolation. For example, when New Orleans rapidly expanded its charters in the wake of Hurricane Katrina, 90% of White students were admitted to the top tier of schools, some of which had selective admissions, while students of color and those from the lowest income families ended up far underrepresented in these schools.⁴⁵ Philadelphia’s expansion of charters also led to greater economic and racial segregation.⁴⁶

Looking more broadly, a 2010 study by the Civil Rights Project found that Black students in charter schools were twice as likely as those in regular public schools to be in “intensely segregated settings”—that is, where 90% to 100% of students were Black.⁴⁷ Recent studies have also uncovered racially identifiable charters that are predominantly White.⁴⁸ A number of studies have explored the issue of charter segregation in depth and have found that without regulatory guardrails, the expansion of charter schools tends to lead to increasing racial and socioeconomic isolation.⁴⁹

Studies have also shown that students with disabilities are underrepresented in charter schools.⁵⁰ Some studies suggest that when charters enroll such students, they are more likely to enroll those with mild versus severe disabilities.⁵¹ In New Orleans, then nearly completely composed of charter schools, the Southern Poverty Law Center sued the district because students with disabilities were being turned away from a substantial number of schools, and some parents could not find any school to admit their child.⁵² Even after the lawsuit was settled, researchers found that while some schools provided legally required services to students with special needs, other schools dissuaded parents from enrolling their students or pushed the students out through transfers or expulsions shortly after they were enrolled.⁵³

While some charters strive for and achieve racial integration, most studies have found that charters tend to increase racial isolation. Studies have also shown that students with disabilities are underrepresented in charter schools.

Similarly, researchers in California found that 20% of charters illegally restricted access for high-need students.⁵⁴ That study noted that charters had a range of admission policies that resulted in the under-enrollment of certain students. These schools:

- denied enrollment to students who did not have strong grades or test scores;
- expelled students who did not maintain strong grades or test scores;
- denied enrollment to students who did not meet a minimum level of English proficiency; and
- selected students based on pre-enrollment requirements such as student or parent/guardian essays or interviews.

Because of accountability and financial pressures, all schools—traditional and charter—have incentives to attract and keep the highest achieving, lowest cost students, and efforts to do so have been recorded in both sectors.⁵⁵ But because of their separate admission processes, charters in many districts can do so more easily than traditional public schools.⁵⁶ Thus, researchers argue that some oversight is needed to ensure that certain student groups are not excluded from charters.⁵⁷ Just 16 states require some affirmative action to create diverse schools, while 13 states have general provisions in charter school laws that require nondiscrimination.⁵⁸

Achievement outcomes. In terms of student achievement, a consistent finding of research on charters is the great variation in their educational outcomes, with some charters outperforming other district schools serving similar students, some doing worse, and others exhibiting similar outcomes.⁵⁹ One large study of charters examined 33 schools across 13 states, comparing students who were admitted through a lottery with those who applied but lost the lottery and attended

traditional schools. The authors found that impacts varied across schools and students. On average across all schools, the impacts of charter schools on student achievement were negative but not statistically significant.⁶⁰

A major national study from the Center for Research on Education Outcomes (CREDO), which compared charter school students with peers from schools that sent students to those charters, found that 25% of charter schools showed significantly stronger learning gains for their students, 56% showed no difference, and 19% showed significantly weaker learning gains than the feeder schools.⁶¹

This study also showed significant variation across states in charter school performance. Further investigation found that outcomes were associated in part with the number of authorizers states permit. It appears that maintaining quality control in the authorization process is an important tool for states to employ in building strong charter schools. In three states with a large range of authorizers and relatively lax oversight laws—Arizona, Ohio, and Texas—charter school students consistently underperform traditional public school comparison students in both reading and mathematics.⁶²

In contrast, Massachusetts has taken a much more deliberate approach to the authorization and renewal process. The state, which is among the highest scoring in the nation, has only one authorizer—the state board of education—and has created a multistep, rigorous application and review process for both initial authorization and for reauthorization. To ensure equity and access, the Massachusetts charter school law requires that charter schools notify parents or guardians in writing that students with diverse learning needs have the right to attend charter schools, which must provide accommodations and support services to students with disabilities and those who are English learners. Studies by researchers at Stanford, Harvard, and MIT have all found that Massachusetts' closely regulated charters are highly effective.⁶³

