



Evidence and Ideology on Consumer Choices in Education Markets: An Alternative Analytical Framework

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Abstract

The question of how information is used by parents in selecting schools is a central issue in school choice debates, where advocates and opponents frequently intermingle theory (often economic), ideological beliefs, and empirical evidence in constructing arguments about the potential of this reform. We employ a nomination strategy to analyze rational choice claims about information on school quality, finding a much more complex picture of this issue than is typically found in policy advocacy. We offer an alternative framework for evaluating consumer information on schools, concluding that researchers and policymakers must consider the nature, quality, and equitable distribution of information.

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A fundamental assumption of all school choice policies is that parents are in an advantageous position for discerning and choosing the best schools for their children. This argument holds that parents are not only best situated to evaluate their own child's educational options, but also have the incentives to choose wisely. This thinking identifies the idealized "rational consumer" in the parent, where individuals are driven by the quest for academic quality and, consequently, advantages in later economic opportunities. This thinking is aligned with what is known as "rational choice" theory, where individual actions are assumed to be based in logical weighting of different alternatives based on accumulated information and motivated by self-interest.¹ While this hypothesis is appealing with regard to educational choice, and is seemingly supported by common-sense evidence, empirical support for this perspective is highly contested in policy debates. In fact, contrary to the claims of some policy advocates, a comprehensive review of the evidence on parental information and choices presents a much more complex picture of parents' use of information on academic quality — one which seriously questions the idealization on a rational consumer pursuing educational effectiveness. We note the key question is not so much whether parents *can* choose wisely for their children, but whether information to make effective choices is readily available and equitably distributed.

In this analysis, we re-examine a framework offered by two school choice policy advocates regarding the theoretical and empirical evidence related to the rational consumer hypothesis, which has been used to support the contention that not only can parents make good choices, but "parents would do a better job choosing schools for their children than do experts in governmental agencies" (Bast & Walberg, 2004, p.431). This framework had been structured around three lines of research:

- 1.) Survey data demonstrating that parents and “experts” come to similar assessments of school quality — indicating that parents have the necessary information on schools in order to make wise choices.
- 2.) Survey data demonstrating that parents tend to focus on issues of academic quality when selecting schools — suggesting that parents are making choices in support of the rational consumer concern with later economic opportunities.
- 3.) Achievement data indicating that academic effectiveness is superior in choice schools, as opposed to that in schools to which students are assigned (see Bast & Walberg, 2004).

Although such claims are often framed as emerging from empirical research, we demonstrate in this analysis that they are instead a clear example of what Belfield & Levin (2005) argue is ideology trumping evidence. As we note in our discussion, the empirical evidence used to support the rational consumer model is highly selective (and sometimes misinterpreted or misrepresented). A more careful review of the research indicates a much more complex picture that defies neat, ideologically pure portraits.

This paper pursues the question of what we know about parents and the use of information on educational options. In the following section we question how this issue is framed, suggesting the need to consider institutional, political, and individual concerns. Then we consider the different research literatures highlighted in the framework (following Bast and Walberg) pertinent to this issue. We examine (1) the evidence on the propensity of parents to accurately determine the academic quality of a school, and (2) whether or not academic quality is the paramount concern for parents. Furthermore, we survey the research on (3) the effects of choices on academic quality; this last issue offers insights into the type of evidence that is used to support the “rational consumer” argument, and suggests the role of an ideological echo-

chamber to substantiate that model. Alternatively, we propose a framework for considering the types, quality, and utility of information on school effectiveness, and provide specific recommendations on improving the availability and distribution of information for consumers. The concluding discussion highlights the need for more careful and comprehensive understanding of the complex evidence on parental choice of schools.

Consumer Information

The simple insight that parents are best able to exercise responsibility over their children's education is quite appealing and seemingly self-evident. Indeed, there are many cases where this is obviously true. However, the question is not whether this is typically the case or not, but whether or not this is to be a guiding principle for shaping public policy. Fundamentally, if parents are expected to make good choices for their children, they must have sufficient information on both their children and their options in order to make this decision most effectively. In that regard, there are three essential issues that need to be addressed — issues that are too often neglected in assumptions about the appropriate role of parents in their children's education.

