

When School Districts Let Families Choose

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Introduction

In the midst of debates over school choice, a critical point often gets lost: the most common, and least discussed, form of school choice is *district* choice. In 2016, 13 percent of students attended a district school of choice.¹

District choice, then, represents twice the number of students (6 percent) who chose a charter school. And district choosers were significantly more common than the 9 percent who chose private school and the 3 percent who provided schooling for their children at home. The remaining percentage—just 69 percent of all those ages five to seventeen—attended the neighborhood school to which they were assigned, a school many parents selected by moving to a neighborhood that contained a school they wanted their child to attend (see figure 1).²

A fast-growing portion of American families are exercising a wide array of choices within the public school system, and within the traditional district governance structure. The fierce debate over charter schools belies this reality.

This paper examines choice opportunities within the district governance model. How much choice is provided by traditional neighborhood schools to which students are assigned according to the residence they have selected? Why do school districts offer educational choice? Under what policies, and to what effect? And what role can states play in enabling district choice and influencing the outcomes?

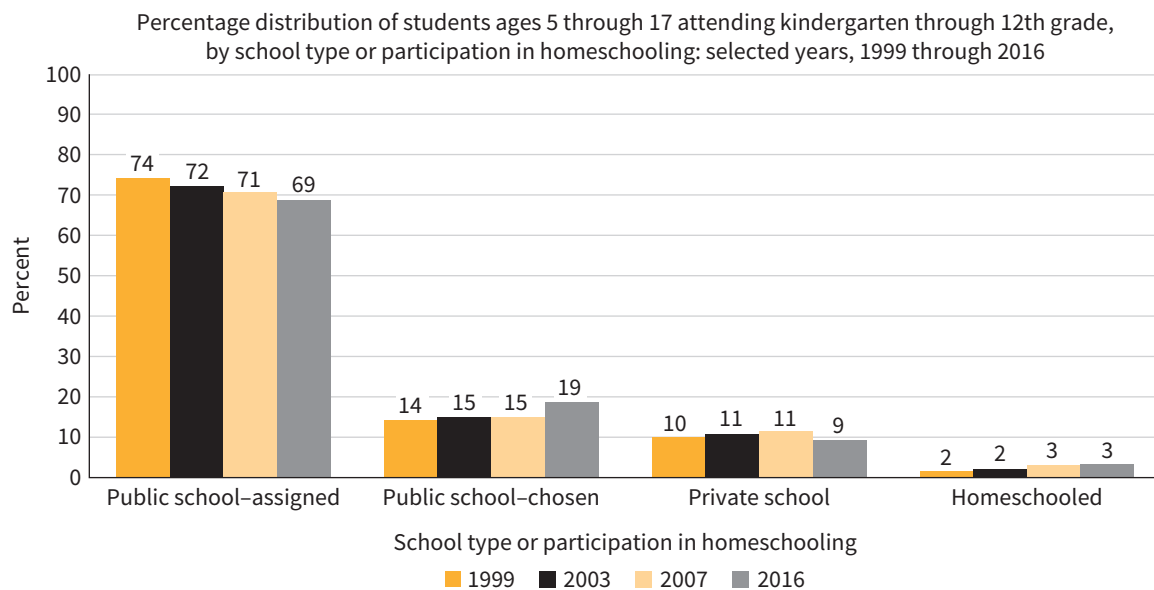
The Forms and Motivations for District Choice

District choice takes a broad range of forms and motivations. This section describes this variety, presents a typology for understanding how they differ, and summarizes the evidence to date on equitable access and efficacy of student outcomes.

The body of research on district school choice shows that districts have historically taken a variety of approaches to choice, including magnet and alternative schools, open enrollment, and portfolio management, with the hope of addressing in-district racial and economic segregation and achievement gaps and with the goal of allowing families to express



Figure 1. Enrollment patterns in various school choice options, 1999–2016



Source: Ke Wang, Amy Rathbun, and Lauren Musu, *School Choice in the United States: 2019*, NCES 2019-106 (Washington, DC: US Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2019), <https://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=2019106>.

preferences and find a good fit. I discuss these gaps and how they are tied to the most prevalent form of district choice—neighborhood schools—which allows families with means to purchase a seat in a high-quality school or school district.

District choice programs are meant to achieve many public policy goals and private interests, which sometimes operate in direct conflict. Some (e.g., exam schools) provide advanced educational opportunities to qualified students. Some provide alternative educational approaches, such as Montessori programs. Some provide specialized settings for students with special educational challenges, such as students at risk of dropping out.

In many ways, all of these purposes can be thought of as segregative, in that they allow students to opt in to schools that fit their unique needs. However, many district schools of choice, in particular magnet schools, are meant to attract a more economically and racially diverse set of students, often by locating exam- or theme-based schools in low-income or racially concentrated neighborhoods.

Districts have more recently offered school choice as a response to increasing competition from charter and private schools. For that reason, today’s urban school districts tend to offer many different forms of choice. In 2014, my colleagues and I found that in eight major cities surveyed, a majority of parents surveyed said they chose an alternative to their assigned school.³

Neighborhood Schools: Choice for Those Who Can Afford It

Neighborhood schools, the traditional mode of public schooling, are not normally considered schools of choice, in that students are assigned to them based on geographic boundaries. However, it is worth noting that data show that approximately one-fifth of families say they moved to their neighborhood based on its public school.⁴ Caroline M. Hoxby's research suggests that people choose school districts within metropolitan areas if the districts are small enough to facilitate such choices.⁵ Buying a home in a different neighborhood, instead of paying for private schools, can save a family a significant amount of money over the course of a decade.

