Does School Choice Mean Students Attend Better Schools?

The Case of Post–Hurricane Katrina New Orleans

School choice policies have become a popular topic in recent decades as a solution to address chronically low-performing schools and to improve student achievement by providing students access to higher-quality schools. Much of this discussion is underpinned by a premise that increasing options will lead to increased student mobility as families look for new and better schools. Prior research, however, has found that, on average, students who choose to move to a higher-quality school are higher achieving, less likely to live in poverty, and more likely to be white. Moreover, several scholars have raised equity concerns related to school choice policies and questioned whether improvements in student achievement—particularly at charter schools—have been driven either by "cream-skimming" the high achievers through selective enrollment or by "pushing out" low-performing students in schools of choice. These differing mobility patterns, coupled with the potential for school-initiated sorting, imply that school choice may lead to unintended consequences over time, such as increasing segmentation and inequities in school populations.

Evaluating School Choice Outcomes: The New Orleans Case

Researchers examined school choice outcomes in New Orleans following 2005's Hurricane Katrina, when the city experienced a significant shift toward choice policies and options. During the study period (2007–2011), schools within the New Orleans city limits were governed by two entities. The first was the Recovery School District (RSD), which is a state-run district created to take over the lowest-performing schools in the state. During the years studied, the RSD had both traditional public schools and charter schools. The second was the Orleans Parish School Board (OPSB), a locally governed school board that kept the highest-performing schools during the RSD takeover of New Orleans public schools. In short, New Orleans had both state-run and locally run traditional public schools and charter schools. Attendance at every RSD school (charter or directly operated) was open to any Orleans Parish student, regardless of residence in New Orleans, because the schools had capacity. OPSB had a mix of both open-enrollment and selective-admission schools. Given these policies, post-Katrina New Orleans provides a

Key findings:

- On average, black, Hispanic, lower-income, and lower-achieving students were more apt to change schools. White, Asian, gifted, and English language–learner students were less likely to change schools.

- Overall, high-achieving students switch to high-quality schools whereas low-achieving students transfer to low-quality schools.

unique opportunity to examine variations in student mobility across student and school characteristics, and to glean insights on how mobility patterns may point to underlying processes that result in increased student segmentation over time in a choice-based school district.

Although most students change schools at some point for structural reasons—e.g., moving from a K–8 school to a high school—the authors focused their analysis on students who moved at nonstructural points. Approximately 14–17 percent of New Orleans students made such a nonstructural change between two school years during the study period. Using student-level data from 2007 through 2011, the authors investigated patterns of student mobility in post-Katrina New Orleans, including the exit patterns of students across the sectors and school types in New Orleans and the destination schools of mobile students. Specifically, they addressed the following questions:

- Does the likelihood of exiting a school differ by students' characteristics, school sectors (i.e., locally run OPSB public and charter schools and state-run RSD public and charter schools), and school types (i.e., traditional public school, charter school)?
- Do students' prior achievement and the quality of their current school predict whether they move to higher-quality schools?

The study, one of the first to document student mobility in post-Katrina New Orleans, contributes to the growing evidence on policy issues related to charter school implemen-

tation and governance and the unintended consequences of school choice policies.

Findings

How do students who change schools differ from students who do not change schools? Across a variety of indicators, students who moved from one school to another were statistically significantly different from nonmobile students. On average, black, Hispanic, and low-income students were more apt to change schools, whereas white, Asian, gifted, and English language–learner students were less likely to do so. Furthermore, mobile students had lower math achievement than nonmobile students.

How likely are students to change school sector (RSD/OPSB) or type (charter/noncharter) when they change schools? In general, mobile students tended to move to a school that was similar to their previous school. For example, students in the RSD often moved to another RSD school, and this pattern extended to school type. For example, 62 percent of the students who moved to a noncharter RSD school also came from one. Nineteen percent of students moved across sectors; however, there was limited evidence of mobile students moving from a lower-performing RSD school to a higher-performing OPSB school. Although the researchers did not interview students about their moves, the results indicate that there may be structural barriers that prevent students from moving across sectors.

Do prior achievement and the quality of their current schools predict whether students move to higher-quality schools? It is clear that while some students are taking advantage of the ability to choose a high-quality educational option, many are not. Overall, the study results indicate that origin school quality plays a significant role in destination school quality. Students in a low-achieving origin school—regardless of their prior achievement—are less likely to switch to a high-achieving school. Moreover, a low-achieving student in a low-achieving school is more likely to transfer to a low-achieving school than a low-achieving student in an average-achieving school. At the other end of the spectrum, a high-achieving student in a high-achieving school is more likely to transfer to another high-achieving school and less likely to transfer to a low-achieving school. Interestingly, students in high-performing schools—regardless of prior achievement—were less likely to transfer to low-performing schools relative to their counterparts in average-performing schools. Similarly, a low-achieving student in a low-performing school has a significantly higher probability of moving to another low-performing school than a low-achieving student in an average-performing school. When broken down by student characteristics, the researchers found that black, Hispanic, and low-income students were also less likely to move to a

high-achieving school than to an average-achieving school, while gifted students were more likely to transfer to a high-achieving school. Special education students were more likely to move to a low-achieving school.