The first issue is institutional. Parents act as proxy-consumers for their children in schools, as they do in other areas of life: medical care, nutrition, religion, and so forth (Brighthouse, 2000). Yet, with regard to different social institutions, proxy consumers play different roles, depending largely on their knowledge and the nature of a specific sector. For instance, parents purchase food and clothing in the business sector for their children based on their assessment of preferences, costs, availability, etc. Similarly, other institutions such as politics and religion are left almost exclusively to the parents to instruct the child as they see fit. However, in more specialized sectors, parents often defer to experts with arcane knowledge on

issues such as medicine, for instance. The issue, then, is whether education is best characterized as a market, politics, or science. But this is a question neglected in the discourse among policymakers debating parental choice. This discussion currently advances largely from the assumption that education is akin to the inculcation of political or religious values, often played out in a market arena where parents can shop for the right educational services for their children. While education does indeed embody these types of qualities, it is also the case that education may require some outside expertise (that is, moving beyond the role of advocate) in “diagnosing” and “treating” each learner — a consideration often denied in the rhetoric about parental control.

The second issue is political, specifically a democratic concern. Families have an interest in reproducing their values in the next generation. Thus, parents rely not only on childrearing or church, but also look to institutions such as education to reinforce (or at least not contradict) the values that they emphasize in the home (Bast & Walberg, 2004). This is widely agreed to be a primary interest of the good parent. However, a democratic society — particularly one with any pretensions of meritocratic fairness — also has an interest in providing equitable opportunities for autonomous citizens. Since family backgrounds provide an inequitable basis for determining future opportunities — with some children receiving a much greater advantage from their families — democratic societies typically look to institutions such as schooling to provide both equity and autonomy for individuals. This means, in a sense, that schools need to break the cycle of poverty (and, implicitly, then, the cycle of affluence as well) that so characterize modern market societies. That is, one of the primary purposes of schools in a democratic society is to make a child’s family factors meaningless for success in schools and life. Similarly, parents typically seek to get children to respect their authority, while a truly democratic society may encourage children to question authority.

The third issue is a concern for the individual and involves the place of the child in a democratic society. Choice advocates often point to a parent's "prior" right to determine their children's education, guaranteed in agreements such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which trumps claims of other interests (Monk, 2004). Although it is assumed that parents will act in the child's best interests, as a parental right, that assumption is largely irrelevant. Instead, this parental right is often articulated and exercised in the manner of a property right. Yet parents do not "own" their children, nor are they the only recognized authority with respect to the child. The broader public also has both a right and responsibility to care for the child's interests. Although parents are typically positioned to be the primary agent in looking after the child, it is generally accepted that democratic societies also exercise an overriding prerogative regarding a child's welfare, particularly in instances where a parent is unwilling or ill-equipped to make wise choices on behalf of the child. Although it can take many forms, this public interest is typically articulated through the role of the government in areas such as education.

While these three concerns confound simplistic claims that a parent's position makes him or her an exclusive authority in education, they are not necessarily the only issues in evaluating parental choices in education. It is also important to consider the empirical evidence on parental choice of schools. As noted above, information is a key component, so it is essential to understand the information available to parents in making school choices. Below we highlight three forms of evidence on parents choosing schools. In doing so, we draw on the framework employed by Bast and Walberg (2004) in promoting the rational consumer model to support school choice: parent ratings of schools, parent preferences for academic quality, and effects of choice on academic achievement — these together are thought to support the classical economic

idealization of a rational consumer, proving that parents are inherently better positioned to make such choices than is, say, a government bureaucracy. Thus, we use a nomination strategy, examining research nominated by policy advocates, under the assumption that such research represents the strongest evidence in support of that position. However, a more comprehensive review of the evidence around these three points suggests a much more complex picture, problematizing easy and attractive assumptions about parents, information, and academic quality.

Rating School Quality

Many observers argue that parents are both best positioned and most likely to make the best education choices for children. Some refer to empirical literatures in order to demonstrate parents' ability, willingness, and effectiveness in making wise and informed choices.

