

EdChoice Policy Toolkit

Eligibility and Scale: Universal or Targeted?

QUESTION

Should educational choice policies be open to all or targeted to the disadvantaged?

ANSWER

All children deserve access to a quality education, no matter their background. Moreover, the best way to improve the lot of the disadvantaged is to include them in a system of universal educational choice.

The promise of public education is that every child—regardless of race, religion, national origin or family income—should have access to a quality education. However, for too long our education system has assigned children to schools based on the location of the homes that their families could afford, which has created a system of immense inequality. Wealthier families can afford to live in districts with higher-performing public schools, or they can pay for private schooling. Lower-income families, by contrast, are often stuck with whatever school their child is assigned to—and these schools tend to be lower-performing, on average. Families without money or connections are often forced to choose between sending their child to a low-performing school or risking imprisonment by lying about their address.¹

There is a better way: educational choice.

To truly fulfill that promise of public education, families should be empowered to choose the education provider that works best for their particular child's needs. Instead of the government funding a school system and then assigning children to schools, families should choose the schools that work best for their children and the public dollars should follow them. Under a system of educational choice, access to a quality education would no longer depend on a family's income or housing.

Although the promise of public education is made to all children, some argue that public policy should focus primarily on narrowing the gaps between the advantaged and disadvantaged. Since the wealthy already have access to educational choice, they argue, choice policies should be targeted toward the disadvantaged, such as low-income families, families living in depressed areas, or students assigned to low-performing schools. When a choice program is limited to a small number of students, this argument has considerable merit. If a state enacts a choice policy limited only to 10 percent of students, justice and fairness require that these educational opportunities go to those who currently have the least access to such opportunities. Nevertheless, such a system should not be the goal of education reformers. Leveling the existing playing field is a noble goal, but the disadvantaged would benefit most from a new playing field.

Educational choice has the potential to unleash innovations that dramatically improve the quality of education, especially for the least well off. However, as Nobel laureate economist Milton Friedman observed, this will happen “only if [policymakers] create a large demand for private schools to constitute a real incentive for entrepreneurs to enter the industry.”² Smaller programs, such as those targeted toward low-income families or limited to particular geographic areas, will fill empty seats at existing schools but they are not of a scale large enough to induce the creation of new seats—let alone the creation of new models of education.

Innovation requires scale. As Professor Paul Hill of the University of Washington explains, market-induced improvements to our education system, “depend on the supply-side, that is, on the success of arrangements that promote the creation of a wide variety of school options, expose all schools to performance pressures through competition, and permit constant replacement of weak schools by promising new ones.”³ The district school system lacks the feedback mechanism that system of educational choice provides. District schools do not expand or close based on their performance, so there is no strong incentive to perform better or to innovate. So long as the vast majority of middle-income families attend a publicly subsidized district school, there will not be a market of sufficient size to produce the innovations that the system desperately needs. To provide the most fertile ground possible for innovation, educational choice policies should be available to the widest possible swath of the population.

In addition, a program that includes middle-income and upper-income families would be more politically sustainable than one targeted to the poor. As Milton Friedman observed, programs targeted toward the poor tend to be poor programs. Because low-income families have fewer resources and are less likely to vote than wealthier citizens, they have less political capital. In the words of Professor Jay Greene of the University of Arkansas, “As much as reformers may be motivated to promote equity, a basic lesson about political reality is that more advantaged people tend to have more political power.”⁴ Welfare programs for the poor are often on the chopping block while universal entitlements (e.g., Medicare, Social Security) almost never are.⁵ Calling for the abolition of public schools, by contrast, is politically unthinkable. Choice programs will be safe only when middle and upper middle-income families can benefit from them as well.

Polls consistently find significantly higher levels of public support for universal educational choice programs than targeted programs. For example, the 2018 Education Next survey found that 54 percent of the public supports universal school choice policy, while only 31 percent were opposed.⁶ By contrast, only 43 percent expressed support for a program limited to low-income families while slightly more respondents (44 percent) were opposed. Likewise, in a split-sample experiment in EdChoice’s 2018 Schooling in America Survey, 74 percent of respondents agreed with the statement “ESAs should be available to all families, regardless of income or special needs,” while only 22 percent disagreed.⁷ By contrast, only 50 percent of respondents agreed with the statement, “ESAs should be available only to families based on financial need,” while 46 percent disagreed.⁸ In other words, universal programs tend to attract more supporters and draw fewer detractors than the more controversial means-tested programs.

In terms of both policy and politics, the disadvantaged will benefit the most when they are in the same proverbial boat as everyone else.

¹ See, for example: Mike McShane, “Enrollment Fraud Reminds Us That Many Public Schools Aren’t Public,” *Forbes*, December 17, 2018, www.forbes.com/sites/mikemcshane/2018/12/17/enrollment-fraud-reminds-us-that-many-public-schools-arent-public/; Kelly Phillips Erb, “Would You Lie About Where You Live To Get Your Child Into A Better School?” *Forbes*, November 6, 2016, www.forbes.com/sites/kellyphillipserb/2016/11/06/would-you-lie-about-where-you-live-to-get-your-child-into-a-better-school/.

² Milton Friedman, “Public Schools: Make Them Private,” *The Washington Post*, February 19, 1995, www.edchoice.org/who-we-are/our-founders/the-friedmans-on-school-choice/article/public-schools-make-them-private/.

³ Cited in: Jason Bedrick & Lindsey Burke, “The Next Step in School Choice,” *National Affairs*, Winter 2015, www.nationalaffairs.com/publications/detail/the-next-step-in-school-choice/.

⁴ Jay P. Greene, “Political Science for Ed Reform Dummies,” *Education Next*, August 15, 2016, www.educationnext.org/political-science-for-ed-reform-dummies/.

⁵ See, for example: Lautaro Grinspan, “Nearly 200,000 Florida kids could lose free school lunch under food stamp rule changes,” *Miami Herald*, December 1, 2019, www.miamiherald.com/news/local/education/article237905579.html/.

⁶ Albert Cheng, Michael B. Henderson, Paul E. Peterson, and Martin R. West, “Public Support Climbs for Teacher Pay, School Expenditures, Charter Schools, and Universal Vouchers,” *Education Next*, Winter 2019, Vol. 19, No. 1, www.educationnext.org/public-support-climbs-teacher-pay-school-expenditures-charter-schools-universal-vouchers-2018-ednext-poll/.

⁷ Paul DiPerna, Drew Catt, and Michael Shaw, “2019 Schooling in America Survey,” EdChoice, October 24, 2019, page 43, www.edchoice.org/research/2019-schooling-in-america-survey/.

⁸ *Ibid.*