

Book Reviews

*Eugene B. McGregor, Jr.,
Editor*

Jason A. Grissom

The Rising State: How State Power Is Transforming Our Nation's Schools, edited by Bonnie C. Fusarelli and Bruce S. Cooper, Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2009, 278 pp., \$80.00, hardback.

When Mayors Take Charge, edited by Joseph P. Viteritti, Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2009, 255 pp., \$22.95, paperback.

Collision Course: Federal Education Policy Meets State and Local Realities, by Paul Manna, Washington, DC: CQ Press, 2011, 206 pp., \$32.95, paperback.

No other phrase sums up American education governance like *local control*. For as long as the United States has had a system of public schools, authority over public education has been marked by decentralization, with local boards of education balancing the preferences of parents and community members with the input of professional administrators to make most education policy decisions of any consequence. This is not to say that state and federal actors have played no role in education; for example, states have long set standards for teacher certification, and the federal government has been instrumental in ensuring educational opportunities for students with special needs. But throughout the history of American public education, local priorities and needs have been the linchpins of decisionmaking.

Beginning in the 1960s, state and federal policymakers began increasing the size of their respective footprints on education policy, becoming increasingly involved in key policy areas such as school finance and programs for students from disadvantaged populations. However, with the accountability and standard movements of the 1990s, which in turn set the stage for No Child Left Behind (NCLB), the reach of the state and federal governments into schools has increased 10-fold, giving local decisionmakers significantly less influence over how schools are run. Moreover, traditional ideas of local control—that is, the school board as the central policy actor—are under attack not just from above but from the sides, with alternative governance arrangements, such as mayoral control, becoming more common, particularly in urban areas.

What can account for this seeming assault on the local education governance tradition from the federal, state, and even local levels? How have school districts responded? And given that *who* makes decisions matters for what decisions are made, how they are legitimated and implemented, and how successful they are,

what is an intergovernmental role shift likely to mean for the future of schooling and school performance?

THE EXPANSION OF STATE POWER

Various authors tackle the growth in the role of the state in the volume *The Rising State: How State Power Is Transforming Our Nation's Schools*, edited by Bonnie C. Fusarelli and Bruce S. Cooper. The first half of the book examines this shift using comparative case studies of six states: California, Kentucky, New Jersey, New York, Texas, and Kansas. As Fusarelli and Cooper point out in their introductory chapter, changes in education governance within the states took place against a common national backdrop, particularly greater movement toward standards and high-stakes accountability and greater concern about the equitability of school resources across districts. The six case studies illustrate some similar ways in which these movements played out. For example, each of the six states made fundamental changes to their resource allocation systems—each of which resulted in greater centralization at the state level—in response to judicial challenges to their school finance systems.

More notable than these similarities, however, are the differences in the paths that states have taken to heighten state control and where they have ended up. One particular contrast that arises is between California and Kentucky, the two states that were first-movers on judicial challenges based on the equity and adequacy standards, respectively, and two states in which judicial intervention has played a central role in the growth of state power. In California, the hodgepodge of uncoordinated lawmaking via legislative action and public initiatives that followed the *Serrano v. Priest* (1971) case, which invalidated the state's school finance system on equal protection grounds, has created a policy system that despite becoming "the embodiment of state control" (p. 23), has "little coherence or consistency" (p. 9). By comparison, Kentucky's response to the *Rose v. Council for Better Education* (1989) decision, which concluded that the state's school unconstitutionally failed to provide each student an adequate education, was the creation of a state task force to address comprehensive school reform around curriculum, governance, and finance in a coordinated fashion. The resulting Kentucky Education Reform Act of 1990 has become a model of coherent, integrated policymaking.

The remainder of the book situates the themes developed in the case studies within the context of changes in state power in other states. These chapters develop a number of keys to understanding the growth of state power in education and differences in that growth across states. One is the importance of state political culture. Another is the interplay between the state and federal governments. States have influenced the development of federal policies, such as NCLB, as evidenced not only by NCLB's "diffusion up" from state-level experiments with high-stakes accountability, but also by the formal and informal input that the federal government considered from the states throughout the policy formulation and implementation stages. NCLB, in turn, has "broadened [states'] revenue bases and increased their administrative capacities" (p. 194), thereby giving states increased control over education even as federal policy actors increased their own influence.

