School choice

Sociology and School Choice (Berends, 2015)

Although a multitude of school reforms have been proposed and implemented over the past several decades, one that receives a great deal of attention is school choice, which refers to a variety of programs providing families the option to choose the school their children attend. School choice options may include neighborhood public schools, magnet schools, charter public schools, vouchers, tuition tax credits, homeschooling, and supplemental educational services (Berends et al. 2009, 2011). One school choice option that has grown signiﬁcantly in the past two decades is charter schools—schools that are publicly funded but run under a charter by parents, educators, community groups, universities, or private organizations to encourage school autonomy and innovation. As the fastest-growing area of school choice, charter schools number more than 6,000 and serve more than 2.5 million children across the United States (National Alliance for Public Charter Schools 2014).

\*Berends M, Springer MG, Ballou D, Walberg HJ, eds. 2009. *Handbook of Research on School Choice*. New York: Routledge. \*Berends M, Cannata M, Goldring EB, eds. 2011. *School Choice and School Improvement*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Educ. Press.

Of course, the charter school movement is not without its critics. For example, one of the strongest public critics has been Diane Ravitch (2010, p. 138), who argues that charter schools have not lived up to their promise of improving student outcomes and the school system as a whole: “In terms of quality, charter schools run the gamut. Some are excellent, some are dreadful, and most are somewhere in between. It is in the nature of markets that some succeed, some are middling, and others fail.” Subsequently, she argued that charter schools have been overrun by privatization, posing signiﬁcant dangers to the public education system: “The developments of the past two decades have brought about massive changes in the governance of public education, especially in urban districts. Some children have gained; most have not. And the public schools, an essential element in our democracy for many generations, have suffered damage that may be irreparable” (Ravitch 2013, p. 179).

\*Ravitch D. 2010. *The Death and Life of the Great American School System: How Testing and Choice Are Undermining Education*.NewYork:BasicBooks.

\*Ravitch D. 2013. *Reign of Error: The Hoax of the Privatization Movement and the Danger to America’s Public Schools*. New York: Knopf.

In exchange for such autonomy and ﬂexibility, charter schools are held to current state and federal accountability standards, such as the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB), which requires testing in certain grades and sets performance targets over time (overall and for various subgroups). Whena charter school has more students applying than there are seats available (i.e., oversubscription), the school is required to hold a lottery to select at random students for those available seats. Economists have relied on market theory, leading to studies that examine charter schools’ vis` a-vis traditional public schools’ impacts on student outcomes and competition effects of schools; sociologists have focused on the social context of charter schools, examining the social organization of schools and institutional theory. Economist Milton Friedman (1955, 1962) was one of the ﬁrst scholars who used market theory to argue that the costs of K–12 education should be covered by the government, but parents should be able to choose the schools, whether public or private, their children attend. To this end, Friedman argued for giving parents government vouchers as a way to accomplish his vision of an education system that was publicly ﬁnanced but delivered privately and publicly. \*Friedman M. 1962. *Capitalism and Freedom*. Chicago: Chicago Univ. Press Many reformers have used Friedman’s arguments for vouchers and applied them to school choice more generally. Such proponents of choice maintain that market-style mechanisms of consumer choice and competition between autonomous schools encourage diverse and innovative approaches to school organization, curricula, teaching, and learning (e.g., Betts 2005, Chubb & Moe 1990, Walberg & Bast 2003). The assumption is that as school choice undercuts bureaucratic political control of public education, it provides educators in schools of choice the opportunity and motivation to experiment with new organizational and instructional strategies to improve student achievement.

\*Betts JR, Loveless T, eds. 2005. *Getting Choice Right: Ensuring Equity and Efﬁciency in Education Policy*. Washington, DC: Brookings Inst.

Proponents of charter school choice argue that providing this freedom not only diversiﬁes educational opportunities but also creates incentives to improve traditional public schooling through increased market competition for services (Chubb & Moe 1990, Friedman 1962). In large part, this argument is about how market competition decreases the amount and inﬂuence of historical bureaucratic structures to increase the opportunities for parents and school staff to establish better relationships to meet parents’ demands. Critics of the market model, however, raise questions about the empirical validity of its key assumptions about parent-consumers (demand side), schools (supply side), and the products that a market in education would generate (Finnegan 2007, Henig 1995, Levin 1998). \*Finnegan KS. 2007. Charter school autonomy: the mismatch between theory and practice. *Educ. Policy* 21(3):503–26 When applied to charter schools, institutional theory emphasizes that all schools operate within highly institutionalized environments, which deﬁne what counts as legitimate schooling. All types of schools, no matter the sector or organizational form, adopt rituals, norms, and myths to support their validity and legitimacy (Meyer &Rowan 1977, 1978; Scott & Davis 2007). Thus, even schools of choice pay attention to institutional rules such as teacher certiﬁcation, curricular subject matter, instructional time, reasonable class size, and mostly age-based grade organization.

