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The Policy and Politics of Urban School Choice:

JON VALANT, Moderator
Fellow, Brown Center on Education
The Brookings Institution

ROBIN LAKE
Director, Center on Reinventing Public Education

Implementation of School Choice Reforms:

JON VALANT, Moderator
Fellow, Brown Center on Education
The Brookings Institution

MAYA BUGG
Chief Executive Officer
Tennessee Charter School Center

BRYAN MORTON
Executive Director
Parents for Great Camden Schools

ANTWAN WILSON
Chancellor
D.C. Public Schools

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P R O C E E D I N G S

MR. VALANT: Good morning. Welcome to the Brookings Institution. My name is Jon Valant. I'm a fellow here at Brookings in the Brown Center on Education Policy and we're very happy to have you all with us for the next 90 minutes. That includes both the folks in the room and also those joining through our webcast. And whether you're in here or out there, you are welcome to follow along the conversation on Twitter with #SchoolChoice. And then we'll also post a recording of this session after the session's over on the Brookings site.

The topic of today's conversation is public school choice in U.S. cities. You could make an argument that no modern education reform, with the possible exception of test-based accountability, has fundamentally shaped what his happening in urban schools to the extent that public school choice programs have. You could also make a case that no modern education reform, with the possible exception of test-based accountability, has generated the same kind of attention and controversy that public school choice has. So today we're going to get into some of those issues and we'll get into some of that controversy and some of the politics and what seems to be going well and what doesn't seem to be going so well.

Public school choice takes a variety of different forms. Of course there are charter schools which are public schools that accept additional accountability in, for example, the form of being accountable to state-approved authorizers in exchange for having greater school level autonomy over curriculum and budget and personnel and other issues. There are magnet schools which are public schools that often have a particular theme, whether it's a fine arts theme, a STEM theme, or something else. And then there's a great deal of open enrollment, so families have quite a few options looking across and within districts to choose public schools other than their own local public school.

To say a bit about the numbers, so for charter schools about 5 percent of students across -- of public school students across the country are in charter schools. That

understates the percentage of students in urban areas, though, and in some cities it's very large. So in New Orleans, for example, about 93 percent of public school students are in a charter school and New Orleans no longer assigns students to schools based on their home address, so, in effect, everyone has to choose. In Detroit, that percentage is 53 percent, so 53 percent of public school students in Detroit attend a charter school; 46 percent here in Washington, D.C.; 38 percent in Camden; and the list goes on. And magnet schools educate about the same number of kids nationwide as charter schools do.

So today we're going to get into some of these issues. I do have an absence to announce. Senator Michael Bennet from Colorado was hoping and planning to come, but he got caught up in the markup of the tax proposal. So when you're tallying up the winners and losers on the tax proposal, remember to think also about panels on urban school choice reform on the loser side. (Laughter)

But we have a terrific panel here with us today. Starting closest to me and working down, Chancellor Antwan Wilson is the chancellor of the D.C. Public Schools. He's been there since February 1st, and he comes to D.C. from the Oakland Unified School District where he was superintendent in Oakland, California.

Prior to that work he was the assistant superintendent for postsecondary readiness in the Denver Public Schools, and taught middle and high school in Kansas, Nebraska, and North Carolina. And also served as a principal in Denver and Wichita.

We almost lost Chancellor Wilson for illness, but he made it through, so thanks for joining us. How are you feeling?

MR. WILSON: Better.

MR. VALANT: Robin Lake is the director of the Center on Reinventing Public Education. She's also an affiliate faculty member at the University of Washington at Bothell. The Center on Reinventing Public Education, or CRPE, is a nonpartisan research and policy

analysis organization that for a very long time now has really been at the heart of the issues involved urban districts and sort of school choice options within those districts.

CRPE has very recently put together a report on public school choice in 18 cities. I think there are parts of the report available, is that right?

MS. LAKE: Yeah, we have city summaries.

MR. VALANT: Just outside. And they have a sort of bigger, broader report that accompanies that.

Maya Bugg is the chief executive officer at the Tennessee Charter School Center. Tennessee Charter School Center supports charter schools in a variety of different ways in the state of Tennessee. Some of those ways relate to policy and advocacy, and then they also have some more school-level supports that Maya will tell us a bit about, including some work with charter school boards and some sort of incubation-type work.

And prior to coming to the Tennessee Charter School Center Maya was a classroom teacher in North Carolina and the founding state director for Education Pioneers in Tennessee.

And at the end of the panel we have Bryan Morton. Bryan is the founder and executive director of Parents for Great Camden Schools. Bryan is a native of Camden and he started this organization that works to empower parents and caregivers to overcome some of the obstacles that can negatively affect their children's educational outcomes. And his organization has a real focus on empowering parents and communities so that they're not sort of subject to the whims of policymakers, but they have an active voice in the policy process.

Bryan was also very involved in Little League Baseball in North Camden, and has a wonderful story of sort of how Little League Baseball can turn into advocacy and community that, hopefully, we will get into a bit today.

Okay, so I'll start with Robin, if that's okay. So, Robin, you and your colleagues

at CRPE now have this new report on public school choice across these 18 cities. Can you tell us a little bit about what your takeaways are from the report?

MS. LAKE: Yes. Thanks, Jon. And I just want to take a moment just to thank you and Brookings for hosting us all today, for the panelists and for all of you joining us. A shout-out to folks on the West Coast who are joining us by webinar. It's early, so we're all waking up together.

So, yeah, we just released a report today. There's a lot in it, so I do encourage you to take a look. I'll try to summarize just the highlights quickly for you. But basically, all of you know that there's been a lot of airtime to private school choice recently, but our report really has dug into the issues that Jon is describing, that public school choice, a vast array of options for urban families, is really becoming the new normal in our cities. Families are increasingly opting out of their assigned schools and looking to both district and charter schools and some actually very interested partnerships between district and charter schools.

And all of this is really driven by a local demand from parents for more high-quality options. Of course, a recognition that kids learn in different ways and they need to have options to find the right fit for their kids. And an increasing number of superintendents, like Chancellor Wilson, who are recognizing that in order to really innovate and find the solutions to problems that have plagued our cities' schools for so long, you really need to empower educators and find ways to free up their energy and allow them to differentiate.

So all that is just setting the stage, right, for what's going on out there. And our research was really designed to understand how's it going? How can it be better? How can we make public school choice work better for families? We wanted to get away from the results war, so we intentionally are not making comparisons between charter schools and district schools or any of that, but rather looking to understand how cities are moving forward on a variety of fronts.

First, most importantly, in terms of student achievement are we seeing any signs of gains for kids? Second, equity and access. And third, we really wanted to look at whether the city school systems were becoming really politically sustainable, having a lot of community support for the direction that things were moving.

And so, overall, a lot of variation, right. No city has got it absolutely nailed on any of these fronts. But in general, we're seeing a lot of momentum, real progress, tangible progress, and reason for optimism. Grad rates generally are on the upswing. There are more high-quality charter and district schools and fewer low-scoring schools. I think folks will be surprised to see how much activity is going on both from community members and from policymakers to just address the issues that come up when you're asking people to choose among a lot of schools.

Parent engagement and information strategies, I think we have some folks here today from D.C. School Reform Now and PAVE doing excellent work around those areas. So there's a lot of momentum building.

But there are also real challenges and we talk a lot about the complications that arise from mostly choice systems: the difficulty that folks can have in navigating a variety of different enrollment systems, accessing their transportation and enrollment systems, their choices. And this is especially true, spend a lot of time talking about how our survey results are showing that still low-income families struggle with these issues the most. They're reporting challenges on all those fronts and especially when they look around the array of options, they have a hard time seeing how they can get really high-quality schools for their kids.