Research has also unearthed some areas of specific concern. A number of studies have found that, in some charter school sectors—notably virtual schools in which all instruction is online—students perform significantly worse than students enrolled in other charters and in district public schools.⁶⁴ One study found that the differences in student learning equated to a student losing 72 days of learning in reading and 180 days of learning in mathematics during a 180-day school year.⁶⁵ Data from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) also show that 87% of virtual schools were identified as low-graduation-rate schools in 2013–14, with an average graduation rate of only 40%, less than half the national average rate (82%).⁶⁶ A number of states have created more intensive oversight for such schools, and some have refused to charter virtual schools.⁶⁷

Schools Based on Distinct Educational Models

Districts and other school developers have added to the supply of choices by adopting or creating schools (or schools within schools) that adhere to a particular design or philosophy. In some cases, these schools are managed by a national organization that provides support and technical assistance. These may include models such as Montessori and Waldorf schools, both long-standing child-centered approaches that have begun to enter the public sector; or newer models such as New Tech Network or Envision Education, networks of affiliated high schools engaged in shared models of collaborative, project-based learning. These schools often share common teacher and leader training, curriculum, and assessment designs, and may have shared approaches to quality reviews.

History of innovative school networks. A key impetus to school design networks was the creation, in 1991, of the New American Schools Development Corporation (NASDC). That organization, funded by corporations and foundations, was formed in conjunction with President George H. W. Bush’s “America 2000” plan and was intended to spur innovation in school design and produce large numbers of new and effective schools. From about 600 design proposals, NASDC funded 11 organizations to develop new models. After the design phase, NASDC funded nine of the original 11 teams to test the designs in real school settings, and then funded seven of the organizations to scale up the designs. About 3,000 schools used the designs by the end of the 1990s.

In 1997, Congress adopted the Comprehensive School Reform Demonstration Program, known as the Obey-Porter program after its sponsors, Reps. David Obey (D-WI) and John Porter (R-IL). That program provided \$150 million annually in grants to school districts adopting whole-school designs. Many of the NASDC designs were adopted, as well as other models, such as Accelerated Schools, High Schools That Work, Core Knowledge, and James Comer’s School Development Program, which spread to more than 1,000 schools in the U.S. and abroad.

In addition, New York City’s strategy of creating new small high schools broke up large, comprehensive schools and replaced them with smaller schools featuring new designs. Building on that strategy, in 2000, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation launched a \$2 billion program of grants to school districts and education organizations designed to break up large comprehensive high schools and replace them with new, smaller high schools. The Annenberg Foundation followed suit with challenges in many cities. The federal government’s small schools grants were also used toward these ends. Together, these investments resulted in the creation of about 2,600 high schools in 45 states and the District of Columbia. More than 200 new schools opened with Gates Foundation funding in New York City alone. These schools are at the heart of the city’s open-enrollment system described above.

The program also led to the creation of new school models, such as EdVisions, a group of schools based in Minnesota, and High Tech High, a group of schools based in San Diego. The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation later awarded grants to 10 school networks, including these two, to serve as demonstrations of deeper learning, a broad set of competencies needed for success in college and career.

Several of the networks have grown quite extensive. EL Education, an outgrowth of one of the NASDC design teams, now has more than 150 schools in 33 states, serving 53,000 students. New Tech Network now has 114 high schools, 47 middle schools, and 28 elementary schools in 115 districts, serving 72,000 students.

New school models in operation. Depending on the context, the schools in these and other networks operate (most commonly) as district-run public schools or, sometimes, as charters. Many models have both charters and non-charters as members. The schools or districts choose a governance approach based on what works most effectively in a given school district or state context. In all cases, they are schools of choice.

