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School Choice: Evidence and Recommendations

Educational Innovation and Diversification in School Choice Plans

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Executive Summary

The concept of innovation has been closely tied to the push for school choice, serving as a key rationale for such choice plans as charter schools, vouchers and other alternatives to neighborhood-based school assignment.

While innovation continually occurs to varying degrees throughout American education, some versions of school choice are specifically designed to accelerate the pace of innovation, not only in how education is organized, but more importantly in teaching and learning, where substantive innovation is thought to have the greatest and most direct impact for students. While some choice reforms are specifically designed to force innovation by generating competition, questions remain as to what extent and how these reforms actually do so.

This review points to several considerations for encouraging substantive educational innovations:

- As with innovations in other sectors, educational improvement entails directing considerable resources into particular schools to develop and pilot specific new approaches to teaching and learning with different populations, rather than trying to do it on the cheap through the relatively simple restructuring of choice models.
- The development of innovations involves nurturing and shielding such efforts from immediate mandates and competitive pressures, rather than forcing schools representing new ideas to sink or swim in the educational marketplace.
- As noted, there are unique qualities around education that defy the easy application of basic market models. If markets are to be used effectively for organizing the production and distribution of education, more thought has to be given to the type of market reflected in education, such as the specific conditions that can best encourage innovation.
- Inability to routinely provide good information about school quality can motivate schools to choose symbolic action rather than substantive innovation; for markets to work effectively, informational "asymmetries" between producers and consumers need to be addressed.

We cannot rely on competition alone to generate quality information for families. While many point to value-added modeling or parent information centers, non-market efforts such as rigorous school inspections (as in the United Kingdom) that provide parents with information on multiple dimensions of school quality can also be useful.

- Furthermore, governments are often better suited than independent market actors to provide a range of options for families. We know that professional activity in the state sector has often been more successful at generating innovations. It could also be that innovation will flow more from government-guaranteed choice plans such as magnet schools, where efforts are made to establish and sustain a range of options.

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The concept of innovation has been closely tied to the push for school choice, serving as a key rationale for such choice plans as charter schools, vouchers and other alternatives to neighborhood-based school assignment. In particular, critiques of traditional public schooling arrangements have played upon the idea that governance by districts stifles creativity and entrepreneurial ingenuity in schools. Such critiques portray a "one-size-fits-all" public education system that neglects the needs of diverse communities and individual learners—presenting a serious equity issue. Hence, according to this thinking, education should be organized under competitive models to nurture new and different instructional approaches, resulting in a range of alternatives for families. Promoters hope that with a set of real options, parents will be able to make decisions based on different curriculum and instructional approaches, rather than on, say, the racial or social-class composition of schools.

Some choice reforms—policies and movements such as charter schools, vouchers, open enrollment and home schooling—are specifically designed to generate competition and thereby force innovation in schools. As a result of such focused efforts, innovation may appear, not only in the new forms of schooling, but also within competing public schools. However, important questions then arise regarding these reforms:

- To what extent do various manifestations of school choice represent innovations in policy?
- How can school choice generate innovation?
- Where do those innovations occur, and what forms do they typically take?
- What factors encourage or inhibit innovation, and what are the consequences?

This review of research notes the dual goals of innovation and diversification of options. It finds that school choice is providing alternatives in some communities, but innovations generated by competitive forces are often focused in areas where they are least likely to improve equitable access to quality education. On the other hand, many useful innovations are emerging from sources not predicted by theories that focus on competition.

The first part of this review notes the promise of innovation, highlighting its significance, but also outlining some of the conceptual difficulties that emerge when we look more deeply into the concept with

regard to education. Following this overview is a typology and survey of the types of innovations born of school choice, examined in light of its promoters' high expectations. The survey identifies areas where the most innovative practices are occurring, explores how such innovation may or may not provide new options for families, and examines factors that encourage or inhibit the generation and dissemination of educational innovation. Contrary to much of the simplistic rhetoric promoting choice as a sure route to innovation and improvement, a discussion of the structures and attributes unique to education demonstrates why it resists easy analogy to innovation in other fields. The concluding discussion suggests that the most beneficial innovations may emerge from professional, rather than competitive, impulses.

The Logic of Innovation in School Choice

There are many expectations and promises for school choice, including community empowerment, parental satisfaction, educational entrepreneurship, and, of course, higher achievement. But a central argument of the school choice movement has been that choice will both lead to and capitalize on beneficial innovation. That is, innovation has been promoted both as goal in itself and as a necessary condition for establishing environments and incentives that will inevitably lead to the ultimate goal of increased educational quality.