So our recommendations are really around it's time to double down. You can't do this halfway. If you're a city that's really engaging in more choices and opportunities for families, you've got to really double down on information systems, making sure that there are high-quality schools close to the families who need them most, and committing to problem-

solving wherever it's coming up.

MR. VALANT: Thank you. And Chancellor Wilson, so sort of picking up on this, the high-quality schools, it would be nice for us to understand what the goal is there. At this point, you've worked in quite a few different capacities in quite a few different districts. And I'm curious if you have thoughts about what it is that distinguishes successful schools and school systems from struggling ones.

MR. WILSON: Yeah, thank you. You know, it's interesting, I think it's similar at the district level and school level in terms of what I've seen. And that is, one, it's just a commitment to excellence and high quality. And that involves students learning, whether it be at the district level saying that the number one goal is to make sure that students are achieving at high academic levels and that they are successful while they're in school and prepared for the next opportunity, whether it be an elementary school preparing kids to be ready on day one going into middle school or middle school to high school or high school on to postsecondary opportunities, at these districts. And they have a very strong vision in terms of what they see for themselves over the course of the next several years and a very strong mission in terms of what they want to do to get there.

I think same at the school level. They really work to staff up to make sure that there is excellent access to educators who are really strong and aligned to a common set of values as to what it'll take to meet that vision and mission.

They're on the same page in terms of the strategies that they're trying to use in the school. They're really clear as to who they are and also clear as to what they're not going to do. And that's challenging because, in many cases, whether it be the district level or school level, you have people who will say, you know, well, you should do X or Y or Z in these places. Not that they dismiss them right offhand, but they definitely want to make sure that they're saying close to their mission and vision.

Speaking specifically here in D.C., we just rolled out our updated strategic plan as it relates to our district, DCPS, and capital commitment. And our strategic plan really rolls out and boils down to three big concepts, the first being excellence. We know that our families deserve excellent schools all over the city, and so we just say we are going to be about making sure that there is an opportunity for quality regardless of where kids live.

The other is equity. We know that our work in the District is about equity work. And for me, that work is important to DCPS, but I think it's important to the entire city, both the district and charter sector, to make sure that the students who are furthest away from opportunity, that they have compelling options so that they can get a great education and that we are doing everything we can to eliminate achievement gaps, which are quite dramatic here in the city.

And then for us the last piece is love, and that is this idea that we have to have schools where our students know that we really care about them and that's the personalization. Personalization can sound kind of distant, but we need to know who our kids are, we need to know what their needs are, we need to know what their hopes and aspirations are so that we can be in the best position to challenge them. Young people are willing to be challenged when you know that they care about them and they know that you have their best interests at heart, that you understand what's going on in their lives and not any way use that information to lower expectations. But because it matters so much to them, because you know how important it is to them that they actually receive the education, then you are doing everything you can at the school level and district level to expose them to the opportunities that they're going to need in order to reach their full potential. So I think that's important.

We want to make sure that in DCPS that performance outcomes can't be predicted by geography, where kids go to school, or they can't be predicted by English language status or whether or not a child has an IEP or the parents' economic background or race. And I

think districts and schools that really are doing this well are committed to lifting up strategies that ensure that young people are put in the best position possible to be successful and they pursue partnerships where they can reach their outcomes with like-minded individuals and organizations, leveraging as many of the resources as they can to ensure that young people get what they need, all young people. So that's the personalization piece that I think is extremely important and I think can be found, whether you're talking about the school level or whether you're talking about the district level, all aligned towards a common mission vision.

MR. VALANT: Thank you. And Maya, picking up on what it is that defines a successful from an unsuccessful one, you in your position, I suspect, will sort of see the evolution of charter schools from their very early days. Are there characteristics of those schools that predict whether they ultimately are successful and are there sort of organizational weaknesses that we should be aware of and should address that keep them from being successful?

MS. BUGG: Sure. Tennessee has a lot of successful charter schools that we can look to and say what are those characteristics that helped them to be successful? The state just released our performance data for all the schools and the schools that were given reward status. In Tennessee, those are either schools that have high growth or high performance. And so the schools that were -- out of all the schools that received that accolade, the only ones that served majority African American, students of color, low-income, and also received that reward status for achievement were the public charter schools. And so there's something that we can learn from our schools there in Tennessee.

Some of the characteristics that you'll find, overall, in a word, they are intentional. So they're intentional about their use of time. They're not just doing extended learning time because it's on trend. It's how am I using this time? How am I filling it with quality teaching? How am I filling it with quality support for all kids?

They are infusing literacy in all subjects. So across the nation, and especially in Tennessee, literacy is a priority for us. It's one of the areas that we just have not been able to move forward as a whole, as a state. And so the successful charter schools have been very thoughtful about their curriculum and they've made sure that literacy is a part of not just reading, but math and science and social studies and so on and so forth.

Another item that I'd point out is that they've mastered and been thoughtful about individualized curriculum, the way the chancellor has just noted. They have really thought about small group learning. In some of our most successful elementary schools, they actually have prioritized in their budgets to have two teachers per classroom throughout all the elementary grades, and we've seen that to be a very successful model.

Something that's super important, and maybe we'll talk about it a little bit today, is they have respect for and they understand the community that they're serving. So they're not seeking to just pop in and tell the community this is what you need. They're talking to community members, they're working with parents, they have a diverse governing board that can give feedback on their direction, as well, and that's critical.

They have focused on professional development for their teachers and collaboration. So we have some schools where every, I don't know, four weeks, six weeks or so, their teachers come together, they assess what has happened in this past quarter, they make arrangements to address gaps individually and as a group, and then they'll move forward with that for the next cycle and not just kind of leave it alone and say, well, they didn't get it. They'll go back and they'll focus on mastery.

And while they're all working -- this is during the school day they're doing this, this kind of pull out and reflection -- the schools partner with Vanderbilt to get pre-service teachers to teach apprenticeships. So they're doing 3D printing and robotics, and then those who need extra help, students who need extra help are getting that intensive work there. So

they're being very intentional about how do we use the time not just of the students, but of the teachers, as well, to make sure they're collaborating and working together?

In terms of operations, they are very strategic about fundraising. They're not relying on fundraising for the operations of their whole school. They use it for particular needs that they have, but they're more so using the per-pupil allotment for the majority of their needs. And that's going to be critical. As we all know, philanthropic dollars come and go depending on what the priorities are, and so if you are a school who has a majority of your budget reliant on dollars given, you could experience some troubles.

But, I mean, these are characteristics of good schools, period. It's not particular to charter schools, but these are just some examples of public charter schools that I'm aware of that have been successful.

MR. VALANT: And Bryan, so you certainly have taken to heart respect for community as being an important piece of education reform and have really focused on parents. Can you tell us a bit about why that is and sort of what brought you to your work today?

MR. MORTON: Yeah, absolutely. So first off, Parents for Great Camden Schools is an organization that is agnostic of school type. We believe that all education institutions within the city of Camden have to be excellent sources of education for our students. And the way that that will happen is if parents have a seat at the table in demanding that the same type of experiences that are happening in higher performing schools are also happening in their schools.

So we work within public schools, we work within charter schools, we work within a charter-public hybrid called "renaissance schools," which is sort of unique -- not unique, but new to the city of Camden. And what we have found is that most oftentimes parents are engaged here in reform efforts for very specific actions or outcomes on behalf of a school or a type and genuine engagement of parents to understand what their interests are, what their

concerns are. And what actually motivates parents in selecting schools isn't really at the forefront. So many times they're used as sort of agents called to action on behalf of a specific action or school type.

