Cities, Regions, and Schools: A Report to the Brookings Institution Metropolitan Policy Program

Equity, Segregation and Choice: The Changing Nature of School Reform

Executive Summary

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Introduction

Within the United States, the debate around educational equity is fueled by dynamic forces and divergent perspectives. An economy with changing workforce needs, patterns of economic and racial segregation, competing theories surrounding the structure and size of effective schools, and persistent funding and achievement disparities between races and classes all play a role in the current quest for educational reform. Within this context, this policy brief attempts to both examine the reasons for the persistent inequity of educational opportunities available to different groups and individuals, and address the undying question policy question of how to bridge the gap in educational quality and achievement that continues to exist in this county between rich and poor, white and nonwhite.

Equity, Segregation and Choice

The issue of equity is applied in various ways, often defined by school funding cases. As applied to access, equity addresses policies of inclusion, such as special education and desegregation by race or gender. When applied to funding, equity means neutrality-oriented school finance. Equity as applied to resources deals with policies of inclusion as related to special programs (like AP) and language programs for ELL students. Finally, when applied to outcomes, equity is achieved through programs such as affirmative action. All these concepts of equity – access, funding, resources, and outcomes – are real issues in many communities and regions across America.

Segregation is often at the heart of the equity debate. According to Gary Orfield, United States public schools are now 41 percent nonwhite and are substantially segregated on the basis of race. Since the 1980s, segregation of black and Hispanic students has been steadily increasing, causing concern that the nation is returning to the segregated schools of the *Brown v. Board of Education* era. Meanwhile, achievement scores are still strongly linked to school racial composition, as well as the presence (or absence) of highly qualified and experienced teachers. For example, a school that is performing well in academics is far more likely to be a majority of upper class white students than lower-class black or Hispanic students.

Recognizing the correlation between segregation and school quality, educational policy makers have proposed a variety of choice alternatives to the traditional schooling model. In general, the idea of choice in education is seen as important because of the positive outcomes that can result from the ability of a parent or guardian to choose a school for his or her child. Studies show parents are more involved and more satisfied when given a choice in schooling. Choice also decreases public school monopoly and increased competition can increase accountability for the schools. Parents are also given the ability to select schools that better suit the needs/interest of the child when choice is offered.

The major choice options examined in this policy brief are small schools, charter schools, and vouchers, with community organizing as an effective tactic that can be applied to all of these reform proposals. Each of the choices produces and grows out of a different relationship with the neighborhood. For example, one choice option may strengthen the focus on revitalizing and reinvesting a struggling neighborhood, while another may bus children out of segregated neighborhoods. With each choice comes a different notion of equity and a different attempt at addressing current challenges within America's segregated metropolitan areas.

Small Schools

Popularized in a national educational context wherein large, impersonal, and often overcrowded urban high schools are perceived to be delivering less-than-adequate results, small schools represent a model for school choice featuring scaled-down, intimate and specialized learning environments. The term "small schools" can be used generally in reference to smaller than average primary and secondary educational institutions, or, more specifically, to refer to the types of school-within-a-school structures that have become popular in recent years within many large urban districts. Other commonly used terms for small schools include, interdisciplinary teams, sub-schools, mini-schools, academies, and theme schools.

Small schools have varying effects on neighborhoods, depending on the type. Because many small schools are theme-based, if a student prefers a theme that is not in their neighborhood, they may have to travel farther to attend a theme of their choice. However, because of the intimate setting, when a small school is neighborhood-based, it has the potential to strengthen the bonds in a community if most children attend the same school.

The benefits of small schools are often framed in terms of their ability to combat the problems commonly associated with large, urban schools, such as overcrowding, poor achievement, under qualified teachers, and unsafe conditions. Recent studies focused on examining the effects of downsizing schools on school climate and student performance have shown that small schools can offer the following benefits: improved academic achievement; decreases in violence and behavior problems; greater student participation in extracurricular activities; stronger personal bonds; greater parental and community involvement; improved communication among staff; improved instructional quality; and improved teacher working conditions and job satisfaction.

Insofar as the students who are most adversely affected by attending large, substandard schools are those from racial minority groups and low socioeconomic backgrounds, small schools are also perceived as a way to address educational inequities. Past research has shown that minority and low-SES students have been concentrated in states that have large school districts and large schools within those districts, and that this distribution has been a notable factor in determining levels of student achievement.