Choice advocates and theoreticians have been explicit in linking more market-like structures in school choice plans to the opportunities and incentives required to generate innovation.[1] The thinking is that provider competition and liberated consumer choice is sure to generate widespread innovation in choice schools, a picture in direct opposition to that painted of public schools, which are characterized as imposing unnecessary constraints on creativity. Few have set out this logic as clearly as Nobel Laureate economist Milton Friedman, the intellectual author of the school choice movement, who argued that public education systems "repel the imaginative and daring," leading to an "excess of conformity."[2]

Nowhere is this perspective more evident than in the charter school movement, particularly in its early assessment of the potential of charters to serve as "laboratories" or "research and development" (R&D) centers for innovative educational practices. As John Flaherty argues: "One of the foremost arguments in favor of charter schools in public education is the increase in innovation that *will surely follow* from the autonomy granted to charter schools" (emphasis added).[3] Many expect that reforms harnessing competitive pressures to attract students will lead to a flowering of different program options from which families may choose.[4] Friedman, for instance, contends that choice systems will provide "many more choices, there will be a whole rash of new schools that will come into existence. The government schools will improve, and the private school system will improve."[5] This is because competition

> would produce a much wider range of alternatives—unless it was sabotaged by excessively rigid standards for approval. The choice among public schools themselves would be greatly increased.... And most important, new sorts of private schools could arise to tap the vast new market.[6]

Thus, most of the legislation authorizing charters is explicit about the expectation that they will produce a flow of innovation in teaching and learning.[7] As Flaherty notes, the "search for innovative teaching methods was foremost on the minds of legislators."[8]

Similar expectations are also associated with other versions of school choice, since freedom from regulation is often equated with freedom to innovate. Such is the case with private schools. The Friedman Foundation—one of the leading champions of vouchers for sending children to private schools—argues that private schools produce superior outcomes because they are unregulated:

> Private schools are good largely because they are free to innovate. Forcing them to use the same standards as public schools, to take mandatory tests based on curricula chosen by the state rather than parents or to comply with unnecessary red tape, is bad news.[9]

Other forms of school choice are also associated with innovation, but in different ways. For instance, virtual or cyber schooling, which is increasingly important in areas such as home schooling, is seen as an innovative delivery mechanism, though there is no particular expectation that it will deliver innovative content. Likewise, public school choice programs, such as magnet schools and open-enrollment plans, are considered innovative in expanding the options offered to parents, but are not necessarily considered a lever to force innovation in teaching and learning.

Conceptual Issues Regarding Innovation and School Choice

For all of the certainty that innovative practices "will surely follow" from charters and other choice plans, the core concept of innovation is actually remarkably nebulous, and often conflated with other ideas. For instance, if a school is said to be "innovative," that could mean several different things. As commonly understood, the term could indicate that the school is (a) a result of a policy innovation, such as a school created by new legislation authorizing charter or alternative schools; (b) producing innovations, such as a school creating a new pedagogical approach; or (c) adopting innovations generated by other schools, such as a school that borrows innovative models from other schools.[10] Moreover,

people often speak of "innovation" when they are actually referring to *diversification* of options in a local context.

In fact, there are different established definitions of the concept, which may contribute to the confusion in its application to school choice. A common understanding, drawing on the primary meaning of the term, is that something must be new in order to be innovative.[11] That is, innovation is the act of creating something original—for example, in the case of schooling, a novel practice or approach. However, most "new" things draw from pre-existing ideas or practices. Therefore, this purist definition slights innovations that are the result of combinations of previous practices, or ideas that have been transplanted from another field. Indeed, in some sense, any change represents innovation.

A more subjective conception classifies things as innovative if they are new to a local context.[12] However, this perspective ignores well-known problems with policy borrowing (that is, transplanting policies across contexts), while expecting each local community to reinvent the wheel is also a highly inefficient use of resources. Moreover, this subjective approach conflates the idea of *innovation* with *diversification*—an important consideration with regard to school choice. Even if "innovation" may refer to the creation of a new practice, something would *appear to be new* if it has not been seen before in a local context. And, indeed, creating new options for families is one of the primary themes of school choice in general, and one of the specific goals of innovation in particular. But a subjective focus on a local context can also dilute the larger push for producing new approaches by confusing the diffusion of practices with the creation of new ones. In fact, much of the argument advancing school choice acknowledges this distinction. For example, many of the laws authorizing charter schools see them as a mechanism to encourage "different and innovative teaching methods," indicating that reformers want both innovation *and* diversification of options.[13] Hence, innovations are anticipated not simply in organizational structures, but specifically in teaching and learning.[14]