When families opt to enroll their children in a neighborhood district school rather than a public or private alternative, they are—in effect—choosing that school. Research shows that housing values are significantly higher in places where perceived school quality is higher. For that reason, parents are willing to pay substantial amounts of money to get their children educated in better-performing schools.⁶ However, compelling research also shows that home buyers factor in the demographics.⁷

Because housing choices, housing policy, and neighborhood schools have been so intimately linked, it is no surprise that school districts have historically been, and continue to be, segregated along race and class lines. Court-mandated and voluntary school busing policies tried to address those inequities by assigning and transporting students across neighborhood lines, but fierce political backlash and white flight led districts, states, and the federal government to end busing and other forced integration policies.

Writing for the *Boston Globe*, columnist Jeff Jacoby wrote: “Busing made everything worse. Public school enrollment plummeted. In Boston, 78 school buildings were closed. In 1970, 62,000 white children attended the city’s public schools—64 percent of the total. By 1994, only 11,000 white students remained. Before busing began, the average black child in Boston attended a school that was 24 percent white. By the mid-1990s, the proportion was 17 percent. Far from reducing racial isolation, busing had intensified it.”⁸

Research on neighborhood schools, then, raises an uncomfortable truth: families make housing decisions and corresponding school decisions based on a complex set of values, including status, neighborhood amenities, race, and class.⁹ Attempts to forcibly override those decisions cannot work because families of means will also find a way to either fight or opt out.

As busing policies ended, federal and state policy turned to voluntary, or choice-based, solutions to address inequities.



Alternatives to Residential Choice: Specialty Schools and Open Enrollment

Selective “Exam” and Alternative Schools: Choice to Meet Unique Needs

A range of special-purpose schools have developed over the years, including “exam” schools, where admission is based on test scores or other indications of achievement or giftedness. “Alternative” schools often serve students with unique needs, such as those at risk of dropping out of high school.

Most major city school systems can point to exam schools. New York City’s storied Stuyvesant and Bronx Latin are some of the more famous. They usually have competitive entrance requirements and long wait lists, and offer a rigorous college-prep curriculum. But they are public, district-run schools.

In their definitive book on exam schools, Chester E. Finn Jr. and Jessica A. Hockett note that exam schools “are sometimes controversial because ‘selectivity’ is hard to reconcile with the mission of ‘public’ education.” Still, such schools are typically subject to the district’s collective bargaining agreement and charge no extra tuition. They do, however, usually operate with many advantages, including attracting highly talented teachers, principals, and student bodies.

Exam schools are often criticized for lack of diversity, but as Finn and Hockett find, they are and they aren’t. Asian, white, and black students tend to be overrepresented, while there tend to be fewer Hispanic students. Exam schools are often racially “imbalanced”; in more than 70 percent of these schools, more than half of all students are of one race.¹⁰

Although these are high-achieving schools, it is unclear whether this is primarily a result of the high-achieving students who attend. Scholarly articles on exam schools find little effect for students at the cusp of going to exam or non-exam schools.¹¹

At the opposite end of the spectrum are “alternative schools,” havens for students who are not thriving—or are failing—in traditional comprehensive schools or who simply want an alternative curriculum, such as experiential learning.

School districts also often offer theme-based schools, such as Montessori or STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math) schools. Such schools may be created by the district to strategically meet the needs of underserved students but are more typically in response to parent demand or educator initiative. In Seattle, for example, a star principal at one elementary school lobbied the district to open an alternative school in a wealthy neighborhood, but it was open to families in other neighborhoods on a space-available basis. Both exam and alternative schools are designed to meet a specific student population; some were created as magnet schools with a broader social design.

Magnet Schools: Choice to Desegregate

Although there is no set definition of magnet schools, the prevalent form of district school choice in the 1970s and 1980s, they can generally be described as theme-based district schools of choice, designed to aid in citywide desegregation efforts. The simplest theory behind magnet schools is that a highly desirable school set in a racially concentrated neighborhood will attract a more diverse student population. In most cases, the intent is to encourage more white families to enroll in schools in mostly black neighborhoods.

Some magnet schools are established by school districts and draw only from that district. Others are set up by state government and may draw from multiple districts. Others are organized as “schools within a school.” In large urban areas, several magnet schools with different specializations may be combined into a single “center.” The federal Magnet Schools Assistance Program fueled their development and start-up with many hundreds of millions of dollars in grants.

Often, such schools are “schools of choice,” but in reality, popular schools are typically admissions based or fill up with neighborhood preference. They are rarely replicated and often have long wait lists. Magnet schools tend to be somewhat less impoverished than surrounding district schools (controlling for district fixed effects) but enroll higher proportions of black and Hispanic students.¹²

According to a March 2017 brief for the Brookings Institution by Morgan Polikoff and Tenice Hardaway, magnet schools make up 3.7 percent of all public schools and show large variations by state, with particularly high concentrations in Florida, South Carolina, and Michigan. Most school districts have just a few magnet schools, but some large urban districts (Miami-Dade, Houston Independent School District, and Los Angeles) have more than one hundred. Polikoff and Hardaway note that while magnets make up less than 4 percent of schools, they serve more than 6.7 percent of all public school students, owing to their typically large size and urban locations. It may surprise some to learn that according to federal Common Core of Data in 2017, magnet schools served more students than charter schools.

