WHO CHOOSES SCHOOLS, AND WHY?

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Who Chooses Schools, And Why?
The characteristics and motivations of families who actively choose schools

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Executive Summary

This policy brief examines empirical research on the demographic characteristics of students and families who actively engage in school choice as well as the research on the motivations, preferences and behavior of families who actively choose schools. Although there have been many surveys asking parents about their preferences for schools or about what they would choose if they had a choice, such studies are not the focus of this brief. Rather, the research reviewed here is only that which focuses on those who have actively chosen a school. The choice options examined here include home schooling, private schools, vouchers, and public school choice programs such as controlled choice districts, charter schools, and magnet schools.

Among the formal choice programs, including vouchers, charters, magnets, and controlled choice, the characteristics of those who exercise choice to some extent depend on the population targeted and the design of the choice program. For example, private school choosers are predominantly White and non-poor, which reflects that the cost of this option often makes private school inaccessible for many Americans. Those who use vouchers to attend private schools, on the other hand, tend to be poor and minority, which reflects that the design of these programs frequently target low-income and minority populations in urban areas. Charter schools are more widely available. However, many are concentrated in urban areas, and a majority of charter choosers nationwide are minorities. Yet within choice options, the data also indicate that trends in enrollment by race and income vary widely among states and even districts.

In contrast, there is much less variation in why parents and students

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exercise choice. The primary stated motivation in all types of choice is perceived academic quality; the primary influence in terms of documented behavior is peer composition in terms of race and class. The specific reasons for, and approaches to, choosing depend on each unique family, but the evidence does show that White parents tend to avoid schools with high minority concentrations, and minority parents tend to avoid schools with high percentages of low-income students. Accordingly, school choice programs have the possibility of increasing racial and ethnic segregation, but policy design may be able to mitigate these effects.

Recommendations

Based on the review of the research, we make six recommendations:

- Policymakers need to carefully consider the intended target population to ensure that choice options adequately address needs and preferences.
- Policymakers need to design any choice program so as not to perpetuate or exacerbate segregation by race, ethnicity or income. Evidence suggests that choice and particular design elements operate differently in different contexts. Therefore, thoughtful design requires looking beyond assumptions and theory to the evidence about how choice and particular design elements operate in practice.
- Public choice policies should address the constraints that target populations may have in potentially exercising their choices. For example, choice plans that are meant to encourage the exercise of choice among low-income families may not provide transportation, which is a significant barrier to participation.
- Both publicly and privately funded choice programs should work to ensure the wide dissemination of appropriate and useful information on programs, as informal information from social networks appears to be a powerful influence on parents' preferences and their ability to act on them.
- Since the Supreme Court has weighed in against the constitutionality of race-based student assignment policies, states and school districts need to find creative ways of ensuring that choice policies expand opportunities for those with the least access to choice and to quality schools.
- Further research in this area should examine the link between preferences and behaviors, perhaps exploring what factors help or hinder parents in acting on their preferences. This research especially should take into account contextual factors such as geographic location, constraints, and supply, to more fully understand the operation of choice. Policy may also benefit from research into the preferences of non-active choosers.

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Introduction

School choice has long existed in the U.S., primarily through a family's ability to choose where to live or whether to attend a private school. In recent decades, federal, state, and local governments have become involved in organizing forms of school choice, so that available choices have grown significantly in variety and scope. These new or expanded choices include charter schools, vouchers, intra- and inter-district choice, and magnet programs. These programs are frequently designed for a particular district or city, such as vouchers in Cleveland and Milwaukee, or controlled choice in Cambridge, Mass., and Charlotte-Mecklenburg, N.C., and intra-district and inter-district choices in St. Louis. Many of these programs, such as magnets and vouchers, have roots in earlier racial desegregation efforts.

School choice is largely a state and local phenomenon. The only broad federally mandated policy on school choice can be found in the *No Child Left Behind Act*, which requires districts to allow parents or guardians of children in schools that repeatedly fail to meet Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) targets to choose a non-failing public school in the same district.[1] There is also some limited federal financial support for magnet and charter schools, as well as vouchers in the District of Columbia.

Despite the growing range of options, in 2003 only an estimated 15% of children attended schools of choice rather than their assigned school.[2] Yet the same source estimates that the parents of about one-quarter of all students in grades 1 through 12 moved to their current neighborhood for its schools, which suggests greater exercise of choice than the 15% for students attending non-assigned schools. Between private schools, charter schools, magnet schools, and home schooling, as well as the choice to remain in one's assigned or local school when other options

are available, millions of American school children attend schools of choice.

In this brief, we first examine data on the characteristics of choosers and their families, essentially asking who makes different kinds of choices. We then review the research on the motivations of choosers. Understanding these motivations is important for crafting policy. If choice were to be expanded dramatically, it would be useful to understand whether school choice functions according to theory. For example, the theory behind many choice programs is that choice engenders competition and competition leads to improvement. If this underlying theory of action doesn't work as expected, not only will choice programs not likely have desired outcomes, there might be negative consequences in terms of educational equity and racial or economic segregation.[3] Or, if choice played out in such a way that a lack of information led families to consistently choose lower performing schools, the intended goal of choice would not be met: schooling would not improve. Knowing the characteristics of choosers and their response to various design features is essential for policymakers to be able to design programs to ensure equity and access.

The Logic Behind School Choice

The historical roots of public policies addressing choice lie in early efforts to desegregate schools. For example, the court-ordered desegregation in St. Louis created two types of school choice there: inter-district choice and intra-district choice. African American students who were in segregated, poor quality schools could transfer to White suburban schools in other districts.[4] Also, students could choose one of the 27 newly created magnet schools within the district. In addition, the original purpose of magnet schools in many northern cities was to voluntarily desegregate schools.[5] Less praiseworthy were attempts in some southern states to defy racial desegregation orders through the provision of private-school vouchers to White students.

Although many modern day choice policies are characterized by language stressing choice and competition, many also continue to reflect explicit or implicit racial concerns. For example, the Cleveland voucher program provides funds to allow the district's mostly poor and African American students to attend private schools in the city. Backers of such programs assume that competition and the threat of losing students will spur the public schools to take new steps to provide low-income, African American children equal educational opportunities.[6]

Those who support school choice do so for diverse reasons, but there is widespread agreement among them that the ultimate goal is improved student learning or outcomes. Applying an economic rationale to schooling, choice policies adopt principles of the marketplace: if parents can choose among schools, schools will compete for students, and

the competition will spur all schools to improve student learning in order to attract more parents and children. Of course, this logic depends on a number of assumptions that may or may not be correct, including that parents will choose the best school (frequently defined as academically superior), that there is abundant information on which to base a decision, and that competition can and will work as intended.