And so at Parents for Great Camden Schools we really seek to put parents at the center of the conversation. And a lot of times, you know, that work really begins with building up the capacity of parents to understand what the issues are at play. You know, this place is even intimidating to me, so imagine if we had a group of just regular parents from Camden City where, historically, the last two decades-plus before this superintendent, we had a dropout rate that was over 60 percent. And we are now flipping that on its head, so that is something that we have to really understand when engaging parents is sort of not to pat them on the back and say there, there, but to really understand their starting point and to make that a place where our conversations begin.

So we really try to help parents to understand the policies that are at play and encourage them to use their voice and their story, their understanding of how the system has supported their dreams and hasn't supported their dreams. And then we seek to align parents across school types so that they begin to understand the things that they have in common.

Because many times in the reform effort, you know, parents have to plant a flag. I'm with this school, I'm with this type of school. And we try to abolish that because if parents can begin to have conversations back and forth around what their concerns are and around what the outcomes are that they want to see for their children achieved, then we can begin to build sort of a real political power back into the community as parents begin to align on issues that then they can speak to their stakeholders.

And once the parents can align and begin to speak to their stakeholders with confidence, then the stakeholders will over time, in a sustained and meaningful way, engage and interact with parents. And a lot of times, you know, our work is about restoring or working

with parents to understand or get reconnected to the ideal, the promise that education once held.

You know, part of my story is that by the time I arrived in high school there had been so much change and so much turnover in my community that the zest and zeal I once held for education was gone. The belief in the community of education as a pathway from poverty was eliminated. The place for parents to be in school and their voice was disappearing. And sadly, I would leave school at the end of my freshman year, and that is not an uncommon tale for many black and brown young men or students here in America. They no longer believe in the system and households don't believe in education.

So how do we restore the promise that made so many of us immigrate or migrate to this country for the belief in something better? And that's where Parents for Great Camden Schools and our sessions with parents, it really is about bringing back the inspiration and a belief in the system and helping parents to understand that they are central and holding the system accountable. For without their voice we cannot guarantee the changes that are most important to parents and will benefit our students over the long haul.

So that's where we're at and that's the role that we believe our organization plays and that's the place that we believe parents must take in this conversation. They have to be just as central and just as equal and just as important to the conversation as our think tanks, as our professionals, as our school leaders in ensuring academic outcomes for students.

MS. LAKE: More important, that is certain.

MR. MORTON: Thank you.

MR. VALANT: And one of the tensions that certainly comes up is sometimes what it is that parents want for their kids and for their school systems differs from what education leaders think is best for kids and for school systems. And this is really a question for any of you, but we see this particularly with charter school closures, which are some of the sort

of bloodiest fights that see in education today. But how would you think about navigating this sort of potential conflict between what it is that parents want and what leaders might thing is best?

MS. BUGG: And I'll jump in for a second. You know, school closures, it's a double-edged sword. Right? I mean, they're necessary, but we know that the schools that are not properly serving our kids do not deserve the privilege to continue to educate our kids. But, on the other hand, we also know that black and brown and low-income children are most impacted by these school closures, disproportionately so. And when you're closing the schools, mostly the children are either doing as good or worse than they were doing in the failing school. So now you've got a situation where you're closing schools without providing some other avenue for the families to go to a better school, basically.

So two thoughts. Authorizers in districts have to be more thoughtful about who's being impacted by school closures. What I've seen is authorizers sometimes, and just what I have seen in certain instances, using school closures as a way to punish a school operator. You know, we're closing you down versus the families that are inside of that school, what's going to happen to them? Because at the end of the day, whether you close a school or not, you still have families that are looking for a quality school.

And so we have to really think about if you have it where there's a quality school desert in certain neighborhoods, then we have to be thoughtful around what do we do with the families? How do we support them to transition into better schools if and when we close this particular school? And if the answer is I don't know or we've not thought about it, and you're going to just transition them to another low-performing school, then the solution might not be ad hoc school-by-school closures. You need to be doing something a bit more systemic. It's just traumatic to close schools.

And the other part is usually the surprise that we've seen where families are

saying why are you closing my school, it's because no one has told them what the quality is. And so we have an obligation to be more transparent about the quality of the schools. Of course, if someone comes and tells you today we're closing down your kids' school, if you have any kids, and this is the first you're hearing about it, you're going to fight, too.

We just passed an A-through-F school report card policy in Tennessee. We've not implemented it yet. We're hopeful that that will be helpful, that parents will understand the quality of schools. I think it's easier to work with communities to say here's the quality of school. What do you feel that quality means? Here's what schools are responsible for, and to have that dialogue earlier on. It shouldn't be here's a notice, next month your school's being closed. So it just has to be more intentional.

MR. MORTON: And I would have to agree. You know, when I began this work, that was one of the most difficult conversations we had in the community is helping parents to understand how well their school was or was not doing, so being able to provide real meaningful data to parents to help them understand the proficiency rate.

Because parents in the city of Camden were selecting schools based upon many variables, and the top two most often came down to perception of safety and transportation. Could I get my child there? And once my child was there, were they going to be safe? Academics and outcomes, you know, often fell third, fourth, or fifth.

And so when it comes to school closures, there is an emotional response from within the community because this is a place that I trust to keep my child safe. And it is only at the tail end that parents were being informed, you know, well, in this school only 60 percent -- which is a high number in the city of Camden because we have, on average, schools that are 10, 12, 15, 30 percent proficient. And that's a travesty, but that's not a story that parents are being informed.

And sort of a dirty secret within our efforts is that there is a lot of engagement

around sort of condemning the traditional system for its failures, but there is often a lack of that same willingness to call out some of those charter schools that may begin to underperform. And so in the city of Camden recently, we had to -- you know, my group had to push for the closer of one which had dipped down to a proficiency rate of single digits. But parents did not know and there was a conversation in sort of the back rooms around do we make this public knowledge? And so, meanwhile, parents and children were languishing.

And so to your point, we really have to make data a regular part of the conversation. We have to, you know, produce and make it more easier to access these school report cards. In the state of New Jersey, it is a real laborious process to navigate the state website, to actually come up to the report card to determine how well a school is doing. And many times, some schools are so new that the data isn't available readily to understand how a school is doing.

So school closures, again, could be a double-edged sword, but I think that if we were using data as a regular part of the conversation, helping parents to understand what the expectations are from the schools that are being established, then we have a more realistic opportunity to ensure that the schools are turning out the outcomes that we're seeking. And when a time comes to have that conversation, the school is being held accountable.

So I think that would send a positive shockwave throughout the system that the community is expecting results, not promises. And so if you're not delivering on what you're saying to this community that you have claimed to come in to offer a better solution, there will be a real consequence. Otherwise, we continue to kick the can down the road, and black and brown children or most neediest children regardless of color, will continue to suffer. You know, generations will continue to be left behind and we'll continue to see, you know, the wealth gap widening across the country.

MR. WILSON: You know, I'll add a few thoughts to the conversation. One is,

and it's probably even building off of something that both Maya and Bryan mentioned, but to hone it in even more, yes, it's the same communities that often are impacted by these decisions, but it's actually often the same families. And then drill down, it's the same kids.

So that needs to be paid attention to in terms of the pain that many families have, is that this was a conversation that was happening at this school or in this community when my child was in kindergarten and now we're having the same conversation. My child's in fifth grade and now we're having the same conversation. My child's in eighth grade and we're having the same conversation. My child's a junior. So it does require a real understanding that there are some families that are going through these conversations multiple times.