With initial support from the James Irvine Foundation, Linked Learning, a California-based initiative to combine rigorous academics with career preparation, was initially launched in nine districts. The districts all had a high proportion of disadvantaged students and below-average student achievement. The support from the foundation provided technical assistance, including

district coaches, district residencies, and visits to other sites. California has provided more than \$2 billion for these initiatives through the Career Pathways Trust and the Career Technical Education Incentive Grant. Dozens of districts in California and other states are now implementing Linked Learning in partnership with local employers and area colleges.

Districts also have created new school options to strengthen the appeal of neighborhood schools. One of the more popular approaches has been the creation and development of community schools that link to community agencies and organizations to provide services and supports to students and their families, such as health and social services, after-school programs, internships, adult-education classes, and other offerings. By keeping their doors open late and in summers, community schools also serve as neighborhood hubs.

Districts such as Cincinnati, OH; Tulsa, OK; and Nashville, TN, for example, have created extensive systems of community schools. The Cincinnati effort began in 2003, when voters approved an initiative providing \$1 billion for a facilities master plan that required all schools to transform themselves into “community learning centers.” Building on these models, the New York City public schools developed an initiative in 2014 to create community schools on a large scale in the nation’s largest school district. A key part of the initiative was converting 94 Renewal Schools—those with consistently low performance—to community schools, rather than closing them or replacing the staff.

A recent review of more than 140 studies of community school approaches found benefits for student attendance, attainment, and achievement for well-implemented designs, underscoring the importance of thoughtful design and careful management.

Outcomes of new model schools. As with the other forms of school choice, there is variation across these models and schools in terms of their effectiveness. For example, among the NASDC models, both Success for All and Expeditionary Learning showed strong positive impacts on student learning in early evaluations.⁶⁸ Studies of the rapidly expanded Comer School Development Program also found it to be highly successful where accompanied by strong professional development, adherence to key design features, and continuity in leadership, but less so where these elements were underdeveloped—a common implementation dilemma.⁶⁹

A recent review of more than 140 studies of community school approaches found benefits for student attendance, attainment, and achievement for well-implemented designs, and again underscored the importance of thoughtful design and careful management.⁷⁰ In the new community schools initiative in New York City, an early evaluation by the RAND Corporation found that the schools are implementing the components of the model effectively and beginning to see benefits in terms of student attendance and progress through school.⁷¹

Where new models are carefully tended, the results can be more reliable. For example, after 7 years, an evaluation by SRI of schools engaged in Linked Learning and supported by strong technical assistance found that they produced lower dropout rates, higher graduation rates, higher levels of high school credit completion, and stronger performance on the English language arts exams for graduation and college admission. The size of the positive effects was especially large for students who were underperforming when they entered high school.⁷²

Case studies of Linked Learning schools and those in the Envision Education network—both focused on creating personalized learning environments centered on project-based learning—highlighted elements that appear to make them successful.⁷³ These included:

- building relationships with students through small class size and advisory systems;
- rigorous, relevant, and engaging instruction and assessments;
- academic supports for student success; and
- shared leadership and professional development.

The studies also identified state and district policies that support the development and sustainability of these kinds of networks. These include adequate and equitable funding, human capital supports to prepare teachers to teach in the schools, and opportunities for local innovation.

A particularly promising case of large-scale innovation that reinforces these findings is the earlier-discussed small schools movement in New York City, spearheaded by several chancellors and innovative school leaders such as Deborah Meier, who developed Central Park East Elementary and High Schools and later worked with colleagues to develop 50 additional high schools with similar designs as part of the Annenberg Initiative. These designs personalized learning through advisory systems and teaching teams; made learning more authentic and relevant through project-based learning and performance assessments; and redesigned schedules to allow teachers more time for collaborative planning and learning, as well as longer term relationships with students. The new models showed early indications of success,⁷⁴ and these school creation and redesign efforts continued over two decades, resulting in several hundred new schools in the city. Researchers were later able to take advantage of the existence of lotteries to compare the achievement gains of students randomly selected for the small schools with those of students who applied but did not win the lottery. The study found that student performance in the new schools was significantly higher than in the large comprehensive high schools they replaced.⁷⁵