\*Scott WR, Davis GF. 2007. *Organizations and Organizing: Rational, Natural and Open System Perspectives*.Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.

For instance, using her ethnographic work in Philadelphia and the city’s expansion of school choice options, intended to attract the city’s middle- and upper-class families into the city and its schools, Cucchiara (2013) shows that school organization may reﬂect signiﬁcant differences among social classes, and that the vision of lower-class families is often overwhelmed by the vision and preferences of middle and upper-class families. Moreover, the choices that families make—and are able to make—often have implications for how society is stratiﬁed and segregated by social class and race/ethnicity (see Lareau & Goyette 2014, Patillo et al. 2014, Roda & Wells 2013, Sattin-Bajaj 2014, Wells 1993).

\*Cucchiara MB. 2013. *Marking Schools, Marketing Cities: Who Wins and Who Loses When Schools Become Urban Amenities?* Chicago: Univ. Chicago Press

\*Lareau A, Goyette K, eds. 2014. *Choosing Homes, Choosing Schools*. New York: Russell Sage.

\*Patillo M, O’Connor LD, Butts F. 2014. High stakes choosing. See Lareau & Goyette 2014, pp. 237–67.

\*Roda A, Wells AS. 2013. School choice policies and racial segregation: where white parents’ good intentions, anxiety, and privilege collide. *Am. J. Educ.* 119(2):261–93.

\*Sattin-Bajaj C. 2014. *Unaccompanied Minors: Immigrant Youth, School Choice, and the Pursuit of Equity*.Boston, MA: Harvard Educ. Press.

Thus, there is somewhat of a school choice paradox: mixed effects on achievement and positive effects on high school graduation and college attendance [a paradox that has been noted in other areas of school choice such as vouchers (Wolf et al. 2013)].

\*Wolf PJ, Kisida B, Gutmann B, Puma J, Eissa N, Rizzo L. 2013. School vouchers and student outcomes: experimental evidence from Washington, DC. *J. Policy Anal. Manag.* 32(2):246–70.

Beyond the consumer: parents, privatization, and fundraising in US urban public schooling (Posey-Maddox, 2016).

Yet the state is not absent in neoliberal reforms – rather, these reforms require that the state create conditions that facilitate capital accumulation and support private interests through deregulation, cuts to social services, and the privatization of public enterprises, goods, and services (Hackworth 2007; Harvey 2007; Lipman 2011; Ross and Gibson 2007). In this context, education is treated as a private good – a commodity that parents can invest in to maintain or improve their child’s status and social position, rather than a public good that has social and collective benefits. Parents’ ‘consumption’ of public schools, via school choice, is key to neoliberal educational reform agendas. \*Hackworth, J. 2007. The Neoliberal City: Governance, Ideology, and Development in American Urbanism. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press. \*Harvey, D. 2007. A Brief History of Neoliberalism. Oxford: Oxford University Press. \*Lipman, P. 2011. The New Political Economy of Urban Education: Neoliberalism, Race, and the Right to the City. New York: Routledge. \*Ross, E. W., and R. Gibson. 2007. Neoliberalism and Education Reform. Cresskill: Hampton Press. Research on social class, race, and education demonstrates that not all consumers are treated equally or offered similar choices in an educational marketplace, with civic and educational leaders treating White middle- and upper middle-class families as ‘valued customers’ (Cucchiara 2013b) based upon the assumption that they’ll both improve the local schools and revitalize city spaces (Cucchiara 2013b; Gulson 2010; Hankins 2005; Reay, Crozier, and James 2011; Smith and Stovall 2008). Similarly, not all parents exercise choice in the same way or have similar resources at their disposal as White middle-class parents possess a wider range of options, given the multiple forms of capital they possess (Ball 2003; Ball and Vincent 1998; Reay 1998; Schneider, Teske, and Marschall 2002; Van Zanten 2003). Although White middle-class parents are not a uniform group and may have distinct ideological and political commitments (Cucchiara and Horvat 2009), they are similarly situated in relation to present-day racial structures and systems of domination.

\*Cucchiara, M. 2013b. Marketing Schools, Marketing Cities: Who Wins and Who Loses When Schools Become Urban Amenities. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

\*Gulson, K. 2010. Education Policy, Space, and the City: Markets and the (In)visibility of Race. New York: Routledge.