The first element of this argument is that parents and education experts rate school similarly. To support this point, Bast and Walberg (2004), for instance, cite three studies indicating that parents' ratings and ranking of schools were accurate on specific criteria. However, two of the studies cited actually contradict that thesis. Hoxby (2001) examines parental satisfaction with different public schools, relative to the actual academic effectiveness of those schools. Yet, contrary to the thesis that parents are necessarily accurate judges of school quality, the majority of parents were incorrect in their assessment of school quality; according to the data reported by Bast and Walberg: only 44% were "highly satisfied" with the highest performing schools, and 15% of parents were "highly satisfied" with the worst schools — suggesting that the majority of parents (71%) assessing school quality in that study were inaccurate or highly inaccurate. A second study, examining New Zealand's educational choice reforms, noted that parent assessments of high quality schools were probably based on the

socioeconomic characteristics of the students (Fiske & Ladd, 2000). This finding is problematic for the argument that parents are the best judges of academic quality, since it suggests that academic quality is either difficult to discern, or parents focused on other information instead, such as the racial characteristics of students in a school, rather than actual evidence of school quality.ⁱⁱ Thus, it appears that the evidence cited does not necessarily support claims about parents' ratings matching those of experts, but instead actually undermines this argument, and presents a more complex picture of this issue.

In fact, a comprehensive research literature suggests that parents do not necessarily always agree with objective assessments of school quality. In research on parents' school choices in Chile — a nation with a much more comprehensive market model for education than those in the US and New Zealand — studies have found parents had tenuous sources of information, and were largely incorrect when asked to identify high and low quality schools in their area (Espínola, 1993; Gauri, 1998). And in a comprehensive study of US mathematics achievement on the National Assessment of Educational Progress, Lubienski and Lubienski (2006) noted that, after controlling for student demographics, charter schools were actually performing significantly beneath the level of public schools, despite their much-mentioned waiting lists (see also Braun *et al.*, 2006a). More importantly, students in self-described conservative Christian schools, which are the fastest-growing segment of the private school sector, are almost a year behind their public school counterparts, while higher performing Catholic and Lutheran schools often struggle to attract families — indicating that popularity with parents is not a good proxy for academic quality (see Broughman & Pugh, 2004; Braun *et al.*, 2006b). Similarly, evidence that parents are using vouchers to send their children to higher performing schools is less than compelling (Belfield, 2006).

Indeed, much evidence already indicates that parents have different perceptions around general issues of school quality than do school choice advocates. President Bush's 2006 State of the Union address called for a dramatic ramping up of math and science training, a theme echoed by many business leaders and school reformers. But parents are generally satisfied with the amount and quality of instruction their children receive in these areas (Johnson *et al.*, 2006). Parents often see more value to the local public schools than some advocates of rational choice believe they should.ⁱⁱⁱ Surveys have repeatedly demonstrated that the people thought to be best positioned to make assessments of school quality — “those who are closest to and most familiar with the situation” (Bast & Walberg, 2004, p. 433) — also tend to give relatively high marks to the schools they know the most: the local public school that their children attend (Rose & Gallup, 1999, 2003, 2005). Either parents are in error regarding the quality of their local schools and therefore, by implication, are incapable of judging school quality, or the experts calling for drastic moves to market models for schooling are inaccurate in their own assessment of schools. Once again, the issue is much more complex than some of the advocacy rhetoric would indicate.

