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Lessons for Improving School Choice from Other Policy Areas

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As school choice expands in different states and districts, it appears in several different forms: (1) open enrollment policies among traditional public schools, (2) charter schools available to students regardless of their neighborhood (including online charter schools), or (3) school vouchers that families can use to enroll in other districts or private institutions. Each of these school choice systems can be complex and confusing for low-income families, especially when they are contending with challenges ranging from unstable employment and housing to limited transportation.

In the search for solutions, education researchers and policymakers may have overlooked lessons about systems of choice from other policy arenas. This issue focus suggests strategies for consideration from MDRC's extensive experience designing and evaluating interventions to support low-income people's decision making in arenas outside P-12 choice systems.

WHAT P-12 CHOICE SYSTEMS CAN LEARN FROM OTHER POLICY ARENAS

Housing choice: Similar to families choosing schools, holders of housing vouchers face supply-side constraints, and they struggle to find and understand information that will help them in the decision-making process. Even though voucher holders tend to prefer higher-opportunity and lower-poverty neighborhoods, they do not necessarily end up in those neighborhoods because of limited affordable housing options and the search process itself.¹ School choice literature has documented a similar dynamic, whereby parents often express a preference for schools of higher academic quality but often are unable to prioritize that consideration when selecting schools.²

One potential solution is offering families more access to "brokers."³ Just as voucher holders may benefit from a real estate broker to find housing in a high-opportunity neighborhood, low-income families in school choice systems with limited information about high-performing schools could benefit from an adviser who connects them to educational opportunities. In collaboration with the Housing Authorities of Seattle and King County (Washington) and researchers Raj Chetty, Stefanie DeLuca, Nathan Hendren, and Lawrence Katz, MDRC is testing the broker approach to housing in a project called Creating Moves to Opportunity.

Child care choice: Low-income families seeking high-quality child care for young children encounter similar supply-side constraints. However, research shows that parents perceive their choices for affordable care are more limited than they actually are, and parents often lack information about how various child care options differ in terms of their quality.⁴

MDRC designed and evaluated a series of [interventions in Indiana](#) to address some of these constraints in the child care decision-making process. Simplifying and personalizing the information

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¹Kathryn Edin, Stefanie DeLuca, and Ann Owens, "Constrained Compliance: Solving the Puzzle of MTO's Lease-Up Rates and Why Mobility Matters," *Cityscape* 14, 2: 181-194.

²Mary Pattillo, "Everyday Politics of School Choice in the Black Community," *Du Bois Review: Social Science Research on Race* 12, 1: 41-71; Marc Stein, Ellen Goldring, and Xiu Cravens, "Choosing Indianapolis Charter Schools: Espoused versus Revealed Academic Preferences" Research Brief (Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University, National Center on School Choice, 2010).

³Mario Luis Small, "Neighborhood Institutions as Resource Brokers: Childcare centers, Interorganizational Ties, and Resource Access Among the Poor," *Social Problems* 53, 2: 274-292.

⁴Nicole Forry, Kathryn Tout, Laura Rothenberg, Heather Sandstrom, and Colleen Vesely, "Child Care Decision-Making Literature Review" OPRE Brief 2013-45 (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation, 2013).

parents received about child care providers increased the percentage of parents choosing a highly rated provider. The limited research on efforts to improve school choice systems also demonstrates that simplifying the information parents receive about their school choices increases the likelihood that parents will select a higher-performing school.⁵ What is less well understood — and is an important area of future experimentation — is how to personalize this information for parents.

College choice: College choice offers a more direct lesson for P-12 choice systems. Research has found that low-income and minority students tend to “under-match” in their college application process — meaning they do not apply to selective colleges even when they meet the college’s academic eligibility requirements and have a good chance of being accepted.⁶ In response, MDRC and partners designed the [College Match Program](#), which supported high school juniors and seniors during the college search, selection, and choice process using a number of strategies:

Offering advising: College Match provided proactive supports, including individual and group advising to help students and families navigate admissions and financial aid applications. Future testing could shed more light on advising strategies in P-12 choice systems. Important questions to consider are the advising’s appropriate target (parents, students, or both), its necessary intensity and dosage (for instance, one-time workshop versus multiple one-on-one sessions), and the best and most cost-effective mode of delivery (for instance, online versus in person).

Expanding the set of choices: College Match helped students identify “match” colleges, or selective colleges that are a good fit based on students’ academic profiles, financial considerations, and personal needs and that would most likely increase their chances of college success. School choice interventions have not yet fully considered factors other than a school’s academic quality that may lead to success in a P-12 context (such as particular pedagogical approaches, special programming, or extracurricular offerings) and how best to present those school characteristics to families.

Including encouragement and support: College Match paired students with “near peer” advisers — or trained young adult advisers who are recent college graduates — who provided encouragement and emotional support through the college application process. The relationship forged between students and their advisers proved to be an essential component of the program model.⁷ Since parents are critical players in selecting elementary schools, finding trusted community members to support and advise parents through that choice process is a promising area of future research.

NEXT STEPS FOR POLICYMAKERS, PRACTITIONERS, AND RESEARCHERS

These lessons add to MDRC’s evidence on the implementation of [small high schools of choice](#) in New York City. Taken together, there are three broad approaches that researchers and practitioners in P-12 choice systems can adopt to make their programs easier for parents to navigate. First, consider simplifying and personalizing the information parents receive about their school choice options. Second, design and test interventions that support families’ persistence through the arduous school choice process. Third, develop and evaluate effective models for coaching families through the school choice decision. MDRC is [currently partnering](#) with community-based organizations in New York City to develop and test interventions that address each of these approaches.

⁵Justine S. Hastings and Jeffrey M. Weinstein, “Information, School Choice, and Academic Achievement: Evidence from Two Experiments,” *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* 123, 4: 1373-1414.

⁶William G. Bowen, Matthew M. Chingos, and Michael S. McPherson, *Crossing the Finish Line* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011); Melissa Roderick, Jenny Nagaoka, Vanessa Coca, and Eliza Moeller, *From High School to the Future: Making Hard Work Pay Off* (Chicago: University Of Chicago Urban Education Institute, Consortium On Chicago School Research, 2009).

⁷D. Crystal Byndloss, Rebecca Coven, Yana Kusayeva, Christine Johnston, and Jay Sherwin, *In Search of a Match: A Guide for Helping Students Make Informed College Choices* (New York: MDRC, 2015).