

Covert Self-Seeking

Because the state can't stop sophisticated parents from working the system to get the best from it....
By Paul T. Hill with Kacey Guin

Critics of school choice argue that it will allow alert and aggressive parents to get the best of everything for their children, leaving poor and minority children concentrated in the worst schools. But choice is not the only mechanism whereby this occurs.

Alert and aggressive parents have always worked the system to get the best for their children. Bureaucratic modes of decision-making do not eliminate self-seeking — they only make it covert. Choice programs should be compared against the real performance of the public education system, not its idealized aspirations.

The purpose of this article is to establish an appropriate baseline against which choice programs can be assessed. How far does the current system of bureaucratic allocation diverge from its aspirations to equal opportunity for all? Under the current system, how much are students sorted by social class, and how unevenly allocated are the best and worst educational experiences?

Economic Segregation

This harmful effect happens because of a process that public school systems do not control: housing economics. Low-income families cluster in neighbourhoods with low-cost housing, while wealthier families avoid living in these neighbourhoods. Public school systems exacerbate this problem by maintaining attendance boundaries that divide neighbouring areas.

Dollar and Human Resource Inequities

Laypersons might expect funding to be allocated to public schools on a per-pupil basis, but that is not the case. Districts buy things like teachers, books, equipment, and maintenance, and those things are allocated to schools through political and bureaucratic processes. As a result, some schools may receive much higher funding allocations and much more valuable resources than others.

The most valuable resource allocated in this way is the teaching staff. In virtually all school districts, the most senior and highest-paid teachers get first choice; they tend to choose schools in the 'nicer' neighbourhoods. The result is that the teachers who work in schools with the most advantaged students are, on average, much more highly-paid than teachers who work in the poorer part of town.

Funds for the education of children with disabilities are allocated on the basis of diagnoses of children's needs, and in this parent initiative is a major factor since more sophisticated parents are more likely to demand and get expensive individualized placements for their children.

In addition, districts control resources such as computers and science lab equipment maintenance funds, and these tend to be allocated on a 'squeaky wheel' basis. As well, schools in wealthy neighbourhoods are more successful at fundraising.

Allocation of Opportunity-Limiting Programs

The fact that students come to school with different amounts of prior knowledge and different abilities presents problems for teachers, schools, and districts. Some differentiation of instruction is inevitable, even desirable, but there are ways in which it can harm disadvantaged students.

Removing students from regular classrooms to get special tutoring can mean that they never master the material that others are learning while they are away. Reducing contact with advanced students can eliminate a potential learning opportunity.

While assignment to special education and lower-track placements is not always inappropriate, conventional public education uses disability labels liberally, especially for disadvantaged students. The result is often a kind of segregation more complete and more consequential than segregation based openly on social class.

Misallocation of Opportunity-Expanding Programs

Some schools get programs that others do not. Gifted programs and special programs such as French immersion are allocated to middle- or upper-class neighbourhoods. As well, not every high school has excellent laboratories, an array of enriched courses, or enough qualified teachers of mathematics or science.

In many areas, these opportunities are allocated in part by traditional patterns in course enrollment — an approach that may sound reasonable but can create a watering-down of instructional opportunities in low-income schools. These opportunities are also allocated in response to family and neighbourhood pressure, which further favours schools serving middle-class students.

Until a serious choice experiment is tried — one that is large and long-lasting enough to gauge supply-side effects as well as families' decisions — we cannot be certain whether choice would provide worse outcomes than the current system.

For the time being, however, it appears that those who oppose choice and defend the current public system have failed to recognize that they, not the proponents of choice, must bear the burden of proof.

Opponents condemn choice because it creates opportunities for alert and aggressive parents to gain the best of everything for their children. They argue that choice is risky and that the existing public education system is a safer and more just alternative.

However, the existing public system, which restricts choice by assigning children to schools, is not currently accomplishing economic integration or giving disadvantaged children equitable access to good schools.

(Adapted with permission from "Baselines for Assessment of Choice Programs" — see review on page 3)

Overt Self-Seeking

...it might as well introduce school choice with the resulting improvement of options for all students.

