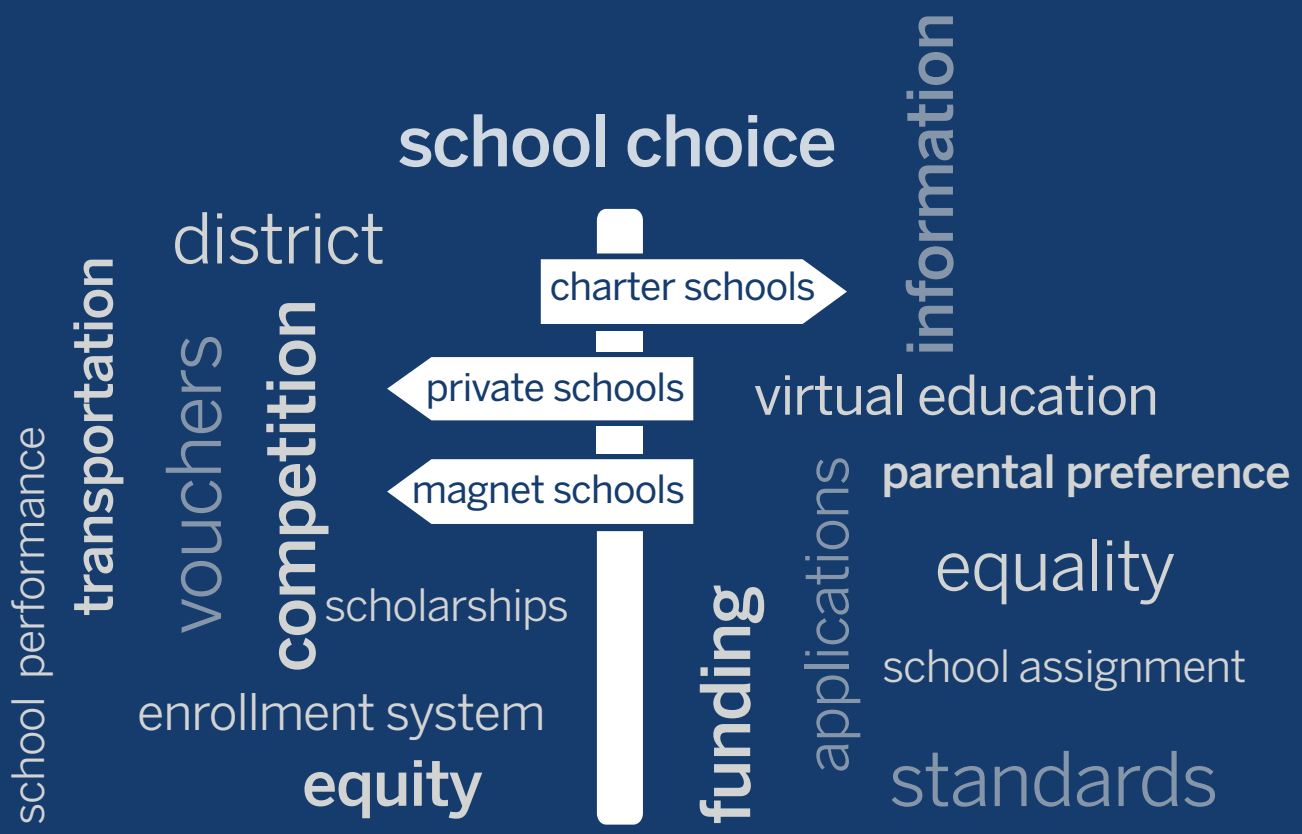
BROWN CENTER on
Education Policy
at BROOKINGS



The 2014 Education Choice and Competition Index

Summary and Commentary

Grover J. (Russ) Whitehurst
Ellie Klein

February 2015

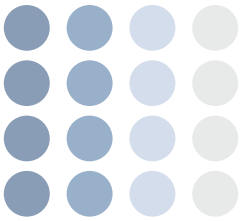
Introduction

Most large public school districts in the United States offer some degree of parental choice over the schools to which students are assigned. Depending on the district, families can choose public charter schools, affordable private schools, magnet schools, virtual schools, and regular public schools in which assignment is based on parental preference as expressed through a formal application process. Districts differ in which, if any, of these options are available, the ease with which parents can exercise the choices afforded to them, and the degree to which the choice system results in greater access to quality schools for students who would otherwise be assigned to a low performing public school based on their family's place of residence.