Choosing a School Based on Academic Quality

The second pillar of the rational consumer model holds that parents are primarily interested in academic quality. We find a much less conclusive sense of the literature on this issue than advocates or opponents of school choice may like. The notion that parental preferences for schools revolve around issues of academic quality is a key element in the rational consumer idealization in much of the thinking on school choice (see Schneider *et al.*, 2000). Specifically, economic logic holds that the parents are primarily interested in the academic quality of a school because this will in turn enhance economic prospects for their children (Bast & Walberg, 2004).^{iv} Theorists seek to support this notion by citing four sources showing

national and local survey research in which parents identify academic quality as the most important criterion in selecting a school. On the other hand, there is a substantial research literature — both survey and behavioral — from the US and other nations suggesting that parents choose for a number of reasons besides strictly academic considerations (e.g., Gauri, 1998; Molnar, 1996; Polansky, 1998; Smith & Meier, 1995; Wells, 1993). This is not to say that parents do not choose schools based on academic quality, but that many other considerations (e.g., location, transportation, curricular focus, uniforms, sports, or student demographics) also come into play — making for a much more complex picture than is portrayed in the rational-consumer idealization. In fact, since school choice moved into the national spotlight, this question has been debated, and the literature hardly reflects the consensus implied by the four sources cited by some rational choice theorists (see Coulson, 1999; Moe, 1995; Solomon, 2003; Witte, 2000).

Of course, there are problems with citing survey data to support any contention on this issue. Most importantly, surveys are notoriously unreliable when people are asked to express preferences on controversial topics, compared to when they actually reveal their true preferences away from public scrutiny. For instance, although few parents cite racial composition of schools as a factor in their choices (Schneider *et al.*, 1998), it is, in fact, perhaps the most urgent bit of information they seek when considering different schools (Schneider & Buckley, 2002; see also Glazerman, 1998; Henig, 1996). Furthermore, many of these studies survey parents who have chosen to use a voucher or charter school, presenting a problem with selection bias; not only are those schools based on choice more likely to have already shed disgruntled families, who would then not be included in the survey, but, furthermore, those remaining are unlikely to admit in a survey they have chosen poorly for their child.

Finally, while parents may *say* that academic quality is a high priority, this does not mean that they actually *have* hard information on that issue. For instance, recent studies of school marketing in competitive environments suggest that evidence of academic quality is not a prominent theme in school promotional materials; instead, schools often seek to attract families through images of white or Asian-American students, information about extracurricular opportunities, or symbols associated with exclusive schooling, rather than, say, test scores (IDENTIFYING INFORMATION REMOVED). This trend may be troubling. Even if parents act on “*perceived* academic quality,” school officials may recognize and respond to incentives to shape those perceptions through surrogate information on school quality that highlights racial and socio-economic criteria (Bast & Walberg, 2004, p. 431; emphasis added). Competitive dynamics may promote sorting on these factors, and undercut incentives for school improvement (IDENTIFYING REFERENCE, 2005).

Our analysis of the relevant literature leads us to conclude that academics may be one of a variety of factors that influence school selection by parents. Moreover, problems with selection bias in the survey data and difficulty in getting trustworthy evidence of school quality complicate the rational consumer argument.

Academic Achievement Gains Are Higher in Schools of Choice

The third pillar of the rational consumer argument is that academic achievement gains are higher in schools of choice than traditional public schools. The dynamics set in motion by parental choice are thought to lead to more effective schools overall (Hoxby, 1994). This is a crucial claim. As Bast and Walberg (2004) note:

Higher academic achievement by students attending schools of choice, after controlling for family socioeconomic status, *could* be evidence that parents are

choosing wisely. However, it could also be evidence that competition produces better schools... even if parents are not choosing wisely, the fact that producers must compete or that choice motivates parents to be more engaged in their children's schooling may lift their children's academic achievement. (p. 436, emphasis in original)

As a case in point, Bast and Walberg (2004) cite 25 studies on a number of school choice programs, including public school choice, private schools, charter schools, and voucher programs to support this claim. Not all of the studies report original research, but some instead summarize existing research. More importantly, a review of these studies indicates a much more complex picture than is implied in the effort to support this claim. For instance, a study by Grogger and Neal (2000) is cited as evidence of a "positive and statistically significant" private school effect on academic achievement. In fact, Grogger and Neal's study of NELS:88 data found no statistically significant effect for Catholic schools on mathematics achievement for students in the suburbs, but a modest advantage for White students, and larger gains for minority students, in urban areas; no private school effect was found for secular private schools.^v (This is a significant omission, in view of the thesis about the competitive impact of choice, since non-religious private schools may be more susceptible to market-like forces than Catholic schools, which can rely on the more inert patronage of parishioners.) Other studies cited show similarly mixed results. Furthermore, causation is often implied, but cannot be supported by the data or analysis. For example, Bast and Walberg cite a one-page study of inputs and achievement of Catholic and public school students in New York as proof that achievement "growth is greater in Catholic schools than in public schools" (Peterson & Walberg, 2002, p. 435). However, the authors do not indicate that they used longitudinal data, nor does it appear that they controlled