\*Reay, D., G. Crozier, and D. James. 2011. White Middle-Class Identities and Urban Schooling. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

\*Smith, J., and D. Stovall. 2008. “‘Coming Home’ to New Homes and New Schools: Critical Race Theory and the New Politics of Containment.” Journal of Education Policy 23 (2): 135–152.

\*Cucchiara, M. B., and E. M. Horvat. 2009. “Perils and Promises: Middle-Class Parental Involvement in Urban Schools.” American Educational Research Journal 46 (4): 974–1004.

A growing body of scholarship, however, suggests that although middle-class parents can ring valued resources to underresourced urban schools, there are also some costs. Much of this research explores the choices, values, and actions of White middle- and upper middle-class parents in city schools, showing that these parents may exacerbate race and class inequalities and create new patterns of marginalization in school and district contexts through their choices and engagement (Ball 2003; Kimelberg and Billingham 2013; Cucchiara 2013b; Hassrick and Schneider 2009; Posey-Maddox 2014; Reay, Crozier, and James 2011; Van Zanten 2003). In a neoliberal era marked by competition and individualism (Apple 2006; Ball 2003; Hursh 2005), these parents often carve out privileged spaces for their children within diverse school and district contexts via mechanisms, such as tracking and schooling for ‘gifted’ children (Kozol 2005; Roda and Wells 2013). Similarly, research exploring the relationship between neighborhood gentrification and school change suggests that an influx of middle-income households in neighborhoods does not necessarily translate into academic gains for low-income students in the local schools (Keels, Burdick-Will, and Keene 2013). Indeed, the school choices of new and more affluent residents can ultimately render ‘good’ schools less accessible to low-income families via assignment policies and practices that favor the gentry (Butler, Hamnett, and Ramsden 2013; Posey-Maddox 2014).

\*Kimelberg, S., and C. Billingham. 2013. “Attitudes Toward Diversity and the School Choice Process: Middle-Class Parents in a Segregated urban Public School District.” Urban Education 48 (2): 198–231.

\*Hassrick, E. M., and B. Schneider. 2009. “Parent Surveillance in Schools: A Question of Social Class.” American Journal of Education 115: 195–225.

\*Posey-Maddox, L. 2014. When Middle-Class Parents Choose Urban Schools: Class, Race, and the Challenge of Equity in Public Education. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

\*Apple, M. W. 2006. Educating the ‘Right’ Way: Markets, Standards, God, and Inequality. New York: Routledge.

\*Roda, A., and A. S. Wells. 2013. “School Choice Policies and Racial Segregation: Where White Parents’ Good Intentions, Anxiety, and Privilege Collide.” American Journal of Education 119: 261–293.

\*Keels, M., J. Burdick-Will, and S. Keene. 2013. “The Effect of Gentrification on Neighborhood Public Schools.” City & Community 12 (3): 238–259.

\*Butler, T., C. Hamnett, and M. J. Ramsden. 2013. “Gentrification, Education and Exclusionary Displacement in East London.” International Journal of Urban and Regional Research, 37 (Mar.): 556–575.

Choice, Information, and Constrained Options: School Transfers in a Stratified Educational System (Rich & Jennings, 2015).

The concentration of disadvantage in urban neighborhoods— shaped by historical forces of racial discrimination, municipal disinvestment, white avoidance, and economic inopportunity—presents a substantial challenge for policymakers attempting to break intergenerational cycles of poverty (Sharkey 2013). This challenge is particularly salient in the arena of education, where socioeconomic resources strongly determine access to educational opportunities. Households with greater financial, human, and social capital have greater access to higher-performing school districts and school assignment zones, and they have the ability to pay costly private school tuition (Saporito 2003).

\*Sharkey, Patrick. 2013. *Stuck in Place: Urban Neighborhoods and the End of Progress toward Racial Equality*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

\*Saporito, Salvatore. 2003. “Private Choices, Public Consequences: Magnet School Choice and Segregation by Race and Poverty.” *Social Problems* 50(2):181– 203.

Family sorting has contributed over time to a system of separate and unequal schools (Logan, Minca, and Adar 2012), reinforced by the dynamic choices of families (Goyette and Lareau 2014; Reardon and Owens 2014).

\*Logan, John R., Elisabeta Minca, and Sinem Adar. 2012. “The Geography of Inequality: Why Separate Means Unequal in American Public Schools.” *Sociology of Education* 85(3):287–301.

\*Goyette, Kimberly, and Annette Lareau, eds. 2014. *Choosing Homes, Choosing Schools*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.

\*Reardon, Sean F., and Ann Owens. 2014. “60 Years after Brown: Trends and Consequences of School Segregation.” *Annual Review of Sociology* 40(1):199–218.

