



School choice: Why it can deepen inequality

◆ —◆
Erica Frankenberg
Pennsylvania State University

The Idea of Choice



- ✦ What could be more American than the freedom to choose your own school or even create a school?
- ✦ Ideals include freedom, creativity, markets, competition, attacks on old bureaucracies
 - ✦ All of these have elements of American tradition
 - ✦ Capture the spirit of an era cynical about government, disappointed in social reforms, and dominated by business ideas
- ✦ Choice seems attractive, usually does not cost much, and leaves those already satisfied with their schools undisturbed.
 - ✦ The politics and parent eagerness are not difficult to understand.
- ✦ Not surprising that last five Presidents have embraced choice as a major solution for educational inequality

Political support



- ✦ “.. in some cases [when schools fail], that’s going to mean restarting the school under different management as a charter school – as an independent public school formed by parents, teachers, and civic leaders who’ve got broad leeway to innovate. And some people don’t like charter schools. They say, well, that’s going to take away money from other public schools that also need support. Charter schools aren’t a magic bullet, but I want to give states and school districts the chance to try new things. If a charter school works, then let’s apply those lessons elsewhere. And if a charter school doesn’t work, we’ll hold it accountable; we’ll shut it down.”

✦ President Barack Obama, National Urban League

Bipartisan support



- ✦ “Schools will be given a reasonable chance to improve, and the support to do so. Yet if they don’t, if they continue to fail, we must give parents and students different options: a better public school, a private school, tutoring, or a charter school. In the end, every child in a bad situation must be given a better choice, because when it comes to our children, failure is simply not an option.”
--George W. Bush, 2001

Political Support, cont.



- ✦ “We know charter schools provide real public school choice. When I became President, there was just one independent public charter school in all America. Today, thanks to you, there are 1,700. I ask you now to help us meet our goal of 3,000 charter schools by next year.”

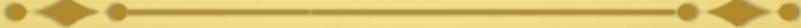
--Bill Clinton, 2000

But is it ideal?



- ✦ Recent choice policies have paid little attention to discrimination
- ✦ Public school choice isn't an American tradition
- ✦ Evidence of the benefits of school choice is mixed

Questions to resolve



- ✦ What do we know about the conditions under which choice provides clear benefits for the children and communities that most need them? Under what conditions is it likely to fail?
- ✦ What kinds of policies are needed to insure racial equity and opportunity in choice programs at a time in which the country is growing increasingly diverse?

Why Diversity Matters

✦ Benefits of Diversity

- ✦ Social and academic benefits
- ✦ Improve career-readiness and college access
- ✦ Helps the social and economic success of communities

✦ Harms of Racial Isolation

- ✦ Qualified, experienced teacher mobility
- ✦ Educational achievement, attainment
- ✦ Overlap with poverty concentration

✦ Supreme Court cases and some federal policies reflect these research findings

- ✦ Federal government released guidance in Dec 2011 affirming importance of diverse K-12 school

Types of school choice



- ✦ Can differ by jurisdiction:
 - ✦ Within school districts or between school districts (intradistrict or interdistrict choice plans)
 - ✦ Within public schools or between public and private school (e.g., voucher), or
 - ✦ Create a new educational agency (e.g., charter school)

Types of choice, cont.



- ✦ Open to all equally on the basis of interest or can have admissions requirements.
- ✦ It can have a plan for diversity or ignore the issue of segregation.
- ✦ Provide free public transportation or require families to provide transportation.
- ✦ Offer beneficial choices of much better schools or limit choices to weak receiving schools.
- ✦ There can be subsidized lunches available for hungry poor kids or none.
- ✦ The choice system can have strong outreach and counseling for all parents or limit their market to particular groups or neighborhoods.
- ✦ There can be special and unique magnet curricula or not.

What does this mean?



- ✦ All the combinations and permutations of these features mean that there are a great many kinds of choice and the kind of choice offered matters greatly. Choice approaches cover the gamut from those very likely to offer few benefits to very children in poor communities to programs that could be of great value.
- ✦ Choice is only meaningful as an educational reform strategy when better choices are available, and when the parents who need them know about them and are supported in making choices.