Launched as part of these early efforts in New York City and now spread to Boston, San Francisco, and Los Angeles, a network of International High Schools was also found to be highly successful in boosting achievement, graduation rates, and college going/success for new English learners.⁷⁶ An evaluation of schools in the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation's deeper learning network, including the International High Schools and several others initially designed in New York, also found significant improvements in student performance and attainment.⁷⁷ All of these schools have operated in networks of expert practitioners who have learned to support school designs and educator development in sophisticated ways.⁷⁸

Lessons in Managing Choice for Quality, Access, and Integration

The central lesson from decades of experience and research on various strategies to create schools of choice is that choice alone offers no universal remedy for the challenges facing public schools. Simply creating new options does not lead automatically to greater access, quality, equity, or integration. In fact, we have cited examples in which the introduction of choice variously expanded or restricted access, increased or decreased segregation, and led to positive or negative impacts on student achievement, depending on how it was designed and managed.

An additional consideration is that, by a large margin, parents' preferred choice is their neighborhood public school. Thus, systems of choice must equally attend to quality and access to these schools, as well as those with particular orientations or themes. Looking across the research, we have gleaned some lessons that policymakers might consider as they craft plans for supporting families' choice of schools. Through these lessons run the themes of equity, ensuring access for all, and a strategic approach to building a system of high-quality schools, not a disconnected set of individual schools of widely varying quality.

Lesson 1: Make All Schools Worthy of Being Chosen

While the promise of choice sounds tantalizing, the realities of creating viable choices for all students through choice mechanisms have proven to be much more complex. It turns out that, in many systems of choice, a relatively small number of good schools are available to a small number of children—usually the most advantaged. These schools are often oversubscribed, and, unless the district is doing something to strengthen all schools, many of those left over are of low quality, offering little meaningful choice.

Some districts have demonstrated, however, that choice policies can provide both quality and access. Consider New York City. As noted above, the nation's largest school district was a pioneer in launching open enrollment, with a system in Community District 4. In retrospect, the leaders of that effort recognized that they had succeeded in seeding innovation and creating some good schools. But quality was not uniform. As then-Superintendent Anthony Alvarado put it:

My strategy [in District 4] was to make it possible for gifted and energetic people to create schools that represented their best ideas about teaching and learning and to let parents choose the schools that best matched their children's interest. We generated a lot of interest and a lot of good programs. But the main flaw with that strategy was that it never reached every teacher in every classroom; it focused on those who showed energy and commitment to change. So, after a while, improvement slowed down as we ran out of energetic and committed people. Many of the programs became inward looking instead of trying to find new ways to do things. And they focused people's attention on this or that "program," rather than on the broader problem of how to improve teaching and learning across the board.

When Alvarado moved to Community District 2, he maintained a system of choice but focused central office efforts on strengthening instruction in every school and classroom. Alvarado noted:

So, when I moved to District 2, I was determined to push beyond the District 4 strategy and to focus more broadly on instructional improvement across the board, not just on the creation of alternative programs.⁷⁹

In District 2, the leadership adopted a set of innovative curricula, allocated district dollars to various supports for instructional improvement, and, above all else, provided in-depth professional development to all teachers. A professional development laboratory was created in which teachers could view model lessons. Coaches were provided in the schools. Teachers were encouraged to visit one another's classrooms. And principals were trained to focus their energy and time on supporting instructional improvement in the classroom.⁸⁰

Some forward-looking districts and states focused on instructional improvement have sought to support and regulate schools of choice to ensure quality and equity of access. In Massachusetts, the state's 81 charters—which operate under a cap that voters recently refused to lift—are consistently found to be high performing.⁸¹ These schools are held to rigorous expectations not only for curriculum and staffing quality and academic performance, but also for the admission and retention of high-needs students.

Some forward-looking districts and states focused on instructional improvement have sought to support and regulate schools of choice to ensure quality and equity of access.

