

## School Choice Stress



You've heard of work stress, relationship stress, and health-related stress. Now, researchers have identified another type of psychological strain common to contemporary life, especially for low-income families: school choice stress.

In an [article](#) published earlier this year in the peer-reviewed journal *AERA Open*, NEPC Fellow [Huriya Jabbar](#) of the University of Southern California, [Hanora Tracy](#) of Tulane, [Emily Germain](#) of the Learning Policy Institute, [Sarah Winchell Lenhoff](#) of Wayne State University, [Jacob Alonso](#) of the University of Southern California, and [Shira Haderlein](#) of The Center on Reinventing Public Education at Arizona State describe the psychological, compliance-related, and educational burdens of school choice. Those burdens, they suggest, may fall more heavily on low-income families of color because these activities consume a larger portion of their more limited resources.

For their study, the researchers spoke with a total of 36 parents, through interviews and focus groups, in six districts across Colorado, Louisiana, and Michigan. Parents included those who ultimately sent their children to charter schools, public schools run by school districts, and private schools that accepted vouchers. They divided the burdens of school choice into three categories: “learning costs” (e.g., visiting multiple schools because the information available online is limited, incomplete, inaccurate, or out-of-date); “compliance costs” (e.g., some schools required parents to drop off applications in person); and “psychological costs” (resulting from stress and anxiety related to choosing schools and awaiting admissions decisions that were frequently announced just weeks before the new school year began).

Some districts (such as Denver and New Orleans) lessened the administrative burdens by

implementing centralized application and information systems. But the researchers explained that such steps cannot address the underlying reality that, rather than focusing on ensuring that every option is high quality, choice-based systems instead create a system of winners and losers in which excellence is treated as a scarce commodity that only some children will be able to access via the efforts and efficacy of their parents or guardians.

In addition, steps such as centralization did little to reduce psychological stress, which was reported across every setting—by 30 of the 36 parent participants. The stress, the researchers write, “came from the act of having to choose, the repetition of the application procedures, the responsibility of finding the ‘right school,’ and the timing and uncertainty regarding the outcome.”

They propose that choice—especially when “forced” or mandatory for all parents in the district, as in New Orleans—shifts the responsibility of securing “high-quality education for a child from the state or district to parents.”

Parents, in theory, were empowered to choose, but the low-income parents and parents of color in our study, due to the stratified and segregated nature of public schools, reported a great deal of pressure to navigate the system and find a suitable school for their child.

This pressure includes navigating closures, which are most common in schools serving low-income families and students of color. One family that participated in the study had experienced multiple closures—and their children were still in elementary schools. Parents tended to blame themselves for closures and other problems with the schools they selected.

The researchers conclude:

Our work illuminates . . . how families can internalize the failure to successfully navigate these administrative burdens, that is, when they miss deadlines or believe that they did not gather sufficient information. School choice thus places a *double burden* on families through the learning, compliance, and psychological costs of choosing as well as the burden of responsibility for their child’s educational success. Every minor misstep in the process—missing a deadline or not completing a form, as some families in our study noted—not only costs families time, money, and other tradeoffs, but they also believed that it reflected on them as parents and had tangible consequences for their children.

## NEPC Resources on School Choice

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