The book's concluding chapter suggests that, while these gains have further eroded local authority and local input, the more "tightly coupled" systems that have resulted in most states have "led to improvements in student achievement and less inequities in student outcomes by subgroup" (p. 264). Unfortunately, the evidence for a strong causal link between increased state authority and higher, more equitable local performance does not come through clearly in the other chapters. Instead, the message seems to be that the expansion of state control, though undeniable, has meant very

different things in different locations. The question of whether this particular set of attacks on localism has been on net good or bad is not yet answered.

NCLB AND ACCEPTANCE OF FEDERAL PRIORITIES

Paul Manna's *Collision Course: Federal Education Policy Meets State and Local Realities* returns to the theme taken up in the Cooper and Fusarelli volume of how the differential responses of states and local communities to policy change can lead them to very different implementation destinations even within a seemingly monolithic education reform movement—in this case, NCLB. Though not explicitly by design, these differences were inevitable given NCLB's theory of administration, which, recognizing the federal government's own lack of capacity and relatively small monetary investment, relied heavily on states to make key policy and implementation choices. The law sets a broad framework for accountability, but defers to the states on many of the details, limiting the federal role. Whereas states set standards, designed tests, and set proficiency cut scores, the Department of Education focused on monitoring a set of administrative process requirements that, though important, were much less central to how schools experienced the law in practice. Because states started from very different places—particularly along the dimensions of preexisting state accountability regimes, the willingness of state leaders to get on board with NCLB's expectations, and raw administrative capacity—variation naturally arose in implementation across states. The clash between federal accountability expectations and states' institutional realities that affected the law's translation into schools and classrooms is but one of the collisions around which Manna organizes the text.

Variation in how schools experienced the law *within* states was just as great. NCLB required districts with consistently low-performing schools to facilitate school choice options and access to supplemental educational services for low-income students, but differences in district-level implementation choices (e.g., ineffectiveness at notifying parents widely, establishment of onerous application processes) could lead to very different participation rates for eligible students, even in adjacent districts. If districts continued to perform poorly after reaching the choice and supplemental services stages, they entered into NCLB-required corrective action or governance restructuring. Both those steps, unless reaching the stage of state takeover, were also run at the local level, meaning that they could vary on the same will and capacity dimensions that states experienced in implementing other aspects of the law. Many such corrective actions were, unsurprisingly, far from dramatic.

Because of several of NCLB's policy design choices, other contextual factors could contribute to local variation in how schools were affected by the law. For example, schools with diverse student populations were given a larger number of hurdles to clear because of Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) subgroup requirements, which mandated achievement growth not only overall but also among individual groups, such as African Americans or students with disabilities. Small schools were more likely to be affected by cohort composition changes or random events (e.g., exceptionally hot testing days) that could move them significantly along states' performance metrics. Rural schools' geographic isolation made it harder to fulfill "highly qualified teacher" requirements (which, again, varied by state). In sum, despite being underlain by a strong theory of accountability for high performance across schools, NCLB was far from a uniform treatment at the street level.

Unsurprisingly, then, in assessing the evidence on NCLB's effects on students, Manna concludes that, though average test scores, particularly in elementary grade math, have gone up, there has been wide variation in its impacts on students. Racial achievement gaps may have narrowed slightly, but gaps between economically

advantaged and disadvantaged students have not. Teachers report focusing instruction and attention toward so-called “bubble students”—those near the proficiency margin who have the greatest likelihood of affecting AYP determinations—at the expense of very low-achieving and very high-achieving students, which may have led to stagnating performance for those students.

Impacts of NCLB on state and local education governance going forward have been similarly mixed. On one hand, the law improved state and local administrators’ technical capabilities, including the collection and use of student data. It has arguably increased the transparency about school system performance and highlighted the needs of disadvantaged students. It has also provided reform-minded entrepreneurs political cover—and new power—to make necessary and even transformative changes to how some schools were run. On the other hand, the law has created incentives for states to lower expectations and rigor. It has focused school on gaming the system in areas like student assignment. It has also created a massive compliance industry at the state and local levels, diverting time and resources toward meeting procedural requirements and away from core educational functions. The challenge for the regime that follows NCLB will be improving this mix of impacts on how schools are run—and the student outcomes that should follow—within the frame of a federalist system that will necessarily require a major policy and implementation role for the state and local levels. Manna’s analysis suggests that this order is likely to be a tall one.

