

Reforming K-12 Education: A Policy Analysis

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For many years, the quality and effectiveness of K-12 education in the United States has been intensely debated. Growing dissatisfaction among parents, teachers, and policymakers has heightened concerns about declining student achievement and persistent inequalities. In response, two major education reform policies have gained significant traction: charter schools and school vouchers/universal school choice. Charter schools operate independently but receive public funding and are designed to provide alternative educational environments. Conversely, voucher programs offer families public funds to enroll children in private schools of their choice. This paper applies Kraft & Furlong's policy analysis framework, evaluating effectiveness, efficiency, equity, political feasibility, and administrative feasibility to determine the best approach to current educational challenges.

Historical Context of Education Reform

Education reform has been a priority issue for decades, driven largely by dissatisfaction with public school performance. Charter schools emerged in the early 1990s and quickly gained bipartisan support as innovative alternatives to traditional schools. Meanwhile, school voucher systems have existed longer but surged in popularity after key developments, such as the Indiana Supreme Court's 2013 decision upholding voucher legality and Louisiana's charter school reforms post-Hurricane Katrina in 2005. These developments highlight ongoing dissatisfaction with conventional public education, motivating policymakers to explore new educational models. Advocates argue these programs offer innovation and personalized learning options, appealing to parents seeking better educational outcomes. However, critics worry about the diversion of resources from traditional schools and potential inequalities that might emerge from selective access.

Effectiveness

Effectiveness measures whether education reforms achieve their intended outcomes, particularly improved student performance. Charter schools have demonstrated potential improvements in standardized testing, graduation rates, and overall student satisfaction in some districts. For instance, the NY Post (2025, March 10) reported that parents in the Hempstead School District increasingly chose charter schools, driven by their dissatisfaction with local public schools. The preference for charters highlights perceived improvements in educational quality and responsiveness to student needs. However, the performance of charter schools is inconsistent, with outcomes heavily dependent on individual management quality and oversight.

Vouchers are similarly aimed at improving educational outcomes by offering school choice, particularly benefiting students with special educational needs. According to the Houston Chronicle (2025, March 8), vouchers have provided significant opportunities for special needs families to enroll their children in specialized private schools, which public schools often cannot adequately provide. Yet vouchers don't always guarantee superior education, as elite private schools frequently charge fees beyond the voucher amounts. Consequently, vouchers may fall short in broadly improving educational quality, especially for lower-income families.

Efficiency

Efficiency addresses how well public resources are utilized under different policy models. Charter schools have faced criticism for their efficiency due to diverting per-pupil funding from traditional public schools, resulting in budget shortfalls. In Hempstead, school district leaders attribute potential school closures directly to lost funding from charters (NY Post, 2025, March 9). This diversion can negatively

impact public school budgets, causing resource scarcity and ultimately undermining broader educational quality.

Voucher systems have encountered similar concerns regarding efficiency, as evidenced by the financial instability experienced in Arizona after widespread voucher implementation. The Houston Chronicle (2025, March 7) noted that Arizona's voucher experiment led to severe budget constraints, raising doubts about long-term financial sustainability. The loss of students to private institutions often means public schools must operate with reduced funding but still maintain fixed costs, undermining overall efficiency. Therefore, vouchers may inadvertently create inefficiencies rather than enhancing educational quality across the board.

Equity

Equity in education ensures all students have fair access to high-quality educational opportunities, regardless of socioeconomic status. Charter schools raise equity concerns, as some students lack resources needed to navigate applications or transportation requirements. Limited charter enrollment availability due to lotteries or application barriers can disproportionately exclude disadvantaged students. Additionally, profit motives in certain charter schools may lead to decisions prioritizing financial returns over student outcomes, thus exacerbating inequities.

Voucher programs also present substantial equity challenges. A significant portion of Texas voters, for instance, express strong opposition to vouchers because they primarily benefit affluent families, leaving economically disadvantaged students in deteriorating public schools (Chron.com, 2025). Many high-quality private schools have tuition costs exceeding the voucher values, further marginalizing lower-income families from truly benefiting from these programs. Without additional support mechanisms or

higher voucher amounts, these programs risk perpetuating rather than addressing educational disparities.

Political Feasibility

Political feasibility refers to the acceptability of policies to stakeholders, including policymakers and voters. Charter schools typically receive bipartisan backing due to their innovative and flexible approaches to education reform. Nonetheless, strong resistance from teachers' unions and advocates for traditional public schools poses significant political hurdles. These groups argue charter expansion undermines public education by diverting necessary funds and resources.

School vouchers face even greater political challenges, particularly in politically conservative regions such as Texas, where voters strongly oppose the allocation of public funds to private institutions (Chron.com, 2025). Ethical concerns about using taxpayer dollars for religious institutions also intensify political opposition. Consequently, while vouchers appeal to certain constituencies, they encounter fierce political resistance that can limit their implementation and scalability.

Administrative Feasibility

Administrative feasibility examines the practicality of implementing and monitoring policies. Charter schools, being publicly funded, typically have established frameworks for oversight and accountability, making administration relatively straightforward. The consistency of regulations and standards helps ensure charters deliver quality education and adhere to public standards.

Vouchers, however, present complex administrative challenges, including maintaining oversight across numerous private institutions with varying educational standards. Concerns frequently arise regarding

ensuring accountability, especially when public funds support private or religious schools. This complexity increases the administrative burden and potential misuse of resources. Consequently, vouchers face greater administrative hurdles compared to charter schools.

Conclusion and Policy Recommendation

After examining both policies through the Kraft & Furlong policy analysis framework, charter schools emerge as the most effective and practical solution for reforming American K-12 education. While both policies aim to increase choice, charter schools provide a better balance of effectiveness, equity, efficiency, political feasibility, and administrative manageability. Despite their limitations, charter schools offer significant advantages, including potential for improved student outcomes, easier implementation, and broader political support. Future reforms should continue focusing on expanding charter schools, while actively addressing equity concerns to ensure all students can benefit equally from improved educational opportunities.

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