NEPC Review: K-12 Without Borders: Public School Students, Families, and Teachers Shut In by Education Boundaries (Manhattan Institute, November 2022)

Reviewed by:

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Summary

A new report from the directors of EdChoice and published by the Manhattan Institute oversimplifies important equity issues as problems of school zone boundaries. The report contends that diminishing or eliminating school district boundaries and expanding school choice will allow for three desirable outcomes: (1) students attending better schools, (2) homeowners moving to cheaper housing or seeing their property value rise, and (3) teachers enjoying improved pensions. Despite noting mixed research results on how school choice affects housing patterns, the report assumes that eliminating school zone boundaries will necessarily result in wealthy families voluntarily relocating into poorer neighborhoods—ignoring the documented reality that many parents work to ensure that school district boundaries replicate segregation and inequity. In addition, the report offers no solutions to such concurrent problems as transportation for students choosing distant schools or housing for residents displaced by gentrification. Instead, the report glibly assumes someone, somewhere, will somehow find solutions. The report's illogical assumptions, lack of evidence, sleight of hand, and improbable leaps of logic make its advice to policymakers useless.

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I. Introduction

In decades of school choice debates, supporters have routinely cast choice as the key to educational salvation, while detractors have cast it as an existential threat to public education. Proponents argue that more choice will increase educational opportunity and equity as well as lower costs, encourage innovation, reduce segregation, improve achievement, increase civility, and reduce crime.[1] In contrast, critics argue that choice will undermine the political and financial viability of public education and increase segregation, adding inefficient, redundant systems while privatizing a public good.

In such debates, groups like EdChoice and the Manhattan Institute have been reliable advocates, prolific in producing reports affirming the theoretical benefits of choice on multiple measures. The latest such report, *K-12 Without Borders: Public School Students, Families, and Teachers Shut In by Education Boundaries*, authored by EdChoice directors Martin F. Lueken and Michael Q. McShane and published by the Manhattan Institute, makes the typical argument that expanding choice—by eliminating or diminishing district boundaries—can increase "educational opportunity,"[2] and it adds the theoretical benefits of improved housing markets and teacher pensions.

Policymakers should carefully consider to what extent reliable evidence is offered for such assertions.

II. Findings and Conclusions of the Report

The report is not an analysis, but a proposal that promises three outcomes:

> We propose an alternative: a system with fewer boundaries—one that allows students to access a wide array of schools, regardless of where they live, and one that does not punish teachers for moving between public, charter, or private sectors, or between states (or even within states, in some instances)—will improve outcomes for students, increase equity among homeowners, and promote retirement security for teachers.[3]

Thus, instead of reporting on research to determine whether such a strategy is actually effective, the report argues that weakened school district boundaries and expanded choice will automatically improve three areas—student outcomes, housing markets, and teacher pensions.

III. The Report's Rationale for Its Findings and Conclusions

As a proposal, the report uses no analytical framework except the agendas and assumptions of its sponsoring organizations. The report does, however, refer to Charles Tiebout's notion of "voting with one's feet."[4] Tiebout's idea—published a year after Milton Friedman's 1955 essay that launched the modern notion of school choice[5]—mirrored Friedman's thinking in that it applied market-style analyses (conceptualizing citizens as consumers who can manipulate options by having the choice to exit a system) to traditionally non-market endeavors (local public goods and services). The report uses Tiebout's thinking to argue for "porous" boundaries to encourage competition among government as well as non-government entities: "People can live in one city, work in another, and go for a meal or catch a ballgame in a third."[6] Thus, the report bases its recommendation on a prior economic analysis of local governance of schools—in reality, a highly political issue.

IV. The Report's Use of Research Literature

Since the report is not an analysis, its credibility depends on evidence for its claims, as reflected in the research literature it cites. In that regard it is severely wanting: overly narrow in its treatment of the issues, selective in its references to supporting research, and downright misleading in its claims of success. In some cases, the report cites studies to support its claims when in fact those studies offer no such supporting evidence.