Like charter schools, magnet schools’ growth has been fueled by federal start-up grants. The Magnet Schools Assistance Program has provided nearly \$100 million annually over the past few years alone.¹³ Magnet schools have not required any special state legislation, as they typically operate under the district legal structure and union contract. For these reasons, they have largely been unopposed by teachers unions, though recent opposition by the California Teachers Association to magnet school expansion in Los Angeles provides an interesting counter-narrative.¹⁴



There is very little rigorous academic research on magnet school outcomes, an issue that—given the number of students served—should be ameliorated. That said, a 2018 analysis by Jia Wang, Joan L. Herman, and Daniel Dockterman reviewed eighteen studies of magnet school outcomes, with an emphasis on lottery and other quasi-experimental designs—and found generally positive results, particularly for magnet secondary schools.¹⁵ However, there is significant variation across location and across types of magnet programs, in terms of both academic outcomes and racial makeup.

In an experiment designed to assess the effect of schools that convert to magnet status, Julian Betts et al. found that both types of schools studied (traditional and destination) experienced the intended changes in racial composition, leading to a more diverse student body. However, these changes may have occurred in those schools anyway due to shifting neighborhood demographics. Achievement improved only in the traditional, not destination, magnets and may have been due to shifts in the types of students (lower or higher achieving) attending the school.¹⁶

In another study, Mark Berends and R. Joseph Waddington studied the effect of switching from traditional public schools to magnet, charter, and Catholic schools in Indianapolis.¹⁷ The authors found that students experienced learning loss when switching to magnet schools (in math and language arts) and to Catholic schools (in math only) but not to charter schools.

One study of magnet school applications showed that white families tend to avoid schools with higher poverty rates and higher percentages of nonwhites.¹⁸ The differences could not be accounted for by other school characteristics, such as test scores or safety. This reluctance and bias among white families is a rarely discussed, but repeatedly confirmed, barrier to integrating schools via magnet and other choice policies.

A federally administered household survey in 2015 (updated in 2016) found that parent satisfaction with magnet and other district choice schools was roughly comparable to that of charter school families. Families in district schools of choice were less satisfied with their schools than were private school families but more satisfied than those in assigned district schools. In an analysis of the results, Albert Cheng and Paul E. Peterson observed: “Despite the greater exclusivity and resource advantages enjoyed by magnet schools, parental satisfaction with magnet schools and the other district schools of choice is no greater—and may be less—than the level of satisfaction of parents with a child at a charter school. This does not demonstrate that charter schools are superior to magnet schools, as we do not have any direct evidence about school quality independent of parental perceptions. But if parental satisfaction is a desirable, policy-relevant outcome in its own right, the data suggest that charters are a viable—and perhaps the preferred—option for those seeking to expand choice within the public sector.”¹⁹

Overall, the available research suggests that magnet schools may offer somewhat positive but highly varied academic results. However, it is unclear how much those results are driven by selection bias given the lack of rigorous studies. Parent satisfaction is higher than assigned district schools but the same as charter schools, which tend to be less exclusive. Perhaps most important, they appear to have had marginal impact on racial integration, their primary goal.

Open-Enrollment Policies: Choice for Those Trapped in Low-Performing Schools

In an attempt to level the playing field in districts with highly uneven school performance, states and districts have created “open-enrollment” policies designed to allow families to choose between district schools (intradistrict). Open-enrollment policies began in 1988 in Minnesota (the state that went on in 1991 to pass the nation’s first charter school law) as a way to create more within-district choices for families who could not move or attend private school.

The specific policies vary, but often families can request to enroll in another school within a geographic zone or elsewhere in the district. Transportation may or may not be provided; often, families in the neighborhood assignment zone have first preference. Districts can adopt these policies themselves, but thirty-three states explicitly allow or require intradistrict choice.

Forty-three states also have *inter*district open-enrollment policies that allow students to attend schools across district lines. Laws vary, but enrollment is usually offered on a space-available basis and availability may vary from year to year, creating uncertainty for students. Transportation is rarely offered.

Although many states have interdistrict school choice programs, few students participate in such programs because districts that are prospective recipients of choice students will resist accepting such students because they bring fewer dollars and worse “peer effects.”²⁰

For all of those reasons, not many students participate despite the prevalence of laws. Those who do tend to be students from higher-income households whose parents have the agency and income to learn about the opportunity and provide transportation.

There are no nationally representative studies of the academic results of intradistrict enrollment policies. One study of the open-enrollment policy in Florida’s Pinellas County found that students performed significantly worse as a result of opting out of their assigned school; however, the author acknowledges that there are limitations to the study.²¹ Another study found that District of Columbia students who attend out-of-boundary public schools and charter schools significantly outperformed similar students who attend in-boundary public schools in both reading and math tests.²²



Studies of open-enrollment policies have also found that without attention to transportation and other supports, high-income families are most likely to take advantage of such policies and that they can exacerbate segregation.²³ Enabling conditions, such as those described in the section on portfolio management, can help ensure more equal access, but political tensions quickly arise when many families are trying to get access to few high-quality schools.

