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The Details Matter: A Systematic Review of School Choice Policy and Implementation Research

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At least one-third of students no longer attend their neighborhood public schools due to the growth of school choice policies. We systematically review the empirical literature on nine key elements of policy that affect how choice works (e.g., transportation, information, and choice school accountability). We conclude, first, that many aspects of choice policy improve access to choice schools. Second, choice policies are generally poorly designed to serve marginalized students. Third, some policies have potential to improve efficiency and equity simultaneously. Fourth, policy effects on access to choice schools appear somewhat detached from effectiveness on academic outcomes. Fifth, implementation is at least as important as policy design. We also provide an extensive future research agenda.

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Abstract: At least one-third of students no longer attend their neighborhood public schools due to the growth of school choice policies. We systematically review the empirical literature on nine key elements of policy that affect how choice works (e.g., transportation, information, and choice school accountability). We conclude, first, that many aspects of choice policy improve access to choice schools. Second, choice policies are generally poorly designed to serve marginalized students. Third, some policies have potential to improve efficiency and equity simultaneously. Fourth, policy effects on *access* to choice schools appear somewhat detached from *effectiveness* on academic outcomes. Fifth, implementation is at least as important as policy design. We also provide an extensive future research agenda.

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Introduction

School choice has been one of the central organizing principles of K-12 education policy and school reform for more than three decades. The idea is based on two related principles: first, that families have the right and capacity to choose what type of schooling their children receive and, second, that schools themselves should have the flexibility to design and manage schools as they see fit. Advocates argue that school choice policies increase quality, effectiveness, and efficiency of education by reducing the role of government regulation and collective bargaining, increasing competition, giving families choices among a wider variety of options, and encouraging the development and expansion of new and innovative schooling designs and practices. Further, advocates argue that choice increases equity by giving marginalized groups[1] access to schooling options currently available only to more advantaged groups, allowing them to exit low-performing schools and breaking the link between school spending, housing, and income (Friedman, 1955; Hoxby, 2003).

Critics counter that choice policies raise certain costs (e.g., administration and transportation) (Buerger & Harris, 2021), undermine the public good aspects of education, e.g., common values and democratic virtues (Levin, 2012), and reduce the neighborhood social capital that comes with attendance zones (Rönnberg et al., 2025). Also, rather than improve equity, choice might undermine it by increasing discrimination (Bergman & McFarlin, 2020) and segregation.[2] To the latter point, scholars have noted that Friedman's (1955) writing on vouchers immediately followed the Supreme Court's decision in *Brown v. Board of Education,* and the idea was promoted to sidestep desegregation efforts. More generally, critics argue the assumptions advocates make about education markets in the above arguments are unrealistic in ways that undermine both efficiency and equity (Harris, 2023).

While this larger debate about the advantages and disadvantages of school choice continues, it has become clear that school choice policies are here to stay. The share of school-age children attending choice schools[3]–schools other than their neighborhood public schools–has been rising for decades (Harris, Witte, & Valant, 2017). This started with magnet schools in the 1970s and picked up steam in the 1990s when a confluence of choice policies began to take hold. The first charter school opened in 1992. District open enrollment policies (i.e., intra- and inter-district choice), while less well documented, followed suit. The legal impediments to homeschooling also greatly diminished and virtual learning made homeschooling easier for parents.

The slow and steady growth of choice policy and utilization in the 1990s has been followed by rapid expansion of universal school vouchers and "education savings accounts" (ESAs) that support access to private and religious schools.[4] While some small-scale programs had developed in prior decades, 17 states and counting have adopted these much more expansive policies just since 2020. The timing of this surge is not a coincidence. President Trump selected one of the nation's leading private school choice supporters, Betsy DeVos, as Secretary of Education in 2016. In 2020, the COVID pandemic created political and market demand for school choice, coupled with strong criticism of public schools from Trump and DeVos for requiring masking and keeping public schools closed to in-person instruction. All of this was made possible by a series of U.S. Supreme Court decisions, beginning in the early 2000s, that set aside prior constitutional constraints, including state Blaine Amendments that limited public funds that supported religious instruction. For decades, school choice, in all its forms, has been heading in one direction: up (Harris, Witte & Valant, 2017).

A vast literature has studied these reforms with most of the attention placed on the academic outcomes of students (e.g., student test scores and high school graduation) who exit traditional public schools to participate in these choice programs. In some cases, research also examined economic efficiency by comparing effectiveness in relation to costs (DeAngelis, et al. 2019; Harris, 2020) or simulating the effects on more abstract notions of household welfare or utility (e.g., Barseghyan, Clark & Coate, 2019). This research has generally focused on the question, do choice policies "work" for a variety of desired outcomes?

Given how many types of choice policies now exist and how widespread they are, we argue that an increasingly urgent question is, how can we make choice work better–overall, and especially for marginalized students? In other words, how does the variation in school choice policy design and implementation shape efficiency, equity, and other aims?[5] We inform the answers to these questions with a systematic review of evidence organized according to nine key policy elements.

To organize this review, we start, in the next section, by outlining the standard theory of action used or implied by choice advocates, which rests on simplifying assumptions from economics. Then, we explain why the unusual features of the schooling market make the market apt to break down, which calls for various types of government intervention. We identify nine elements of school choice policies that have the potential to address these market failures, organized around the stakeholders whose actions the policies aim to shape: those focusing on household actions (mostly choice facilitation) and those focusing on school actions (resources and governance). These categories align with the supply-and-demand concepts of economic market analysis and with the topics covered in many actual choice policies. The resulting modified theory of action provides a more realistic depiction of the schooling market with

greater clarity and depth about school choice policy design that serves as a foundation for our systematic review. This modified theory also connects policy debates more closely to prior critiques of market functioning.

Next, we explain our methods and findings. We carried out keyword searches of major databases that include terms concerning the nine policy elements and many other related ones, picking out thousands of studies. We then narrowed this list to studies that provide empirical evidence about direct effects on student outcomes or various intermediate outcomes, e.g., whether the policy leads to more students attending choice options. We also included studies about policy implementation, which is central in educational policy generally (Honig, 2006).

Several important, overarching conclusions emerge from this review of the evidence: First, many different aspects of choice policy can improve access to schools, but they vary dramatically in their costs. Second, choice policies are generally poorly designed to serve marginalized students. Third, some of the policies that have potential to improve choice for marginalized students could increase efficiency simultaneously. Fourth, policy effects on *access* to choice schools are somewhat detached from *effectiveness* on academic outcomes. Fifth, implementation may be more important than policy design. We outline several ways in which key actors (parents, educators, government officials) exercise discretion in the choice process, which also point to ways in which implementation might be important.

Our review represents one of the first attempts to gain a comprehensive understanding of the design and implementation of school choice policies and, in the process, calls into question the usual labels like “charter schools” and “vouchers.” It also informs a rapidly changing, and increasingly choice-based, schooling environment, as well as future research agendas.

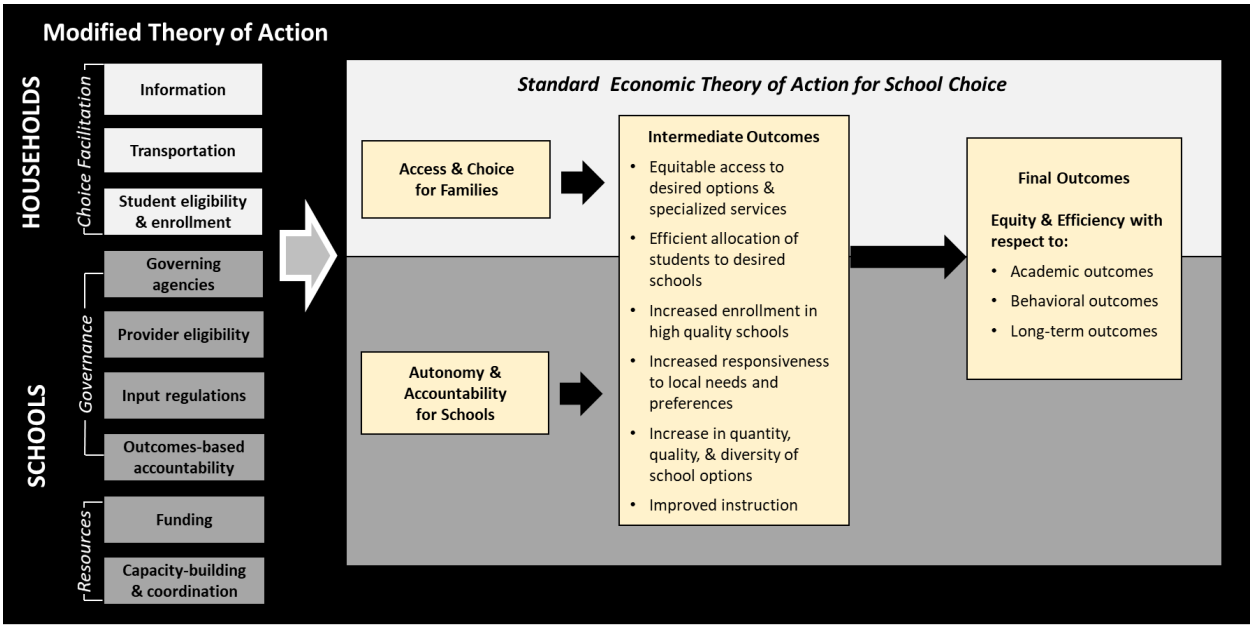
Economic Theor(ies) of Action: Standard and Modified Versions

School choice advocates and market-based arguments have long held that providing households choice and access to a variety of school options (demand side) and schools with greater autonomy and accountability to parents (supply side) will increase healthy competition that improve intermediate outcomes (e.g., increased responsiveness to local needs, quality, diversity of school options, improved instruction[6]) and long-term outcomes (e.g., academic, behavioral, social, occupational, economic, family, community outcomes) for students.

Advocates also argue that school choice increases equity, primarily by offering access to alternative schools for those who are otherwise forced to attend low-performing traditional public schools.[7] This means, among other things, that the above academic, social, and behavioral benefits accrue as much, or more so, to marginalized populations, including students from low-income families, students of color, students with disabilities, and students who are English learners.

The above standard economic theory is shown on the right side of Figure 1. Decades of research, however, has demonstrated the limitations of this idealized theory and pointed to multiple potential market failures (e.g., Walford, 1996; Bradley and Taylor, 2002; Hess, 2002; Ladd, 2002; Betts, 2005; Levin, 2012; Lubienski and Lubienski, 2013; Jabbar, 2015; Harris, 2020). These arise because the assumptions of the standard economic model fail to hold, to an unusual extent, in primary and secondary education (Harris, 2023). Parents are poorly informed, distance limits practical options, and schools have incentives to exclude certain students, to take a few examples, and all of this may stunt the competitive process and stifle outcomes, especially for marginalized groups. Markets might not improve efficiency or equity in the ways described in the standard theory.

Figure 1: Standard and Modified Theories of Action



In the presence of market failure in any sector, economists consider possible corrective measures by the government. Below, we list nine policy elements, organized into three broad categories, that might help address the above market imperfections. They collectively represent a modified theory of action in which a combination of government and market activity leads to more efficient and equitable outcomes.