Education is a complex good or service, and thus what is "best" will have different meanings to different people.[7] Parents' priorities may not be to place their child in the highest achieving school, and such non-academic priorities do not necessarily reflect irrational behavior. Parents may, for example, be looking for a good fit or a nurturing environment, a school with after-school care or a school similar to the one they attended. In addition, competing goals within public choice policies — the goal of equity versus the goal of competition, for example — may interfere with the workings of the idealized economic model, perhaps creating perverse incentives or unforeseen and unintended consequences, such as exacerbating racial and economic segregation of students.

In the real rather than the theoretical world, Hamilton and Guin note, several conditions are required for parental choice[8] to work well.[9] These authors contend that parents need to:

- Have preferences about education and schooling and gather information about the schools available to their children.
- Make trade-offs between the attributes of these schools.
- Choose the school that best fits their preferences (p. 41).

What parents prefer regarding the education of their children is likely more than good test scores, though that is surely part of a set of preferences. Because choices about education do not happen in a vacuum, families make tradeoffs between preferences and constraints. The supply of available schools also likely influences parental preferences and their ability to act on them. For example, many of the schools that parents might prefer can select the students they want and turn away others. This selection on the part of the school interacts with parents' actions and preferences and likely contributes to the patterns evident in choice outcomes.

Given the current policy environment, options and constraints, who chooses schools and who chooses what kinds of schools? The focus of the next section is on the characteristics of choosers. Following the section on characteristics, we review the research on the motivations for school choice, focusing on parents' use of information about schools, self-reported reasons for choice, and then motivations as revealed through behavior. We conclude the paper with a brief review of the findings and some recommendations for policy.

Review of Research: Characteristics of Choosers

To describe the profile of those who actively engage in choosing schools, we have opted to examine evidence about which groups choose each option (private schools, vouchers, charters, home schooling, and others) most frequently. Specifically, we have identified patterns in (1) race/ethnicity (2) income or social class and (3) other factors, such as mother's education level. It is important to remember, however, that choice is constrained for most people. Such constraints may include money (for private school tuition or other fees), time (travel, distance), limited space availability, and the selective admissions process at many schools. Therefore, the picture sketched below of active choosers does not necessarily represent what the outcome might be if choices were more inclusive or more widely accessible.

Characteristics of Private School Students

Estimates from two National Center for Education Statistics surveys in 2003-2004 suggest that about 10% of American school children in grades 1-12 attend private schools,[10] with about 82% of all private school students attending religious-affiliated schools.[11] The percentage of students in private schools has remained relatively stable since 1993.

About 5.1 million students attend private schools, with 2.3 million of these attending Catholic schools and about 921,000 in non-religious schools.[12] Behind these figures, there are some differences in private school enrollment by race, poverty status, and other demographic characteristics.

In terms of the demographic trends in private school enrollment, White, non-Hispanic students were a clear majority of private school students — about 76% of all private school students in 2003-04, compared to 9.5% Black, non-Hispanic, and 8.8% Hispanic.[13] Looking at the population as a whole, enrollment rates in religiously affiliated private schools (the largest sector of the private school market) differed dramatically by demographic and family characteristics: parents' educational attainment (14% of all parents with a bachelor's or graduate degree enrolled their children in such schools; only 4% of those having only a high school diploma); family structure (10% of two-parent families; 5% of one-parent families); and poverty status (3% of those below poverty; 12% of those at or above 200% of poverty).

A smaller-scale study of choice in several cities found similarities to the national research above.[14] Comparisons of public and private school students and their families have found, among other differences, that private school parents were more likely to be married, to have attended private schools themselves, and to be religious. In addition, private school parents rated different factors as more important in choosing a school,

placing particular importance on values and on school culture, including environment and safety.

In general, then, most students in private schools are in church-related private institutions. They are more likely to be White, non-Hispanic, and to come from homes in which there are two parents, where they would not be first-generation college students, and where the family income is well above poverty level. They are less likely to be students of color, to live in poverty, to have single-parent families, and to have a parent or parents with only a high school diploma.

Characteristics of Voucher Participants

Vouchers as a form of school choice typically consist of funds provided to parents or guardians to send a child to private school (or, in some cases, funds are provided directly to the school). There are publicly funded voucher or voucher-like programs as well as privately funded voucher programs. The design of voucher programs varies significantly. Some pay for all tuition fees, some pay partial tuition fees, some allow funds for religious schools, and some do not.

Similarly, it is difficult to neatly summarize the characteristics of voucher program participants. Data on the 13 established voucher or voucher-like programs operated by states plus the numerous privately funded voucher programs are not collected in one place. In addition, each program has its own eligibility and benefits criteria. Thus some of the information presented below only represents the characteristics of students and families in particular voucher programs rather than across programs.

Most voucher programs, whether public or private, target low-income and minority students either directly or indirectly. For example, a number of voucher programs operate in a single city or district, usually areas that are very low performing and have large concentrations of low-income and minority students, such as in Dayton, Ohio, and Washington, D.C. Not surprisingly, characteristics of voucher programs also vary widely. For example, Maine and Vermont have voucher-like programs dating back to the late 1800s that provide tuition for rural students living in areas without public schools, enabling them to attend public and non-religious private schools elsewhere.[15] Many other programs operate in a single city or area, such as the Cleveland voucher program, or serve very particular groups of students, such as programs for students with disabilities in Arizona, Florida, Georgia, and Utah.