Origins of choice



- ✦ Until mid-20th century, choice was extremely rare
 - ✦ Limited to a handful of elite specialized schools and vocational-technical schools
 - ✦ Vast majority of U.S. students always attended school where local school officials assigned them
- ✦ Beginning of more widespread school choice in the South in the aftermath of the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision in 1954
 - ✦ Freedom of choice plans left segregation intact
 - ✦ Voucher plans allowed white students to attend academies

Choice isn't enough



- ✦ In mid-1960s, the federal government began to assess the outcomes of choice programs in judging whether they complied with the law.
 - ✦ Office of Civil Rights in 1965 set minimum civil rights standards for choice plans such as providing transportation, honoring family choices, and welcoming other-race students into schools
- ✦ In the North, open enrollment meant choice sped resegregation & many urban transfer plans were found unconstitutional
- ✦ In the civil rights era, federal courts found the dominant forms of choice across the U.S. to be fostering or maintaining unconstitutional segregation.
 - ✦ Choice was a strategy strongly linked to segregation

Choice to further diversity



- ✦ Magnet schools combined choice, educational innovation, and desegregation; were open to all
 - ✦ Minimized conflict that often accompanied beginning of mandatory reassignment for desegregation
- ✦ Magnet schools, which were aided with federal funding in Emergency School Aid Act in 1970s, offered unique curricula, deliberate outreach, and high-quality faculty
- ✦ By 1980s, 2400 magnet schools existed, educating more than 1 million students; concentrated in big cities
- ✦ Magnets with civil rights policies provided answers to the segregating tendencies of unlimited choice while still greatly expanding parental choice and creating a level of racial integration that was broadly acceptable across racial lines.

Choice to further diversity, cont.



- ✦ Controlled choice first implemented in early 1980s to move away from neighborhood schools by offering parents options to rank school choices
- ✦ Student's assignment was to highest rank choice that was also compatible with district desegregation goals
 - ✦ Families liked having more control & minimized conflict while also pursuing desegregation
 - ✦ Plans often included efforts to ensure all families knew about school choice options
 - ✦ Vast majority received their top choice(s) for schools & preferences for out of neighborhood schools grew

Shifting focus of choice options



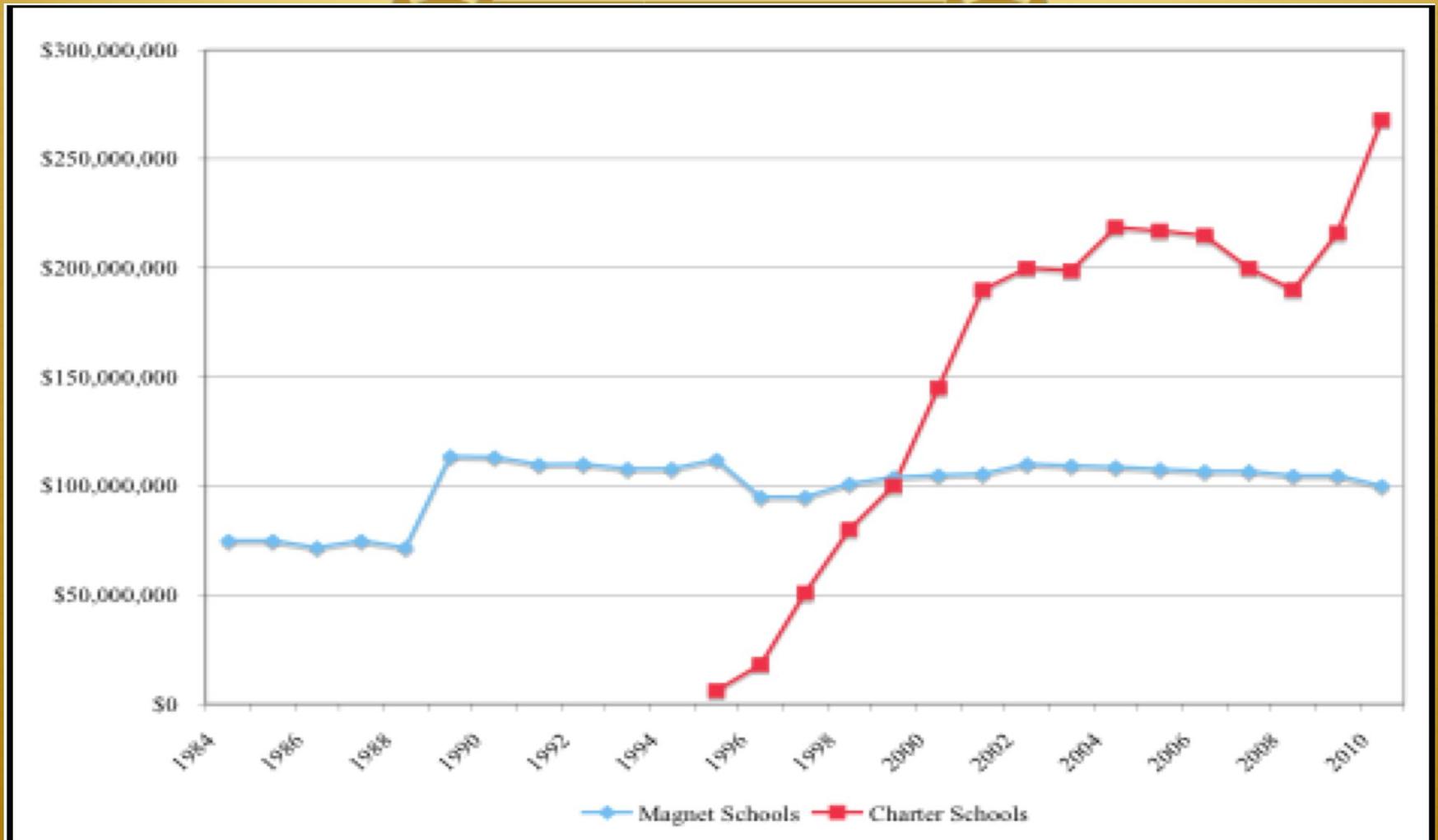
- ✦ The justification for choice in the civil rights era was to create voluntary desegregation through educational innovation
- ✦ Choice since 1980 is hailed as a solution to failing urban schools without any reference to segregation
 - ✦ Bureaucracies and unions are seen as part of the problem stifling innovation
 - ✦ Educational inequality could be solved by educational entrepreneurs, competition, and freedom
- ✦ Yet, does choice without civil rights controls exacerbate inequality?