MAYORAL DISPLACEMENT OF LOCAL BOARDS

The volume *When Mayors Take Charge*, edited by Joseph P. Viteritti, approaches the question of school governance from a different perspective, examining the movement toward mayoral control of urban schools and what has been learned from it. Just as the accountability movement at the state and national levels described in the previous two books grew from frustrations with the performance of locally managed schools, those same frustrations have manifested as a different demand for accountability in many urban districts: throw out (or subvert) the low-visibility, amateurish school board (elected in its low-turnout, union-driven elections) with all its instability, conflict, and underrepresentation of minority populations, and replace it with an agile, politically connected mayor who could run it like he or she ran the rest of the city and be held accountable for doing so. Numerous cities have instituted this approach. The first few chapters of the book assess what we have learned from these institutional reforms in general, whereas the remaining chapters turn to conclusions from in-depth mayoral control case studies, first of Boston, Chicago, and Detroit, then, for three chapters, of New York City.

Unfortunately, as Jeffrey R. Henig notes in Chapter 2, the knowledge base in this area is tentative, with few established certainties. The difficulties include the relatively small numbers of districts that have converted to mayoral control, the scarcity of good data that track what those districts are doing in comparison to other districts over time, and the nonrandomness of which districts choose mayoral control. Anecdotally, mayoral control has led to greater financial oversight and more robust management systems in several important districts—three of which are analyzed in the case study chapters. In other districts, however, such as Detroit, mayoral control has worked so poorly on so many fronts that the system has reverted to an elected school board. No doubt, Detroit is different from successful mayoral control districts, such as Chicago or New York, on some important dimensions—including fiscal resources, why mayoral control was initiated, who appoints governing board members, and how much policy involvement the state has—but Chicago and New York differ from one another on those dimensions also. Drawing conclusions from

these cases about what works well—and might work well in a different city with its own history and institutions—becomes a difficult enterprise.

Here is where looking systematically at more comprehensive data is useful. The chapters by Henig and Kenneth K. Wong review such analyses. There are some bright spots. For example, data suggest that cities with mayoral control indeed spend less on administration and slightly more on instructional services, which might be interpreted as more efficient resource allocation. There is also evidence that giving the mayor the power to appoint the school board results in substantial test score gains and does so at no greater financial cost (another indication of greater efficiency). Oddly, however, districts do better when mayors have a moderate level of control; districts in which the mayor can go so far as to appoint the school board with no oversight from a nominating committee actually have significantly worse test scores. Moreover, mayoral control appears to be associated with larger gaps between high-achieving and low-achieving schools.

What might we conclude, then, about the overall efficacy of mayoral displacement of traditional understandings of local control by an elected school board? By numerous metrics, including test scores and public opinion polls, mayoral control has been successful in some large districts, an unmitigated disaster in others, and, for the majority, perhaps, neither a significant success nor failure. One drawback of the volume—or perhaps of this research area more broadly—is that it does little to illuminate the factors that sort the districts among these three categories. A factor that does emerge from the case study chapters is the importance of strong leadership. In Boston, for example, Mayor Thomas Menino and Superintendent Thomas Payzant formed not only a stable team of 11 years, but one that remained focused on a package of coherent reform to improve instruction. In Chicago, Richard Daley's formal and informal influence was central to the district's success. In contrast, the legitimacy of Detroit's mayoral control system was undermined by leadership missteps from Mayor Dennis Archer and scandals and declining public support for his successor, Kwame Kilpatrick. Of course, strong leadership can be exercised within the existing structure of school board-led schools, and given our inability to observe the counterfactual of what might have happened in the absence of mayoral takeover, we should be cautious in concluding that, even in the presence of able leadership, shifting to mayoral control is likely to translate into good results. The evidence presented in this volume suggests that a district looking to improve by instituting mayoral control in place of existing governance structures is as likely to be disappointed as rewarded.

CONCLUSION

Until just the last few decades, the public schooling system in the United States has adhered to a governance blueprint mostly sketched at the system's inception. Though localized decisionmaking by boards of education remains important, the emergence of strong policymaking influence from other actors has begun shifting control elsewhere. As the three books reviewed here illustrate, these shifts and the policy outcomes that are accompanying them underscore the critical role of governance structures for education. They also point out, however, that there is substantial variability on the ground within these shifts that broad descriptions such as "growth in state power" miss. State power has grown, but different states have seen their power grow in different ways and to different ends. NCLB increased the federal reach into schools, but schools with different characteristics or in different states may have been profoundly affected or not affected much at all. Mayoral takeover of urban schools has spread, but some mayors have successfully reformed their districts with positive results whereas others have not. In other words, governance

structures matter, but they are far from determinative. The future of research on education governance likely lies—as do these studies—in recognizing and understanding the heterogeneity within these and other broad governance movements, such as the growth of charter schools or involvement by the for-profit sector. Numerous variables can interact with policy system designs in ways that affect outcomes, including policy context, political culture, social norms, and even individual personality. Identifying these potential moderators, finding ways to measure them well, and testing hypotheses about their impacts are essential for mapping the links between who makes education policy decisions and the effects of those decisions inside schools.