Voucher program participants are overwhelmingly poor and low-income, reflecting the fact that many programs purposefully target low-income students and families. For example, in the late 1990s the privately funded school voucher programs in San Antonio, New York City (NYC), Dayton, and Washington, D.C., targeted low-income families, and indeed the average reported income of participants was quite low — about $10,000 in the NYC program in 1998-99, and about $18,000 in the Dayton

and Washington programs.[16] The publicly funded Milwaukee voucher program, which also targets low-income families, reported income data only in its early years, 1991-1995, when the average family income for participants was about $12,000.[17] The Cleveland Scholarship Program, a publicly funded city-wide voucher program gives priority to families with income below 200% of the poverty line.[18]

There is some evidence of higher female parental educational attainment among voucher users. In the Dayton, New York City, Cleveland, San Antonio, and Milwaukee programs, mothers of those who accepted vouchers had somewhat higher levels of education than did those who did not receive or others eligible but not participating in the programs.[19] Data from the national Children's Scholarship Fund also show that mothers of voucher users had slightly higher levels of education; voucher users' mothers were about seven percentage points more likely than eligible non-applicants to have college degrees, but average family income for the voucher users was about $3,000 less.[20]

Various evaluation and research studies report that in addition to being primarily low-income, the majority of voucher recipients are African American or Latino. This is not surprising considering that the programs are primarily in central cities where large percentages of the population are low income and minority. For example, 63% of Cleveland Scholarship recipients were minority in 2004; however, data for 2000-2001 indicate that about 81% of Cleveland public school students were minority.[21] In the privately funded Dayton voucher program, about 75% of the students were African American; in Washington, D.C., 95% were African American; and in the San Antonio program, 96% were Latino.[22] The percentage of minority voucher recipients in D.C. and San Antonio mirror the minority percentages of the public school population in those cities (95.5% minority each).[23] Data from the privately funded national Children's Scholarship Fund find that about 51% of its applicants are Black and another 19% are Hispanic or Latino.[24]

In general, based on data for voucher programs that are not geared specifically to students with disabilities, we find that students using vouchers — both publicly funded and privately funded — to attend private schools are primarily Black and Latino and primarily low-income. These characteristics are directly related to program design and program location. The characteristics of the students attending private schools via vouchers differ quite dramatically from the general characteristics of private school students presented above. Given how the population of voucher participants differs from the general private school population, one might conclude that means-tested voucher policies have the potential to provide low-income and minority students with opportunities to attend private schools they may not otherwise been able to attend. Of course, nothing here addresses the issue of whether the schools voucher recipients attend are better than their public school options or whether they receive a better education.

Characteristics of Charter School Students

Currently, 40 states and the District of Columbia allow charter schools. In 2004-05, about 1.8% of all public school students attended charter schools.[25] This percentage suggests that about 887,000 students were then enrolled in charters; that number has now risen to more than 1 million in a more recent estimate.[26]

Charter schools are not evenly distributed within states, and charter school laws do not generally target specific types of students, unlike many voucher laws and programs. Thus, there is more variation in who attends charter schools than in who uses vouchers. Reflecting perhaps the fact that 52% of charters are in central cities, compared with a quarter of traditional public schools, overall charter schools enroll a slight majority of students of color, with a national average of 31% Black, 22% Hispanic and 42% White students.[27] In traditional public schools, the percentages are 17% Black, 19% Hispanic, and 58% White.[28]

Because charter laws and patterns are not uniform, charter availability and enrollment trends vary both across and within states. Each state and region may have its own profile of a charter school chooser. While just under 2% of all students nationally attend charter schools, in some places, a large proportion of students attend charter schools — 25% in Washington, D.C.; 28% in Dayton; 18% in Detroit and Toledo; and 8% in the state of Arizona.[29]

There is also wide variation in enrollment patterns by race and other characteristics, depending upon the jurisdiction. In some states (Arizona, Colorado, Kansas, North Carolina), the majority of charter students are White, but the percentages are similar to those in traditional public schools.[30] Data from the National Charter School Research Project find that in several states (Alaska, Hawaii, Mississippi, Nevada), charter students are mostly White, whereas traditional public school students are not. In numerous states (Connecticut, Illinois, Indiana, Massachusetts, Michigan, New Jersey, New York, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Wisconsin), as with the country as a whole, the majority of charter students are minority, while traditional public school students are not.[31] Yet it is very important to pay attention to local context and enrollment patterns because overall state figures may mask whether charter schools increase segregation locally.[32]

Statistics on the poverty status of charter students present an equally mixed picture, with several states having higher charter percentages of students eligible for free and reduced-price meals than are enrolled in traditional schools (Arizona, Connecticut, D.C., etc), several having similar percentages (Alaska, Arkansas, Mississippi), and others where charter students are less likely to live in poverty than are traditional school students (Colorado, Florida, Georgia).[33]

National data on poverty also show unusual patterns in charter schools, indicating a stratification lying beneath global statistics. The *Digest of Education Statistics* suggests that, aggregated at the national level, 39% of charter schools have free and reduced-price meal populations of less than 15%, while only 22% of traditional public schools have free and reduced-price meals populations of less than 15%. In other words, a greater percentage of charter schools than of traditional public schools have very low populations of poor students.[34] However, at the other end of the spectrum, the *Digest* also indicates that a higher percentage of charter schools serve very high concentrations of poor students. More specifically, in 22.5% of all charters, 75% of the student body is eligible for free and reduced-price meals; the comparable percentage of traditional public schools is 17.8%. The pro-charter school organization, the National Alliance for Public Charter schools, estimates that about 52% of charter school students are eligible for free and reduced-price meals; however, it provides no source for this statistic.[35] The Alliance also estimates that about 11% of charter students are special education students, which is similar to the 13% nationally in 2001-2002, and 12% are English Language Learners compared with about 6.7% nationally in 2001-2002.[36] Again, however, the Alliance provides no sources for these statistics.

Given the data available we conclude that there is great diversity across the states in terms of the characteristics of charter school students. Because of this variation between and within states, it is impossible to say that the average charter school student is like X or Y. In some places charters appear to under-enroll low-income and minority students compared with the general student population, but in others, the opposite is true. States where there are wide disparities in the racial or poverty enrollment between traditional and charter schools warrant further investigation into these patterns and the reasons for them.

Who Makes Other Choices?

There is much less research on the other forms of school choice, such as magnet schools, inter- and intra-district choice and home schooling. Magnet schools and inter- and intra-district choice are initiatives that predate charters and vouchers. The only recent data available on magnet schools, which are typically found in urban areas and large districts, come from the 2001-2002 *Common Core of Data*, which suggests that about 3% of all students attend magnet schools. However, that report offered no further data about magnet school students.[37]

Nor were the authors able to find recent estimates on the use of inter- and intra-district choice programs, although in 1999 it was estimated that less than 1% of all school children exercised inter-district school choice.[38] It is estimated that about a quarter of all families, especially White middle and upper class families, choose schools by virtue of

choosing where to buy a home.[39] A later section of this brief discusses this choice, but the authors were not able to find data on the characteristics of those who choose schools in this way.