Aside from superficial acknowledgement of the traditionally conservative American value of local control of education and historical reference to New Deal housing programs, the report offers no meaningful consideration of either the origins or (mal)formations of these "unseen" boundaries that have "sprung up" in the US,[7] nor the systems still in place reinforcing those "unseen" boundaries. In its superficial discussion of the issue's origins, the report

ignores existing evidence that such boundaries are still being formed, often by affluent communities seeking to ensure racial patterns in housing and schools.[8] The omission suggests to readers that historical injustices such as redlining are in the past, and school districts are the only remaining artifact. The report fails to explore how de jure segregation has been replaced by de facto segregation bolstered by intractable inequities in lending practices and wealth distribution.[9]

Rather than teasing out the complex relationship between "residential stratification" and school quality (albeit undefined), the report argues without evidence that because of the correlation between community socioeconomic privilege and "school quality . . . the public K-12 model exacerbates majority-minority and socioeconomic achievement gaps."[10] That is, the report asserts unconvincingly that the complex relationship between residential and school segregation is unidirectional and assumes that residential segregation can be fixed through school choice.

That assertion is beyond simplistic, and the report offers no evidence demonstrating that school choice alone can accomplish that goal. Fully ignored is voluminous research from the US and around the globe indicating that choice policies are associated with *increased* school[11] and residential segregation,[12] which can exacerbate the disadvantages experienced by non-White families[13]— a reality, again, ignored by the report. Established evidence indicates that a neighborhood's racial composition is a major factor in relocation decisions—particularly among White families who prioritize avoidance of non-Whites.[14]

Several citations are illogical or borderline absurd. For example, the report notes that "Children growing up in low-income households exposed to better areas experienced increases in income in adulthood, compared with similar children growing up in less favorable areas."[15] However, in this claim, the report unwittingly makes a case for socioeconomic integration, not school choice. In addition, the only evidence offered to indicate "that private school choice programs have the potential to significantly diminish income differences and housing price differences across public school districts"[16] is a reference to an unpublished conference paper[17] that cited yet another paper[18] that finds *potential* effects—in a simulation.

The most egregious sleight of hand in the report is the claim that choice leads to a "higher-quality school system" that "will improve outcomes for students."[19] Rather than evidence directly supporting the claim, the report uses metrics indicating choice systems' increasing popularity—a bit like saying Ivermectin proved an effective Covid treatment because it became popular in some circles. Decades of research on the effects of choice exist,[20] yet the report offers only a single paper tracking educational outcomes in the US over time, where the "researchers attribute the overall positive progress to a variety of education reform policies, including school choice."[21] But even that study[22] (written by choice advocates) actually shows *no causal link* between choice and academic progress. It simply mentioned choice as one of several reforms, including "school desegregation, school accountability, more equitable financing, English Language Learner policies," whose emergence correlated with improved student performance in recent decades.

Given that 30 states already have some form of interdistrict choice programs, [23] and given that the effects of choice versus non-choice have been studied for decades, the omission of

reference to this research base is telling. The empirical evidence is beyond disappointing, and even quite concerning. Every study of the effects of statewide voucher programs in the US—most similar to the proposal in this report—finds not only that they don't improve student outcomes, but that they actually have a negative effect.[24] For example, the evaluation of Ohio's choice program (conducted through a pro-voucher group) found large "unambiguously negative" impacts on student learning.[25]

Literature on school funding is also neglected. Increased and equitable funding—especially for schools serving poor students—is quickly dismissed with the contention that "equalizing school funding is unlikely to equalize school quality and therefore unlikely to mitigate residential stratification."[26] The report ignores research indicating positive effects of increased funding,[27] and it ignores the chasm between equal and equitable funding—the latter providing not equal but greater funding for schools serving students with greater needs. Historically, funding has been not only inequitable but unequal as well: US districts serving poor students in primarily non-White school districts, where needs are typically greatest, have received $23 billion less funding over the last 50 years than schools serving primarily White students.[28] Thus the complex and well-documented effects of chronic underfunding are glibly dismissed rather than acknowledged as relevant to meaningful reform.

Similarly questionable or unsupported claims about choice and housing markets and teacher pension plans appear. With no evidence, the report argues that if choice "became a tool for wealth redistribution" through leveling of housing markets,[29] some opponents of school choice would then endorse it. Similarly, the report contends that "Homeowners would no longer have to worry about school quality as an element of their household value."[30] This is clearly incorrect, as school proximity[31] is a primary preference for families and walkability is increasingly a factor in quality of life measures.[32] Similarly, the report asserts that:

> research shows that the availability of choice programs increases housing values in general. Looking at the various studies of private school choice programs, it is clear that offering a wider set of choices to families can make a state or district more attractive to potential homeowners.[33]

The "research" cited is, in fact, another report by EdChoice[34] that, on closer inspection, is a limited and misleading collection of cherry-picked studies authored by voucher advocates, and which says nothing about homeowners, despite the claims in the report.[35]

Similarly, arguing that a choice system would allow for portability of teacher pensions across systems, the report cites sources such as the Equable Institute, which has been described as "a true who's who of anti-pension ideologues."[36] Moreover, its data shows only that employees who stay in a pension plan longer have greater retirement security.