In order to shine light on those differences, the Brown Center on Education Policy at Brookings releases an annual Education Choice and Competition Index (ECCI) that chronicles how school choice is manifested in the nation's 100+ largest school districts. The ECCI scores and ranks districts on the degree to which families within the district's borders have access to:

- Maximum choice, including:
  - good traditional public schools
  - magnet schools
  - charter schools
  - affordable private schools
  - virtual education
- A choice process that maximizes the match between parental preference and school assignment, including:
  - no default school (everyone must choose)
  - a common application
  - availability of rich and valid information on school performance (including test results that incorporate growth and are comparable across all schools)
  - clear presentation of information (including support for less educated parents)
- Funding and management processes that favor the growth of popular schools at the expense of unpopular schools, including:
  - weighted student-based funding in which a high proportion of a district's own funds follows students to their schools of choice
  - processes for closing unpopular schools
- Subsidies for the costs of choice for poor families, particularly for transportation

This report accompanies the fourth release of the ECCI covering the 2013-2014 school year. The ECCI can be accessed and utilized most powerfully through the interactive website, which allows a variety of customizable views of the data and provides definitions and details for each of the multi-faceted dimensions on which districts are measured and scored. This report highlights some interesting findings and provides a commentary that focuses on the need for both access to and quality of choice.



Grover J. (Russ) Whitehurst is the Herman and George R. Brown Chair in Education Studies, a senior fellow in Governance Studies, and director of the Brown Center on Education Policy at the Brookings Institution.

Ellie Klein is the Research and Center Coordinator of the Brown Center on Education Policy at the Brookings Institution.

Highlights of results

Leaders in choice

The 10 top scoring cities/counties[1] in the 2014 ECCI, with their overall letter grades and scores on a 100 point scale are:

City/County (district name)	Summary Score	Letter Grade
New Orleans, LA (Recovery School District)	83	A
New York, NY (New York City Department of Education)	73	A-
Newark, NJ (Newark Public Schools)	72	A-
Washington, DC (District of Columbia Public Schools)	66	B
Houston, TX (Houston Independent School District)	66	B
Denver, CO (School District No. 1 in the County of Denver)	61	B
Tucson, AZ (Tucson Unified)	59	B-
Greenville, SC (Greenville County Schools)	59	B-
Chicago, IL (Chicago Public Schools)	59	B-
Boston, MA (Boston Public Schools)	57	B-

As has been the case for all three years in which the ECCI has included 100+ school districts, the Recovery School District serving New Orleans and the New York City Department of Education lead the nation's districts in terms of school choice and competition.

The Recovery School District in New Orleans scores well on nearly all of the components of the ECCI. In particular, there is high availability of choice, with nearly 80% of schools being charters, a supply of affordable private schools, vouchers for private school attendance available from the state, and virtual education provided through Supplemental Course Academy/Course Choice. The school assignment process maximizes the match between parental preference and school assignment through an ideal computer matching algorithm. There is no default school assignment (everyone must choose), a common application for traditional public schools and charters, and information on school performance that includes test results for children attending private schools. Information on school performance is clearly presented with support for parents in understanding and navigating the choice process. Transportation expenses to schools of choice are covered through free public transportation tokens or yellow bus service.

New York City (NYC) also repeats its position in second place overall and in first place among the 100 largest school districts.[2] NYC scores particularly well with respect to its choice process, policies for closing unpopular schools, and information provision to parents and students.

