



School Choice That Puts Families First

By Joanne Weiss

January 18, 2017

The incoming Trump administration’s early policy announcements promise to spur renewed conversation on the meaning, goals, and mechanisms of school choice. For the past two decades, I have worked on issues related to choice with teachers and principals, charter school and district leaders, school board members, and city and state leaders. Based on all I have learned from them, I suggest a set of principles to ensure that policy aims are clear, guardrails support success, and implementation is coherent. I also propose a new competition—mounted by a large foundation, a city, a state, or the federal government—that’s designed to encourage locales to develop approaches to school choice that put families first.

School choice, in a variety of forms, has long been a fact of life for many Americans. Parents exercise choice when they buy or rent a house because it’s in a good school district, or send their kids to live with relatives because the schools there are better. They do it when they enroll their children in expensive private day schools or boarding schools, or send them to parochial schools, yeshivas, or madrassas. They do it when they choose to keep their kids home and teach them themselves, when they arrange for virtual schooling online, or when they falsify their residency to make students appear eligible for a school across the boundary line.

In my view—mindful that this view is not universally shared—the purpose of a publicly funded education choice policy shouldn’t be simply to ease choice for those who already have it. It should be to level the playing field so that good educational options—schools in which children have the opportunity to excel academically in physically safe and supportive learning environments—are available to all families, regardless of what neighborhoods they live in, what languages they speak at home, what special needs their children have, or what they can afford.

Choice, in and of itself, is not an end; it is a mechanism for empowering families to seek out the best educational opportunities for their children. When done right, it can be a powerful mechanism. But choice alone will not boost learning. Choice per se does not make teaching more effective, content higher in quality, or students more engaged. Choice by itself does not (to borrow from the lessons of PISA) direct more resources and better teachers to those who are neediest, enroll more disadvantaged young children in high-quality preschools, or establish school cultures that put a premium on constant improvement.

Further, choice is not a viable approach for supporting every family. It typically works best in cities, for example, where population density ensures a large enough supply of options to make it feasible to choose a good school from among alternatives. So while choice is a policy that, done right, is worth pursuing, it is far from the only policy that should be on an education-improvement agenda.

That said, this paper describes three principles that form the core of any choice policy designed to promote equitable educational opportunities for all families: access, information, and quality. And it offers an example of how these principles could be built into a new policy or program.

The principle of access dictates that every family has the same shot at getting its students into a good school as every other family. By transferring power from the school system to the family, this principle affirms that it should be the family’s decision where to send the child, not the system’s decision. Arcane application procedures or deadlines, fees and tuition, distance and time—these all subtly tilt the ability to choose toward families with more resources. To level that playing field, barriers to access must be addressed. Geography cannot be a limiting factor (except perhaps a practical one for a family), so school boundary lines must be lifted. Cost cannot limit access, so there ought to be no tuition charged beyond what the state pays. A school cannot siphon off the “easiest” students and decline to accept those with special needs or those who are over-age, speak no English, or are otherwise “hard to teach.” And, of course, no student can be barred based on race, religion, or class.

While schools participating in a publicly financed choice enterprise cannot deny entrance to families, families can select schools based on their students’ interest and the schools’ specialties. Hence, schools can have specific academic focuses, such as the arts, STEM, International Baccalaureate, or Chinese immersion. Or they can employ specific instructional approaches, such as project-based learning, personalized learning, or traditional, structured learning. The goal is to offer families diverse, high-quality school options from which to choose, and not to limit a family’s ability to get the option it prefers. Note that this is not an argument against the small number of specialized public schools that select students based on *individual* aptitude and talent in, for example, the arts or sciences. However, it is a prohibition against attempts to *categorically* segregate, rather than diversify, schools’ student populations.¹

To further enable access, two other barriers should be addressed: the application process and transportation to and from school. Processes that require families to apply separately to every school demand an extraordinary ability to maneuver through multiple, complex systems. Such methods are unwieldy, time consuming, and confusing, especially for already overburdened or immigrant parents. To make access equal for all families, there could, for example, be a unified process that allows families to make their school selections from among all options, and a fair and transparent process for matching students to selected schools.