Thus, the idea of innovation is itself vague, particularly in a politicized area such as school reform. Perspectives from economics and organizational theory provide some insights into the question of how change occurs, and how it may be distinct from "innovation." For instance, Rogers highlights the notion that a practice is innovative if it appears to be novel to people in local contexts.[15] Yet this perspective may blunt the push for new innovations overall by conflating the invention of a practice with its dissemination. For example, is opening a McDonald's restaurant in a town that previously had only a Wendy's an innovation? Most people would probably say no. Although some changes may appear to be innovations in a local context, they may represent nothing new in the broader scheme of things. Indeed, change alone is not innovation. As Daft and Becker observe: "Innovation is the adoption of something new; change is the adoption of something different."[16] Organizational theorists

contend that true innovation involves "at least partly exogenous support or legitimization"[17]—an issue of "valuation," where marketplace value is an indicator of innovation.[18] Theories of management tend to equate innovation with invention, since organizations pursue innovations through research and development in order to gain a competitive advantage.[19] Similarly, economists note that innovation, unlike change, "presumes a net improvement"; from an economic perspective, innovation is something that produces improvements in efficiencies and outcomes.[20] The industrial organization literature perceives innovation as the keystone in a process whereby inventions/innovations are commercialized and then propagated through the market largely through emulation.[21]

Regardless of the specifics of the meaning, the idea of encouraging innovation through competition in education, from the perspective of policymaking on this issue, presumes two prerequisites. First, innovations must be replicable—that is, what has been found to work in one school needs to be transferable to other schools. While this may seem obvious, inasmuch as school choice also encourages diversification and specialization, more successful practices may be unique (or uniquely effective) for a particular population or community, or may not be suited to more comprehensive models of schooling common in the district sector. Secondly, there must be some mechanism to facilitate the spread of a practice. Many market advocates argue that competitors will emulate successful practices. However, this also assumes that information about innovations is available to competitors, and that they are allowed to use them. Because of problems in this regard, some have argued that competition is not itself enough to encourage innovations, but that formal networks are also necessary to help in the dissemination of innovations.[22]

Discussions of innovation through school choice plans can be remarkably vague—partly because the nature of innovation can be unpredictable, but also because there is no consensus about what innovation means, especially in its difference from diversification. The next section pursues more clarity in the discussion by offering a typology of change that can be considered innovative to varying degrees. This typology draws on the empirical record of change and innovation evident in different school choice programs, and offers a brief overview of the types of innovation typical of various school choice models.

A Typology of Innovation for Examining School Choice

To better assess the logic applied to school choice—that competition will inevitably spark educational innovation and improvement—it is important to consider the different dimensions in and through which change may occur, so that we can weigh the extent that such changes might be considered innovations, a subset of change. These dimensions include the level at which innovation is perceived (school, district or classroom level, for example); the nature of practices thought to

be innovative (marketing or pedagogical strategies, for example); and how innovations are prompted and nurtured by such choice mechanisms as charter schools, open-enrollment programs, inter- and intradistrict choice, voucher plans, and home schooling and virtual or cyber schooling. By examining these issues, we can better illuminate where changes are more substantive, more symbolic, or simply non-existent — an important notion if we are to understand factors that nurture or inhibit innovations, and to design systems in which innovation is encouraged. As described in the concluding discussion, contrary to much of the simplistic rhetoric that promotes choice as inevitably leading to innovation and improvement, structures and attributes unique to education resist easy analogies about innovation drawn from other fields.

Levels of Innovation

A substantive discussion of educational innovation requires distinguishing among policies that conceptualize innovation as input and those that conceptualize it as intended outcome—or both. Policymakers may seek to promote improvements in schools by adopting innovative governance policies (as with charter schools), school funding (as with vouchers), or delivery mechanisms (cyber schooling)—all inputs at the *governance level*. Such changes may be ends in themselves, or may be intended to spur innovations more immediately evident to students—for instance, in a school's orientation or organization, or in the classroom. On the other hand, policymakers may seek to implement improvements directly at the classroom level—for example, by mandating a specific curriculum. However, school choice as a reform movement generally refrains from such top-down micro-management. The assumption is that local actors (including parents and teachers) understand the individual needs and preferences of a child better than bureaucrats and policymakers.[23] Consequently, policymakers interested in choice focus instead on institutional levers for creating the optimal environment and structural incentives to compel schools to improve. Hence, in this thinking, classroom-level innovation is best encouraged through structural reforms, rather than specified by policymakers.[24]

After leveraging policy to produce changes in governance, a second and sometimes intermediate level is the local *school (or district)*. Institutional policies are typically targeted at precipitating improvements in schools. For instance, due to the competition generated in school choice systems, many schools have taken on a more entrepreneurial orientation, hiring business managers, cutting costs through contracting for services, or employing marketing campaigns. Freed from many school regulations, charter schools have a number of opportunities in this area, and many have pursued innovations in terms of new forms of organization, alternative employment practices, accessing private capital, or targeting niche markets.[25] While these might appear most obviously in individual schools,

their significance is most notable in terms of aggregate effects. A single school may make internal changes in terms of how teachers are evaluated or how the school promotes itself, but the larger impact is in how other schools in that area respond in creating a range of new and, it would be hoped, improved options for families in the community.

