

WHO CHOOSES SCHOOLS, AND WHY?

Executive Summary

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The characteristics and motivations of families who actively choose schools

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This policy brief examines empirical research on the demographic characteristics of students and families who actively engage in school choice as well as the research on the motivations, preferences and behavior of families who actively choose schools. Although there have been many surveys asking parents about their preferences for schools or about what they would choose if they had a choice, such studies are not the focus of this brief. Rather, the research reviewed here is only that which focuses on those who have actively chosen a school. The choice options examined here include home schooling, private schools, vouchers, and public school choice programs such as controlled choice districts, charter schools, and magnet schools.

Among the formal choice programs, including vouchers, charters, magnets, and controlled choice, the characteristics of those who exercise choice to some extent depend on the population targeted and the design of the choice program. For example, private school choosers are predominantly White and non-poor, which reflects that the cost of this option often makes private school inaccessible for many Americans. Those who use vouchers to attend private schools, on the other hand, tend to be poor and minority, which reflects that the design of these programs frequently target low-income and minority populations in urban areas. Charter schools are more widely available. However, many are concentrated in urban areas, and a majority of charter choosers nationwide are minorities. Yet within choice options, the data also indicate that trends in enrollment by race and income vary widely among states and even districts.

In contrast, there is much less variation in why parents and students exercise choice. The primary stated motivation in all types of choice is

perceived academic quality; the primary influence in terms of documented behavior is peer composition in terms of race and class. The specific reasons for, and approaches to, choosing depend on each unique family, but the evidence does show that White parents tend to avoid schools with high minority concentrations, and minority parents tend to avoid schools with high percentages of low-income students. Accordingly, school choice programs have the possibility of increasing racial and ethnic segregation, but policy design may be able to mitigate these effects.

Recommendations

Based on the review of the research, we make six recommendations:

- Policymakers need to carefully consider the intended target population to ensure that choice options adequately address needs and preferences.
- Policymakers need to design any choice program so as not to perpetuate or exacerbate segregation by race, ethnicity or income. Evidence suggests that choice and particular design elements operate differently in different contexts. Therefore, thoughtful design requires looking beyond assumptions and theory to the evidence about how choice and particular design elements operate in practice.
- Public choice policies should address the constraints that target populations may have in potentially exercising their choices. For example, choice plans that are meant to encourage the exercise of choice among low-income families may not provide transportation, which is a significant barrier to participation.
- Both publicly and privately funded choice programs should work to ensure the wide dissemination of appropriate and useful information on programs, as informal information from social networks appears to be a powerful influence on parents' preferences and their ability to act on them.
- Since the Supreme Court has weighed in against the constitutionality of race-based student assignment policies, states and school districts need to find creative ways of ensuring that choice policies expand opportunities for those with the least access to choice and to quality schools.
- Further research in this area should examine the link between preferences and behaviors, perhaps exploring what factors help or hinder parents in acting on their preferences. This research especially should take into account contextual factors such as geographic location, constraints, and supply, to more fully understand the operation of choice. Policy may also benefit from research into the preferences of non-active choosers.