Choice Facilitation

This set of policies focuses on the household and includes three policy elements–transportation, enrollment systems, and information–that are intended to overcome barriers and "make choice real" for families (Harris, 2020). Below, we describe how each might help correct market failures and improve efficiency and equity.

Transportation. In most situations, parents are choosing among brick-and-mortar schools that require students to get to and from school almost every day. Except in densely populated

areas, this limits families' feasible choice sets and their preferred options (Glazerman & Dotter, 2017; Harris & Larsen, 2023). It is also more efficient in some ways to operate a small number of larger schools. This means that, in contrast to the standard theory, a free market would provide families with few practical options and reduce competition across schools. A government policy requiring transportation therefore has the potential to expand the scope of the market for each family, especially for marginalized students, improve the match between their preferences and school services, and create more competition across schools. Some schools might decide to provide this service voluntarily, to increase enrollment, but schools serving advantaged students have less incentive to do so, making them less accessible to marginalized groups. Required transportation may take multiple forms including public mass transit or more customized "yellow bus" service.

Enrollment systems. Markets, by definition, have firms acting autonomously and therefore in a decentralized fashion. In schooling, this means every child must submit applications separately to every preferred school and schools must manage their admission processes. A key problem is that, though the market is supposed to increase household utility, decentralized choice offers no way for an individual school to know how strongly an individual student wants to attend it.[8]

Private schools can also select students on almost any basis they wish. Prior academic performance, behavior, and letters of recommendation are common considerations. They can also legally reject students based on gender, gender identity, sexual orientation, religion, disability, and more, essentially anything other than race. Legal admission requirements are much more limited with charter schools and public school open enrollment; however, with charter schools these are often difficult to observe or enforce.[9] As a result, as Jennings

emphasizes in the title of her 2010 study, we are talking about "schools' choice" as much as parental "school choice."[10]

Yet another problem with decentralized enrollment is that some students might end up with many options and some with none at all. Even if schools wanted to avoid this scenario, they have no way of knowing the decisions other schools have made when making their own admission decisions. This is perhaps the most extreme case of unequal schooling access and is especially likely to arise for marginalized students.

The above issues can be addressed through coordinated or unified enrollment systems. These systems allow families to express their preferences by submitting a single rank-ordered list for each child, reduce administrative burdens with a single process, and ensure that all students have at least one schooling option (Harris et al., 2015).[11] Such centralization is unlikely to emerge organically and might not even be legal when organized by private firms, given laws restricting anti-competitive practices.

In addition to schools' admission decisions, some choice policies restrict participation by limiting who is eligible to receive public funds to attend their school of choice, such as remaining geographic/jurisdictional constraints (e.g., living within a given state or county). In the case of vouchers/ESAs, funding access, rather than school admission, is sometimes restricted based on income or whether students have attended public schools. We include these student eligibility issues in the enrollment system category because both pertain to students' ability to gain admission to schools.

Information. While transportation and enrollment systems determine families' feasible choice sets, information shapes families' perceptions about which schools they deem more

desirable (Corcoran & Jennings, 2019). All markets require that consumers have good information to choose among various options, but the market for information itself is imperfect. In the case of schooling, many key outcomes are difficult to measure or, as Hess (2002) writes, schooling involves "exceptionally ambiguous output." Even when the outcomes can be measured, it is difficult to isolate the contribution of schools from those of households (Harris, 2023). Schools also have information that they may not wish to share (what economists call an information asymmetry). Even when they do wish to share that information broadly, schools face a coordination problem—to be useful to consumers, most schools would need to agree on what information is collected and reported to ensure comparability.

In some choice settings, this problem is addressed through parent guides, enrollment centers, personalized assistance, school fairs, and information embedded within centralized enrollment systems. Third-party user-review platforms also increasingly provide a wider array of information to parents. (See also the later discussion of accountability policies that provide additional information.)

School choice, as the name implies, is supposed to be about households choosing schools and, as we have shown, policy affects these choices by shaping households' practical choice sets (transportation), the options they prefer within those sets (information), and whether they are able to access the options they prefer (enrollment systems).

Governance

The general point of our modified theory is that governments might need to intervene, in ways that go beyond funding, to address market failure and improve efficiency and equity. But discussions of govern*ment* require institutional details about actual govern*ance*, which we define

to include setting objectives, values, strategies, and broad policies that guide the actions of choice schools, and ensuring compliance and achievement.[12] As discussed later, some aspects of governance are written and circumscribed by constitutions, laws, statutes, and other official documents, but much of the key decision making is subject to judgment and falls in the category of implementation. While we limit ourselves to "policy" for now, we explain later why we think implementation is a critical and under-explored topic in the choice realm.

In this modified theory of action, policies related to school governance fall into four subcomponents: governing agencies, provider eligibility, input/process regulation, and outcomes-based accountability. In contrast to the above discussion of choice facilitation, these generally focus on the supply side of the market.

Governing agencies. The first question is, which agencies govern choice schools? Federal and state legislative bodies, and their departments of education, are clearly always a part of governance.[13] Choice laws also sometimes name specific governing bodies, such as charter authorizers, to oversee this work. In some cases, the governing bodies of choice schools are the same as those governing traditional public schools: school districts and state education agencies. However, with charter schools, the governing agency is the authorizer, which can also include independent charter boards, universities, and non-profits. A related important debate is whether governing agency representatives are directly elected or appointed.

It is not obvious which governing agencies will generate the most efficient and equitable outcomes. Some argue that governing agencies should be separate from state legislatures and school districts that govern traditional public schools (TPS) because part of the aim is to provide alternatives to TPS. On the other hand, as we discuss below, there may be coordination advantages to having a single body overseeing all schools in each location.

Provider eligibility. The imperfections in the schooling market, as noted above, create perverse incentives for providers (e.g., excluding certain students) and allow some poorly performing schools to survive the competitive process (Harris, 2023).[14] For this reason, governing agencies might restrict government subsidies to schools that are more likely to meet public objectives. The government could exclude some types of schools (e.g., for-profit and non-accredited schools) or, as with today's charter authorizers, select certain providers from pools of applicants based on a wider range of criteria (e.g., based on prior performance). The intent is to filter out "bad actors," though, unless the exclusions are based on school characteristics that are closely related to school quality, the government will also end up excluding "good actors" in the process. The issue of provider eligibility is more than just about academic quality. Both parents and the government expect schools to achieve a variety of objectives. Parents want to keep their children safe and happy, among other things, and the public wants to prepare them as workers, citizens, and community members.

Input/process regulations. Rather than restricting which schools receive public funds, another government response to the market's stifled competition and perverse incentives might be to impose input regulations. For example, the government could allow private schools to participate but require them to hire certified teachers, choose from among a specific set of textbooks, or hold periodic public meetings to advise the local community on their plans and to take input on important school policy decisions. The market motivation behind these regulations is the same as provider restrictions–to increase efficiency and equity.

Outcomes-based accountability. The above input-oriented approach to government policy has been criticized because, by itself, it does not set clear goals, because specific inputs and processes do not seem closely linked to outcomes, and because compliance can be difficult and

costly to establish. This spawned the "new accountability" in the U.S. starting in the 1990s (Fuhrman, 1999) in which the government sets goals and measures progress toward them while letting schools use their autonomy and knowledge of their student population to decide how to meet them–that is, tight on results, but loose on process. Outcomes-based accountability goes beyond merely providing information to families (see above) and might include the governing agencies' closure, takeover, or other non-renewal of schools that do not meet minimum outcome benchmarks.

In short, governance policies address what units of government are responsible for choice schools, what schools those governing bodies allow to receive subsidies, and what objectives and processes the governing bodies require choice schools to pursue, circumscribing the set of options available to families.

Resources

A second set of school-focused policy efforts to improve upon the equity and efficiency of choice systems relates to resources. This includes funding, as well as less obvious factors that affect the ability of schools to utilize their resources, which we call capacity and coordination.

Funding. It is widely accepted that schooling creates positive externalities for society that necessitate public subsidies to avoid under-provision. Less recognized is how variation in the level, manner, sources and allowed use of those funds—the details of subsidies—creates alternative incentives.

Choice-based systems tend to rely on student- or enrollment-based funding, in keeping with the market logic that parents should be able to "vote with their feet" and take their funding with them. An additional key decision involves the degree to which funding is targeted to

marginalized students (student funding can be "weighted" to direct more resources to these students) and rules around tuition and fees, which can increase the total resources available to schools but also restrict access by lower-income families. Government funds can also be provided directly to families (through accounts or tax credits) or to schools, possibly through intermediary organizations (e.g., Scholarship Granting Organizations). These intermediaries, because they control funding, end up with considerable power and therefore may take on some of the responsibilities of governing agencies.

Capacity and coordination. Other factors influence the ability of schools to utilize the above funding for productive purposes. In the standard theory of action, firms are responsible for creating their own capacity. However, it is widely recognized that individual firms cannot carry out some functions efficiently, e.g., creating a workforce with the right general skills or assembling property necessary for large, specialized facilities. It is therefore common for the government to work with employers and colleges to fund and coordinate workforce training and use eminent domain powers to help with property acquisition. Choice school governing agencies might also need to play those roles for choice schools, as school districts do for TPS.

Schools might also need to coordinate with one another (voluntarily or otherwise) in ways that companies do not. The above discussion of student enrollment is one such example; coordination is necessary to ensure that every student has access to at least one school. Another example arises because students with disabilities have needs that are so specialized and expensive that the market is unlikely to meet them.[15] Efficiency and equity might be improved by schools' pooling resources to serve students with disabilities. Since such coordination would be difficult on a voluntary basis, the government might need to require school contributions to

such efforts. We couple this coordination with capacity-building because both involve schools' utilization of funding and interconnections across schools.

Discussion of Modified Theory of Action

Our modified theory of action, illustrated in Figure 1, provides a foundation for our systematic review that structures the search for studies (see search terms in the next section) and the discussion of findings, including guiding the connections between the large number of studies (see the results section). It also makes additional contributions. First, it connects prior critiques of the free market to specific government policies that might be able to address market failures. Also, the modified theory provides greater depth and clarity about policy design, compared with broader policy labels like "charter schools" and "vouchers" that are often assigned for legal or political reasons, but which vary widely in their underlying designs. For example, in our framework, the old statewide *voucher* program in Louisiana has more in common with that state's *charter* policy than it does with the state's new voucher policy.[16] We need a better way to think about what makes one choice policy different from others and this modified theory provides some assistance.

We emphasize that this is a theory of action and therefore does not address the potential unintended consequences of these policies. Transportation might expand families' practical options and increase competition but, in a world of fixed budgets, this also takes resources away from instruction. Input/process regulations might improve efficiency and equity in some ways, but also could induce some potentially good schools not to participate or, even among those that do enter the market, undermine their autonomy and outcomes. Outcomes-based accountability might help provide information to families and eliminate poor performers who would otherwise be able to remain in the market, but, as the evidence on high-stakes testing makes clear, this can

lead to teaching to the test and related poor teaching practices. These, and other, unintended negative effects are as important, theoretically and empirically, as the intended positive effects that are the basis for the theory.

It is tempting to think that the empirical analysis that follows provides a formal test of the modified theory. If the theory is valid, then at least some of these nine policies should improve access and outcomes (accounting for costs). As we will demonstrate, the evidence base is not yet strong enough to establish the theory's validity, but our analysis does make progress in that direction and provides a framework for more convincing answers in the future.