Seattle Public Schools created a zoned open-enrollment policy in the late 1990s but quickly ended it: families who had bought homes in particular north Seattle neighborhoods to ensure access to good schools suddenly found themselves losing access to more disadvantaged south-end families. Having done nothing to increase the supply of high-quality schools, the school board was besieged by complaints and activism until it ended the policy.

Interdistrict policies tend to have low participation rates and lackluster results for increased access and achievement for disadvantaged students. This is due in part to high-performing districts and schools having few incentives to enroll students who may be academically behind.²⁴ A study of out-of-district enrollment in Ohio found that open districts tended to be small, rural, racially homogeneous districts that had been losing enrollment. Their major reason for accepting transfers was to increase enrollment. Closed districts tended to be suburban districts with above-average per-pupil expenditure. Their major reason for not receiving transfers was insufficient space.²⁵

Housing values can be affected by open-enrollment policies. One study found that after their states adopt interdistrict choice programs, districts with desirable nearby, out-of-district schooling options experience relatively large increases in housing values, residential income, and population density.²⁶

Open-enrollment policies, on their own, have a lackluster academic track record. There is little evidence of improved access to higher-performing schools and little evidence of academic gains. In some cases, such policies can produce academic losses and exacerbate racial segregation.

Despite all of these challenges, some states, such as Indiana, feel that open-enrollment policies offer an important addition to the public choice options and can help normalize the idea that money should follow students to whatever public school is the best fit, and that public schools should offer good choices of many kinds.²⁷ Some studies suggest that policies that allow students to leave low-performing school districts may inspire competitive responses from school districts.²⁸ Some evidence also shows that such policies can increase housing values in some areas, but without overall improvement in school quality, the corollary, presumably, is lower housing prices in other areas.

Open-enrollment policies, then, be they within or across districts, are a prevalent, but weakly utilized, policy tool in US public education; without complementary reform strategies, such policies are unlikely to grow.

State Policies on Open Enrollment

States have passed enabling legislation for both *inter- and intradistrict choice*. According to a 2018 analysis by the Education Commission of the States, thirty-three states have policies that explicitly allow or require students to attend another school within their resident district. Forty-three states have policies that allow students to select and attend another school outside their resident district. State open-enrollment policies vary by whether they are:

- voluntary—districts may enter into such agreements at their discretion;
- mandatory—all schools or districts must accept transfer students, subject to restrictions such as space availability; or
- special circumstance—special transfer provisions for students in low-performing or other defined regions.

State funding typically follows the student, and sometimes some portion of local funding follows the student. In most cases, districts and schools can opt out if they do not have available space. Court-ordered desegregation can override transfers as a way to prevent white flight. States typically give preference to students transferring from low-performing schools and to siblings of currently enrolled students. Conversely, states generally prohibit districts from cherry-picking more advanced students or discriminating against students with special needs or limited English proficiency.

As of 2018, states were still actively considering interdistrict policy, and eight states were enacting legislation that year. Most of that legislative policy consisted of minor tweaks to laws, such as notification, eligibility, or transportation requirements.

Some states, notably those already committed to a broad array of choice options, are aggressively expanding district open-enrollment options. Legislation (HB 7209) enacted by Florida in 2016, for example, made both inter- and intradistrict choice mandatory throughout the state and gave transfer preference to select student populations, such as children of active-duty military personnel and children in foster care.²⁹

In sum, all of the above options are responses to specific political circumstances, and none provide a vision for comprehensive public school choice or a clear plan for lifting the performance of a school district as a whole. Each of these options has contributed something in terms of either academic or societal outcomes, but none has established that it is a potent tool for school reform. At best, they serve a distinct population but often at a cost to another population.

Comprehensive District Choice: Portfolios and Partnerships

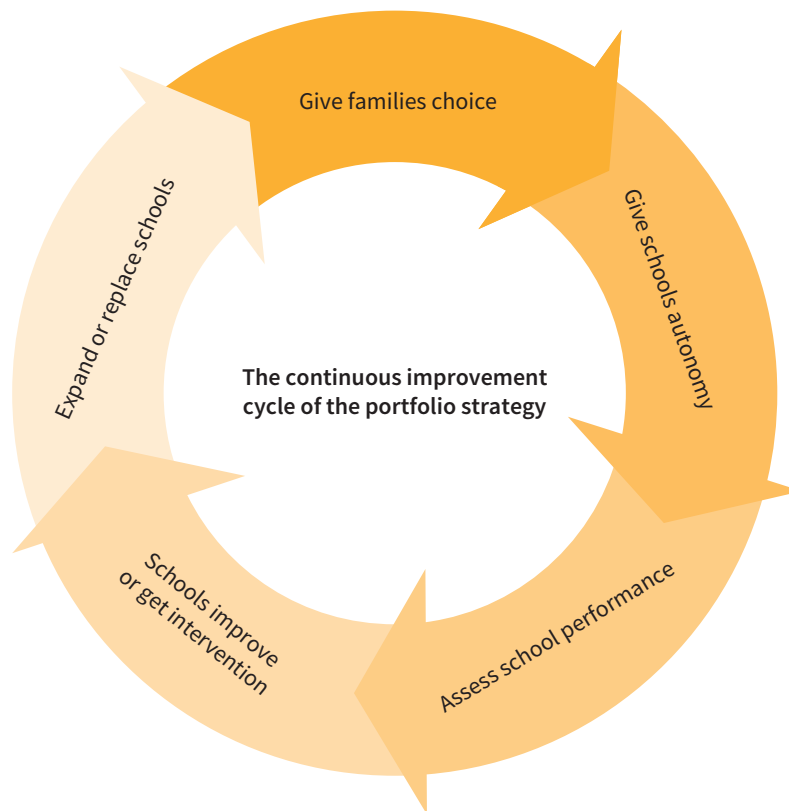
A fast-growing number of school districts have opted to address the long wait lists and politics of unequal access to a limited number of excellent neighborhood, magnet, or exam schools by allowing educators to create as many distinctive schools of choice as families want, each with high levels of autonomy, performance-based accountability for results, and attentive government oversight and supports to ensure equitable access.



