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Berends, Mark; Cannata, Marisa & Goldring, Ellen B. (Eds.) (2011) *School Choice and School Improvement*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press.

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Reviewed by Charles Gibbs
University of Toronto

Speeches on topics of highly contested social policies are always scrutinized, word by word, for signs of hidden bias or indirect support. This is especially true when the giver of the speech, de par the office, is expected to remain above the fray but wants to add his two cents. President Obama's recent comments on improving national security, without mentioning gun control directly, are a case in point. Queen Elizabeth's 2011 broadcast about athletic activities, interpreted as a queen-like expression of disagreement with government cutbacks affecting youth sport, is another.

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The volume *School Choice and School Improvement*, edited by Mark Berends, Marisa Cannata and Ellen R. Goldring (Harvard Education Press, 2011), can be seen as the scholarly equivalent of such a speech. This collection of 12 articles wades through the ultra-politicized topic of school choice and its impact on schools and communities with great care.

"Choice" being a quintessentially American value, the topic of school choice is large and growing area in Educational Administration in the United States. As stated by one researcher, it "provides steady work". This collection represents a selection of research on the impact of charter schools, voucher programs, intra-district choice policies and patterns of switching to separate and private schools on a variety of educational goals. A few authors also consider the effect of school choice on the traditional public schools (TPS) left behind and on the larger community. The research in this collection is done primarily in an urban American context. One notable exception studies school segregation among new immigrants in the Netherlands. Most of the articles contained within the collection adopt quantitative methods, establishing one specific aspect of school choice as the independent variable, although a few use qualitative as well as quantitative data.

By and large, the authors do a good job of maintaining the appearance of neutrality while reporting on recent research on school choice from a balanced perspective. Nonetheless, careful consideration of particular wording, repetition or omissions gives the observant reader clues about the author's underlying beliefs. From this reviewer's perspective, the authors in this collection are split just about evenly on the question or whether school choice is a good or a bad thing.

The book is divided into three overlapping sections. The first part of the book examines the effects of school choice on outcomes, variably defined as achievement on test scores, noncognitive skills leading to success and graduation rates. Despite the centrality of the issue of achievement, none of the authors argue with certainty that school choice options leads to increased achievement gains. In the second section entitled Parent Choice, the authors use quantitative and qualitative methods to

determine what underlies parents' decision-making. The importance of social networks, rather than data on student performance, is highlighted. In the third section, the effects of various models for school choice are assessed in relation to the competition and segregation effects on other schools.

In the first section, the research contained in *School Choice and School Improvement* offers little to advocates of school choice policies hoping to find evidence that charter schools, vouchers or intradistrict transfers promote student achievement. When significant, the results are at best shallow and muddy. In "School Vouchers in the Nation's Capital", Patrick J. Wolf, Brian Kisida, Babette Gutmann, Michael Puma, Louis Pizzo and Nada Eissa conclude that attending a private or separate school after being offered a school voucher in the District of Columbia leads to a modest increase in test scores in reading (but only after four years, and not in math, and only for White students, and not for students with low socio-economic status). In the same way, parents (but not students) expressed increased satisfaction with the new school, but only parents who are White and not parents of low socio-economic standing. However, the authors do report a general increase in graduation rates among those who switch to a private school using a voucher, and they note that this may be an issue of school environment rather than school quality. In studying the impact of switching to a charter school on student achievement in Indianapolis, Anna Nicotera, Maria Mendiburo and Mark Berends offer a contradictory finding: some benefit to school choice can be found in math scores, but not reading, and only after two years. One strength of this study is the description of the methodological problems encountered with this type of research, such as selection bias. The subjects in these studies do not represent a random sample; they are of interest because of the choice they or their parents have made to take advantage of school options.

