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ABSTRACT

This publication is the first in a series of reports that examine policy issues in education. It looks at the four major forms of school choice--charter schools, open enrollment, home schooling, and vouchers--and how they are changing the landscape of public education. School choice is one of the fastest-growing innovations in public education, with nearly 1 in 10 American public-school students participating in some form of choice. The report describes how charter schools are becoming increasingly popular throughout the U.S. and how states are meeting demand for these schools. It looks at open enrollment, which allows parents to choose where their children receive their education, and provides a brief history of this practice. An overview of homeschooling includes the racial composition of homeschoolers and the number of homeschooled students. The report discusses voucher programs, which enable parents to send their children to any school of their choice, and outlines why this practice is so controversial. The text closes with the observation that school choice depends on good policy, and it comments on the ground swell of support of school choice. Sidebars in the article offer further information, such as a list of resources that includes Web sites. (RJM)

The Progress of Education Reform 1999-2001

School Choice

Volume 1, May 1999

What's inside

The school-choice movement is changing the landscape of public education

School choice is one of the fastest-growing innovations in public education. Today, nearly one in 10 American public-school students participates in some form of choice, ranging from charter schools to vouchers to open-enrollment programs that allow youngsters to attend any public school within or, in some cases, outside their district.

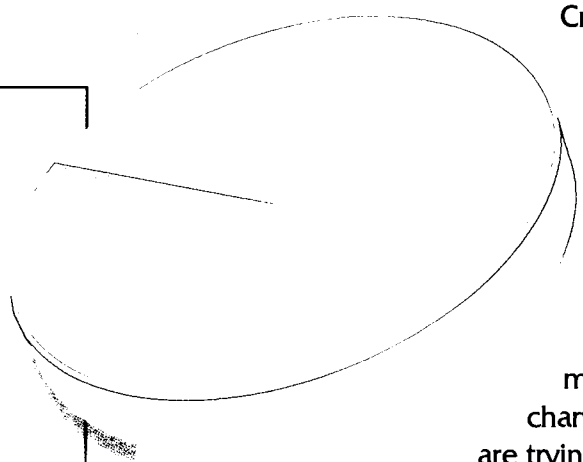
Proponents of school choice contend that such programs will bring about change and improvement by forcing public schools to compete for students, and will expand and diversify the range of learning opportunities, experiences and environments available to students. Critics of school choice, on the other hand, argue that using marketplace reforms in the education arena treats learning as a commodity and has the potential to jeopardize the cherished American ideal of providing a quality education to all children.

Whatever the pros and cons, the school-choice movement continues to gain ground. Increasingly state choice programs include a mix of inter- and intradistrict enrollment options, charter schools and home schooling. Several states are trying out or considering programs that provide cash certificates, tax credits or tax deductions to allow students to attend any school of their choice–public or private.

What is driving the school-choice movement? Will charter schools, vouchers and other choice programs undermine the traditional public school system, or will they serve as a catalyst for wide-scale change and improvement? And what research has been done to assess the impact of choice programs on school quality and student achievement?

This issue of *The Progress of Education Reform 1999-2001* takes an in-depth look at the four major forms of school choice – charter schools, open enrollment, home schooling and vouchers – and how they are changing the landscape of public education.