Massachusetts charters may not impose admissions requirements, must admit students by lottery, and must serve special education students and English learners. Their willingness to do so must be publicly posted and, after earlier concerns, is now monitored extensively by the Bureau of Elementary and Secondary Education. The Bureau not only approves recruitment and retention plans and reviews enrollment as well as attrition data, but also makes anonymous "Mystery Parent" calls to verify that students with high levels of need are provided with "equal and unfettered access to each school's application and enrollment process." To renew a charter for an additional 5 years, a school must affirmatively demonstrate faithfulness to its charter, academic program success, and organizational viability, as well as adherence to its recruitment and retention plan to serve high-need students.

As part of the state's plan, Boston authorizes a small number of charters and also operates many district-run schools of choice through its successful Pilot Schools program⁸² and others. Boston is one of the higher achieving cities in the nation on the National Assessment of Educational Progress and has created means for supporting high-quality options throughout the city.

In another example, Denver sponsors a variety of innovative schools that are both district-run and charter-operated. It has created what it calls its School Performance Framework to identify high-quality schools and strategically replicate them, while also identifying schools in need of intervention, support, or closure. The district operates a rigorous authorization process and ensures that all students are served by schools they want to choose by managing the admissions process by which lotteries are used to allocate students to schools (so that high-need students are not

excluded). In addition, the district ensures empty seats in charters are filled from the lottery wait list when there is attrition during the year. Charters cannot expel students on their own; they must go through a district-run process that provides due process and seeks to minimize student exclusions.

Creating a system of high-quality schools requires districts to use data for improvement, not punishment. As the high turnover of schools and students in New Orleans has demonstrated, when the central strategy for improvement is school closure, the result can be an insufficient supply of high-quality schools and a disruptive shifting of students from one poor-performing school to another.⁸³

Lesson 2: Ensure Access to High-Quality Schools for All

Choice is meant to offer additional options to families; however, if these systems are not subject to well-implemented rules regarding quality, open access, and retention of students, certain families may be excluded from full and equal participation—and thus “choice” may actually exacerbate racial, ethnic, and economic disparities—as we noted in earlier examples.

Three district practices have been found to help address the challenge of promoting equal access to high-quality options: standardizing the enrollment process to level the playing field, expanding and customizing the dissemination of school choice information, and creating support and incentives for all schools to accept and educate students with special needs.

A number of districts, including Denver; Oakland, CA; Camden, NJ; and—in part—New Orleans, have instituted a unified and open enrollment system that includes both charter and regular district schools. The goal is to allow families to go through one district-created portal and process to apply to any school of choice. Families submit an application for each student and rank their students’ top preferences. The district then matches students to schools based on students’ preferences and available space, in some cases giving priority to students who live nearby or have a sibling currently enrolled in the school.

Such systems are intended to provide all parents equal access to all schools and to prohibit selectivity and favoritism. They can be difficult to implement well, however, in part because some charter operators argue that common application systems undermine their autonomy. For example, while Denver has succeeded in getting all charters and district schools to participate in its common enrollment system, New Orleans has not. There, charters in what is known as the Recovery School District are required by law to participate. Other schools, including new or conversion charter schools and schools accepting vouchers, participate voluntarily. After a number of years of uneven participation, as of the 2015–16 application cycle, 89% of New Orleans’ public schools participate in the centralized enrollment process.⁸⁴ For such systems to be effective, all schools must participate.

Effective systems of choice require consistent and clear information for families. To meet this need, some districts have proactively built robust, accessible information systems for families to use when choosing schools. In Denver, for example, the district provides parents and students with a number of resources to help them research their choice options, including a SchoolMatch tool that helps parents find schools with particular characteristics they are seeking, such as language services, before- or after-school programs, special subject emphases, and college- and career-readiness programs. The district also has a SchoolFinder tool that helps families locate their neighborhood schools and understand the overall system of choice.⁸⁵

In Boston, each family receives a customized list of school choices based on the family's home address. The list includes every school within a 1-mile radius of the family's home and nearby schools that have the highest levels of performance and growth. Students pick their top choices from their customized lists, and then the district uses an algorithm, similar to a lottery, to assign students. English learner students and students with special needs have access to schools on their home-based list, as well as program options in a wider cluster. Data show that the plan, which the district began implementing in fall 2013, is beginning to reduce disparities between charter and traditional public schools in the number of English learner and special education students.⁸⁶