JASON A. GRISSOM is an Assistant Professor of Public Policy and Education at the Peabody College of Education and Human Development, Vanderbilt University, 230 Appleton Place, Nashville, TN 37203.

Ashlyn Aiko Nelson

Whither Opportunity? Rising Inequality, Schools, and Children's Life Chances, edited by Greg J. Duncan and Richard J. Murnane, New York, NY: Russell Sage Foundation, 2011, 551 pp., \$48.70, hardback.

School Choice Policies and Outcomes: Empirical and Philosophical Perspectives, edited by Walter Feinberg and Christopher Lubienski, Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2008, 242 pp., \$26.95, paperback.

Charter Schools: Hope or Hype? by Jack Buckley and Mark Schneider. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007, 343 pp., \$25.95, paperback.

Taking Measure of Charter Schools: Better Assessments, Better Policymaking, Better Schools, edited by Julian R. Betts and Paul T. Hill, Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Education, 2010, 230 pp., \$28.59, paperback.

FRAMING EDUCATIONAL INEQUALITY

If you read, discuss, purchase, or teach one book on education policy this year, it should be *Whither Opportunity*. Greg J. Duncan and Richard J. Murnane's edited volume is a remarkable achievement, convening an all-star cast of leading scholars in the field to report on the relationship between growing economic inequality and education in the United States. The project—initially conceived by economist Rebecca Blank, Spencer Foundation President Michael S. McPherson, and Russell Sage Foundation President Eric Wanner—intends to lay the foundation for a new subfield in education policy research that examines how social and economic inequalities mediate education access and outcomes. Duncan and Murnane's resulting volume assembles education and public policy scholars from the fields of economics, sociology, psychology, and even neuroscience to discuss the role of inequality in shaping the life outcomes of American youth. While America's concern with racial and economic achievement gaps is not new, the macro-level sources of these inequalities and their implications for education policy have not been explored systematically using an interdisciplinary approach. *Whither Opportunity* comprehensively addresses this gap in the literature. Duncan and Murnane set forth a framework for examining how trends in growing income inequality interact with children's cognitive functioning, skill development, families, neighborhoods, labor markets, and educational

environments, and ultimately influence children's educational access, achievement, and attainment. The volume contains six parts: The Overview (Part I); The Developing Child and Adolescent (Part II); The Family (Part III); Neighborhoods (Part IV); Labor Markets (Part V); and Schools (Part VI).

Duncan and Murnane's excellent overview (Part I) provides clear motivation for the chapters that follow: Despite a near doubling in U.S. GDP from 1977 to 2007, economic growth was concentrated disproportionately among families in the top of the income distribution. While families in the 20th percentile of the income distribution saw only modest (7 percent) increases in their income over the time period, families in the 80th percentile enjoyed average income growth of 34 percent. At the same time—and as documented by sociologist Sean F. Reardon in Chapter 5—the test score gap between low-income and higher-income children increased by approximately half a standard deviation since the 1950s (approximately 60 points on the SAT, a standardized college admissions test), and the gap in years of completed schooling between students with family income in the top and bottom quintiles also increased by half a standard deviation (approximately one year). Puzzlingly, the black-white test score gap decreased substantially over the same time period.

Part II, "The Developing Child and Adolescent," examines how rising income inequality may shape children's initial brain development, early skill development, and subsequent educational achievement and attainment. Social scientists will particularly appreciate Chapter 2, in which Charles A. Nelson and Margaret A. Sheridan provide an accessible description of the mechanisms through which income inequality may affect neurobiological functioning during childhood: through differential exposure to traumatic stress, differential access to language-complex environments, and differences in school structure. The next chapter, by Greg J. Duncan and Katherine Magnuson, finds substantive income-based gaps in early childhood math skills, attention skills, and antisocial behavior, each of which has been shown to predict academic achievement, attainment, and criminal behavior.