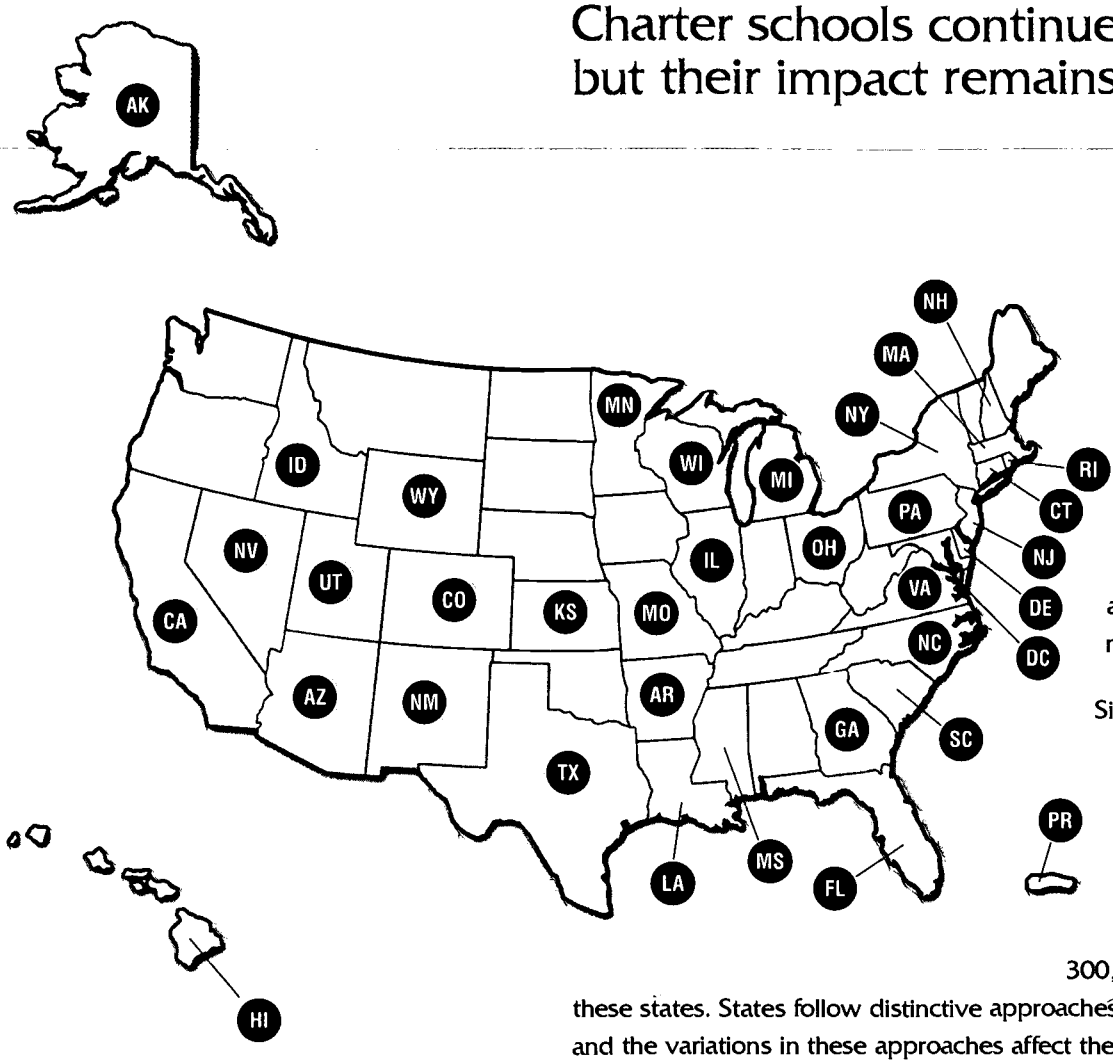
K-12 school-age population, 1998-99



- 42.2 million – regular public schools (80%)
- 5.9 million – private/parochial schools (11%)
- 3.3 million – open enrollment programs (6%)
- 1.0 million – home schooling (2%)
- 310,000 – charter schools and voucher programs (1%)

Source: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Center for Education Reform

Charter schools continue to proliferate, but their impact remains unclear



States with charter school laws

Charter schools are semi-autonomous schools founded by teachers, parents, community groups or private organizations that operate under a written contract, or charter, detailing how the school will be organized and managed, what students will be taught and expected to achieve, and how success will be measured.

Since 1991, 34 states, the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico have enacted charter school legislation. According to the Center for Education Reform, more than 1,200 charter schools, serving roughly 300,000 students, operate in 27 of these states. States follow distinctive approaches to charter school development, and the variations in these approaches affect the number, type and operation of charter schools in each state.

Several recent studies have examined the impact of charter schools on students and school districts. While it is difficult to draw any definitive conclusions, these studies shed some light on who is attending charter schools, how charter schools operate and how school districts are reacting to, and interacting with, charter schools.

In 1998, Policy Analysis for California Education (PACE) released a study examining the impact of charter schools in 25 school districts in eight states and the District of Columbia. According to the PACE study, because of charter schools, school districts:

- Lost students — and often financing — to niche-focused charter schools
- Experienced shifts in staff morale
- Lost significant numbers of disgruntled parents
- Redistributed some central office administrators' time
- Faced increased challenges predicting student enrollment and planning grade-level placement.

PACE found most school districts had not responded with swift, dramatic improvement, but rather had gone about business as usual and responded to charter schools slowly and only in small ways. Roughly one-quarter of the districts studied, however, had responded energetically to the advent of charter schools and significantly altered their education programs.

