

## "School Choice"

**Patrick J. Wolf and Anna M. Jacob**

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Many families in the U.S. have been choosing their child's school since the nineteenth century. Until recently, this choice has been driven by wealth, as families of means have paid a premium to live in a neighborhood with high-quality public schools or self-finance private schooling for their children. Most suburban schools in the U.S. are well-resourced and filled with predominately middle-class, educationally advantaged, white students. Low-income families who lack the capital to purchase a home in a neighborhood with excellent public schools or pay for private schooling often are left trapped in chronically failing neighborhood schools. Such schools, most common in urban and some rural areas, are populated by other low-income, disadvantaged minority students. Their students miss out on the superior resources and positive peer effects their suburban counterparts are experiencing. Such contrasting schooling experiences likely contribute to the black-white test score gap in the U.S. and inhibit the upward economic and social mobility of disadvantaged members of society.

In recent years, students in the U.S. that are disadvantaged by income, disability, or educational environment have been able to access school choice options through a variety of policy reforms. These programs may operate within the existing public school structure, such as magnet schools, interdistrict and intradistrict choice options, transfer opportunities to higher performing public schools. They also may permit students to attend charter schools which are public schools that operate independent of the local school district. Other initiatives provide public assistance in the form of a voucher or "opportunity scholarship" for students to attend

private schools. These various choice options all share a commonality: they free students from forced attendance at their residentially assigned public school. To what extent can freedom from this constraint increase educational equality?

### **Extent of School Choice in the US**

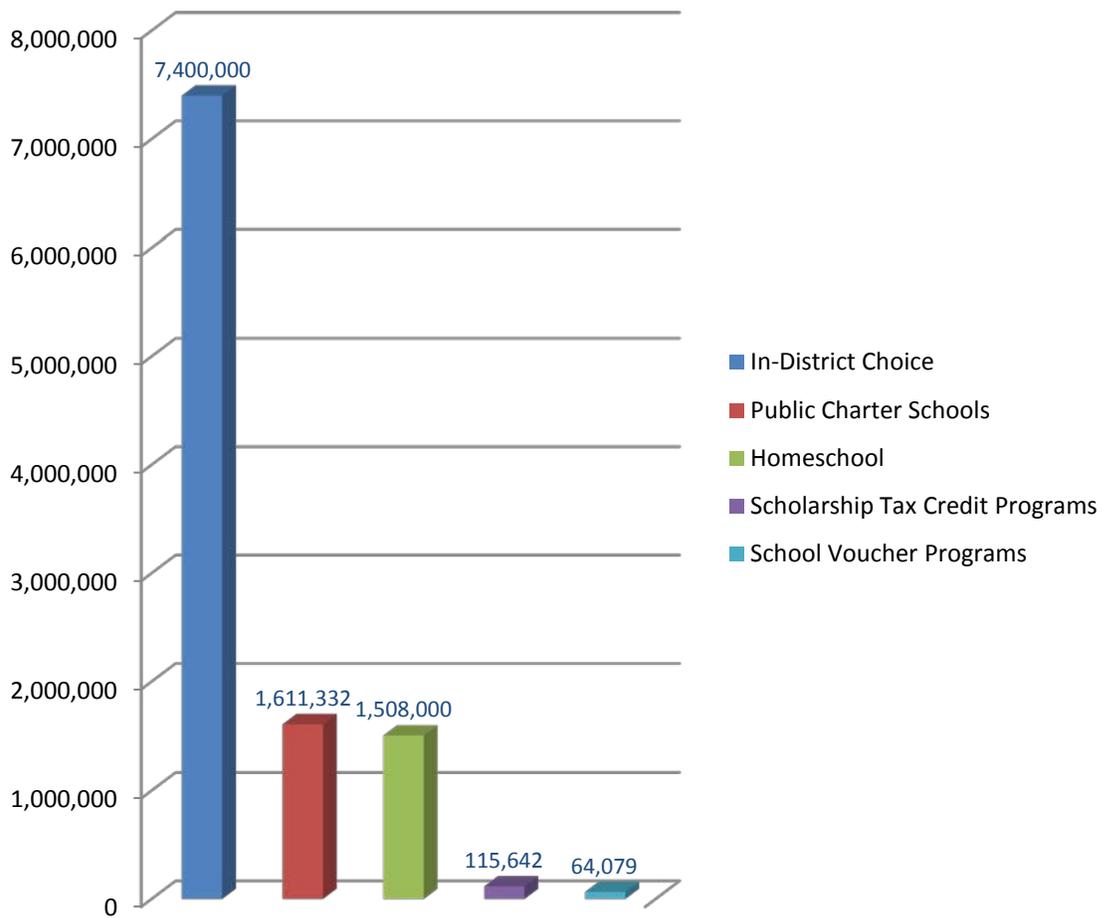
Reliable enrollment data are available regarding five distinct forms of school choice in the U.S.: choice within public school districts, charter schools, homeschools, direct voucher programs, and tax-credit scholarship programs (figure 1). The oldest and most common form of school choice policy allows parents to select a school for their child while keeping that student within the public school system. Such internal choice mechanisms include interdistrict and intradistrict public school choice plans, open enrollment policies, magnet schools and public school transfer options as mandated by NCLB.