The presence of these income-based gaps in early childhood underpin a major conclusion of the book, echoed in the Obama Administration's Promise Neighborhoods initiative, in recent federal and state efforts to expand early childhood education, and in the programmatic focus of the 2011 meeting of the Association for Public Policy Analysis and Management (APPAM): that selective investments in high-quality early childhood education may be more cost-effective than remediation in improving children's life outcomes. In the chapters that follow, scholars describe how gaps based on socioeconomic status persist through middle school (Chapter 4); have widened over the last 50 years (Chapter 5); have contributed to growing gaps in postsecondary college entry and completion (Chapter 6); and may be mediated by a narrowing income-based gap in children's expectations of their future educational attainment (Chapter 7).

Part III, "The Family," further explores potential explanations for the income-based achievement gap. In Chapter 8, Michael Hout and Alexander Janus find that intergenerational educational mobility—defined as the percentage of youth achieving more education than did their parents—has declined substantially since the 1970s. They attribute this decline not to growth in income inequality, but rather to capacity constraints in the education sector that prevent institutions of higher education from accommodating enrollment growth. Intergenerational mobility, however, is just one piece of the puzzle. The subsequent chapters document substantial income-based differences in families' investments in children's supplemental educational activities (Chapter 9), in parent time dedicated to educationally productive activities, and in the quality of interactions between children and their primary caregivers (Chapter 10). These disparities may be explained in part by the disproportionate growth in single parenting among low-income families, a topic addressed by Megan M. Sweeney in Chapter 11.

Part IV, “Neighborhoods,” examines the linkages among rising income inequality, residential segregation, and education access and outcomes. In Chapter 12, Julia Burdick-Will, Jens Ludwig, Stephen W. Raudenbush, Robert J. Sampson, Lisa Sanbonmatsu, and Patrick Sharkey summarize the state of knowledge on neighborhood effects on education outcomes, relying heavily on a well-referenced evidentiary base: experimental data from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development’s Moving to Opportunity (MTO) initiative, quasi-experimental data from Chicago’s Gautreaux residential mobility project, and observational data from the Project on Human Development in Chicago Neighborhoods. They argue that while evidence is mixed on the extent to which neighborhood context matters for educational achievement—the MTO experiment famously found no support for such a relationship across the five sites studied—growing empirical evidence shows that specific neighborhood conditions found in some cities but not others (e.g., concentrated poverty and crime) may most accurately predict educational outcomes and may also explain the attenuated relationship between neighborhood conditions and educational outcomes in cities without concentrated poverty and crime. The discussion provides a nice backdrop for the largely theoretical Chapter 13, in which David Harding, Lisa Gennetian, Christopher Winship, Lisa Sanbonmatsu, and Jeffrey Kling set forth a conceptual framework and accompanying social science research agenda for examining neighborhood effects on schools and students.

Part V, “Labor Markets,” provides a refreshing departure from the traditional literature on rates of return to education, examining instead the effects of local labor market conditions on educational achievement. In Chapter 14, Elizabeth O. Ananat, Anna Gassman-Pines, and Christina M. Gibson-Davis examine the effects of involuntary job loss on student achievement outcomes in North Carolina. They find evidence of an adverse causal effect of community job losses on children’s academic achievement, and they find that these effects disproportionately affect low-income and low-achieving students. In the following chapter, Phillip B. Levine finds relatively little evidence that parents’ labor market participation influences children’s educational outcomes, but he is unable to differentiate empirically between the effects of voluntary and involuntary unemployment.

Part VI, “Schools,” investigates the role of schools in exacerbating or mediating the effects of income inequality on children’s educational outcomes. In Chapter 16, Joseph G. Altonji and Richard K. Mansfield find that between 6 and 16 percent of the variation in children’s educational and labor market (wage) outcomes is explained by observed and unobserved school characteristics; however, substantial educational and labor market effects are associated with moving from low-quality to high-quality schools (i.e., moving from a school in the 10th percentile of the achievement distribution to a school in the 90th percentile). The following chapters explore the mechanisms through which income inequality may adversely affect the school environment. In Chapter 17, Stephen W. Raudenbush, Marshall Jean, and Emily Art document the disproportionate exposure of low-income Chicago students to schools with highly mobile student populations and find that this instability has a negative, cumulative effect on academic achievement outcomes. In Chapter 18, Don Boyd, Hamp Lankford, Susanna Loeb, Matthew Ronfeldt, and Jim Wyckoff find that teachers prefer schools in neighborhoods with higher median family incomes and lower violent crime rates, which may concentrate disadvantage among low-income students. In Chapter 19, David S. Kirk and Robert J. Sampson find that this disadvantage is exacerbated by unsafe environment and crime in schools. The relationship between immigrant concentrations in schools and school achievement outcomes, however, is less clear: in Chapter 20, Amy Ellen Schwartz and Leanna Stiefel find that while immigrants are more likely to be poor than the native-born or than immigrants in previous decades, they may be more likely to attend higher-performing schools. In Chapter 21, Jacob L. Vigdor explores how the end of court-ordered,

