



Disloyalty Is the Norm: How Choice Undermines Voice



When families are dissatisfied with schools, two main courses of action are available. They can “exit” or they can stay put, exercising “voice” in order to try to effect change. Their decision is dependent on the degree of “loyalty” they feel to their schools, according to the “exit, voice and loyalty” [framework](#) developed by German economist Albert O. Hirschman in the 1970s to describe how individuals react to problems with businesses and other organizations.

In a [recent article](#) published in the peer-reviewed journal *Urban Education*, NEPC Fellow [Bryan Mann](#) of University of Kansas, and [Annah Rogers](#) of the University of West Alabama, used this framework to analyze how White parents choose schools in Washington, D.C.

Drawing upon interviews and document-based case studies of nine White families living in some of the city’s most rapidly gentrifying neighborhoods, Mann and Rogers identify two main themes relevant to the families’ choice preferences: (a) logistical values related to concerns such as proximity and traffic patterns; and (b) tension between individual versus collectivist motives.

The authors find that families were willing to overcome logistical concerns if schools otherwise met their individualist needs. Regarding these needs, the families ask questions such as whether the school is high prestige, provides bilingual programming, or (in the lower

grades) feeds into desirable middle or high schools. They also report that relatively few families in the study explicitly acknowledged that these needs are often felt in opposition to collectivist values. And it's those latter values that might guide these White families to, for example, select and then help improve a local school, which might better support the communities where they live.

Despite the fact that D.C.'s algorithm-based choice lottery is sometimes touted as "un-gameable," the case-study families did find ways to work the system to their advantage.

For example, some families participated in the lottery annually, regardless of whether their child was at a transition grade or eager to switch schools. That way, they could jump on an opportunity to, for example, switch children to elementary schools that fed into middle schools the parents considered to be desirable. The families also used strategies such as examining past data to study the probability that their children would be admitted to a particular school, and then limiting their choices to schools where they had a better chance of being selected and that, ideally, also fed into the preferred middle or high schools.

"The lottery system encourages a tenuous relationship between White families and local schools," Mann and Rogers write.

This arrangement allows for an ecosystem that does not prompt incoming White families to leverage their resources to support their neighborhood schools. Even the most committed parents played the lottery every year to see if they could improve their choices and did not spend time advocating to support neighborhood schools.

In other words, as the researchers write, "choice undermines voice."

Exiting (to private schools or by moving outside the city) was an option that was never far from the families' minds. Parents also shared stories of people they knew who had tried to align choices with their individual needs by, for instance, renting an apartment in a certain school boundary and having mail sent there, or by engaging in political battles to change boundaries to better meet their needs.

"Disloyalty was the norm across participants in this study," Mann and Rogers write, using Hirschman's *loyalty* framing. "Participants showed their disloyalty in both the process of choosing schools and the values they espoused in making decisions. The behavior of continually playing the lottery, leaving the system, and manipulating the system shows a low loyalty threshold."

Mann and Rogers emphasize that they blame the system and not the parents for the problems their study identifies. "The parents behaved as the system prompted them to behave."

They conclude that D.C.'s lottery system is unfair and that it encourages segregation. "Our research suggests that the hope for system-wide integration is unlikely because the relationship between White families and schools is predicated on encouraging exit and disloyalty," they write.

Remedies with the potential to be enacted within the current system include expanding dual language options and weighting lotteries to diminish segregation at over-subscribed schools, the researchers write. However, by its very nature, a market-based system creates “winners” and “losers.” Predictably, in the context of public education in America, the winners are more likely than the losers to be privileged and White. This means choice-based systems—including those with elements like Washington’s that are designed to promote less gaming—are limited in their potential to further integration and to raise standards for all students, especially when it comes to their ability to “address the racial isolation of unpopular schools.”

NEPC Resources on School Choice

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