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****NEWS RELEASE--FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE****

**New Report Questions School Choice Assumptions
Survey of research finds evidence that families' selection of schools
doesn't match their commonly cited desire for better academic quality**

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TEMPE, Ariz and BOULDER, Colo. (Jan. 7, 2008) — School choice reforms, such as charter schools and vouchers, give parents the task of deciding which school is best for their children. But a new policy brief questions some key assumptions about how and why those choices are being made.

The new brief offers a careful and comprehensive look behind the choice curtain, providing crucial information for policy makers and others interested in how the choice process actually takes place. Titled *Who Chooses Schools, and Why? The Characteristics and Motivations of Families who Actively Choose Schools*, the brief is authored by Natalie Lacireno-Paquet, with assistance from Charleen Brantley. Lacireno-Paquet is senior program/research associate at WestEd, a not-for-profit, non-partisan research, development and service agency. Brantley is an Ed.D. candidate at the University of Massachusetts, Boston.

The brief is published by the Education Policy Research Unit (EPRU) and the Education and the Public Interest Center (EPIC).

Lacireno-Paquet and Brantley report that families who actively choose their children's schools rely as much or more on social networks than on official sources of information in making their choices. They also find that while these families typically say that academic quality is the main basis for their decision, their choice behavior suggests that race and class may more strongly influence choices. White parents, the researchers find, tend to avoid schools with high concentrations of non-White students, while minority parents who exercise choice tend to avoid schools with high numbers of low-income students.

“Parents overwhelmingly say they are looking for a better education but much, though not all, of the research examined suggests that parents are paying more attention to the social and racial demographics of potential choice schools than they are to measures of academic quality,” Lacireno-Paquet and Brantley conclude.

“The evidence on behavior, or the way in which parents make their choices, doesn’t match very well with what parents say are their preferences. This suggests that race and class play a key role and that parents may view the racial or peer composition of a school as a proxy for quality. This is not encouraging to those who view choice as a way to potentially eliminate the barriers to truly integrated schools.”

These and other findings were derived from a review of extensive research into the many choice options currently available to parents: home-schooling, private schools, vouchers, and public school choice programs such as open enrollment, charter schools, and magnet schools. “Who Chooses Schools, and Why?” explores research concerning demographics and other characteristics of families who actively exercise school choice, as well as parents’ motivations for doing so.

Lacireno-Paquet and Brantley note that the demographics of people who choose schools vary considerably depending on the specific form of choice involved. For example, while private school choosers are mostly White and non-poor, voucher programs tend to be “means-tested,” with the result that most voucher students are poor and minority. Among charter schools, meanwhile, enrollment trends by race and income can vary widely among states and districts, the two researchers report. Home-schooling families are more likely to be White (like private school families), but also more likely than private school families to be of low- or moderate incomes.

As a result of their findings, Lacireno-Paquet and Brantley make six recommendations, focused on the specific design of choice policies. In a nutshell, they call on policy makers to be cognizant of past experiences and to carefully craft future policies to accomplish desired goals.

Find the report *Who Chooses Schools, and Why?* by Natalie Lacireno-Paquet, with Charleen Brantley, on the web at:

<http://epsl.asu.edu/epru/documents/EPsl-0801-247-EPRU.pdf>

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