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## SCHOOL CHOICE FOR TEACHERS



School choice involves different choosers—students, their parents, and of course the schools themselves. But teachers choose too when they decide where to work. Increasingly, this process involves deciding whether to work or not to work in the charter sector.

A [recently published study](#) by [Andrene J. Castro](#) of Virginia Commonwealth University, [NEPC Fellow Huriya Jabbar](#) of the University of Southern California, and [Sebastián Núñez Miranda](#) of the University of Texas at Austin takes a closer look at this process via interviews with 23 prospective or new-to-the-profession teachers and 22 current educators about their job searches in San Antonio, Texas, where about a quarter of the students attend charters. The semi-structured interviews were conducted pre-pandemic, during the 2016-17 school year. The study was published last summer in [Education Policy Analysis Archives](#), a peer-reviewed, open-access journal.

The goal of the research was to examine “how choice policy contexts alter teachers’ professional identities as they search for jobs,” a topic that had received only limited attention from researchers. The researchers describe how:

[T]he job search is not separate or isolated from teachers’ professional identity, rather it is a critical juncture where teachers evaluate their professional identity as they make choices about the sector—charter or TPSs [traditional public schools]—and/or school organizations that best align with their professional beliefs and values.

Teachers, the researchers write, “largely construct professional identities to match positions in the primary sector, that is, jobs in TPSs, which typically offer greater stability, higher salaries, and predictable career paths.” These qualities of TPSs appealed to most of the interviewees.

As one interviewee noted,

Even though they [charter schools] tell you that you’re going to get paid more, in all reality once you sign the contract, the pay is not what you’re told at the beginning of signing the contract. It’s a little more frustrating because I feel like you have to fight more . . . I think it’s more of a challenge now than working at the regular big public schools.

Some interviewees also indicated that charter schools were not in line with their professional identities or values. “I’m not really interested in charter schools,” one job seeker said. “I feel like the public schools, there’s a lot of areas that we need to improve. That’s where I feel like I can do the most good.”

For these and other reasons, the interviewees in this study typically turned to charters as a last resort, explaining that charters tended to pay less, offer temporary contracts, and lack transparency. But some interviewees embraced a charter school career, responding to a different professional identity.

Teach for America participants emerged as a group favoring charters over TPSs. They perceived that the values of TFA aligned with the missions of specific charter management organizations. Also, a few younger teachers who were interviewed felt more comfortable at charters because they tended to have younger staffs, with many teachers who were new to the profession.

Teachers also applied to charters because they believed that those charters provided higher levels of autonomy, better opportunities to learn a lot in a short period of time, and the chance to receive pay raises and promotions more rapidly than might be possible in the traditional public school system. One interviewee noted:

You can be stuck in the same teaching position for seven years [at a TPS] as opposed to [charter school] where if you’re really just doing a rock-solid job at what you’re doing now you can be within mid-management principal-ship within five, 10 years.

One additional finding from the study has clear policy implications for those hoping for cross-fertilization and sharing of ideas and experiences between the sectors: Prospective teachers were more open to switching sectors than were current teachers seeking to change jobs.

“To some extent, we found these segmented identities led to sector entrapment, constraining teachers’ notions, both individually and collectively, regarding what it means to be a teacher in either sector, rather than the profession at large,” the researchers conclude.

## NEPC Resources on Charter Schools

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