race-based school desegregation in North Carolina may have re-concentrated disadvantage among low-income and minority students. Though there is little evidence of achievement effects at the elementary level, the end of desegregation busing is associated with higher high school dropout rates among black students.

The final chapters in Part VI describe, frame, and summarize existing research on interventions aimed at reducing income- and race-based achievement gaps. In Chapter 22, Frank F. Furstenberg finds little evidence that efforts to alter family behaviors actually influence children's academic outcomes. In Chapter 23, Vilsa E. Curto, Roland G. Fryer Jr., and Meghan L. Howard review results from rigorous research on the effects of school-based interventions—and charter schools in particular—in raising the academic achievement of low-income and minority students. The concluding chapters discuss conceptualizing education reforms as “external” versus “internal” to schools (Chapter 24) and the types of education reforms thought to be most educationally productive (Chapter 25).

One of the central dilemmas presented in *Whither Opportunity* is why income-based education gaps have increased while race-based gaps have declined. While this volume does not square the issue entirely—some articles conflate race and income inequality and do not address the extent to which trends in income-based gaps may be explained by the changing composition of race and immigrant status across the income distribution—some chapters do shed light on this issue. Notably, Sean F. Reardon's chapter, “The Widening Academic-Achievement Gap,” documents growing income-based achievement gaps within white, black, and Hispanic student subgroups, albeit at different rates.

While *Whither Opportunity* certainly represents an excellent scholarly contribution, academics will also find the volume pedagogically useful. In keeping with the volume's original intent, the book may be used to develop entire courses that explore the relationship between income inequality and school outcomes, and it would also be useful in teaching approaches to policy analysis in interdisciplinary perspective—including how to articulate appropriate theoretical frameworks for examining social policy issues. Individual chapters also may be used to supplement course readings in the economics of education, sociology of education, educational psychology, education policy, and school-based interventions. Further, several chapters provide useful examples of applied empirical methods and causal inference techniques that may be used to supplement methods courses. In particular, Chapter 14, “The Effects of Local Employment Losses on Children's Educational Achievement,” and Chapter 21, “School Desegregation and the Black-White Test Score Gap,” provide elegant examples of how social science researchers can exploit plausibly exogenous policy shifts to infer causality. These empirical examples could couple nicely in a causal inference course with Richard J. Murnane's other recent landmark contribution with John B. Willett, *Methods Matter: Improving Causal Inference in Educational and Social Science Research* (2011).

SCHOOL CHOICE AND EDUCATIONAL INEQUALITY

Duncan and Murnane's compendium sets the stage for examining how the structural features of K-12 public education may be altered to reduce inequality. School choice endures as a promising yet controversial means to reduce inequality by modifying the structure of school service delivery. Three recent volumes examine the school choice movement from theoretical and empirical perspectives.

In *School Choice Policies and Outcomes: Empirical and Philosophical Perspectives*, editors Walter Feinberg and Christopher Lubienski have asked ethicists, theorists, and empiricists to summarize philosophical and empirical arguments on both sides of the school choice debate. In the Introduction, the editors identify four theoretical

justifications for school choice: (1) individual liberty, (2) improved efficiency and efficacy, (3) greater equity, and (4) community building. In Chapter 1, Rob Reich examines the emergence of the common schooling and school choice movements as responses to pluralism; he argues that school choice is not incompatible with the goals of common schools, as long as parents are free to choose among schools with common educational aspirations. In Chapter 2, Harry Brighouse presents a sanguine perspective on school choice and argues that the most compelling justification for school choice lies in equity—rather than efficiency-based arguments, although his equity-based arguments for school choice hinge on the assumption that systems of school choice are as efficient as the status quo in producing student outcomes.

