



IS SCHOOL CHOICE REALLY ABOUT EQUITY? CAN IT BE?



Rhetorically, school choice advocates regularly claim that these policies advance equity. Yet a [new research report](#) of school choice policies in five geographically and demographically diverse states found that equity has been little more than an afterthought in the development and implementation of these policies.

The study is based on interviews conducted with 58 state policymakers and experts in Colorado, Florida, Louisiana, Michigan, and Oregon. The states were selected with an eye to including a diverse set of geographic, demographic, and school choice policy settings.

Authored by NEPC Fellow [Katrina Bulkley](#) of Montclair State University in New Jersey, and by Julie A. Marsh and Laura Mulfinger of the University of Southern California, the report, *States Can Play a Stronger Role in Promoting Equity and Access in School Choice*, was published in December by the National Center for Research on Education Access and Choice (REACH) at Tulane University in Louisiana.

The researchers found that, rather than equity, lawmakers in the five states emphasized factors such as local control, innovation, efficiency, and parental freedom when designing school choice policies.

These policies have a predictable impact. “A very large number of the charter schools in Colorado serve and explicitly are designed to serve middle-class or even upper middle-class students,” a staff person with the Colorado School Boards Association told the authors of the report.

There are more than a handful who are, for all practical purposes, college prep programs for high-income families. And out of the way we’ve written our laws

and the way they're structured, there's no reason for them not to do that.

Although the researchers found that state choice policies were neither created with equity in mind nor consistently made more equitable over time, they did suggest several steps that policymakers throughout the United States can take in order to make school choice more accessible, and perhaps therefore more equitable.

- **Accountability:** Schools of choice—including charter and voucher schools—should be held accountable for, and incentivized in the direction of, providing high-quality options to historically underserved student populations that too often encounter limited or low-quality school options in or near the neighborhoods where they live.
- **Information:** The researchers found that information on schools of choice and school choice policies can be difficult to find and understand. This information needs to be widely available and comprehensible.
- **Enrollment:** Burdensome enrollment processes can shut out students from historically underserved groups. States should step in to ensure that this is not the case. The researchers positively highlight a policy in Oregon that financially incentivizes schools of choice to enroll students from underserved populations.
- **Teaching:** States should promote teacher quality measures for all schools of choice while also acknowledging the need for teachers who understand culturally relevant pedagogy and other measures designed to serve students from underserved populations.
- **Transportation:** Families are often required to provide their own transportation to schools of choice. This can effectively shut out lower-income students whose parents lack the means to help them get to and from school.

These recommendations align with some of those offered in the new book, *School's Choice: How Charter Schools Control Access and Shape Enrollment*, by Wagma Mommandi and Kevin Welner. Yet addressing accessibility within school choice systems is best thought of necessary but not sufficient for reaching larger education-equity goals, which must be focused on children's actual experiences in school as well as the health of the overall system of choice schools and neighborhood public schools.

NEPC Resources on School Choice

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