New Orleans, NYC, Denver, and new to our list of top performers this year, Newark, standout in their use of a centralized computer-based algorithm to assign public high school students to schools in such a way as to maximize the match between student preferences and school assignment, conditional on any admission requirements exercised by the school. Students apply once and receive one offer, assuming

they can match with one of the schools they have listed among their choices. New Orleans, Denver, and Newark include charter schools in their single application process, whereas NYC does not.

Laggards in choice

Thirty-three of the 107 districts we scored received a grade of F on the 2014 ECCI. For sake of economy, we only present the 10 lowest scoring of those districts:

City/County (district name)	Summary Score	Letter Grade
El Paso, TX (El Paso Independent School District)	24	F
Howard County, MD (Howard County Public Schools)	24	F
Pasadena, TX (Pasadena Independent School District)	24	F
Mesa, AZ (Mesa Unified School District)	23	F
Fort Worth, TX (Fort Worth Independent School District)	21	F
Houston, TX (Alief Independent School District)	20	F
Mobile County, AL (Mobile County Public Schools)	19	F
Brownsville, TX (Brownsville Independent School District)	18	F
Loudoun County, VA (Loudoun County Public Schools)	18	F
Northern Utah County, UT (Alpine School District)	13	F

A letter grade of F on the ECCI means that families have very little in the way of school choice other than the choice that parents can exercise by purchasing a residence within the geographical assignment zone of their preferred public school.

A city/school district that receives a letter grade of F on the ECCI, as 33 do, is not necessarily a low-performing school district in terms of its impact on student achievement. In fact, some low scorers on the ECCI have received awards for their performance. For example, the Broad Prize for Urban Education was awarded to Brownsville Independent School District, TX in 2008 based, in part, on the selection committee's determination that Brownsville showed higher student achievement and lower achievement gaps than in comparable districts within the state.

As indicated by Brownsville's place at third from the bottom in our rankings, families in the Brownsville Independent School District have little choice in school assignment for their children. Students can transfer between schools in Brownsville only through a laborious application process with many requirements, including that the parent obtain the paper transfer application form in person at one given location for the whole district on one particular calendar day for the whole year. In order to be eligible to transfer schools, the student has to be passing all subjects in his or her zoned school and have a sterling attendance record. If a student is new to the district schools, his or her residentially zoned school must clear the transfer. A transfer is only possible to a school that has vacancies after all students in the attendance zone are placed. Once a transfer occurs, it can be revoked if the student is not passing all courses and meeting attendance goals at the new school, or if the student's parents are judged to be uncooperative by the new school's administration. Parents must provide transportation to the school of choice and arrivals must be punctual. Transfers are valid for a single year.

These are not requirements designed to encourage choice or to provide public school options for students who are not thriving in their zoned school. The ECCI gives no credit for this type of choice policy. It is as if the district leadership wants to be able to say that they offer school choice but doesn't want to deliver it to more than a few families that have the wherewithal to tackle the application process, provide daily transportation, and have children who are doing well academically anyhow.

We single out Brownsville's choice process only because it has received a prominent award for its

academic performance, not because its choice process in unusual. De minimis choice policies are prevalent among the large districts we study that have low scores on the ECCI. At least Brownsville's are public. Some districts have secret choice policies in the sense that a process similar to the one used in Brownsville is available—but only if the parent knows to ask about it, i.e., nothing about school choice is available through the menu system on the district's website.

Assuming that Brownsville has continued to be a comparatively high performing district in Texas since its award in 2008, the lack of choice in the Brownsville Independent School District during the time span we have examined demonstrates that there are factors other than school choice that can drive student achievement at the school district level that are under the control of district and city leaders, such as human resource policies that affect the talent pool of teachers, choices of curriculum, and the use of data to drive instruction and school management decisions. Student achievement gains that are under the control of the school district are largely a matter of the quality of interactions students have with teachers and instructional materials. School choice is a design variable that can affect the quality of instructional interactions, but only if the circumstances are right and the choice system has the components that are likely necessary for success (and which are incorporated into the ECCI scoring system). But school choice is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for high quality instructional interactions.

