



Does School Choice Affect Gentrification?

Posing the Question and Assessing the Evidence

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A major focus of education-policy research in the 21st century is understanding whether and how school choice policies benefit individual students. Assessing the impacts of school choice on educational outcomes of individual children is essential for education policymakers who wish to improve the quality of schooling and academic outcomes. But school choice also has the potential to affect neighborhoods and cities more broadly. It can affect demands on public transportation systems, parental time commitments, vehicle use, and traditional neighborhood schools. School choice also may have implications for neighborhood social cohesion, real estate, and workforce development.

School choice emerged in the wake of the 1960s Civil Rights Movement. The first magnet schools opened in the 1970s to offer alternative programming that could integrate black and white students (Smrekar and Goldring 2009). In the early 1990s, education reformers opened charter schools with the goal of achieving results through market-driven competition. Since their inception, both of these school-choice strategies have enjoyed great and perhaps unexpected growth and support that has only accelerated in the 21st century. The number of charter schools, for example, grew 186 percent between the 2001 and 2012 school years (NCES 2014). Moreover, school-choice options have expanded from magnet and charter schools to include open-enrollment policies and private school vouchers.

Given the continued proliferation of school choice, city planners, elected officials, parents, and other stakeholders need to consider how school-choice policies will affect students, schools, neighborhoods, and cities. Understanding the role of school-choice policies in shaping neighborhoods, and the institutions and communities within them, will be increasingly important as cities and

metropolitan areas continue to experiment with varied mixes and applications of choice policies. Understanding school choice's myriad of effects may be especially important in cities like Atlanta, Denver, Philadelphia, and Washington, DC, which are experiencing increases in the number of young middle-class families living in city centers who are reconsidering leaving once they have children (Posey-Maddox, Kimelberg, and Cucchiara 2014). In these areas, school-choice policies might play an increasingly important role in patterns of development by influencing which city neighborhoods these families deem most desirable, changing the distribution of public education resources, and introducing uncharted opportunities for alleviating or exacerbating inequality.

In this brief, we raise awareness of how school-choice policies may relate to neighborhoods in urban districts by examining the interrelationship between school choice and gentrification. We review the existing literature on this relationship, hypothesize unexplored paths, and present ideas and themes from a 2014 convening of education and housing policy experts hosted by the Urban Institute with support from the Thomas B. Fordham Institute.

We explore how school choice might influence gentrification, but research has not yet established clear directionality or causality in the connection between these two phenomena (Posey-Maddox, Kimelberg, and Cucchiara 2014). Their relationship may be bidirectional, or it could lack directionality and causality. Far from suggesting a direct linear and causal relationship between school choice and gentrification, we use existing research about these two to explore how they may interact and how the relationship might function and layout research directions. We do not advocate for increased school choice or for gentrification, nor do we take a stance on the relative merits, virtue, or desirability of school choice and gentrification. This brief is a starting point for understanding how two increasingly powerful forces are interacting to shape urban landscape.

Definitions

School choice is any arrangement that allows parents to decide which of two or more publicly funded schools their child will attend (National Working Commission on Choice in K–12 Education 2003). School choice allows administrators, schools, and teachers to exercise some independence—in nonacademic operations of hiring and from local and state mandated curricula—from the regulatory framework of the US public education system. For example, students may attend a magnet program, a traditional public school outside of their assigned school boundary, or a public charter school, or they may obtain a voucher or tax credit to offset the cost of private school tuition. Some school-choice programs limit students to only attend schools within a school district ('intradistrict'), and others allow students to enter into schools in a different district ('interdistrict'). In this brief, we focus most of our attention on magnet schools, charter schools, and open-enrollment policies because they are the most common school-choice policies operating in urban school districts (Council of Chief School Officers 2013).

Gentrification is the process whereby higher-income households move into low-income neighborhoods (Levy, Comey, and Padilla 2006). Displacement of low-income households is included in

some but not all definitions of gentrification. For this brief, we do not focus on residential displacement as a result of gentrification, but we do explore the potential displacement or marginalization of low-income children in school. In addition to economic-class change, we consider change in racial and ethnic composition from gentrification germane to the topic. The term **gentrifiers**, in this brief, refers to both middle-class *individuals* and *families* who move into urban areas.