Magnet schools were the first distinctive form of public school choice, emerging largely in response to demands for desegregation in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Magnet schools are characterized by a distinguishing school-wide theme, curriculum, or pedagogical approach. Admissions policies aim to achieve racially balanced schools by attracting students from across a school district or retaining existing (mostly white) students who might otherwise abandon the public schools. In 2009, more than 2.3 million school children were enrolled in 3,021 magnet schools across the United States (Snyder and Dillow 2011, 165).

Despite their origins as vehicles of desegregation, magnet schools have had only limited success in promoting racial and ethnic integration. While many magnet schools appear to be racially heterogeneous on paper, their internal operations often permit substantial segregation by race (Blank 1991). African American students are more likely to be assigned to the lowest

academic tracks in many magnet schools, limiting contact with their white classmates. Whole-school magnets, which do not assign students to separate academic tracks, currently are viewed as the more authentic form of magnet schooling (Christenson et al 2003).

**Figure 1: Extent of School Choice in the United States**



\* Sources: NCES Digest of Education Statistics 2009; The Alliance for School Choice: School Choice Yearbook 2009-10

\*Note: Enrollment figures are for 2010, with the exception of 'Homeschool' and 'In District Choice' for which the most current estimates are from 2007

Other choice options within the traditional public school system include interdistrict school choice plans that permit students to attend a public school district other than the one in which they reside. Intradistrict choice plans, on the other hand, allow students to attend a school within their district other than their assigned neighborhood school. Such plans are sometimes referred to as “open enrollment.” In addition, NCLB has a public school choice provision that allows students attending Title 1 schools designated in need of improvement, corrective action or restructuring for two years in a row to transfer to a higher performing public school within their district.

A charter school is another public school choice option. Charter schools are governed by an independent group or organization operating under a charter or contractual agreement with the state legislature or other government authority. That agreement provides the school with funding and autonomy from the regulatory burden imposed by the state on traditional public schools. In exchange, the school must meet or exceed certain accountability standards. Charter schools typically operate outside of the governance structure of the local district and are considered their own Local Educational Agency.

Admission to most charter schools is not determined by residential address and, in the case of oversubscription, an admissions lottery typically is held. A school’s charter is reviewed every three to five years, and can be revoked if performance standards, fiscal accountability procedures, curriculum guidelines or other requirements are not being met. Since the first charter school opened in 1992, this public school choice option has grown exponentially. From 1999-2000 to 2008-2009, the number of students enrolled in charter schools increased from 340,000 to 1.4 million (Aud et al. 2011). Today, more than 5,400 charter schools operate in 40 states and the District of Columbia. About 61% of the students in charter schools in 2008-2009 were minorities

compared to 44% of traditional public school students. Charter school students are also more likely to be poor (Aud et al. 2011, 147) and to be behind academically.

School voucher programs assist parents in sending their children to participating private schools of their choosing. A school voucher is an arrangement whereby parents who meet certain eligibility criteria can qualify to have public dollars finance some or all of the expenses associated with a private school education (Wolf 2008a, 635). In some states, government tax credits induce corporations or individuals to donate money to nonprofit organizations that distribute tuition scholarships to needy students in elementary or secondary schools. Privately-funded scholarships like this are not school vouchers, although both are used to help underprivileged students gain access to private schools. Prior to the start of the most recent state legislative sessions, there were 10 school voucher programs enrolling 67,267 students and nine tax-credit scholarship programs enrolling 123,544 students in the U.S. (Campanella et al 2011, 24). In the spring of 2011, five states created new school voucher programs, three enacted new tax-credit scholarship programs, and ten expanded existing voucher or tax-credit initiatives.

School voucher programs vary by the eligibility requirements imposed on applicants, the number of vouchers granted, the value of the voucher, the types of schools that are allowed to participate in the program, and the regulations imposed on those schools (table 1).

A growing number of parents are enrolling their children in virtual schools, online classes, homeschooling, or some combination of the three. The number of students being homeschooled has risen to about 1.5 million in 2007 compared with 850,000 in 1999 (Bielick 2008). White students constitute the majority of homeschooled students (77 percent) and students in two-parent households comprise 89 percent of the homeschooled population (Planty

et al 2009). The most common reason for homeschooling cited by parents is a desire to provide religious or moral instruction (36 percent).

Parents of high school students have the option of either supplementing or replacing a traditional public school education with courses offered by an online provider. For example, Florida Virtual School (FLVS) became the country's first state-wide, online, public high school when it was founded in 1997. FLVS served over 97,000 students in the 2009-2010 school year, offering more than 90 courses including core subjects, electives, world languages, honors, and Advanced Placement courses.