District movers

Districts whose scores changed by at least 10 points between the 2013 and 2014 indexes are:

City/County (district name)	Change in Score
Newark, NJ (Newark Public Schools)	21
Greenville, SC (Greenville County Public Schools)	10
DeKalb County, GA (DeKalb County Public Schools)	-10
Gwinnett County, GA (Gwinnett County Public Schools)	-11
New Orleans, LA (Orleans Parish School Board)	-17

The largest positive change occurred in Newark, NJ, and reflects a major upgrade in several aspects of their choice system, the most notable of which is a new "One Newark Enrolls" process for enrollment: Students/parents rank up to eight schools and are matched to one through a computer algorithm that minimizes the overall disparity for all applicants between their preferences and their assignments. The new enrollment system includes charter schools in the common application. The Newark Public Schools website provides a great deal of guidance on using the new system. Transportation is now provided for everyone, with free shuttles to support families most impacted by One Newark.

Other cities that moved up in the rankings based on improvements in choice did so through less dramatic transformations than Newark. For example, Greenville, SC made improvements in the display of information relevant to school choice on its website, and made it easier for parents to express their preference for a school outside their child's default assignment.

Likewise, districts whose scores dropped on the ECCI largely did so through multiple marginal alterations rather than through a clear change in policy or a major overhaul of mechanisms. For example, the score drop in DeKalb is due to out-of-date information on school performance on their website, and a change in the way they explain (or fail to explain) the performance information that is available. The score drop in Gwinnett is due to a decrease in virtual school enrollments, the removal of transfer information from their newcomer and parent web pages, and a decrease in the number of students enrolled in alternative schools. Not listed in the table of movers, but notable because it dropped out of the top 10, is Minneapolis. Here, too, changes were at the margins rather than fundamental: decreasing school closures, a change in their website that places enrollment information off the family/parent page,

and a decrease in the number of students enrolled in affordable private schools.

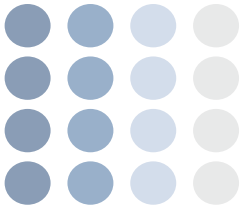
Normative facts and trends

With three years of annual data on the districts in our index,[3] we can begin to identify normative facts on school choice and competition, and search for trends. Among the interesting descriptive findings are:

- In 2014, 51% of the districts made public choice available to parents and students at the high school level (at least), either through an open application process with no default residential assignment zone (12%), or through an easy process of requesting reassignment after a default zone assignment (39%).
- The percentage of schools offering open enrollment or an easy reassignment process has edged up in the last three years, from 48% in 2012 to 51% in 2014.
- In 2014, only 9% of districts allocated 75% or more of their district funds to individual schools based on a weighted/fair funding formula. This is important for the realization of the competitive effects of school choice on school improvement, because under such a weighted formula, schools that gain students gain funding, and vice versa.
- In 2014, only 8% of districts provided student transportation to any school of choice within the district borders on the same terms as for a district assigned school. Choice without student transportation seriously disadvantages lower-income and working parents who are less likely to have either a vehicle with which to transport their child to a school of choice, or the time during the workday to provide that transportation.
- The average percentage of students enrolled in alternative schools in the years 2012-2014 was 24%. This number does not differ appreciably across the three years. Alternative schools in the ECCI are defined as charters, magnets, and private schools that enroll students whose tuition is covered in whole or in part by public funds through vouchers and tax credit scholarships and/or are affordable because of low tuition. In other words, these are schools of choice other than traditional public schools that are affordable or free to families of modest to moderate means.
- Based on the 24% of students enrolled in alternative schools, the 27% of parents who report[4] that they moved to their neighborhood of residence because of the school, and the large (but not calculable from available data) percentage of parents who attend regular public schools through a choice process (open enrollment or requested transfer), it is safe to conclude that substantially more than half the school-aged children in the United States are attending a school that has been actively chosen by their parents.