Methods of Systematic Review

We examine the existing empirical evidence concerning the effectiveness and implementation of the nine policy design elements outlined in the modified theory of action. Our review not only aims to describe the causal impacts of these policy elements on the intermediate and student outcomes, but also stakeholders' experiences with these elements to understand *how* and *under what conditions* the policy design elements enhance or inhibit families' abilities to meaningfully access schooling options and schools' autonomy and capacity to improve student outcomes. We also describe how the policy design elements influence stakeholders' perceptions of the fairness and legitimacy of school choice policies, which is important for their continued support and ultimately their success.

In accordance with systematic review guidelines (Alexander, 2020), we frame our review around two research questions:

1. How do the design elements of school choice policies affect students' intermediate and long-term outcomes?
2. How does the implementation of the design elements of school choice policies influence stakeholder experiences with and perceptions of school choice?

We focus our review on studies about school choice, broadly defined, in a U.S., K-12 context. Our literature identification, screening, and inclusion process is informed by both the PICO (population, intervention, comparison group, outcome) and SPIDER (sample, phenomenon of interest, design, evaluation, research type) systematic review search frameworks because we include both quantitative and qualitative studies (Methley et al., 2014). We map each quality of these frameworks to qualities of our study in Appendix Table A1.

Search Strategy

First, we formulated a single search strategy to answer our two research questions. Given the wide range of units of analysis (e.g., policymakers, school administrators, community members, parents, and students) and outcomes (e.g., school choice participation; choice of school; segregation; students' academic, behavioral, and long-term outcomes; experiences and perceptions) as well as the inclusion of both qualitative and quantitative studies, we focused our search terms on interventions under study within our phenomenon of interest: our policy design elements of school choice policies. We chose school choice and design element terms through an iterative process of pilot searches and discussion. The design elements also evolved throughout the data collection process; many were combined. Our school choice search terms included traditional types of school choice policies (e.g., vouchers, charter schooling, magnet school, portfolio management model) and design element search terms were words and phrases commonly associated with each design element or general policy design and implementation.

Appendix Table A2 includes a full list of search terms with Boolean operators and classified by school choice policy design element.

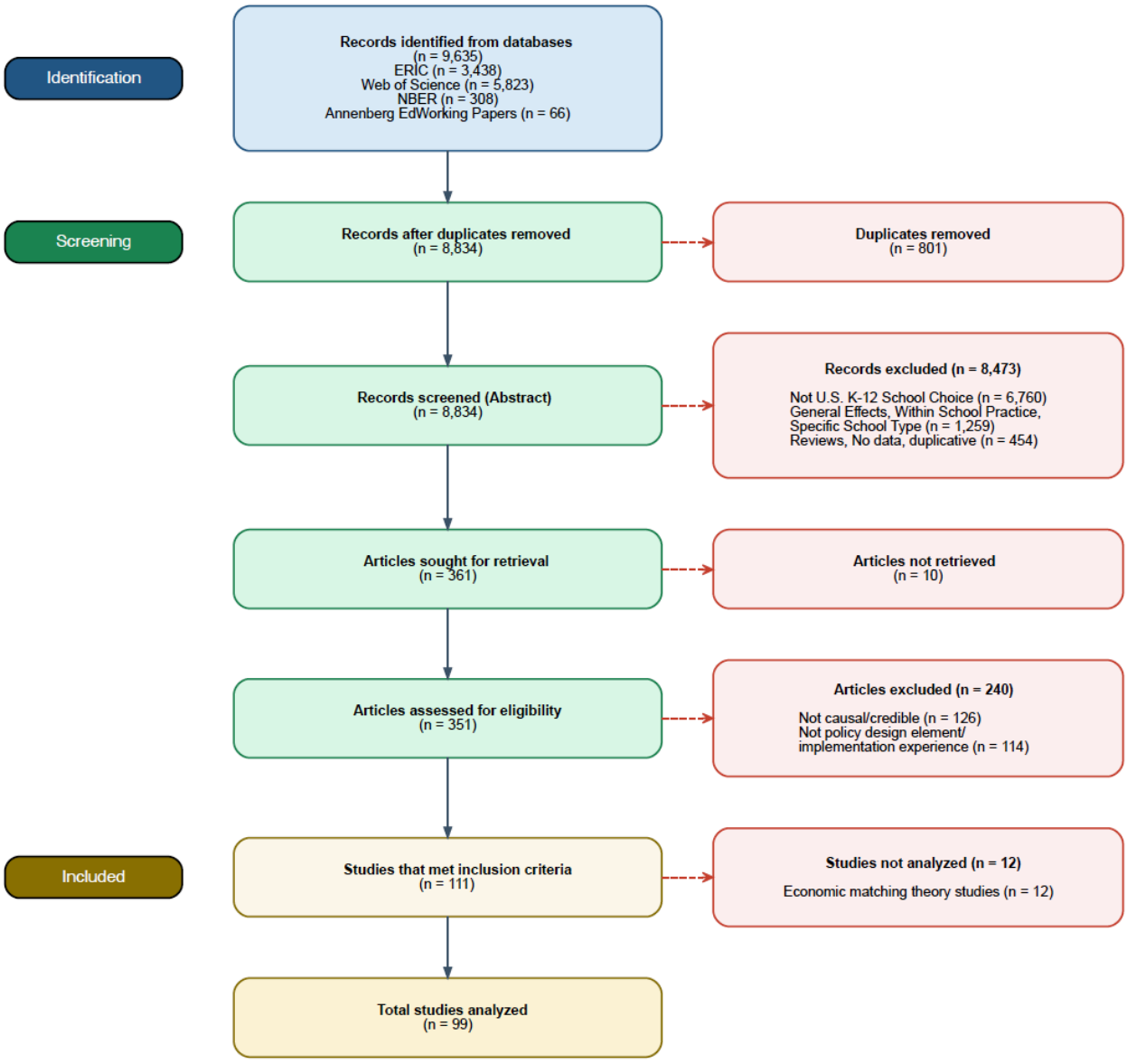
We executed our search using the Education Resource Information Center (ERIC) and Web of Science databases on September 3, 2025. ERIC was chosen for its focus on education research, the main subject of our study. We used Web of Science to capture high-quality school choice studies from other disciplines such as economics and political science. We focused most of our search to peer-reviewed studies published since January 1, 2000, to increase relevance to current choice contexts at scale. We also performed separate searches for National Bureau of Economic Research (NBER) and Annenberg Institute working papers, which are not peer-reviewed. Our search uncovered 8,834 unique articles.[17]

Study Screening

Next, we conducted two rounds of screening to identify articles for inclusion in our analysis: a title/abstract screening and a full-text reading. Figure 2 summarizes our inclusion process. In our first round of screening, we first excluded studies if they did not take place in a U.S. K-12 context or did not focus on school choice. Second, we only included studies where the policy design element(s) could be clearly identified from the title or abstract. Specifically, we excluded studies that examined the effects of school choice or a type of school choice, including competitive effects studies, because they do not focus on a specific design element, just the presence of or participation in school choice. We also excluded studies of specific school types (e.g., Montessori school; dual-language school) or within-school policy or practices because they are not directly related to the design of school choice policies, the focus of this study. Third, we excluded studies not focused on school and/or household outcomes (e.g., teacher outcomes).

Finally, we excluded reviews of prior studies, studies with no empirical K-12 education data, and duplicative studies.

Figure 2: Systematic Review PRISMA Flow Diagram



Titles and abstracts were screened by two researchers: an author and a research assistant. Eighty percent of abstracts were double coded. They engaged in a pilot round of screening

(agreement rate: 92.5%; Cohen's Kappa: 0.58), an initial round of screening (agreement rate: 93.9%; Cohen's Kappa: 0.37), and then check-ins to guard against rater drift (>90% agreement rate). In each meeting, they also engaged in a reconciliation process to decide on inclusion for conflicting articles. In total, 361 (4%) studies were identified for inclusion in the second round of screening.

Phase 2 screening was performed by one of the authors. Quantitative studies were screened to determine whether they answered our first research question, concerning the effects of the design elements on student outcomes, whereas qualitative studies were screened for the second research question. One-hundred thirty-four and 227 studies were determined to have mainly quantitative or qualitative methods, respectively. If a study used both types of methods, or its methods were misidentified from the title/abstract, they were screened for both research questions.

Quantitative studies were mainly screened for credibly causal research design in Phase 2. Studies were included if the authors attempted to account for selection bias (e.g., matching, simulation, quasi-experiment, experiment). Forty-six quantitative studies met the inclusion criteria. Twelve of the 46 included quantitative studies study different types of student-school matching algorithms, which we exclude because they pertain only to small variations in centralized enrollment systems. Very few students are currently assigned via these algorithms, so we focus instead on the empirical and principal policy issue—whether to have a centralized system at all.[18]

Qualitative studies were screened in Phase 2 for their alignment with the second research question and their credibility. We excluded studies that: (a) did not focus on the experiences or perceptions of stakeholders in the choice process, (b) described design elements prior to

implementation, (c) did not include empirical data, and (d) were not credible. Qualitative studies were considered to be credible if they transparently described their data collection and analysis methods and reported at least one action to establish credibility such as the use of multiple data sources (triangulation), lengthy time in field, or meetings to establish interrater reliability. In addition to the 34 quantitative studies, this process added 65 qualitative studies (N=99).

Analysis

For each included study, the authors identified which of the nine school choice policy design element(s) was discussed and summarized the findings. For quantitative studies, the outcome, treatment, and research design were also recorded while the subject of the experience and/or perception was recorded for qualitative studies. The studies were organized by policy element to determine patterns and themes across studies. Below, we discuss our findings for each policy element.