This governance model, what my colleague Paul T. Hill named “portfolio management,” has played out in different ways across the country. In some cases, school districts, such as New Orleans, have formed these schools as a system of charter schools. In others, as with Indianapolis, they are a mix of district-run schools, charter schools, and district schools with charter-like autonomy. What each has in common, however, is that the role of the school district is meant to shift to making high-quality school choices available to all families, allowing educators to create schools that families want, creating the policy condition to support equitable access, and intervening when things are not working well.

The portfolio strategy’s origins trace back to Paul T. Hill, Lawrence C. Pierce, and James W. Guthrie’s book, *Reinventing Public Education: How Contracting Can Transform America’s Schools*.³⁰ In essence, the authors wrote that school boards should contract for a “portfolio” of distinctive schools rather than directly operate a set of one-size-fits-all schools. School systems have built on this basic “contracting” concept to determine how school leadership teams can have control over their curriculum and budget while meeting performance goals, thus allowing schools to do what is right for students. The portfolio strategy has evolved over time to consider the specific role of charter schools, as well as to engage a variety of civic groups interested in the welfare of families and children (figure 2). The strategy also

Figure 2. The portfolio strategy: a problem-solving framework



now recognizes the importance of public engagement and system supports to help parents navigate choice.

Prevalence and Differing Approaches

Some form of the portfolio strategy has been pursued in more than twenty major cities, including Camden, New Jersey; Chicago; Cleveland; Denver; Grand Prairie, Texas; Indianapolis; New Orleans; Newark, New Jersey; Oakland; San Antonio; and Spring Branch Independent School District, Texas. Additionally, high-choice cities such as Atlanta; Boston; Detroit; Kansas City, Missouri; Los Angeles; Miami-Dade, Florida; New York City; Philadelphia; Tulsa, Oklahoma; and Washington, DC, have elements of a portfolio strategy, even if district schools tend to be run more centrally.

Schools in a portfolio model may have a particular focus or specialization similar to that of a magnet school. These schools could be focused on the arts, STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math), or dual-language immersion. Schools may be based on classical direct instruction, or they may be organized around personalized learning, with increased flexibility in how staff and student time is used during the school day. As part of the portfolio strategy, the central office or school authorizer allows schools to determine their design or focus, while occasionally submitting requests for proposals to ensure a diverse supply of school options.

Motivations for Portfolio Districts

The rapid expansion of US charter schools has been a significant factor for school districts to consider. On the one hand, charter schools are a clear competitor to district-run schools, in that they allow more students—especially those from low-income households—to opt out of district schools, taking their state (and sometimes local) funding with them. On the other hand, in most states, school districts are allowed to authorize charter schools themselves and charter schools can operate as district schools. In some states, districts are the sole authorizers and charter schools may only operate as district schools with enhanced autonomy.

In urban and suburban ring communities where charter schools have expanded rapidly, districts have struggled to cope with the fiscal impact, especially when they have not reduced costs (e.g., consolidated schools, reduced central office costs) in proportion to enrollment loss. Research has demonstrated that most districts do have the ability to reduce such costs proportionately, but political barriers and state and local policies make it unlikely that they do, which can lead to a downward spiral of enrollment loss, financial stress, and further reductions in instructional supports for students.

This rather toxic result of competitive effects can make it more difficult for school districts that want to expand choices for disadvantaged students by partnering with high-quality charter providers. Many districts choose to fight the charter expansion. Others choose to



compete and integrate these and other competitive forces, such as vouchers and suburban districts, by employing the portfolio strategy.

District-Charter Partnerships

Many portfolio systems actively partner with charter schools or create a subset of schools with charter-like autonomy. Consistent with the concept of “co-opetition” in the business world, dozens of districts have proactively worked to make agreements with local charter school providers and district employees who want more autonomy but prefer to operate as part of a school district.

These partnerships allow districts to serve their own and charter schools’ educational and financial interests. For that reason, contracts or memoranda of understanding often establish that the schools operate with more financial, programmatic, and operational autonomy than district schools but less than under a full charter arrangement. Partnerships often require charter schools to accept neighborhood assignment, not open enrollment, for example, so that districts can ensure that a school with a certain theme or approach can serve an underserved neighborhood. In Washington, DC, the traditional school district and the charter community collaborate to identify how best to respond to parental demand for certain types of schools, using data from the common enrollment system. This planned, coordinated response is more efficient than merely letting education entrepreneurs open whatever school they want, wherever they want.