The remaining chapters provide critical perspectives on the school choice movement. Kenneth R. Howe's response to Brighouse in Chapter 3 presents evidence from a few empirical studies showing that charter schools do not outperform public schools on average, and in some cases have increased racial segregation across schools. In Chapter 4, Kathleen Knight Abowitz criticizes Ohio's EdChoice Scholarship Program for inadequately promoting various dimensions of justice, including intergenerational justice (i.e., sustainability). While she argues for enhanced state oversight to ensure that justice is promoted in a system of school choice, she does not provide evidence that traditional public schools outperform charter schools in promoting justice. In Chapter 5, Christopher Lubienski contends that parents do not have the information necessary to make well-informed decisions about their children's education in a system of school choice, and that the tools parents typically use to differentiate school quality—such as school Web sites that report average test scores—do not provide detailed information on the complex bundle of services offered by schools. Further, as Courtney A. Bell argues in Chapter 6, low-income and disadvantaged parents are the least able to exercise school choice in ways that reflect their preferences. Other criticisms of school choice include the assertion that education management organizations (EMOs) and charter school management organizations (CMOs) provide "a way for White men to preserve an elite and privileged space in educational leadership and policy" (p. 154, Chapter 7), that the school choice movement may serve to reinforce rather than dismantle existing social power structures (Chapter 8), and that school choice may continue to perpetuate inequality, as evidenced by the experience of black children in post-apartheid South Africa (Chapter 9). Feinberg's conclusion in Chapter 10 is that school choice alone will not level the playing field between advantaged and disadvantaged students; he calls for an expanded view of school choice that includes rethinking school district boundaries.

In *Charter Schools: Hope or Hype?*, Jack Buckley and Mark Schneider examine charter schools in Washington, D.C., offering a debate on the rationale behind the charter school movement and empirically investigating whether charter schools outperform traditional public schools along a variety of measures. Compared to Feinberg and Lubienski, Buckley and Schneider provide a more comprehensive discussion of the theoretical justifications for—and limitations of—charter schools, including the argument that charter schools may enhance allocative efficiency by improving the match between student needs and school characteristics. Next, they describe the institutional context of the charter school movement nationally and within Washington, D.C. (Chapter 2), and describe the two main data sources used in the study (Chapter 3): data on school search behavior among parents using DC-SchoolSearch.com, and data from a four-wave panel survey of parents and students attending both charter and traditional public schools in Washington, D.C. Results from the panel survey (the fourth wave included about 300 parents and 150 students) indicate that parents of children enrolled in charter schools versus traditional public schools are similar across several important dimensions, including age, employment, marital status, and mobility rates; however, charter school parents have lower average incomes, are more likely to be black (and less likely to be Hispanic),

and are more likely to have completed college than parents of students enrolled in traditional public schools. The authors report similar levels of parental engagement, despite longer commute times for charter school students. In Chapter 4, the authors use cross-sectional student achievement data to examine whether charter school students are harder to educate. They find that charter school students are more likely to be poor, are less likely to be English language learners, and are about as likely to have special needs as traditional public school students; further, there is little evidence that the D.C. charter schools “cream-skim” relatively high-performing students.

In several subsequent chapters, Buckley and Schneider explore how parents use information when selecting schools. Chapter 5, “Shopping for Schools on the Internet Using DCSchoolSearch.com,” provides a fascinating case study examining whether school choice changes parental incentives to become informed and involved in the educative process. The authors spent approximately \$200,000 to develop a comprehensive Web site that would allow parents in Washington, D.C., to compare their public school (charter and non-charter) options. During its period of operation from 1999 to 2003 and despite extensive advertising and outreach activities, the site had only 4,800 hits from parents. The authors conclude that school choice alone does not change the incentive structure for parents to seek information on available alternatives. In Chapter 6, the authors dig further into the black box of parent-choice behavior and find that parental preferences for school attributes—including academic performance indicators and the composition of the student body—are different when measured by parent survey responses than when measured by parent Web site search behavior. In Chapter 7, Buckley and Schneider present evidence that parents on average possess low levels of information on the quality of the schools in which their children are enrolled, as well as on the distribution of school quality indicators across schools. However, these low information levels may not interfere with how school markets function; parents who actively search for school quality information are more likely to select a new school for their child (Chapter 8).