While the small schools model clearly presents an opportunity to improve school cultures and educational outcomes, various political, economic and social factors can pose real barriers to forming and sustaining implementation these types of schools. For example, long-established ideas about what a schools, and high schools in particular, should look like can present a barrier to the acceptance of the small schools model. Forming and maintaining small schools also can be hampered by a lack of sustained resources and technical assistance and by perceptions that small schools simply cost more to run than large ones can be a notable impediment.

This brief will present case studies from two locales – New York City and Oakland, CA – wherein numerous small schools have been opened as part of overarching school reform efforts. Many small schools in Oakland have been opened as part of the City's Small Schools Initiative, an effort that involved collaboration between Oakland Community Organization (OCO), the Coalition for Equitable Schools (CES), the Bay Area Coalition for Equitable Schools (BayCES) and the Oakland Unified School District. In New York City, more than 200 small high schools have been opened in various parts of the City. A driving force behind the explosion of small schools in New York City has been an organization called New Visions for Public Schools (New Visions), which has worked in partnership with the New York City Department of Education to engage communities in the process of developing and sustaining small, personalized high schools that offer academically rigorous educational opportunities for all students.

Charter Schools

Charter schools, which account for 1.5 percent of the U.S. K-12 student population, are autonomous, tax-funded public schools that are self-governing and largely freed from school district regulations. Parental choice determines pupil enrollment in charter school, not residential zones. Charter schools are an attractive reform proposal to some because they allow school leaders to design their own school programs and practices without the regulation of the school district. In theory, the idea of charter schools gives more community empowerment because parents are more in control of their children's future. While some charter schools draw from the immediate neighborhood and help to strengthen community involvement, many others attract students from a wide area and increase the mobility of students to seek a new school outside of their current neighborhood. By providing the choice to attend a different school not controlled by district placement mechanisms, charter schools often move students to new places outside of the neighborhood. This would potentially reduce resources for the local schools as students, and their average daily attendance funding, go elsewhere

Charter schools provide some advantages over traditional public schools. They are more likely to have a specialized curriculum that focuses on topics of student interest or modalities of learning that are different than the traditional audio-visual model. They are also more likely to offer curriculum in noncore subjects such as music, foreign languages and fine arts than do comparable public schools. Parental participation is higher in charter schools as well.

However, there are also barriers to effective implementation of charter school. New charter schools across the country face difficulties securing adequate facilities, obtaining start-up funding, and acquiring the expertise to run a charter school. Researchers also found evidence that the charter school accountability system is flawed because parents may not be able to determine whether or not their child's charter school is effective. Troublingly, studies have shown that charter schools lead to more racially stratified schools. Because charter schools are schools of choice, some students (or parents) may choose to attend a school that has a similar ethnic or racial composition to their own.

This brief will present case studies on successful charter schools and analyze current research on charter school student achievement. The case studies will examine both stand-alone charter schools (Lighthouse Community Charter and High Tech High) and professionalized charter schools (KIPP). The brief will also examine a case study of a Bronx charter school that closed because of financial mismanagement. Current scholarly work on the issue of charter school student achievement has yielded mixed results. Some studies came to the conclusion that charter school students, on average, begin with lower test scores than their public schools counterparts and then after an initial start up period, attending a charter school had null or negative effects on test scores when compared with public schools. Other studies have shown increases in charter school student achievement compared to their public school counterparts in their neighborhood.

Vouchers

While a controversial issue, educational vouchers – certificates issued by the government to families to be redeemed at competing public and private schools – can be a dynamic remedy for expanding school choice options among low-income students. Few publicly-funded voucher experiments have actually been implemented, however, and only at a limited intensity and duration, making it difficult to assess the impact such programs have on issues of choice and equity. The impact vouchers could have on neighborhood schools appears to be significant, as it

allows for greater mobility among students. Like charter schools, vouchers often move students to new places outside of the neighborhood, which potentially reduces resources for the existing local schools.

Evidence from the limited data that does exist shows promising trends in the academic achievement of voucher students, as well as the ability to provide real choices for low-income families if the program provides sufficient funding directed at low-income participants. In Milwaukee's Parental Choice Program, two independent evaluations have shown that choice students perform higher in math than nonchoice students four years after program implementation. The program has also been effective in creating real choice options for low-income families, regenerating several parochial schools in the city, and providing vouchers to students that were more disadvantaged on average than the average student in Milwaukee public schools.