Kristie J.R. Philipps, Charles S. Hausman and Elisabeth S. Larsen studied the effect of intra-district transfers on test scores, and found no significant difference. However, these authors do conclude that a significant difference can be found when separating parents who make academically-motivated switches from lower towards higher-performing schools. This category of switch is not very frequent,

which throws doubt on parents' ability or willingness to judge school quality based on test scores. To explain this finding, the authors hypothesize that "parents make socially motivated decisions" rather than on whether the school is "academically successful".

Most of the articles in the collection describe what they call "good" schools using the interchangeable terminology of "effective", "academically successful", "high-performing" or "high-quality". Springing from Organizational Theory, this stance assumes that the organization itself, either through its structure or the aggregate effect of its members' actions, are effective or not in producing the desired outcome: in this case, increased test scores. Of course, schools are more than static organizations and the desired outcomes of schooling are more than increased test scores. Little consideration in this collection is given to what, in reality, makes schools whose students obtain high test scores better.

In a rare exception, Paul Peterson and Martina Viarengo studied the impact of school choice on noncognitive skills (attendance, punctuality, attention in class and nondisruptive behavior) as well as psychological well-being ("self-esteem" and "fate control"). Following Coleman's social capital theory, the researchers hypothesized that the social roles of adults in Catholic schools are more cohesive and their communications more regular, making it less likely that the educational environment will be affected by peer group pressures. In concordance with previous research, they found that Catholic school attendance has an impact on some measures of compliance (attendance and punctuality), but not the more fundamental issues of attention and behaviour in class, nor on measures of psychological well-being.

For advocates of school choice policies, choice is believed to increase educational outcomes through the interplay of market-driven pressures. The mechanism is as follows: parents of children attending low-quality or underperforming schools become dissatisfied, they explore the competition, they opt for better schools who are working harder, resources are transferred to the successful schools, and the threat of continued loss of clientele or closure challenges underperforming schools to improve.

The result is thus increasing results across the board. *School Choice and School Improvement* casts a shadow on many of these assumptions.

First, for this competitive mechanism to work out as anticipated, one would require parents to consistently choose higher performing schools. In the second section of the book, Marc Stein, Ellen B. Goldring and Xiu Cravens examine the factors motivating parents' choice to enrol their child in a charter school in Indianapolis. They found that parents do not often make the predictable choice of sending their child to a higher-performing school, but rely on informal social networks to get a feeling for a school's overall reputation. In their conclusion, the authors expound on their understanding of what may constitute a "good" school for some parents: few fights, small class sizes, accessible building, a neighbourhood that is free from violence. They also call for future research on "what is meant by academic quality" (page 123). This is one of the many thorns in the school choice rosebush: the unwillingness to see test scores alone as an indicator of school quality.

W. David Stevens, Marisa de la Torre and David Johnson also studied the decision patterns of parents who opt out of neighbourhood schools in Chicago. Contrary to Stein (et all.), these authors found that parents who opt-out of neighbourhood schools do, in fact, choose higher-performing schools based on graduation rates and test scores. This finding was stronger for White and Asian parents than African American parents, and less strong for students of low socio-economic status. The authors elaborate with a qualitative study of the reasons students stay in neighbourhood schools. These reasons include transportation costs, poor application process strategies, low parental involvement and inadequate information from the school counselling department. These authors would fall into the "Yes, with improvement" camp of school choice. If barriers to options can be reduced, then the choice mechanism will operate more effectively.

In addition to the issue of defining school quality, the availability of information is another problem facing the market-driven model for school choice. What information sources do parents use to make choice, and are they accurate? Following the "improved choice" model,

Carolyn Sattin-Baja presents a qualitative account of issues related to access of information. This author observed public information sessions, reviewed literature, conducted focus groups with school guidance counsellors and interviewed parents in order to paint a picture of the quantity and quality of communications allowing for Latin American immigrant families in New York City to make informed decisions. She concluded that although information comparing the quality of schools as measured by test scores was in the public domain, scant attention was paid to this issue. Further, great variability in translation services, cultural miscommunications and limited use of the Internet prevented Spanish-speaking families from obtaining the pertinent decisions necessary for effective choice. Clearly, for Sattin-Baja, more information leads to better choices.