Home schooling represents yet another form of choice, one that Belfield and Levin call "perhaps the most radical reform of the U.S. education system…the ultimate in privatization" because it completely removes education from the public realm, and little is known empirically about it.[40] Estimates of home schoolers in 2003, from the *National Household Education Survey*, suggest that about 1,096,000 students are home schooled to some extent, with 900,000 of these students exclusively home schooled.[41] The NCES data comparing home schoolers to students in public schools and private schools show some similarities and differences. Families who choose to home school tend to be larger, with 62% of them having three or more children, compared with 44% of other public and private school families. Home-schooled students are more likely to come from two-parent families than are public school students (80.8% compared to 69.5 percent), but the percentage is essentially the same as for private school students (80 percent).

In 2003, home schoolers were more likely to be White (74 percent) than are traditional public school students (61 percent), but they were similar in percentage to private school choosers (about 71-72 percent).[42] Lower percentages of Black and Hispanic students were home schoolers compared to their size in the public school population (10% and 6% respectively for home schoolers, compared with 15% and 17% for traditional public school students). This same report estimated that in terms of family income, home-schooling families were about equally as likely to be below the poverty line as are public school students (about 19 percent), which is significantly higher than the poverty status of private school students (about 6-7% below the poverty line).

Parents of home-schooled students generally have more education than parents of public school students, but slightly less than parents of private school students. The household income of home-schooling families is similar to that of public school families, although generally lower than that of private school families. Another notable difference between home-schooled students and students in public or private schools is that home-schooled students are much more likely to live in the South.

The religious affiliation of home schoolers is not proportional to that found among public or private school student populations.[43] Baptists are much more likely to home school than those of other religious affiliations and at a significantly higher percentage than their share of the public and private school market.

Summary of the Characteristics of Choosers

There is great diversity in the characteristics of choosers and choice program participants by type of choice, though some patterns do

emerge from this review of the data. Users of means-tested vouchers are clearly more likely to be poor and minority, and they look quite different from the majority of private school choosers, who are White and not poor. Home schoolers are like public school families in some ways, such as having similar income characteristics, but they are more like private schoolers in terms of race, and they are different from other choosers in terms of having larger families and in religion. There appears to be great variation in the characteristics of charter school students. Future research should continue to examine implementation results at the local level.

To know who is drawn to which choice option is one thing, but to know why is another. What motivates families to opt out of their neighborhoods schools, engage in a possibly time-consuming search, and choose a school that may have additional costs?

Review of Research: Motivations for Choice

Motivations of Active Choosers

In this section of the paper we review research on parental motivations for school choice. We start by looking at how parents use information and what the information used by parents tells us about motivations, and then we examine their stated motivations or preferences in terms of choices actually made. Finally, we examine the behavior of choosers as indicative of preferences or motivations, as actions may speak louder than words about what one really values when it comes to schools and choices.

A note about some relevant complexities is in order before reviewing the research. A common, and commonly examined, assumption is that most parents will choose schools based on academic quality, although other factors such as religion may come into play. However, there is a difficulty with directly asking about "academic quality" as a motivator because the term means different things to different people. Hamilton and Guin suggest that parents' self-reports may "produce somewhat misleading conclusions," [44] because they might offer socially appropriate answers (e.g., academic quality) rather than more honest ones (e.g., "I didn't want to drive my child across town to school every day").

Another common assumption about choice motivation rests on an economic theory of human behavior that presumes parents are "rational utility maximizers" who choose schools based on the best interests of their children.[45] A similar problem in analyzing motivation occurs here: a child's "best interests." like "academic quality," means different things to different people. Therefore, it is similarly unclear exactly what "best interests" might actually mean as a motivator.

Overview of the Research

Parents overwhelmingly say they value academics and characteristics of school quality (good teachers, good curriculum, high test scores, etc) when choosing schools.[46] In self-reports, such as in survey data and interview data, parents consistently cite academic quality to explain their decision to seek a school of choice and the particular choice they made.[47] However, such self-reports tend to have weaknesses, which include that respondents generally know what kinds of answers are socially acceptable and which are not. In addition, most studies of school choice reviewed here only look at active choosers and cannot answer the question of whether non-choosers or non-active choosers also value academic quality to the same extent.

Thus, some of the more interesting recent work looks at both what parents say they value and what they actually do — that is what choices they actually make.[48] This research points to race and the socio-economic composition of school student bodies as central factors in parents' choices. A complicating factor in interpreting the preferences that underlie choice behavior of families is that choice has to some extent been constrained by such things as regulations regarding racial balance or program preferences for some types of students/families over others, and the ability of certain types of schools (private schools, some charters) to select their students.

Most school choice options can be classified as "option demand" choices — that is where a student or his or her parent needs to actively select a non-assigned school in order to engage in school choice. Option demand programs include such choices as private schools, vouchers, charter schools, magnet schools, home schooling, and inter- and intra-district choices, and possibly even choosing a school through choosing where to live. Those who exercise option-demand choice are a self-selected group of students and families who exhibit motivation to obtain and evaluate information and then make an active choice of a non-assigned school. In the next section we review the research about how families use information in making their choices about schools.

Use of Information and Searching Behavior

Studies examining how parents use different kinds of information in making school choices provide insight into the factors that parents deem important in their choices. For example, the fact that parents look at information about the racial composition of schools suggests that race plays a role in school choice. The fact that many parents use word-of-mouth or other social networks to gather information raises the possibility that parents trust people they know more than official sources of information, or that what parents are looking for in schools is hard to measure by test scores and statistical summaries about schools.

One study covertly followed parents' use of information on a school choice information website.[49] This research examined the school factors or characteristics that parents used in their searches, and for those website users who provided some information about themselves, such as race and educational attainment, whether there were differences between those with college degrees and those without. These data on the obviously motivated, and perhaps the more advantaged (having Internet access in the late 1990s), show that individuals using the website to collect information on schools tended to look at student body characteristics most frequently, about 10 percentage points more than they looked at test scores and about 8 percentage points more than location. Also notable are the differences in search characteristics between those with and without a college education. College-educated searchers looked much more frequently at both student body composition and test scores and somewhat less frequently at location and the availability of basic programs.

