Today's Choices for Selecting a School:
Public, Private, Charter Public, Charter Private, or Homeschools

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Abstract

Today, "equity" and "a quality education" are at the forefront of education conversations at the family dinner table, the local diner, and the editorial page of the newspaper. Why? Local and national efforts are increasing to meet students' needs academically and developmentally. Families strive to address their children's needs educationally through a relevant support system couched in a well-matched learning environment. With more choice in how schools are structured and how there is availability to consider different types of schools (e.g., charter, public, private), families and the general too have found voice through surveys and questionnaires about the choice of different school structures. This paper provides an overview of choice of schools available to families in the United States - public, private, charter public, charter private, or homeschools. This paper summarizes fundamental differences among various learning environments within these schools and learning settings to help families analyze what indeed is the best environmental match for each of their child's or children's learning needs.

Keywords: school choice, public schools, private and public charter schools, and homeschools

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Overview and Purpose of Paper

"Equity" and a "quality education" are at the forefront of conversations about school choice. Local and national efforts are increasing to meet the needs of individual students wherever they are and provide relevant support to overcome obstacles that may be preventing them from a fair chance at an education in a public school. Twenty-five percent of families are considering moving their children to another school based on better opportunities to hone strong skills for future employment (Great Schools, 2017; Harris Interactive Poll, 2009). Some critics of private schools believe that a private school experience removes the child from authentic real-life experiences. Some proponents of private schools believe that these schools provide more of a focused opportunity to learn a specific set of skills (e.g., Career and Technical Education) or talents (e.g., theatre). This paper is built on findings from multiple data sources to provide insights to help discern distinct characteristics about schools in the United States: public schools, private schools, charter public charter private, and homeschools. As part of the discussion two additional features of schools are addressed: single gender schools and religious-centered schools. This paper also presents an overview of the multiple variables that come into play when parents are deciding the school that is the best fit for each of their children.

Methodology

This paper is a research synthesis that provides a framework for analyzing and interpreting sources that capture a comprehensive analysis of a current topic (Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2008). Data have also been gathered from informal interviews of families and administrators at various sites, observations at sites across the United States, and documents and publications from respective sites. Data were analyzed using content analysis and theme analysis to capture a broad understanding of school choices today. As part of the study, data that were also collected and included in the paper provide current findings from research articles, national and local data, and individuals involved in various learning choice settings. This multiple data approach helps provide more dimensions to capture the "roundedness" of each setting's characteristics, namely, education environments and curricula, that may assist local school districts in closing the achievement gap. In addition, subtle issues that families also explore such as equity, gender, socioeconomic level, and gender are explored through statistics data such as IES NCES, 2017; Niche, 2017, or Public School Review, 2018. In addition to star ratings that are now available as part of each school's rankings in terms of scoring on national exams, families are also finding first-person accounts from families in the area and local press on coverage of school events – both positive and negative. These data sources change yearly and this paper provides a brief overview on a complex issues that is constantly in flux.

Some Overall Distinctions Between Public Schools Vs. Private Schools

As a baseline, it is important to address the distinctions between public and private schools. Public schools do not charge tuition. Education ratings help create a rationale for purchasing a home in a high-star rated school as compared to a low-star rated school. Some families also use a rationale that splits the difference - electing to purchase a less expensive home to afford the tuition for a private school.

