

MI Policy Brief: Parent Choices and School Reform

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Score choice leads to tough choices

School choice is a core component of Arizona's education policies. Over the years, policymakers have approximated a free-market educational system by supporting and strengthening open enrollment, tuition tax vouchers and charter school laws.¹ These choice policies are intended to not only provide parents with more control over their children's education, but to also serve as a catalyst for public school reform.

School reform through choice occurs when parents have options to leave poorly performing schools for schools with academic promise, thereby threatening underperforming schools to shape up or close. Although Arizona school choice policies give parents an array of options, we know little about how parents construct and evaluate the choices available to them.

This policy brief is intended to illuminate the dynamics that influence how and why parents select schools and to suggest the need for a more critical evaluation of parent choices and their implications for public school reform.

What Constitutes a Good School: School Choice Priorities and Value Assumptions

In a free-market economy, consumers are motivated to purchase goods and services for a variety of reasons. Some consumers make choices on price point, others focus exclusively on quality, and some are enticed by emotions and advertising appeals. The same is true for consumers of school choice. Although the literature is clear that most parents rank academics as the No. 1 priority in school selection, other factors yield significant consideration, particularly among parents of minority children.²

For minority and low-income parents, school safety plays a large role in their school choice decisions.³ Parents in low-income and urban neighborhoods may have more reason to be

¹ Maranto, Milliman, Hess, and Gresham. (1999). *School Choice in the Real World: Lessons from Arizona Charter Schools*.

² Haynes, Phillips, and Goldring (2010). *Latino Parents' Choice of Magnet Schools: How School Choice Differs Across Racial and Ethnic Boundaries*.

³ Friedman, Bobrowski, and Geraci. (2006). *Parents' School Satisfaction: Ethnic Similarities and Differences*.

concerned with school safety than parents living in middle-class, suburban areas where crime rates and deviant behavior are typically lower. School offerings such as sports programs, afterschool activities and even the design and age of facilities also factor into school choice decisions.

Convenience and location are notable considerations for parents choosing schools outside of their home district. Parents with hectic work schedules or those with multiple children attending different schools may opt for schools that are geographically close to home or work or a central location convenient for the entire family. Although these parents may have the means to get their children to and from better performing schools, they may sacrifice a level of quality for convenience.

There is another segment of parents that have limited or no ability to choose high-quality schools due to resource limitations. Arizona's Open Enrollment policy, for example, does not mandate schools to provide transportation to students outside of the home school area, even if those students are poor and eligible to receive free or reduced lunch. The policy places the onus on the parents, if their children are accepted into a choice school, to provide transportation. Because of the way schools are funded, it can be assumed that most parents seeking open enrollment do not live within the district to which they are applying. Most highly performing public schools are located in suburbs where property taxes are high and public transportation is often unavailable or inconvenient. Thus, lack of transportation can pose a considerable barrier to participating in open enrollment for many poor and working-class parents.

Cultural Capital, Social Networks and School Choice Outcomes

The concept of cultural capital asserts that the possession of highly valued cultural resources provides specific advantages that privilege certain people over others.⁴ This concept has been advanced by several scholars in recent years and has been particularly helpful in exploring the relationship between social class, school choice and educational success in American schools.

It is important to note that cultural capital is not about quantity; everyone possesses the same amount of cultural capital. Rather, it is the investment and exchange value of cultural capital that yields different social and educational profits. The differences in exchange value become problematic for working-class families when school choice policies, which require agency and specialized knowledge, are favored over systemic reform to address educational disparities.

Social networks are typically comprised of family members, friends, neighbors, co-workers, and people from church. They provide parents with a wealth of information for choosing schools.⁵ Similar to cultural capital, information accessed through social networks often results in unequal choice outcomes that typically place poor and working-class children in contact with

⁴ Bourdieu, 1977

⁵ Bell, C. (2009). *All Choices Created Equal? The Role of Choice Sets in the Selection of Schools*.

underperforming, non-selective schools and middle-class children in contact with higher-quality schools.⁶

Arizona's school-choice policies place the onus on families to seek information about available programs. Yet, there is no centralized data repository for information regarding school choice policies, program options, school quality, and application and enrollment procedures. Families must navigate multiple websites or call myriad agencies in order to access information about school choice options.

Additionally, families must first be made aware of school choice policies in order to inquire about them. It is unlikely that working-class families will be made aware of choice policies by the very schools they are dissatisfied with. Poor performing schools are not incentivized to market-choice policies because they lose funding for each student who exits their school. Further, the provision of the Open Enrollment law that gives enrollment preference to students who have a parent working in the district to which they are applying is not likely to pertain to working-class families. Instead, this provision advantages middle- and upper-class families with the educational capital to obtain such a job in a high-quality school.

Marketing Strategies and School Choice Decisions

In competitive school-choice environments, school providers must employ savvy marketing strategies and increase incentives to attract and retain students. It is not uncommon for high schools to buy advertising spots on popular radio stations to attract students. Billboards often announce the opening of new charter schools, and flyers are routinely posted at churches and community centers. However, studies have found that marketing materials tend to center on emotional themes, logos and incentives to attract students rather than on hard evidence to suggest superior quality and high-academic performance.

In many instances, the information available to parents through promotional materials and marketing campaigns challenges the notion that parents make rational choice decisions based on school quality and academic performance.⁷

Parent Choices and Implications for School Reform

There are many implications for assuming that parent choices will lead to public-school reform and better educational outcomes for underserved students. Here are three to consider:

- A “good school” is determined by a host of factors that differ based on parent perspectives, priorities and resources. It is a false assumption to think that parents assess and choose schools based on academic achievement alone. Without an understanding of the multiple factors that influence choice decisions, progress towards public school reform may be derailed.

⁶ Bell, C. (2009)

⁷ Lubienski, C. (2007) Marketing Schools: Consumer Goods and Competitive Incentives for Consumer Information

- Parents must have at least some high-quality schools to select from if the goals of reform through school choice are to materialize. Understanding how cultural capital, social networks and financial resources intersect with school choice decisions is a necessary step to accurately interpret how and why parents choose schools. Continued steps towards mitigating the effects of cultural capital and asymmetrical information gained through social networks will go a long way towards increasing the equality of parent choices.
- Critical consumption of marketing ploys is needed in competitive choice environments. Perhaps guidelines for the marketing of schools could be created so that while schools are able to promote their differentiators and incentives, as well as report hard data on key indicators of academic achievement. Such a policy would better aid parents in making informed school choice decisions that have better odds of resulting in higher academic attainment for their children.

Recommendations

- Create a centralized data repository for information regarding school choice policies, program options, school quality, and application and enrollment procedures. The information could be hosted by the Arizona Department of Education – a seemingly natural choice – but would need to have its own interactive, easily navigable webpage. An informative “one-stop-shop” for school-choice consumers is imperative to creating a fair educational marketplace.
- A concerted effort must be waged to make school-choice policies, options and benefits more visible, available and accessible to those who need it most. Otherwise, it is unreasonable to put the onus of school reform on parents – especially working-class and poor parents whose cultural capital, financial resources and knowledge of education policies are rarely leveraged to secure better educational outcomes for their children.
- An in-depth study to analyze parental choice sets in Arizona and how those choice sets impact educational achievement is needed to determine if our robust choice policies are indeed on par with our goals of reforming public education.

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