In fact, it is expected that these changes will then have an impact in the *classroom*. Policymakers can change institutional arrangements and shape alternative structures and incentives for schools, and schools can respond to those factors in how they organize themselves and arrange their resources. But, without improvements in educational quality—a classroom-level concern—other institutional and organizational reconfigurations are only so much reformist posturing. As Richard Shavelson observes, "the real issue is whether what goes on in the classroom has substantially changed."[26] Indeed, reforms such as charter schools make this a central consideration. However, educational historians warn that classroom practice—what organizational theorists call the "technical core" of the educational enterprise—is the area most resistant to change.[27]

Nature of Changes

In addition to the known difficulty of effecting classroom change, there are several other reasons to believe that many changes presented as "innovations" in education may be more about appearance than essence—particularly in view of the enhanced incentives to pursue innovations in the new education marketplace of school choice. In view of the weight of demographic factors, the degree to which schools have a primary impact on student learning is questionable, and it is not clear that educational innovations can significantly increase that effect.[28] Thus, because it is so difficult to increase student learning, instead of focusing on innovations in teaching and learning, schools often focus on marketing innovations to simply attract "better students." An "innovative" school may thus appear to have changed its impact on student learning when what has actually changed is the student body. Moreover, many parents are not particularly interested in sending their children to an "innovative" school, preferring instead schools that focus on traditional practices. Furthermore, in an area such as education, families are at an "informational disadvantage" relative to schools because of the complexity of the organizational processes involved.[29] Because of this asymmetry, it is relatively easy for schools to suggest innovation even when little or none is taking place.[30] This issue is exacerbated because of the rise of marketing in areas with more intensive school choice programs.

Therefore, it is important to consider the nature of changes and practices that are presented as innovations. Some innovations entail fundamental and sustained improvements in teaching and learning. For instance, computer assisted instruction that seeks to individualize

education for different learners might be shown to improve academic outcomes. Innovations in systems and structures might also represent real change, but they may not automatically have the anticipated impact on teaching and learning—change might remain at the structural level. But innovations in symbols and marketing may become more common; such "innovations" may be of value more for their use in shaping perceptions of the educational enterprise, as with changing the name of a school or an administrative title, or the addition of school uniforms, or a school logo.[31]

Diversification and Innovation

As noted earlier, innovation should not be too easily equated with diversification. While creating more alternatives is important, and is certainly a co-equal goal, it is important to note that innovation is a prerequisite for diversification. That is, innovation generates new options, whereas diversification extends the fruits of innovation into multiple local contexts, where families could then choose among different options. Thus, although innovation and diversification are closely related, they are distinctly different processes. Observers must take a big-picture perspective when considering innovation in schools in order to assess whether new practices are either initiated or replicated at a given school.

One question to consider is whether school choice is itself a prerequisite for, or a result of, innovation. If the former, then markets may be better suited for creating alternatives, since competitive forces generated through choice can spark innovations, which will lead to a greater diversity of options. But if, it is the latter—if choice results from innovation—then governments, capitalizing on research and development efforts, might more easily establish contrasting programs at different schools in order to offer families alternatives. That is, the state could provide diverse options, reflecting innovations already in existence. While further innovations may then transpire, the primary point in this scenario would be to offer alternatives.

This issue is illustrated in the example of charter schools, which were advanced as R&D centers for new practices and approaches in teaching and learning. The idea behind this thinking was that autonomy from direct state oversight, competition, and choice would generate innovations, and thus diversification in the form of new options for families. Although some ideas were truly novel, many charter schools quickly trended towards more familiar educational practices, and charter school "innovations" in teaching and learning were for the most part already evident in other schools (see below). Notably, this includes state-run schools of choice such as magnet schools, through which district-run schools were already using practices that were then considered "innovative" in charter schools. Consequently, the rhetoric around charter school innovations shifted, so that advocates saw them as "laboratories" or "greenhouses" where unique practices available elsewhere could be

further developed. Later, some saw charters only as "showrooms" where new practices could be brought to local contexts, making them primarily delivery mechanisms, as opposed to development mechanisms. In this sense, it is not clear that greater innovation necessarily results from competitive choice systems. Instead, insofar as the "innovations" evident in charter school classrooms were already evident elsewhere, one could make the case that innovations were already occurring in larger state systems.

Assessing Innovation in School Choice Models

With these considerations in mind, a brief overview of practices in different school choice schemes suggests that innovations tend to vary somewhat by school type, and most often appear outside of the classroom.[32] Furthermore, few substantive innovations may be occurring in teaching and learning, but the paucity of good research on innovation in many of these models suggests that this topic is drastically under-studied.