Charter schools



- ✦ Charters were a new form of nonsectarian autonomous public schools outside the public school systems
 - ✦ Invented in 1991, first opened in St. Paul, MN in 1992
 - ✦ appealed to conservatives because of their autonomy
 - ✦ Democrats because they could help block the drive for vouchers and keep funds in the public sector
 - ✦ Appealed to business leaders, foundations, and energetic educators
- ✦ Charter had the advantage of little additional cost and none of the threat to middle class status quo posed by desegregation efforts.
- ✦ In late 1980s, priority in funding and advocacy shifted from magnets to charter schools despite no record of educational advantage

Annual Federal Appropriations for Magnet School and Charter School Programs



Serious Questions About Charter School Performance



- ✦ Many charter schools have failed to provide appropriate support and outreach to English learners and students with disabilities.
- ✦ CREDO study shows 17% had higher achievement, yet more had lower than average achievement.
- ✦ Issues like frequent use of suspension, grade promotion testing, and high rates of attrition raise questions about charter efficacy.

Enrollment and Racial Composition of Charter and Public Schools, 2007–08

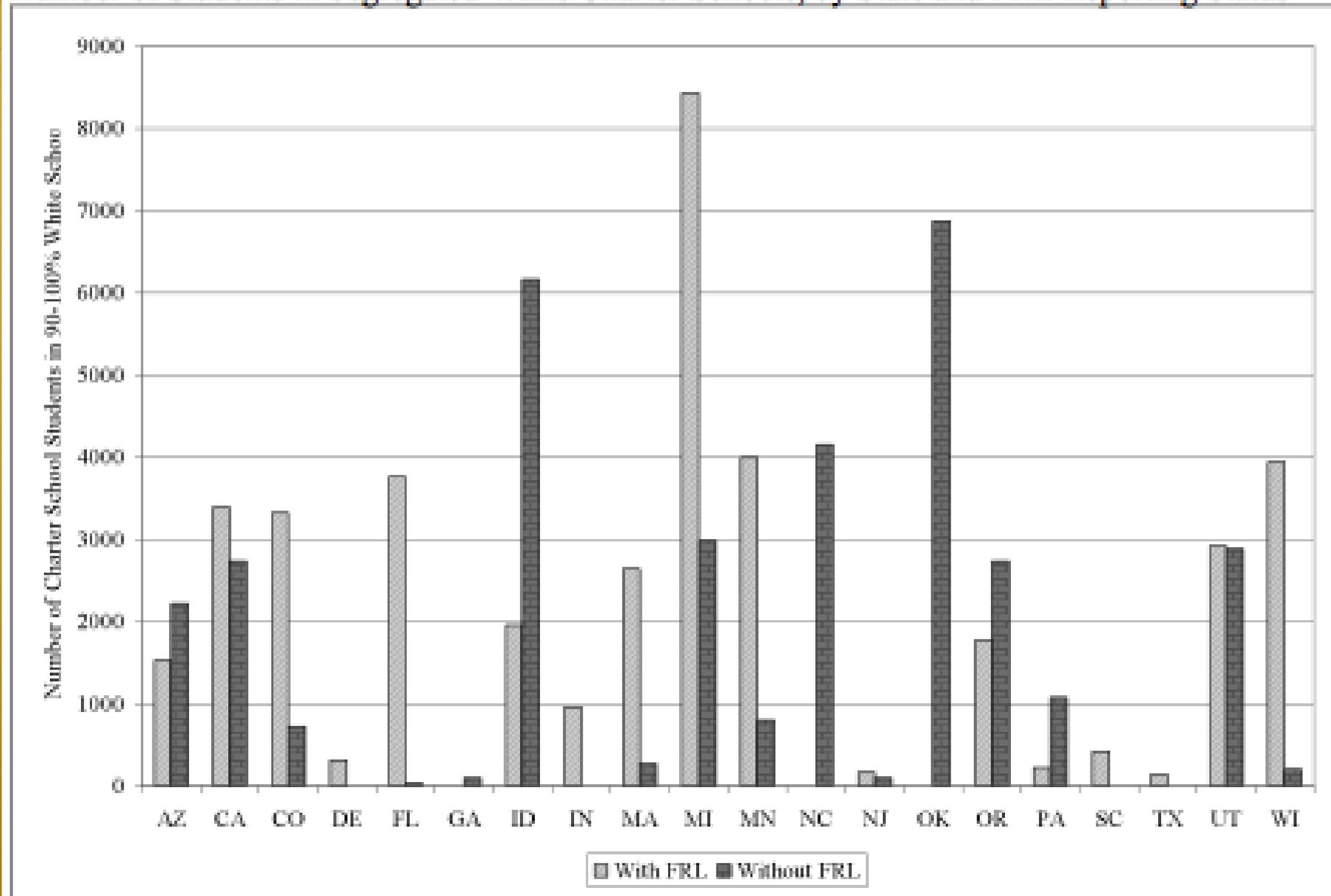
	Enrollment	White (%)	Black (%)	Latino (%)	Asian (%)	American Indian (%)
Charter	1,193,286	39%	32%	24%	4%	1%
Public	46,283,865	56%	16%	21%	5%	1%