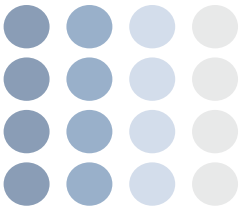
The two pillars of school choice: access and quality

Data from the 2014 ECCI and previous years indicate that access to school choice, while falling far short of the universality that many advocates see as desirable, is substantial on average, near universal in some districts, and on the rise overall. Future increases in access are likely to depend on two principal mechanisms: a) districts moving away from the status of default zone assignments with an easy process for parents to request reassignment to an open enrollment system with no default assignments, and b) districts with de minimis choice processes establishing assignment mechanisms that are transparent and easily utilized by parents who prefer a school other than the one to which their child has been assigned. Given the strong support of the U.S. electorate for school choice,[5] and the existence of either open enrollment or easy transfer in a majority of the nation's largest districts, we think both these types of movement are quite likely.



In 2014, 51% of examined districts made school choice easily available to parents and students.

The need for quality in school choice has been obvious to choice advocates and theorists where it has been seen largely as an issue of supply. For example, the role of district leadership in the popular portfolio model is to encourage the entry of strong school providers into the marketplace and to force out under-performing schools.[6] The theory of action is straightforward: Parents given the opportunity to shop for their children's school should have good schools from which to choose.



More attention needs to be given to mechanisms that help parents and students make good choices when they shop for schools.

> We believe, and evidence suggests, that access to choice and a decent supply of good schools are necessary but not sufficient conditions to obtain some of the goals of the choice movement, most certainly including equity. Education is a very complex service for which to shop, with limited opportunities to repair bad decisions. If someone chooses a restaurant with bad service, or questionable food, or unreasonable prices, that person has the opportunity to make a better choice the next time out. Better yet, they can avoid the situation in the first place by gathering relevant information on quality from a variety of online information sources or friends before dining out. The choice of a school for one's child is not similarly guided by past experience, or good sources of information, or the ability to easily recover from a bad decision.

In addition to these general constraints on parents' ability to shop for schools, there is substantial evidence that low-income parents shop differently than other parents when there is an open enrollment process for public schools. In New York City, for example, students self-sort into schools that serve students from the same backgrounds.[7] This means that lower-income, lower-achieving minority students are more likely than their more advantaged peers to have as their first choice a lower-performing, high-minority school. And since the algorithm for high school assignment is driven by the expressed preference of applicants in unscreened schools, and includes expressed preference as part of the calculation in all high school assignments, schools tend towards stratification based on socioeconomic background.[8]

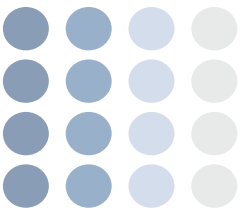
These facts suggest that more attention needs to be given to mechanisms that help parents and students make good choices when they have the opportunity to shop for schools. Currently there is no public school search site that deploys the suggestions and product placements that we all are used to on internet shopping sites such as Amazon. Were such sites in existence that would probably increase the likelihood that parents using open-enrollment systems would pick better schools. Further, the present generation of school search sites makes no use of insights from behavioral economics on the extent to which simple nudges and constraints on the way that information is presented can affect choice. We know from research in other domains that if people have a large number of options from which to choose, giving them a default choice that is likely to be best for them and allowing them to opt out produces better results than completely open choice. We need such approaches applied to school choice.

School choice in context

A lack of school choice perpetuates inequality in education opportunity in school districts that have residential school assignment zones for neighborhood schools that are stratified by family income and socioeconomic status (as is typical in most cities), and in which schools that serve disproportionately lower-income families struggle to attract and retain highly effective teachers and school leaders (as is also typical). In such a district, a parent whose child is assigned to an under-performing school because of where the family lives, and who does not have the wherewithal to move to a different neighborhood with a better school, is stuck with a subpar education for her child. In contrast, a similar parent in a district that affords the opportunity for school choice that includes charter schools and open enrollment in traditional public schools can have the same chance of her child being admitted to a good school as any other parent being served by the district. If the district has good schools and the parent shops wisely for one, the future of her child can be substantially improved. Further, the information on school performance and consumer satisfaction that is revealed through the preferences

parents reveal as they choose schools can be a powerful tool to the district in managing its portfolio of schools—those in demand can be expanded or can serve as models for replication, and those that are unpopular can be targets for improvement or closure.