- Perhaps the model with the greatest level of innovation is *cyber schooling*, including blended models of on-line and face-to-face instruction that cut across not only instructional approaches but also public and private sectors. Cyber schooling, or virtual schooling, an innovation in content delivery, is particularly popular with home schoolers, although it has spread far beyond that audience. Nearly 150 charter schools are cyber schools, and numerous other public and private schools use Internet delivery as a resource to varying degrees.[33] Cyber schooling affords parents additional opportunities to monitor children's work, and it gives administrators new means to employ, supervise and assess teachers.[34] Although there are many opportunities for further educational innovations in this respect, this new forum for schooling also presents significant accountability and resource challenges in some areas, such as questions of quality and training for teachers on the public payroll.[35]

- *Home schooling* is often associated with traditional family values, and frequently represents a reaction against overly modern curriculum and pedagogy, but it also offers the potential for developing great innovations in teaching and learning. Home schooling families are developing strong networks, and are even establishing "institutions," such as learning centers, to support learning in ways that parallel, but differ from, conventional schooling.[36] Home schooling is also blurring boundaries between different sectors, as charter schools and public school districts seek different ways of catering to this growing population.[37] However, the little research that has been done on this model strongly suggests that, despite its potential for innovation, most home schooling in fact focuses on traditional forms of pedagogy.[38]

- *Charter schools* are the choice model most explicitly tied to the idea of innovation. Because their substantial autonomy provides great opportunity for creativity, and because of the competitive pressures charters face, reformers have been clear in their expectations to see substantive innovations in charter classrooms. However, research suggests that in charters—the most studied model in terms of innovation—most innovations are happening outside the classroom. For instance, charters have embraced alternative employment practices such as merit pay, and they have taken the lead in using marketing to attract students.[39] Yet larger scale studies indicate relatively few innovations in charter classrooms, with most practices tending toward familiar or traditional approaches.[40]

- *Magnet schools* may also have the opportunity to innovate, due to their distinctive missions, and often more homogenous community. However, since they may deal with more specific and sometimes more affluent students, opportunities to innovate may result more from demographics than school type. Still, there have been relatively few studies of innovation in magnet schools. In the early 1990s, over one-third of magnets focused on a specific subject, and over one-quarter had a unique pedagogical focus.[41] Teachers in magnet schools report greater levels of autonomy and less standardized curricula, but few substantive differences in classrooms compared to other schools.[42] Some magnet schools have attempted to re-orient themselves to be more student-centered, and in pursuit of this goal have adopted such practices as project-based learning.[43]

- *Intra- or interdistrict* choice plans are typically not geared specifically towards generating innovations, as are, say, charter school programs. Instead, they primarily allow for greater freedom of choice. Still, some research has suggested that some schools in such districts are pursuing information about parental decision-making practices—perhaps a form of administrative innovation.[44] In some instances, though, districts provide for the establishment of individual schools or sets of schools specifically for research and development, "to develop best practices and to be a catalyst for change that could be transferred to the rest of the system" (see below).[45] These efforts, brought about by professional impulses to improve, rather than to generate competitive incentives, have garnered some acclaim from across the political spectrum for the extent of their educational innovations.[46]

- *Vouchers for private schools* are advanced more with parental control, rather than innovation, in mind. However, private schools in voucher programs in many ways best approximate the theoretical conditions for producing innovations: they are free of district regulation, must

> compete for students, and are held accountable to consumers largely on results. Thus, the pro-voucher Friedman Foundation contends that "Private schools are good largely because they are free to innovate."[47] Yet while vouchers programs themselves might be considered to be innovative at the policy level, there is virtually no evidence to suggest that private schools accepting vouchers are generally any more innovative—especially at the classroom level—than any other schools. In fact, parents might very well pursue private education for their children largely because it is often associated with more traditional curriculum and instruction. Even on a wider scale, looking at public and private schools in general, the picture is quite mixed. Some progressive private schools (not the type to accept vouchers) are known to adopt non-traditional forms of curriculum and pedagogy,[48] but independent private schools are also the most conventional and often the most internally standardized.[49]

Thus, in general, there is a considerable amount of activity and change in and around schools, although differences in that regard do not appear to be strictly associated with school type or model. Instead, once again, evidence of substantive and symbolic innovation is clearer at policy and administrative levels, such as with employment and promotional practices, while evidence of new and different classroom practices is relatively sparse or, where it exists, often concentrated in the state sector—contrary to the logic of some competition-oriented reforms.

Factors that Inhibit or Encourage Innovation

In order to understand the patterns of innovation and conformity in different models of school choice, it is important to understand the sources of innovation, at least on a theoretical level. Then we can recognize how these do or do not play out in the real world of schooling and, more importantly, appreciate the obstacles to innovation that are inherent in different models, and in education itself.