Percentage of Charter and Public School Students in Segregated Minority Schools, 2007–08

	Charter			Public		
	50-100% Minority	90-100% Minority	99-100% Minority	50-100% Minority	90-100% Minority	99-100% Minority
White	19%	2%	0%	13%	1%	0%
Black	89%	70%	43%	72%	36%	15%
Latino	83%	50%	20%	77%	38%	9%
Asian	60%	23%	9%	55%	15%	1%
American Indian	61%	31%	11%	49%	20%	9%
All Students	58%	36%	19%	38%	15%	4%

Source: 2007–08 NCES Common Core of Data

Number of Students in Segregated White Charter Schools, by State and FRL Reporting Status



Source: 2007-08 NCES Common Core of Data

What kind of choice do charter schools offer?

- ✦ Although originally promoted as a way to transcend boundary lines (and segregation), this varies by state.
- ✦ Charter schools may have incentives to locate in urban areas, and often may not draw beyond their neighborhood (i.e. no transportation, little outreach)
- ✦ Context of under-resourced and poorly performing schools reconstituted as a charter.
- ✦ Creates a captive audience.
- ✦ Will not only contribute to more hyper-segregated schools, but can eliminate the democratic control of the school.

Concluding thoughts about school choice

- ✦ Both the complexities of the different forms of choice and the extreme inconsistency of policy and law contribute to the deep confusion about the issues.
- ✦ In December 2011, the federal government issued guidance clarifying how educators might use choice—within legal parameters—to pursue diversity but local conditions vary widely.
- ✦ As charter schools grow rapidly & their striking segregation became apparent, are we repeating the errors of “freedom of choice” and “open enrollment” policies that failed four decades earlier?

Future direction of charter school policy

- ✦ FY 2011 Charter School Program for SEAs included competitive preference for promoting diversity or avoiding racial isolation
 - ✦ States need help understanding what this looks like
- ✦ Provide incentives for conditions that might improve racial isolation in charters
 - ✦ Transportation
 - ✦ Outreach to diverse groups
 - ✦ Serve more than one district
 - ✦ Location
 - ✦ Adopt magnet school diversity goals

School Choice Could Foster Integration

- ✦ Some types of school choice produce integration; others, segregation
- ✦ NCLB transfer provision:
 - ✦ expand to interdistrict options
 - ✦ provide transportation
 - ✦ Require outreach to underserved communities
- ✦ Give priority to interdistrict magnet and charter options to improve integration and academic opportunity
- ✦ Expand funding and allow for a range of educational uses (family engagement, staff development)
- ✦ Require same data reporting requirements for all public schools to be able to distinguish truly effective charter schools

For more information



Erica Frankenberg, Assistant Professor
Department of Education Policy Studies
Pennsylvania State University
Email: frankenberg@psu.edu

**Forthcoming book:

Orfield, G., & Frankenberg, E. (fall 2012). *Educational Delusions? Why Choice Can Deepen Inequality and How to Make it Fair*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.