

WMU center part of study finding mixed picture for school choice

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KALAMAZOO--The Western Michigan University Evaluation Center is part of nationwide research project that has found school choice yields mixed results.

Project findings, released jointly today, show that while advocates of school choice offer it as a certain path to school reform founded on free-market principles and opponents warn of serious unintended consequences, a close examination of research on the topic finds a decidedly mixed picture of choice's benefits and shortcomings.

"School Choice: Evidence and Recommendations," a collection of 10 policy briefs on specific topics under the umbrella of choice, brings together some of the top scholars in the field and presents a comprehensive overview of the best current knowledge of these important policies. Together, the briefs offer reason to believe that choice policies can further some educational goals, but they also offer many reasons for caution. In addition to the Evaluation Center, the project was carried out by the Education Policy Research Unit (EPRU) at Arizona State University and Education and the Public Interest Center (EPIC) at the University of Colorado at Boulder.

The series is co-edited by Dr. Gary Miron, WMU Evaluation Center chief of staff, along with Dr. Kevin G. Welner, associate professor of education at the University of Colorado at Boulder, Dr. Patricia H. Hinchey, associate professor of education at Penn State University, and Dr. Alex Molnar, professor of educational leadership and policy studies at Arizona State University.

The series of briefs examines choice in its various forms: charter schools; home schooling and "virtual" schooling; voucher plans that allow students to use taxpayer funds to attend private schools; tuition tax credit plans that provide a public subsidy for private school tuition; and public school intra- and inter-district choice, such as magnet schools.

"School choice is a reform ideal that consistently has been debated and contested," says Miron, the lead editor of the series. "This contentious debate arises, in part, because choice means so many different things to different people. But the debate often overlooks the diversity within the broad

realm of school choice and the differences in how specific types of school choice are legislated and implemented."

Miron says that a "key aim of School Choice: Evidence and Recommendations is to facilitate a more nuanced understanding of school choice."

Indeed, the expected outcomes of choice--usually presented as improved student achievement and instructional innovation as competition spurs all schools to do a better job of educating students--have thus far not been borne out on a large scale, the researchers say.

Each of the 10 briefs that make up School Choice: Evidence and Recommendations zeroes in on particular aspects of choice and offers research and policy-making recommendations.

School Choice: Evidence and Recommendations is being jointly released by EPRU, EPIC and the Great Lakes Center for Education Research and Practice, which provided funding for the project.

In addition to acting as chief editor, Miron wrote the final brief in the series, "The Impact of School Choice Reforms on Student Achievement," with help from Stephanie Evergreen and Jessica Urschel. They reviewed evidence for and against claims that schools of choice inherently contribute to greater achievement by students. Jessica Urschel, who is a research assistant at The Evaluation Center, noted that "there are large differences across school choice types in terms of the amount of research available, the overall quality of the research, and the conclusions the research supports." Stephanie Evergreen, who is a project manager at The Evaluation Center, illustrated this point by noting that "the research on vouchers was generally of high quality, while the research on homeschooling was fairly weak, although the evidence on student achievement from both of these forms of school choice indicates a positive impact." The studies of student achievement in charter schools were the most numerous, although the quality of the evidence was mixed and the conclusion drawn from the evidence was that charter schools perform similar to traditional public schools, a finding that Miron pointed out, "has not changed with time or with the addition of higher-quality studies in recent years."

Other brief titles include "How Legislation and Litigation Shape Choice," "School Choice and Accountability," "Educational Innovation and Diversification in School Choice Plans" and "School Choice and Segregation by Race, Class and Achievement."

The 10 policy briefs on school choice are available online and can be downloaded from The Evaluation Center Web site at: www.wmich.edu/evalctr/charter.