Despite the promise of improved achievement levels and choice options for low-income students, several barriers remain for the effective implementation of educational voucher programs. Chief among these are concerns that vouchers lead to disinvestment of the public school system, further segregate society along lines of race and class, increase the costs of education, and violate the constitutional separation of church and state. Some of the barriers – such as how to sufficiently fund voucher levels in ways that create meaningful choices for low-income students – are not easily resolvable and have difficult political implications. Other barriers, however – such as how to improve access for (or limit discrimination against) the highest need students – have solutions that have either been proposed in the literature or implemented in current voucher programs. Milwaukee, for instance, has a random selection requirement for participating schools, effectively limiting the ability of private schools from discriminating against students on the basis of academic performance, religious affiliation, aptitude, achievement or test scores.

Community Organizing

Community organizing for school reform represents an emerging strategy for improving urban schools and for addressing issues of educational equity that affect students attending such schools. Central to the community organizing approach is the assertion that in order to address the issues commonly associated with struggling urban schools, such as low student achievement, poor teacher training, and degraded schools facilities, schools and communities must work together to develop the relational power necessary to foster change. Working collaboratively, organizers, educators, and community members are able to not only improve educational opportunities for youth, but to advance larger community development objectives.

Community organizing for school reform utilizes numerous strategies, depending on the specific community and educational context. Often, schools and local residents partner with community organizations, many of which are already well established before engaging in school reform efforts. These organizations often have been engaged in organizing around other issues within the community, and are thus well suited as builders of social capital. This has the potential to strengthen and revitalize communities and is the most neighborhood-focused of the reform options presented in this brief.

Several benefits to the community organizing approach to school reform are described herein. One noted benefit is that because reform efforts grow organically out of the interests and ideas articulated through interactions between parents, teachers, and concerned community members, they tend to be more strongly and enthusiastically supported than reform projects imposed from outside. Moreover, many community-based organizations engaged in school reform link their

education endeavors to broader initiatives, thus enabling them to engage in more far-reaching community development efforts. And, even more importantly, by building the local leadership base, community organizing for school reform teaches local actors to develop skills and capital that will allow them to engage in future efforts for school and community change.

Several drawbacks are listed as well, such as the notion that while building social capital can be for individual school and neighborhood improvement, a broader solution would require creating the political capacity to address issues of structural inequality. Furthermore, there are many practical and ideological barriers to organization around school reform, such as a lack of willingness on the part of groups with divergent roles and viewpoint to collaborate with one another.

Herein, examples of strategies for organizing around school reform are presented both within a review of the literature related to this approach, and in the form of case studies. Each of the case studies (New Settlement Apartments, South Bronx; Orinda Educational Foundation; and Logan Square Neighborhood Association) represent examples of community organizing efforts that have made successful attempts at fostering educational change within different neighborhood contexts.

Recommendations

To address the issues of equity and segregation and to increase the effectiveness of choice options, in this brief we propose several recommendations:

1. There should be more easily accessible information for parents on school performance and choice options. Often, low-income parents who would most benefit from school choice, are least likely to know how to access information needed to make informed decisions about their child's school.
2. Charter schools and schools participating in voucher programs should have access requirements in order to limit discrimination against the highest need students. There is some evidence that schools participating in voucher programs and charter schools have discriminated against students on the basis of academic performance, religious affiliation, aptitude, achievement, or test scores.
3. Programs should create incentives for drawing in low-income students. Schools must see a benefit to seeking out and enrolling low-income and minority students in order to increase equity.
4. Schools and communities should be encouraged to work together to continually improve neighborhood schools. Community members understand what their locality needs and can be a great asset to school leaders in addressing the needs of their community.
5. There needs to be more "best practice" sharing amongst reform efforts. With the exception of a few professionalized charter schools (KIPP, Aspire), there is little "best practice" sharing amongst innovators in the field. This information can be used to make improvements in the quality of education received through different choice options.
6. More emphasis should be placed on addressing issues of equity and segregation from a regional level. Until cities and districts are willing to reach out across borders to collaborate, and potentially share funding or students, glaring disparities will likely continue. For example, students who move to a new school could be provided a subsidy for transportation in order to cover the costs of attending a school that may be located farther away from their house. This recommendation is more likely to impact low-income students who may not be able to attend a more challenging school due to lack of transportation options or sufficient funds.