Miami-Dade: Choice by Design

By their count, nearly 70 percent of Miami-Dade students attend some form of choice school, including magnet programs, career academies, international programs, and district-authorized charter schools. A decade ago, only 10 percent of the district’s students attended a school of choice.³¹ The evolution to a “high-choice” district came in tandem with major shifts in Florida state law, including expansive charter school policies, several types of private school scholarship funds, such as the McKay Scholarship for students with special needs, and education savings accounts that allow families to choose among different educational providers and services. Concurrently, the state has put in place school rating and intervention systems. This combination of choice and accountability hasn’t always translated to greater quality in the state, but under the leadership of Dr. Alberto Carvalho, Miami-Dade has aggressively responded to community demand for greater choice while running a tightly managed system of continuous improvement. School leaders continually review data and adapt quickly to address deficits in teaching and learning. Miami-Dade has consistently shown positive results, ranking as one of the top two urban districts on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) Trial Urban District Assessment (TUDA) (after adjusting for demographics).³²

Notable District-Charter Partnerships

- Atlanta, Georgia: Purpose Built Schools and Kindezi Schools, both high-performing and locally sought-after charter school networks, are building a K–12 feeder pattern of traditional public schools within Atlanta Public Schools but with the flexibility and full autonomy of a charter school.
- Denver, Colorado: Innovation Schools were established in 2008 by state law, granting waivers from certain state and district rules to give them more sovereignty than district-run schools but not as much as charter schools. Since then, Denver Public Schools has pushed to decentralize and increase autonomies. In 2016 the district granted increased autonomies to four schools in the Innovation Zone. These schools were given flexibilities similar to those of charters without having to separate from the district. They were overseen by a nonprofit, exempted from district meetings and initiatives, and allowed to “opt out of centralized district services.”
- Grand Prairie, Texas: Uplift Education, a Dallas-based charter network, runs a program at one elementary school as a “school-within-a-school.” Students can matriculate at Uplift’s middle and high school campuses.
- Indianapolis, Indiana: Indianapolis Public School leaders advocated for passage of the state’s 2014 “Innovation Network Schools” law in partnership with the mayor’s office (the city’s largest charter authorizer), allowing school districts to convert existing schools into autonomous schools, restart existing schools as autonomous schools, or open new autonomous schools with their own 501(c)(3) boards. There are more than twenty Innovation Schools in 2020, and many are incubated and supported by a local education nonprofit, The Mind Trust.
- Tulsa, Oklahoma: Greenwood Leadership Academy opened in fall 2017 and is operated by a local community group, Met Cares Foundation. The school operates under state legislation passed in 2015. Tulsa Public Schools (TPS) also pursues performance contracts with school leadership teams. Tulsa operates other partnership models where TPS employees provide the primary instruction and partner organizations provide key wraparound services.

Outcomes

Just as the implementation of portfolio management has varied, so too have the outcomes. A number of large urban districts, including New York City, New Orleans, and Chicago, that have pursued the portfolio strategy over the course of many years have seen rising graduation rates, college readiness, and test scores. New schools of choice, including district-sponsored charter schools, have tended to drive the higher results, suggesting that the strategy of replicating success, and intervening based on performance, is a successful one. Indianapolis’s results are the latest example.

Results are not, however, guaranteed or based on an easy formula. In some portfolio districts, the results have been more uneven between types of schools or for different student populations, such as students with special needs. A state “achievement zone” in Tennessee pursued the portfolio strategy but with disappointing results.



Overall, districts that increase the supply of new high-quality schools, close or replace low performers, and help disadvantaged families choose and have fair access to schools tend to provide students with more equitable access and an upward trajectory in outcomes. Portfolio is a continuous improvement model and, if implemented with fidelity, works over time.

The comprehensive approach of portfolio and partnership models, then, addresses the inherent inequities of neighborhood schools and the constraints of more limited district choice programs. However, sustaining the strategy over time has proved to be politically fraught and technically challenging.

Power, Politics, and Resistance

For districts, making school choice work for all students is not just a technocratic effort. It inherently threatens people and groups who benefited from the neighborhood school status quo—namely, more affluent parents who could previously buy their way into good schools, and teachers unions whose membership, power, and influence were dependent on having the district, not individual schools, as the bargaining unit. Together these two powerful constituencies, and their allies, represent a formidable blocking force against district choice. The reasons are many.

Creating opportunities for autonomy over staffing and budget (noted earlier as a necessary precondition for creating sustainable, mission-oriented, and distinctive schools), giving schools freedom from union contracts, and partnering with charter schools are seen as threats by the unions—and their allies on the school board.

Unless the overall school-aged population is growing, districts that commit to developing a strong supply of new, high-quality schools will likely have to contemplate consolidating, closing, or turning around low-performing schools. Failing to do so will quickly lead to underutilized buildings and budget pressures. There is little community activists dislike more, however, than being told that one of their local schools will be closing, especially when the closure can be linked to causes—such as autonomous schools—that the teachers unions oppose. New York City district officials encountered fierce opposition to closures and school colocations in town hall meetings so volatile they required police protection.

Policies designed to create equitable enabling conditions for choice, such as per-pupil funding and unified enrollment, also carry political risk. They fundamentally shift the power base away from families who bought their way into certain neighborhoods and therefore schools. Economically and politically advantaged families from the “hills” of Oakland so vociferously opposed a unified enrollment system, as did the teachers union, that the board backed away from it.