Also in 1998, University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA) researchers released a study that compared many of the most prominent claims of charter school advocates against the day-to-day experiences of educators, parents and students in charter schools as well as in nearby public schools. Seventeen case studies in 10 California school districts were conducted. The major findings include:

- In most instances, charter schools are not yet held accountable for enhanced academic achievement, and they vary widely in the amount of operating autonomy they need or want and in the demands they make on districts.
- School boards are ambivalent about their responsibilities to monitor charter schools, and many are reluctant to become involved.
- Charter schools exercise considerable control over the type of students they serve, and the state requirement that charter schools reflect the racial and ethnic makeup of their districts has not been enforced.
- Teachers in charter schools value their freedom, their collegiality and relatively small classes, but heavy workloads are an issue.
- No mechanisms are in place for charter schools and regular public schools to learn from one another, and public school educators believe charter schools have an unfair advantage.

The largest research project on charter schools is the U.S. Department of Education's four-year National Study of Charter Schools, which will be concluded in late 2000. Among other things, the final report is expected to provide the first comprehensive analysis of achievement trends among charters school students.

To find out more...

- Visit ECS' Web site at www.ecs.org for information on choice and related topics.
- Visit the Center for Education Reform's Web site at http://edreform.com.
- Read the full text of the latest report of the National Study of Charter Schools on the U.S. Department of Education's Web site at www.ed.gov/pubs. A variety of other information about charter schools is available at www.uscharterschools.org.
- For copies of the report, *How Are School Districts Responding to Charter Laws and Charter Schools?*, contact Policy Analysis for California Education at 510-642-7223, or read the text of the report online at www.gse.berkeley.edu/research/PACE.
- For copies of the UCLA study, contact the report's authors at http://www.geis.ucla.edu.

More public school students are taking advantage of open enrollment

17 States Have Comprehensive, Statewide Open-Enrollment Programs

Arizona, Arkansas, Colorado, Connecticut, Delaware, Idaho, Iowa, Minnesota, Nebraska, North Dakota, Ohio, Oregon, South Dakota, Tennessee, Utah, Washington and Wisconsin (also Puerto Rico)

11 States Have Limited Open-Enrollment Programs

Alabama, California, Indiana, Louisiana, Massachusetts, Michigan, Missouri, New Hampshire, New Mexico, New York and Texas

Open-enrollment programs – which allow parents to choose where their children get an education rather than being assigned to a school on the basis of where they live – are one of the primary tools states are using to increase the versatility and responsiveness of the public school system.

Enrollment choice is not new to American education. Voluntary student-transfer programs and "magnet schools" – specialized programs drawing students from beyond the boundaries of regular attendance zones – were created in the 1960s and 1970s as part of desegregation plans in many cities. They were viewed as a way of attracting students to otherwise unpopular areas or schools.

The first state to establish a comprehensive, statewide open-enrollment system, permitting students to transfer both within and among school districts, was Minnesota, in 1988. Since then, 17 other states (and the territory of Puerto Rico) have enacted similar legislation. Another 11 states allow school choice, but on a more limited basis – restricting it to transfers within districts, for instance, or leaving it up to individual districts to decide whether to accept students from outside their boundaries.

Some choice advocates say the full potential of open enrollment as a catalyst for reform has been undermined – even in states where it is mandatory – by a lack of public information and outreach. In Colorado, for example, a statewide survey found that only one in five public-school parents was aware of open-enrollment options that had been in place for several years. Another problem area is transportation. Most states require students to provide their own transportation to and from their new school. This makes open enrollment impractical for many students, particularly low-income, inner-city students and those who live in rural areas.

Nevertheless, participation in open-enrollment programs has grown steadily over the past decade, to nearly four million students nationwide, according to U.S. Department of Education estimates. In some districts, as much as 20% of the student population takes advantage of intradistrict enrollment options. For example, roughly 13,000 of the Denver Public Schools' 69,000 students currently attend a school other than the one to which they would normally be assigned.

In a recent report, *School Choice and Urban Education Reform,* Columbia University researchers Peter W. Cookson Jr. and Sonali M. Shroff conclude while there is little compelling evidence directly linking open-enrollment programs with higher student achievement or school improvement, such programs can have beneficial effects on education effectiveness and opportunity. "Children's opportunities are influenced by the neighborhood their parents choose to live in, or are forced to live in, and by the quality of schools in that neighborhood. Choice does provide exit from these controlling circumstances and, to that degree, provides opportunities that might not otherwise exist for some children," they found.

Home schooling works for families who make a commitment to it

Students schooled at home outperform public and private school students on standardized tests, but they also tend to come from families with higher incomes and education levels than the average American student.

Those are among the key findings of a newly published study by University of Maryland researcher Lawrence M. Rudner. Rudner's study, involving 20,760 home-schooled students in 50 states and underwritten by a grant from the Home School Legal Defense Association, is said to be the largest-ever survey of home-schooled students.