Table 1 Analyzed Quantitative Studies

Authors	Yr.	Design Element	Choice Type	Treatment	Outcome	Design
Grosskopf et al.	2020	funding	Charter	government grants	fundraising expenditures; enrollment	IV
Kamat & Norris	2025	funding	Private Sch.	voucher amount	welfare=benefit-cost	simulation
Zimmer et al.	2014	governance	Charter	authorizer type	test scores	student FE/matching
McEachin et al.	2016	governance	Portfolio District	governance type	test scores; behavior	VAM
Ferrare et al.	2023	governance	Charter	authorizer	test scores	matching
Harris & McKenzie	2023	governance	Charter	statewide authorizer	charter market share	DiD
Witte et al.	2014	outcome account.	Private Sch.	high stakes testing	test scores	DiD
Carlson & Lavertu	2016	outcome account.	Charter	accountability closure	test scores	RD
Bross et al.	2023	outcome account.	Charter	closure or restart	test scores, HS grad., college entry	DiD
Singleton	2017	school elig.	Charter	for-profit status	proficiency; expenditures	Time FEs & VAM
Lavertu & Tran	2025	school elig.	Charter	EMO operated charter	test scores; attendance	DiD
DeAngelis et al.	2023	input regs	Private Sch.	regulations	participation in voucher program	survey RCT
Thompson et al.	2024	input regs	Private Sch.	regulations	participation in hypothetical ESA	survey RCT
Singer	2024	enroll. sys./stud. elig	Interdistrict	interdistrict enroll. policy restrictiveness	within district segregation	TWFE
Koedel et al.	2009	enroll. sys./stud. elig.	Intradistrict	integration/busing vs open enrollment	within district segregation	simulation
Abdulkadiroglu et al.	2015	enroll. sys./stud. elig.	Portfolio District	Uncoordinated vs. coordinated enrollment	school placement	simulation
Hungerman & Rinz	2016	enroll. sys./stud. elig.	Private Sch.	restricted vs. unrestricted voucher	state level Private Sch. revenue	DiD
Andreyeva & Patrick	2017	enroll. sys./stud. elig.	Charter	implementation of proximity priority	housing prices	DiD
Zhan	2018	enroll. sys./stud. elig.	Private Sch.	means tested vs SPED voucher	number of Private Schs.	DiD
Bonilla-Mejia et al.	2020	enroll. sys./stud. elig.	Magnet Sch.	implementation of proximity priority	housing prices	DiD
Prieto et al.	2023	enroll. sys./stud. elig.	Magnet Sch.	enrollment priority, algorithm & capacity	access and equality of access to schools	simulation
Valant & Walker	2023	enroll. sys./stud. elig.	Portfolio District	enrollment priorities	school placement	simulation
Lincove & Valant	2024	enroll. sys./stud. elig.	Portfolio District	centralized enrollment	demos, enrollment, mobility, discipline	CITS
Avery et al.	2025	enroll. sys./stud. elig.	Charter	Decentralized/common app/coordination	placement at first choice school	simulation
Wilson et al.	2007	transportation	Intradistrict	bus service	cost, travel distance, emissions	simulation
Trajkovski et al.	2021	transportation	Portfolio District	bus eligibility	choice of school	RD/McFadden
Valant & Lincove	2023	transportation	Portfolio District	school bus provision	commute times	simulation
Hastings & Weinstein	2008	information	Intradistrict	school test score information	choice of school; test scores	RCT
Corcoran et al.	2018	information	Portfolio District	simplified sch. quality info.	choice of school	RCT
Glazerman et al.	2020	information	Intradistrict	online display of information	hypothetical choice of school features	survey RCT
Valant & Weixler	2022	information	Portfolio District	information on high growth schools	choice of school	RCT
Houston & Henig	2023	information	Intradistrict	information on levels and growth	hypothetical choice of school	survey RCT
Campos	2024	information	Intradistrict	Information on levels and growth	choice of school; test scores; college enroll	RCT/DiD
Cohodes et al.	2025	information	Portfolio District	Customized & simplified sch. quality info.	applications and enrollment	RCT

Table 2. Included Qualitative Studies

Authors	Year	Choice Type	Subjects	Design Elements	Context
Ahn	2011	charter	admin.	funding	MN, NV, PA
Wohlstetter et al.	2011	charter	admin.	funding	National
Egalite et al.	2020	private sch.	parents	funding; enroll sys. & stud. elig; information	NC
Williams	2021	charter	admin.	funding; outcome acc.	Washington, D.C.
Bulkley et al.	2022	all	state policy makers	funding; governance; input regs; enroll sys.; info.; transport.	CO, FL, LA, MI, OR
Sattin-Bajaj	2023	portfolio district	admin.	funding; transportation	NYC, Detroit, NOLA
Perera et al.	2024	charter	admin.	funding	Los Angeles
Marsh et al.	2021	portfolio district	admin., policy makers, advocates	coordination; governance; outcomes acc; enroll. sys.	Denver, NOLA, Los Angeles
Berry et al.	2022	portfolio district	admin.	coordination; governance	Memphis
Hashim et al.	2022	portfolio district	admin.	coordination; governance	Los Angeles
Enoch-Stevens et al.	2024	charter	admin./authorizers	coordination; governance; outcomes acc;	southern urban district
Sattin-Bajaj & Hashim	2024	portfolio district	admin.	coordination	NYC, Detroit, NOLA
Vergari	2000	charter	charter authorizers	governance	AZ, MA, MI
Garn	2001	charter	authorizers; state bureaucrats	governance; input regs	AZ
Blitz	2011	charter	admin.	governance; outcome acc.; input regs	WI
Karanxha	2013	charter	admin.	governance	FL
Marsh et al.	2020	portfolio district	admin.	governance; outcome acc.; input regs	Los Angeles
Allen & Gawlik	2021	charter	admin.	governance	FL
Bulkley et al.	2021	portfolio district	admin.	governance	Denver, NOLA, Los Angeles
Bulkley et al.	2024	charter	charter authorizers	governance	5 states
Jabbar	2016b	portfolio district	admin.	governance	NOLA
Finnigan	2007	charter	admin.	outcome acc.; input regs	AZ, CA, MA, MI, NC, TX
Jennings	2010	portfolio district	admin.	outcome acc; enroll sys. & stud. elig.	NYC
Jabbar	2015	portfolio district	admin.	Outcome acc; enroll. sys. & stud. elig.	NOLA
Kotok et al.	2019	intradistrict	admin.	outcome acc; school elig; enroll sys. & stud. elig.	El Paso
Castillo	2020	charter	admin.	Outcome acc; enroll. sys. & stud. elig.; information	NYC
Wright-Costello & Phillippo	2020	portfolio district	parents	Outcome acc.	Chicago
Jabbar	2016a	portfolio district	admin.	Outcome acc; enroll. sys. & stud. elig.	NOLA
Glazer et al.	2019	charter	charter admin. & teachers	Outcome acc.; enroll. sys. & stud. elig	Memphis
Wohlstetter et al.	2004	charter	admin.	school elig.	National
Henry & Dixson	2016	portfolio district	community members	school elig.	NOLA
Finnigan & Scarbrough	2013	interdistrict	admin.	input regs; enroll sys. & stud. Elig	cities in upstate NY
Austin	2015	private sch.	admin.	input regs	Indiana
Stambach & Becker	2006	charter	parents	enroll sys. & stud. elig.	
Smrekar	2009	magnet sch.	parents	enroll sys. & stud. elig.	Nashville
Jessen	2013	portfolio district	parents & admin.	enroll sys. & stud. elig.; information	NYC
Condliffe et al.	2015	portfolio district	students	enroll sys. & stud. elig.; information	Baltimore
Pattillo	2015	portfolio district	parents	enroll sys. & stud. elig.; information; transport.	Chicago
Delale-O'Connor	2018	portfolio district	parents	enroll sys. & stud. elig.; information	Chicago
Fong & Faude	2018	portfolio district	parents	enroll sys. & stud. elig.	Boston
Potterton	2019	all	community stakeholders	enroll sys. & stud. elig.	AZ

Evans	2020	magnet sch.	admin., teachers, & students	enroll sys. & stud. elig.	Northeast city
Sattin-Bajaj & Jennings	2020	portfolio district	counselors	enroll sys. & stud. elig.; information	NYC
Sattin-Bajaj & Roda	2020	portfolio district	parents	enroll sys. & stud. elig.	NYC
Phillippo et al.	2021	portfolio district	students	enroll sys. & stud. elig.	Chicago
Kafka	2022	portfolio district	parents	enroll sys. & stud. elig.; information	NYC
Akchurin & Chouhy	2024	portfolio district	admin. & advocates	enroll sys. & stud. elig.	NOLA
Eisenlohr et al.	2024	charter	admin., policy makers, stakeholders	enroll sys. & stud. elig.; transportation	Washington, D.C.
Roda & Sattin-Bajaj	2024	portfolio district	parents	enroll sys. & stud. elig.; information	NYC
Cuddy et al.	2025	portfolio district	parents	enroll sys. & stud. elig.	Chicago
Fast	2025	portfolio district	admin.	enroll sys. & stud. elig.	NYC
Jabbar et al.	2025	all	parents	enroll sys. & stud. elig.; information	CO, LA, MI
Holme et al.	2013	all public choice	admin.	transportation	CA, MN, TX
Mavrogordato & Stein	2016	charter	parents	transportation; information	Indianapolis
Wao et al.	2017	all	parents	transportation; information	FL
Lenhoff et al.	2022	all public choice	parents & students	transportation	Detroit
Hashim & Sattin-Bajaj	2023	portfolio district	admin.	transportation	NYC, Detroit, NOLA
McGinn & Ben-Porath	2014	portfolio district	parents	information	Clarksville, TN
Sattin-Bajaj	2014	portfolio district	students	information	NYC
Sattin-Bajaj	2015	portfolio district	parents	information	NYC
Delale-O'Connor	2017	portfolio district	parents	information	Chicago
Sattin-Bajaj et al.	2018	portfolio district	counselors	information	NYC
Sattin-Bajaj & Jennings	2022	portfolio district	parents	information	NYC
Faude	2025	intradistrict	families; welcome center staff	information	Boston
Villavicencio et al.	2025	portfolio district	parents	information	large urban district

Results

Before discussing our findings in detail, we quantitatively summarize the policy elements, outcomes, and experiences of the studies synthesized in our review. We list our 34 quantitative studies of interest in Table 1. Twenty-one studies examine the impacts of choice facilitation elements, 11 concern governance elements, and only two estimate the effects of resources for choice schools. Only two quantitative studies of choice facilitation design elements examine private school choice, and they estimate the effects of voucher eligibility requirements (e.g., universal vs. means-tested) on number of and revenues for private schools (Hungerman & Rinz, 2016; Zhan, 2018). The rest of the choice facilitation studies focus on choices among public schools. The 13 quantitative studies concerning policy design elements related to governance and resources examine charter school (9) and private school (4) choice programs. Across both quantitative and qualitative studies, only two focus on interdistrict choice.

Studies examining design elements concerning governing agencies and outcomes-based accountability estimate effects on student outcomes, mainly test scores, except for one study (Harris & McKenzie, 2023). In contrast to the studies of governance elements, only two studies of the impacts of choice facilitation elements examine the effects on student outcomes (Campos, 2024; Hastings & Weinstein, 2008). The 19 public school choice facilitation studies examine effects on choice of school (13), commute (2), segregation (2) and housing prices (2). Our 65 included qualitative studies are listed in Table 2. The majority (38) of the qualitative studies examine experiences with school choice policy design in portfolio districts such as New York City, Los Angeles, Chicago, New Orleans, Washington, D.C., Boston, Denver, and Memphis with nine others in smaller choice-rich cities such as Baltimore, Nashville and Indianapolis. Therefore, it is unsurprising that 86 percent of our qualitative studies examine issues around

charter schooling (18), other forms of intradistrict choice (4), or both (34). Four studies examine interactions between all forms of choice, usually at the state level (Bulkley et al., 2022; Jabbar et al., 2025; Potterton, 2019; Wao et al., 2017) and only two exclusively examine private school choice programs (Austin, 2015; Egalite et al., 2020). In terms of the experiences and perceptions examined, studies concerning governance and resource policy design elements mainly focus on school, district, and charter school leaders, authorizers, and policymakers whereas studies concerning choice facilitation detail the experiences of parents, families, and students.

In what follows, we synthesize the literature concerning each of the nine policy elements identified in the modified theory. We conclude each summary with the highest priority questions for future research paying particular attention to both efficiency and equity concerns and policy design and implementation. We also pay particular attention to the new vouchers/ESAs, which are quickly remaking the choice landscape and about which there is little research. We note that here, and in the discussion below, these questions do not necessarily emerge from the existing evidence reviewed. Some questions are high priority precisely because there is little prior research on them. In some cases, these questions have already been partially addressed through prior research and our point is only that more is needed in that area.

