



DOCUMENT REVIEWED: “Expanding Choice in Elementary and Secondary Education: A Report on Rethinking the Federal Role in Education”

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PUBLISHER/THINK TANK: Brown Center on Education Policy at Brookings

DOCUMENT RELEASE DATE: February 2, 2010

REVIEW DATE: March 3, 2010

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SUGGESTED CITATION:

Scott, J. (2010). *Review of “Expanding Choice in Elementary and Secondary Education: A Report on Rethinking the Federal Role in Education,”* Boulder and Tempe: Education and the Public Interest Center & Education Policy Research Unit. Retrieved [date] from <http://epicpolicy.org/thinktank/review-expanding-choice>

### **Summary of Review**

*Expanding Choice in Elementary and Secondary Education: A Report on Rethinking the Federal Role in Education* presents a seemingly egalitarian prescription for the federal government to expand school choice. An examination of the arguments and evidence for increasing choice, however, reveals at least three important shortcomings. First, the authors tend to overuse research that is still in progress and research produced by advocacy organizations and think tanks, leading them to be overly optimistic about particular school choice reforms’ effects on educational achievement, access and equity. The second oversight is the neglect of important scholarship, causing the authors to fail to acknowledge the complex social and political dynamics informing parental choice processes as well as choice schools’ practices that limit and shape their student enrollments. A third shortcoming emerges from this omission: the authors do not sufficiently consider issues of diversity, including the social categories of race, ethnicity, special education, and English Learners. They fail to acknowledge that some school choice reforms have had segregative effects. As such, in the singular pursuit of their goal to universally expand school choice the authors miss an opportunity to affirm the federal role in ensuring the creation of diverse, equitable, and high-quality choice schools that would produce individual and societal benefits.

## Review

### I. INTRODUCTION

Americans, especially parents of school-aged children, care deeply about the state of the nation's K-12 public schools, yet they have been historically conflicted about their preferences for what public schools should do and whom they should serve.<sup>1</sup> Questions about whether schools should produce workers or citizens, or whether they should serve as a tool for social equity or reward individual achievement, for example, remain unresolved in the public imagination and in policy making. Meanwhile, schools and school systems are persistently and increasingly characterized by deep racial and social class segregation, resulting in a remarkably heterogeneous and unequal array of schooling systems.

Still, while there is often deep dissatisfaction among many parents whose children's schooling options are far from optimal, parents for the most part report being satisfied with the education their children receive in public schools.<sup>2</sup> In the annual Phi Delta Kappan/Gallup Poll of public attitudes toward the public schools,<sup>3</sup> respondents indicate that the biggest problem facing public schools in their communities is a lack of sufficient funding—a consistent ranking for the last decade. At the same time, this poll reports that a majority of Americans are enthusiastic about charter schools even as they reveal significant confusion about what charter schools are. For example, a majority does not believe charter schools are public schools and believes that charter schools charge tuition and can select students based on ability.<sup>4</sup>

Given that parents seem to support school choice and are so satisfied with their current

public schools that they want to see them receive more state funding, how should the federal government proceed on the issue of school choice? The question of federal involvement is taken up in a recent report issued by the Brown Center for Education Policy at Brookings titled *Expanding Choice in Elementary and Secondary Education: A Report on Rethinking the Federal Role in Education*. Authors Greene, Loveless, Macleod, Nechyba, Peterson, Rosenthal & Whitehurst<sup>5</sup> call for local school districts and the federal government to expand school choice reforms, facilitating the creation of an open market “in which public, private, charter, and virtual schools compete on an equal footing for students and the tax revenues that are attached to them” (p. 5). They further encourage federal support for the creation of web-based information systems that would help parents to learn about choice options and secure information about school quality.