In full realization of choice systems, a central office may need to shrink and transform. As resources move to the school level, reformers must deal with the vestiges of the old structures, including centralized staff, policies, and financial arrangements that are no longer relevant in a decentralized district choice system. Even these seemingly mundane actions can stir opposition. Central office middle managers can have a hard time deferring to schools, fear losing their jobs, or simply resist change.

These forces, combined, can represent a powerful source of resistance to meaningful, large-scale district choice—what Terry M. Moe has referred to as the “second face of power.”³³ Successful implementation, then, requires political acumen from district choice proponents and their allies.

Many districts have demonstrated how these blocking forces can be countered through a combination of:

- organized and sustained efforts to elect *choice-friendly board members* (Denver);
- *civic cohesion and vision*, key role of mayor, local business leaders (Indianapolis);
- *authentic, community-driven demand*, critical for sustainability (Camden); and
- *savvy, compelling leadership* (New York City, Miami-Dade).

In reality, however, even the most organized coalition building and strong leadership are unlikely to overcome opposition from special interests without outside political pressure and cover from the state and federal governments.

How States Can Support Comprehensive District Choice

Leaders who want to pursue portfolio strategies have typically relied on state charter laws for at least some of their autonomous schools. State takeovers have often provided a temporary reprieve from political opposition, allowing local actors to focus squarely on innovation and improvement.³⁴ However, states must deal with initial local backlash and must eventually return the schools to local control. Researchers urge states to think about this in advance and plan to restructure board and district governance to ensure that progress can be sustained post-return.³⁵

Some districts, facing intense competition from charter and other schools of choice, have requested specific flexibilities from the state to allow them to more effectively compete or cooperate. For decades, Indianapolis Public Schools lost thousands of mostly middle-class students each year to neighboring suburbs and was struggling financially and on a path to bankruptcy. In recent years, lower-income families who could not afford to move left district schools for charter schools authorized by the mayor. The result? By 2009 the district



enrolled fewer than forty thousand students, down from nearly one hundred thousand students in the 1970s. But enrollment stabilized by 2018, and the district now sees a path to financial sustainability. In response, the district lobbied the state for legislation to give it the power to let district employees operate with the same freedoms as local charter schools. It struck mutually advantageous academic and financial partnerships with local charters to open district schools. And it rethought the role of its central office to support newly empowered school leaders.³⁶

States can consider focusing on one or two types of district choice reform, but both the Indianapolis and Miami-Dade examples described in this paper suggest that a wide array of choice strategies can prove to be much more powerful than just one, creating a variety of incentives and opportunities for districts to provide options, yet also providing alternatives if districts fail to act.³⁷

This paper presents evidence that providing more district choices can exacerbate inequities or ameliorate them, depending on how those choices are implemented and what complementary policies and supports are put in place. Accumulated research points to a set of enabling conditions that work *in tandem* to make district choice work.

First, district schools of choice must have *real and sustained missions and autonomy*. Schools of choice that operate as district schools have historically lost their distinctiveness over time or lost their effectiveness when the founder leaves, taking her vision along with her. It is not clear how much autonomy is “enough,” but some research suggests that schools need enhanced or full control over their teacher and principal selection (so that employees are on the same page about the purpose and approach of the school) and instructional and pedagogical approaches, as well as the ability to allocate resources in a way that aligns with the school mission. Control over delivering on that mission is also an essential foundation for the basis on which the schools will be evaluated by the district. There are few examples of district schools with very limited autonomy sustaining the types of academic gains seen in high-performing charter schools. The goal here is for schools of choice to have agency and clarity of purpose and leadership. This is difficult if not impossible to achieve without autonomy. Without these elements, districts can offer schools with diverse labels but with little real distinction.

But while autonomy is a necessary condition, it is by no means sufficient. Just letting parents choose doesn't guarantee good choices or a level playing field. Districts have shown that they can support positive outcomes in choice systems by creating *information, transportation, and enrollment* systems. Most portfolio systems, such as New Orleans, Denver, Indianapolis, and Washington, DC, have invested in a wide array of strategies to make it easier for low-income families, immigrants, families with children with disabilities, and other historically disadvantaged populations to choose across different types of district-run schools and across district and charter schools.

Coherent district choice cities have one “unified enrollment” system. Families have access to information guides and advisors and submit just one application form with their preferred schools ranked. They then receive an impartial computer-generated assignment. The process reduces the opportunity for schools to screen out students who are difficult to educate, and it gives every family a fair chance of assignment in highly desired schools. To further support family access, New Orleans and Denver provide free transportation across all types of district schools.

To put all choice schools on a level playing field, financial parity is essential. Districts have worked to ensure that resources follow students to their school of choice and are often weighted for individual student need. To ensure that every school has access to high-quality leaders and teachers, districts such as New Orleans, New York City, and Washington, DC, have pursued sophisticated *talent strategies*, recruiting talent nationally and establishing new talent training programs locally.

Support organizations, such as special-education co-ops and school support networks, can provide back-office or instructional supports to schools of choice that operate with high degrees of autonomy. Such supports are sometimes offered on a fee-for-service basis from the district or are run by nonprofit organizations.