In Chapters 9 and 10, the authors explore parental and student satisfaction with charter versus traditional public schools. Parents of charter school students initially report higher school satisfaction overall and with respect to school values, school size, and class size, but these satisfaction levels decline over time and become statistically indistinguishable from those of parents with children attending non-charter schools; there are no discernible satisfaction differences between students in charter and non-charter schools. And while parents rate charter school teachers as more respectful, responsible, and honest—and rate their fellow parents as more responsible on average—these perceptions do not correspond to higher rates of school and/or civic engagement (Chapter 11). The authors do, however, find positive, modest effects of charter school attendance on civic skills acquisition (Chapter 12). Buckley and Schneider conclude that charter schools pass the basic test of sound public policy—do no harm—but they do not find substantial evidence favoring charter schools over traditional public schools.

Editors Julian R. Betts and Paul T. Hill provide a timely and definitive contribution to the charter school debate in *Taking Measure of Charter Schools: Better Assessments, Better Policymaking, Better Schools*. The volume grew from initial efforts made by the National Charter School Research Project (NCSRP), which convened a panel of experts to author the 2006 white paper *Key Issues in Studying Charter Schools and Achievement: A Review and Suggestions for National Guidelines*. The white paper set forth a standard of methodological rigor for evaluating charter school efficacy, and *Taking Measure of Charter Schools* expands on these concepts. The book divides neatly into two sections: Chapters 2 through 8 discuss how to improve estimates of charter school performance, while Chapters 9 through 11 provide policy recommendations.

In Chapter 2, Julian R. Betts, Y. Emily Tang, and Andrew C. Zau compare experimental and nonexperimental methods to evaluate the effect of charter school attendance on student achievement in San Diego, California. They also compare results from models that use two different outcome measures: student test scores and student learning gains. They find positive and statistically significant effects of charter school attendance on student achievement when using value-added measures of student achievement as the outcome measure and controlling for student fixed effects, but they do not find these effects when using absolute test scores—rather than gains—as the outcome measure. In Chapter 3, Laura S. Hamilton and Brian M. Stecher call for a move toward using innovative measures to evaluate charter school effectiveness, including benchmark assessments; student portfolio work; measures of attainment, productivity, and civic engagement; and evaluations of school conditions and processes. In Chapter 4, Julian R. Betts relies heavily on meta-analysis to review existing studies evaluating the effect of charter schools on achievement, attainment, and behavioral outcomes. Betts finds evidence that charter schools outperform traditional public schools in elementary reading and middle school math but underperform in high school math; he also presents some evidence that charter school students are more likely to graduate from high school, more likely to enroll in postsecondary education, and less prone to adverse disciplinary events. Subsequent chapters provide thorough, accessible discussions of key issues that charter school researchers should consider when evaluating charter school effectiveness: the selection of students into charter schools (Chapter 5), whether charter school lotteries do in fact mimic random-assignment conditions (Chapter 6), charter school maturation over time (Chapter 7), and the sorting of teachers into charter schools (Chapter 8).

The final chapters position these research issues within the broader charter school policy debate. In Chapter 9, Robin J. Lake and Larry Angel provide an excellent review of existing state research on charter school effectiveness, reviewing 26 charter school studies conducted or commissioned by states from 2000 to 2006. Using criteria for high-quality research as defined by the NCSRP consensus panel, they conclude that the vast majority of state studies—80 percent of the studies reviewed—use “poor” or “fair” research methods and do not meet rigorous methodological standards for evaluating charter schools. In Chapter 10, Jeffrey R. Henig explores how these studies are used, interpreted, and politicized in the popular press. In Chapter 11, the editors conclude the volume with a description of the changing charter school policy environment and a series of policy recommendations.

Taking Measure of Charter Schools could benefit from a more nuanced discussion of how charter schools vary in terms of institutional details (e.g., the charter school mission, teacher recruitment and retention strategies), the students served, and differences in their service delivery plans (e.g., instructional and noninstructional programmatic features). Such features certainly play a role in explaining performance differences between charter and traditional public schools. Nonetheless, this volume accomplishes the challenging task of explaining the need for rigorous charter school evaluations in a manner accessible to researchers, policymakers, and practitioners alike.

ASHLYN AIKO NELSON is Assistant Professor at the School of Public and Environmental Affairs, Indiana University, 1315 E. Tenth Street, Bloomington, IN 47405.

REFERENCE

- Murnane, R. J., & Willett, J. B. (2011). *Methods matter: Improving causal inference in educational and social science research*. New York: Oxford University Press.