A second distinction is that public schools are funded by taxes – federal, state, and local - and are accountable for rules and regulations locally, state, and nationally. Private schools, on the other hand, generate their funding sources and many times, this funding is provided by tuition that ranges in cost from $10,841 at a minimum to $25,000 in exclusive private schools (Clearinghouse, 2015). Public schools accept all students and provide accommodations for special needs and gifted students. Private schools can add a clause in their admission standards that they do not provide services for students with special needs or those who need accommodations. There are ranges of other differences – class size, teacher preparation, and curriculum selection. Private schools have more choice in how they organize their classrooms and daily schedule, select their teaching staff and evaluate their curriculum outcome scores (IES NCES, 2017, Niche, 2017; Public School Review, 2016). Private schools, both elementary and secondary, are educational institutions that are not primarily supported by public funds (Digest of Educational Statistics, 2017). Typically, these schools are grouped by categories that are principally religious: Catholic, other religions, and nonsectarian (Digest of Education Statistics, 2017). Since 2015, where there were 5.8 million students in private schools, the population has been in flux (4.1 million in fall 2013 to 4.3 million students in fall 2015). (NCES.ed.gov, 2015). In a closer look at private schools, namely Catholic schools, there is a distinction in racial enrollment: White students constituted the largest share of enrollment in Catholic schools (66 percent), other religious (73 percent) and nonsectarian schools (6 percent) based on statistics in 2015. Black students made up the second-largest share of enrollment in other religious schools (11 percent), and Hispanic second-largest share of enrollment at Catholic schools (16 percent). A larger percental of students were Asian at nonsectarian schools (9 percent) than at Catholic and other religious schools (5 percent). Likewise, the percentage of students who were two or more races was larger at nonsectarian schools (6 percent) than at Catholic schools (4 percent). Pacific Islander and American Indian/Alaska Nation students constituted 1 percent or less of enrollment at Catholic, other religious and nonsectarian schools (nces.ed.gov/programs, 2019).

The Difference between Public Charter Schools vs. Charter Schools

In a more specific comparison – that is looking at public charter schools, as compared to charter schools - there are many similarities. Public charter schools are open to all children, do not charge tuition, and do not have a special entrance requirement (National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, 2017; Social Solutions, 2017). The first charter schools were started in 1992 in Minneapolis. In 2008, there were 1.29 million students enrolled in charter schools; by 2014, there were 2.57 illion students enrolled in public chater schools. Over 39 states have regulations for charter schools. Charter schools need to participate in testing and federal accountability programs, but tend to have more regulatory freedom and authnomy from state and local rules in terms of staffing curriculum choices and budget management (EPE, 2017). These schools are funded publically and typically follow governance by a group or organization under a legislation contact namely a charter with the state, school district, or other entity. The difference is that a public charter school has fewer state regulations and more potential for flexibility. It is important that the public charter school still needs to meet the accountability standards outlined in its charter and these are reviewed periodically to ensure that the charter is aligned with the practices at the public charter

school. If the guidelines are not followed or the standards are not met, the charter can be revoked (Abdul-Alim, 2016).

Another distinction is that charter schools have a charter approved typically by the state. Unlike a private school, a charter school depends upon money from the government to operate. In contrast to a private school, a charter school has less freedom to operate and make decisions. Both private and charter schools can receive accreditation and typically charter schools are more likely accredited than private schools (Social Solutions, 2017).

A Focus Look at Single-Gender Public Charter Schools

There are many examples of public charter schools which operate only boys' schools – such as the Urban Prep Academies in Chicago, or the Eagle Schools in New York – or only girls' schools, such as the Young Women's Leadership Network of schools in New York. Presently, middle school public charters make up the majority (47%) of schools in the United States followed by high school (34%) and lastly K-6 (28%). The single gender public schools that were open in 2003 have decreased. Most of the single gender charter public schools are located in large urban settings, for example, Capital Prep in the Bronx supported by rapper Puff Daddy, Eagle Academy Staten Island and Urban Prep D.C. The principal locations of single gender public schools are within the eastern United States, while the rest of single-gender public charter schools reside mostly in large urban areas surrounding Chicago, Cleveland, Miami, Dallas, and Houston. There "appear to be" zero all boys' public schools west of Texas. All but two schools (located in the southern states) serve a student population with more than 84 percent African American and Hispanic; sixteen schools are 98 percent diverse. Many students in these schools are on 100 percent free/reduced lunch (Authors, 2015).

Studies based on boys' and girls' performance in single-gender schools as compared to mixed gender schools shows that both groups showed modest advantages in their performance in mathematics but not for science (Pahlke, Hyde, Allison, 2014). In a more recent study, Megan Murphy, executive director of the National Coalition of Girls' Schools (NCGS) has reported that single gender education has been shown to do wonders for many underserved girls. She adds that approximately 80 percent of graduating seniors from the Young Women's Leadership Schools are the first in their family to attend college (Murphy, 2017).