As noted above, charter schools overall enroll a smaller proportion of special education students than other district schools. Ensuring that all schools offer necessary services, that all children have access to all schools (charter or not), and reaching out to families when they first choose a school may be especially promising strategies.⁸⁷

New Orleans has also sought to shift the incentives for schools to serve all students with special needs through a flexible special needs funding formula, coordinating cost-sharing across the district through a citywide exceptional needs fund, and creating financial incentives for schools to expand their special education offerings.⁸⁸ New Orleans' new funding formula allows the district to distribute dollars to schools based on the level of service a student needs, differentiating funding where a student's disability diagnosis requires additional support.

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Schools can also tap New Orleans' citywide \$1.4 million exceptional-needs fund for students whose special education costs exceed \$22,000 a year. New Schools for New Orleans provides grants to high-performing charters to support their ability to serve students with special needs and also provides professional development support to charter school leaders to help them prepare their teachers to serve students with special needs.

Lesson 3: Promote Diversity and Inclusion

Because of the striking levels of segregation in American neighborhoods and schools—nearly 1 in every 5 schools enrolls 90% to 100% non-White students, up from 1 in 20 in 1988⁸⁹—choice provides opportunities for greater diversity. Indeed, many choice plans, such as magnet schools and several interdistrict transfer programs, were designed to enhance diversity by enabling students of color in segregated schools to enroll in predominantly White schools.

However, choice can also increase segregation by enabling White students to flee diverse schools and enroll in more segregated schools. As noted above, this has happened to some extent in Minnesota after a shift in its open-enrollment system. This possibility poses challenges for districts that want to maintain and expand the number of diverse schools.

But the challenge of maintaining diversity does not end with enrollment. An equitable system requires that students be treated fairly, regardless of their school. No school should be able to jettison students they perceive to be challenging to educate.

To promote diversity and inclusion, some states and districts have created clear and transparent structures and guidelines for all schools. Three promising practices are “controlled choice” systems for maintaining racial and income balance, requiring all schools to “backfill” slots when students leave, and creating common disciplinary guidelines across all schools.

To maintain racial and income balance within and across schools, states and districts have monitored the demographic composition of schools and limited transfers to ensure that schools remain more or less proportionate to the district in which they are housed. For example, under California’s open-enrollment system, sending or receiving districts may prohibit a transfer if it would negatively impact a court-ordered or voluntary desegregation plan or the racial and ethnic balance of the district. Other state policies contain similar provisions, as do controlled choice plans in districts such as Cambridge, MA, and Montclair, NJ, whose controlled choice plans take into account a school’s racial and socioeconomic balance in determining which student choices to allow.

If certain students are counseled out or families choose to leave a school, that school’s student body can change appreciably, particularly in schools that do not backfill, or replace exiting students. To address this issue, many districts require that schools backfill when a student leaves. That is, charters—like other district schools—are required to replace students who leave with other students from their waitlists (or students just entering the neighborhood or district). Denver manages the process of backfilling by maintaining centralized waiting lists. While this strategy does not ensure the maintenance of diversity, it is a step toward fairer enrollment practices.

In response to data showing relatively high rates of suspensions and expulsions in many charter schools, Washington, DC, created a transparent reporting system that includes “School Equity Reports” for every school—charter and other district schools—which show suspension, expulsion, and mobility rates. When data reveal that a school has especially high rates of suspensions and/or expulsions, the DC Public Charter School Board holds a “board-to-board” meeting with the school’s board chair, members of the school’s board, and the school principal to discuss steps the school might take to address the problem.⁹⁰

Schools that do not make progress are at risk of nonrenewal of their charter. Early research shows marked declines in suspensions and expulsions.⁹¹ For example, while expulsion rates vary across DC charter schools, the overall expulsion rate has dropped from 14.5% in 2011 to 9.1% in 2015, comparable to the regular DC public school expulsion rate of 10% in 2015.⁹²

New Orleans—also in response to disparities in expulsion and suspension rates among schools—created a common district-managed process. Any school that seeks to expel a student must bring the case to a centralized administrative body that uses a common set of guidelines to make the final decision, which, according to research on the district, has moved the needle on equity and transparency for students and families regarding discipline practices.⁹³

New Orleans’ centralized process also includes an expulsion hearing in which the hearing officer, in collaboration with the student’s family and school, creates a plan to address the student’s behavior and work to ensure the student receives appropriate educational placement in an alternative school, a new school, the expelling school on probation status, or homeschool.