How Innovations Emerge

Essentially, theorists point to two general sources of innovation. The first is driven by professional or social-benefit ideals; the second by marketplace incentives. Innovation can emerge from professional motivations where innovators seek to meet a social need or to advance the public good through improvements and inventions. An impulse toward such innovation is built into the norms of many professions.[50] Historically, advances in the field of medicine illustrate the desire to improve care for humanitarian reasons. In such instances, innovations are developed for the public good by non-profit entities. However, in the current environment, there is some concern that introducing competitive incentives into

traditionally non-profit sectors—including education—can re-orient or diminish such impulses.[51]

Of course, in the marketplace, competitive environments have generated innovations in many areas. In an arena focused on material gain, individuals and organizations pursue innovations in order to maximize profits and win competitive advantages. The market then rewards the most flexible and effective innovators who can provide consumers with higher quality options and lower costs. The need for ever-increasing innovation is woven into the fabric of markets, but support for it can take different shapes. Some markets, such as information technology, are structured to nurture small-scale, independent innovators; for example, many improvements in computers have been developed by people working in their basements (or a garage, in the case of Apple Computers). Other markets, like aerospace engineering, rely on larger corporate firms with access to considerable resources for R&D.[52]

In considering both professionalism and competition as sources of innovation, it is important to examine how each affects both the rate and the focus of innovation. Economists such as Gary Becker argue that competitive market incentives "would induce a more rapid rate of innovation into curriculum and teaching"—but to what end is not clear.[53] For instance, the competitive pharmaceutical industry directs a considerable amount of innovation toward profitable, but not necessarily widespread, problems.[54] Furthermore, it is not clear that markets necessarily produce a greater rate of innovation in education, since such incentives work better in some sectors than others, and it remains unclear what type of market education represents.[55]

Under these two models, different factors can be leveraged to encourage the development of substantive innovations in education. The market-based perspective emphasizes that competition provides structural incentives to compel schools to pursue new and better ways of teaching individual learners. Therefore, the focus in the market model is largely on enhancing effectiveness at the school and classroom level by structuring the external incentives to induce innovation, which in turn will enhance effectiveness at the school and classroom level. Eschewing the idea that schools might benefit from more resources, market advocates rely on competition and its threat of fewer resources to force schools to innovate. Consequently, teachers' qualifications become less important than their ability to think creatively in response to competitive pressures. But in this equation such creativity is also thought to require autonomy from external (i.e., district, union) regulations that leave little room for entrepreneurial activity.

In contrast, the social-benefit perspective acknowledges that education professionals are specially trained to deal with issues in schools. Therefore, they can be expected to seek solutions to problems by innovating, both because they are aware of a professional responsibility to do so and because better meeting students' needs is an intrinsically good

thing to do. Still, while professionals may not be primarily motivated by financial gain, efforts to create and improve systems for meeting the needs of students require major resources—for instance, to support professional or curriculum development, or program creation and administration. Moreover, successful innovations can be elevated and disseminated as "best practices," but the possibility is easily undermined. Where there is a lack of professional autonomy, bureaucratic mechanisms often impose new practices on practitioners, irrespective of context and most often with thoroughly inadequate professional development.

While professional and market models for innovation differ widely in their assumptions and implementation, however, both face significant structural barriers to change inherent in the current educational environment and processes.

Impediments to Innovation

There are also many serious impediments to innovation in education under both market and professional models. Market advocates highlight one of the most serious challenges in publicly administered schools: the control exerted by the "education establishment"—the hegemonic alliance of school boards, bureaucracies, and teachers unions. Critics note that self-interested parties controlling education governance focus resources and efforts towards their own purposes, rather than towards improving the education of children. Indeed, although there is some interest from unions and education officials in reforming education, concerns about special interests cause many to suspect that such reforms are largely about further enriching and empowering the established interests.[56]

While this is a strong and compelling critique, there is research indicating that innovations have often resulted from government or bureaucratic intervention when choice-based systems were failing to generate innovations—indicating that competitive markets may also involve barriers to innovation.[57] Indeed, some of the most innovative educational practices in the US are evident in district-run programs.[58] In fact, key aspects of public education, such as open access and public funding, defy the logic of purer market models, and the blunt application of markets in education may create *disincentives* for substantive educational innovation.[59] It appears that education markets embody incentive structures that corrupt market pressures to innovate, so that such markets might actually cause many schools to standardize curricula rather than innovate.[60] This is particularly true in cases where consumers have common goals for a service such as education (which are often reinforced through such standardized measures of quality as standardized tests).

Other challenges are found in characteristics of the current teaching force and profession. As market advocates correctly point out, under current arrangements, teachers do not own—and therefore cannot

profit from—any innovations they develop, thereby undercutting the incentive to innovate. Additionally, new ideas about teaching children can be blocked by district and union regulations. Moreover, high rates of turnover in the profession and a disproportionate share of inexperienced and unqualified teachers in poorer schools make it difficult to develop and sustain new pedagogies. On the other hand, it could be that less experienced teachers may be *better* situated to develop innovations, since their approach to teaching is not yet as established.

