School Choice and the Path Forward
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Abstract

K-12 education in recent years has undergone many changes to its policies. What was started as a general concept of allowing schooling for every child in America has taken a new approach. School choice has had a huge impact on public education. School choice is a relatively new concept that started in the 1960's.

Since its creation there has been a lot of debate on whether it’s a positive or negative on students. In this paper I looked at sources to find out if school choice helped or harmed students. Throughout this paper I discuss how school choice has expanded and is a widely used option in many states and school districts. Even more students are choosing to participate in school choice programs.

School choice programs are widely used by low income students and by disadvantaged students. Overall more charter schools are being built to cater to students with special needs. One other thing that was observed is that parents have a lot that they consider when sending their child to a school but mostly for academics and extracurricular activities.

School choice does provide a way for students to perform better. This is shown by test scores. School choice also helps traditional public schools as well. This is shown by the fact that school choice does provide a positive competition for traditional public schools.

Overall the research done shows that school choice has a positive effect on students. However, there can always be improvements to the system. One suggestion is the concept of the money following the student.

Introduction

Since the start of public education in America there has always been the question of how to make education better for all students. First it was expanding public education to all parts of America. Then it was the expansion of the system to include 12 grade levels. One of the biggest reforms in public education was the desegregation of public schools during the 1950’s.

The desegregation of public schooling was one of the biggest reforms to happen in recent years. From integrated schools came zoning school districts. This was sending kids to their closet geographic school. This was a common theme for many years and remains the case in many states and school districts to this day. However, in the 1960’s in Chicago, the Chicago public school system decided to do something different. The Chicago public school system decided to start a school choice program. (Danns, 2018)

Since then school choice has become a lot more common across the United States. There are many different ways school choice is implemented. There are also many different ways that parents and students participate, whether that may be public, homeschooling, charter, or private school. Lastly each school districts might have varying levels of school choice.
Since the creation of school choice there has been a lot of back and forth arguments and debates over the results and viability of school choice. This has largely been done at the state and national levels. These debates tend to happen via party line. For example, many republicans argue school choice creates competition and many Democrats argue school choice has a negative impact on students that can’t get into select schools. It goes beyond party lines. Many activist groups have started up to argue for or against school choice.

One group that has popped up for school choice is Ed Choice. One group that is against school choice is the National Education Association. Ed Choice argues for school choice on the basis that it helps students achieve success both in academics and extracurricular activities. (Ed Choice) On the other hand the National Education Association believes that the voucher system is not the direction that education should go in, instead that public schools should become stronger (National Education Association).

Further on the point of arguments as a whole, the book titled School Choice, A Balanced Approach by William H. Jeynes provides some of the most common arguments by supporters for school choice and those who are against school choice. The arguments he lists for school choice are greater freedom and higher achievement, better matches between families and schools, economic efficiency, and parents are likely to be more satisfied. (Jeynes, 2014, p. 2-8) The arguments against school choice that he lists are it might reward more highly educated and/or aggressive parents, school choice and equity/possible segregation and reduction in diversity, church/state issues, special education might suffer, and public school teacher morale might decline. (Jeynes, 2014, p. 9-19) These arguments will be considered throughout the paper as a way to compare information reviewed with these arguments.

In this paper, through the research done in the past, I will answer the question: does school choice help or harm students? This question is important to answer for a few different audiences. The first is state legislatures that are largely responsible for creating or changing school choice laws. Without a direction for these elected officials to go, they could make the wrong decisions for students. Next is the parents.

Parents have a lot vested into the success of their children. When parents move to a school district that has school choice or a state as a whole, they are making a decision that could affect their children. Parents need to know if school choice is good for their child's education or not. Local business also has a lot at stake in the success of public education. Many businesses require employees that are well educated and if the local populace is not, they may not decide to hire from that populace. Last policy writers relay on research done to help create future legislation or the effective rollout of a policy.

Through the research I have viewed, many students use the school choice program and overall the school choice program helps students. However, there are some improvements that can be made to help more students.

**School Choice as a whole**

School choice as a whole is a relatively new concept. On the basis it’s allowing parents to choose what school they want their kids to go to in the school district. An article that takes a neutral stance on school choice and looks at it from an overarching prospective is Lisa Martin’s academic journal article titled Music Education in the Era of School Choice. In this article she firsts starts out by talking about the creation of modern school choice and that it was suggested by Milton Freedmen. Lisa Martin describes the argument that Milton Friedman said as “Friedman proposed that districts provide parents with vouchers redeemable for sanctioned educational services, generating new interest in the possibility of alternatives to traditional public schools.” (Lisa Martian, 2018)
How school choice programs are carried out is different depending on where you are at. This overview of school choice is expanded open by Lisa Martin. In the beginning of the article, Lisa Martin starts out by talking about the different ways school choice is implemented in a school district. These ways are a voucher program, tax credit scholarships, individual tax credit, education savings accounts, or open enrollment. (Lisa Martin, 2018) Each of these ways comes with its own individual way of being implemented but the goal is the same.