Parents in high-choice cities often note that choice without quality is no choice at all. For that reason, district *data and accountability systems* are important to inform parent choice by collecting data and rating schools. They are also necessary to address cases of low performance and to inform continuous improvement.

An essential but often overlooked function of school districts that offer choice is a dedicated effort to build up the supply of high-quality schools. Repeated studies have shown that families struggle to make choices when there are few good options nearby.³⁸ If districts fail to attend to accountability and supply, families will continue to vie for the few best schools—and more advantaged families will always have an edge. No amount of transportation or information can overcome limitations in the supply of high-quality school options.

Communities have managed to increase the number of quality schools by creating school incubators, by replicating successful schools, and by recruiting proven models from elsewhere. However, increasing supply takes time and necessitates school closures or replacements.

It is clear from the literature that limited district choice, in the form of exam, magnet, and open-enrollment schools, has led to highly mixed results. Portfolio and other comprehensive district-level strategies are promising but face strong and organized opposition from narrow interests. Something more is needed.



Looking Forward: The Next Generation of District Choice

While the choice wars rage on, school districts across the country have been providing choice for decades. And they will continue to do so. The root motivation for district school choice is not a privatization agenda or even a theory of competition. It is a recognition that neighborhood school assignment will always lead to economic and racial segregation and inequity as long as housing prices and location choices vary. Forced integration via busing or other means of compulsion have proved to be intolerable solutions to the problem, leading to the very natural conclusion that it is better to induce people of different backgrounds to attend schools together than to force them.

The second primary motivation for district choice is a recognition that until all schools perform at similarly high quality, students ought not to be compelled to attend one of low quality.

The third is that students and their families value the opportunity to choose schools that are distinct or specialized in some way. Students should be allowed to find a good “fit.” And, through exercising choice, engaged and motivated parents improve outcomes for students.

The various efforts to achieve these goals have shown the following:

- It is more difficult than imagined to desegregate schools or to give students equal access to the best schools. The fundamental challenge is how to prevent white and economically advantaged families from fleeing or fighting to end the well-intended policies. Magnet schools, our country’s grand attempt at voluntary integration, made but a tiny dent.
- It is possible to give students from low-income households an escape route to higher-performing schools. But those routes are technically and politically challenging to create system-wide. There are plenty of examples of test scores improving for *all* students in a district but no examples of improvement for *every* student.
- Increasing the number of quality schools, and providing more choices, are necessary preconditions for integration and equity.

It is easy, and important, to respond to family demand to create theme-based schools, but it is much harder to truly customize instruction for students so they don’t have to “fit” the school; the school should instead fit the student.

If the past two decades of school district evolution can be characterized as adaptation to the realities of choice, the next two decades should be about proactive use of choice to fully meet every student’s needs. I would argue that this will be possible only by looking beyond

school-based choice and toward student-based choice. Districts ought to continue to focus on portfolio management, but they are beginning to consider not just portfolios of schools but portfolios of pathways for students within and across schools. In other words, districts and states may begin to move beyond inter- and intradistrict choice to inter- and intraschool choice.

Denver, for example, has invested heavily in new career pathways for students by formulating new partnerships between the school district, higher education, employers, and other government entities to improve student completion of high-quality career pathways. A local nonprofit, RESCHOOL Colorado, is working to help students from low-income households access the same types of enrichment and social-emotional learning opportunities as more advantaged students.

New Orleans is developing a new set of “microschools” that allow students to develop their personal passions through a combination of active, student-led learning and community-based internships and apprenticeships.

Both cities have been leaders in portfolio management, but civic leaders came to the conclusion they had to go further to realize more ambitious equity and learning goals.

States can support this next level of choice across schools—and even across social service boundaries—by ensuring that public funding is not tied to buildings but to students. Course-based funding, out-of-school enrichment funds, and career education savings accounts are essential to allow a more porous set of learning opportunities to prepare students for the future.

As with any expanded choice opportunities, equal attention must be paid to equity of access and outcomes. State accountability systems must consider how to allow students to demonstrate knowledge through credentialing systems and how to ensure that districts are providing effective supports and interventions to help every student succeed. The Center on Reinventing Public Education’s recent publication goes into greater detail about how a portfolio of learning pathways can function well and what state policies are necessary.³⁹

These first-level takeaways for school districts and state education agencies interested in promoting school district choice are fairly straightforward: enabling laws should focus on creating a *broad menu of choices*⁴⁰ in a state, to give districts cover and to provide a continued push for districts to allow their educators to innovate and compete for the privilege of educating both advantaged and disadvantaged students.

To ensure that districts can compete on a level basis, states should consider legislation that gives districts added flexibilities, such as Indiana’s Innovation Network Schools law.



To allow districts to adapt to new financial realities as funding shifts away from central offices to schools, states should consider providing transition aid to school districts experiencing rapid declining enrollment. However, such state funding should come only after the district has demonstrated a viable plan to compete academically.

States should take these steps to expand opportunity—and then they should hold districts to account for whether they use that opportunity well. States cannot stop there, however. As this paper is being written, the COVID-19 crisis is well underway. The early, slow response from districts and even charter schools to shift to a nimbler delivery system is making it obvious that the future will demand a more radically nimble, student-centered American education system. New technologies, course-based funding, and flexible schooling models are needed to enable this more fluid delivery model and may forever shift how schools, school districts, students, and families conceive of education and options.

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