Systems intended to ensure fairness, however, are easier to design than to implement. Early on in New Orleans’ charter expansion process, not all schools participated in the common disciplinary system. In California, the Sacramento Unified School District, likewise, designed a system of “student study teams” to ensure that students who were expelled were placed in an appropriate school, but not all schools wanted to participate, and with a change in district leadership, the plan was never implemented.

Lesson 4: Leave No School Behind

In some districts with extensive choice programs, neighborhood schools are “left behind,” as are some less advantaged new schools, whether charter or district-run. Well-heeled schools of choice often have access to more resources than other schools, thanks to philanthropic dollars, special facilities financing mechanisms, and start-up grants. These schools, more heavily advertised, some with new facilities and external resources, can become more attractive to parents and may even locate in advantaged sections of town to attract desired students. Moreover, if a substantial proportion of schools become charters, there may be fewer resources to support the core functions of the district—increasing the “tax” on the remaining district schools. In the worst cases, neighborhood schools can turn into “dumping grounds” for students other schools of choice do not want.⁹⁴

National data show that when parents have choice options available to them, three quarters of them choose their assigned school—usually their neighborhood public school—and identify it as their first choice.⁹⁵ And when parents want to choose a different school, they often cite distance as a challenge. Districts also cite as an issue transportation costs for choice plans that bus many children across large distances. In New Orleans, where all schools are now charters, many children are bussed long distances, often passing other schools on the way, because schools emerged without a centralized planning process.⁹⁶ In other districts, such as Detroit, school closures have created what some observers have called “educational deserts” within the city.⁹⁷

If the first, most desired, option for most families is having a quality neighborhood public school, part of planning for options is considering how to create high-quality options in all communities. This suggests that geographic considerations for the placement of new schools and the preservation of existing schools are important to fold into expectations for planning, along with processes for assessing and improving quality. In order to avoid a divide between “have” and “have-not” schools, some districts focus on ensuring that all schools are high-quality options and on strengthening any schools that are not viewed by families as worth choosing. Strategies for improving all schools include developing stable and high-quality staff in all schools, offering professional development and school improvement supports, and broadening desired approaches or themes to a broader spectrum of schools in the district.

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Denver’s district-wide choice strategy includes charter schools, neighborhood schools, and innovation schools—that is, district-run schools that have more autonomy than other district schools. The district’s Collaboration Compact drives equitable funding and access for all schools, and strives to replicate the most effective schools of all kinds. While some charters have been authorized in Boston and New York City, both cities have continued to focus on districtwide improvements in all schools, which are equally schools of choice.

To avoid imbalances in teacher quality and experience across schools, most states have required training and certification for teachers in both traditional and charter sectors, and some districts have supported professional learning across all their schools, including finding ways to leverage the practices and professional capacity of teachers in some schools for the betterment of all schools. Boston, for example, has conducted joint professional development trainings for teachers in all its schools to improve instruction for underserved students, including English learners, special education students, and Black and Hispanic males.⁹⁸

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In states and districts that have successful approaches to school choice, such as Massachusetts, there is a regular assessment of the quality of each school’s offerings, staffing, and services, often through a School Quality Review or other assessment system.⁹⁹ Such a review occurs for each charter before it can be reauthorized. Supports and interventions are provided to improve schools that may be lagging. These may include professional development for educators, strengthening leadership, improvements in curriculum, or the creation of community school models that provide wraparound health and social services where they are needed by students. Some districts—including Boston, Denver, and New York City—provide this kind of review and assistance for both traditional public schools and charters, and offer professional learning opportunities to both, so as to improve opportunities for children, rather than having to close many failing schools. Under the new Every Student Succeeds Act, many states are creating school review and assistance programs that can create systems of continuous improvement for all schools.¹⁰⁰