The next part of this article, Lisa Martin lays out how many students use school choice and how it is implemented. Lisa Martin on the number of students that participate in school choice says, “current enrollment trends indicate school choice is becoming an increasingly accessed option in the United States.” (Lisa Martin, 2018) This statement is really important. It shows that school choice programs are widely used. In this article she also talks about how charter school, magnet schools, and private schools have increased student enrollment. (Lisa Martin, 2018) She says that in the 2013-2014 had 4.5 million students nationwide. (Lisa Martin, 2018)

In the book A School for Every Child, School Choice in America Today by Sandra Harris and Sandra Lynn Tillman Lowery there is a comprehensive evaluation and examination of multiple aspects of the school choice system. One interesting piece of information that is discussed is the expansion of alternatives to traditional public schools. In particular Sandra Harris and Sandra Lynn Tillman Lowery say that there is an expansion of private schools. (Harris and Lowery, 2014, p.4) On the subject of private schools, Sandra Harris and Sandra Lynn Tillman Lowery say that 75 percent of students that attended private schools come from families that make less than 75,000 dollars of income a year. (Harris and Lowery, 2014, p.73) This overview they provide shows some information that is important to account for.

**Parents’ impact on School Choice**

Do to the nature of school choice and the expansion of school choice to new areas, more and more parents are having to make the decision where to send their child to school. This tough decision is talked about in the academic journal article “How Do Parents Choose Schools, and What Schools Do They Choose? -- A Literature Review of Private School Choice Programs in the United States by Heidi Holmes Erickson”. The article first starts out with the important question of if parents have enough incentive to participate in the school choice system. Heidi Holmes Erickson notices two things: first, that parents do feel confident in their decision to pick schools for their child. (Heidi Holmes Erickson, 2017) Heidi Holmes Erickson said this was shown in several studies. Expanding on that point one study she cites shows in Detroit, 71% of parents reported having shopped for an alternative to their assigned school. (Heidi Holmes Erickson, 2017)

Heidi Holmes Erickson writes “general patterns in the literature show parents value academic quality along with school conveniences and extracurricular activities.” (Heidi Holmes Erickson, 2017) This statement shows a few things when it comes to where parents send their child. Heidi Holmes Erickson, later in the journal article, goes on to further talk about how parents make the choice about where to send their children. This is shown when Heidi Holmes Erickson writes, “There is a general consensus in the literature that parents value a school’s academic quality and consider it when selecting a school in a private choice program.” (Erickson, 2017)

On a more precise level parents look at extracurricular activities when making the decision as well. This is important because it shows that parents have a vested interest in the overall experience of the school. Parents also look at academics to determine what school to send their children to. This was the basis of
the concept of school choice, to go to a school that was the best for the child. This same argument is also shown in the academic journal article Music Education in the Era of School Choice by Lisa Martin. Lisa Martin in her journal article writes, “Attitudes toward school choice can be influenced by the perceived quality of a child’s assigned school or whether or not a family believes that school meets their child’s unique academic and social needs.” (Martin, 2018)

One argument used has been school choice allows students to break free from failing schools. This statement is shown in the journal article Different Choices: A Public School Community’s Responses to School Choice Reforms by Amanda Potterton. The parental feeling is shown when Potterton says “On the one hand, advocates promote school choice policies because of their potential to offer parents and families more options for their children’s school instead of being restricted to assigned neighborhood placements.” (Potterton, 2018, p. 1908) This is important because this is the main argument proponents of school choice makes.

Another article examines how parents find information to select what schools their child goes to. In the article Subject to Evaluation: How Parents Assess and Mobilize Information from Social Networks in School Choice by Kelley Fong, there is an examination of how parents find information on where to send their children to school. Kelley Fong argues that parents look at social media to find out where they should send their kids to school. (Kelley Fong, 2018, p.158) She concludes this by conducting interviews from parents with kids in the Boston public school system.