### II. FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS OF THE REPORT

The authors start with a simple and unproven assumption: parents want universal school choice. In fact, they argue that most parents exercise school choice through residential selection, buying homes attached to desired school districts. Because this option privileges families with the resources to purchase homes in such locales or the wherewithal to relocate, the authors argue that school choice should be greatly expanded on egalitarian grounds. While the authors acknowledge a divide in the perspectives of school choice advocates and opponents, they argue that neither the hopes of advocates nor fears of opponents have yet been realized in empirical studies of school choice reforms.

They conclude that space exists for public school supporters and school choice advocates to find common ground. They argue this accord would be accomplished by increasing educational opportunity for disadvantaged students through the implementation of school choice systems in which all parents would be required to choose a school for their children, through the development of information “portals” that would provide parents with helpful data on school quality to assist their choice-making, and through a funding system that would allocate more resources to help those schools and systems that parents prefer to see grow. The authors suggest that choice advocates and critics would support the creation of open access, high-quality choice schools subject to the same accountability measures and sanctions for underperformance as traditional public schools (p. 4). Of course, readers might question whether public school supporters would, in fact, agree with a system that includes vouchers and other controversial open-market approaches.

The authors contend that the maximization of school choice options requires a number of actions led by the federal government. First is the creation of better sources of information on schools, to help inform parental choice-making. The presentation and emphasis of this information could and should, they argue, encourage parents to choose school quality over other considerations. The authors’ proposal would also encourage choice expansion by providing additional funding for oversubscribed or popular schools. Included in these possibilities is increased support for virtual schools, which are less expensive to operate.

Other elements of the proposal are as follows: a call for open admissions; the use of lotteries for schools with more applicants

than spaces; mandatory choice systems in which there is no default school for parents not making explicit choices; the requirement for choice schools to be subject to the same standards and assessments as traditional public schools; the closing of undersubscribed schools; the requirement that school systems provide parents with needed information about schooling options; the development of “choice navigation websites”; the provision of incentives for school systems to connect navigation websites to their choice programs; the development of a metric of the extent to which a given school system has sufficient choice options; federal encouragement for choice options to be increased in low-choice, low-performing school systems; and the expansion of virtual schools. A final suggestion is that federal officials collect systemic data on (and learn from) choice implementation, and encourage school districts to respond to findings with a redesign of choice plans (pp. 2-4).

### **III. THE REPORT’S RATIONALE FOR ITS FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS**

A review of research and advocacy-based literature constitutes the majority of the report. The authors base their recommendations on their interpretation of the “best evidence” (p. 4), which they argue comes down to four key findings: (1) all parents are potentially able to make choices informed by school performance; (2) low-income children benefit when their parents choose higher-performing schools for them; (3) when it comes to information sources about schools, the form in which the information is presented affects parental choice-making; and (4) choice can create a more competitive market for higher-quality schools, as long as low-performing schools are closed or restructured and high-performing ones are able to grow.

#### IV. THE REPORT'S USE OF RESEARCH LITERATURE

The report uses a diverse array of research literature to support its arguments. While the authors do use a substantial amount of research literature published in peer-reviewed journals and other scholarly publications, they also employ a great deal of literature generated by ideologically identifiable think tanks, and pro-choice researchers and advocacy groups. Examples include reports from the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, The Foundation for Educational Choice (formerly the Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice), and Florida TaxWatch. Florida TaxWatch and The Foundation for Educational Choice have advocated for a reduction of public investments in education,<sup>6</sup> and Fordham and The Foundation for Educational Choice support school choice.<sup>7</sup> Conclusions supported only by advocacy documents are more suspect. In addition, the authors cite several working papers from the National Bureau of Economic Research (NBER), yet the NBER's website has the following caution about citing these works:

NBER Working Papers have not undergone the review accorded official NBER publications; in particular, they have not been submitted for approval by the Board of Directors. They are intended to make results of NBER research available to other economists in preliminary form to encourage discussion and revision before final publication.<sup>8</sup>