And so I think that it's important that we have a few things happen. One is to make sure that there are conversations around how do you involve families in terms of what they feel matters to them early on. Before we're ever talking about school closures, we're talking about how to make sure that there's really great school quality and that the practices in schools are really good.

And so in DCPS, one of the things we're really trying to make sure we get right is getting schools to think more thoughtfully at the local level in terms of what good governance looks like at the school level. And we're saying that, you know, look, I just think this great school leadership involves really great leadership practices that involve families. And then when you marry that with the type of transparency that both Maya and Bryan were talking about in terms of what quality is and giving people an opportunity to inform that definition of what that looks like, then I think that we can find that there doesn't have to be a disconnect between what the educational professionals think is needed and what parents think is needed.

And I just wanted to illustrate this just really quickly this way. I've had an opportunity in a couple of different districts to take families in communities to see other schools, sometimes in the same community down the road. And when they see examples of quality and

things that they're children are not exposed to, I've never had a parent say, ah, leave that for those children. I don't want my children to have any of that. It never goes that way. It always goes, well, why isn't this happening in our school? How do we get some of those opportunities for my children?

And so in addition to, you know, telling families, I think there's a lot of times you have to create opportunities for families to see what that standard of excellence could look like, and they'll advocate it for in their school. And if their current school can't provide it, then they'll look to the district or they'll look to authorizers, and they say, well, why aren't you providing this for us?

My point is I think there's an opportunity to marry the desires of families and the needs of the educators in terms of recognizing what students need. It just takes more time, which means that involving parents early on normally can lead to the type of solutions that benefit children, but also help parents feel empowered.

Last thing, and it just goes to our piece in our strategic plan I mentioned, you know, this idea of love is extremely important. I mean, I am a parent. I want to believe that you know my children. I have twins. I want you to know that Alani is different than Amari; that they see the world differently. They both have great potential, but I want you to not see them as the same. And I think that parents want that type of personalization and that type of feeling in the school.

And it's really important that we don't diminish that because when we talk about what families want, oftentimes we talk about the data and statistics and the outcomes, but as was shared, I think Bryan mentioned it, this idea of safety is extremely important. This idea of connection is extremely important.

So as we have these conversations around options, we want to make sure that parents feel that we understand the personal aspect of these decisions and how they play out in

young people's lives, and that's very hard. And again, that just leads back to the sooner we engage families, the earlier they are involved in the process, the better our prospects are for some type of alignment in terms of the types of the types of decisions when difficult decisions have to be made.

MS. BUGG: I'm sorry, can I just jump really quickly? I 100 percent agree about the parents being involved at the front end. We launched something called Community Launch in Tennessee through our Charter School Center. And the purpose of Community Launch was an idea that a colleague and I thought through. I'm in grad school, also, because I don't have anything else to do, and I also have twins. (Laughter) So a colleague and I, my cohort member, we were thinking about what would it mean to get parents involved at the beginning of these conversations about what kind of schools are going to come to their communities?

And so I wrote out the proposal. We got the funding. We launched it last year and what we did was reached out to community members. There was grandmoms and parents and so on and so forth, and we talked them through what is quality. What do you think is quality? In terms of compliance measures what is quality?

Then we took them to tour schools up the street, neighboring city, Chicago, California. Here's what quality is looking like in other places and in schools that are serving populations similar to your kids.

And then here's the thing that's a bit different. We thought about what if you actually then were able to give input to a new school that wants to come to your neighborhood? And so we got at least one school that applied -- that was thinking to apply, and we said why don't you get feedback from our parents first? Right. Everybody likes to go to the professionals. You hire consultants, tell me about my application.

And we found that the parents and community members gave just as valid feedback to this potential operator as a consultant would. And they told them you're not ready

to come to our neighborhood. You're not ready. They made a plan for North Memphis and at the last minute they decided, actually, we're going to go down to South Memphis. Those are two different places. You can't just pick up your plan and drop it.

And so that operator decided I'm not going to apply this year. I'm going to wait. I'm going to take your feedback. I'm going to try to strengthen this and then I'll come back and talk with you.

And so that's the type of empowerment that is key. We like to bring parents in at the end or we like to give them a solid plan and then say you like this, don't you? Sign here. And so it was pretty powerful to see that group say that they felt more engaged, they felt like they had more political power. They were more civically engaged is what I'm trying to say. Some of them said I'm going to open my own school or I'm going to run for county commissioner. You know, they just were feeling like we stopped this school. They were feeling real good, which they should have.

So, hopefully, we'll be able to continue with that program. Just to kind of punctuate, it is critical that we are not looking for parents just to sign off on ideas that we already have.

MS. LAKE: And I just want to say, a really important finding from our work was that across all of the studies we heard really consistent words about community engagement. We heard from community members there was so much good will around the strategies that are being deployed, but the folks who are charging forth with kind of technocratic solutions are missing huge opportunities to engage families and community leaders on these kinds of issues. And failing to go there is just a huge liability that's unnecessary, you know. Folks are generally on board with we want more quality schools, we want them in our neighborhoods, so let's engage in that and get there.

And the other point here I think is this is the lynchpin that is paralyzing a lot of

cities on moving forward on quality. When they can't figure out how to manage the more controversial replacement or closure decisions, you can't make progress.

MR. VALANT: And Robin, so another takeaway that I have from your report was that one concern in general about school choice programs is that they sort of naturally advantage the parents who are most adept at navigating those systems, who can go and find what they need and they are sort of on top of all of the deadlines, which can be really confusing. I should confess, I missed a deadline when I was literally studying the system I was applying to and I didn't notice the deadline. And they're confusing and they're hard.

So how do you think about that concern? And what have you seen sort of across these cities in how we can make sure that all families are getting sort of the supports and the resources that they need to manage the system?

MS. LAKE: Yeah, it's absolutely a concern and something that shows up in the data over and over again. I guess I will start by saying in some ways people might be surprised by how many families from low-income backgrounds and other sort of disadvantages really jump into the choice process and love it and engage in it and you've seen that in New Orleans to a large degree. But there are always some families who are feeling so much distress for whatever reason, income and all that goes with poverty is a reality and, of course, there are language barriers, there are families with kids with disabilities, who have unique needs and struggles in trying to figure out among all these options out there how is my kid who's got real challenges in the follow area is going to be loved, accepted, welcomed, and well-served?

So, you know, there are no easy answer to this and this is where we're seeing cities really dig in and try to get creative, listen to families. I mentioned the folks here in D.C. that are doing so much good work around parent engagement and that does not mean a flyer or a community meeting. That means one-on-one support for families who need it most. And we're seeing much of that in New Orleans with a group called EdNavigators, where families are

assigned an advocate who helps them work through the choice process.

So there are a ton of ways to make sure this works and you have to commit to it. You really have fully commit to it because these are the families who most need more high-quality options.

MR. VALANT: Chancellor Wilson, can you speak a bit to how a district reacts to these kind of competitive pressures that come when parents are searching around and shopping for schools?

MR. WILSON: Yeah. Well, let me say, you know, start off by saying that for me I was educated in the public education system and have worked in a public education system my entire career, and I will say my opinions on this are informed by both. I mean, I was a kid who moved all the time and went to a lot of different schools, and I guess what that afforded me is the opportunity to see both the good and the bad in the public education system. And I think sometimes it was really happy that my mother was able to choose a different school, and then other times, it felt like I had hit the lottery. And so all of that to say I believe in choice. I believe that families should have the ability to make decisions that are right for their children.

And I think there are a few things that are really important. I think that being a part of a city that is saying we want to really focus on providing quality options all over the city, I think that's important. I think having a process for providing new schools in places where families have less access to quality options, I think that's important.