What We Do (and Don't) Know about School Choice and Gentrification

There is little existing literature or research explicitly discussing the interrelationship between school-choice policies and patterns of gentrification and revitalization. Existing research mainly includes case studies that explore other aspects of the relationship between school policies and gentrification, such as how gentrification affects public school performance or the role of improving schools as part of larger neighborhood revitalization initiatives (Keels, Burdick-Will, and Keene 2013; Turnham and Khadduri 2004; Joseph and Feldman 2009). There are still questions about how and to what degree school-choice policies might influence residential choices.

Before exploring a potential interrelationship, descriptive information about gentrification and school choice helps provide a necessary contextual basis. Well-researched, descriptive information about the two phenomena includes patterns of school-choice use among parents of different socioeconomic classes and common characteristics of gentrifiers. The following descriptions of who exercises school choice and where gentrifiers go to school, though far from an exhaustive exploration, provide a starting point to understanding how one might influence the other.

Who Exercises School Choice?

A number of studies demonstrate that nonwhite low-income parents are less likely to exercise publicly provided school-choice options than white upper-income parents (Keels, Burdick-Will, and Keene 2013). Low-income families often face income constraints and make difficult tradeoffs in where and how much they work, where they live, and how they travel; these constraints affect their ability to exercise school choice. By contrast, upper-income families, who do not experience such constraints, can also exercise their social and economic privilege through larger social networks to access better information on school quality and navigate school-choice systems (Gallagher, Comey, and Zhang 2013). Upper-income parents' primary mechanism for exercising school choice is through choice of residence, a mechanism that is economically prohibitive for many low-income families (Goyette 2008).

Where Do Gentrifiers Go to School?

The economics and demographics of gentrifiers help explain variable impacts on public schools. Gentrifiers are often childless, such as young professionals, artists, and gay and lesbian couples (Kennedy and Leonard 2001), but those who do have children tend to pay for private school or exercise

school choice when available in urban districts (Keels, Burdick-Will, and Keene 2013). Studies have observed that gentrifiers tend to put their children into select charter or public schools with other gentrifying families, resulting in little change to other schools in the area (Burgess et al. 2004; Kimelberg and Billingham 2012).

Qualitative research from three urban school districts in Boston, New York, and Philadelphia provide additional insight into the school preferences of gentrifiers in urban areas and suggest under what conditions they send their children to diverse public schools. Drawing on interviews with gentrifier parents in New York City public schools, Stillman found the parents often choose to send their children to neighborhood public or charter schools when the schools offer special programs or within school “enclaves” for their children (2012). Similarly, in Boston, Kimelberg and Billingham’s interviews with gentrifier families attending diverse public schools showed the families chose the school because they were assured other gentrifier families would also be in attendance. The families tended to cluster their children into a few “socially vetted” schools and indicated they were not comfortable sending their children to a neighborhood public school unless other gentrifier families were also attending (2012).

Cucchiara’s (2008) case study of gentrifier families in Philadelphia reveals another motivation for families to enter the public school system. The City of Philadelphia’s effort to revitalize a downtown area included marketing its public schools toward gentrifier parents (Cucchiara 2008). Among other incentives from the city to move into central Philadelphia, the city courted gentrifier parents by awarding them priority admissions to a newly created school district within central Philadelphia.

Have Researchers Tied School Choice to Gentrification?

There has not been a systematic review of how various school-choice policies may relate with patterns of gentrification. Even studies that discuss the importance of improving neighborhood schools as part of a larger neighborhood revitalization framework do not critically examine the role of school-choice policies within revitalization (Joseph and Feldman 2009).

Thus, the mechanism of influence between school choice and gentrification remains uncharted. To begin to understand the connection (if there is one) between these phenomena, we present potential pathways for future exploration of one relationship: school choice’s potential to affect gentrification.

Potential Pathways from School Choice to Gentrification

Schools certainly factor into where many families decide to live, but they are one part of many balanced trades families consider, including housing prices, job locations, family commitments, and lifestyle preferences (Gallagher, Comey, and Zhang 2013). We start from the assumption that choice of residence is one of the principal mechanisms by which families with means select their schools (Goyette 2008). School-choice policies, too, could potentially influence where middle and upper-middle-class families choose to live. Below, we pose four potential pathways, drawn from existing research, for how specific school-choice policies might influence gentrification.