The second barrier is transportation. Traditional school busing solutions are expensive for taxpayers and rigid for students. Their strict schedules often do not allow for participation in sports or other after-school activities, depriving students of full membership in their school communities. Cities with good public transportation systems have long subsidized this option to allow older students flexibility, but in most places this is a partial solution, at best. New approaches, such as ride-sharing programs in place of school bus fleets, should be considered. Transportation solutions that are affordable, safe, convenient, and flexible are increasingly commonplace and could enable students from across a region to come and go to and from schools as their schedules demand.

The second principle, information, concerns the ready availability of relevant, accurate, reliable, timely, and understandable information about schools, so that families can make informed decisions about which schools are right for their children. Nationwide, the

overwhelming majority of families believe that their children are on track to graduate from high school ready for college; the reality is that far fewer than half actually are. If parents are not being told the truth about their school's or their children's performance, demand for other options may not even exist.² To enable such transparency, families need three things: the right information, gathered using a trustworthy process, and reported in actionable ways. Without this, conventional wisdom, wishful thinking, and marketing spin fill the void, and families base their decisions on this less-than-reliable information.

Transparency begins by identifying the questions families are trying to answer—and therefore the information they need—to empower them to make good decisions. Families might, for example, want to know: How do students (especially children like theirs) perform in math, reading, science, history, and the arts in a given school? Is achievement at this school getting better over time, or worse? If it's a high school, what is its graduation rate and how does this compare to other schools and to the state? How do graduates fare when they leave—what percentage attend college, earn an industry-recognized credential, or enlist in the military? How good are the teachers—what are their qualifications? How is their attendance and what does their turnover look like? What are the opportunities for students to participate in athletic and extracurricular activities at this school? How diverse is the school—what are its demographics? And what do other families and students think about the school? Does it feel safe and welcoming? Are children engaged and challenged? Are teachers responsive to families' calls and e-mails? Are families happy there?

Once these questions are understood, the relevant data needed to answer them must be identified and gathered. The process for collecting the data should ensure the information's timeliness, reliability, and accuracy. And the processes should be well understood and trusted by the public, since trust in the quality of the information undergirds the entire endeavor.

Finally, the reports provided to families should proactively support their decision making. The reports should be easy to find, not buried clicks-deep on websites. They should be easy to understand, with data visualized so clearly that interpretation is self-evident. And they should enable families to do easy, side-by-side comparisons across schools.

The final principle, quality, is crucial to ensuring that all schools meet basic standards of academic, financial, and operational performance, so that chronically underperforming schools do not persist. Although families will “vote with their feet” as the ultimate indicator of their satisfaction with a school, financially reckless, unsafe, or academically failing schools harm students and communities. As research makes clear, strong oversight—with consequences—is critical.³

At the most basic level, every school must, of course, comply with laws and regulations that ensure student safety and prevent financial waste, fraud, and abuse. In addition, schools that receive public funds must meet their state's academic standards for delivering a basic education.

Schools have a solemn responsibility beyond this, though, to deliver the promised education to their students. Schools that do not meet their obligations should not receive public funds. For example, charter schools that do not meet the obligations of their charter contracts should be dealt with by strong authorizers. Districts with chronically failing schools should fix or replace them. If failing schools persist and districts fail to set them right, states should step in. School oversight and accountability, with consequences for chronic low performers, are crucial protections for families. Families should be empowered to select from among successful school options, not failing ones.

For choice to thrive in a community, a diverse supply of high-quality school options is also needed. That's not so much a principle as a fundamental reality. To support creation of such a supply, policy conditions should level the playing field for all types of publicly funded schools. In much the same way that "demand side" policies should ensure the ability of every family to access quality schools of their choice, the "supply side" policies should ensure that schools receiving public funding operate under equitable conditions. Such policies may include, for example: lifting arbitrary caps on the number of charter schools that can open, making school facilities equally affordable to all types of school operators, protecting the ability to attract and retain the best talent, and ensuring that authorizers, districts, and other overseers are required and empowered to control quality.