I think that it is also important that we elevate opportunities for families to get to these schools, and so D.C., with the help of the leadership of our mayor, Mayor Bowser, also our City Council providing an opportunity for students to get access to public transportation free to get across town, I think that's extremely important. Otherwise, you don't have choice if kids can't really get there. I also think having common measures of accountability and a common understanding of what excellence looks like in schools and what quality looks like in schools, I

think that's extremely important, as well, so that parents can have some common understanding of what success looks like.

I also believe that having neighborhood schools, there are parents who want that. They want their kid to -- you know, I hear from parents all the time, I want to understand what the trajectory could look like. My kid started in this elementary school, continued him up through high school. I think that there are parents who want that and we need to respect that at the same time, and I think you can have both. You see, that's what we're focused on is providing those opportunities.

I do think that it's beneficial to have parents, either way, make that choice. So if you're saying that I want to follow a traditional path with my children to be able to affirmatively go in and choose those schools, I think it's a good thing, even if the school's down the street. And I think it's a good thing if parents have an opportunity to say, you know, I think that there are two or three options across town that I would prefer closer to my school if they have a means to get there.

What I will close on is just saying for us in D.C., we want parents to not have to go across town because what that often means is migration one way. Okay. And I'm new to D.C., so for me it's migration east to west, and I noticed that coming in with my kids. A lot of encouragement was happening as I was coming in and looking for homes, and it was you want to be on this part of town. And I tend to be a bit contrary, so I decided, no, I don't. I want to be here and we can figure out the rest from there.

But I don't think parents should have to send their kid out of their neighborhood. And so that's why collaboration for me with the charter sector is so important, to make sure that we can have some consistent ways in which we work together to ensure that there is access to quality schools and that the District is doing its part in understanding the public charter school sector's doing their part, so that families have options in their neighborhood or as close to their

neighborhood as possible, so that if they are choosing a school across town it's because of something that's compelling for their child or something that makes the most sense in terms of how their lives work. Maybe they work closer to this school or something like that.

And so, again, choice is important, but it's important to have common accountability. It's important to have transportation worked out. It's important to have really great communication systems so that families understand what they're getting into and how it works. And if they want to engage in a traditional progression of elementary, middle, and high school options in a feeder pattern, that that's available there for them, as well.

MR. VALANT: And is it your impression that there are ways in which DCPS operates in the presence of a large charter sector where it would behave differently in the absence of that sector?

MR. WILSON: Well, you know, I will say this, and, again, I've been here a little less than a year, but I tend to believe that the charter sector has benefited D.C. Public Schools from this standpoint. And I think the D.C. Public Schools have also benefited the charter sector. So let me just say that absent the insertion of choice, we didn't have a lot of good schools. And I'm not speaking about D.C. I'm talking about a lot of urban areas. Absent other options, there was some complacency. And I felt this as student, so I can't sit here as the chancellor of D.C. and say it didn't exist. It did exist.

And I think that when parents have other options, I think it forces us to pay attention as a district to what's happening in all our best schools, our top schools that are making a difference regardless of where they're at. I think it forces us to pay attention to what's happening across sectors. And I think that that has helped.

But I also think that what has happened in D.C. is that has led to opportunities in transportation and the transportation isn't just for the District of Columbia Public Schools, it's for students in public schools regardless of sector. I think that's important.

When it comes time to respond to controversial events, I mean, we had a public response with both our school district and district public charter schools. When there was a lot of outcry out of the Charlottesville incident, we responded as a sector. We're talking about ways in which we can collaborate as a sector. There's an executive master's program.

So I think there are multiple ways I've seen people respond to the competition. In my last district there was a lot of noise around and a lot of energy focused on the fact that there is competition. My perspective is the competition is there and so what type of competition and what type of environment do you want to create? Do you want to create an environment where the focus is on excellence and then, therefore, both sectors can benefit? Can you come up with some mutual ways of thinking about the work, mutual ways of thinking about serving the population, so that students win? That's one way to do it.

Another way to do it is to focus on arguing with each other, you know, mudslinging and getting into data wars and all those types of things. I don't think all students are served well that way and I think you have problems.

And so I think that it's important for us to make sure that in the district, and in the District of Columbia specifically, we do our part to make sure that families have great elementary, middle, high school options for their children; we are doing our part to maintain students as our top priority and creating an environment where adults want to come and work. I think that influences the charter sector. So, for instance, as D.C. has improved its pay, the charter sector had to improve its pay for teachers, as well; want to be competitive. I think that creates an environment where teachers want to come and work in D.C. and if they land in a DCPS school or a district charter school, either way kids win from that perspective. And so I think that is an example of how both sectors benefit each other.

Currently now, in terms of performance, we're quite comparable. On the PARCC assessment, in ELA we are, as a district, slightly ahead of the charter sector in ELA. Even in

math there are some student populations where we are doing better at serving; there are some student populations where the charters have done better serving. So I think from a data perspective, our graduation rates, 73.2 for the district, 73.4 for charters. I mean, it's statistically even and so it's getting better.

So I think that the more we work together, the better we are going to be positioned to meet the needs of families. And I for one as a leader am not interested in getting into arm wrestling conversations around sectors. I'm much more interested in trying to find ways in which we can meet the needs of families and meet the needs of children through some type of mutual understanding because both sectors are here, both sectors are valued in the city. And as the chancellor, I understand that, but I also really love serving District of Columbia Public Schools and making sure that all of those schools are great places for students to come and learn.

MR. MORTON: Sort of jumping on both Robin and the superintendent's point, when we're rolling out these choice systems we have to understand that parents access information through diverse ways. So how are we getting that information out to parents? So, you know, it's great that you have a website, but are you making it mobile-friendly? In a city such as Camden, access to technology has been extremely limited due to the low income in households. So less than 10 percent have Internet at home, but most of us carry around a supercomputer in our pockets through a smartphone. So making it accessible.

Tying into those neighborhood organizations that parents know and trust, so the local nonprofits that become centers where parents can actually go and maybe access a computer or have access to someone that can work one-on-one with them so that they can navigate the system and understand the choices, and that's really where data comes in, to help parents understand at that point in time how well the schools that they're choosing are doing. Otherwise, you're just giving them a bunch of names on a piece of paper and hoping that they

can pick the best one.

And in that sense, to the superintendent's point, that's where the competition has actually made schools that in the past were failing or that had begun to take for granted that they had a natural pool of students, so they didn't have to outreach to the community, they didn't have to offer a variety of wraparound services. You know, I'm the neighborhood school, the parents from this ZIP Code have to come to me regardless. And we've seen that shift since universal enrollment where our traditional schools, our charter schools are actually engaging parents and the community, are actually developing, you know, I don't want to say snazzy, but real meaningful outreach and marketing campaigns and really beginning to think about, well, what is happening inside our building that distinguishes us from the school that may be just a few blocks away? And how can we change that so that parents are choosing us as an option first?

So we're really seeing the true emergence of choice and not just a selection of examples or samples that are out there. And that's how it has benefited us in the city of Camden.

MS. LAKE: Can I say, though, I mean, I absolutely agree the common enrollment systems, cooperation between charters and districts, when we get to the point where we have so many schools of choice, it's no longer an option. It has to happen. But it is not an easy thing to accomplish really.

Charter schools were told that they would be fully autonomous. They could locate wherever they wanted to locate was the original deal. There are a lot of elements in mistrust often in cities between charter and district, personalities and relationships that aren't strong.