When first implemented, accountability reforms provide new information about school testing outputs and about which schools may face punitive consequences for underperformance. This information could prompt families to exit schools labeled as low-achieving. Yet access to high-quality schools depends not only on new information, but also on family resources and the quality of viable school alternatives (Lauen 2008). A central question is thus whether and how families will respond to new information about school quality when their enrollment decisions are bounded by financial, social, and geographic constraints (Orfield and Frankenberg 2013). In a contemporary policy climate that often favors choice-based levers to address systemic inequalities, it is critical to understand the impact of new information on the actual sorting behavior of families whose school selections are embedded within stratified contexts.

\*Lauen, Douglas Lee. 2008. “False Promises: The School Choice Provisions in NCLB.” Pp. 203–226 in *No Child Left Behind and the Reduction of the Achievement Gap: Sociological Perspectives on Federal Educational Policy,* edited by A. R. Sadovnik, J. A. O’Day, G. W. Bohrnstedt, and K. M. Borman. New York: Routledge.

\*Orfield, Gary, and Erica Frankenberg. 2013. *Educational Delusions? Why Choice Can Deepen Inequality and How to Make Schools Fair*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Several school choice events occur over a child’s educational career. The first choice typically begins with initial enrollment into kindergarten, but families must choose again at various grade-structure transition points, such as promotion from 8th grade to high school. Families also make schooling choices when they relocate between regions, cities, or distant neighborhoods; in fact, residential relocation is the most common reason for non-structural school transfers (Rumberger 2003). In many cases, families do not deliberate over which school to attend, so default neighborhood assignment rules make the choice for them (Rhodes and DeLuca 2014).

\*Rhodes, Anna, and Stefanie DeLuca. 2014. “Residential Mobility and School Choice among Poor Families.” Pp. 137–66 in *Choosing Homes, Choosing Schools,* edited by K. Goyette and A. Lareau. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.

School choice advocates typically also acknowledge the need for wider availability of information about school academic performance so that families can make decisions as informed consumers (Le Grand 2007).

\*Le Grand, Julian. 2007. *The Other Invisible Hand: Delivering Public Services through Choice and Competition*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

By considering school choice at the intersection of these individual and contextual factors, our analysis draws together neighborhood, educational, and stratification literatures. We focus on two key points. First, because families differ in their financial resources, they also vary in whether leaving the school district (whether for private school or for another school district) is truly part of their choice set. These family resources interact with structural features of the local context—the degree of socioeconomic and racial segregation in the housing market, features of the local labor market, and the cost of private schools in the area—that determine the districts and private schools to which students could transfer (Lauen 2007). The degree of social network stratification in the local context may also play a role as parents attempt to process the meaning of the new information and assess their options (Sampson and Sharkey 2008). Second, the options for transferring to another public school within a district are also shaped by the interaction between family background and structural constraints. Families prefer to attend schools that require limited commuting time, and they choose geographically proximate schools in the context of school choice programs (Hastings and Weinstein 2008; Nathanson, Corcoran, and Baker-Smith 2013). When children are young and cannot travel to school alone, a longer commute time can act as a significant tax on scarce family time and resources, such that a “good school” and a “close school” become synonymous. As a result, families who do try to upgrade may have limited success. New information may lead to the desire to exit one’s school, but the spatial distribution of school quality within the district can limit the quality of viable alternatives.

\*Sampson, Robert J., and Patrick Sharkey. 2008. “Neighborhood Selection and the Social Reproduction of Concentrated Racial Inequality.” *Demography* 45(1):1–29.

\*Hastings, Justine S., and Jeffrey M. Weinstein. 2008. “Information, School Choice, and Academic Achievement: Evidence from Two Experiments.” *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 123(4):1373–1414.

\*Nathanson, Lori, Sean Corcoran, and Christine BakerSmith. 2013. *High School Choice in New York City: A Report on the School Choices and Placements of Low-Achieving Students*. New York: Research Alliance for New York City Schools.

However, opponents warn that school choice reforms could generate higher levels of inequality through consumer-driven segregation (Orfield and Frankenberg 2013), and our results add validity to this concern. Exiting a school requires some combination of human, social, and financial resources, and it is well-known that these resources are not uniformly distributed across families. The fact that non-poor families transferred within the district at higher rates than poor families, and that they were much more likely to leave the district altogether, demonstrates the enduring impact of family background on educational access. It also leaves open the possibility that an underserved population of poor families would have opted out of probation schools if they had the means to do so. Some cities are more economically and racially segregated than others, and cities differ in population size and area, both of which may affect the number of schools from which to choose and the difficulty involved in accessing them. Rather than making universal claims about the effects of school choice reforms across contexts, as has been typical in this literature, we argue that features of local spatial contexts interact with family background to produce choice outcomes when new information is available.