for student demographics — two fatal errors if one is to demonstrate that a school type, and not family factors, *caused* achievement growth. Many of the other studies cited to support this claim are actually just summaries of previous studies that have also been contested on methodological grounds.^{vi}

Not only does the rational choice argument depend on a selective interpretation of these studies, but it would depend as well on a very selective review of the literature. Other studies not cited found no academic advantage for schools of choice, and a few found a *negative* effect. For instance, studies by Rouse (1998) and Miron and Nelson (2002) of achievement in voucher and charter programs, respectively, do not support the thesis that school choice necessarily leads to greater achievement gains. In a longitudinal study, Figlio and Stone (1997) found a small but statistically significant negative effect for religious schools for White students, but a positive impact for minority students (see also Figlio & Stone, 1999). More recently, using national samples, Lubienski and Lubienski (2006) and Braun, Jenkins and Grigg (2006a, 2006b) found schools of choice to be trailing public schools in academic achievement after implementing appropriate controls for student demographics. And Belfield (2006) found a negative private school effect in his rigorous study of the Cleveland voucher program. We reference the aforementioned studies, not to “prove” that choice has a particular impact (or not) on student achievement, but to demonstrate that the picture is much more complex than what is implied in support of the claim that choice generates gains in academic achievement.

Ideology and Evidence in Support of Rational Choice in Education

The three pillars of the rational consumer hypothesis that parents would do a better job choosing schools than experts are tenuous at best. A selective use of the literature and a mischaracterization of several key studies undercut the rational choice argument significantly.

However, another problem also problematizes such claims. The rational choice claim relies heavily on studies of questionable value for researchers and policymakers. As Table 1 demonstrates, many of them are supported and published by various think tanks rather than traditional peer reviewed publications. In an analysis of their references we found only two of the 64 total references come from traditional refereed journal articles while 32 are published by think tanks — most with definite political agendas.^{vii}

Table 1:
Think Tanks and Other Sources of Research Citations in Bast and Walberg (2004)

Source	Frequency
Brookings Institution	9
Hoover Institute	6
School Reform News (Heartland Institute)	2
American Enterprise Institute	1
National Center for the Study of Privatization in Education	1
Carnegie Foundation	1
Pacific Research Institute	1
RAND	1
Manhattan Institute	1
Kettering Foundation	1
Morrison Institute	1
Goldwater Institute	1
Human Resources Policy Corporation	1
Reason Public Policy Institute	1
Princeton University Working Paper	1
Public Agenda	1

The World Bank	1
National Bureau for Economic Research	1

For example, the three surveys offered by advocates support the assertion that parents rate schools similar to experts were published by the Human Resources Policy Corporation, the Hoover Institute, and the Brookings Institution. Similarly, in section 4.3.2 (p.437) Bast and Walberg identify nine references to support their assertion that the private school effect is statistically significant (see Table 2).

Table 2:
Sources of Research on School Effects Cited in Bast and Walberg (2004)

Reference	Publication Source
Chubb & Moe, 1990	Brookings Institution
Coleman & Hoffer, 1987	Basic Books
Grogger & Neal, 2000	Brookings Institution
Neal, 1996	National Bureau for Economic Research
Patrinos & Ariasingam, 1997	The World Bank
Rouse, 2000	Princeton University Working Paper
Sander, 1995	Westview Press
Witte, 1996	Brookings Institution
Peterson & Walberg, 2002	The Heartland Institute

Simply analyzing the publication source raised credibility issues in several cases. In fact, the table they present on page 435 summarizing research on school choice includes only two peer-reviewed journal articles. Thirty-two of the references are to documents produced by think tanks

(Brookings, Hoover, Heartland Institute, etc.). In sum, the quality of the debate is weakened when publications from ideologically driven think tanks dominate the citations.