Further, funding arrangements should provide adequate support to operate a quality school. Funding, for example, should not simply follow students, but should also consider the special needs of those children and the concentration of children in poverty served by the school.⁴ Starving schools by inadequately funding them is no recipe for enabling quality choices for families that need them.

Finally, policies that focus solely on choice—without also increasing the number of good schools in a community—will not suffice. That kind of choice simply shuffles the list of students who get to attend the few good schools, leaving way too many families without real options.

Until there are plenty of high-quality schools for families to choose among, choice will remain a small slice of the education solution. Yet if done well, choice can be a powerful force for improving educational opportunities.⁵ The principles proposed here forward that goal, maximizing impact and equity by thoughtfully and fully serving the needs of every family. If policies do not attend to access, the advantage goes only to the families who feel most empowered and who have the time, ability, and resources to navigate the system. If trustworthy and relevant information is not available, families' decisions rest on public relations "spin" and school marketing campaigns. And if oversight is not strong, the quality of the entire region's schools can decline—and children pay the price.

Choice can make a positive difference for families and communities, but there is no one-size-fits-all answer. There are many ways to put these principles into practice, and communities need solutions that work for them. Competitive programs are particularly good vehicles for empowering those closest to the work to bring forward good ideas that are tailored to the needs and circumstances of particular places. School choice policies will succeed best when

they are based on local communities' sound approaches to putting families first in their efforts to choose the best schools for their children. (For more insight on how competition could empower local innovation while embodying these principles, see *A Competitive Design that Adheres to these Principles*.⁶)

A Competitive Design that Adheres to these Principles

Why a Competition?

Despite the handful of cities that are working today toward the principles outlined in this paper, there is still much to be learned about designing successful choice policies—and it's no secret that what succeeds in one place may be different in key details from what works somewhere else. A policy targeted at creating successful citywide or regional proof-points would significantly contribute to the field's knowledge and evidence base. Competitions, when well designed and executed, can be strong mechanisms for seeding models and advancing learning because:

- *They identify the best.* The best ideas come from those closest to the work. And when done right, competitions act as magnets to attract talented people to come together and design novel solutions to worthy problems.
- *They galvanize political will.* Because applying is voluntary, only those interested in implementing the policies step up. Thus, applicants typically have the political will to undertake the new initiatives and the public support to carry out the plans.
- *They enroll key stakeholders.* When a competition is designed well, the act of applying requires all stakeholders to come together, get aligned, and commit to doing the work—increasing the chances of successful implementation.
- *They spur local accountability.* Competitions focus local media and community watchdogs on the initiative. Over the long term, these groups continue to hold winners accountable for delivering on their promises.

Who Competes?

To create citywide or regional proof-points, key leaders across many elements of the locale should come together to design a school choice program that works for their community. Optimally, applicants will be mayors or county officials working in concert with school system leaders and families in their region, and with the participation and assent of many other stakeholders.

Questions for Applicants to Address

A competitive design that adheres to the principles described above would ask applicants to think through and respond to requests such as these:

- Provide an overview of the *vision for how you propose to turn your region into a model* in which all families benefit from school choice. Explain where you are starting from, where you are headed, and why. Include research and data to support your argument.
- Describe how you propose to provide *multiple strong school options* for all participating families. List the schools that are included as part of this proposal: for example, districts, charter schools, and any others that will take part. Include executed participation agreements that articulate each party's roles and responsibilities. For any schools or types of schools in the city that do not participate, indicate who they are and why they are not included.
- Describe the *policy conditions* (enablers and barriers) that currently exist, need to be created, or need to be removed to allow you to execute your vision—and your plan for getting there.
- Describe how you will provide families with *access to school options*, such that every interested family has the same chance of getting their children into a school as every other family. Describe the methods you will use for enabling easy and consistent application, fair matching of students to their choices, and flexible transportation to and from school.
- Describe your plan to *keep families and communities informed* about school features and performance so they can make good decisions, minimizing the role of marketing and maximizing the role that facts about schools play in families' decision making.
- Describe how you will *hold all schools responsible for delivering a high-quality education* to students, including through school oversight, accountability, and consequences for chronic low performers.
- Describe the *family, community, and political support* you have (including binding letters of intent), the barriers you still need to overcome, and your plan for doing so.
- Describe how you will *monitor and evaluate effectiveness and communicate the lessons you learn over time*, such that the field learns from your experiences and your own implementation continues to improve.
- Describe how you will *use the funds* you are awarded to realize your vision, and explain how you will maintain and sustain the choice program once funds are gone.

