

School Choice

What is school choice?

School choice has been viewed as a remedy to improve the quality of local schools and empower inner-city and lower-income parents by offering parents the freedom to choose the kind of education their children would receive.

In the realm of public school education, school choice has taken the form of magnet schools, charter schools, and other test-based or specially tracked schools. Parents and students have the option to choose schools other than neighborhood schools that generally have a similar racial, ethnic, and socio-economic make up to their local area. Private school choice, on the other hand, is a measure that some states have adopted to give lower-income students the opportunity to attend private schools they otherwise could not afford. This comes in the form of a voucher that parents can use towards the cost of a private or religious school tuition for their children.

Though advocates of school choice claim that it is the best way to enable students in failing public schools to get a better education, the issue of school choice raises some troubling questions about the impacts of individual “choice” on a society that aims to provide all of its citizens with equal access to educational opportunities.

Educators have found that choice programs are likely to increase the

segregation of students by race, social class and educational background. Greater choice in public education is also unlikely, on its own, to increase either the number of programs offered or the overall performance of schools.

Civil Rights Concerns

While school choice may allow such *informed* families and communities to make significant decisions about their children’s education, it is important to understand that not all families are equally informed. Better-educated parents who are more likely to be involved closely with their children’s schooling, for example, have consistently been prone to participate in choice programs. While those children in families that are aware of school options and have the means to actively choose them may benefit from a greater range of opportunities, those that are not aware of options will not. The lack of resources and information for families living in largely minority areas of high poverty means that not everyone will benefit equally from school choice. Those students that are able to make informed school decisions will leave those that are not in their neighborhood schools. Thus, school choice will further segregate schools along racial, ethnic, socio-economic, and educational backgrounds.

In the case of both public and private school choice, the greatest effect is that neighborhood schools will become a "last resort" option. Schools will become more racially and economically segregated than ever. Funds that could go towards public school improvement - reducing class size, updating facilities, and buying much needed supplies - will be redirected towards voucher payment of a non-public education.

In addition to the issue of private spending of public money, private school vouchers raise concerns about the separation of church and state as set forth in the Constitution. Public funds may not be designated to cover the costs of a child's education at a religious institution.

Above all, school choice is not an equitable remedy for the problems with local public education. It will provide opportunities only for those who have the means to seek them out, and will leave the others in all but abandoned schools.