Other potential barriers to innovation are evident at the organizational level of the education enterprise. For instance, it could be that newer organizations, such as a newly established charter school, are not bound by previous practices and traditions, and thus are better positioned to develop and embrace alternative practices—an argument for new charter schools. But sociologists also point out that such organizations are more desperate to establish "legitimacy," and have to prove themselves in the marketplace—incentives to adopt established practices.[61] Indeed, there is some evidence that new schools established as alternative educational models quickly recognize pressures to conform to common methods of schooling.[62] (In fact, the greater autonomy offered as the remedy to escape standardization often serves instead as a device that allows schools to avoid at-risk students, as well as the educational innovations that could help those students.[63]) And as with teachers, schools generally do not own any innovations they develop. This is particularly evident in the contradictory position in which charter schools find themselves. Unlike district-run models, such as Boston's Pilot Schools, which are also designed as R&D centers to create innovations for other public schools, charter schools are expected to share any innovations they develop with the competition. Private schools and education management organizations (EMOs) are in some ways better positioned to deal with the problem of owning and profiting from innovations, but this would mean using legal protections to withhold innovations from competitors.

The issue of scale also has implications for encouraging or inhibiting innovations. Reformers often highlight the importance of small, independent "mom and pop" schools as the best model for innovation in education, as local providers can pursue different ways of meeting the needs of individuals. Yet, because it is so difficult to observe instructional processes and measure learning outcomes in multiple small sites, questions about legitimacy and quality constantly plague such operations.[64] Furthermore, sizable organizations such as large school districts or private EMOs have the institutional capacity to develop and nurture innovations by directing additional resources—what economists call "monopoly rents"—to R&D efforts *shielded from direct competition.* Larger organizations, however, have a greater interest in developing "process innovations" that reduce costs than they do in developing benefits to clients. While market theorists point to incentives for

bureaucracies to be self-focused, the for-profit motive of the new education management industry suggests that different types of large educational organizations share an incentive to redirect the purpose of innovation away from students and towards organizations. In order to access savings from such innovations, EMOs have an incentive to standardize their model. And, indeed, many claim that it is not just public school districts, but also private management companies that lead to "cookie-cutter" models of schooling.[65]

Conclusion: The Potential for Innovation in School Choice

The question of innovation in education is significant because of the need to find new ways of reaching chronically underserved students. As critics correctly note, traditional approaches to education too often deny individual students and whole communities equitable access to quality educational opportunities. Innovation is a key mechanism for developing more effective ways of meeting the needs of diverse learners, and for improving the quality of education. Without substantive improvements in educational opportunities, parents may be more likely to choose schools based on criteria other than quality, such as the demographic characteristics of students at a school. But the question of how to encourage useful educational innovations has substantive implications for this issue. Contrary to the expectations of competition-based reform models, some of the more innovative practices—such as mentoring programs or the use of new technologies and manipulatives in mathematics—are emerging due to professional activity in the public sector. However, not only does it appear that choice itself is no panacea when it comes to further outcomes such as raising achievement,[66] but when competition is introduced as a significant factor in local education markets, schools, unfortunately, may recognize perverse market incentives to adopt symbolic innovations in areas such as marketing in ways that may further sort students.[67]

Indeed, the question of innovation is problematic because of the notable resistance to change traditionally exhibited by the education system in the United States. In fact, historians and others have highlighted not only the remarkable continuity of educational practices over the decades, but also the ability of the system to deflect and co-opt efforts to make substantive changes.[68] Partly this may be due to the ways that teachers and parents internalize and then replicate their own schooling experiences for the next generation, and in the process construct a defined notion of what "real" schooling should look like.[69] Moreover, the system is designed in such a way that constant reform can generate much activity at policy levels in terms of governance, accountability, or funding, while teachers still seem to hold a rather consistent view of what they need to do on a daily basis. In fact, as an institution, the education system is inherently conservative in terms of the pace of change. Although many—

perhaps too many[70]—fads come and go, core practices remain remarkably similar through the years.[71] While this is rightly seen as a fault in the system in terms of its chronic failure to meet the needs of disadvantaged communities, it may also indicate that teachers focus on some stable learning goals rather than on every new instructional trend.