Choice Facilitation by Households

Transportation. Lack of school transportation is perceived to be a large barrier to accessing school choice options even when public transportation is available and free (Bulkley et al., 2022; Eisenlohr et al., 2024; Hashim & Sattin-Bajaj, 2023; Holme et al., 2013; Lenhoff et al., 2022; Pattillo, 2015; Wao et al., 2017). Parents have safety concerns about public transportation, especially for unaccompanied elementary school students, and, in many cases, public transportation is not convenient for students traveling to schools outside of high-traffic areas

(Eisenlohr et al., 2024). Thus, it is unsurprising that access to school-provided transportation is an important factor in families' schooling decisions. When interviewed, parents state that having access to school transportation was an important reason they chose the school they did (Mavrogordato & Stein, 2016). This is corroborated in school applications. School bus eligibility increases the likelihood a family chooses that school by up to four percentage points (Trajkovski et al., 2021). Additionally, school bus transportation reduces overall commute time and costs (Wilson et al., 2007), including to schools with higher performance ratings, which tend to be in more advantaged neighborhoods, increasing access to schools with higher achievement levels (Valant & Lincove, 2023).

While school transportation can increase equitable access to choice schools, few states require schools to provide it to students exercising choice (McShane & Shaw, 2020). This leaves it up to schools and districts to decide whether to use their own scarce resources to provide transportation. In many cases, the high costs and complex logistics deter many schools from providing transportation (Hashim & Sattin-Bajaj, 2023; Sattin-Bajaj, 2023). However, some schools view transportation as necessary for equitable access (Hashim & Sattin-Bajaj, 2023). In others, they use school-provided transportation to differentiate themselves from other schools and attract students, providing schools the opportunity to shape their enrollment (Hashim & Sattin-Bajaj, 2023; Sattin-Bajaj & Hashim, 2024). Some schools choose to not provide transportation at all or limit it to desirable neighborhoods likely to reduce access for students they perceive to be difficult to educate (Hashim & Sattin-Bajaj, 2023; Kotok et al., 2019).

In response to these equity concerns, some choice-rich cities have created uniform rules concerning transportation eligibility, and, in some instances, centralized its provision. Schools perceive these regulations as hindering their autonomy, especially their ability to utilize

resources for instructional purposes and shape their enrollment and school culture. Additionally, centralized transportation can create frustrations among schools and families when top-down routing and eligibility decisions create little flexibility for schools to respond to individual families' needs (Sattin-Bajaj & Hashim, 2024).

High-priority areas for future transportation research*:* What effect does access to all forms of non-personal transit have on access to schools and long-term outcomes? What is the average cost of various transportation policies and the marginal cost of potential improvements that would increase schooling access? How do distance and transportation shape the educational experience, e.g., student attendance, student participation in after-school activities, and parental engagement in school? What formal or informal arrangements do private schools make to help get children to school under vouchers/ESAs?

Enrollment Systems. Families perceive public school choice enrollment procedures to be burdensome, creating barriers to school choice participation and inequities in access to desired schools (Cuddy et al., 2025; Fast, 2025; Fong & Faude, 2018; Jabbar et al., 2025; Pattillo, 2015; Phillippo et al., 2021; Roda & Sattin-Bajaj, 2024; Sattin-Bajaj & Roda, 2020). First come, first served, decentralized enrollment policies favor parents with access to transportation, flexible jobs, and more social capital (Stambach & Becker, 2006). Early application deadlines leave families who lack school information and residential stability at a disadvantage when making school choice decisions (Delale-O'Connor, 2018; Fong & Faude, 2018). The multitude of application deadlines and requirements are burdensome and may be too cognitively demanding, limiting the number of applications submitted (Phillippo et al., 2021). Restrictive enrollment policies, such as early application deadlines, result in reduced school choice participation of economically marginalized students and students of color (Singer, 2024). Families with more

social and financial resources may be able to overcome these restrictions, giving them an advantage in the enrollment process, perpetuating inequities (Phillippo et al., 2021; Roda & Sattin-Bajaj, 2024). In addition to creating barriers to access, the uncertainty and waiting induced by enrollment processes induces stress and reduces perceptions of agency even for families that can overcome the burdensome procedures (Jabbar et al., 2025; Pattillo, 2015).

Enrollment priorities and selective admissions policies also create inequities in access to schools. Many schools, including traditional public schools, give priority enrollment to students who live near the school. Families respond to these priorities by moving into priority access neighborhoods, as evidenced by increased housing prices (Andreyeva & Patrick, 2017; Bonilla-Mejia et al., 2020), resulting in increased access to high-performing schools for families who can afford homes in a particular neighborhood, in turn, creating socioeconomic and racial inequities in school choices (Sattin-Bajaj & Jennings, 2020; Smrekar, 2009; Valant & Walker, 2023). Admissions requirements that rely on student performance also limit access to high-performing schools. Students may not be aware of the necessary test scores and course work for enrollment in desired high schools, constraining access before the application process begins and creating perceptions of unfairness (Condliffe et al., 2015; Egalite et al., 2020; Phillippo et al., 2021; Sattin-Bajaj & Jennings, 2020). This creates another opportunity for advantaged parents to use their resources to hoard access to high-quality educational opportunities (Sattin-Bajaj & Roda, 2020).

Burdensome applications and restrictive admissions requirements partially result from schools' efforts to shape their enrollment. Schools use their enrollment procedures to deter low-performing students or students who are more costly to educate, such as special education students, from enrolling, especially when high performance accountability pressures exist

(Jabbar, 2015; Jabbar, 2016a; Jennings, 2010; Jessen, 2013; Kotok et al., 2019). More opportunities for schools to select students or "cream skim" arise when enrollment is decentralized, policies are vague and provide little oversight, and schools have discretion over enrollment (Bulkley et al., 2022; Castillo, 2020; Evans, 2020; Finnigan & Scarbrough, 2013; Jabbar, 2015; Jabbar, 2016a; Jabbar et al., 2025; Jennings, 2010; Kotok et al., 2019).[19]

Many school systems have instituted centralized enrollment systems to improve the equity and efficiency of school assignment in choice-rich cities and districts. These systems take two main forms: uncoordinated and coordinated. Uncoordinated systems act as more of a common application where schools still control their admissions processes, similar to the Common App for college admission, whereas one centralized body matches students to schools in a coordinated system. Coordinated systems aim to standardize enrollment processes across schools and maximize the number of students attending desired schools through an algorithmic matching procedure in addition to simplifying enrollment procedures through a single application (Akchurin & Chouhy, 2024). This reduces subjective admissions decisions as well as application burdens, resulting in more equitable access, at least in theory (Jabbar et al., 2025).

Coordinated enrollment systems increase the number of students receiving an enrollment offer and attending their first choice school, unlike uncoordinated centralized enrollment systems (Abdulkadiroglu et al., 2015; Avery et al., 2025). Some evidence exists that coordinated enrollment systems also increase the enrollment of non-white students in historically white schools (Lincove & Valant, 2024). This may be due to overall increases in enrollment in these schools that result from participation in a coordinated application system (Lincove & Valant, 2024; Prieto et al., 2023). However, the complexity and opaqueness of these algorithms leaves families and stakeholders to perceive coordinated enrollment systems as illegitimate and

procedurally unfair (Akchurin & Chouhy, 2024; Sattin-Bajaj & Jennings, 2020). This is especially true when there are enrollment priorities and a shortage of seats in "high-quality" schools because for many, fairness is judged by their enrollment outcome, not the procedure (Akchurin & Chouhy, 2024).

Explicitly prioritizing the enrollment of historically marginalized populations may make access to schools through public school choice programs more equitable. School choice programs that explicitly provided priority enrollment for students of color or implicitly encouraged it through bus availability reduced segregation whereas school choice programs with no priority enrollments in the same context increased segregation (Koedel et al., 2009). However, the explicit use of racial priorities in school assignment has been rendered illegal by the courts. Qualitative evidence suggests that race-neutral priorities, such as socioeconomic status or English Learner status, have not resulted in the racial balance intended (Fast, 2025).

The little research concerning enrollment in private school choice programs focuses on student eligibility requirements (e.g., universal vs. means-tested) rather than enrollment procedures or priorities. Means-tested private school subsidies seem to expand access and increase the supply of private schools as measured by enrollment and number of private schools respectively whereas unrestricted private school choice scholarships seem to increase tuition prices without increasing enrollment (Hungerman & Rinz, 2016; Zhan, 2018). However, families perceive such eligibility requirements as unfair because they exclude some from participation or deter them from seeking opportunities that they believe will increase their future income (Egalite et al., 2020).

High-priority areas for future enrollment system research: What is the effect of changes in student eligibility (e.g., vouchers shifting to universal eligibility) on participation, segregation,

and student outcomes? In decentralized enrollment settings, do schools follow proper procedures (e.g., with respect to lottery selection and admission criteria)? Do centralized enrollment systems meaningfully influence access to schools and improve long-term outcomes relative to decentralized systems? Now that many localities are served by five or more entire choice sectors, at what point do centralized systems become preferable to decentralized ones? With the growth of various forms of choice, how do their various school enrollment systems create challenges for families? What share of private schools exclude students through the enrollment/admissions process and on what basis, especially in places with vouchers/ESAs?

Information. Lack of credible and comparable information concerning the school choice process and school quality limits the ability of families, especially families with smaller social networks and less social capital, to make informed choices and, in some cases, participate in school choice programs (Delale-O'Connor, 2018; Jabbar et al., 2025; McGinn & Ben-Porath, 2014). When school- and state-provided information is available, it is often perceived as confusing, inaccessible, unhelpful, vague, and of poor quality (Bulkley et al., 2022; Villavicencio et al., 2025; Wao et al., 2017). Official information may be inaccessible for some families because it is not in their native language (Egalite et al., 2020; Marsh et al., 2021; Roda & Sattin-Bajaj, 2024; Sattin-Bajaj, 2015; Sattin-Bajaj & Jennings, 2020; Villavicencio et al., 2025). For families without a computer or stable internet access, print materials or information compatible with mobile devices may increase accessibility (Egalite et al., 2020; Sattin-Bajaj, 2015).

Providing families information about school quality, whether that is student achievement levels or growth, increases their chance of participating in choice programs and selecting a high-quality school, or, at least, not selecting a low quality one (Campos, 2024; Cohodes et al., 2025; Corcoran et al., 2018; Hastings & Weinstein, 2008; Houston & Henig, 2023; Valant & Weixler,

2022). By increasing enrollment in schools with higher levels of achievement, these information interventions also improve student test scores, socioemotional outcomes, and college enrollment rates (Campos, 2024; Hastings & Weinstein, 2008). These positive effects of information interventions also spill over and improve choices and outcomes for their peers (Campos, 2024). However, focusing on achievement levels rather than achievement growth may lead to increased segregation (Houston & Henig, 2023). How information is displayed and presented also affects students' school choices. For example, families are more likely to choose higher performing schools when they are listed first or when there are icons denoting higher performing schools (Glazerman et al., 2020). Low-income, Hispanic, and low-scoring students are also more likely to actively participate in school choice programs and choose schools where their odds of admission were higher and less likely to choose schools with low graduation rates when they receive a paper information intervention (Cohodes et al., 2025; Corcoran et al., 2018).