More recent research on the search behavior of choosers compared to non-choosers using the same Internet website on schools in Washington, D.C., found those families who ended up in a choice school use the Internet search engine differently.[50] This study found that choosers use a two-stage decision making process: they first create their "choice set" through an editing process, then make in-depth comparisons of the options they are considering. While these findings are interesting, they may not be typical of all choosers, as the study combined an email survey to those who left their email addresses on the website (a minority of all users) with data on the information gathered by the users on the website. However, an earlier study on magnet school choice also identified the process of choice as having two stages. In that study, the first stage was creating a choice set through elimination: White families eliminated schools with high proportions of Black students, and Black families eliminated schools with high proportions of poor students.[51]

Research conducted in California examined different types of information-gathering techniques used by families who moved in order to gain access to particular schools and districts. The results were not inconsistent with the findings on the search behavior of Internet users.[52] Examining the school choices of mostly White families who bought a home in order to attend a particular school or district, it was found that parents made assumptions about the quality of schools from student body composition and sought to place themselves among peers of similar values and beliefs. The author calls these "status ideologies." Parents did not express concerns about the instruction or curriculum in the schools they avoided; rather they expressed concerns about the quality of the peers. These concerns linked perceived quality as being lower in schools with more low-income and minority students.

Other researchers have also tried to "observe" parents in their searching behaviors. For example, a study of how 48 parents in a Midwestern city made their choice decisions found that both higher and

lower socio-economic status parents make their choices in similar ways — that is, they use a similar process of gathering information about schools and eliminating or considering schools.[53] This research finds that while the processes are similar, the schools that get considered and that make up the "choice sets" of parents from different socio-economic strata are very different. The primary way that parents learn about schools is through their social networks. Social networks are important regardless of the social class of the parents. What social networks do is present constrained choice sets of schools. Of particular note here is that lower-income families tend to have more failing and less competitive schools in their choice sets. These ostensibly less desirable choice sets may, to some extent, be influenced by the customary attendance patterns of those attending feeder schools in earlier grades.

Other research also supports the importance of social networks in school choice.[54] Social networks appear to act as a filter, informing parents about which schools they can realistically consider. These networks can also inform parents and students about what choices are available, as in the first five years of the Milwaukee voucher program, where friends and relatives were the most frequently cited (about 51% of the time) sources of information on the program.[55] Social networks were also found to be influential in the earlier-cited study from California. Of the 36 parents who moved to their current home for the schools, only 25% visited the school for which they bought their home and only 9% had obtained any test score data before making the decision to move.[56] Respondents had relied primarily upon word of mouth and reputation, and the study's author found this information was not necessarily reliable.

In a 2005 survey of 800 parents who had made active school choices in three choice-rich cities (Milwaukee, Washington, D.C., and Denver), the authors' findings are consistent with other research that word of mouth and social networks are important sources of information.[57] One notable difference is that the authors of the three-city study found that 85% of parents say they had visited a school under consideration. In the California home-buying study, while not perfectly comparable, the respondents had purposefully moved to their new homes for the schools but few had visited schools prior to their purchase.

A study of a much different population had similar findings about the use of information and lack of visits to schools under consideration.[58] This study of mostly low-income, minority families making high school choices in Philadelphia found that while parents seemed aware of and involved in the choice of high schools, they gathered most of their information from word-of-mouth and personal contacts, and not all of the contacts had good information. Few parents visited the schools their children were considering, and most expressed preferences for schools that fit with their children's interests.

Recent research also shows that having instructional and academic information about schools, which many choice programs provide (i.e.

booklets on choice programs), is not necessarily sufficient to get families to choose schools of high academic quality.[59] Demographic information about schools appears to be a key factor parents consider in a variety of choice settings, even when other information directly related to academics is available.

In short, the research on the use of information points to the importance of social networks in getting information about schools of choice and evaluating schools. The opinions of friends and others can be very influential, even though that informal information may not provide a good foundation on which to base educational choices. The research also seems to suggest that parents tend to go through a two-stage process in making the choice decision. The first is the elimination of possible schools, and second is the more in-depth examination of the schools remaining in the choice set. There is also some concern that some types of families, middle-income and White, might have better access to the types of networks and information sources that provide more reliable information about schools and about how to get into good schools. Indeed, the research discussed here shows that higher-income families do have social networks that lead them to consider different and higher-achieving schools. It is apparent that parents use information on the composition of the student body in making decisions about which schools to avoid, but the reasons for doing so are not clear. Some parents may not want their children to be racially isolated, others may associate high minority concentrations with low quality, and others may have different reasons. However, this information is useful for policymakers to consider in constructing and designing choice programs that minimize the potential for resegregation.

Stated Reasons for Choice and Motivations of Active Choosers

In this section we look at the research on why parents say they chose the school they did and what factors were important in that choice. This section includes studies of charter school choosers, voucher users, and those in controlled-choice districts. It is important to keep in mind that these studies generally ask parents after the fact about their choice. While we can assume that most survey and interview respondents will be honest, some people may be tempted to give socially acceptable responses or may try to justify their choice after the fact. In addition, many surveys provide a set of response choices rather than leaving the question open-ended for parents, which may limit responses and not accurately characterize the range of motivations that parents have.

In parental self-reports (surveys and interviews) of motivations for choice, academics are often the highest-rated or most frequently cited reasons for choice.[60] A 1998 survey of more than 1,000 charter school parents in Michigan found that academic reasons (e.g. good teachers and academic reputation) were four of the five top rated reasons (with safety as

the other) on a scale of 1 to 5.[61] One weakness with the survey is that it does not identify the information on which the parents based their choices. Parents may cite academic reasons, but whether they had any factual information about quality, for example, is unknown.

A similar study of charters in a different part of the country found consistent results.[62] Parents of more than 1,000 charter school students in Texas were surveyed and asked to rate the importance of five possible factors influencing their selection of schools: educational quality, class size, safety, location, and friends at the school. Between 93% and 96% of all parents, regardless of race, ranked educational quality as important or very important. (Some variation in responses by race and income was seen on the factors of safety, location, and friends. Low-income and Hispanic parents were more likely to rate safety as important or very important.) Interviews and focus groups with parents and students participating in the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program also suggests that academic reasons, more specifically the search for a better education, and school safety were the most common motivators for participation.[63] Parents cited looking for better curriculum, religious education, and other more specific qualities of schools.