Towards a Deeper Understanding of Parent Information on School Quality

In view of these difficulties in substantiating the thesis that parents are positioned to make the best choices for their children's schools, it makes sense to take a deeper look at the issue. Indeed, it appears that there are serious shortcomings with the question itself when it is framed as: "Can parents choose the best schools for their children?" or "Can people be trusted to decide for themselves?" (Bast & Walberg, 2004; Brandt, 2000, respectively). Such representations of the issue treat parents as monolithic, ignoring substantial evidence that parents' views of schools and information can be diverse and socially situated (e.g., Ball *et al.*, 1995; Bell, 2005; Gewirtz *et al.*, 1995; Schneider *et al.*, 1998). Furthermore, as noted above, framing the issue along strictly individualistic/ consumer lines negates any broader social or democratic interest in a child's education. Therefore, hypotheses such as "Parents would do a better job choosing the schools their children attend than "experts" working for governments" (Bast & Walberg, 2004, p. 432), while empirically falsifiable, largely miss the point. Rather than asking if parents *can* make informed choices (when for many the answer is obvious), it makes more sense to ask *whether the requisite knowledge or information to make such choices is of sufficient quality, widely available and equitably distributed.*

A Framework for Assessing Information on School Quality

To that end, we offer three dimensions to consider in evaluating information that could be employed in selecting a school: insights into observable productive processes, the nature of the good or service,^{viii} and information that encourages horizontal and vertical differentiation. Although there is a strong case to be made that education exhibits many of the primary aspects of

a public good (Labaree, 2007), we can assume here, for the sake of argument, that schooling is primarily a private good, and should be examined as such.

1) Information on productive processes. First, to understand information on the quality of any consumable good, it is important to consider what aspect of the good is being illuminated for the consumer. For many goods, such as a car or a computer, consumers look for information on the quality of the finished product.^{ix} For others, such as health care, the quality of the production processes is a key concern (Weisbrod, 1998). With schooling, for instance, a diploma may be important, but it tells us little about the quality of the school experience — instead, such information is often just a proxy for school inputs (such as the socioeconomic characteristics of students enrolling at a school). Perhaps slightly more accurate assessments of quality come from evaluations of the more immediate educational inputs in a school (e.g., teacher qualifications, class composition and size, etc.). Probably the best information on processes would be information on actual educational processes at a school: curriculum program, pedagogical practices, etc. However, productive processes and their effectiveness are not always apparent to consumers, leading to asymmetries of information between producer and consumer that put the customer at a relative disadvantage. The clarity of productive processes can be represented on a scale, where more obvious processes are *transparent* to the consumer, somewhat complex or hidden processes are *translucent*, while *opaque* processes are more obscured or even removed from the consumer's view. As is noted below, schooling involves some aspects that are difficult to make apparent to the consumer.

2) Information on the consumable qualities of a good. Second, just as information on productive processes can be important to consumers, different goods themselves exhibit different types of qualities — qualities that are conveyed to the consumer in different ways. Some goods

embed qualities that are readily apparent to consumers before purchase and consumption. For instance, we can usually decide if fruit is ripe, or if a sweater fits, and use that information in making a selection. Such qualities then allow consumers to make choices based on other factors as well, such as price and availability, and competitive marketing for these *search goods* tends to offer information on those criteria (Aggarwal & Vaidyanathan, 2003; Darby & Karni, 1973; Nelson, 1974; Tirole, 1988). However, important aspects of other types of goods are not readily apparent to consumers before purchase, in the case of *experience goods* such as canned food or a movie; while, for *credence goods*, important qualities may never be really known — for instance, the effects of an herbal supplement, or the actual effects of higher octane gasoline on an engine. In these cases, marketing tends to play upon the information asymmetries enjoyed by the producer, further obscuring information on quality by appealing to emotions or allegiance. Therefore, it is useful to consider the types of information available about a good: whether the information makes “softer” emotional appeals, or provides direct or “hard” evidence of product quality or effectiveness.

