



# School choice & social stratification: How intra-district transfers shift the racial/ethnic and economic composition of schools



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## ABSTRACT

The liberation model hypothesizes that school choice liberates students from underperforming schools by giving them the opportunity to seek academically superior schooling options outside of their neighborhoods. Subsequently, school choice is hypothesized to diminish stratification in schools. Data from one urban school district is analyzed to test these hypotheses. We specifically examine which factors influence the propensity for parents to participate in choice, and how school choice changes the racial/ethnic and economic composition of schools. We further examine how school choice influences similar changes within distinct sociogeographic areas within the district. We find that families who are zoned to more racially/ethnically and economically diverse schools in sociogeographically diverse areas are more likely to participate in school choice. We also find that intra-district choice is associated with a slight increase in social stratification throughout the district, with more substantial stratification occurring in the most demographically diverse areas and schools.

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## 1. Introduction

School choice has been identified as “easily the most controversial education policy issue of our time” (Fowler, 2002, p. 4). This controversy is fueled by the expansion of school choice policies such as voucher programs, magnet schools, charter schools, and intra- and inter-district transfer plans over the past few decades. Although charter schools and vouchers attract much of the academic, media, and political attention, many districts use intra-district transfer policies to incorporate school choice into their practices. As of June 2013, state-wide intra-district transfer legislation allowing students to transfer from their assigned schools to other schools within their designated school district had been enacted in twenty-eight states (Education Commission of the States, 2013a,b). While intra-district transfers have not received as much attention in the academic literature as other forms of school choice, they are becoming increasingly popular—to the extent that more students are currently served by this type of school choice than any other type (Reback, 2008).

As school choice programs have grown in popularity, they have also become a focus for research on issues related to educational equity and social stratification. The expansion of unrestricted school choice is hypothesized to liberate

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students—particularly disadvantaged students who live in low-income, urban neighborhoods—from low-performing neighborhood schools and give them access to better schools without moving to a different neighborhood. Hence, school choice is hypothesized to create educational equity because it offers a variety of educational options to all students, particularly students whose families lack the financial resources to attend private schools or to move to different neighborhoods with presumably better public schools (Betts, 2005; Friedman, 1955; Neal, 1997). Furthermore, school choice advocates suggest that it diminishes racial/ethnic- and income-based segregation in schools, as all students are able to compete for enrollment opportunities in academically superior schools (The Friedman Foundation for School Choice, 2012). To test hypotheses about school choice and social stratification, this study examines the relationship between intra-district transfers and subsequent racial/ethnic- and economic-based segregation in elementary schools within the context of one urban school district.

## 2. Review of literature

### 2.1. School choice theory & the liberation model

Regardless of policies that facilitate school choice, affluent parents have always been able to exercise school choice by choosing where they live. Furthermore, their residential choices are often based on the educational opportunities provided in their selected neighborhood (Johnson, 2006). Parents who face economic disadvantages do not have access to the same opportunities for housing and are therefore unable to choose from as many schools as can more advantaged parents. Therefore, school choice has the potential to extend the same educational opportunities to less advantaged students that more advantaged children already have: the opportunity to choose schools that parents believe would provide a good academic environment for their children, regardless of where they live (Coons and Sugarman, 1977; Hoxby, 1998; Schneider et al., 2000).

By decoupling educational markets from housing markets, school choice presents access to educational opportunities that may not otherwise be accessible to all students. However, the degree to which school choice can be effective in achieving hypothesized outcomes is contingent upon the degree to which school choice environments approximate the hypothetical conditions assumed by school choice theory. Broadly conceptualized, school choice theory is based largely on economic principles of markets and laissez faire competition. In this view, market-based mechanisms of supply and demand shape the educational market in such a way that perfect competition emerges and efficiency is achieved (Betts, 2005). Building on school choice theory, the liberation model hypothesizes that as students are able to participate in the choice process, school-based racial/ethnic and economic segregation will be reduced as all students compete for enrollment in high-quality schools (Archbald, 2004; Bifulco, Ladd, & Ross, 2009a).

These hypothesized outcomes associated with school choice, however, rest on several fundamental assumptions (Betts, 2005). First, the school choice environment must include numerous “buyers”, or school choice participants. A volume of participants is a necessary condition for competition to occur. Second, numerous “suppliers”, or participating schools, must be available. Without an abundance of participating choice schools, monopoly-like conditions can emerge and diminish the degree to which perfect competition can develop. Third, schools must be willing to accept all students. When schools discriminate in the selection process, the full benefits of competition do not emerge. Fourth, perfect information about schools and the choice process must be available to all parents. Lack of information leads to non-optimal choices and hinders the development of competition. Fifth, parents are motivated to maximize their children’s long-term educational interests. Simultaneously, schools are motivated to maximize their productivity.<sup>1</sup> And sixth, parents must have the flexibility to continue participating in the choice process until they effectively maximize their child’s educational wellbeing. Ultimately, school choice and competition must be perpetually available as parents’ and students’ needs and experiences change (Betts, 2005). In practice, it is unlikely that any school choice environment will perfectly satisfy these hypothetical conditions upon which school choice theories are generally based. However, such an idealized understanding of school choice mechanisms provides a useful heuristic for testing hypotheses about school choice in more realistic social settings.

Under ideal conditions, school choice offers the potential for more equitable and less racially/ethnically and economically stratified educational experiences, particularly for children who face disadvantages that often preclude them from fully engaging in the school selection process. With high levels of residential segregation in the U.S. which contribute to the subsequent segregation in schools, school choice has the potential to reduce school-based stratification by providing families with access to schools that are higher performing and more diverse than the neighborhoods and neighborhood schools available to them. This is particularly true for less advantaged students, who are more likely to live in segregated, lower-income neighborhoods and are therefore more likely to be zoned to attend lower-performing schools (see Orfield et al., 2014a,b). Against a social backdrop of continued, widespread segregation of low-income and racial/ethnic minority children within public school systems coupled with the persisting achievement gaps between these groups of children and their more

<sup>1</sup> Some scholars suggest that public school choice options such as intra-district transfers do not adequately motivate schools to maximize their productivity because they are not fiscally independent of each other. As such, they are not necessarily incentivized to maximize their profits (Hoxby, 2002). Nevertheless, others contest that the assumption that choice schools seek to maximize profits only fully applies to a small number of for-profit schools. Therefore, for most choice schools, maximizing productivity is not merely a function of maximizing profits. Rather, to be competitive, all choice schools must align their definitions of productivity with consumer expectations (Betts, 2005). Thus, schools that participate in intra-district transfers are incentivized to maximize their productivity by aligning themselves with parents’ educational expectations.

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