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with EC-6 Generalist Concentration

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Impact of School Choice on Standardized Test Scores and the Achievement Gap

Abstract

The purpose of the study was to assess the impacts of school choice on standardized test scores and the achievement gap in diverse student populations. The study used secondary resources and datasets published from 2010 to 2021 to identify qualitative and quantitative evidence that impacts school choices and their relationship with standardized test scores. The findings suggest that school choices had a positive impact on student achievement, thus, widening the achievement gap between diverse student populations. The study recommends equitable access to resources to minimize further development of the achievement gap between populations without access or means to attend school choice.

1. Introduction

It would be irresponsible for us to deny that far too many of our public schools are experiencing low student performance, due to a variety of issues; consequently, parents and guardians are encouraged to seek out alternative options, in hopes of fostering a better, more comprehensive education. Our goal, as a society, should be to provide and ensure equitable education- investing in staff and administrative development, incorporating social-emotional learning into classroom curricula, and guaranteeing access to high-quality learning environments. However, the funding necessary for these measures to be taken is, instead, being put into school choice programs that tend to amplify socioeconomic disparities.
School choice was an idea first introduced in modern America in the 1950s and 1960s as part of massive resistance to desegregation. Southern states introduced the idea to combat the ruling of Brown v. the Board of Education, attempting to recreate isolated, exclusive classrooms. However, the federal courts ruled this unconstitutional in the 1970s, and school choice programs shifted focus to how public funding could support religious schools. Resistance to desegregation is only a portion of the history regarding school choice vouchers; during the 1960s, various left-leaning figures supported the idea of school choice, citing the program’s potential to create more equitable educational opportunities. School choice programs saw a new wave of support in the 1990s, as many African American politicians grew frustrated with the shortcomings in urban education. Despite the bipartisan support school vouchers seem to have, the support is not unanimous.

A large part of the controversy surrounding school choice programs stems from a financial perspective. These programs utilize tax credits, which drain money from underserved public schools to provide for private schools and other school choice programs. While some private schools and other school choice programs claim that they will “improve education opportunities for Black and Brown students and students from low-income families,” the reality is that they do not (Pierce, 2021). Rather, enrollment trends in private schools highlight a majority white student body, free from any economic disadvantages.

School choice programs emphasize educational disparities and allow public schools to continually face funding challenges. The resource disparities between public and school choice programs contribute to the longstanding gaps in student education.

1.1 Socioeconomic status and the achievement gap

Socioeconomic status (SES) refers to the social standing of an individual or group. It is often a combined measurement, encompassing income, educational progress, financial stability, and social status and class. SES analyzes the quality of life, considering the privileges associated with certain people in society. SES has a considerable impact on a student’s educational career as a result.

Students from low-income families and communities develop academic skills at a much slower rate than those from higher-income families and communities; low SES in childhood, for example, is linked to poor cognitive development, language, memory, and social-emotional processing. Furthermore, low-SES communities’ school systems are frequently underfunded,
further impacting children’s academic development and achievement. The realities of such disparities highlight test score variances and, resultantly, the achievement gaps that have remained unchanged over several decades.

The systematic disparities between student populations create fundamental achievement gaps between socioeconomic classes. The persistent gap in resources and academic outcomes from students with low-SES need be addressed; however, as mentioned, the funding necessary to rectify this achievement gap is split.

1.2 School choice demographics

School choice programs not only take away funding from underserved schools, but also attract populations with higher SES due to their financial stipulations. Such programs can install tuition fees, maintenance fees, and other monetary requirements that help to further fund the school. Due to the costly nature of such programs, a student with a low-SES background may not be able to attend simply because they are not able to afford such stipulations; resultantly, the student must attend public schools that often lack the resources needed to fully support student achievement. While there is nothing inherently wrong with the demographics able to attend school choice programs, it is important to note how this could contribute to a socioeconomic achievement gap. If students with high-SES can consistently attend school choice programs that do not fear a lack of resources or support, the academic gap between such students and low-SES students begins to widen. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to assess the impact school choice programs had on test scores and the overall achievement gap. The study addresses the following research objectives-

a. Identify the impacts schools of choice have on test scores
b. Identify the impacts schools of choice have on the achievement gap

2. Methods

retrieved from Lamar University Library Journal search engine and Google Scholar using keywords to search for specific topics/articles, including- “School choice” + “attainment,” “Private school vs. public school,” “Public schools + test scores,” “Private schools+ test scores,” “Achievement gap + private school + public school,” “Effects of a private school on test scores,” “Effects of a private school on the achievement gap,” “Effects of public school on test scores,” and “Effects of public school on the achievement gap.”

Each article was reviewed through an analytical scope, evaluating the findings that corresponded with the research topic and supported the hypothesis- school choice programs have a significant impact on standardized testing and, thus, the socioeconomic achievement gap. Furthermore, additional studies that contradicted the goal of the research were assessed to identify the differences. The study used vocabularies such as school choice, achievement gap, specific population, as defined below.