Other Considerations for Policymakers

When designing a competition, there are other considerations that policymakers (or other funders) need to keep in mind:

- *Size matters.* Grant awards need to be large enough to encourage applications and to fund high-quality implementation, but they must enable a bridge to ongoing sustainability—not create a funding cliff.
- *Scoring matters.* Through point allocation and scoring rubrics, competition managers signal their priorities and provide additional guidance about what is expected, both of applicants and reviewers.
- *Evidence matters.* Writing applications and making big promises is easy. Implementing is hard. Applicants should be required to provide evidence, such as executed Memoranda of Understanding, that all participants are fully signed up to do the required work—on an agreed-upon timetable, to a defined level of quality, for a specified budget—and that governing bodies and decision-making protocols are established, clear, and agreeable. In addition, relevant data track records of past accomplishments can increase confidence in future success.
- *Preconditions matter.* Sometimes, no matter how well intentioned an applicant is, unless policies, regulations, or laws change, the plan cannot be implemented. Competition designers need to think through what conditions must be in place before applying if plans are to be executed, and how to enable that to happen. This is a political as much as a policy decision, and consequences should be carefully considered.

About the Author

Joanne Weiss is an independent consultant to organizations on education programs, technologies, and policy. For the past fifteen years, she has focused on driving systems-level education change through high-impact grant making, investing, and policymaking. From 2009–2013 she served in the Obama Administration as chief of staff to Secretary of Education Arne Duncan and director of the federal Race to the Top program. Prior to that, she was a partner at NewSchools Venture Fund and served on the boards of a number of charter management organizations.

Endnotes

- ¹ S. Carr, “In Southern Towns, ‘Segregation Academies’ Are Still Going Strong,” *Atlantic*, December 13, 2012, <http://www.theatlantic.com/national/archive/2012/12/in-southern-towns-segregation-academies-are-still-going-strong/266207/>.
- ² C. Finn, “The Fog of ‘College Readiness,’” *National Affairs* 30 (Winter 2017), <http://www.nationalaffairs.com/publications/detail/the-fog-of-college-readiness>. See also research on “Parent Perspectives” prepared by Learning Heroes, December 2016.
- ³ R. Lake et al., “Fixing Detroit’s Broken School System: Improve Accountability and Oversight for District and Charter Schools,” *EducationNext* 15, no. 1 (Winter 2015), <http://educationnext.org/fixing-detroits-broken-school-system/>.
- ⁴ The California Local Control Funding Formula seeks to adjust for both student and school funding needs. See M. Taylor, *An Overview of the Local Control Funding Formula* (Sacramento, CA: Legislative Analyst’s Office, 2013), <http://www.lao.ca.gov/reports/2013/edu/lcff/lcff-072913.aspx>. See also M. Marchitello and R. Hanna, *Robin Hood in Reverse: How ESEA Title I, Part A, “Portability” Takes from the Poor and Gives to the Rest* (Washington, D.C.: Center for American Progress, February 4, 2015), <https://cdn.americanprogress.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/ESEApportability-brief2.pdf>.
- ⁵ C. Hoxby et al., “How New York City’s Charter Schools Affect Achievement,” Second report in series. Cambridge, MA: New York City Charter Schools Evaluation Project, September 2009, http://users.nber.org/~schools/charterschoolseval/how_NYC_charter_schools_affect_achievement_sept2009.
- ⁶ Such a competition could be mounted by any level of government or by a sizable private funder, but it assumes that new funds are made available. Were it to be undertaken by the federal government, existing funds from major programs such as Title I cannot be repurposed without harming poor students and the schools that serve them. And existing federal choice programs, such as the Charter Schools Program, focus largely on building the supply of high-quality charter schools—and so remain critical to the field in their present form.