School choice is a central theme in contemporary strategies for education reform. Across the United States and around the world, governments are turning toward markets in their efforts to improve the performance of schools and students. By giving parents more choices about the schools their children attend, and opening up the education system to competition from new actors including the private sector, policymakers hope to make schools more efficient and more effective.

The move toward market-based approaches to education has already brought about significant changes. School choice policies have given educators and parents new options, and they are responding. In Michigan alone, more than 50,000 students are now enrolled in charter schools. Many more are enrolled in schools outside their home school districts. Across the United States, thirty-six states have adopted charter school legislation. Nearly 2,000 charter schools are now in operation, with more than one million children enrolled.

Michigan State University (MSU) convened an International Conference on School Choice and Educational Change in East Lansing on March 15-17, 2000. The main goal of the conference was to move the debate on school choice policy beyond the simplistic question of whether choice is “good” or “bad.” School choice is here to stay. The question now is how to design policies that give parents more choices about the schools their children attend, while simultaneously protecting children against the harm that poorly designed policies can do. Participants in the conference were encouraged to think about how to harness the power of choice to improve the performance of the education system.

The conference was organized around five issues that are critical in evaluating school choice policies – student outcomes, innovation, governance, equity and access, and accountability. Two speakers were invited to address each issue. One speaker was broadly supportive of school choice policies, the other more critical.

- On the theme of **student outcomes**, advocates of school choice argue that increasing choice and competition in the education system will lead to...
improved outcomes for students, including higher test scores. Critics question the evidence on which these claims are based, and argue that large gains in student outcomes can be achieved in traditional public schools. Addressing the theme of student outcomes were Henry Levin and Paul Peterson. **Henry Levin** is a Professor at Columbia University, and Director of the National Center for the Study of Privatization in Education. **Paul Peterson** is a Professor at Harvard University, and Director of the Program on Educational Policy and Governance.

- On the theme of **innovation**, proponents of school choice claim that the introduction of market-based policies will spur innovation and improvement in the education system. Critics of choice policies question whether choice will lead to the development of new educational practices, and affirm the capacity of traditional public schools to foster educational innovation and improvement. The speakers on this theme were Deborah McGriff and Bella Rosenberg. **Deborah McGriff** is Vice President of Edison Schools. **Bella Rosenberg** is Vice President of the American Federation of Teachers.

- On the theme of **governance**, critics of school choice assert that the introduction of market-based policies undermines the democratic control of schooling. Supporters respond that choice policies empower parents and teachers, and reduce political interference in the education system. The speakers on the theme of governance were Anne Bryant and Terry Moe. **Anne Bryant** is Executive Director of the National Association of School Boards. **Terry Moe** is a Professor at Stanford University, and a Senior Fellow at the Hoover Institution.

- On the theme of **equity and access**, school choice advocates argue that choice opens up new opportunities for poor families who find themselves trapped in failing schools. Critics argue that choice policies will do little to benefit the poorest children, and may even make them worse off. Addressing the theme of equity and access were Howard Fuller and Amy Stuart Wells. **Howard Fuller** is a Professor at Marquette University, and the Director of the Institute for the Transformation of Learning. **Amy Stuart Wells** is an Associate Professor at the University of California at Los Angeles.

- On the theme of **accountability**, those who favor school choice policies argue that giving parents choices about the schools their children attend makes schools more accountable to the parents and students who rely on their services. Opponents ask whether the market-based education system foreseen by choice advocates will hold schools accountable for achieving the public purposes of schooling. The speakers who addressed the theme of accountability were Jeff Flake and Bruce Fuller. **Jeff Flake** is the former Executive Director of the Goldwater Institute in Phoenix, Arizona, and a candidate for Congress in Arizona’s First District. **Bruce Fuller** is Associate Professor at the University of California at Berkeley, and Associate Director of Policy Analysis for California Education (PACE).

Participants in the conference explored
the arguments for and against school choice policies, and considered the available evidence on how choice is affecting students and schools. Both advocates and critics recognize the need for additional evidence before firm judgments can be reached. We nevertheless have enough experience with these policies to identify some critical questions, and to draw some preliminary conclusions.