Homeschooling

Homeschools students are school-age children (ages 5-17) in a grade equivalent to at least kindergarten and not higher than 12th grade who receive instruction at home instead of a public or private school either all or most of the time. NCES (2019) reports that approximately 3 percent of the school-age population was homeschooled in the 2011-2012 school year. Interesting enough, a higher percentage of those homeschools were White (83 percent) as compared to Black (5 percent), Hispanic (7 percent), and Asian or Pacific Islander (2 percent). A commonly held belief is that homeschooling means that the parent (or a designee) teaches the child in the home, providing whatever instruction is needed to educate the child. A clarification is that there are many alternatives including co-ops, enrichment classes, drop-off classes,

tutoring programs, dual enrollment, charter schools, satellite schools, courses offered by the public-school system in the home, on-line courses, homeschool umbrella organizations, homeschool programs connected to private academies, and correspondence courses. Many of these options take place elsewhere, with the teaching done by someone other than the parents. The parents still make the decisions and direct the instruction, but they do not necessarily do the teaching. The bulk of a student's learning may happen outside the home or at home in an atmosphere where learning can take place. Those who have embraced homeschooling report many benefits which include the ability to adjust each child's learning needs and the flexibility in setting up a learning schedule (Redford, Battle, & Bielick, 2017). Homeschooling allows the teacher to bring in the child's interest and talents and support learning needs. There is no set time limit in learning to master a concept or skill; a child can explore a topic more in-depth or take more time to learn about a concept that is difficult. A comprehensive study from 1998 through 2008 of 250 homeschool families in Pennsylvania noted that there were significant changes in homeschool programs. By the end of the study, programs were using a religious and non-religious curricula as well as school district textbooks and technology applications. Also, there were more collaborative sharing of resources and levels of expertise with school consultants and a more organized network of other homeschooling families (Hanna, 2012). Research on investigating issues related to equity and diversity related to homeschooling have brought in evidence that African American homeschoolers were able to gain a more comprehensive understanding of American History beyond the typical ethnocentric curriculum found in many public schools (Mazama & Lundy, 2013). There has also been a positive shift in the attitude that admission officers' attitudes toward and perceptions of the homeschooled graduates. More than 78% of surveyed admission officers indicated that they expect homeschool graduates to perform as well or to bet their first year of college as compared to traditional high school graduates (Lechner & Jones, 2013). Perhaps, the most consistent negative press for homeschooling is that studies on homeschool outcomes – job preparation skills, civic engagement, or academic success – are not substantiated with research studies that have high response rates (Lubienski, Puckett, Brewer, & Jameson, 2013).

Shifts in Population Among Public Schools, Public Charter Schools, Charter Schools, Private Schools, and Homeschooling

Over the past two decades, the range of options that parents have for the education of their children has expanded. Private schools have been a traditional alternative to public school education, but there are now more options for parents to choose public charter schools or charter schools, and more parents are also homeschooling their children. Between fall 1999 and fall 2013, enrollment in private schools decreased from 6.0 million to 5.4 million, a decline of 0.6 million or 10 percent. During the same period, the percentage of elementary and secondary students enrolled in private schools declined from 11.4 percent to 9.7 percent (IES National Center for Educational Statistics, 2016). The percentage of all public-school students who attended public charter schools increased from 1 to 6 percent between fall 2000 and fall 2016. During this period, public charter school enrollment increased steadily from 0.4 million students in fall 2000 to 3 milion students in fall 2016- an overall increase of 2.6 million students. In contrast, the number of students attending traditional public schools increased by 1.3 million between fall 2000 and fall 2005

and then decreased by 0.6 million between fall 2005 and fall 2016, an increase of 0.7 million students. (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2019).

Also, there has been an increase in the percentage of 5- to 17-year-olds who are homeschooled. About 1.8 million children were homeschooled in 2012, compared to 0.9 million in 1999. The increase is also mirrored in the number of students who are in school, especially schools with a population larger than 300 students. Charter public schools increased by 1.8 million students, another statistic that helps showcase diverse school settings that have changed since 2004 (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2019).

Who Is Attending Schools – Ethnic and Socioeconomic Levels?