And so I will commend the leaders in D.C. across both sectors, and in other cities, who have really brought it in terms of saying enough, we're not going to do this fighting

anymore. We're not going to do this comparing anymore. We're actually going to work and get down to business and solve problems. But just the point, it's not an easy thing. It requires leadership.

MR. VALANT: So in just a couple of minutes we're going to turn it over for audience Q&A. I do want to throw one more question to the panel. Maybe Robin you can start and then others feel free to chime in.

The politics of school choice are shifting pretty rapidly now, so since President Trump and Secretary DeVos have taken office and really embraced school choice, we have seen in a couple of new polls that have come out that there is -- that Democrats in particular are more wary of charters and choice than they had been in the past. And I'm curious about the implications of that both in the short term and the long term for these kinds of reforms.

MS. LAKE: Oh, there are politics? (Laughter) Yeah, it's interesting times right now and it's complicated. People use the words "school choice" very loosely and folks who are new to the choice discussion are making assumptions about who supports what that aren't always true.

Look, I take the long view on this having worked following school choice for so many years and seen that there has always been strong bipartisan support for public school choice and the private school choice is more complicated. And I expect that in the long run that will fold because folks in blue states and red states have an interest in better schools and more choices.

And I think I've seen, you know, over the years when charter schools were a big part of No Child Left Behind and were used as essentially a sanction for a low-performing school, a district school would be replaced with a charter school. That was built into the law. There was a lot of this kind of angst and turmoil around what is choice.

But I guess I'm reminded of -- I asked Bryan the question earlier this morning

around, now, are the national politics on this really playing out in Camden? Are people really talking about this? And he said, no, we're really getting to work. So I guess I'm the old lady on the panel here and we'll just say I think things settle out and bipartisan support will hold ultimately.

MR. WILSON: I think that a lot of this is just regional or it's local in terms of what's going on. But I think from a national perspective, I think what some people are concerned about is the demise of the public school system which for many served as the great equalizer or a potential to be a great equalizer in terms of providing people access to opportunity they otherwise were locked out from, and I think that that is something that we need to be very cognizant of. And for me, that's why I choose to do my work from within public school systems because I believe that we have to have public systems that work. The majority of our students are there.

And as much as I love and support the work that's happened down at New Orleans, I recognize that New Orleans has had its system for some time and it's not been this huge exodus to create that type of structure all over the city. I mean, the majority of students who are furthest behind or in greatest need of opportunity advancement are going to be educated in traditional public districts. And so we need to make sure those districts are working.

And so how do you uplift strategies to make sure that all students, students who are in families with great privilege as well as students who, for all intents and purposes, have no other choice but to be educated in some type of public school system, how do you ensure that those students and their families get the educations they need? And I think that is the concern that we are seeing uplifted as conversations are happening around choice, absent conversations of accountability. And I think that that's what people get nervous about, is this idea of we're going to take from here, give to over here, and we're going to have different systems of accountability, different opportunities for access and those types of things.

D.C. has operated for some time with opportunities for families to go to District-run schools as well as District charter schools, public charter schools, as well as to pursue vouchers and go to a private school. That has happened for some time and has not created, you know, just a complete upsetting of the apple cart here in D.C. I think when people start to get nervous about those types of things it is when it is they're fearful of the attack on the traditional public school system as a means of opportunity for all kids. And I do think it's something that we need to pay attention to and ensure that that has not happened because the lion's share of our kids, whether it's a traditional school district or public charter schools where all kids have an opportunity to pursue them, most kids, if they're going to have any type of opportunity to pursue middle class, upward mobility, it's going to come from one of those two systems.

MR. MORTON: And one of the, I guess, greatest factors when you ask that question that comes to mind is, who are they listening to? And so we see businesses in forms of educational nonprofits, you know, hire consultants and professional lobbyists. We see unions really engage our leaders around lobbying and parents are often at the tail end. And so it really is incumbent now that as we consider this landscape that we sort of really dive in to developing independent and autonomous parent advocacy organizations that can influence our leaders much in the same way as these other entities. Because only then will we really begin to have conversations around all schools rising, all students succeeding, as opposed to this difference-based conversation that once again is trying to find solutions in spite of as opposed to options in addition to.

So as we hear about Betsy DeVos or the President, I just think back to who are they listening to and where are parents at in this conversation? And how can we really begin to empower and inform parents so that they can have a seat at that table? So that our leadership and our politicians are listening to them in the same way, so that the entire system is benefiting

students and that there's accountability across the system and not just negative attention focused on one side.

MS. BUGG: Can I just say one thing? You're absolutely right, it's who is being listened to. In Tennessee, we're a bit different than D.C., so almost all of our charter schools are authorized or approved by the actual local district. And so technically our charter schools are also district schools, and so they've got the community governing board, but they also are beholden to the elected board. And unfortunately, we've had some struggles, particularly in Nashville, where we've had elected officials who won't step foot in a charter school.

You say who are we listening? You may have seen, there was an article, this was a bit ago, hundreds and hundreds of parents signed a letter to say please respect us. We are your constituents. We don't want this back and forth. We want good schools.

One of the board members put up a resolution to say, this seems like it should be just a given, but the resolution basically said we will respect our parents regardless of what their school choice, their public school choice. And you know they did not pass that resolution.

MR. MORTON: Who's funding who?

MS. BUGG: They didn't vote it down. They said, wow, we'll come back around. And so, you know, there's this tension of who is important, whose voices. You've got the parents of the kids who are in your district. They have chosen to go to a school that you approved, so this rhetoric is tough in some cities and it's confusing to families because it's like a district within -- a war within itself.

MS. LAKE: And the parents don't care what the school is called.

MS. BUGG: Parents have no -- they are not going around the neighborhoods and saying, oh, this says charter, no thank you. All right. They are saying is it a safe school? Can I get to the school? Are my cousins there so they can watch over my little one? You know, these are the kinds of questions. Do they have good academics? These are the questions

they're asking. So it's not a debate necessarily for most of the parents who are choosing this school to go to. They're not having an internal struggle typically about should I really put my kid in a charter school?

MR. VALANT: That's interesting. Okay, so we'll turn it over to audience Q&A. I think we have a couple of microphones going around.

I do have a couple of requests. One is before you ask a question, please identify yourself. And the second is that there are strong opinions about school choice and strong opinions tend to make questions turn into statements, and if we can keep the questions as questions that would be great.

MS. GREENE: Hi. My name is Ashira Greene. I'm a Ph.D. candidate from University College London.

You spoke earlier in this discussion about failing schools and I was wondering if you could talk a little bit more about whether failing schools are an epidemic. If it a school fails and is closed, does the next school next door then fail? Is it a domino effect? Or when a school fails and is closed, are those problems somehow magically solved by the next school that the families go to? Thank you.

MR. MORTON: I think Robin made an excellent point earlier or it might have been Maya about are we actually developing schools that have the academic supports and capacities in place or are we just punishing one school and sending kids to another school? So it's about having the conversation up front. Otherwise, you will see an epidemic occurring.

We've been fortunate in the city of Camden that as we began to open schools, we have sort of looked at what the issues are, underlying factors attributing or contributing to the failure of one school, and sort of try to problem-solve for that in other places. So developing common practices for both charter, renaissance, and public schools, or all three, around providing robust opportunities for ESL and ESL learners, ensuring that each school type has to

serve its fair share of special needs students so that we don't see, as the superintendent said, this sort of congregation or bottlenecking of the most neediest within the traditional system; ensuring that there's outreach and wraparound services for those students that are most neediest or coming from the poorest family having the most difficult time of getting to schools or having parent support.

So I think that's where the system has to develop sort of the supports to ensure that the schools are opening and operating in a way that benefits the entire community and not just a subset of the population that they're serving.

