

# School Choice

March 5, 2019

# Background of School Choice

- Important to keep in mind that in the US we've ALWAYS had some form of school choice.
- Its best to think of school choice as a spectrum:
  - On one end we have a system where school enrollment is dictated purely by home address
  - On the other end we'd have a full market of school choice options with many options for students
- There are many types of school choice policies and programs
  - Private schools
  - Charter schools
  - Voucher programs
  - Inter-/Intra-district choice
  - Magnet programs
  - Online learning
  - Home Schooling
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# Theories Motivating School Choice

- The oldest reason for school choice has been religious freedom (e.g. Catholic schools made up a majority of private schools for a long time).
- Another prominent idea is we should let parents make decisions on how to best educate their kids (e.g. maximize household utility).
- More recently people espouse school choice as a mechanism to impose market principles on a public education.
- Early charter proponents thought the model would allow for more experimentation, and best practices would make their way back into the traditional public system.
- And finally, some argue that it's difficult to both integrate schools and neighborhoods, and through school choice maybe we can do at

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# Assumptions

-There are a number of important assumptions to keep in mind with school choice policies.

- Demand side (e.g. parents, students, etc.)
  - Access to adequate information about enrollment processes, school quality, choices, and so on
  - Ability to get to the various schools
  - Mobility costs
  - Tuition or other fees
- Supply side (e.g. schools)
  - Enough \$ to open a school
  - Political environment
  - Physical capital
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# Methods to evaluate choice policies

- OLS w/ controls
- Value-added framework (similar to the above)
- Student fixed-effects
- Matching
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# Student fixed-effects

- Between 2000 to 2010 or so, it was common to see researchers use student fixed-effects to estimate the effect of school choice programs and policies
- Conceptually, the approach removes all time-invariant factors among students from the analysis
- There are a number of important drawbacks:
  - You only identify treatment effects from students who switch among school sectors (e.g. charter to public, or public to charter)
  - This is often a small share of the sample. Open question as to whether the effect for “movers” and “stayers” are similar
  - Most approaches assume symmetric effects, (e.g. effect is the same for moving from charter to public as moving from public to charter).
  - Unlikely that movements among school sectors are not related to time-varying student-level factors

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# Matching

- Matching is also a method that ebbs and flows in acceptance among researchers (also varies among fields)
- Ideally one uses baseline student-level data (e.g. data pre-choice) to match students who did attend a school of choice to students who did not.
- There are a number of ways to do this, beyond the scope of this class.
- Method assumes that the reasons students do and do not attend schools of choice are fully captured in observable data.
- For example, one group of students live near charter schools and another do not, and the decision to live in one of these two neighborhoods is at least conditionally random.
- Personally, while the method can be a decent way to evaluate choice policies, I'm often left with the unanswerable question: If two students look otherwise observationally similar, why did one decide to attend a school of choice and the other did not?

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# Lottery

- Lottery designs typically have the best internal validity
- Rely on random assignment of students to choice schools from usually a non-random sample.
- As with all methods, these designs have a number of important considerations:
  - These designs while also often estimating an ITT, produce LATEs
  - Often don't help our understanding of the quality of an entire market since schools with lotteries are likely already better than average (e.g. why they have a waiting list).
  - Selection into the lottery sample is often not well understood, and treatment effect is sensitive to the definition of the counterfactual (all to say context matters).
  - Logistically many schools do not keep good lottery records



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# What we do we know (in a slide)

- Early evidence that private schools produced better student outcomes, but designs relied on selection on observables
- Charters as a large sector, no better or worse than traditional public schools
- In densely populated urban areas, oversubscribed charter schools produce large effects on students math and reading achievement. Effects on long-term outcomes less clear
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