While the potential quality and value of the NBER Working Papers is not questioned, it is clear that their authors and the NBER do not mean for them to be cited as completely vetted works. Accordingly, conclusions drawn from these working papers should be understood to be provisional. Rather than

relying on works in progress and advocacy-based research, the authors could have informed their analysis through the use of more established and peer-reviewed research on the multifaceted and complex terrain of school choice processes. Had they done so, their review of research would not have omitted important and relevant scholarship that finds school choice processes interact with the social categories of race, ethnicity, special education, socioeconomically disadvantaged students, and English Learners. Researchers have also established that these interactions lead to stratification of students by these categories into particular choice schools and across particular school choice forms, such as charter schools.<sup>9</sup> Much of this literature finds that the choice process does not just involve parents exercising their preferences, but schools doing the same. Choice schools are active in the process of shaping student enrollment and parental preferences through the use of admissions criteria, discipline and expulsion policies, and practices that lead to high attrition rates, as well as choice of where to geographically locate a school.<sup>10</sup>

The authors also neglect a significant body of research literature on parental choice processes that could have helped to inform their conclusions about how information and choice operate—a major matter of interest in the report. Specifically, there exists compelling literature finding that parents place primacy on school demographics—especially the percentages of African American and Latino students—when choosing schools.<sup>11</sup> The finding comes through across multiple forms of choice and across parents of differing racial and ethnic backgrounds. This literature calls into question a central argument and conclusion of the report, but it is never discussed or even cited. Simply put, the notion that parents are primarily concerned with a school's performance in isolation

from its demographics is not borne out by the empirical evidence. As such, investments in information instruments that attempt to guide parents into choosing quality schools, but fail to attend to these demographic preferences, are unlikely to meet parental information needs as parents seem to be indicating them. Moreover, the fact that parents currently choose schools largely based on schools' student demographics presents significant challenges for the creation of equitable and accessible choice systems, an issue the report fails to engage in its recommendations for policy action.

Another omission—particularly given the report's stated equity concerns—is the short shrift the report gives to choice programs whose design combines parental preferences with efforts to maximize student diversity and equity.<sup>12</sup> Related to this literature on choice schools that have an equity or desegregation agenda is a significant research literature that finds important educational and social benefits for students from all backgrounds who attend a diverse school.<sup>13</sup> An example is the rich literature on the problems and possibilities of magnet schools,<sup>14</sup> as well as research on district-wide choice plans aimed at maintaining diversity while providing for parental preferences, such as the school choice plans in Berkeley, California.<sup>15</sup> Berkeley's plan requires all parents to choose elementary schools, and uses students' neighborhoods to ensure socioeconomic balance of schools. The plan's legality has been upheld by California's Supreme Court, and it has been successful in creating similarly resourced elementary schools that are also racially diverse, while still allowing the vast majority of parents to get their first choice of school. Given that the U.S. Supreme Court has affirmed the pursuit of diversity in public institutions as a compelling state goal while also limiting the use of race in student as-

signment,<sup>16</sup> the Berkeley choice plan could be a model for the expansion of choice as the report's authors advocate.

## **V. REVIEW OF THE REPORT'S METHODS**

The authors' methods involve constructing a literature review. Typically, researchers review literature in order to draw conclusions across common empirical findings or theories. In this instance, the authors provide an overview of research across different school choice forms, which could help educate policymakers and the public about the range of school choice possibilities. For the most part, the authors acknowledge in their review that achievement results for school choice are not superior to those for traditional public schools. Yet they never fully confront the implications of this acknowledgement, and never draw an explicit rationale from the literature about why school choice should be expanded in the ways the authors recommend. As such, the authors seem to have constructed a literature review supporting their preordained arguments for policy action to expand particular school choice forms rather than having such recommendations stem from any conclusive research findings on the individual and social benefits of school choice.