1. Can Open-Enrollment Policies Make Distressed Neighborhoods More Appealing to Gentrifiers?

Without the guarantee of attending a certain school by moving to its associated neighborhood, the link between school and neighborhood is decoupled. If a city or district adopts an open-enrollment policy allowing parents to send their children to schools outside neighborhood boundaries, distressed areas of the city may become attractive to parents who want to send their child to high-quality schools but are unable to purchase homes in city neighborhoods with high real estate values where quality schools are most likely to be located. In this scenario, school choice through open enrollment removes choice of residence as a primary mechanism for gentrifiers to choose schools and may indirectly prompt gentrifying parents to consider neighborhoods or areas of cities they may have otherwise deemed undesirable because of limited schooling options.

In some cities, open-enrollment policies and traditional school-assignment policies coexist. Students may have a right to attend their neighborhood school and have an option of attending a school outside their neighborhood. In such contexts, the link between home and school is weakened.

2. Is School Choice Appealing to Gentrifiers?

Among the various types of school-choice policies, charter and magnet schools may exercise the strongest pull of gentrifying families into distressed neighborhoods. Because of their lack of administrative barriers, flexible curricula (or specialized curricula for magnet schools), and ease of entry into the market, charters schools and, to some extent, magnet schools offer multiple potential mechanisms for affecting gentrification. Below, we explore a few possible mechanisms by which charter and magnet schools could affect gentrification.

ENCLAVES

Because gentrifier parents are often able to select schools through choice of residence, they are unlikely to enroll their children in a distressed school without a strong incentive or lure. Examples of lures include language-immersion and gifted and talented programs. Such programs are referred to in one study of New York City public schools as “enclave” programs for their tendency to have a concentration of gentrifier families as participants (Stillman 2012). These programs may be specifically designed to attract gentrifier families, who are unlikely to live in a racially and socioeconomically mixed neighborhood and attend its boundary school unless they know there will be families of similar socioeconomic background attending (Kimelberg and Billingham 2012). Charter schools and magnet programs within otherwise distressed neighborhoods create such incentives.

MARKETING AND BRANDING TOOLS

Cities and suburbs compete to attract middle- and upper-class families (Joseph and Feldman 2009). Some market or brand themselves to remain competitive and attractive to gentrifiers, or they offer tax incentives, housing incentives, or unique or attractive resources or amenities (Cucchiara 2008).

In the same way, charter schools can target their recruitment efforts to attract certain constituents. Unlike publicly operated schools, charter schools often have the administrative and programmatic flexibility to advertise their enhanced per-pupil funding or special programs or curricula to their target populations, thereby differentiating themselves from competing public or charter schools (Turnham and Khadduri 2004). When such strategies are successful, they may affect patterns of gentrification. For example, marketing may allow some schools to differentiate themselves from schools in the suburbs or resource rich city neighborhoods. However, such marketing strategies must convince gentrifier parents that the benefits of attending a charter school within a distressed neighborhood outweighs the costs of living in or near the neighborhood, which may include higher crime rates and nonexistent or underfunded neighborhood amenities like parks, libraries, and grocery stores (Cucchiara 2008).

LOCAL CONTROL AND EASE OF MARKET ENTRY

Some of the literature suggests that parental control over a school's decisionmaking processes, governance, operations, and other policies ("local control") may be a critical factor in determining gentrifier school-choice decisions. Gentrifier parents expect to exercise local control over their neighborhood school through parent-teacher organizations and other governance opportunities (Cucchiara 2008; Desena 2006). Turnham and Khadduri (2004) posit that charter schools in particular allow for increased local control and autonomous decisionmaking for principals and parents, and they remove administrative barriers (such as difficulty enrolling siblings into the same school) that discourage gentrifiers from attending public schools. In some communities, local control and the entry of gentrifier parents into either charter or public schools lead to the exclusion or marginalization of low-income children and parents, an issue described more fully in box 1.

Local control in charter schools begins with the relative ease of creating charters ("ease of entry") in many metropolitan areas. Depending on state regulation, charters can be granted to nonprofit and for-profit organizations, small groups of parents, and other entities. Market entry becomes easier as community regulation or prescription over new schools decreases and funding for school choice increases (National Working Commission on Choice in K-12 Education 2003). Gentrifiers without children who move into distressed neighborhoods may be encouraged to stay in the neighborhood once they have children (or when their children become school age), particularly if they are able to exercise local control by creating a charter school (Posey-Maddox, Kimelberg, and Cucchiara 2014; Hankins 2007). In this scenario, charter schools may affect the retention of gentrifier families in a neighborhood or, once gentrifiers establish a neighborhood charter school, accelerate the entry of gentrifiers into the neighborhood (Kimelberg and Billingham 2012).