An interesting change in public charter schools that have emerged from 2004 to 2014 is that public charter schools are the response to the question, "Who is attending a public charter school?" (IES NCES, 2017) The population of students in public charter schools who are Hispanic increased from 22 percent to 31 percent, as did the percentage of students who were Asian/Pacific islander - from three to 4 percent. White students who attended public charter schools decreased from 42 to 34 percent. There was also a reduction for African-American students (from 31 to 27 percent) and American Indian/Alaska Native (from 2 to 1 percent). The percentage of students attending high-poverty schools (students who qualify for free or reduced lunch) was higher for public charter schools (35 percent) as contrasted with traditional public-school students (24 percent).

Family Choice in Selecting a School

Charter schools are the typical form of choice available to parents within the public education sector; however, some opportunity for parental choice also can be found in traditional public schools. In 2012, the parents of 37 percent of all 1st- through 12th-grade students indicated that public school choice was available to them. Also, in 2012, 13 per cent of students in traditional public schools were in a school chosen by their parents rather than an assigned school. There were differences in the characteristics of students attending their local assigned public schools in 2012 compared to those in public schools chosen by their parents. For example, White students made up a higher percentage of those in assigned schools (53 percent) than of those in chosen schools (40 percent). In contrast, African-American students made up a higher percentage of those in chosen schools (22 percent) than of those in assigned schools (14 percent). Hispanic students also made up a higher proportion of those in chosen schools (27 percent) than of those in assigned schools (23 percent). Students in cities made up a higher percentage of those in chosen schools (46 percent) than of those in assigned schools (25 percent). In contrast, students in rural areas made up a higher percentage of those in assigned schools (26 percent) than of those in chosen schools (14 percent) (IES NCES 2017). Compared with students in assigned public schools, a higher percentage of students in chosen public schools had parents who were very satisfied with some elements of their children's education in 2012. Among students in grades 3 through 12, the percentage of students whose parents were very happy with their school was higher for students in schools of choice (56 percent) than for students in assigned (public) schools (52 percent). Similarly, the percentage of students whose parents were very satisfied with their school's academic standards was

higher for students in chosen schools (59 percent) than for students in assigned schools (53 percent). Also, higher percentages of students in choice schools had parents who were very satisfied with school order and discipline (58 vs. 52 percent) as well as with staff interaction with parents (49 vs. 45 percent). However, there was no measurable difference between the percentages of students in choice and assigned public schools whose parents were highly satisfied with the teachers in their school (52 percent each) (IES NCES 2017).

Males and Females in Today's Schools

There continues to be a difference in the graduate rate of males in K-12 schools as compared to females. Although the national high school dropout rate for boys is half of what it was in 1985, it continues to trend downward; boys still have a higher high school dropout rate (7.2% in 2013) than females (6.3% in 2013) (IES NCES, 2017). One of the reasons is the lower level of aspiration for males to continue an education beyond high school. In the 1980s, although seniors of both genders had similar expectations about graduating from college and attending graduate school, girls already had higher aspirations (close to two percentage points) than boys. By the 2000s, the expectations index for both college and graduate school was eight percentage points higher for girls than boys. Gender differences in aspirations for college and graduate school are respectively eight percentage points and eleven percentage points greater in favor of girls. Six percent of boys versus 3 percent of girls have declared no postsecondary aspirations. This trend begins in among eighth graders, already 4 percent more girls than boys report being enrolled in a college preparatory program although a significant proportion of students (43 percent of both boys and girls) have not made clear choices yet.

The number of males graduating from college is roughly 10% less than females (NCES, 2017). This trend is even more evident when variables such as race and socioeconomic level are brought into the discussion. Males of African American and Hispanic backgrounds have a combined dropout rate of 20.8 percent, which has decreased by roughly 53 percent since 1985 due to national attention on racial inequity (Nelson, Stahl, & Wallace, 2015). Students from the lowest quartile family income have a dropout rate of 10 percent compared to 3.2 percent highest quartile (Center for Research on Education Outcomes, 2015; Dwyer, Hodson, & McCloud, 2013).