A more recent survey of charter school parents in Texas asked parents to rank six factors according to their importance in selecting the school of choice.[64] The six factors included test scores, discipline, school racial/ethnic characteristics, location, teaching of moral values, and safety. The highest ranked factor among parents of students in charters for not-at-risk students was teaching of moral values, but significant differences in first-choice rankings were evident by race: test scores for Whites (29 percent), teaching of moral values for Blacks (33 percent), and discipline for Hispanics (27.5 percent).These findings differ from the earlier Texas charter schools study that found academics as the highest rated factor (perhaps indicating that many parents do not equate "test scores" with "academics"). One potential source of this difference is that the respondents in the earlier charter school study were much more likely to be White, non-Hispanic (though the authors attempted to correct for this using weighting), while in the more recent study the racial composition of the sample had roughly equal numbers of each racial group.

One study of a controlled choice district with many magnet schools compared survey results from four groups of parents: those who chose magnet schools, those who chose integrated but non-magnet schools, those who chose non-integrated, non-magnet schools, and those who did not actively choose any school.[65] Seventy-one percent of parents in the sample were active choosers, and White parents were somewhat more likely to be active choosers. Among those who actively chose schools, magnet school choosers rated academic reasons most highly; they also reported being less concerned about convenience and slightly more concerned about safety/discipline and values than parents who chose other options.

Students themselves seem to value academics when making school choices. One of the few studies to examine students' motivations for attending a choice school analyzed students' admission essays to five pilot high schools in Boston Public Schools. This study identified three main sets of reasons why students chose these pilot schools: academics, support, and school culture.[66] The category of academics in this study included factors such as a challenging curriculum (the most frequently coded reason), programs, and career and college preparation.

The evidence on the stated motivators for choice clearly points to academics and the search for a better education or a better educational fit as primary drivers behind seeking choice. However, in certain areas, such as urban areas, other reasons such as safety come into play as motivators. Next we examine the research on parents' actual choices, as they are indicative of preferences and motivations.

Behavior as Indicative of Motivations

While the stated reasons for choice are important to know and are informative to policymakers in designing choice programs, it is perhaps more telling to see how families actually behave in choice programs. Behavior can be indicative of motivation but also of access to choice and constraints on exercising choice. The research reviewed below points to race and poverty status as important factors in how choice programs actually play out.

In a study of requests to magnet schools, it was found that White families tended to request transfers into schools with higher proportions of White students than the schools they were coming from, and similarly that minority families also requested transfers to magnets that had higher proportions of minorities.[67] These patterns were consistent even when school-level characteristics, such as type of magnet school, were controlled for. A more recent study in New York City shows that student body characteristics are a strong predictor of demand for high schools and high school programs.[68] In this study of the number of applicants per available seat in high school programs, it was found that schools or programs with higher percentages of Black students or high percentages of English Language Learners had lower demand. These results are consistent even when the academic achievement of the school is taken into account. This study, however, was unable to examine the demographics of the applicants.

One study of charter school parents first conducted a survey of their stated preferences, then examined how the stated preferences matched with the characteristics of the chosen charter schools.[69] The study found that, on average, charter school families went to charter schools with lower average test scores than their previous public schools. This held true even for those who listed test scores as the most important motivator for choice. While few parents in the survey chose the racial

make-up of a school as a primary motivator, the authors found that the racial composition of schools was a strong predictor of the charter school chosen. These results are provocative: parents cite academics as primary but decisions are linked to race, suggesting that parents might be using race as a proxy for academic quality. Kleitz and colleagues remind us that even with clear preferences parents must choose from available schooling options and that real-life limitations also interact with preferences for choice.[70] For example, a parent without a car or accessible public transportation may be limited in the realistic set of schools from which she can choose, or families with two working parents may face limitations relating to after-school care that mediate the ability to achieve one's preference.

Research in a Colorado district found that parents tended to choose schools that were relatively close to their homes and that the schools parents chose to move their children out of were schools with high percentages of poor students and low test scores. However, there were other, higher-achieving schools the parents could have chosen, suggesting perhaps that geographical distance is important.[71]

These studies are contradicted somewhat by another study, which did seem to show behavior matching stated choice preferences.[72] The researchers examined four districts with varying degrees of available choices, asking how well parents' stated preferences match up to the characteristics of the schools they actually chose for their children.[73] Among New York City parents in the sample, those who actively chose a school tended to enroll their children in a school that was above the district mean on the main preference (e.g., test scores or some other characteristic cited by the parent); this relationship between preference and school characteristics was not evident for the non-choosers in the study. The findings were similar in New Jersey, the other site in this study.

Other studies of how choice is playing out in an option-demand district have found that behavior is quite indicative of preferences and motivations.[74] The results also raise concerns about the differences between those who choose and those who do not engage in the choice process.[75] For example, in an experimental study on the impact of different types of information on choice, it was found that when presented with a simple summary of school performance and odds of admissions, parents in failing schools (NCLB-sanctioned schools) were less likely than might be expected to opt to choose another school.[76] However, among low-income families in non-NCLB sanctioned schools, parents were more likely to choose highly selective schools when presented with information on the program and odds of admissions. The study also examined the role of school population characteristics on preferences and choices and the tradeoffs parents make in terms of their preferences about student racial composition and test scores. They found that White parents valued schools with a mostly White population and Black families exhibited preferences for schools with higher Black student populations. In both cases, families

balanced these preferences with their preferences for test scores. These findings are similar to other research on magnet schools and charter schools discussed above. What is clear from this work is that many parents and students make trade-offs among their preferences for things like location, guaranteed choice, student body composition and test scores and that access to information appears to aid in these considerations. It is also striking that there is a significant group of parents who are, as the authors say, "inert," in that they fail to actively engage in school choice even when it is widely available.