In Rudner's study, home schoolers' median scores, across all grade levels and subject areas, typically fell in the 70th and 80th percentiles. Nearly 25% of the home schoolers were studying one or more grades above normal for their age.

The study also showed the vast majority of home schoolers (94%) are white, tend to come from two-parent families and watch significantly less television than children nationwide. Nearly 88% of home schoolers' parents continued their education after high school, compared with 50% for the nation as a whole. And the median income for home-school families was $52,000 vs. an average $36,000 for all U.S. families with children.

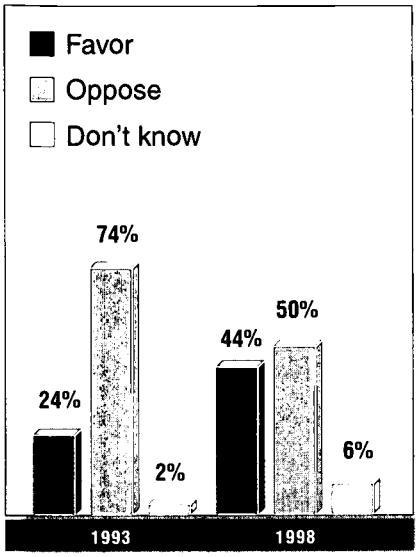
The study does not prove that home schooling is superior to private or public education, Rudner said in a recent issue of *Education Week*, but rather that "home schooling works for those who've made a commitment to do it."

The U.S. Department of Education in 1998 estimated that more than one million students nationwide are home-schooled; other estimates range from 700,000 to two million. Since 1993, following years of court battles, it has been legal in all 50 states for parents to take charge of their children's education from kindergarten through college. Most states have a home-schooling coordinator and some, such as Iowa and Washington, have established resource centers for parents. Several states also have adopted policies allowing home schoolers to use public school libraries and computer rooms, sign up for certain courses or participate in extracurricular activities.

To find out more...

- Visit the National Home Education Research Institute's Web site at www.nheri.org or contact the institute at 503-364-1490.
- Copies of the Rudner report, *The Scholastic Achievement and Demographic Characteristics of Home School Students in 1998*, are available for $2 each from the Home School Legal Defense Association at 540-338-5600. The report is also available online at http://epaa.asu.edu/epaa/v7n9/.
- The Cookson-Shroff report on school choice is available online at http://eric-web.tc.columbia.edu/monographs/uds/110/ or by calling the ERIC Clearinghouse on Urban Education at 1-800-601-4868.

Vouchers remain the most controversial form of school choice



Change in Choice

Over the past five years, support has grown for allowing students and parents to choose private schools to attend at public expense.

Source: Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup Poll of the Public's Attitudes Toward the Public Schools.

Voucher programs, which provide cash certificates enabling parents to send their children to any public or private school of their choice, are perhaps the single most divisive topic in public education today.

So far, such programs have been implemented in just a handful of states and only on a limited basis. In spring 1999, Florida lawmakers approved what will be the first statewide voucher program in the nation. Under this legislation, children attending schools that fail to meet the state's standards will receive vouchers worth at least $4,000 each to attend any public, private or parochial school in Florida. Legislators in several other states – including Arizona, New Mexico, Pennsylvania and Texas – also are considering adopting voucher programs.

Rising interest in school vouchers is at least partly attributable to the U.S. Supreme Court's decision last year not to review a case involving the constitutionality of the Milwaukee voucher program. The high court thus allowed to stand a 1998 ruling by the Wisconsin Supreme Court, which found the program to be constitutional. In addition, recent survey data show that public opposition to taxpayer support for private or parochial education has dwindled over the past few years. In fact, a 1998 Gallup poll found a majority of Americans, for the first time, would support partial government payment of tuition at private or parochial schools.

A new wrinkle in the evolving debate about vouchers is the implementation of private voucher programs. The Children's Educational Opportunity America Foundation (CEO America), founded to provide vouchers to low-income children, is affiliated with about 40 privately funded voucher programs across the country. Perhaps CEO America's most controversial endeavor is the Horizon Program, started in San Antonio's Edgewood School District in fall 1998. The program offers every low-income student within the district vouchers of up to $4,000 a year to attend a public, private or parochial school of his or her choice. CEO America is providing up to $50 million over 10 years for the program, in which 837 students currently participate.

Another private voucher program is the Children's Scholarship Fund (CSF), created by Theodore J. Forstmann and John Walton, who together pledged $100 million to help low-income parents send their children to private and parochial schools. Their initial donation drew $70 million in matching funds from other private sources. In April 1999, CSF selected – from a pool of 1.2 million applicants – 40,000 children who will receive scholarships ranging from $600 to $1,600 a year for at least four years. CSF also is backing statewide programs in Arkansas, Michigan and New Hampshire, and is reserving 5,000 scholarships for applicants in a nationwide pool.