Online courses can be coordinated either entirely over the internet or through a hybrid schooling model. While still attending a brick-and-mortar school structure, students in hybrid schools spend all or some of the day taking online classes or utilizing instructional software under the supervision of school staff. Rocketship Education, a charter school network currently operating three campuses in San Jose, California, is a hybrid school that successfully uses technology for part of the school day to deliver curriculum to students.

### **Public School Choice Impacts**

Well-designed studies tend to show that charter schools produce academic achievement outcomes that are equal or superior to traditional public schools, even though most charter schools are less than five years old, generally receive only 60-80% of the per-pupil operational funding of traditional public schools, and receive no capital funding from government sources. The major exceptions to this pattern are a national study of charter middle schools by Mathematica Policy Research that found no net achievement benefits of charter schools and a multi-state evaluation by CREDO that concluded 17% of charter schools in the study

outperformed their traditional public school matched twin, 46% performed similarly to their twin, and 37% performed below their twin (Gleason et al 2010; CREDO 2009).

Evaluations that follow students over time are more valid than single point-in-time studies that must statistically adjust for preexisting differences among students. The National Alliance for Public Charter Schools (2009) singled out 33 studies that met modest eligibility criteria by using longitudinally-linked, student-level data to look at change over time in student or school performance while controlling for prior achievement as well as school and student characteristics. The studies that use the most recent data show that charter schools produce more instances of higher achievement gains than traditional public schools. Narrowing the eligibility criteria even further, the 13 most rigorous studies show that charter schools clearly outperformed traditional public schools. Additionally, longitudinal studies of high school graduation and college matriculation results all favor charter schools over traditional public schools.

Well-designed charter school studies are settling the cream-skimming dispute largely in favor of school choice supporters. A 2009 report by RAND analyzed transfers to charters in five metropolitan areas- Chicago, Denver, Milwaukee, Philadelphia, and San Diego. The authors followed students who switched from traditional public schools to charter schools and concluded that “it does not appear that charter schools are systematically skimming high-achieving students or dramatically affecting the racial mix of schools for transferring students” (Zimmer et al 2009, 19).

There have been fewer studies of the systemic or competitive effects of charter schools on the achievement of students who remain in traditional public schools and these tend to vary dramatically in quality. The most rigorous studies generally show that competition by charter schools boosts achievement in traditional public schools. Other studies of the systemic effects of

charter schools have found positive effects on the political knowledge and voluntarism of students in traditional public schools (Godwin and Kemerer 2002; Greene 1998, 83-106).

### **Private School Choice Impacts**

Fortunately, a sufficiently large number of school voucher programs have been established and evaluated in the United States to answer pressing policy questions related to vouchers targeted to underprivileged students. The highest quality studies are those that randomly assign participants to receive the offer of a voucher or serve in the study control group. Of the ten separate analyses of data from random assignment studies of school voucher programs in six cities reviewed by Wolf (2008b), nine conclude that some or all of the participants benefited academically from using a voucher to attend a private school of their choice. On average, the academic growth equals about an extra month of learning per year, with all or some subgroups of students showing gains eventually. Although the exact pattern of positive results varies by study, no negative achievement effects of vouchers have been found.

Voucher programs also generate increased parental satisfaction with schools, particularly regarding curriculum, safety, parent-teacher relations, academics and religion. This result has been confirmed by all five gold standard studies that asked these questions (Wolf et al 2010).

A comprehensive review examined 21 quantitative studies regarding the effects of school choice on seven civic outcomes for students: political tolerance, voluntarism, political knowledge, political participation, social capital, civic skills, and patriotism. All but three of 59 analyses within those studies revealed that choice schools did as well or better than traditional public schools at promoting civic values, suggesting that increasing parental school choice does not undermine the public goals of education and may actually advance them (Wolf 2007).

## **Conclusions**

Nearly eleven million students in the United States participate in school choice through out-of-boundary public school choice programs, charters, tax credit scholarships, vouchers, homeschooling, or other formal choice mechanisms. Millions of others participate informally by deliberately choosing homes in neighborhoods that host desirable public schools or by using personal financial resources to access a quality private school education. The vast majority of students, however, are by default assigned to schools based on where they live. This situation tends to work to the disadvantage of low-income, minority students, particularly African Americans. The findings of the rigorous school choice evaluations presented here point to the potential of school choice policies to narrow the enduring and alarming achievement gap between black and white students in the U. S.

The core logic that has emerged from school choice research is straightforward. The conventional system of residentially assigning students to neighborhood public schools or permitting private school choice through self-financing disproportionately works to the advantage of white students. The same students who tend to lose out educationally under the conventional system of residential assignment -- low-income minority students -- seem to benefit from school choice policies targeted to them. These benefits range from neutral to modestly positive. An insufficient number of studies have been conducted thus far to assess longer-term impacts such as the intergenerational effects of school choice, but no rigorous empirical study has demonstrated negative effects of public or private school choice programs on student outcomes in the U.S. Given this body of evidence, it seems that expanding school choice options for disadvantaged families while continuing to learn about and refine policies through rigorous

evaluations of their effects is the most reasonable path to pursue if we hope to someday completely realize the goal of educational equality.

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