By Caroline M. Hoxby

Opponents of school choice often take the view that schools can be “only so good,” so that what some students gain, other students must lose. The usual argument runs as follows: If the better students leave the regular public schools to attend choice schools, the students who remain in regular schools will be worse off.

Experts on school choice, particularly those with a background in economics, find the view that schools can be only so good to be strange. As a rule, *the* key way in which organizations respond to competition is by becoming more efficient. This tendency is so strong that we often say that an organization has “become more competitive” when what we really mean is that it has become more efficient or productive in response to competition.

Thus, it is not only possible, but likely, that regular public schools will respond to competition from choice schools by raising their pupils’ achievement or another pupil outcome valued by parents.

To find out what happens to the achievement of public school students when choice is introduced, I decided to examine how their achievement was affected by three important choice reforms: vouchers in Milwaukee, charter schools in Michigan, and charter schools in Arizona.

I chose these three reforms because they are the only ones in which the choice schools can, legally, garner a large enough share of enrollment to provide a non-negligible amount of competition for the regular public schools. I attempted to see whether public schools respond competitively when they face the possible loss of only 6% of their enrollment.

Looking at early evidence, as I have, is the worst case for school choice. When a school has lost only a bit of its enrollment for only a few years, it might not respond competitively or respond in any way.

Grade 4 Test Scores

	96-97	99-00	Change
Math National Percentile Rank			
More comp	34.5	53.3	17.8
Less comp	33.7	48.2	14.5
No comp	50.0	60.6	10.6
Science NPR			
More comp	31.9	52.8	20.9
Less comp	32.2	49.7	17.4
No comp	56.0	62.9	6.9
Social Studies NPR			
More comp	41.6	54.2	12.6
Less comp	43.4	50.7	7.3
No comp	61.0	65.6	4.6
Language NPR			
More comp	41.8	49.4	7.6
Less comp	41.8	46.2	4.4
No comp	53.4	53.2	-0.2
Reading NPR¹			
More comp	44.2	46.5	2.3
Less comp	45.1	43.6	-0.5
No comp	59.0	55.0	-4.0

Milwaukee

I separated the Milwaukee schools into two groups: schools that ‘faced more competition’ because a large percentage of their students were eligible for vouchers; and schools that ‘faced less competition’ with fewer eligible students.

Then I chose a third group of Wisconsin schools that most closely matched Milwaukee’s schools in urbanness, share of black and Hispanic students, and poverty rates. Because the control schools are slightly less disadvantaged than the Milwaukee schools, they had better achievement.

I compared the students’ scores on Wisconsin’s grade 4 statewide examinations on five tests: math, science, social studies, language, and reading. The table shows the results of comparing the three groups before and after the voucher program created significant competition in 1998.

Michigan

¹The decline in reading scores at most schools may be due to the state-wide introduction of whole language during the period.

I evaluated the effect of charter schools on Michigan public school students in much the same way as I evaluated the effect of the Milwaukee voucher program. Again, I found significantly greater improvement in student achievement in areas that faced competition, although the effect was not as great as in Milwaukee.

Arizona

I found a similar pattern in the Arizona public schools that faced competition from charter schools. The Arizona gains are similar to or just a bit larger than the gains made by Michigan public school students.

It appears that public schools are induced to raise achievement when they are faced with competition. The choice reforms that are currently in place do not appear to generate both winners and losers — only winners.

(Adapted with permission from “How School Choice Affects the Achievement of Public School Students” — see review on page 3 and excerpt below)

“In the parcel post industry, the United States Postal Service (USPS) had a monopoly. When lawmakers proposed to allow private firms to compete with the USPS, some commentators issued dire warnings. The private firms, they argued, would skim the most profitable parcel post customers, and the common person’s parcel service would deteriorate profoundly. They argued that USPS could not improve, and its parcel service would be slower, have fewer options, etc. if private firms were allowed to take some of its best customers.

“Exactly the opposite reaction occurred. USPS is now far more efficient than it was when it had a monopoly, and it has introduced new services that make its customers better off. Those who use the private firms’ services are also better off.”