From these interviews, Fong finds that parents looked at their peer’s children’s successes in schools for information as to where to send their child. This is shown when Kelley Fong writes “When others’ children had positive academic outcomes, this aligned with parents’ hopes for their own children, suggesting affinity, and indicated that these ties had the knowledge and skills to make good educational decisions, suggesting authority.” (Kelley Fong, 2018, p.166-167) In the end Kelley Fong finds that information will not shift a parents decision as to where to send their child unless they choose to use it for that extent. (Kelley Fong, 2018, p.177)

**Funding of School Choice**

School choice overall has a different impact on funding of education then traditional public schooling. For this reason, one concern raised is that charter schools and private schools take away funding from traditional public schools. Overall the question becomes does school choice cost more on the students? In the academic journal article Music Education in the Era of School Choice by Lisa Martin, she cites how some states have funded school choice. Lisa Martin says that in 2017, 31 states have some sort of financial option for parents to participate in school choice. (Lisa martin, 2018)

This topic is explained in the academic journal article titled Financing School Choice: How Program Design Impacts Issues Regarding Legality and Equity by James Shuls. In this article James Shuls seeks to understand the topic of funding schools in the current age of school choice. In this article James Shuls says, “as school choice programs continue to expand, they offer an opportunity not just to expand educational options, as proponents suggest, but to improve how we fund education for all students.” (James Shuls, 2018, p. 500)

This is a very interesting statement. First it suggests that school choice programs are going to expand. Next it shows that as these programs expand, we can improve the funding of education for every student. That is very important and something that most legislators are trying to move towards, to be able to better fund the education for the students.
This is later expanded when James Shuls writes, “this results in charter schools typically receiving significantly less money than their counterparts in the surrounding public school districts.” (James Shuls, 2018, p.501) This is also very interesting as well. One argument made is that charter schools get funded a lot in comparison to traditional public schools. Based on this statement, that would not be the case.

In the book *A School for Every Child, School Choice in America Today* by Sandra Harris and Sandra Lynn Tillman Lowery there is a discussion about Education Management Organizations. These are organizations that run charter schools in some states and consequently fund charter schools as well, to a certain extent. There has been a lot of concerns raised when it comes to Educational Management Organizations. (Harris and Lowery, 2004, p. 53) For this reason they look at and examine these Educational Management Organizations to see if they have the best practices in mind. What they found is that the top Educational Management Organizations use strategies that save money. (Harris and Lowery, 2004, p.59) This information directly contradicts the concerns brought by people about them.

**Impact of School Choice on Students**

The impact of school choice programs on students is the most important question to answer. With this question comes the question of who is using school choice programs the most. Do these students fall into a certain demographic, a certain economic status, and a certain geographic area? These are important considerations to make.

In the academic journal article titled *School Choice Programs and Location Choices of Private Schools* by Crystal Zhan. In this article Crystal Zhan talks about how private schools, which have been largely affected by school choice choose where to go. In this journal article Crystal Zhan writes “When school choice programs spread, the share of students with special needs plays a more important role in the location selection of private entry.” (Zhan, 2018, p. 1639) This is a very interesting statement because it shows two things.

The first is that private schools have many special need students. These students have largely been overlooked by the school system in years past. The second is that new private schools are opening where there are special need children live. This shows that on the school end of things they want special need children to go to their school.

Next, we know that school choice programs are used by many students across different demographics. In the academic journal article, *The Expansion of High School Choice in Chicago Public Schools* by Lisa Barrow and Lauren Sartain we see this discussed in detail. Lisa Barrow and Lauren Sartain say, “We find that the students most likely to enroll in a high school other than their assigned school are African American students and those living in the poorest neighborhoods.” (Barrow and Sartain, 2017, p. 2) This statement shows two things: First, that school choice has a wide-reaching effect and that the notion of “zip code” isn’t a limiting factor as much anymore. Second, this also verifies the notion that at-risk children benefit from school choice just as much as students that aren’t at risk might be.

This argument is later expanded when Lisa Barrow and Lauren Sartain say, “For students living in the poorest neighborhoods, charter high schools are a popular option, with 36.6 percent of students attending a charter high school (compared with 18.0 percent of students living in the highest-income neighborhoods).” (Barrow and Sartain, 2017, p. 16) This statement is really important because it adds numbers to the argument that low income students are taking advantage of school choice. This statement also shows that students in the highest income neighborhoods attend the schools they are assigned to.
In the academic journal article “What Leads to Successful School Choice Programs? A Review of the Theories and Evidence” by Corey A. DeAngelis and Heidi Holmes Erickson, DeAngelis and Erickson discuss what two major parts of school choice produce good outcomes for students. The first part of school choice they look at is “Does competition helps students?” Corey A. DeAngelis and Heidi Holmes Erickson say that private school choice programs have a positive effect on test scores. (DeAngelis and Erickson, 2018, p. 248) They go on later to say how that competition has a positive effect on students test scores in district schools. (DeAngelis and Erickson, 2018, p.249) They end their article by talking about how ESA programs offer the best way for children to go to a high-quality school. (DeAngelis and Erickson, 2018, p. 257).