At the very least, school choice offers an otherwise missing relief valve for parents who are frustrated with their child's school assignment, and at its best, school choice provides a way of managing a system of schools based on market mechanisms that allows for innovation and dynamism at the school level and a much more even playing field for school access for lower-income families. But just as the devil is in the details for a school system that uses traditional residential school assignment zones to provide quality education to most of its students, so too does the effectiveness for a district that offers considerable school choice depend on how choice is implemented. This requires attention to the parameters of choice and competition that are highlighted in the ECCI as well as to the fundamentals of choice access and quality. ■



Acknowledgments

The data collection effort for this project benefited from the invaluable help of Jaylan Elrahman, Bridget Galassini, Elise Levin, Elizabeth Pelletier, Emily Pollard, and Sarah Whitfield. The visual display of information on the ECCI Web page benefited immeasurably from the help of Kevin Hawkins. We thank them for their contributions.

Endnotes

[1]The data in the ECCI are organized around the geographical areas served by the nation's largest school districts. Most frequently these areas are conterminous with city boundaries, but sometimes a city is served by more than one large district, and sometimes a large district encompasses an area larger than the city. For ease of reference in this report, we use a city name if the relevant district has the same or smaller boundaries than the city, or if a large city is the anchor for the district. We use a county name if there is no large city within the district (e.g., Gwinett County, GA).

[2]The Recovery School District in New Orleans is covered in the ECCI because it is a district of special interest. It is not among the 100 largest school districts.

[3]The annual ECCI includes the 100 largest school districts for the relevant school year (based on total student population, including private school and charter school students in the geographic district) as well as seven school districts of special interest: Albany, District of Columbia, Indianapolis, Minneapolis, Newark, Orleans Parish and the Recovery District. When comparing across years in the normative facts and trends section, we use data from the 102 districts for which we have complete information for all three years and which did not experience a substantial geographical reorganization.

[4]National Center for Education Statistics. Fast Facts: Public school choice programs. Retrieved from http://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=6

[5]Beck Research. (2015). Memorandum Re: School Choice Survey Research Results. Retrieved from http://www.federationforchildren.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/1_22_15-Polling-Memo-and-Questions_final.pdf?e40fe9

[6]Center on Reinventing Public Education. Portfolio Strategy. Retrieved from http://www.crpe.org/research/portfolio-strategy

[7]Tullis, T. (2014, December 7). How Game Theory Helped Improve New York City's High School Application Process. *The New York Times*, pp. MB1.

[8]Whitehurst, G., & Whitfield, S. (2013). School Choice and School Performance in the New York City Public Schools – Will the Past be Prologue? Retrieved from http://www.brookings.edu/~/media/research/files/reports/2013/10/08%20school%20choice%20in%20new%20york%20city%20whitehurst/school%20choice%20and%20school%20performance%20in%20nyc%20public%20schools.pdf

ABOUT BROOKINGS

The Brookings Institution is a private nonprofit organization devoted to independent research and innovative policy solutions. For more than 90 years, Brookings has analyzed current and emerging issues and produced new ideas that matter—for the nation and the world. The conclusions and recommendations of any Brookings publication are solely those of its author(s), and do not reflect the views of the Institution, its management, or its other scholars.

ABOUT THE BROWN CENTER ON EDUCATION POLICY

The mission of the Brown Center on Education Policy at Brookings is to bring rigorous empirical analysis to bear on education policy in the United States. The primary activities of the Brown Center are based on quantitative social science, and are responsive to the immediate interests and needs of those who participate in policymaking.

Brown Center on Education Policy
The Brookings Institution
1775 Massachusetts Ave., NW
Washington, DC 20036
Tel: 202.797.6090
Email: browncenter@brookings.edu

BROWN CENTER on
Education Policy
at BROOKINGS