Evidence in the School Choice Debate

School choice policies are new, and it is still too early to tell what their lasting consequences will be. The first charter school opened in 1991, and most have been in operation for less than five years. The relatively few voucher programs that have been implemented are of even more recent vintage. All of these programs have been studied intensively, but assessment of their effects remains provisional at best. For now, the available evidence suggests that choice has neither had the dramatic positive effects that its advocates promise nor the devastating negative effects that its critics fear.

Student Achievement

One of the most closely watched questions in the policy debate over school choice is whether allowing parents to choose the schools their children attend will bring about improvements in student achievement. Standardized test scores are the focus of public and media attention. As Paul Peterson noted, “No one wants to talk to you if you don’t have test scores.”

Despite calls from all sides for more evidence on the effects of choice on student achievement, however, the role of student test scores in the school choice debate is likely to be small, for two main reasons. First, virtually all of the evidence that is available thus far suggests that the effects of choice on achievement are relatively modest. Most (but not all) effects appear to be positive, but by themselves they are simply too small to justify calls for radical changes in the institutions of public education. In addition, as Henry Levin pointed out, similar or larger achievement gains appear to be available from reforms that can be made within the traditional public school system, including changes in class size or the adoption of new strategies for curriculum and instruction. If improvement in student test scores is the goal of educational policy it is uncertain why policy-makers should prefer school choice over other, more familiar strategies.

Second, in Michigan and other states the introduction of school choice policies has coincided with the introduction of a variety of other educational reforms. Among many other changes, most state governments have moved toward a much more rigorous and consequential reliance on curriculum standards and standardized testing. Because these reforms have been implemented simultaneously, it will never be possible to identify the unique effects of choice on student achievement. If student test scores rise in Michigan over the next few years, for example, this effect may be attributable to choice, or to enhanced standards, or to something else. The same is true if achievement falls. Test scores cannot tell us whether choice “works” or not.

Innovation and School Improvement

One of the strongest arguments for school choice policies is that freeing schools and teachers from the standardizing pressures of state regulation and bureaucratic administration will lead to innovation and improvement in educational practice. Jeff Flake argued that schools in the current public school system must seek out the “lowest common denominator” among parental preferences in order to keep all parents reasonably satisfied. In a market-driven system, in contrast, schools would be free to pursue unique missions, and parents could seek out schools that closely matched their own values.
So far, however, there is little evidence that school choice policies encourage schools to innovate, or to adopt distinctive missions. Most “choice” schools feature curricula and instructional practices very much like those used in traditional public schools. Innovation is as likely, and as widespread, in traditional public schools as it is in charter schools, as Bella Rosenberg pointed out. Insofar as schools have adopted distinctive missions, these generally emphasize ethnic or cultural traditions rather than novel instructional strategies.

Deborah McGriff notes that schools that are safe, clean, and successful in teaching children to read look like an important innovation in some public school districts. School choice policies and the competitive pressures that they bring to bear may support the emergence of successful schools, inside and outside the traditional public school system, even if these do not look much different from “traditional” schools.

If the development of new and more effective instructional strategies is among the goals of educational policy, however, then policymakers will have to provide incentives that encourage experimentation and differentiation in schools. On the basis of the evidence that is now available, it seems unlikely that they can rely on the market to do it for them.

The Rules Matter

The outcomes of school choice policies depend decisively on the rules that govern the choices of parents and educators. Different rules create different incentives, and different incentives produce different outcomes. An earlier Michigan State University report on school choice policies in Michigan discussed the many ways in which the rules matter.¹ School choice policies may make the distribution of educational opportunities more equal, or less equal, depending on the rules that are put in place to govern the choices of educators and parents. Some rules may encourage innovation and experimentation, while others may discourage them. Good rules can help to make the education system function more efficiently and effectively. Poorly designed rules can do serious damage to schools and students.

The challenge for policy-makers is to design a framework for school choice policy that harnesses the power of markets to improve educational opportunities while protecting against the harm that simply “unleashing” markets can do. This will require careful attention to the alignment between rules, incentives, and the goals of educational policy.

