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# Increasing Participation in No Child Left Behind School Choice

One of the main innovations of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) is to offer students in low-performing schools the opportunity to switch schools. In addition to offering these students the opportunity for a better education, the developers of NCLB expected that the law would result in more competition among schools, exerting more pressure on low-performing schools to improve. The lawmakers assumed that parents would take advantage of the new opportunity in numbers large enough to make schools compete for students.

However, in 2006–2007, more than five years after the implementation of NCLB, only about 1 percent of students in schools identified for improvement took the opportunity to transfer to better-performing schools, even though the option is generally being offered where required. The low rate of uptake is due to a combination of operational issues, parental lack of knowledge, and parents' need to take into account other key factors. Policymakers can address these issues through policy and regulatory measures.

Although school choice by itself cannot generate the level of competition across schools to induce all the educational improvements needed, it can help provide better options to a larger number of students in low-performing schools. This research brief summarizes what we know about the current low level of participation and the policy actions that could improve it.

## Research Reveals Several Reasons for Low Participation in School Choice

**Many parents remain unaware of their children's school status and of the opportunity to choose.** Although most parents of students in schools identified for improvement reported having heard of NCLB, only one in five of such parents knew that their child's school was so identified. Furthermore, only about half of parents sampled in eight large urban districts knew that, according to NCLB, they must be given the

### Abstract

This is one in a series of policy briefs on key education issues prepared by the RAND Corporation for the Obama administration. No Child Left Behind gave students in low-performing schools the opportunity to switch schools, but only a small percentage of eligible students exercise the option. The low rate of uptake is due to operational issues and parental lack of knowledge. Although improved parent notifications may help, research suggests that the power of school choice to induce educational improvement is limited at this time.

choice to transfer their child to another school.

### Districts are slow in notifying parents.

Nearly half of all districts nationwide did not notify parents of eligible students of their school choice options in time for them to make an informed decision. Most states continue to have difficulty completing the analysis of state test results in time to notify districts of the status of their schools before July of each year. As a result, fewer than half of the districts were able to notify parents of their child's eligibility for school choice before the beginning of the school year. This timing makes a difference: Eligible students of parents who were notified of their school choice option before the beginning of the school year were twice as likely to transfer to another school as students of parents who were notified after the beginning of the school year.

**Notifications are not always effective.** In many cases, when districts sent notifications of the school choice option to parents of eligible students, the parents either did not receive the notification or remained unaware that they had been notified. Surveys of eight large urban districts in 2004–2005 and 2006–2007 found

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that 80 percent of parents of eligible students said they were not aware that they had been notified of their school choice option, even though the districts had sent notifications. In those cases, parents might have not actually received the notifications, might have thought they did not apply to them, or might have set them aside not understanding what they were.

**Notifications often leave out important information.** Across districts, the information contained in parental notifications of school choice varies greatly. Parents who received such notifications commonly reported that although they could understand the notifications, they often failed to convey key information, such as how and where to apply or whom to contact with questions.

**Some parents are satisfied with the teaching at low-performing schools.** Only 10 percent of parents of students in schools identified for improvement who were notified of their school choice option actually transferred their children to better-performing schools. The majority of parents who did not transfer their children reported that they were satisfied with the quality of teaching at their current school, suggesting either that those parents do not understand or believe the “identified for improvement” status, or that they are satisfied with the education their child is receiving even though the school is low performing. In addition, a majority of parents who did not transfer their children said they did not do so because of the convenience of their children’s school; 40 percent did not take advantage of the option because their children did not want to change schools.

### **These Findings Point to Several Policy Actions**

**Use the previous year’s test results to provide adequate time for parents to make informed decisions.** It is unlikely that states will be able to reduce the time needed to analyze spring test results so that districts can notify parents with adequate time for those parents to make informed choices before the beginning of the school year. However, research

shows that the previous year’s test results are generally a good predictor of test results in the following year. Therefore, providing parents the school choice option based on the previous year’s state test results could improve the situation.

### **Engage schools to provide information to parents.**

Parents are more likely to pay attention to notifications from their children’s school than those from the district. Therefore, policymakers can improve the effectiveness of notifications by requiring that schools, in addition to districts, inform parents of their school choice option.

### **Standardize school choice notifications to parents.**

States should be required to develop a standardized letter for districts to use in notifying parents of their school choice. States ought to consult with parent advocate groups in helping to draft these notifications.

**Make parents more aware of the need for improvement in K–12 education.** In surveys, most parents report being generally satisfied with their children’s schools, suggesting that a large segment of the population has yet to be mobilized to demand improvement in K–12 education, even in their own children’s education. Policymakers at the federal and state levels should consider measures to improve parents’ knowledge of their options and increase understanding of the status of their children’s schools.

## **The Outlook for School Choice in Education Reform**

The policy actions described above would provide school options to a larger number of students in low-performing schools. However, many factors besides school performance influence parents’ decisions. These factors include school location, after-school activities, and student preference to remain in the same school with friends. Therefore, policymakers must understand that the benefits of the competitive effects produced by school choice are limited at this time, and we should continue to focus efforts on reforms that improve performance in all schools while offering school choice. ■

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This policy brief describes work done for RAND Education. It is based on research by RAND and others. For further reading, see [http://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_briefs/RB9424/index1.html#references](http://www.rand.org/pubs/research_briefs/RB9424/index1.html#references). This policy brief was written by Georges Vernez and Jennifer Li. The RAND Corporation is a nonprofit research organization providing objective analysis and effective solutions that address the challenges facing the public and private sectors around the world. RAND’s publications do not necessarily reflect the opinions of its research clients and sponsors. RAND® is a registered trademark.

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