

Market-style incentives to increase school choice have opposite effect

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Education professor Christopher Lubienski, left, and graduate student Peter Weitzel have found that a market-based approach to increasing school choice actually leads to fewer educational opportunities, particularly for disadvantaged students in urban areas. Credit: L. Brian Stauffer

A market-based approach to increasing school choice actually leads to fewer educational opportunities, particularly for disadvantaged students in urban areas, according to a University of Illinois expert in education.

As schools compete for [students](#) to improve their market position, the demands of the market often trump specific educational policy goals

such as increased equality and access to better-performing schools, according to Christopher Lubienski, a professor of educational organization and leadership at the U. of I. College of Education and primary author of the study published in the August issue of the *American Journal of Education*. The study examined school options in three major metropolitan areas.

"When there's competitive incentives for schools to recruit students, new market hierarchies form," Lubienski said. "Some schools consciously avoid riskier students because they see themselves as up-market, and therefore serve a more up-market clientele. That leaves riskier students marginalized and excluded from the better schools."

Lubienski said free-marketers have been touting school choice and markets in education for years as a way to level the socio-economic playing field. School choice was seen as a way of cutting across boundaries, of opening up private schools to students who ordinarily couldn't afford tuition or didn't live in wealthy districts. Competition for students was expected to generate greater educational opportunities, leading to more equitable access for students across varied, and often segregated, urban areas.

But now, according to Lubienski, there's evidence to question "this notion of an open market leveling the playing field." Market-based educational policies, he said, despite being implemented to alleviate social injustice in education, are actually helping to exacerbate inequality and erect further barriers for poorer students.

"We're seeing some evidence that schools are changing their behaviors in undesirable ways, as far as only serving specific populations and avoiding those other students who would be seen as a drag on that school's reputation," Lubienski said.

To study the effects of markets on school choice, Lubienski and co-authors Charisse Gulosino, a professor at Brown University, and Peter Weitzel, a graduate student at Illinois, conducted geo-spatial analyses of education markets in Detroit, New Orleans and Washington, D.C.

On paper, Lubienski said, the cities are very different, "but they're probably the most competitive urban markets in terms of school choice," he said.

"Unlike in, say, Des Moines, where people seem to accept the idea of a neighborhood school, parents in these cities expect to be able to choose from different options, so the schools there really do have to compete with each other to attract students."

All three cases showed that schools embraced patterns of exclusionary strategies to enhance market position, Lubienski said, including employing a ringing strategy where new and independent schools don't serve high-need areas, but instead remain on the periphery.

"That allows schools to target and recruit better students, rather than produce them," he said. "It's a strategy where they can still serve disadvantaged students, but they're only serving the disadvantaged students who have the most active families from that sub-group."

Another tactic is putting money into marketing at the expense of improving the curriculum.

"It's easier to put out advertisements and make it appear as if your school is one thing, rather than change what's actually happening in the school, which history has shown us is a very difficult thing to do," Lubienski said.

In New Orleans, which Lubienski describes as a "near-universal choice

city - about as close as we can get to a true experiment in market-based education" - the lack of a public school system has amplified the problems of relying on the invisible hand of a self-regulating market.

"Lots of cities have charter schools and voucher programs, but there's usually a pretty strong public school system that's still the big player in the room and acts as a buffer," Lubienski said. "But after Hurricane Katrina, New Orleans really wiped the slate clean by firing all the teachers in the city and starting over with all the charter schools."

The brute-force application of markets to schools doesn't seem to be having the effect that school-choice advocates expected because education is "too fragmented to be a true market," Lubienski said, and schools "aren't responding the way free-marketers assumed they would."

"The generic model for markets in [education](#) just doesn't seem to be working," he said.

Source: University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign ([news](#) : [web](#))

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