



When They Choose Public Schools, What Do Parents Want?

Patrick Denice, Washington University at St. Louis

Across the United States, parents are offered more control over their children's schooling. School choice programs are a major component of this development. But they are controversial. Proponents argue that allowing parents to choose schools for their children has the potential to reduce racial and socioeconomic segregation and enhance equity in public education. Opportunities to choose schools have long been available to families that could afford to move to areas with good schools or enroll their children in private schools. Choice programs aim to extend similar opportunities to families of all statuses, no matter where they live. Critics claim, however, that inequities can get worse if more affluent and white families take greater advantage of choice programs their disadvantaged counterparts. Even more worrisome, parents might choose schools based on non-academic factors like racial composition.

This argument highlights that the impact of school choice programs on educational equity and quality may depend on which parents can fully participate and how they make choices. In an on-going research project, my colleagues and I are investigating an innovative school choice approach called *unified or common enrollment*. Data generated by these new enrollment systems allow a close look at the goals parents are trying to further when they make choices and the trade-offs they consider as they register their preferences.

A New Way to Help Parents Choose Schools

Parents can find it difficult to choose among many schools, rather than simply sending children to assigned schools. The spread of magnet schools and citywide or charter schools means that, in many places, each individual school uses its own enrollment system. Parents can be faced with a bewildering variety of procedures to navigate. At an earlier time in Denver, for example, parents had to deal with more than 60 different school application procedures and deadlines, if they wanted to enroll their children in schools other than those in their neighborhood or assigned by default. So much complexity makes it very costly for many families to exercise rights to choose schools – and creates especially high burdens for less advantaged families and single parents. Decentralized and highly varied procedures also make it possible for particular schools to game the system – by counseling out difficult students or being more selective in practice than the law supposedly allows.

To make things easier and more transparent, some districts, like Denver starting with the 2012-13 school year, have moved to a single, comprehensive choice system. Under the new arrangements, parents submit a single application form, specifying preferences for any district-run or charter public school in the city for which their children are eligible. All parents receive comprehensive information before they rank up to five public schools. Each step in the process happens on a common timeline and all assignments are announced at the same time. Students are matched to schools with the aid of agreed rules.

Denver families like the new system and key indicators suggest it is working fairly well.

- Most families participate, particularly when students transition to kindergarten, 6th grade, and 9th grade – junctures when which students are more likely to be changing schools. For those grades, applications were submitted for roughly 70 percent of students; and across all grades, applications were submitted for a quarter of students.
- Families that submit applications are highly likely to get one of the schools they choose. About three-quarters of students were assigned to their first choice school, and more than 90 percent were assigned to one of the five schools their parents listed.

Nevertheless, important gaps remain in the system. School choices are more likely to be submitted by white and more affluent families than by Hispanic, black, and less affluent families. Participation in the system is also higher for parents of children currently enrolled in schools with average levels of performance, compared to parents of children in the lowest-performing schools.

Family Preferences and the Impact of School Choice Programs

Our analysis of Denver’s applications has helped us understand what parents are looking for when they choose schools. Currently, evidence about parents’ preferences comes either from general social surveys or from surveys of parents whose children already attend particular schools. But there are problems with these sources of evidence. When people answer surveys, they may feel most comfortable just checking off socially desirable responses. And when we ask parents about schools where their children are already enrolled, we do not learn about the other options the parents may have considered. Using preference listings on comprehensive school choice applications gives us much richer information about what parents value and the kinds of trade-offs they consider. Our analysis of the Denver data uncovers several clear patterns:

- Everyone looks for academic quality. As the average test scores of schools rise, parents are more likely to list those schools on their applications. Indeed, school performance appears to be very important to nonwhite families – and especially Hispanic families in Denver.
- Across American cities, racial and ethnic groups live in different areas – and high-performing schools tend to be in more affluent, white areas. Because Hispanic, black, and lower-income families tend not to reside near high-scoring schools, these families face hard trade-offs between choosing nearby schools or high-scoring schools.
- White families appear more sensitive to racial composition than Hispanic or black families. As the proportion of Hispanic or black students in schools increases, white parents are less likely to list those school on their applications. The same is *not* true for Hispanic or black families.

What can we conclude from this evidence about the preferences of parents? To the extent that high-scoring schools are available in system, parents will try to steer their children toward them. But simply allowing parents to choose does not correct for the reality that many families do not live near good schools and cannot easily send their children far away. Even efficient and transparent choice programs cannot eliminate inequities, unless we find additional ways to improve schools everywhere.

Read more in Bethany Gross and Patrick Denice, “An Evaluation of Denver’s SchoolChoice Process, 2012-2014,” SchoolChoice Transparency Committee at A+ Denver, January 2015.

Read more in Bethany Gross and Patrick Denice, "An Evaluation of Denver's SchoolChoice Process, 2012-2014," SchoolChoice Transparency Committee at A+ Denver, January 2015.