

TH9.10.12 The Limits of Charter Schools and School Choice

Challenging the Market Logic of School Choice: A Spatial Analysis of Charter School Expansion in Chicago, IL

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In an era of neoliberal education reform, school choice has been touted as the primary mechanism to achieve quality education and increased efficiency in public schools. Proponents of neoliberal education reform argue that school choice is an efficient and rational way to deliver “education services” (Dempster 2013). Critics of neoliberal education reform have argued that measures such as charter expansion can exacerbate inequalities, including greater racial segregation and exclusion of children through disciplinary policies (Lipman 2011). However, there is little research on the relationship between the location of charter schools, neighborhood demand and the impact on school budgets strained by austerity. Using spatial analysis, census data, charter school financial audits and Chicago Public Schools (CPS), we map out the location of charters opened between 2000 and 2014, neighborhood population census data and proximity to underutilized, efficiently utilized or over crowded public schools. We find that from 2000 – 2014, over 80% of charter schools were opened in neighborhoods that experienced a decline in school age population, with 50% opened in areas with high (25% or more) population decline in school age children. Meanwhile, few charter schools were opened in neighborhoods experiencing school overcrowding. We then correlate charter school budget data to understand the magnitude of debt taken out to finance new charter facilities constructed in areas experiencing population decline. The financing of redundant charter school facilities saturating low demand areas contributed to CPS budgetary stress. Our findings challenge the market logic of school choice by demonstrating the “inefficiency” of charter proliferation in low demand areas, resulting in school closures and budgetary stress across the entire public schools system, leading to closures and significant cuts to frontline education impairing CPS’s ability to deliver quality and equitable education.

Education Policy with Urban Implications: How School Choice in Michigan has Disadvantaged the Lansing School District

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Schools play an integral role in shaping social space in the urban context. What impacts the school house inevitably impacts the community in which it is located.

In 1993, Michigan began a process of policy reform that introduced school choice and completely overhauled education finance in the state. This research examines the issue and implementation of school choice in Michigan as it has impacted the district and city of Lansing. Coming from the perspective of the locality, this work allows for an in-depth review of how this complex set of policies play out in one particular urban context. Understanding that each locality presents complex, multidimensional environments of study, this work uses both qualitative and quantitative data including interviews, a review of media, as well as data on demographics, enrollment, and finances, to present a comprehensive case study of how school choice functions in this mid sized Michigan city. Results of this study have

shown that the Lansing School District has borne large costs due to school choice policies. This presentation compares the policy design of school choice in Michigan with the impact of that policy on Lansing. Moreover, the result of this study show how state policy around school choice have set districts and cities like Lansing at a disadvantage strategically holding suburban spaces over urban ones.

Why Community Development Lenders Support Charter Schools, Even When the Communities they Serve may not

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In the last month, both the NAACP and the Movement for Black Lives, have called for a national moratorium on new charter schools. Their stances have amplified a growing set of concerns about the rapid charter school expansion that is happening disproportionately in low-income communities of color. In contrast to pro-charter school arguments about choice and opportunity, these organizations argue that charters hurt low-income communities of color by worsening segregation by race, income, English proficiency, and special needs; by contributing to the school to prison pipeline through harsh discipline and high suspension rates; by undermining public accountability; and by draining scarce resources from traditional district schools.

Amid this community backlash, our paper explores the role played by community development loan funds (CDLFs) in the growth of charter schools. According to a recent LISC report, as of 2014, nineteen CDLFs provided \$2 billion in grants, recoverable grants, loans and loan guarantees to charter schools as well as nearly \$1 billion in New Market Tax Credit financing for facilities. Over the last two decades, CDLFs also have become close friends and political allies of the charter school industry - serving on charter school boards of directors and lobbying for charter school expansion.

This paper explores why charter schools have enjoyed CDLF's ongoing support, despite growing opposition by the low-income communities that CDLFs serve. We focus on six potential explanations: two advanced by CDLFs - school performance and urban revitalization; and four additional ones that we posit - funding, politics, ideology, and complexity of charter school impact assessment. We then empirically explore the feasibility of these alternative explanations by testing a claim made by multiple CDLFs that the charter schools receiving their investments are less prone to the concerns raised by community activists than other charter schools.