3) Horizontal and vertical differentiation. Third, in any competitive market, producers or providers are expected to differentiate their product or service from those of competitors.^x While assessments of the diversity of different options can be made by examining the qualities of actual products, more importantly for the present purposes is the information made available to consumers regarding the differences between products. In sectors such as education it is important to note whether that information identifies differences between different options arranged on a *vertical* scale of different-but-equal programs, or on a *horizontal* scale of quality (Glomm *et al.*, 2005). If the information focuses on the former, that could indicate niche marketing to diverse preferences. If the information focuses primarily on the latter, that could

indicate a monolithic conception of quality, but it could also suggest competitive incentives to enhance market position by attracting more “preferred” customers.

Discussion

The educational processes in schools are relatively esoteric, and largely obscured from the direct observations of current and potential consumers. Since schooling does not appear to lend itself to easy comparisons between options based on explicit indicators of quality, as it would if it were a search good, competition between providers by itself is unlikely to generate the information necessary for consumers to make informed choices (IDENTIFYING REFERENCE, 2001). Instead, with experience or credence goods, extra-market remedies such as licensing, regulation, or accreditation are often necessary in order to compensate the consumer in light of informational asymmetries favoring producers.^{xi} Unfortunately, quality information appears to be rare, or rarely used.^{xii} Furthermore, the information that is available has little to do with program diversity, and more to do with socio-economic distinctions between students, suggesting incentives for families and schools to sort themselves by such characteristics, and thereby voiding incentives for school improvement, innovation, and equitable access to diverse options. Of course, it is likely that many parents get information on schools from social networks — the word-of-mouth means of gathering information on options (IDENTIFYING REFERENCE, 2005). However, it is important to note that these networks tend to be relatively homogenous, so that information disseminated through such channels will not be equitably distributed (Schneider *et al.*, 1997).

As noted earlier, there are many justifications for parental choice of schools, and most school choice plans depend on the informed participation of parents. As former Secretary of Education Rod Paige so aptly put it in championing NCLB: “there is no more powerful advocate

for children than a parent armed with information and options” (WrightsLaw, 2002). Such assertions, while simple, eloquent, and appealing, appear to be more of a statement of ideology than of evidence. This analysis finds both the ideological and empirical aspects of such claims to be problematic in light of both their own internal logic and evidence on the dynamics of school choice in the real-world context. The issue of parental choice of schools is much more complex than simplistic assertions would indicate. Instead of debating whether or not parents are able to choose the best schools, it is important to consider whether the requisite knowledge or information is widely available and equitably distributed. The question is centered largely on the issue of school quality, which is difficult for researchers to identify even with advanced statistical measures, and is also difficult to convey to potential consumers. Yet more useful types of information are least likely to be available to parents, thereby hindering parental choice as an effective vehicle for equity and effectiveness in education. This does not mean that parents are incapable of choosing wisely — a claim that is obviously not supported by this analysis. However, this absence of quality information problematizes easy assumptions about informed parental choice of schools as the basis for public policy.

NOTES

ⁱ “Rational Choice” theory (see Blau, 1997; Goode, 1997) is often called “market theory” when applied to education (Lubienski, 2006; see, for example, Walberg, 2000).

ⁱⁱ See also (Schneider & Buckley, 2002). Although rational from the consumer’s perspective, such patterns can also be problematic since they indicate incentives for providers to promote themselves based on evidence of the social characteristics of their students, rather than evidence of academic quality (see below; see also IDENTIFYING REFERENCE, in press-c).

The third study cited by Bast and Walberg — from Solomon (2003) — supports their thesis, but is of highly dubious quality. Not only was it never peer reviewed, but it suffers from multiple shortcomings, including low response rate (29%), selection bias (surveying only families with children currently still in charter schools), and possible responses weighted toward higher scores (with the inclusion of an A+ response).