MR. WILSON: And I would just add as an LEA in a larger system, for us, we have 115 schools. I look at it as we have a school that's struggling, it's the LEA's issue, meaning we need to think about that less as, you know, we have this bad school over here and more in terms of what's going on in the larger ecosystem of the neighborhood and how we support the school in the context that they're in, and then thinking about solutions there.

And for us I think that's a big part of our work is making sure that we are not positioning the conversation to be the failure of an individual school. Who chose the leader? Who's making decisions around the policies? Who's picking the curriculum? I mean, it's us. So we have to recognize that when the schools are struggling, it's less something that's bad about them and more something that we need to -- it's a problem of practice that we have as a larger LEA in this community we want to figure out.

And oftentimes, it has implications for us to think about several schools and the supports that we provide, the resources, how we're structured, maybe governance, all of those types of things. It doesn't make it any easier in terms of the conversations early around involving families and all of that. But I do think of the mistakes we have made traditionally in just terms of public school districts is we're a district when it's all good and then when something's bad, it's the individual school.

MS. LAKE: That's a great point. I would just add, too, that I think one thing the superintendent in Camden has done exceptionally well is really listen to the community about what kinds of schools they wanted to see as a forward-looking vision. And one of the things that was important to the community was really nice buildings that announced to the world that the district cared about that community and in the midst of the crumbling infrastructure of Camden that was very important. And so I think sending a message to the community around respect and value in this process, this isn't about closing schools, it's providing new opportunities and how do you do that well.

MR. VALANT: All right, go ahead in the very back.

MS. LEITH: Hi, good morning. My name is Ann Trina Leith. I'm outreach and development manager for the International Baccalaureate Organization.

My question is about school choice. Do you feel like it's important to parents that the schools that they're choosing offer some type of program or has some type of identity? My child goes to school in the District of Columbia, as well, and I have three children. But looking at the wait list for like certain schools, like Yu Ying or even Deal, these seem to be schools, when I've tried to master the application process myself, that offered something. Is that something you feel like families are looking for, schools with like STEM identity, Montessori immersion, or is that D.C.-specific?

MR. WILSON: Well, I'll just jump in really quickly. I think that there are some families that actually are attracted to certain types of schools, you know, whether it be STEM, STEAM, dual language, multilingual, international baccalaureate, if you will. I think that there are definitely families that have that attraction.

I think more so the attraction is excellence. And whether it's dual language or one of those other models, I think that it goes back to schools that really seem to purposeful around what they're trying to get done, intentional in terms of how they work with young people,

and then have a real identity as a school in terms of what they do and don't do. So, for instance, you mentioned Deal Middle School. I mean, Deal's just a middle school. It has a lot of really great programs in the school and really has had really great leadership, tries to build really great relationships with families and great interactions with schools. It's a larger school that works real hard to make the student experience feel small and personal. So students feel like when you're in there -- I know I've had an opportunity to speak with students about this large, just about what they like about their school, what could be better, and that's what they highlight.

I think parents, again, they feel, and I've heard this from Deal parents, as well, they feel a connection with the school and the school is personalizing the experience. And then you have some parents that absolutely know they want a dual language opportunity for their children. And so I think for us as a district we have to recognize both.

And one of the things D.C. has done and we will continue to do is try to make sure that some of the opportunities that are available at a school like Deal are also available across town at Brookland Middle School, if you will. So making sure we have multiple language programs there, making sure we have visual and performing arts there, and making sure that those opportunities aren't a product of school size, which oftentimes can become the case. And then also making sure we have schools like McFarland Middle School, which is a dual language path middle school, so it definitely has a program that it is offering. It offers some of the other things, but it's very much dual language.

MS. LAKE: Seeing our research, it's absolutely true that families want a diverse array of programs and they want schools to have character and they want to be able to choose to match their child's needs with the school and have information systems that tell them that stuff about the school culture and things like that. But a lot of times cities will make the mistake of going there first, so, you know, we're going to create a portfolio of school options. We're

going to have STEM programs and math and science and arts programs, et cetera, without attending to the first order of priorities, a parent's -- quality absolutely, safety always ranks number one.

So I just encourage folks to keep in mind that there are lots of goals to be accomplished when you're kind of trying to figure it out. And the best thing to do is keep listening to parents, keep asking them, keep surveying them, having conversations with them about whether the current options are meeting their needs. And if not, how do we change that?

MS. BUGG: And Tennessee has been more -- it's almost like a bonus. Oh, and this is a STEM school. The parents were looking for what can you do to support my particular child? He or she struggled in this other charter school or in this traditional school. What is this particular school able to do to support my kid or kids? And then it's, and this is very exciting that you also are programming drones and building robots, but it wasn't necessarily the driving force. Some of the families, yes, it was a kid who's always tinkering and they thought this could be an interesting place for them, but most of the parents that we have seen, they're all what we've already said, they're looking for the school that is safe, better.

MR. MORTON: And I would just add that there's a high probability that those schools that you named are really good at attaching how this type of program is contributing to the bottom line for the families, like the success of their students. And so while some families may be attracted to the shiny object, in the end those schools that are going to sustain and develop a great reputation and a long waiting list are going to be those ones that are actually able to say this STEM program, this robotic program, this dual language program has this success rate and these are how many students are graduating high school and going on to success in college.

So it may be shiny and new in the beginning, but over the long term, as the information begins to trickle out, families will begin to flock to those schools based upon the

outcomes for students. So it's a combination of both, you know, oh, you have this program, but how is it actually benefiting students and their learning?

MR. VALANT: The gentleman in front here.

SPEAKER: Hi. So I have a couple quick questions. One, the Times did some reporting earlier this year that large voucher programs in Indiana, Louisiana, and Ohio were not found to work or faired the worse academically in charter schools and public schools compared to students that didn't use the voucher program. Robin, do you differentiate between vouchers and public school choice? Basically I'm asking does your study contradict what the Times has reported earlier this year?

MS. LAKE: Apples to oranges. So we're just looking at public school choice, so schools that receive public dollars and are held publicly accountable for results, that are open free of tuition. Absolutely, voucher results are a different program.

SPEAKER: And second, for the entire panel, whether this kind of capitalistic model of vouchers and school choice, even though they're different, is that something that parents want, that maybe some schools will be closed down and won't exist so that they can have a choice to send their children maybe somewhere else further right, even though in the long run schools may not get improved, bad schools may not get improved, but schools that are already performing well will get expanded? Does that work and how are parents responding to that?

MS. BUGG: I would just say most parents don't want to have to travel across town for a good school. The goal is to be, and the chancellor mentioned it as well, the goal is supposed to be that every neighborhood has a good school, not only a good school, a good feeder pattern towards that school. You know, there are neighborhoods in Memphis where some of the schools are doing well, some of the schools are not; other neighborhoods where you can wake up every day and take your kid to school on time from pre-K through 12th grade

and still be guaranteed to be in some of the worst performing schools in the whole state. And so the goal is always to have a school nearby and that's what I was just mentioning earlier. You know, there has to be more intentionality around school closure, a plan behind it. If I close this school what happens to the families and have I thought about an option that's going to be better for them that is nearby and accessible? And I don't know that we're necessarily there yet.

MR. MORTON: And for me when thinking about voucher programs that may take a student from an underperforming school and give them the opportunity to go to a great school somewhere in the suburbs. There's no guarantee for that child's success or those students' success if those schools have not built in the safeguards to sort of triage and ensure the success of that student. So there could be the huge potential for this sort of exodus, you know, similar to what we may have seen early in the charter movement, but only to see a return of the most neediest students that are underperforming in those schools as sort of the testing or mechanisms internal figure out a way to sort of begin to exclude or cut out. So it's a real double-edged sword, you know. How well are those schools prepared for the incoming students?

