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Berends, Mark; Cannata, Marisa & Goldring, Ellen B. (2011)
School Choice and School Improvement. Cambridge, MA: Harvard
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School choice and school improvement, as part of the educational reform movement, provide fertile ground for discussion, policy development and implementation, and research at national, state, and local levels. Politicians, policy analysts, legislators, educators, parents, students, and other stakeholders hold a variety of opinions concerning how to best accomplish change—or if change is even necessary. Since the early 1990s, a variety of school choice initiatives designed to improve the educational process have developed across the nation, including but not limited to, public charter schools, private

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schools, intra-district transfer programs, and vouchers. As this privatization movement has matured over time, research opportunities designed to measure policy and program efficacy have been realized with a wide range of often conflicting results. Mark Berends, Marisa Cannata, and Ellen B. Goldring add to this body of work with an edited volume titled *School Choice and School Improvement*. This work provides an avenue for individuals to examine school choice in multiple contexts and consider how, if at all, the exercise of choice leads to school improvement.

The editors of this work clearly state their purpose by expressing a desire to “bring together exemplary, policy relevant research on school choice options” (p. 3). Furthermore, they attempt to provide research which examines “how communities, districts, and states use choice as a strategy for improving schools” (pp. 3-4). A key intent of school choice policy is to provide an alternative means for students to receive a quality education outside the traditional public school system. As a result, the bulk of *School Choice and School Improvement* serves as a research based evaluation of choice programs and focuses on the implementation and outcome phases of the public policy process.

School Choice and School Improvement consists of a series of chapters written by a variety of authors which seek to examine empirically different elements of the school choice movement. Part I is organized around three strands of discussion: 1) The effects of school choice on student outcomes; 2) Parental influence and decision-making related to choice; and, 3) Whether or not choice options have changed traditional public school behavior due to increased competition for students and resources. In Part II, the effects of school choice on student outcomes is the focus. The outcomes studied center not only on student standardized testing data, but also on behavioral, psychological, and social elements which influence the development of the whole student. Part III moves from an examination of student outcomes to an analysis of parental motivation to either select from a variety of school choice options or have their respective students continue to attend traditional public schools. Competition in the educational marketplace serves as the backdrop for Part IV as the authors of these chapters look to determine whether or not

school choice options have influenced the behaviors of traditional public schools. Additionally, Part IV raises the question of whether or not a relationship exists between school choice programs and inherent racial and ethnic segregation in schools.

Many of the chapters and the corresponding research studies included center on choice programs offered in a variety of local, urban school districts in the United States. For example, the cities of Indianapolis, Chicago, Washington D.C., and New York have all implemented school choice programs which provide alternatives for a large number of students. Research based on choice programs available to students in Michigan provides an example of choice at the state level. National and international school choice programs, such as in The Netherlands, serve as units for analysis as well.

Data generation, analysis, and interpretation varied across the multiple chapters included in this work. Specifically, the authors of nine of the twelve studies included utilize data derived using a variety of quantitative methodological techniques dependent on the research questions being pursued. Of these, all but two examined longitudinal data covering multiple school years to ensure a broad spectrum of analysis. The two chapters pertaining to studies using primarily one year of data were based either on parental motivation surveys as they related to school choice or a sample of over one hundred schools and their principals' perceptions of school choice competition on their respective leadership behaviors. The authors of the remaining two chapters generated and analyzed data using either a mixed-methods approach or qualitative techniques. Interestingly, both these latter studies were designed to gauge the decision-making process used by parents concerning whether or not to seek enrollment for their children in schools of choice.

As mentioned, this work provides a broad swath of research which covers a great deal of ground in the debate over the efficacy of school choice programs and whether or not they lead to school improvement. A careful analysis of the research included in this volume allows one to determine inherent strengths and weaknesses of the volume as a whole. This analysis looks at the collection of research studies and how they are structured as a whole,

not as stand-alone research studies on a chapter by chapter basis. Certainly, each individual chapter and the research included could be meticulously analyzed from multiple perspectives; however, this is not the intent here.