Recommendations: Toward a System of Schools Worth Choosing

As John Dewey wrote more than a century ago in *The School and Society*,

What the best and wisest parent wants for his own child, that must the community want for all of its children. Any other ideal for our schools is narrow and unlovely; acted upon, it destroys our democracy... Only by being true to the full growth of all the individuals who make it up, can society by any chance be true to itself.¹⁰¹

What will it take to achieve a system of schools worthy of Dewey's vision? At the heart of the challenge is creating a system of schools worth choosing in which all children are chosen. Moreover, children need to choose and be chosen by a good school that serves them well and is readily accessible to them, including a high-quality neighborhood public school. This can be accomplished within public education systems if there is a clear focus on building capacity in all schools, creating collaborative learning opportunities, and supporting school diversity to match students' needs, rather than focusing on competition that creates winners and losers. To support choice within a system of good schools, it is also important to be sure that all families have easy access to detailed information, convenient transportation, and open enrollment processes that include all, rather than excluding those with greater needs.

Since the inception of schools of choice over a century ago, researchers and practitioners have learned many lessons, both positive and negative. At their best, choice options provide all families access to high-quality school options while they foster a more common, integrated experience for students across society's dividing lines. But the promise of high-quality educational options is not a guarantee. We have also seen that choice plans can sometimes limit access and provide more low-quality educational options without sufficient oversight and support. These lessons also show that there are many roads to increasing access to high-quality options for parents within the regular district system.

Recommendations

With these lessons in mind, we offer the following recommendations for those who are seeking to expand choice while supporting school quality, student access, and greater integration:

1. Focus on high-quality learning for children, not the preferences of adults.

Too often, questions related to school and program design get debated and decided in terms of the preferences of adults, not the needs of children. The key questions should be: How do we create high-quality learning environments for all children? Are there some schools or programs that are oversubscribed and could be replicated or expanded rather than setting a fixed number of slots and rationing access? Are there some groups of students who are not receiving adequate and equitable learning opportunities? Are there groups of students or schools that are underperforming? Are there certain neighborhoods in which families do not have high-quality choices? Subsequent questions should help determine how those needs might best be met. Answers to these questions surface strategies that can improve educational opportunities, such as redesigning schools, adding wraparound services, increasing bilingual services, improving training and recruitment of special education teachers, or investing in new curriculum approaches.

2. Work to ensure equity and access for all.

Expanding choice can provide greater opportunities, or it can complicate and sometimes restrict access to convenient and appropriate opportunities, typically for the neediest students. We have learned from districts' experiences that creating systems that truly provide equal access to all students is extremely challenging. Simply opening up the district to a parental choice market tends to favor those families with the most social capital, rather than those whose children lack quality choices. The focus has to be on ensuring that all students have access to high-quality schools—not simply creating options with the hope that they do so. This requires centralized 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.

The focus has to be on ensuring that all students have access to high-quality schools—not simply creating options with the hope that they do so. This requires centralized efforts to ensure good schools in every neighborhood.

3. Create transparency at every stage about outcomes, opportunities, and resources to inform decision making for families, communities, and policymakers.

Across the country, we have learned that for districts to maintain a healthy array of school options, parents, community members, and policymakers need ready, consistent, comparable, and easily accessible information on all schools. Such information should include information about admission processes, recruitment and retention outcomes, enrollment patterns, finances, access to high-quality curriculum and learning opportunities, student outcomes, such as achievement and graduation, and disciplinary practices and their results. It should also include the results of school quality reviews that provide qualitative evidence about school practices, programs, and climate, and that can guide diagnostic investments.

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.

As this report illustrates, public schools in many communities offer a rich tapestry of school choice. The task ahead is to learn to expand quality and access to schools worth choosing, while bringing children together across lines of race, class, and academic history to build unity, rather than create division.

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