However, families also desire information specific to their child's needs. This is especially true in the case of students with disabilities. The lack of specialized information about special education services and their quality serves as a barrier to school choice participation for students with disabilities and restricts their choice sets (Jessen, 2013). In some cases, schools may withhold information about special education services to deter these families from enrolling students with disabilities, who they may perceive to be more expensive and difficult to educate, in their schools (Jessen, 2013).

Outside of official information, families often use school, community, and social resources for personal assistance in school choice decisions. Personal assistance can buffer enrollment barriers and provide more in-depth and personalized information, leading to more positive school choice experiences (Wao et al., 2017). It may be particularly helpful to families

who lack understanding of school choice materials or who are more comfortable getting information from social networks (Delale-O'Connor, 2017; Mavrogordato & Stein, 2016).

In practice, the availability of personalized assistance, by itself, may not reduce disparities in access to information. School counselors, welcome centers, and social workers often have huge caseloads and competing tasks that prevent them from providing personalized school quality information to each family. Rather, they focus on providing technical assistance with enrollment processes (Faude, 2025; Sattin-Bajaj & Jennings, 2022; Sattin-Bajaj et al., 2018). Their perceptions of their role in the choice process and concerns with school quality data may also deter them from assisting in assembling families' school lists (Faude, 2025; Sattin-Bajaj et al., 2018). When counselors and welcome center staff do provide school quality information it tends to be focused on those who seek out resources and already have a strong knowledge of the choice process (Faude, 2025; Sattin-Bajaj, 2015), potentially exacerbating existing racial and class inequities in access to information (Sattin-Bajaj, 2014). See also Corcoran and Jennings (2019) for an excellent review of research on information and school choice.

High-priority areas for future information research: What are the effects of "navigators" and/or other personal school choice assistance programs on choice of school and student outcomes? What effect do online user review platforms have on choices, especially in the context of voucher/ESA expansion and given that less information about private providers is generally available? What are the effects of information interventions on long-term outcomes? How do the answers to all the above questions differ for marginalized students?

Finally, some questions cut across all the choice facilitation elements: How do transportation, enrollment, and information policies shape competition across schools? Also,

how do families make choices in increasingly complex settings that now involve not just many schools but many types of schools and choice processes? To what degree are marginalized families accessing vouchers/ESAs, given limits on choice facilitation in this policy context?

School Governance

Governing Agencies. All our studies concerning governing agencies (and provider eligibility) come from the charter authorization literature. This is in part because open enrollment policies involve otherwise traditional public schools governed by school districts, and that is beyond the scope of the present analysis; and school vouchers and homeschooling have extremely little oversight by government agencies.

Charter authorizers can, in theory, shape existing school supply, increase equitable access to schools, and influence student outcomes through regulation, support, or some combination of both (Jabbar, 2016b). The extent to which they enforce regulations or aid struggling schools depends on their authority, resources, and governing philosophies. Lack of authority from state policy and resources impedes the ability of governing agencies to regulate or assist charter schools, prevent financial mismanagement, or close schools (Berry et al., 2022; Enoch-Stevens et al., 2024; Garn, 2001; Karanxha, 2013). Even when governing agencies have ample authority and resources, their philosophies may inhibit them from actively shaping school supply, family demand, and student outcomes. For example, accountability-oriented charter authorizers may decide against offering operational and academic assistance to their schools because it could constrain schools' autonomy while others may choose to provide it to ensure academic quality (Bulkley et al., 2021). Governing agencies' philosophies may play a larger role in determining the extent to which they enforce regulations and provide support when state policies concerning

their authority are more nebulous and there is less state oversight of the governing agencies themselves (Bulkley et al., 2021, 2022; Vergari, 2000).

TPS districts, the most common charter authorizer, seem to have a stronger regulatory role than other types of authorizers. Administrators at charter schools authorized by TPS districts perceive that they have less autonomy and flexibility over school operations, possibly due to districts' ability in, and history of, asserting more regulatory control (Allen & Gawlik, 2021; Blitz, 2011; Hashim et al., 2022). School districts might also generate less competition because they are less inclined to create competition with their own schools (Bulkley et al., 2022). On the other hand, a single TPS district governing school operations can lead to greater centralization and coordination of the school supply, potentially resulting in more equitable access to high quality schools (Marsh et al., 2021). The addition of a statewide charter authorizer, where school districts had previously been the sole authorizers, increases charter school market share (Harris & McKenzie, 2023).

Student achievement is generally similar across authorizer types. One study finds that student achievement is slightly lower in charter schools authorized by non-profit authorizers compared to other charter schools (Zimmer et al., 2014). Other studies find variation in authorizer effects between individual authorizers, even of the same type (Ferrare et al., 2023; McEachin et al., 2016). These differences in authorizer effects seem to be driven by the types of schools they authorize (e.g., virtual schools, for-profit schools, schools part of charter networks) (Ferrare et al., 2023; McEachin et al., 2016).

High-priority areas for future governing agency research: We have an especially long list of questions in this section because there is so little research on governing agencies and because they seem to play such a central role in all forms of governance. Regarding the charter sector:

What authorizer practices increase students' access to charter schools or student outcomes? How do authorizer practices vary across authorizer types? Does having a single authorizer do more to increase access and outcomes than having multiple authorizers with jurisdiction over the same location? Similarly, is the portfolio approach, with a single authorizer and governing agency, more effective than allowing different segments of the schooling market to operate under different governing arrangements? Where there are multiple governing agencies with jurisdiction over a specific locality, is there coordination between them? To what degree do authorizers engage in non-required educational activities, e.g., providing support for school improvement? To what degree does public input occur with non-school-district governing agencies–do parents and community members know who to turn to when they have a concern with schools? What are the objectives of authorizers and what forces shape them?

A somewhat different set of questions arises with private schools and vouchers: How have vouchers/ESAs worked in the rare, and mostly historical, cases when they have had oversight from government agencies? Do Scholarship Granting Organizations (SGOs) use their discretion to subtly or indirectly decide which schools are eligible or make governance-like decisions that affect eligible private schools? These questions are more difficult to answer precisely because the organizations involved are private, subject to much less oversight and, anecdotally, less inclined to share data or be observed.[20]

Provider Eligibility. State policies can restrict school eligibility for receipt of public funds based on accreditation, profit status, and other factors. Those policies, and additional rules set by governing agencies can also shape school supply in more subtle ways. First, the amount of support authorizers provide to potential charter school operators during the application process can influence whether schools apply and the quality of their applications. Burdensome

application processes deter applicants with less outside support and prior experience operating charter schools, dissuading community members and organizations from applying (Wohlstetter et al., 2004).

Authorizers' priorities also play a large role in the charter school application process. For example, valuing charter school applications that espouse neoliberal values such as individualism and meritocracy, concentrate on test scores improvement, and champion "no excuses" approaches, may disadvantage community-focused providers and providers of color, creating perceptions of authorizers as racist (Henry & Dixson, 2016). However, authorizer priorities, especially around equity, can be shaped by state policy. Authorizers are more likely to require applicants to address their ability to provide an equitable education in states where charter policy emphasizes it, leading to a larger focus on meeting the needs of historically marginalized populations in charter school applications (Bulkley et al., 2024).

Schools belonging to larger school networks, such as charter management organizations, have larger positive effects on achievement compared to independent charter schools (Ferrare et al., 2023; McEachin et al., 2016; Center for Research on Education Outcomes, 2017), whereas virtual schools and schools operated by for-profit companies are similarly or less effective at improving student achievement and attendance when compared to charter schools operated by non-profits (Ferrare et al., 2023; Lavertu & Tran, 2025; Singleton, 2017).[21]

High-priority areas for future provider eligibility research: To what degree is school accreditation an effective basis for quality control? To what degree and in what ways do authorizers and SGOs exercise discretion in school approval/opening decisions? What application processes and information most consistently predict choice school effectiveness? Are written applications very effective, especially in the world of artificial intelligence where it is

easy to produce persuasive and comprehensive materials? How effective are authorizers in excluding ineffective schools? How many potentially effective schools never apply because of the authorization process?

Input regulations. In general, administrators of choice schools have negative views of input regulations. High amounts of regulation are associated with a lower amount of perceived autonomy and less ability for market differentiation (Finnigan, 2007; Marsh et al., 2020). They create more administrative and financial burdens and increase negative perceptions of regulators (Austin, 2015). Further, regulations, such as prohibiting selective enrollment practices, testing requirements, and prohibition of additional tuition payments, reduce private school leaders' willingness to participate in voucher programs (Austin, 2015; DeAngelis et al., 2023; Thompson et al., 2024).

High-priority areas for future input regulation research: What rules are most useful in improving educational efficiency and equity without unduly dissuading potentially effective providers from participating? Do governing agencies actively enforce rules? To what extent do choice schools act differently when rules are relaxed? How does the potential for future regulation affect school decisions even where no rules currently exist? How are practices different between public and private schools in the areas where public schools are typically regulated (e.g., hiring of certified teachers or treatment of students with disabilities)?

Outcomes-based accountability. Similar to input regulations, outcomes-based accountability is perceived to limit schools' and teachers' autonomy over school operations, leading to homogeneity among schooling options and failure of schooling models that do not focus on test score achievement (Berry et al., 2022; Blitz, 2011; Finnigan, 2007; Glazer et al., 2019a; Glazer et al., 2019b; Marsh et al., 2020; Williams, 2021). Performance accountability is

perceived to not only limit school autonomy but families' choices over their child's schooling. When a school of choice closes due to low enrollment or underperformance, families view it as unfair, as if their choice and community were taken from them (Enoch-Stevens et al., 2024; Marsh et al., 2021; Wright-Costello & Phillippo, 2020).

Performance accountability also creates perverse incentives for schools to actively avoid enrolling low performing students to maintain the achievement levels needed to avoid closure and sanctions as well as attract future students. Selective enrollment practices range from under enrollment practices such as ending mid-year enrollments, to the creation of burdensome enrollment processes and barriers to access to active discouragement and outright selection of students (Castillo, 2020; Jabbar, 2015; Jabbar, 2016a; Jennings, 2010; Kotok et al., 2019).

However, there exists causal evidence that outcomes-based accountability of choice schools can increase student achievement. Closure of low-performing charter schools and high stakes testing of all students in private schools accepting vouchers improves test scores (Bross et al., 2023; Carlson & Lavertu, 2016; Witte et al., 2014). However, the effects of charter school closures on high school graduation and college enrollment are mixed (Bross et al., 2023).

High-priority areas for future accountability research: In the few recent voucher/ESA programs that have them, what have been the effects of accountability on which schools participate, their effectiveness (particularly for marginalized students) and entry and exit of schools? When choice schools close, to what degree is this driven, directly or indirectly, by external accountability as opposed to market forces (low enrollment) or voluntary decisionmaking? Would low-performing schools have closed anyway, without government accountability? To what degree do charter authorizers seem to collect and consider hard-to-

measure or non-contracted factors in renewal decisions? Do parents make different school choice decisions when they have information about school quality from government accountability?