One of the primary strengths of this book is the nature of the research included in each chapter. Regardless of the methodology applied to the respective research questions, the authors in almost every case utilize techniques appropriate for addressing the expressed purpose of each study. The quantitative methods applied across the studies using statistical techniques tend to provide a robust look at the data being considered. In fact, most of the quantitative studies included are longitudinal in nature, allowing for analysis of multiple years of data in order to strengthen the ability to generate valid findings. This is important as school choice programs have been implemented inconsistently across the national education scene. The editors note this as being a challenge in the book's introductory chapter.

Another effective element of this book relates to the nature of the research problems addressed in each chapter. The editors of this volume logically structure the three primary sections to address contemporary questions being considered about the nature of school choice. In doing so, they take in to account criticisms of school choice programs and attempt to address them via the chapters included. As such, the research problems, methodological techniques, analyses, and findings of each chapter are clearly communicated and add to the overall discussion being furthered by the editors.

Certainly, the first and foremost question which should be asked about most any foray into educational research concerns whether or not students and their ability to develop academically, psychologically, and socially benefit. Specifically, Part II of this work addresses this and provides balanced findings which show evidence that school choice programs can be effective, but not to the extent that one may expect. This is strengthened by the editors' decision to include studies which look at choice options in a variety of contexts, including vouchers, private schools, charter schools, and intradistrict transfer programs, each of which are viable, common school

choice options which generate measurable student outcomes.

The question concerning how parents decide whether or not to involve their students in school choice programs is developed in Part III and serves as another area of strength of the work as a whole. Interestingly, the trend over the three chapters provides evidence that parents often do not make decisions based on academic reasons. A lack of understanding of state and federal accountability systems and how they measure school effectiveness, logistical problems related to attending schools located distances away from student homes, and general problems with information dissemination are all suggested to influence parental decision-making.

One area of criticism related to this work, and one the editors note, concerns the ability to generalize the bulk of the findings of the various research objectives beyond the examined level. As mentioned, many of the studies included, regardless of which of the three general parts of the book where found, are based on localized, urban school districts. While these studies allow for a large number of students to be included and provide locales where choice programs have been developed, they do not allow one to say with confidence that the results could apply to other settings. An interesting addition to this volume, or perhaps an excellent avenue for further research, would center on local choice programs outside urban centers, in either suburban or rural areas.

While reading this volume, one is able to note that, in most cases, the school choice programs studied were developed with an emphasis from the political and policy-making stakeholders on expressly creating an environment to ensure success. As such, one must question, when comparing traditional public schools to those based on choice, whether or not the desire for the choice options to succeed from those in authority led to increased capacity for improvement in relation to traditional public schools. In other words, if choice options are believed to be the best mechanism for student success and are important to politicians and policy-makers, then one could expect them to receive a myriad of advantages that traditional public schools do not enjoy. This thought also applies to the inherent advantages schools of choice have the potential to

enjoy due to increased parental interest and involvement coupled with greater student volition, all of which lead to increased capacity. The editors tease us with this information in the book's introduction; however, it would have made for very interesting reading if this question of capacity and capacity-building had been explored in more detail.

Finally, while this volume is designed to look at contemporary issues related to school choice, a look at the development of the movement would have provided an interesting, comprehensive look at the issue. A detailed analysis of the creation and development of school choice policy and procedure is not included. The editors reference background in the introduction, which leaves one wanting more information. Practitioners and those not familiar with the totality of the movement would certainly benefit. After considering prior knowledge of choice research and contemplating the new information gained from the studies included here, the thought of the usefulness of a meta-analysis of the literature to shed light on the effectiveness of the policy initiative lends itself to the potential for further research.

School Choice and School Improvement serves as a solid volume of collected research studies designed to add to the body of work related to school choice. It seeks to provide a balanced, objective look at difficult questions related to school improvement. The lack of an apparent agenda coupled with the quality of the research included allows one to carefully examine the questions being asked and generate an entire new set to consider. School choice research has proven to be a mixed bag due to the eclectic nature, inconsistent application, and general philosophical/political/legislative dissonance surrounding the subject. The editors here acknowledge this dynamic and use it as a mechanism for providing analysis and pointing out areas for further study.

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