There appears to be fairly consistent evidence that when given the chance parents choose to avoid schools with high percentages of low income students, and that White parents avoid schools with high percentages of minority students. This and other evidence from various choice policies, including charter schools and controlled choice districts, gives some credence to the concern that school choice may lead to further segregation by race and class. However, some recent research suggests that we need to pay attention not just to the correlation between demographics and choice, but also to the influence of contextual neighborhood characteristics (i.e. transportation, disadvantage) and earlier schooling characteristics on the exercise of choice.[77]

Home schooling

In this section we briefly examine the motivations for home schooling one's children. Home schooling is discussed separately because it is a choice to educate outside of traditional public and private schools. In the home schooling arena, ideological concerns, such as religion and sheltering children from mainstream cultural influences, were typically found to be important motivators but are of perhaps declining influence.[78] Few studies have actually looked at why parents home school. Some information comes from the 2003 *National Household Education Survey*, which asked home-schooling parents to identify their primary reasons for home schooling.[79] The three most often cited reasons were the school environment, reflecting concerns with such elements as safety, drugs, and peer pressure (85% of parents); the desire to provide religious or moral instruction (72%); and dissatisfaction with the instruction in schools (68%).

A study of parents involved with a charter school network that supports home schoolers in California also found that being critical of or concerned about traditional public schools rated relatively high as a factor motivating home schooling (15.77 out of 20), though in this particular survey being attracted to the particular charter organization was rated somewhat higher (16.47) and ideological reasons were also rated high (14.63).[80] More information comes from a recent study conducted in the southeast, which surveyed a non-random sample of home-schooling parents.[81] These findings suggest that home-schooling parents have a

strong belief that they should be active in their child's education and, perhaps more importantly, that they also have the time, resources, and knowledge to do so. Consistent with the federal survey data, this study indicates that home-schooling parents have low confidence in the public schools' ability to educate their children and low opinions of public schools related to values and beliefs, ability to meet special needs, and teaching methods.[82] Indeed, the scale with items relating to parents' beliefs regarding public schools received the lowest mean rating out of the 11 total scales that included concepts such as personal beliefs about education and parents' self-efficacy in helping their children learn.

The choice to home school is quite different from choosing to send one's child to a non-assigned school. The evidence points to a strong distrust or dislike of traditional public schools' ability to teach their children, as well as concerns about the cultural and moral environment in public schools.

Discussion and Analysis

The examination of the characteristics of participants in different types of choice programs suggests that those who make choices that are completely private, such as private schooling and home schooling, tend to be different demographically than those who make choices through formal governmental or non-governmental programs such as charter schools, magnets, and vouchers. Home school and private school students tend to be non-poor and White; users of means-tested vouchers, on the other hand, tend to be minority and poor. The picture is more mixed for charter and magnet school students. The implications are that choice *may* be able to offer educational opportunities to low-income minorities in the small scale, such as vouchers, but whether the same patterns of use would exist in large- scale programs has not been empirically determined. The mixed evidence across the states in terms of who participates in magnet and charter school choice also suggests that program design is very important in creating and constraining opportunities by race and class. It suggests that in and of itself choice does not necessarily provide greater educational opportunities to poor and minority students and, in fact, may exacerbate inequalities that already exist in education.

Parental choice for schools does not happen in a vacuum. It happens in multiple social, political, and cultural environments. The evidence points clearly to the prominent role played by social networks, word of mouth and informal information in choice. Parents seem strongly influenced by this type of information. Social networks appear to act as filters — not only about which schools are "good" and which are "bad" but which schools are part of a realistic choice set. It is unclear whether parents would rely less on word of mouth if other types of information were provided.

In terms of preferences or motivations for choice, it appears that some notion of academic quality is a key factor, though preferences and perceptions of quality appear to be influenced by race and other social factors. Kleitz and colleagues suggest that the preferences of parents for school choice do not differ by race, ethnicity or social background and that all parents are seeking schools of educational quality.[83] Rather, they argue, the differences we see in actual choices by race are a result of "real world" context, options and limitations (p. 846). It may be that many parents want out of their assigned public school, perhaps thinking that any other school is better. Parents overwhelmingly say they are looking for a better education but much, though not all, of the research examined suggests that parents are paying more attention to the social and racial demographics of potential choice schools than they are to measures of academic quality. As Jacob and Lefgren note, "what parents want from school depends on the educational context in which they find themselves."[84] The evidence on behavior, or the way in which parents make their choices, doesn't match very well with what parents say are their preferences. This suggests that race and class play a key role and that parents may view the racial or peer composition of a school as a proxy for quality. This is not encouraging to those who view choice as a way to potentially eliminate the barriers to truly integrated schools. Indeed, Pallas and Riehl note, "[T]he evidence also suggests that there are valid concerns about whether school choice plans will increase the racial/ethnic separation of students, because parents tend to weigh demographic information about schools heavily and to make choice decisions that will not create social isolation for their children."[85]

Recommendations

Based on the review of the research, we make six recommendations:

- Policymakers need to carefully consider the intended target population to ensure that choice options adequately address needs and preferences.
- Policymakers need to design any choice program so as not to perpetuate or exacerbate segregation by race, ethnicity or income. Evidence suggests that choice and particular design elements operate differently in different contexts. Therefore, thoughtful design requires looking beyond assumptions and theory to the evidence about how choice and particular design elements operate in practice.
- Public choice policies should address the constraints that target populations may have in potentially exercising their choices. For example, choice plans that are meant to encourage the exercise of choice among low-income families may not provide transportation, which is a significant barrier to participation.

- Both publicly and privately funded choice programs should work to ensure the wide dissemination of appropriate and useful information on programs, as informal information from social networks appears to be a powerful influence on parents' preferences and their ability to act on them.
- Since the Supreme Court has weighed in against the constitutionality of race-based student assignment policies, states and school districts need to find creative ways of ensuring that choice policies expand opportunities for those with the least access to choice and to quality schools.
- Further research in this area should examine the link between preferences and behaviors, perhaps exploring what factors help or hinder parents in acting on their preferences. This research especially should take into account contextual factors such as geographic location, constraints, and supply, to more fully understand the operation of choice. Policy may also benefit from research into the preferences of non-active choosers.

Notes and References

[1] Little research to date has been conducted on the use of the choice provisions under NCLB though the available research suggests that not many parents avail themselves of the choice option. See for example, Howell, W.G., (2006) Switching Schools? A Closer Look at Parents' Initial Interest in and Knowledge About the Choice Provisions of No Child Left Behind. *Peabody Journal of Education*. *81*(1): p. 140-179.