ⁱⁱⁱ Thus, there is a degree of irony when market enthusiast John Stossel (2006) cites parental choice advocate Kevin Chavous in arguing that parents do not understand about school quality: “If you're like most American parents, you might think ‘These things don’t happen at my kid’s school.’ A Gallup Poll survey showed 76 percent of Americans were completely or somewhat satisfied with their kids' public school. Education reformers like Kevin Chavous have a message for these parents: If you only knew. Even though people in the suburbs might think their schools are great, Chavous says, ‘They’re not. That’s the thing and the test scores show that.’ Chavous and many other education professionals say Americans don't know that their public schools, on the whole, just aren’t that good.” Similarly, former Heritage Foundation analyst and Bush (II) administration education official Nina Rees says: “To some extent, when you offer something new to low-income parents or to any parent group, initially you’re not going to have a surge signing up because they don't know what it is and the procedure to sign kids up is somewhat complicated” (Saulny, 2006).

^{iv} Bast and Walberg do note — and we agree — that it is presumptuous to assume that academic achievement is the ultimate measure for school success. (There are, after all, other goals for schools that are often neglected in reform rhetoric: socialization, democratic citizenship, integration, tolerance, etc.) However, this is certainly the metric that is elevated by reform discourse on school effectiveness, so it is important to consider.

^v This finding caused Hoover Institute economist Eric Hanushek to wonder, in his commentary, how parents could violate basic economic logic by paying for an underperforming service when a superior alternative is free of charge (Grogger & Neal, 2000, p. 196).

^{vi} See, for instance, Krueger & Zhu (2004a, 2004b), Metcalf (1998), and Witte (1996).

^{vii} Most of these sources are agenda-driven think tanks, although a few — including the National Bureau of Economic Research and the National Center for the Study of Privatization in Education — focus instead on presenting research for its own sake, and thereby reflect a range of perspectives.

^{viii} For brevity, we use the term “good,” while understanding that education and other “consumables” can also be described as a service.

^{ix} In those cases, process innovations (as opposed to product innovations) may lower production costs, but are largely irrelevant to the consumer as an immediate consideration in making a choice.

^x Of course, producers at the low end of a hierarchy have an incentive to minimize distinctions between their product and those of their more prestigious competitors, while those at the high end of the scale attempt to exaggerate any differences. In education, policymakers have used reforms such as charter schools to encourage diversification of options so that parents have a greater set of choices.

^{xi} Walberg and Bast (2003) focus on market mechanisms to deal with asymmetric information (p. 65). In particular, they point to information from producers, repeat purchases, and “personal and public sources of information.” However, schooling does not lend itself to repeat purchases, which would be required to punish bad providers; and children, not the choosers, are the ones who have to pay a price for unfortunate choices in this idealized “discovery process” (Bast &

Walberg, 2004, p. 433; Brighthouse, 2000; IDENTIFYING REFERENCE, in press-b). And, as this analysis shows, information from producers, as well as personal and public sources, can be more limited than these authors assume.

^{xii} It does not appear that competition is necessarily producing quality information on schools' value-added effects (IDENTIFYING REFERENCE, in press-b). Bast and Walberg (2004) point to extra-market mechanisms such as school data collection sites on the internet as a possible device to equalize access to information. While the internet is certainly just one means of accessing information on schools — and, of course, access to the internet is not equitably distributed — it is fast becoming a primary method for gathering information on schools (as Bast and Walberg note). Indeed, while gaps in access exist, we might expect the most demand for high quality information from the relatively sophisticated consumers with internet access. Still, the quality of information from school information websites is relatively poor, and speaks more to school inputs and demographic characteristics than to school effectiveness (IDENTIFYING REFERENCE, in press-c).

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Note from the Spring 2016 Executive Editor, Constantin Schreiber

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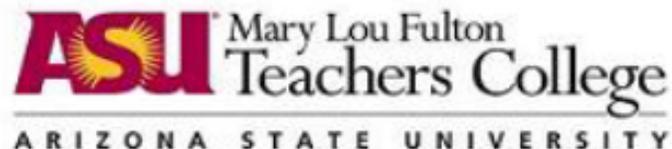


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