Another source that looks at school choice in multiple aspects is the book titled A School for Every Child, School Choice in America Today by Sandra Harris and Sandra Lynn Tillman Lowery. In this book they examine multiple parts of the school choice argument. The first thing they say is that “parents and children that choose charter schools also indicate a high level of satisfaction.” (Harris and Lowery, 2004, p. 41) This would show that charter schools have a positive effect on students and their parents.

In the book “School Choice, A Balanced Approach” by William H. Jeynes, there is a discussion of comparing private school and public schools. William H. Jeynes does this by comparing standardized test scores of students in public school and private schools. In particular the private schools William Jeynes is looking at is religious schools. So, this could include Christian and Catholic schools. Based on the research, he writes “the results show that twelfth grade students attending religious schools outperform their counterparts attending nonreligious schools.” (Jeynes, 2014, p. 106) This again shows evidence that students that seek alternatives forms to education do better in academics then those in public schools.

The Path Forward

From the research shown above we know that school choice can be different for each school district. We know that parents invest a lot in where their children go to school. We know that the history of school choice was started to desegregate schools. We know that school choice is expanding. The last thing, and the most important is that many students that are disadvantaged are taking advantage of the school choice system to help them. This is true in Chicago and across the country.

How can we better fund the school system?

We know attendance is rising. With this comes the need for more money for each school to help each of there students. How do people propose to do this? In the academic journal article “Financing School Choice: How Program Design Impacts Issues Regarding Legality and Equity” by James V. Shuls, Shuls suggests the creation of a program that would allow the money, the taxes paid each year towards education, to follow the student. This is expanded when James Shuls writes “When a student leaves a high spending school, to attend a lower spending school they would take all of the funding with them to their lower spending school, including the facilities funding.” (Shuls, 2018, p. 513) James Shuls goes later on to say, “When a student transfers to a higher spending school, they would take only a portion of the funds with them.” (Shuls, 2018, p. 513) This is a very powerful concept that is being used to describe James Shuls’ suggested way to fund school choice.

This concept in many ways is comparable to the voucher system. This concept of the money following the student has been widely used and is something that many proponents of school choice are wanting the system to go to. Where this concept that James Shuls suggested differs from the voucher system is
the portion of the money would change depending on where the student would go, instead of a standard amount of money.

Summary

In summary there were some common themes discussed throughout the paper. One that school choice is widely used across the United States. Two the demand for school choice is growing, this is shown by the large amount, and increasing amount, of students participating in a school choice program. The types of students using it are generally low income and disadvantaged students. These disadvantaged students are sometimes students with special needs. Another thing discussed is how school choice was started to desegregate schools in Chicago. Also, parents are very invested in to making sure their child goes to a school that is good in academics and extracurricular activities. Parents also receive information from those they trust however this does not mean that they will go with this information.

Another finding is that school choice does improve student achievement. This can be seen in tests scores. This is very important because it relates to what was being said about school choice improving academics. We also see that competition does have a positive effect on traditional public schools as well. This relates again to a common argument made by people who support school choice.

Conclusion

In conclusion, school programs are widely used and expanding. Based on the information given, school choice programs show the makings of effecting students in a positive way. This is shown by the increasing number of students using it and the fact that parents choose the best academic and extracurricular schools for their child. Also, many students most commonly left behind by the traditional public school system are getting a better chance at succeeding thanks to the school choice program. Also, students are performing at a higher rate which is what should be the main focus in education.

These are all things said by school choice proponents that are being shown. We also know that charter schools, which are one of the biggest benefactors of school choice, are being built in places where there are students with special needs. This again is something that school choice proponents have argued for.

However, school choice does need its improvements. It’s not a perfect system. School choice programs cost money and the expanding number of students each year will only make that number go up. The path forward is to build upon the foundation given.

James Shuls’ proposal of the money following the students is something being talked about by many education policy writers. His take on it could solve a funding issue that needs to be fixed. The topic of vouchers is quickly becoming a popular topic that was even discussed within this paper. This topic of the voucher system and the concept of the money following the student should be researched more to determine the viability of it.