- **School Choice**
  - a program in which students are given the choice to attend a school other than their district's public school (as at a charter school, private school, home school, or at a public school in a different district) – Merriam-Webster
  - School choice allows public education funds to follow students to the schools that best fit their needs- whether that is to a public school, private school, charter school, home school, or any other learning environment families choose- (EdChoice, n.d.)
  - the Voluntary Public-School Choice Program supports efforts to establish or expand intra-district, inter-district, and open-enrollment public school choice programs to provide parents, particularly parents whose children attend low-performing public schools, with expanded education options. This includes charter schools, magnet schools, private schools, and homeschools- U.S. Department of Education (US Department of Education, 2014)

- **Achievement Gap**
  - The “achievement gap” in education refers to the disparity in academic performance between groups of students. The achievement gap shows up in grades, standardized-test scores, course selection, dropout rates, and college completion rates, among other success measures- (Ansell, 2011)
• the term achievement gap refers to any significant and persistent disparity in academic performance or educational attainment between diverse groups of students, such as white students and minorities, for example, or students from higher-income and lower-income households. – (The Glossary of Education Reform, 2013)

• Specified populations are defined in this study by students with a low-SES background versus those with a high-SES background.

3. Findings & Discussion

The average price of tuition for school choice programs, scholarships aside, is $10,940; as seen in Figure 1, the costly nature of these programs suggests a “strong positive role of family income in predicting private-school enrollment” (Murnane et al., 2018). When compared to public high school pupils, those in private schools came from households with a higher socioeconomic position (Hitt et al., 2018). Private schools have higher fees that are associated with an added higher value that make them more attractive than public schools (Davies & Davies, 2014). Resultantly, the “well-educated affluent parents who send their children to private schools may be less interested in devoting their political and social capital to advocating for better public schools,” further contributing to the under-serviced nature of public schools that inhibits test scores (Murnane et al., 2018). The under-served nature contributes to the overall achievement gap, becoming victims of the unfair success rate.

The disinterest in public schools continues to academically disadvantage those who attend. Especially as the fact presides that a student’s SES is among the strongest determinant of learning in a school environment (Coleman et al., 1966, as cited in Berkowitz, 2021). In fact, as portrayed in Figure 2, “on average, students who attended private high schools scored higher on...
academic tests at age 15 and had higher levels of educational attainment by age 23, than students who attended public high schools” (Frenette & Chan, 2015). More specifically, “charter schools had a significant and positive effect on language arts and math scores” (Hitt et al., 2018). Those who had attended a private high school are, on average, more likely to “have graduated from high school, attended and graduated from a post-secondary institution, and began graduate or professional studies,” as seen in Figure 3 (Frenette & Chan, 2015). Furthermore, “CTE schools had positive and significant impacts on ELA and math scores, high school graduation, college attendance, and graduating with a four-year college degree” (Hitt et al., 2018).

Across the board, school choice programs are more able to provide a better academic career. The impact school choice programs have on test scores and, more generally, the achievement gap is not exclusive to American education; verily, this impact is seen globally. With Seoul's new school choice legislation, the variance in students' test results increased as better students segregated themselves into autonomous private high schools (Jaesung & Jisoo, 2018). Additionally, in a study conducted through Brazil’s educational system, “it is observed that, for all quantiles, the students attending public schools score less” compared to their private school counterparts; moreover, the students with richer families perform better (Rodrigues de Oliveira et al., 2013). Furthermore, “…there are differential effects across school types in Seoul such that autonomous private high schools’ test scores increased substantially whereas other (regular, autonomous public, and special purpose) high schools’ test scores fell” (Jaesung & Jisoo, 2018).

The gap in student success is the result of a lack of inputs in public schools (Rodrigues de Oliveira et al., 2013) As mentioned, school choice programs have financial requirements for attendance that their public counterparts do not have. As such, “private schools detain more resources at their disposal to invest in structure, whereas public schools rely solely on public funding” (Rodrigues de Oliveira et al., 2013). The sole reliance on public funding results, across the board, in public schools that are underserved, maintaining a severe lack of resources that cannot afford greater test scores or the narrowing of the achievement gap.
The reality is that school choice programs have greater financial benefits that allow such programs greater access to a variety of resources (i.e., the ratio of computers to students is often smaller in private institutions). This outreach creates a positive impact on test scores compared to public counterparts. Whilst that fact alone may not be problematic, the implications of such a fact contribute to the widening of the achievement gap, as private institutions and high-SES families continue to be better equipped to academically succeed. Comparatively, public institutions and low-SES families are consistently underserved and left behind to fight against inequities.

4. Conclusion

The data implies that school choice programs had a favorable impact on student achievement, measured through test scores, which expands the overall achievement gap between differing student groups, defined by their socioeconomic classifications. The study suggests that equitable access to resources be implemented to reduce the achievement gap between populations that do not have access to or the financial means to attend school of their choice.

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