BOX 1

School Choice, Marginalization, and Exclusion

When gentrifier parents gain control in neighborhood schools, they risk marginalizing or displacing low-income students and longtime neighborhood parents. More and more, evidence shows the potential for such negative outcomes. Even if low-income children are not displaced from or marginalized within the school, any initial benefits from the influx of gentrifier families are not likely to be sustained (Posey-Maddox, Kimelberg, and Cucchiara 2014).

Broader evidence on the effects of neighborhood gentrification shows that, in courting higher-income residents into distressed neighborhoods, the institutions may end up excluding the low-income residents they are trying to help (Formoso, Weber, and Atkins 2010). This means that urban school districts that market themselves toward gentrifier families may marginalize or exclude poor parents and children already in the school system from decisionmaking processes (Cucchiara 2008). Moreover, competition might emerge between poor and gentrifier children for slots in increasingly high-quality schools (Cucchiara and Horvat 2009).

Exclusivity, marginalization, and limited benefits for low-income children in schools can be mitigated through deliberate, collective approaches to parental organizing and leadership that value the participation and contribution of students and parents from all socioeconomic backgrounds (Cucchiara and Horvat 2009; Posey-Maddox, Kimelberg, and Cucchiara 2014).

Another risk of school choice is its potential to exacerbate existing lines of racial and economic segregation. School choice may offer a mechanism for gentrifier parents to opt-out of neighborhood schools based on their racial or class composition or to cluster their children in enclaves (Burgess et al. 2004; Kimelberg and Billingham 2012; Oberti 2007). For public institutions in neighborhoods to benefit from influxes of gentrifiers, gentrifiers must actually use those institutions (Formoso, Weber, and Atkins 2010).

3. Can Charter Schools with Preferences for Neighborhood Residents Make Distressed Neighborhoods More Appealing to Gentrifiers?

Charter schools that give admissions preferences to neighborhood residents may affect a gentrifying family's choice of residence. In this scenario, higher-income families who move into the neighborhood could send their children to the neighborhood charter school. The more desirable the charter school, the more likely (a "stronger pull") a gentrifier family will purchase a home in the neighborhood, even for those less desirable areas of the city. Such a scenario assumes the charter school is higher performing than the local traditional public school.

4. Will Charter Schools Be Used to Redevelop Real Estate in Distressed Neighborhoods?

Physical redevelopment of a distressed neighborhood is another mechanism by which choice schools can affect patterns of gentrification. If charter schools open in previously vacant or abandoned lots, warehouses, churches, or other facilities, they may increase property values of surrounding real estate (Chung 2002). Such curb appeal and increasing property values could influence gentrifier families to move into the neighborhood, even if those families do not have children or do not send their children to the charter school.

Emerging Perspectives on School Choice and Gentrification

In 2014, the Urban Institute hosted a convening of housing and education policy experts, researchers, and practitioners to bring critical attention to the research and policy implications of school choice and changing neighborhood demographics. Convening participants agreed that, as the literature suggests, gentrifier parents need incentives to enroll children in schools within revitalizing neighborhoods. They also confirmed previous studies that flexible hiring practices, principals, pedagogy, and curriculum can close the divide between gentrifiers and longtime residents within a school. In this section, we summarize topics of conversation that have not emerged in the literature but are relevant for understanding the potential interrelationship between school choice and gentrification.

“So if you don’t privilege the middle class and make [them] feel like they have a voice, they will just leave. You can’t retain [the middle class] unless you make them feel privileged...like they are getting the best for their kids. This is a major dilemma”

-Education policy researcher and self-identified gentrifier

Opportunities for Integration, Inclusion, and Equity

Convening participants reinforced and expanded on the idea that gentrifier parents desire local control and unique privileges when they send their children to neighborhood schools. Indeed, some participants described local charter schools in their community as born out of the explicit desire for gentrifier parents to control their children’s schooling.

Concerns about exclusion or social stratification that can happen when gentrifiers seek such control (discussed in box 1) led the participants to address how schools in gentrifying neighborhoods

can maintain racial and socioeconomic diversity and inclusivity of all children. One of the principal challenges to inclusivity, as one participant described, is that schools feel pressure to provide privilege to middle-class parents to keep them from sending their children elsewhere.

Participants offered multiple perspectives and solutions on how to counteract the exclusion that occurs when gentrifier parents enroll in predominately poor schools. One participant, drawing on her observations of a neighborhood-based charter school created in a racially and socioeconomically diverse area of New Orleans, offered that explicit discussions of racial and class differences among parents, school administrators, and students can create more inclusive school environments.