Policy and Politics

In the end, the debate about school choice policies is a political debate. The arguments that motivate the debate are rooted in competing beliefs about schooling in a democratic society. When Anne Bryant affirms the importance of locally elected school boards in educational governance, for example, she calls upon a political tradition that identifies school board members as the legitimate arbiters of community preferences. Terry Moe calls upon a competing political tradition when he argues for more direct control of schools by those who work in them, or send their children to them. Evidence about rising or falling test scores is unlikely to alter these beliefs. Decisions about school choice policies are therefore likely to turn on such other questions as these:

- Should school choice policies target poor families, or expand choices for all families?
- What kinds of schools should be eligible for public funding?

Finding answers to these questions will require continued public dialogue, to clarify
the issues at stake and to identify potential areas of agreement and common interest.

School Choice for Whom?

Americans have always had choices about the schools their children attend. The choices that households make about where to live are also choices about the schools to which they will send their children. Those who are dissatisfied with public education are free to send their children to private or religious schools, or to educate them at home.

Not all parents have the same choices, though. The best choices are reserved for those with the money to buy a house in a desirable school district, or to pay tuition in a private school. Poor families are unable to take advantage of these alternatives. Many must send their children to poor schools, because no other choices are open to them.

As Howard Fuller stated, “The issue is not choice in America. The issue is who has it.” The most powerful argument in favor of school choice policies is that they will provide new options for poor parents trapped in failing schools. Voucher experiments in Milwaukee, New York, and other cities are explicitly designed to make it possible for poor families to choose better schools for their children. Charter schools in Michigan and some other states are mostly located in school districts where family incomes and average student achievement scores are relatively low.

Not all school choice policies open up new options for poor families, however, and choice policies do not benefit all poor families. In contrast to Michigan, charter schools in California are mainly located in suburban and small town school districts, as Amy Wells explained, and they enroll a larger percentage of white children than traditional public schools. Policies introducing charter schools and tuition tax credits in Arizona do not target poor children at all. One key question that will have to be answered about school choice policies is whether they offer access to better schools for families who have previously been denied such options.

How Many Choices?

Many choices are available in the American education system, but only some of these choices are publicly funded. At present, families who want to send their children to religious schools or to educate their children at home must pay for these choices themselves. Families who wish to send their children to segregated schools, or to schools taught in a language other than English, may find that the choices they prefer are simply not available.

The policy debate on school choice raises fundamental questions about the variety of educational options that should be available in a democratic society. Should decisions about the schooling of children be left up to parents, or does the state have an appropriate role? Should parents be free to choose religious schools or Spanish-language schools for their children? Should the state pay to support these choices?

Reasonable people will disagree about the answers to these questions. Some will favor greater discretion for parents, while others will seek to advance a common interest and a common tradition through the public school system. For example, Bruce Fuller expressed the fear that “the advocates of school choice are being a little reckless in slowly eroding the power of the state.” Terry Moe argued strongly that parents should have more authority over the schooling of their children.

The practical question for policy-makers is where the boundary between parental discretion and the public interest should be drawn. Current moves toward the introduction of market-based mechanisms in the education system mark a significant shift. These policy changes seek to make schools more responsive to parents and their concerns. They do not eliminate the need for state regulation and assessment, however.
As Jeff Flake pointed out, “We’re spending the money, and we need to be sure that these kids are learning.”

**Coming to Public Judgment**

The fundamental question in the policy debate over school choice is how to harness the power of choice to serve the key goals of Michigan’s public school system. This will require ongoing public discussion of the many issues at stake, and close attention to the details of policy design. Citizens and policymakers must have opportunities to weigh the arguments of advocates and critics as they move toward considered judgments on the directions in which the educational system should move. Michigan State University’s conference on “School Choice and Educational Change” provided an occasion to explore some of the crucial issues that will have to be addressed in this public discussion. We hope that the conference report will support continued exploration of these questions as the citizens of Michigan move forward with their efforts to improve the performance of the state’s education system.


Both publications are available for purchase from EPC or can be downloaded at [www.epc.msu.edu](http://www.epc.msu.edu)

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