V. Review of the Report's Methods

The report is not an analysis leading to a conclusion, but a "proposal"—one that has been around for decades—reflecting the agendas of EdChoice and the Manhattan Institute. There-

fore, there are no "methods" to review. However, there are elements of the argument that deserve additional attention.

First, the report minimizes or ignores difficulties in the evidence cited that undermines its argument. For example, while the report assumes widespread demand for new school options, it also indicates that of families "with a child attending their residentially assigned school, about 80% said that the school was their first choice."[37] In terms of teacher pensions, it not only fails to provide evidence of effectiveness of its proposal,[38] but also concludes that "For approximately 80% of teachers, the math might work out to a worse deal."[39] Though a purported benefit of choice is decreased segregation, the report cites a study showing that such choice increases "the likelihood of gentrification in racially isolated neighborhoods of color."[40] Indeed, this has actually occurred in places like Chicago and New York, where affluent and White families move into an area and send their children to a new charter school, consigning the current, lower-income families to older public schools while also increasing their housing costs.[41] Additionally, as other choice advocates have acknowledged, school choice exacerbates racial segregation within schools.[42] These confounding realities undermine the assumptions of the report itself about integration of neighborhoods and schools.[43] To make matters worse, another complication is that, as the report acknowledges, "houses that have capitalized the quality of local schools into their value would possibly lose value as a result of a more porous border into that school."[44]

Importantly, the report also provides broad principles with no guidance on practice: "we want to alter the way this schooling system functions, in order to maximize the benefits of the district-centric way of organizing schools and to minimize its downsides."[45] Even when acknowledging several potential difficulties, the report offers no thoughts on remedies. For example, it notes that "Taxation, transportation, and school funding all need to be addressed to implement choice policies that involve students crossing educational barriers,"[46]—no word on how. The same is true of meaningful student access. Magnet schools put "up barriers to admission,"[47] and "open enrollment . . . [has allowed for] . . . restrictions and requirements that have limited who has been able to participate in open enrollment programs."[48] The report admits some restrictions have been reasonable—but again, no guidance appears on how to prevent "unreasonable" practices. Finally, the report acknowledges that an "administrative burden would be placed on the system as well, as school leaders try to figure out the fairest way to allocate seats in desirable schools."[49] Yet this ignores that school leaders, however well-intentioned, would have to balance demands from local residents and performance incentives—which often translate to marketing and sorting efforts undercutting the report's call for more equitable access. And even before admission, there is the question of how families might choose a school: "Picking a school will become much more complicated. Rather than simply going to the nearby public school, students and their parents would need to research various school options, figure out how to get to and from the schools, and find out how to apply for admission."[50] Again, no helpful suggestions appear, nor does recognition that various social groups have uneven ability to shoulder search costs and access information.[51]

And yet, despite these many acknowledged problems, the report concludes that "Those costs would, however, be *outweighed by the benefits* that we have outlined here"[52] (emphasis add-

ed). This despite the fact that the report has offered no evidence for its claims of benefits, beyond the assumed, theoretical, and simulated.

VI. Review of the Validity of the Findings and Conclusions

As detailed above, the report's claims that school choice can fix education, housing markets, and teacher pensions are unsupported and unfounded. Some of the assertions—such as that "wealthier families would find strong incentives to move to lower-quality school districts"[53]— are laughable, especially in view of evidence from within other choice systems such as New Zealand, where competition to get into the most preferred schools is driving up housing prices in those neighborhoods.[54]

VII. Usefulness of the Report for Guidance of Policy and Practice

This report is not an analysis, but an agenda-driven proposal familiar to anyone who has paid attention to education policy over the last six decades. It is evidence-free and wholly ideologically driven, more likely to exacerbate segregation and low achievement than produce the benefits promised. As such, it has nothing to offer policymakers seeking serious solutions to critical education problems.

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