Other participants stressed that schools in gentrifying neighborhoods need talented principals or teachers who can “speak to both sides” in diverse schools, bridging cultural and class differences between constituent parents. Such leaders can help gentrifier parents understand and respect the experiences of their low-income counterparts and value the participation of both low- and middle-income students and families in school activities and governance.

“We talk about principals as teaching leaders. We talk about serving poor kids. Being in a room with people from different backgrounds and it helps us to bounce ideas. Those real things sometimes are hard to talk about. Talking about race and culture, I wasn’t developed for that. I think that ability to talk [to] both sides—it has to come from an experience standpoint, and I think that’s a challenge from many perspectives”

-Former Chicago public school principal

Unexpected Challenges and Costs

Several convening participants offered perspectives that were inconsistent with or absent from the literature. These perspectives may help inform new research and provide new direction for exploring how school choice and gentrification may relate.

FAMILIES WANT PREDICTABILITY

Drawing on their experiences in metropolitan areas with school choice, some convening participants described how families of all racial and socioeconomic backgrounds want predictability in their schools. These participants said families do not want to move into a neighborhood expecting to attend the local school and then have “the rug pulled out from under them” with a new school-choice or assignment policy that sends their children elsewhere. A desire for predictability among middle-class families is unexplored in the literature, which has focused on the increased likelihood for these families to exercise school choice. One implication is that school-choice systems based on lotteries, with irregular openings

and closings of charter schools or with limited availability at high-performing schools, may decrease the attractiveness of cities to middle-class families.

ATTRACTING MIDDLE-INCOME FAMILIES MAY BE DISADVANTAGEOUS

One participant offered that certain moderately low-income schools may be at a tipping point where the schools would become ineligible for Title I support with additional enrollment of nonpoor students. Such schools may find it fiscally prudent to maintain the current socioeconomic composition of their student body and not attempt to attract additional middle-class families.

Measuring the Relationship

In this brief, we explore a number of elements of a possible relationship between school choice and gentrification. For the most part, we discuss a unidirectional influence where school choice precipitates gentrification. However, the opposite may be true as well. It may be that gentrification creates a demand for school choices that did not previously exist in the neighborhood. Both directions are worth exploring, and directionality and linearity are far from established.

Understanding such a complicated relationship requires new research. This new research base will require a number of different but complementary strategies. Research can examine correlations between trends in school choice and trends in gentrification at the city or district level. For example, one can examine changes over time in the charter school market share, socioeconomic and demographic composition within charter schools, and socioeconomic and racial composition at the neighborhood and city level to identify concurrent trends in school and neighborhood change.¹

To expand the trend analyses described above, it will be necessary to catalog policies and rules across school districts and states and over time. Such a resource would facilitate research on questions relating not only to gentrification but also to other outcomes of interest. For example, one can examine socioeconomic and demographic population change in relation to the onset or sunset of open-enrollment policies in a given district.

Future ethnographic and case-study research should go deeper to explore the behavior and motivations of childless gentrifiers. Under what circumstances do they stay in cities, for how long, and to what degree do schools and school policies factor in to their residency decisions? Such research would inform the work of schools, school boards, education authorities, planning departments, and developers.

Of course, existing data sources should be further mined to explore the relationship. Data from common lottery applications can be used to explore the school preferences and residential locations of families. Of particular value is longitudinal student-level data. In some localities, administrative records allow researchers to analyze the movement of students across schools, neighborhoods, and time. Such data can illuminate patterns of school composition in neighborhoods before and after the onset of school choice.

Conclusion and Next Steps

School choice is a growing phenomenon that has great potential to influence neighborhoods and cities. Although little is known about how exactly school choice affects gentrification, emerging research hypothesizes a link and suggests that their intersection will be increasingly important to the social and economic landscapes of cities and neighborhoods and the schools within them. Existing research is descriptive and localized, so new research approaches will be needed to document and then disentangle the broader trends in school and residence decisionmaking. This brief presents hypothetical pathways as a starting point for understanding some of the mechanisms that might be at play. Expanding and deepening our understanding in this area is critical for honing our education and urban policy tools and maximizing the welfare of students, families, neighborhoods, and cities.

Notes

1. The charter school market share is the number of students enrolled in charter schools divided by the number of students enrolled in all public schools in the district. Socioeconomic composition is represented by the proportion of students who qualified for free- or reduced-price meals.

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