Over the past several years, a number of studies have examined publicly and privately financed voucher programs. As with charter schools, it is difficult to make any definitive statements about the impacts of vouchers, although these studies have shed some light on who is participating, how the programs operate and how satisfied participants are with the programs.

In 1998, John Witte, University of Wisconsin professor, reviewed the results of the first five years of the Milwaukee voucher program before it was expanded to include parochial schools and more students. His study revealed a successful targeting of very low-income minority pupils and substantial gains in parental satisfaction and involvement. Moreover, the achievement data, though not marked by any significant improvement in test scores, showed some increased stability of student outcomes over time.

Two other studies have reached different conclusions on the issue of student achievement. One study, by Paul Peterson, Harvard University professor, and his colleagues, found that by the third and fourth years of the voucher program, participating students had made sizable gains relative to their public school peers in both reading and math. The other study, by Cecilia Rouse, Princeton University professor, found gains in math but not in reading. The differing conclusions are attributable to variations in how comparison groups were selected and how the data were analyzed.

On the privately funded voucher front, Peterson and his colleagues in October 1998 released their study of the first year of the New York School Choice Scholarships Program. Through this lottery-style program, about 1,300 students receive scholarships worth up to $1,400 toward tuition at the private or parochial school of their choice. According to the study, after one year, students who received a scholarship scored higher in math and reading tests than control-group students. In addition, parents of scholarship users were much more satisfied with their children's education than control-group parents.

To find out more...

- Visit CEO America's Web site at www.ceoamerica.org.
- Read the full text of the Peterson studies of the Milwaukee, Cleveland and New York voucher programs at www.data.fas.harvard.edu/pepg/.

Publicly Funded Voucher Programs

Milwaukee

In the 1998-99 school year, about 6,000 students took advantage of the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program, which provides vouchers of about $5,000 a year to cover tuition costs at private and parochial schools. Fewer than half of the available slots in the program (15,000) were filled.

Cleveland

In Cleveland, a pilot scholarship and voucher program created by Ohio policymakers in 1995 provides students with vouchers of up to $2,500 for tuition at a private, public or parochial school of their choice. Up to 4,000 K-5 students a year are eligible for the program, although only 3,678 participated in 1998-99.

ECS Resources

For more information on vouchers, tax credits, tax deductions, choice and charter schools, please see the ECS Web site at www.ecs.org or contact the Information Clearinghouse at 303-299-3600.

EDUCATION COMMISSION OF THE STATES ECS

School Choice

Potential of school choice depends on good policy

When it comes to education, families in Milwaukee have a wider array of options than any others in the nation. Parents may send their child to a regular public school, a specialized "magnet school," a private or parochial school, or one of a variety of charter schools operated by the district, the city or a local college or university. In the case of low-income families, parents may send their child to a private or parochial school, with tuition covered by a publicly funded voucher of up to $5,000 a year.

Is Milwaukee an anomaly on the landscape of American education, or does it signal the wave of the future for school districts, particularly those in urban areas?

According to Columbia University researchers Peter W. Cookson Jr. and Sonali M. Shroff, America is still only "at the edge of the school-choice phenomenon." Over the next decade, they predict, the organizational picture of schooling in the United States will be very different from what it is today – "more privatization, more choice, more opportunity, more danger."

Choice, said Cookson and Shroff, has proved to be a useful tactic in promoting experimentation, and its focus on the involvement of all families in all phases of schooling is an important new element of education reform. Yet there is a danger that choice will be viewed as a panacea, diverting attention from other reforms that need to be enacted in conjunction with it. In the end, they conclude, "good schools for all children will only be achieved through finance equity, prepared professionals, and high standards and purpose."

Clearly, the school-choice movement is increasing in volume and diversity. Given the potential ramifications of this movement, it is important to focus on the relationship between school choice and student opportunity and achievement. Thus, policymakers, educators and others concerned about the future of public education must address a number of critical questions:

- ✔ Which combination of school-choice options will have the greatest impact on student opportunity and achievement?
- ✔ How can states and communities move from their current systems to ones that provide various combinations of school-choice options?
- ✔ What other policy changes must be enacted along with school-choice policies in order to further increase student opportunity and achievement?

This publication, the first in a series of bimonthly reports, is made possible by a grant from the GE Fund. The report was prepared by ECS Writer-Editor Suzanne Weiss and Policy Analyst Todd Ziebarth.

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