And then the second part for me is why does it have to be, to the superintendent's point, necessarily a punishment in one area? Like we're going to close your school so that we can offer this type of resource to you. Why can't the conversation be sort of dualistic in that this is the plan for developing or reestablishing this school, but, in the meantime, this is an opportunity option for families that are seeking another choice.

MR. VALANT: I think we have time for one more question. Yes, ma'am.

MS. LEE: Hi, my name's Erica Lee. I'm currently at the Office of Management and Budget.

My question is around data and we're just going to be getting more and more data soon. So in about a year from now states will be coming out with their new report cards

and there's a lot of additional data which ESSA mandates be in those report cards. GreatSchools recently revamped their individual school ratings. There's a lot more data, there's more numbers, more colors.

I'm just kind of curious to hear how you guys are kind of planning to -- you know, so we already know right now parents need more help and there's going to be a whole rush of even more data coming now and in the next year. So thank you.

MR. WILSON: Yeah, I'll just start with in our strategic plan we have five priorities. One is to engage families and part of that priority is around effective communication with families. And so really making sure that we have a real strong strategy, both at the macro level across the District, but also within schools to help families navigate the information that they have. I think it's extremely important.

In the District of Columbia there will be a common data set that is released by our Office of the State Superintendent of Education that assigns schools a rating. We want to make sure parents understand what that looks like and what that means. At the same time, what's in the District, we have some additional things that we think matter. And so we want to make sure that all our families are connected to the school and receiving information, choosing as many different mediums as possible. So I was just in a meeting yesterday as to how do we better leverage the use of the cell phone. But, at the same time, I think most information is best shared in person.

So we continue to uplift strategies such as home visits. I mean, D.C. does -- you know, our teachers do the most home visits of any district in the country and we have schools where 100 percent of our parents are visited. And so we want to continue to leverage those strategies. We intend to grow those types of strategies because we believe that parents are going to be best receive and be able to navigate that information if they're able to receive it in a way that creates the most meaning for them.

I do think consistency and having a common source of being able to get certain types of answers are important, so it relates to accountability. I think having the state say, okay, this is the way we see it, I think that does provide them an opportunity to reference information across the city and create some way of making decisions that way.

MS. LAKE: I'm excited about more data. As a researcher, I love it. Both on performance, also financial transparency, we're going to have a lot more information about where the money is going in school systems, so that we can help folks understand if it's working equitably.

I think there's a fine line between more information, more nuanced information, and kind of a baffling array of information for parents to sift through and even for district officials and school leaders to sift through. So, you know, incumbent upon anybody who is working with the data to figure out how to communicate it in really meaningful ways that can be actionable for families.

MR. VALANT: So before we wrap up, I would love to hear from each of you very quickly on what is the one thing you want us thinking about our worrying about when it comes to public school choice in urban areas as we walk out.

MS. LAKE: Well, I think I'll start. I think it's clear from our look across the 18 cities that choice is not magic. Anybody who says that it is, is kidding themselves. It requires real commitment and investment. And that it's not going away; that the demand is there, it's real. There's real momentum among superintendents, among state chiefs who are trying to figure out how to free up districts to work differently. And there's real demand for personalization.

So I'm just real pragmatic about this. I think we get to work.

MS. BUGG: I would say I just want to remind us all that these conversations we're having about school choice are very privileged. These are very privileged conversations

for us to sit and go back and forth about the philosophy of school governance models. Most of the children, at least for us, in the majority of charter schools that are being educated are low-income and are students of color, and this is not a conversation that they can wait for us to figure out the politics and the egos.

And the reason I get most frustrated about it is because most of us who are having the conversation, we already have school choice. You're going to move to a certain neighborhood, you're going to make a phone call to the chancellor, hey, Antwan, you know, get my kid in. (Laughter)

MR. WILSON: You'll get in trouble doing that.

MS. BUGG: That's just for example. He wouldn't do that, but my point is that, you know, for us to block access and choice for some of our most underprivileged families is obscene to me. It's -- I don't know what else to call it.

MR. WILSON: Criminal.

MS. BUGG: Criminal. And so for us, these conversations are important, but it's super important that we are again connecting with communities and families. I am hopeful about where conversations are going to go around school choice. In Memphis, they've just moved forward the Charter Compact to really start to talk about how can we better collaborate? What is our ideal situation and engagement together? So that is super promising. In Nashville, you've got some of the charter schools that are actually training and coaching the traditional school teachers on their STEM curriculum.

So, again, I am hopeful on where this conversation can go, but I just want to remind us that it's privileged and it's very urgent that we kind of remember we can't continue to kick the ball down the road or, what do they call it, kick the can down the road. Should we have charter? Should we not? Do you want it? We have to keep moving.

MR. MORTON: And to follow up on that, you know, for me it's really important

that as you leave that you maybe have a conversation with yourself or even within your organization as to what your lasting role is in the community or amongst the populations that you serve.

One thing in the reform movement that I've seen in the short time that I've been doing this work is that many of us like to picture ourselves and our organizations as saviors. And Parents for Great Camden Schools challenges that, that we stop thinking that we have all the answers and we really begin to flip that and trust the communities that we serve to become equal partners. So a part of our philosophy should become or part of the philosophy as we're engaging in choice or reform or transformation is how do we take the capacities and skills that we take for granted within our organizations and leave them behind in the communities that we serve?

So that we're actually building up or contributing to the reestablishment of the capacities and competencies of those communities that have been so stressed by urban flight and the disinvestment, so that parents can become equal partners in the conversation. Because it's only through understanding and information and encouragement and empowerment that they can develop an independent autonomous voice to continue to reach out and speak out on behalf of what's best for their communities. And we'll see sort of a dissipation of these top-down approaches and strategies that may work or may not work, that may develop pools of opportunity for some children or families that are best positioned to take advantage, while leaving the most vulnerable at risk.

So it really is a challenge that I put forth to all of us in here to really think about how we can leave behind what we know in the communities that we serve so that they can begin to take up leadership positions and an equal place at the table.

MR. WILSON: Jon, I just have two thoughts. One is I'll just leave people with choice isn't new. It's always existed. What we're talking about is how do we give it to those

folks who have been least privileged in our country over the years, but the most privileged people have always made choices about where they want to send their children. And a little bit what Maya was sharing, the idea of it being available to everyone shouldn't freak people out.

I think we shouldn't be talking about choice in a vacuum. It is one of the means, it is not the means or the end. It is a part of a much larger, broader conversation and a menu of options. I think anytime we start talking about one thing as the thing to make a difference or drive change, I get a little nervous around that.

And then, three, I think it's important to keep the main thing, the main thing. Students need to get a great education. In order for this country to work, in order for democracy to thrive, in order for our public to work, you've got to have a great education system. It needs to be available. One of the advantages of our country is we take the best of what every other country has had to offer, and we grow them here, nurture them here, and allow them to have great opportunity here.

The education system needs to work in order for that to happen, and so choice isn't the thing that we're trying to protect. It's student learning, access to great educations that we're trying to protect. Choice becomes one of the tools in which we can help make that happen. It needs to work in concert with a lot of other things and that's why we talk about excellence, equity, and love in DCPS because we think that all of those things working together can lead to the outcomes we want to see for our children.

MR. VALANT: Great. Thank you all for coming. Thanks to the Center for Reinventing Public Education for helping support the event and please join me in thanking the panelists. (Applause)

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