

The Chicken and the Egg of Educational Choice

Tell me if you've heard this chestnut before: "We can't let parents choose their child's school because they don't have enough information to make a good choice."

Lord knows I have.

Like many old adages that have a kernel of truth suffocating under a pile of manure, this statement does have some merit. Insofar as school choice creates a marketplace, that marketplace relies on information to function well. If parents don't know the options available to them, they are less likely to find a school that matches their child's needs. Without the seeking of better options, any kind of competitive pressure on existing schools is lost. Information is essential.

The problem, as identified in a great [new research paper](#) by Michael Lovenheim and Patrick Walsh, is that parents don't have a strong incentive to look for information about school options if they don't have the ability to take advantage of the information. If they don't have choices, why search for information?

This creates a terrible chicken-and-egg problem. We shouldn't give parents choices because they don't have enough information to make good decisions, but they don't have enough information because we haven't given them choices!

Lovenheim and Walsh's paper offers a path forward. They find that parents respond to expansions of school choice options by seeking out new information. The researchers were able to link more than 100 million (yes, you read that right) individual searches on the school information website GreatSchools to geographic areas that either had school choice expanded or restricted during the almost three years of their study to see

how parents respond to changes in the options available to them.

They found that expansions of school choice drove increases in searches for school information. They also found that restrictions of school choice drove decreases in searches for school information.

As it turns out, parents, whose time is valuable, don't waste their time learning about school options that they can't take advantage of. But, when they have options made available to them, they work to find out which one is best for their child.

I can think of three implications for school choice policy:

1. Knowledge is not static. As Tom Stewart and Patrick Wolf demonstrate in their great book, [The School Choice Journey](#), parents have to learn how to navigate school choice systems. At the outset, they might be unfamiliar with the options available to them and they might not know where to find information. That changes over time. They gain access to information and they become more savvy shoppers. School choice advocates should invest time and money in working with parents to understand the options that are available to them.

2. Informing parents isn't a huge lift. According to their [most recent financial statements](#), GreatSchools, which provides information about nearly every school in America to more than 50 million web visitors, has a budget of just more than \$11 million per year. [Show-Me KC Schools](#), a local outfit in Kansas City that provides higher-touch services for families choosing schools has a budget of \$500,000 per year. These figures represent fractions of pennies on the dollar of education spending at the local level, let alone the state or federal level, and are of huge help to families. It doesn't take a massive bureaucracy or piles of money to help inform parents.

3. Parents are not dumb. Lovenheim and Walsh's paper shows a remarkable level of savvy on the part of parents. They know

when options are available to them and when they aren't, and they act accordingly. Why is it that [we are so skeptical](#) of parents' ability to choose the best educational environment for their own children? Is it right to deny a family access to educational opportunities because they might not choose what we think is "the best" option?

It seems like every month we are learning more and more about how parents make decisions about their children's schooling. This is great. New information about parent decision-making can help us understand how parents weigh relative bits of information, such as safety vs. test scores or extra-curricular activities vs. student-teacher ratios. Lessons from this research can also help school choice advocates better support parents as they navigate the proliferating web of school choice programs around the country. Remember, parental information and school choice is only a chicken and egg problem if we want it to be one.

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