## **VI. REVIEW OF THE VALIDITY OF THE FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS**

The authors review a number of school choice forms in order to illustrate the advantages, drawbacks, and possibilities for a potential increased federal involvement in choice expansion. These forms are residential choice, magnet schools and intra-district choice, inter-district choice, charter schools, school vouchers (and "neovouchers" based on tax credits), and virtual education. They suggest that four rationales—economic

theory, social capital theory, theories regarding drivers of educational innovation, and social equity theory—support the development of these school choice initiatives. They further contend that even though these different rationales can conflict with one another, they can ultimately co-exist since they all portend benefits for students. Economic theorists sometimes regard public school districts as monopolies with little incentive to change or innovate because they are not threatened by sufficiently strong competition. Social capital theorists hold that schools of choice are desirable environments because they enable closely tied social networks to flourish. Innovation theorists maintain that innovation stems from independence and autonomy from public oversight. And social equity theory supports an equal distribution of educational resources. For social equity adherents, school choice should be designed to benefit primarily the most educationally disadvantaged.

It is evident, however, that the authors privilege the economic and innovation theories over the other two. These two privileged theories, they argue, can result in greater systemic quality if the policy has appropriate supports and regulations. They assume such systemic improvement will then result in greater educational equality, since (if everything works out) all students would have access to quality schools. Yet this assumption and theoretical rationale are in conflict with the authors' own arguments, especially in their advocacy for the expansion of virtual schools, whose pedagogy and curricula they acknowledge not only vary greatly in quality, but also may be just slightly better than the substandard schools from which many students come. Indeed a key reason the authors advocate the expansion of virtual schools is for the potential cost efficiencies they bring, since they are far less expensive

to operate than traditional “brick-and-mortar” public schools. While they also attend to issues of quality, by requiring virtual schools to be accredited in order to receive taxpayer support, they argue that an increased investment in growing the virtual sector is warranted, because public coffers are low and because there will insufficient resources to support public schools in coming years. Moreover, although the authors emphasize the importance of creating better schools for disadvantaged students, they ignore aspects of research (even research their report cites) that demonstrates existing choice schools are failing to serve such students adequately—by enrolling few special education students or English Learners, or by having exceptionally high student attrition rates.<sup>17</sup>

Similarly, even as they praise New York City's charter schools for their superior achievement, citing a study whose methods and conclusions have been seriously questioned,<sup>18</sup> they fail to consider data generated by New York City's own Department of Education, which shows that its charters enroll nearly half as many special education students and only a third as many English Learners as do the city's traditional public schools.<sup>19</sup> Again, given the report's stated equity goals, consistent findings of demographic trends such as these place the report's findings and rationale in jeopardy. If claims of superior school quality for choice schools come at the price of exclusion of vulnerable student populations known to post lower test scores, then these schools should not be held up as models of innovation or quality for federal policy makers.

The authors conceptualize parents as consumers, but they never establish that these parents are desirous of the vast school choice expansion that they advocate. This claim is in tension with the authors' privi-

leging of the economic and innovation rationales for choice. Moreover, the failure to establish this key underlying desire places in question the report's overall argument that schools should meet, respond to, and be sanctioned according to the market demands of parents. To illustrate this tension, consider the authors' advocacy of "mandatory choice" systems in which neighborhood schools would cease to exist and all parents would be required to select a school for their children, much like what has happened in New York City. Recent research on the New York system of choice reveals dissatisfaction from parents about their inability to leave schools that are not meeting their needs once they have chosen them, the resulting overcrowding of remaining comprehensive high schools, the placement of many students in schools up to 90 minutes away from their homes, and the placement of students in schools they did not choose.<sup>20</sup> Even if the implementation of such a plan had been smooth, the notion of mandating parents to choose would seem to be an oxymoron, at odds with the ideal of free choice—where parents may want to be free *not* to choose, and instead, have their children attend a school that is geographically convenient, safe, or familiar and one that serves as an anchor for the neighborhood.<sup>21</sup>

It should be noted that the authors do not trust local school district officials to design or provide information about choice systems because they believe those officials have a self-interested agenda to limit parents' options in order to maintain their province. The authors base their suspicion on findings from studies about how districts failed to provide parents with timely and accurate information about their choice options under No Child Left Behind. It is, of course also plausible that many under-resourced districts simply lacked the capacity to respond effectively to NCLB provisions. Direct evidence

of self-interested actions is lacking.