School Resources

Funding. The amount of per-pupil funding for students in choice schools can influence both schools' and households' behavior. First, funding influences charter school expansion decisions. Charter operators decide where to expand their networks based on states' charter school funding formulas and access to facilities (Perera et al., 2024; Wohlstetter et al., 2011). When per-pupil funding is low, they instead increase enrollment as well as fundraising efforts (Grosskopf et al., 2020). Additionally, current funding levels are insufficient for charter schools to offer services that will increase student racial and economic diversity and accessibility, such as transportation (Bulkley et al., 2022; Sattin-Bajaj, 2023). Low funding levels also limit their ability to adequately serve students who need specialized services such as students with disabilities and English Learners (Bulkley et al., 2022).

Households respond to the size of subsidies in private school choice programs. Demand for private school vouchers is larger when the amount of the voucher is more than private school tuition, and so is the match between household preferences and schooling options (Kamat & Norris, 2025). However, voucher amounts are often insufficient to cover tuition, deterring some families from participating in private school choice programs (Egalite et al., 2020).

High-priority areas for future funding research: What are the real differences in resources available in different types of choice schools, considering governmental, non-governmental revenue, and in-kind sources? When new choice policies are instituted, to what degree does this reduce traditional public school funding (total and per-pupil)? Which types of schools seem to

use their resources most efficiently? To what degree do various choice sectors charge fees or seek donations and grants? And how do these practices affect who enrolls?

Capacity-Building and Coordination. Opportunities for coordination and collaboration between choice schools are limited without resources or a mandate from a governing agency (Berry et al., 2022; Harris, 2020). One common area where TPSs and choice schools coordinate with each other is facilities allocation. In many states, traditional public school districts own and control school buildings, allowing districts to use facilities as a political tool to shape the charter sector (Williams, 2021). For example, Denver Public Schools made facilities available to charter schools and other semi-autonomous schools if they adopted enrollment practices such as accepting mid-year transfers (Bulkley et al., 2020). Districts can also use their ownership of school buildings to inhibit growth of their competitors, even when they are compelled to provide facilities to choice schools by law. Instead of providing stable access to standalone facilities, they can offer single year leases, spread schools out over multiple locations, and co-locate choice schools with TPSs creating uncertainty and chaos for private providers (Perera et al., 2024). Given these challenges, it is understandable that access to facilities shapes choice school providers' decisions to expand their networks (Perera et al., 2024).

High-priority areas for future capacity/coordination research: In what places have there been concerted efforts to build capacity and coordinate, formally through government agencies and other organizations, or informally through networks–in what specific educational activities (e.g., facilities and special education services) and with what effect? To what degree is school building availability an issue for choice schools? To what degree is relaxation of building codes/rules, or requiring that school districts make space available, effective in increasing the number, location, and building quality of choice schools—and for whom?

Discussion and Conclusions

Several important, overarching conclusions emerge from the above systematic review and discussion of high-priority research. First, many different aspects of choice policy can improve access to schools, but they vary dramatically in their costs. Our review of the evidence shows that improved transportation, information, and school accountability have made small improvements in access or academic outcomes, especially for marginalized students. However, the first item in this list–transportation–is a much more expensive strategy, which means that adopting it is likely to shift funding from teacher hiring, salaries, and other important resources. On the other hand, improved transportation does less to guide the set of options or those selected by families, which some may interpret as being less paternalistic than information and accountability.

Second, choice policies are generally poorly designed to serve marginalized students. Many dimensions of policy, especially enrollment systems, have the potential to significantly improve access to quality schools for marginalized students, but this potential is under-utilized. As is often the case in public policy, however, there are also trade-offs between equity, efficiency, and other objectives. In this case, enrollment and other choice policies act as sorting mechanisms that improve access for one group while reducing access for others, especially in popular schools that are over-subscribed.

Third, some of these same policies have potential to improve efficiency and equity simultaneously. Information is one example. If the information impacts we observe mean that people make better decisions when they have more information, and if information is unequally

distributed, then providing more information improves equity and efficiency at the same time. This implies that the usual equity-efficiency trade-offs economists observe might not always apply in schooling. Doing more to help marginalized students might improve schooling for all, a kind of "double dividend."

Fourth, policy effects on *access* to choice schools are somewhat detached from *effects* on academic outcomes. Policies like transportation improve access and change the schools that students attend, but this does not necessarily increase academic outcomes (e.g., Edwards, 2024). This conclusion aligns with prior evidence that families view academic outcomes as just one of many considerations when choosing schools (Glazerman & Dotter, 2017; Harris & Larsen, 2023; Holme, 2002). A related implication is that the focus on access versus academic outcomes entails a judgement about how we prioritize family preferences versus public objectives pursued by the governments that provide funding.

Fifth, implementation may be more important than policy design. Implementation research is limited in some ways, especially on transportation, governing agencies, regulation, and coordination/capacity, but we have outlined a number of ways in which key actors (parents, educators, government officials) exercise discretion in the choice process, which also point to ways in which implementation might be important. A few of these have been studied (e.g., how authorizers set their priorities when soliciting school applications), but most have not. Appendix Table B1 provides a list of areas where key actors in schooling exercise discretion in ways that affect school choice and therefore serve as potential areas where implementation might be important.

Our analysis also sets up a future research agenda on school choice. Most of the ideas we proposed above pertain to the specific policy elements discussed above. In addition, we identify

here several cross-cutting questions. For example, while research on all nine policy elements is lacking, this is especially true on the supply side. Researchers have been actively studying choice from a household perspective but have focused less on the school perspective. We know little about the effects of school funding in choice settings, provider eligibility, input regulation, outcome accountability, capacity-building/coordination, or governing agencies.

Also, in the U.S., essentially all local markets are now mixed markets. At a minimum, almost every household in America has access to a traditional public school, tuition-paying private schools, a virtual school, and homeschooling options. Access to private education is also growing quickly through vouchers/ESAs, including the new federal tax credit. However, research tends to focus on the separate types of choice schools, neglecting how they interact with each other.

Finally, we note that future analysis of choice policy should recognize how the effects of decisions about each choice policy element depend on decisions about the other policy elements–they are interconnected. For example, if government funding levels were very low, tuition and fees might be more justifiable to supplement total resources in ways that improve outcomes, albeit with some sacrifice in equitable access. Also, if schools are allowed to use essentially any admission requirements, then centralized enrollment systems probably matter less. A broader implication is that it is difficult to generalize about what is the "optimal design" for each individual policy element.

These complexities of school choice need to be recognized by the policymakers in designing policies, by the educators implementing them, and by the researchers in studying them. This is especially true in the new school choice landscape. In just a few short years, we have gone from a world of regulated choice–charter schools, open enrollment, and state-funded virtual

schooling–to one where the thrust of activity lies in largely unregulated choice where the potential for market failure seems high. This new layer of choice is far out in front of research, which adds greater urgency to filling the gaps we have identified. Here, we have tried to provide a structure to help researchers and policymakers respond with equal urgency, both to make sense of the complexity of this new environment and to design choice policies to advance efficiency and equity.

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Appendix Tables

Table A1: Systematic Review Framework

PICO/SPIDER Quality	**Study Quality**
Population/Sample	U.S. K-12 schools/students and relevant stakeholders
Phenomenon of Interest	School choice
Intervention	School choice policy design elements
Comparison Group/Design	Quantitative Studies: causal research design (e.g., experiment, quasi-experiment, simulation) Qualitative Studies: credible; data collection and analysis procedures are described and actions taken to establish credibility (e.g., lengthy time in field, triangulation)
Outcome/Evaluation	Student outcomes (e.g., test scores, graduation); intermediate outcomes (e.g., choice of school, parent preferences, quantity and quality of schooling options); unintended outcomes (e.g., segregation, discrimination, schooling homogeneity); stakeholder perceptions and experiences
Research Type	Qualitative and Quantitative Methods

Note. PICO stands for Population, Intervention, Comparison Group and Outcome. SPIDER stands for Sample, Phenomenon of Interest, Design, Evaluation, and Research Type.

Table A2: Systematic Review Search Terms

Search Criteria	Search Keywords
Phenomenon of Interest: School Choice	
Types of School Choice	"school choice" OR "voucher" OR "education savings account" OR "charter school" OR "charter schools" OR "charter schooling" OR "open enrollment" OR "controlled choice" OR "inter-district choice" OR "interdistrict choice" OR "intra-district choice" OR "intradistrict choice" OR "magnet school" OR "home school" OR "homeschool" OR "micro school" OR "microschool" OR "tax credit scholarship" OR "portfolio management" OR "market-based"
AND	
Intervention: Design Elements	
Funding	funding OR expenditure OR spending OR allotment OR
Facilities	"school building" OR facility OR facilities OR "site planning" OR
Competition management/coordination	"cap" OR "managed competition" OR coordination OR
Authorization/Governance/Governing Agency	authorizer OR authorize OR authorization OR contract OR contracting OR governance OR govern OR "scholarship granting organization" OR
Performance accountability	Accountability OR oversight OR close OR closure OR renewal OR "take over" OR takeover OR "test score" OR
Input regulation	regulator OR regulate OR
Student Eligibility	admissions OR admission OR eligibility OR
Enrollment systems	lottery OR "unified enrollment" OR "centralized enrollment" OR "enrollment system" OR "application process" OR
Transportation	transportation OR "school bus" OR
Information	"information" OR "parent guide" OR "school guide" OR navigator OR
General policy design	"policy design" OR implementation

Note. Policy design elements evolved throughout data collection and analysis.

