

ACU's Public Policy Institute provides critical analysis and research on current issues to improve the quality of policy debate and achieve practical solutions.

Policy Updates are prepared regularly to improve understanding on current and emerging policy issues.

## Choice and values in schooling

*Choosers, no losers...*

Issue #4 - 19 May 2011

### The issues

School choice has been a divisive issue in education policy for a long time, often the subject of heated debate based more on ideology than evidence.

In pursuing choice policies, governments seek to raise the level of student achievement, reflect the diverse values of parents, and allow for religious and educational difference.

Choice is supported by proponents of a free market approach to public policy, as a way of improving performance and increasing innovation and efficiency. Support for choice is also influenced by neoliberal thinking which favours concepts of individual freedom, personal responsibility and choice over state monopoly in the provision of public services. The appropriateness of centralised and bureaucratically delivered services in a modern economy is increasingly questioned. Choice and competition in public services, including schooling, are expected to bring extra pressure for performance, raising quality, increasing efficiency and contributing to the well-being of the population by allowing individuals greater freedom and control over their own lives.

On the other side of the debate, opponents of choice reject a market approach as incompatible with the equity objectives for schooling. While acknowledging the appeal of the concept of choice, they expect the overall costs, especially in terms of social segregation, to outweigh the benefits to some individuals.

The primary concern for critics of choice is the presumption that choice and competition in schooling will hurt the most disadvantaged and weaken social cohesion. Since choice is not within everyone's reach, for financial or geographic reasons, they foresee the benefits flowing to those already better off, the more articulate, educated and active families who have the knowledge, contacts, time and money to exercise choice and therefore exert their privilege. Not only do they expect less well resourced families to have limited choice, they predict that the exercise of choice by the most advantaged families will lead to social segregation and residualisation, taking out the top students, leaving behind those most in need of assistance, and reducing the potential to improve public schooling.

Critics also see dangers in supporting non-government schools that might become “parallel communities,” serving a single ethnic, religious or social class group. This would reduce the opportunity for children from different backgrounds to mix and develop tolerance and appreciation of differences in society.

## The evidence

Several recent international research studies have provided new evidence on the impact of choice and competition on both achievement and equity, and could usefully shift the debate beyond entrenched ideological positions.

School choice has different connotations in different national political contexts. In Australia, it generally means the opportunity to choose between government and non-government schooling, although public systems also offer choice at the secondary level, in academically selective, single-sex or specialised schools.

Demographic analysis of families exercising choice in favour of non-government schooling shows clearly that this is not a marginal issue, nor is non-government schooling simply the preserve of the privileged or wealthy. More than one-third of students nation-wide choose a non-government school and in all but one capital city, 50 per cent or more of secondary students attend a non-government school. Non-government schools cater for a broad spectrum of society and are chosen by families from all income groups. Educational choice can therefore be valued as a vital underpinning of a pluralist society, providing for diversity and promoting greater social cohesion.

The conventional view that choice is a matter of income and class is not supported by survey evidence which shows that school sector choice is more about values and attitudes, community and culture, than about class and wealth. Religion is an important driving force in school choice, especially for Catholic families, and so too are parents’ education level, occupational status and political orientation.

Most OECD countries have government-dependent private schooling and funding mechanisms which support school choice. This provides a comprehensive base for studying the system-wide effects of competition and choice.

## Choice and school outcomes

A wealth of research exists to show the benefits of choice to school effectiveness and achievement, benefits accruing to the individuals who exercise choice, and to the schools of choice.

These better outcomes have generally been attributed to the effects of advantaged background and segregation. Recent research however has been able to isolate school effects from student background and show that non-government schools in Australia add value to student performance in the final years of school – by approximately 9 per cent for independent schools and 5 per cent for Catholic systemic schools – after taking account of socioeconomic background, prior achievement and various aspects of student learning. While the reasons for this are not clear, one proposition is that non-government schools promote a more academic environment that lifts the performance of all students.

Internationally, OECD cross-country studies have provided clear evidence that choice and competition drive up standards and that various forms of school accountability, autonomy and choice policies combine to lift student achievement to substantially higher levels.

## Choice and equity

The concern of critics of choice and competition in schooling that they will lead to greater social inequality is also misplaced, according to OECD studies. A large part of the overall improvement in achievement resulting from competition from private schools accrues to students in public schools.

National features of accountability, autonomy and choice are directly related to equality of opportunity and are characterised as a “tide that lifts all boats.” The additional choice created by public funding for private schools is associated with a strong reduction in the dependence of student achievement on socioeconomic background, benefiting students from low socioeconomic backgrounds most of all.

Countries which combine relatively high shares of private operation with relatively high shares of government funding were found to do best among all possible operation-funding combinations, suggesting that “*fears of equity-efficiency tradeoffs and cream-skimming in implementing market-oriented educational reforms are not merely exaggerated but are largely mistaken*” (Schutz *et al* 2007:34).

## Further reading

Hoxby, C., 2003, *School Choice and School Productivity. Could School Choice be a Tide That Lifts All Boats?* Chicago: University of Chicago Press

Marks, G., 2009, "Accounting for school-sector differences in university entrance performance," *Australian Journal of Education*, Vol 53, Issue 1, Article 2, 19-38

Schutz, G., West, M., Woessmann, L., 2007, *School Accountability, Autonomy, Choice, and the Equity of Student Achievement: International Evidence from PISA 2003*, Paris: OECD

West, M., Woessmann, L., 2010, Competition from private schools boosts performance system-wide, *Vox*, 2 December, [www.voxeu.org](http://www.voxeu.org)

Woessmann, L., *et al.* 2007, “School Accountability, Autonomy, Choice, and the Level of Student Achievement: International Evidence from PISA 2003,” *OECD Education Working Papers*, No 13, Paris: OECD

**This is the second paper in our series of reports on education. The first paper, *Equity and Education*, is available on our website. The third paper, *Parental Contributions*, will be released next month.**

For more information on this series please visit our website at <http://www.acu.edu.au/323354>