

# School Choice Policies in the US: Retrospect and Prospect

by John D. Singleton

## Overview

The adoption of school choice policies over the last several decades is a major development for K–12 education. These policies take several different forms, including public school choice, charter schools, and voucher programs that defray or reduce the cost of private school tuition.

Increased interest in school choice policies has been driven by beliefs that reform from without has often proven more feasible than reform from within, and that school choice tends to level the playing field for low-income and minority students by improving access to high-quality schools.

An important consideration in school choice policies is the degree to which they improve the quality of education in traditional public schools. The consensus of research is that they usually—but not necessarily—have a positive effect by causing public schools to raise their quality in the face of competition.

## Guidance for Policymakers

- For choice policies to create meaningful competition, traditional public schools and districts must face the potential loss of students and funding. Providing student transportation to charter schools (or, in the case of voucher programs, to private schools) will make it easier for students to potentially leave traditional public schools, thus increasing competition.
- Evidence suggests that parents may not know about available choice options and do not have accurate information about school quality. Supplying information to parents about the effectiveness of different schools at advancing student learning will strengthen incentives facing traditional public schools to increase their quality.
- To expand choice for low-income families and students, policymakers could provide financial incentives to charter schools to locate in neighborhoods and areas where traditional public schools underserve students.
- Policymakers can better understand the choice landscape (and thus develop more effective choice policies) by creating expanded measures of school and teacher quality. Such measures could be built on rich evidence from test scores across many subjects, GPAs, attendance and discipline records, college entry and completion data, and even earnings in the labor market.

## What the Research Tells Us

- Certain charter schools generate dramatic improvements in students' academic achievement and rates of going on to college. Recent national data sources show learning gains of charter school students exceed those of traditional public school students.
- Evidence supports the conclusion that the impact of school choice options on those students who remain in their assigned public school (who do not make use of school choice options) is usually—but not necessarily—positive on net. Increased competition appears to cause public schools to raise their productivity.
- A recent review of the findings from private-school choice programs in the United States highlights that most studies find positive evidence of competitive effects and that no study finds evidence of negative effects on students attending traditional public schools.

Scan here to view  
the full report.