Another assumption of the market-driven model of school choice is the reaction effect on lower-performing schools threatened by loss of clientele. The third section of the book examines this controversial issue head-on. In her quantitative and qualitative study of the reaction of public and private school principals to school choice policies, Marisa Cannata found a small negative effect of competition on the perceived ability of public school principals to retain students, to hire teachers or to acquire resources. This negative perception increased for principals whose schools are located close to charter or magnet schools. In the case of retaining students and hiring teachers, the negative effect also increased among principals having accumulated several years of experience. Cannata found no effect of competition on principals' behavior or use of time. Cannata implicitly argues that the school choice does not stimulate the positive effects of competition. She departs from the underlying assumption of many of the previous authors who believe that schools can be improved through increased effort or better decisions. Debate surrounding this "principal as leader" and "teacher as agent of change" paradigm is carefully interwoven into much of the preceding research.

Similarly, David Arsen and Yongmei Ni studied the effect of school choice competition on district allocation of resources in Michigan. According to the market-driven model, one would expect to find school districts reacting to competition by relocating resources to parent and

instruction-friendly measures, such as lower class sizes or the purchase of technology. The authors found that although changes in resource allocation in response to competition were obvious (e.g.: school closures, termination of employment), these changes did not fit a pattern designed to improve instruction. Rather, competition from charter schools created financial insecurity and instability at the district level.

While the advocates of school choice will be left wanting from the research in this volume, so too will the critics. Ron Zimmer, Brian Gill, Keven Booker, Stéphane Lavertu and John F. Witte address the longstanding concern that charter schools have the effect of skimming the most able and motivated students away from traditional public schools, and/or they increase racial segregation within schools. Neither of these arguments is confirmed by the research contained in this volume. According to these authors, charter schools attract a variety of students, and they do not significantly affect the racial composition of traditional public schools. The authors note, however, that African American families tend to choose charter schools that have a higher proportion of Black students. Again, we are likely in the presence of social networks, rather than data, determining what is a good school. Considering the recent opening of an Africentric school in the city of Toronto, one can understand the interest some parents have in using different criteria to evaluation the school experience.

The unique study in the volume that does not describe an American education system is offered by Helen F. Ladd, Edward B. Fiske and Nienke Ruijs. These authors inquire as to whether school choice policies (called the "freedom of education" tradition) in the Netherlands result in increased segregation of the children of new immigrant families. The authors conclude that schools in the Netherlands are largely and increasingly segregated according to ethnic status. They argue that this reality is only partly a result of exercising choice in education, and that residential segregation is also an emerging social problem. These authors fall short of calling for a change in policy, however, as freedom of education appears to be a well-ingrained social value in the Netherlands. The presence of this article in the volume *School Choice and School Improvement* would appear as a cautionary

example dampening the fires of school choice in the United States.

The research contained in *School Choice and School Improvement* will not resolve the acrimonious debate on school choice in the public domain. Both promoters and detractors will be able to point to partial findings and tentative conclusions to keep their end of the conversation going. It would take much more research, quantitative but especially qualitative, to explore in greater detail the most fundamental problems facing school choice that were revealed in this collection: the definition of school quality, the relationship of information to choice, and the applicability of market-driven competition to school improvement. Steady work, indeed.

About the Reviewer

Charles Gibbs is a PhD candidate at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto. He has been a teacher, educational consultant and principal in Toronto and in Montreal. He has two Masters degrees, one in Political Science and the other in Applied Linguistics.

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Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College, Arizona State University

Editors
David J. Blacker
blacker@edrev.info
Gustavo Fischman
fischman@edrev.info
Melissa Cast-Brede
cast-brede@edrev.info
Gene V Glass
glass@edrev.info