

Public School Choice Options in the United States

Subjects: Education, Special

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Under the structure of compulsory education, students in the United States are required to attend school until at least 16 years of age, which can be done at a variety of educational institutions, both public and private. Amongst public schools, students are each assigned a neighborhood school but also frequently have the option to attend a choice school. While the purpose of neighborhood schools is to provide a guaranteed educational option that accommodates most students, choice schools serve varied purposes that accommodate specific learning styles and societal goals. Four types of publicly funded choice schools are magnet, charter, alternative, and virtual schools. While each was established to serve a specific societal goal, their purposes have shifted over time and have produced varied student outcomes, both academic and non-academic.

Keywords: school choice ; choice schools ; magnet schools ; charter schools ; alternative schools ; virtual schools

Compulsory education in the United States can be completed at a variety of educational institutions. Given that children are required to attend school until at least 16 years of age ^[1], the government provides a tuition-free option in the form of traditional public schools (TPS), which students are assigned to based on residence. However, given that quality and programs vary widely between schools ^[2], not all families prefer to enroll their children in their assigned TPS and may choose to enroll in a different school. Though not all families participate in school choice for a myriad of reasons (e.g., lack of transportation, awareness of options), school choice in the United States aims, in theory, to provide families with the opportunity to choose the school that best suits their student's educational needs, thus funding their attendance with public money, as is the case with TPS ^[3].

In order to attend a different school, some families opt to move to a neighborhood with a different assigned TPS. In this case, families leverage residential mobility to gain access to their preferred school that is publicly funded. Movement for this purpose is known by many names, including neighborhood choice, unofficial choice ^[4], and Tiebout sorting ^[2]. However, residential mobility is not accessible to all families due to financial constraints and the strong, positive correlation between home prices and school quality ^[5]. Based on this relationship, neighborhood choice is a practice that is not equally available to all families and that is utilized most often by higher-income families ^[5].

Based on inequitable access to neighborhood school assignments and the existent diversity in school quality, students are not required to enroll in their assigned TPS. Rather, school choice provides families with other options that allow for public funding to be used at both publicly and privately operated schools ^[3]. The expanded opportunity for parents to exercise choice in education is argued to promote equity by not only loosening the association between housing choices and school attendance ^[5] but also incentivizing higher educational quality ^[6] and re-centralizing the priorities of all parents and students in education ^[7]. These benefits of school choice are meant to operate through families' selection of their preferred school, thus creating competition amongst surrounding schools ^[8].

The schools that families have an opportunity to select from are known as choice schools. Amongst the types of choice schools available, there are options that are publicly financed and governed besides TPS, such as magnet, charter, alternative, and virtual schools. These options are not only intended to promote educational equity and quality but also serve a variety of social and economic purposes. While the United States also has non-public choice schools, such as private schools and homeschooling, these schooling options differ in that they predominantly serve private interests rather than societal ones. Public choice schools specifically serve as "agencies of the society as a whole" (p. 32) ^[7] because the institutions are accountable to the government based on their public funding and governance. However, given that societal needs continuously change, the goals of choice schools have also evolved since they were established. The following sections provide an overview of the societal purposes that public choice schools were intended to serve, how these missions have changed over time, and how the missions and administration of choice schools have driven differential outcomes for students.

References

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