

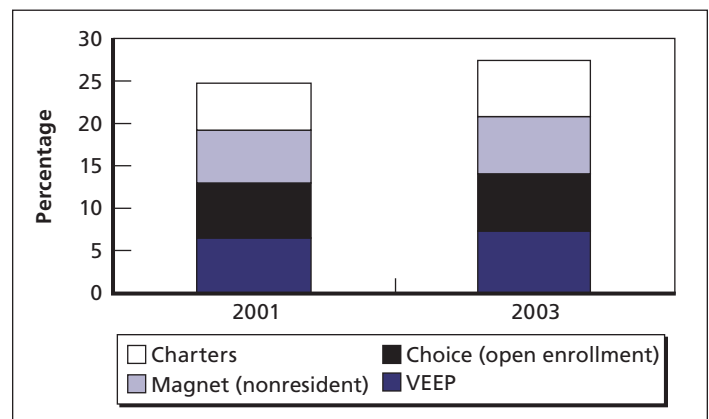
Despite High Demand and Popularity, Benefits of San Diego's Public School Choice Programs Remain Mixed

Public school choice programs in San Diego are extremely popular, especially in nonwhite communities, and many families who apply are turned away each year. A new report finds that these programs, which give students options to attend schools other than the one in their local neighborhood, can clearly help diversify and integrate schools along racial-ethnic and socioeconomic lines. But evidence that choice programs also boost academic achievement is less clear.

In *Does School Choice Work? Effects on Student Integration and Achievement*, researchers Julian Betts, Lorien Rice, Andrew Zau, Emily Tang, and Cory Koedel show that school choice programs have struck an unmistakable chord with the public. In the 2003–2004 school year, more than one-quarter of San Diego district students—28 percent—were attending schools other than local ones through one of four choice programs. Two of these are state-mandated: the districtwide open-enrollment program (also named Choice) and the charter school program, composed of public schools operating with considerable administrative and legal autonomy. The other two programs, magnet schools, which have a specific academic focus such as performing arts, and a busing program known as the Voluntary Ethnic Enrollment Program (VEEP), are both residuals of desegregation court orders of the 1970s. Versions of all four programs are found in other large districts in the state, sometimes under other names and forms. (The report does not examine voucher programs, which are still in formative stages in only a few locations outside California.)

San Diego's status as the second-largest school district in the nation's most populous state, and eighth-largest district nationally, gives the report's findings broad potential applicability not only for state policymakers who authorized the programs but also for those involved in the 2007 reauthorization of the federal No Child Left Behind (NCLB) law.

The report comes amid a national difference of opinion about how school choice programs affect public school students. Proponents argue that the benefits of choice already exist for affluent families who have the means to move where the best schools are located; choice legislation offers similar opportunities to less-affluent families. Moreover, according to this argument, school choice may create an education market that forces schools to improve through competition. On the other side, critics contend that school choice programs will resegregate school districts racially and socioeconomically and divert resources from students who are left behind in failing schools.



In recent years, about 25 percent of students have enrolled in one of San Diego's school choice programs and the percentage continues to grow.

The report addresses three broad issues: how students make decisions to leave their local schools, how choice programs affect student integration, and choice programs' possible effects on student math and reading achievement levels. The authors examined several years of attendance records from the early 2000s, as well as applications to the magnet, open-enrollment Choice, and VEEP programs, and the results of lotteries for the limited slots in these programs.

Choice and Integration

Regarding integration, the authors found that nonwhites are strongly interested in choice options. For instance, in the VEEP program, black high school students were twice as likely to apply as whites. Overall, the choice programs in San Diego appear to be increasing the integration of whites and nonwhites and to be decreasing very mildly integration between students with low and high test scores.

These findings provide comfort to partisans of both sides. Warnings from opponents that new racial or ethnic segregation patterns will ensue from choice programs are contradicted by the patterns in San Diego. But claims by proponents that parents will “vote with their feet” by seeking schools with high test scores, thereby creating competitive pressures for all schools to improve, are not strongly supported either—because a school’s test scores do not seem to strongly motivate those who apply to transfer to that school.

In all of the choice programs, the number of applications outstripped the supply of openings. This lack of supply depressed the actual integrating effects that choice programs might have had. For example, if all the applications filed by black students to exercise one choice option, VEEP, had been successful, these black students would have experienced a nearly 50 percent increase in their exposure to white students in the schools to which they applied. But lack of availability in those schools and other factors reduced the actual increase in exposure to 6.6 percent.

Choice and Achievement

To test whether the school choice programs are boosting the achievement of participating students, the authors compared the math and reading test scores of lottery winners and lottery losers in the open-enrollment, magnet, and VEEP programs. For the most part, the authors found no evidence that winners and losers of a given lottery fared differently in achievement tests one to three years after the admission lottery for fall 2001 was conducted.

But there were two important exceptions: Winners of lotteries to attend magnet high schools did perform better on math achievement tests two and three years later. And in a small number of cases, choice lottery winners showed

lower reading performance in the first year after a transfer but recovered by the second year.

Because the district does not conduct centralized lotteries for charter schools, the authors evaluated the effect of charter schools on achievement using a different method. The results are similar to those found for the other three choice programs, with charter students typically performing about as well as those in regular public schools. However, startup elementary charter schools sometimes underperformed regular elementary schools in their first few years of operation.

Policy Implications

If higher test scores do not seem to result from choice programs, why are they so popular in San Diego? The authors propose two theories. One is that parents may not be making high academic achievement—at least as it is reflected by high test scores—the sole criterion for a “good” school they want their children to attend. Other ingredients for a good school in parents’ minds may include factors such as better physical safety and a generally higher socioeconomic level. Alternatively, parents may simply overestimate the benefits of attending a different school on their children’s achievement.

Policymakers assessing whether or how to expand choice programs may want to note two factors that appear to boost integration. First, the VEEP and magnet programs in San Diego, which did the most to integrate schools racially and ethnically, both provided free busing; the open-enrollment program, which did the least to increase integration, provided no busing. Second, the VEEP and magnet programs gave preference to applicants from certain areas of the city, whereas the open-enrollment program did not. Provision of busing and the use of geographical preferences might be a necessary ingredient for choice programs should policymakers seek to increase integration.

One of the most important policy implications from the test score results may pertain to the federal NCLB law, which requires that students at schools judged to be failing be provided district-funded busing to another school. The results from San Diego raise doubts about the ability of choice programs alone to increase the achievement of participants.

This research brief summarizes a report by Julian R. Betts, Lorien A. Rice, Andrew C. Zau, Y. Emily Tang, and Cory R. Koedel, Does School Choice Work? Effects on Student Integration and Achievement (2006, 220 pp. \$20.00, ISBN 1-58213-114-7). The report may be ordered online at www.ppic.org or by phone at (800) 232-5343 or (415) 291-4400 [outside mainland U.S.]. A copy of the full text is also available at www.ppic.org. The Public Policy Institute of California is a private, nonprofit organization dedicated to independent, objective, nonpartisan research on economic, social, and political issues affecting California. This study was supported with funding from the Smith Richardson Foundation, Inc., and the Girard Foundation.