But the key weakness of the report's argument here lies in a major inconsistency: the authors note that two large school systems, Boston and New York, have designed choice systems that they monitor, provide information about, and implement system-wide. While these districts may have benefitted greatly from outside resources that allowed them to successfully implement the reform, it seems that districts can indeed design, implement, and provide parents with information about their school choice programs.

The report's recommendation in this regard is that instead of relying on districts to implement the choice process, new, undefined "independent entities" (p. 21) should be entrusted to design choice systems and provide information about them. These new entities would create school choice navigator online systems—here, the report ignores the authors' earlier acknowledgement that many parents lack sufficient access to technology to negotiate such systems—that would employ "asymmetric paternalism," tailoring information about schools to help parents make "empirically rational decisions" that support their children's best interests (p. 20). Yet the authors never specify what components would comprise such information portals. Nor do they specify or who or what parties would decide what information parents should be using to inform their choice-making. They similarly fail to discuss on what basis the criteria for school quality would be determined. Moreover, as discussed earlier in this review, this recommendation fails to be informed by the rich data on parental choice processes. Parents are often more likely to be informed by school demographics, interactions with school personnel, and word of mouth about school,<sup>22</sup> and while school performance is clearly important to many parents, they tend

to value more than just test scores when evaluating the fit of a school for their family. In addition to a school's demographics, for example, parents are often interested in extra-curricular activities, arts education, language immersion programs, school size, and school safety. In short, there is no consensus among parents or the broader American public about what constitutes quality or "goodness" in schools. Any new choice information system—asymmetrically paternalistic or not—would have to consider, confront, and address these ambiguities, choice patterns, and multiple preferences that we know currently exist, or it will not meet parental needs. Rather than the online system recommended, for instance, it could be more effective and responsive to parents' needs to provide resources to local organizations and groups that are closest to parents and that understand local parents' concerns and preferences, as well as the intricacies of individual schools in any given community.

## **VII. USEFULNESS OF THE REPORT FOR GUIDANCE OF POLICY AND PRACTICE**

The authors' goal of expanding quality educational choices is a noble one. Despite the report's emphasis on parental preferences, however, it never supports its underlying assumption that this particular expansion of school choice is what parents want in federal educational reform, nor is it clear that parents understand what school choice forms encompass. PDK/Gallup polling reveals instead that the central problem of concern for

parents of k-12 students is the lack of resources in schools. Accordingly, if policymakers wish to attend to parental preferences, the best approach would seem to be more attention to resource shortages in schools and across schooling systems. Moreover, if the goal is to expand choice in a way that addresses equity concerns, policy makers could examine schooling systems that have robust magnet school and open enrollment plans that hold harmless, or even encourage, student diversity and equitable resource allocation. This would be particularly worthwhile given the research demonstrating the individual and social benefits of diverse schools. Certainly there is little support for the report's recommendation of virtual education to meet the needs of parents in many disadvantaged communities who currently suffer from a lack of quality educational options.

While the report's overall goal to expand choice for all public school parents is commendable, its usefulness is limited by the authors' neglect of research that demonstrates the multifaceted and complex political and social dynamics shaping parental choice processes. In fact, given that the empirical research literature demonstrates many parents' tendencies to choose schools largely based on racial and social class demographics, as opposed to indicators of school quality, an expansion of school choice without provisions that incentivize and support the creation of diverse schools would likely inhibit the open enrollment choice terrain the authors imagine.

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The Think Tank Review Project is made possible by funding from the Great Lakes Center for Education Research and Practice.