[2] National Center for Education Statistics. (2006). *The condition of education 2006*. Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office

[3] See for example:

Schneider, M., & Buckley, J. (2002). What do parents want from schools? Evidence from the Internet. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis, 24(2)*, 133-144

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Henig, J. R. (1994). *Rethinking school choice: Limits of the market metaphor*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Saporito, S. Private choices, public consequences: Magnet school choice and segregation by race and poverty." *Social Problems, 50*(2), 181-203.

[4] Wells, A. S., & Crain, R. L. (1999). *Stepping over the color line: African American students in white suburban schools.* New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

[5] One of the more common ways that districts throughout the South tried to resisted desegregation was through "freedom of choice" plans. Black students were technically allowed to choose to attend White schools – or they could stay in their own, familiar schools. Given the threatening environment, these choice plans resulted in very little integration. The 1968 Supreme Court decision in *Green v. New Kent County (VA)*, struck down such a plan as clearly designed to perpetuate segregation.

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[6] Chubb, J.E. & Moe, T.M. (1990). *Politics, Markets and America's Schools..* Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press.

Moe, T.M. (2001). *Schools, Vouchers, and the American Public.* Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press.

[7] Bulman, R. C. (2004). School-choice stories: The role of culture. *Sociological Inquiry*, *74*(4), 492-519.

[8] The authors are well aware that many children do not live with parents, but with other caregivers. We use "parents" here only to streamline the text; we intend the term to include not only parents but a variety of others who assume parental responsibilities.

[9] Hamilton, L. S., & Guin, K. (2005). Understanding how families choose schools. In J. R. Betts, & T. Loveless (Eds.), *Getting choice right: ensuring equity and efficiency in education policy* (pp. 40-60). Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press.

[10] Tice, P., et al., *Trends in the use of school choice: 1993-2003*, National Center for Education Statistics. U.S. Department of Education, Editor. 2006.

[11] Broughman, S.P. and N.L. Swaim, *Characteristics of private schools in the United States: Results from the 2003-2004 Private School Universe Survey*, U.S. Department of Education. Washington, National Center for Education Statistics, Editor. 2006.

[12] Broughman, S.P. and N.L. Swaim, *Characteristics of private schools in the United States: Results from the 2003-2004 Private School Universe Survey*, U.S. Department of Education. Washington, National Center for Education Statistics, Editor. 2006.

[13] Tice, P., et al., *Trends in the use of school choice: 1993-2003*, National Center for Education Statistics. U.S. Department of Education, Editor. 2006.

[14] Teske, P., & Reichardt, R. (2006). Doing their homework: How charter school parents make their choices. In R. J. Lake, & P.T. Hill (Eds.), *Hopes, fears and realities: A balanced look at American charter schools in 2006* (pp. 1-9*).* Seattle: University of Washington.

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[15] Office of Innovation and Improvement. (2007). *Education options in the states: State programs that provide financial assistance for attendance at private elementary or secondary Schools.* Washington, D.C..

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[18] Plucker, J., Muller, P. A., Hansen, J., et al. (2006). *Evaluation of the Cleveland scholarship and tutoring program: Summary report 1998-2004*. Bloomington: Indiana University.

[19] Gill, B. P., & et al. (2001). *Rhetoric versus reality: What we know and what we need to know about vouchers and charter schools*. Santa Monica, CA: Rand.

[20] Campbell, D. E., West, M. R., & Peterson, P. E. (2003, November). *Participation in a national, means-tested school voucher program.* Paper prepared for presentation at the annual conference of the Association for Public Policy and Management, Washington, D.C..

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[21] Plucker, J., Muller, P. A., Hansen, J., et al. (2006). *Evaluation of the Cleveland scholarship and tutoring program: Summary report 1998-2004.* Bloomington: Indiana University.

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[22] Howell, W. G., & Peterson, P. (2000). *School choice in Dayton, OH: An evaluation after one year.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University.

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Peterson, P. E., Myers, D., & Howell, W. G. (1999). *An evaluation of the horizon scholarship program in the Edgewood Independent School District, San Antonio, Texas: The first year.* Washington, D.C.

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[25] National Center for Education Statistics. (2007). *The Condition of Education 2007.* Washington, D.C.: United States Government Printing Office.

[26] National Association for Public Charter Schools. (2007). *Growth and quality in the charter school movement: 2007dashboard.* Washington, D.C.: National Alliance for Public Charter Schools.

[27] U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. (2007). *The Condition of Education 2007* (NCES 2007-064). Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office.

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[30] National Charter School Research Project. "State Comparison Data: Percentage of Students by Race/Ethnicity." Center on Reinventing Public Education, University of Washington, Seattle. Retrieved October 14 from http://www.crpe.org/ncsrp/data/questions.php?question=4

Note these data were collected through a survey of state education agencies and reflect either 2004-05 or 2003-04 enrollment data.

[31] National Charter School Research Project. "State Comparison Data: Percentage of Students by Race/Ethnicity." Center on Reinventing Public Education, University of Washington, Seattle. . Retrieved October 14, 2007, from http://www.crpe.org/ncsrp/data/questions.php?question=4

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[34] Snyder, T. D., Dillow, S. A., & Hoffman, C.M. (2007). *Table 97: Number and enrollment of traditional and public charter elementary and secondary schools and percentages of students, teachers, and schools, by selected characteristics: 2003-2004.* Digest of Education Statistics 2006 (NCES 2007-017).

Note that the data for Table 97 are estimates from the 2003-2004 Schools and Staffing Survey which somewhat underrepresented charter schools, affecting the estimates for charters in unknown ways.

[35] National Association for Public Charter Schools. (2007). *Growth and quality in the charter school movement: 2007 dashboard.* Washington, D.C.: National Alliance for Public Charter Schools.

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[41] Princiotta, D., & S. Bielick, S. (2005) *Home-schooling in the United States: 2003*, National Center for Education Statistics. U.S. Department of Education, Editor, Washington, D.C..

[42] Tice, P., et al. (2006). *Trends in the Use of School Choice: 1993-2003*, National Center for Education Statistics. U.S. Department of Education, Editor.

[43] Belfield, C. R. (2004). *Home-schooling in the US.* New York: National Center for the Study of Privatization in Education.

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