There is no clear answer regarding what drives school choice patterns. Without detailed information about the school choices of low-achieving students or the admission policies of schools in New Orleans, it is unclear what leads to the patterns described here. For example, choices may be affected by the match between students' and schools' background, the marketing activities of higher-achieving schools, differences in the access to information about schools among families, or cost constraints for low-income families. The authors also acknowledge that higher-achieving schools and districts may avoid low-performing students, an example of cream-skimming. The findings show that although students in the bottom third of the achievement distribution leave their current schools at similar rates, they are less likely than their middle- and top-third peers to attend a high-achieving school. This implies that there was student sorting based on prior student achievement in post-Katrina New Orleans.

Finally, it is important to note that the researchers found limited cumulative mobility, with only a small fraction of students switching schools twice or more over the period of study. The majority of students appear to remain in the same school over the four-year period, even when parents are given the freedom to make more choices in the future. Given the rate and frequency of student mobility, these patterns suggest that initial school selection may be an equally or more important factor than student mobility in post-Katrina New Orleans.

Policy Recommendations

This study highlights a number of policy implications related to school choice, as well as areas for future research that could support the evidence base on the topic.

Address potential barriers to changing schools at an early stage. Differences in mobility patterns may speak to initial implementation issues in the choice systems—such as information gaps, inadequate transportation, and selective enrollment procedures—and suggest that system-level coordination at the outset is imperative in a choice-based school district. It is critical that attention is given to these potential barriers to changing schools, particularly in the developing phase of school choice. For instance, between 2007 and 2011, the only available comprehensive information on school characteristics was the New Orleans' Parents' Guide to Public Schools, a document prepared by nonprofit organizations such as the New Orleans Parenting Network, and there were considerable questions on whether parents had knowledge of all the school choice options available to them.

Transportation is another critical factor in school choice. For example, during the study period, because of disputes about financial responsibility, some of the highest-quality schools did not provide free transportation.

Consider open-enrollment policies to deter "cream-skimming." Policymakers implementing school choice policies ought to pay significant attention to the selectivity of charter and traditional public schools and consider an open-enrollment policy for all schools. For example, the selective admissions of a number of OPSB schools may be a contributing factor to differential mobility patterns, as they limit the access many students have to higher-quality schools. Given that policies governing the selective admissions of schools could have significant implications for school district segmentation, policymakers should consider reducing the number of selective schools and replacing enrollment barriers with enrollment incentives that reward high-quality schools for enrolling low-achieving students.

Make open-enrollment policies consistent across all schools and districts. Similar to the previous point, policymakers should consider addressing the differences in schools' open-enrollment policies, especially with regard to the timing of school entry and changes. In post-Katrina New Orleans, RSD schools were essentially open-enrollment schools. Nonetheless, there are enrollment caps on charter schools, whereas noncharter schools in the RSD had no caps, and most students who entered after initial registration enrolled in an RSD noncharter school. These subtle yet key differences in the open-enrollment policies of schools may lead to differential mobility patterns and a segmented system. A universal open-enrollment policy in which all sectors and school types face the same conditions and enrollment rules may improve access to higher-quality schools for low-achieving students, who may enter or switch schools during the school year.

Consider how disciplinary policies may affect mobility and student outcomes. Disciplinary policies and procedures also warrant greater consideration and may partly contribute to differences in mobility patterns. Student discipline and safety was a substantial problem in the initial post-Katrina period. In the study period, each school in New Orleans had its own disciplinary policy and some schools'

"zero tolerance" policies may have led to behavior-related student mobility. Prior to the centralization of discipline policy starting in the 2012–2013 school year, it is conceivable that schools may have used discipline in ways that contributed to differential mobility patterns. Moreover, the school options of students with disciplinary records may also be limited to lower-quality schools.

Consider preferential policies for students in closing schools. Policies toward students attending schools that are closing are also a pertinent factor that may underlie disparities in school mobility. Although ten schools closed during the period of study, there was no apparent preference policy for students from closing schools in this initial implementation era. More recently, a common school application system was implemented that prioritizes students from schools that have closed.

Collect critical school mobility data. Detailed administrative data that track the dates and reasons for school transfers would help in more accurately documenting student mobility patterns. Such data are even more crucial in environments, such as post-Katrina New Orleans, that encourage school choice and student mobility. In addition, because it is difficult to fully judge charter schools' treatment of certain student subpopulations using only administrative data, complementary qualitative studies would be useful to provide more on-the-ground, fine-grained possible explanations of student mobility trends. Incorporating the location of origin and destination schools could also offer additional valuable insights.

Conclusions

In sum, trends in student mobility—as demonstrated by the case of post-Katrina New Orleans—raise concerns about equity and should compel policymakers and researchers to more pointedly consider the relationships among school choice, student mobility, and school quality in a choice-based public school system. In order to improve student achievement and foster equal access to higher-quality schools, it is critical to better understand possible drivers of differential mobility patterns, such as why parents choose schools for varying reasons, as well as to find ways to sort low-achieving students into higher-quality schools in school choice contexts.

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