Data from "Monitoring the Future" surveys provide strong evidence that women now far outnumber men among recent college graduates in most industrialized countries (Vincent-Lancrin, 2008). Interestingly, women have not only overtaken men regarding college completion but also have overtaken them in educational attainment. Girls have shown these gender disparities in academic performance in secondary schools (twelfth and eighth grade over the last three decades (Fortin, Oreopoulos, & Phipps, 2015). The Fortin et al. study also explored issues related to gender over time that could account for the growing gender disparity in academic achievement. These include plans for the future, the family environment and working while in school. Among seniors, boys' expectations about attending higher education were lower as compared to expectations of females (Fortin, Orel Poulos, & Phipps, 2015).

Public vs. Private Schools. The percentage of public-school students who reported being victims of any offence (4.1 percent) was higher than that of private school students (1.8 percent) in the academic year 2008–09.

Race/Ethnicity. No measurable differences were found among the percentages of White, African-American, Hispanic students, and students of all other races who reported being the victims of any crime, theft, or violent crime at school in the academic year 2008–09. Among both White and Hispanic students, a higher percentage of students were victims of theft than of violent crime (2.9 percent vs. 1.2 percent for White students; and 3.0 percent vs. 1.3 percent for Hispanic students).

Grade Level. In the school year 2008–09, a higher percentage of students in grade 9 reported theft victimization (4.9 percent) than did students in grades 7 or 8 (2.1 % and 2.0 %, respectively). Also, higher percentages of students in grades 9, 10, and 11 reported theft victimization (4.9 percent, 3.5 percent, and 3.3 percent, respectively) than did students in grades 6 or 12 (1.3 % and 1.5 %, respectively). No measurable differences were found between the percentages of students in grades 6–11 who were victims of violent crime.

School size. Researchers at the National Center for Education Statistics (IES NCES, 2017) found that discipline problems are often related to school enrollment size. Large schools tend to yield more discipline problems than small schools. Thirty-four percent of schools with 1,000 or more students reported student disrespect for or assaults on teachers at least once per week, compared with 21 percent of those at schools with 500-999 students, 17 percent of those at schools with 300-499 students, and 14 percent of those at schools with less than 300 students.

Household Income. No measurable differences were found among family income levels and the percentages of students who reported being victims of any crime, theft, or violent crime at school in the academic year 2008–09.

Public vs. Private Schools and Grade Level. The percentage of public-school students who reported being victims of any crime (4.1 percent) was higher than that of private school students (1.8 percent) in the academic year 2008–09. Middle school students are more than twice as likely as high school students to be affected by school violence. Seven percent of eighth graders stay home at least once a month to avoid a bully. Twenty-two percent of urban 11- and 12-year-olds know at least one person their age in a gang. The typical victim of an attack or robbery at school is a male in the seventh grade who is assaulted by a boy his age. Studies suggest two reasons for the higher rates of middle school violence. First, early adolescence is a difficult age. Young teenagers are often physically hyperactive and have not learned acceptable social behavior. Second, many middle school students have come into contact for the first time with young people from different backgrounds and outlying neighborhoods.

Focus on Research Question for the Future

As the attention to supporting charter schools in the United States is now on the forefront of the new administration's agenda, it is important that researchers craft a design to look at this phenomenon. The following suggestions provided by the Center for Public Education (2017) help to set the compass. It is anticipated that others who

are considering the issue of school choice will add to this set of opened-ended questions. These are also guides for meaningful discussions that need to be explored in public and social setting – issues that help uncover bias, help to gather relevant data and form meaningful consensus in an open forum. The bottom line is that the focus needs to be on two essential outcomes - student achievement and success.

What are the ingredients that contribute to charter school success, public school success? To private school success? To homeschool success?

Do smaller class sizes, longer days, parent involvement, or freedom from collective bargaining and other regulations play a part?

Is there a difference between public charter schools and private charter schools?

What about the local school district role? What variables count most?

What is not an essential part of school success?

What effects do different governance models have on positive charter school outcomes? How do these effects compare to governance models that are inherent in public school settings?

What interaction exists between traditional and charter public schools?

Is there any evidence of shared ideas and information? Innovation?

Does the charter's authorizer affect the results?

What are charter schools' effects on local school districts regarding funding, governance, logistics, and accountability, or performance?

Where are you getting your information? Is it well-founded?

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