Appendix Table B1: Policy Design Element Details and Implementation Questions

	Policy Design	*Implementation*
Choice Facilitation for Households		
Transportation	● Do states or authorizers require choice schools to provide "yellow bus" transportation to any students (e.g., those located a particular distance from the school)? ● Can they charge a fee for transportation? ● Is public transit free of charge for school-age children (and their parents)? ● Are public transit authorities required to consider school attendance patterns in designing their routes?	● How specific are state and federal policies that might require schools to "provide transportation" and how do schools respond to the implied discretion? ● What is the quality of transportation provided, including the proximity to home, pick-up times, and travel times? ● What personal transportation do families have?
Student Enrollment Systems	● Are the programs universal, so that all students are eligible, or are the programs targeted based on student income, disability status, performance of the current or nearby TPS, or other factors? ● Do families have to apply to the government or any organization to establish eligibility? ● Do states, districts, or other governments restrict the official admission requirements schools can impose? ● Do policymakers provide a centralized enrollment option? ● Where available, are choice schools required to participate in centralized enrollment, or can they opt out? ● Whether centralized or decentralized, which "priority categories" are required or allowed? ● For example, are any geographic zones or boundaries considered in student assignments to schools? ● Are schools required to select eligible students at random (e.g., via a lottery system) where there is oversubscription (and after accounting for priority categories)? ● Is there oversight for mid-year transfers of students across schools? Are schools required to "backfill" when their enrollments decline (i.e., to fill open slots with students seeking to attend)?	● If randomized selection is required, is it enforced? ● What types of schools do families want?
Information	● Does the government require that schools provide information to the public about student outcomes and special services provided? ● Is there a single, local, freely accessible parents' guide (online or otherwise) that provides an array of information about all types of schools in a local area? ● Are providers required to administer and report any	● When non-test information is provided (e.g., special programs offered), is it accurate? ● Is it information that aligns with family preferences so that it is useful to them?

	standardized test, perhaps including the test administered to TPSs? If so, are they required to report this information to the public? ● Is information provided in multiple languages where large groups of non-English speakers reside? ● Is information disaggregated by subgroup so that parents can gauge fit for their children?	
Governance of Schools		
Governing Agencies	● Is there a governing body that is responsible for deciding which schools open/close, for ensuring compliance with laws, or for supporting school improvement? ● How many government agencies are involved in setting and enforcing the above policies? Is authority dispersed? ● Are there non-local-district authorizers? If so, do these authorizers only operate on appeals when local districts reject applications, or can they solicit and choose applications independently? ● Is a specific agency tasked with checking compliance with state and federal laws for students with disabilities and other civil rights laws? ● Is one agency tasked with overseeing essentially all schools in each locality? In other words, is there a "portfolio manager"? ● Are governing agencies required to hold and advertise public meetings to seek public input?	● If there are governing bodies, do they have *objectives* (e.g., filling local needs) that are not specified in law (but which are generally allowable by law)? ● Do governing agencies take on *responsibilities* (e.g., supporting school improvement) that are not specified in law? ● Do governing agencies place in their contracts, or otherwise implicitly impose, provisions that are not specified in law? ● If there are multiple governing agencies, do they coordinate, informally or otherwise (e.g., to avoid "shopping" by providers)? ● If public meetings are required, are they held? At convenient times and locations?
Provider Eligibility and Interest	● Are schools/providers required to be accredited or to meet any other conditions prior to opening, such as being a non-profit? ● Can providers teach whatever they wish, including particular religions? ● Are there caps on the total number of providers (or students) that can participate?	● If an agency must formally approve school opening, does that agency have discretion? Is there a vote on approval that opens up that type of discretion? ● What types of groups try to incubate and/or open schools (educators already operating in local schools, experienced educators from elsewhere, traditionally prepared educators, community organizations, for-profit organizations, etc.)?

Outcome Accountability	● Is there a governing body that has responsibility for holding schools accountable? (See Governing Agencies above.) ● What form of accountability is mandated? Must students take the state standardized tests that students take in traditional public schools? Is there mandated subgroup-level accountability, e.g., for marginalized students? ● Do policymakers automatically punish or disqualify schools from receiving public funds when they do not meet certain benchmarks (i.e., are there enforced performance contracts) or is this at the discretion of policymakers?	● What factors do the governing/renewing agencies consider in renewal decisions? Is there a vote of the agency that opens up discretion? (This is analogous to above with respect to provider eligibility.) ● If schools are not automatically renewed or if an elected body votes on applications and renewals, then what factors do governing agencies consider? Do they consider factors not in the contracts that pertain to individual school performance? Do they make judgments based on local needs, e.g., the number of schools needed to serve the number of local students or perceived unmet needs? ● If there is a governing agency, does it carry out non-required data collection, e.g., inspections or regular meetings with school leaders?
Input/Process Regulation	● To what extent are choice schools exempt from the rules applied to TPS? ● Is there a governing body explicitly responsible for checking compliance with state and federal laws, e.g., for students with disabilities and other civil rights laws? ● Does the state or governing body impose rules for what count as expellable offenses? (See above on Student Enrollment and Eligibility.) ● Does the state or governing body require teachers in choice schools to be certified, earn minimum salaries, or participate in particular retirement systems? ● Does the governing body provide or require appeals processes for parents, e.g., regarding school-level discipline decisions? ● Other regulations probably play a small role in improving academic outcomes or providing access to marginalized students. These include financial stability, board processes, and teacher certification.	● If there is a governing body, to what degree does it enforce these regulations? Are there widely known avenues for stakeholders to report violations? Does the governing body require reporting or confirmation of compliance from providers? ● Do governing bodies visit and observe schools to check on compliance?
Resources for Schools		
Funding	● What is the formula for distributing funds to choice schools, including the average level of funding per student? ● Is funding weighted so more funds follow students with greater needs? ● How does funding vary across school types and choice programs? Does it vary in ways that relate to the services they are required to provide (e.g., how much	● Do schools charge fees? Schools of all school types often do so. This is possible even when top-up in tuition is not allowed. ● Do schools seek "donations" from parents to supplement revenue?

	lower is funding for virtual schools, given their inherently lower costs)? ● When students switch schools, to what degree do TPSs lose funding? ● Is there any provision for capital funding for brick-and-mortar choice schools or for school districts to provide access to under-utilized buildings? ● Does funding flow through intermediaries (school districts, authorizers, voucher management organizations)? ○ If so, what share of the funds are spent by these intermediary organizations and how much control do they have over what is distributed to schools? ● Do states create accounts for families from which they can draw down funds? Or do families have to use their own funds initially and then seek reimbursement, e.g., a tax credit? Are there any limits on what schools can charge for children to enroll and participate in the main activities of the school?	● Do schools seek donations from foundations and companies or have partnerships with such organizations that provide benefits to donors (e.g., preference in admissions)? ● When funding passes through a third party, such as a school district, authorizer, or SGO, does the third party use this fact, and the potential withholding of funds to place pressure on schools to act in particular ways?
Capacity-Building and Coordination	● Does any policymaker have the authority to create specialized schools and services where needs are not being met locally? ● Is funding provided to choice schools for buildings? (See funding topic above.) ● Are school districts required to make under-utilized buildings available to choice schools? ● Who owns, controls, and maintains the buildings? ● Are there rules regarding the types of buildings that can or must be used (e.g., detailed building codes that apply specifically to schools)?	● Do governing bodies leverage their wide latitude to build the educator pipeline and provide specialized services? ● Do school districts make it difficult for choice school operators to use otherwise un-used or under-utilized buildings under their control (e.g., by only allowing very short leases or charging exorbitant rents)?

Endnotes

[1] We recognize the wide range of newer terms, including marginalized, oppressed, historically marginalized, and underrepresented. We believe all these terms generally refer to the same groups of students: students from low-income families, students of color, students with disabilities, or students who are English learners. That is, one could replace the term marginalized with any of the alternatives and this would not change our analysis.

[2] The potential for increased segregation has been an additional concern though research suggests that increased within-district segregation (Marcotte & Dalane, 2019) is largely offset by reduced between-district segregation (Monarrez, et al. 2022).

[3] We recognize that the term "choice schools" creates some complexity regarding public open enrollment policies where some students are assigned to TPS by neighborhood and others request moves into or out of such schools. However, it is useful here given the many forms of choice we are considering.

[4] ESAs place government funds into accounts and allow families to draw down the funds for allowed educational expenses, which includes not only tuition but also tutoring, curricular materials, educational technology, etc. These are generally limited to families not attending public schools.

[5] The concept of efficiency is not entirely straightforward, as scholars have argued it is not neutral and is defined by judgements about which benefits and costs matter, and to whom (Stone, 2012). Going forward, we rely just on "efficiency and equity," which, at least in economics, embody a wide range of aims. For example, the "public good" elements of education are, in economics, elements of efficiency. "Social cohesion" (Levin, 2002) can also be thought of as an element of publicness. This reliance on "efficiency and equity" is not to downplay non-economic ways of thinking but rather to simplify the terminology and remind the reader that the choice policies we examine are in response to the limitations of economic theory.

[6] We include instruction in the theory of action because this is central to understanding any education policy. However, later, we omit this from our empirical review because it is difficult to connect instruction to the specific policy levers we examine and the scope of the review is already quite broad.

[7] We draw on the definition of equity from the National Equity Project (https://www.nationalequityproject.org/). There are many ways to interpret the concept of equity and how policies achieve it. Some believe policies must rectify historical and oppressive structures to achieve equity, while others see the provision of fair processes, or equal access and opportunity as an adequate means (Allbright et al., 2019). For this part of the framework, we are focusing on the outcomes, but we recognize that achieving equity involves broader processes, practices and inputs that are not simply measured by outcomes.

[8] In a regular market, the strength of demand is addressed through market prices, but few choice schools are even allowed to charge tuition and, given the widely held objective of equitable access, this would be a highly debatable mechanism. See the later discussion of school resources for more on this topic.

[9] In some cases, charter schools and open enrollment public schools can consider past disciplinary record, academic background, and/or the schools' perceived capacity to serve students, but even these are atypical. Charter schools are also often required to admit students via lottery when there is oversubscription.

[10] The enrollment system is not the only way that schools can select students, but it is the most direct. Harris (2020) and Mommandi and Welner (2021) identify more than a dozen ways that schools can select students and almost all of these are unrelated to the enrollment system. They include the location of school buildings, availability of transportation, use of fees, choice of school marketing venues, and post-enrollment practices, e.g., related to discipline.

[11] On a smaller point, centralized enrollment systems can be used across choice types. For example, in New Orleans, families use a single form to rank charter schools alongside private schools funded by vouchers.

[12] While we view this as primarily pertaining to the supply side of the market, there is also some connection to choice facilitation as the governing body might be the one to oversee information, transportation, and enrollment systems. We also distinguish governance from management, which focuses on carrying out or implementing the decisions made by the governing bodies.

[13] We focus on *government* agencies here because all non-profit organizations (and many for-profit ones) in the U.S. have their own private governing body, usually a board of directors. While these boards may play a meaningful role, we are mainly interested in the role of government in correcting market failures.

[14] We use the term "provider" here to recognize that some types of choice policies, including the new "education savings accounts" (ESAs) can be used for non-schooling options, such as tutors.

[15] This can be partially addressed with weighted student funding, but this is far from perfect because the cost of providing these services depends on the number of students who have those needs.

[16] Louisiana's old voucher program required that students take the state test, gave the same type of letter grades to participating private schools as to traditional public and charter schools, and restricted participation of low-performing private schools, which created charter-like accountability. The state's new voucher program does none of those things.

[17] We also performed a book search on ERIC on the same date. This search uncovered 304 books. We screened the book abstracts using the same procedure as the article abstracts. Only 22 met the criteria for full screening. Of these 22 books, only 3 were labeled as research, one of which was published in 2003. We supplement our systematic review with the 2 books that met our screening criteria: Bulkley et al. (2020) and Sattin-Bajaj (2015).

[18] Most of these studies compare deferred acceptance (DA), top-trading cycle (TTC), Boston Mechanism (BM), and other algorithms (e.g., Abdulkadiroglu, et al. 2020; Kapor et al., 2020) and the trade-offs between them in terms of efficiency and presence of a stable equilibrium (e.g., Che & Tercieux, 2019).

[19] Although school leaders interviewed in the research cited above report engaging in selective enrollment practices, quantitative research finds little evidence of cream skimming in charter schools or voucher programs (Kho et al., 2022; Waddington et al., 2024).

[20] If we take a broader view of governance, to include the private, organization boards overseeing private schools, then we might ask: How do those boards operate? How do they function similarly and differently from elected boards?

[21] An exception is Dynarski et al. (2018) who find positive participant effects of the for-profit National Heritage Academies relative to counterfactual TPS. This study is not included in the main text because it does not directly compare the effectiveness of different types of schools and only considers one school chain. This placed it outside the search criteria.