In any event, competition-based school choice reforms seek to reconfigure the institutional arrangements of schools in order to change the incentives that drive activity in schools. While such choice reforms have been quite successful in re-shaping activity at the policy or administrative levels, they have been less so in terms of creating change at the key point in these organizations: in teaching. In fact, there is some evidence that public sector institutions have been at least as successful in promoting substantive educational innovations.[72] The main obstacle to educational innovation through market mechanisms is that education itself does not easily fit into a market model. Continued public participation in terms of governance and funding, and public values of open access and equity, represent quite a different set of values than in purer market models. Additionally, the incentives for innovation are not necessarily comparable to what one finds in sectors that produce computers or cars. Indeed, in some markets, competition can generate standardizing tendencies, rather than incentives to innovate or diversify.[73]

Consequently, we are seeing somewhat of a retreat from the idea of innovation as a central goal for school choice—at least among more thoughtful reformers. While innovation was one of the most commonly cited goals earlier in the school choice movement, and particularly for charter schools, it may have served more of a symbolic service as a rhetorical device for advancing school choice reforms, rather than as a substantive goal. In fact, the idea has largely disappeared from much of the discourse around school choice, and some early advocates are now backtracking from their initial expectations about the ease of inducing innovations in education through school choice.[74]

More importantly, though, is the point that innovation is not automatically beneficial. While “innovation” has often been cited as a reason to embrace school choice, the autonomy and competitive incentives unleashed in school choice schemes can also lead to negative consequences, in view of the values commonly held for public education. School choice allows families to choose schools outside of traditional attendance areas that too often reflect race and class divisions. While it is possible that competition can ramp up effectiveness in schools and provide quality options for underserved students, it is also entirely possible that it might do precisely the reverse: competition might result in schools pursuing more effective marketing campaigns to attract already advantaged students, thus actually exacerbating racial and class divisions.[75] For example, the rise of marketing that has accompanied school choice programs has not been simply informational, but has often targeted specific groups, playing on race and class issues in ways that may

further erode opportunities for equitable education.[76] Other opportunities for innovation created by the push for organizational autonomy may have similar detrimental effects, as when schools choose locations likely to attract more advantaged students.[77] That may be an innovation, but it is not necessarily desirable.

If reformers are serious, as they have said, about inducing greater rates of educational innovation in classrooms in order to better meet the needs of different students, it may be that the R&D capacity needs to be substantially re-imagined. Simply replicating current practices in different communities may provide more choices, but it is far from clear that the act of choosing in itself leads to better education, or that more effective practices already exist for the many different underserved learners. Indeed, there is real concern that the families of students most in need to alternatives are often those least likely to take advantage of choice. Consequently, diversification is a worthy but insufficient goal without educational innovations to generate new and better ways of serving diverse learners. This review points to several considerations for encouraging substantive educational innovations:

- As with innovations in other sectors, educational improvement entails directing considerable resources into particular schools to develop and pilot specific new approaches to teaching and learning with different populations, rather than trying to do it on the cheap through the relatively simple restructuring of choice models.
- The development of innovations involves nurturing and shielding such efforts from immediate mandates and competitive pressures, rather than forcing schools representing new ideas to sink or swim in the educational marketplace.
- As noted, there are unique qualities around education that defy the easy application of basic market models. If markets are to be used effectively for organizing the production and distribution of education, more thought has to be given to the type of market reflected in education, such as the specific conditions that can best encourage innovation.
- Inability to routinely provide good information about school quality can motivate schools to choose symbolic action rather than substantive innovation; for markets to work effectively, informational "asymmetries" between producers and consumers need to be addressed. We cannot rely on competition alone to generate quality information for families. While many point to value-added modeling or parent information centers, non-market efforts such as rigorous school inspections (as in the United Kingdom) that provide parents with information on multiple dimensions of school quality can also be useful.
- Furthermore, governments are often better suited than independent market actors to provide a range of options for families. We know that

professional activity in the state sector has often been more successful at generating innovations. It could also be that innovation will flow more from government guaranteed choice plans such as magnet schools, where efforts are made to establish and sustain a range of options.

Notes and References

[1] Futurist Lewis Perelman concurs, noting that "'Choice' as a synonym for free markets—where consumers are free to choose and vendors are free to create and sell a variety of products and services—is undeniably essential to cure education's morbid productivity and festering irrelevance.…We need commercial choice and competition in education first to goad technical innovation—the profit motive is essential to reward the creation and provision of productive technologies. Profit-motivated competition also is necessary to provide quality control. Only markets can create the information needed to determine 'what works' economically."

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This thinking regarding choice, competition and innovation is reflected in the arguments for charter schools by a wide variety of advocates.

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Similarly, many teachers are drawn to the idea because of the possibility of experimenting or trying new models of curriculum and instruction:

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Vouchers represent in some ways an even more dramatic innovation in the institutional arrangements of education, whereby students and public monies are redirected outside of the publicly governed sector. That institutional innovation is then expected to promote choice and competition, and a re-orientation of organizations to be more consumer-centered; relatively few observers see vouchers (as opposed to charter schools) leading to innovations in teaching and learning.

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