SREE Conference Symposium Proposal: "When School Choice Works: Explaining Heterogeneity in Choice Outcomes"

Abstract

Parental school choice, in its many forms, is one of the fastest growing education reforms in the U.S. While the first public charter school was opened in Minnesota in 1991, today more than 5,400 charter schools serve more than 1.7 million students in 40 states and the District of Columbia (DC). As recently as 1997 there were only two private school voucher programs in the U.S., in Milwaukee and Cleveland. By the fall of 2010, a total of ten government-funded and nine tax-credit funded school voucher programs were serving almost 200,000 students in 12 states and the DC. In the spring of 2011, dubbed by The Wall Street Journal "The Year of School Choice," four new government-funded and three new tax-credit programs were enacted and 13 existing programs were significantly expanded. School choice is on the march.

At the same time there is little consistency in the results of studies that examine the effect that school choice has on student outcomes. For both charter schools and voucher programs, the benefits of choice interventions often vary by both the type of students who are exposed to choice and the type of schools they attend through exercising choice. The existence of outcome-variation by type of school or school operator is not surprising, since school choice is, by its very nature, manifests itself as a heterogeneous educational intervention. The specific form that school choice takes for any individual student will depend upon the selection his or her parent makes from the specific choice set available to them.

This symposium will present the current insights of three school choice research teams that have uncovered heterogeneous choice outcomes in their own major school choice evaluations. The papers will offer and explore a variety of explanations for why school choice often produces different outcomes for various types of participants and under different circumstances.


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