

# Chapter 11

## School Choice and the Privatization of Education

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### ABSTRACT

*Today's "school choice" movement is among a growing and extensive series of legislative and bureaucratic processes that, while purporting to further a social good, would ultimately exacerbate student achievement and opportunity disparities. This chapter examines the forces driving the school choice movement, suggesting it is a continuation of a decades-long privatization effort fueled largely by market interests. These interests stand to gain economic and political power while low-income families and communities suffer the greatest losses from a diminished public education system. The chapter examines how the school choice movement manages the conversion of public tax dollars to private entities, identifies many of the organizations and institutions driving the effort, and asserts the need for public education supporters to join forces with teacher unions, citizen action organizations, and universities to curb the process and appropriately address barriers to student achievement and opportunity. Strategies including university-assisted community schools are presented.*

### INTRODUCTION

We are at a critical juncture in our nation's education policy, and one that could have unprecedented implications for economic mobility and democracy in the United States. While at the moment of this chapter's conception education reform has been little mentioned at the federal level, at the state level market-based "school choice" initiatives have become a leading priority. School choice programs in the form of private school voucher programs have taken hold in 30 states across the country, with an almost 65 percent rate of growth in the past decade (EdChoice, 2018). Similarly, charter schools have expanded to 45 states and national enrollment stands upwards of 3 million students, having almost tripled in the past ten years (David & Hesla, 2018). This growth is predicated on the notion that expanding charter schools and private education options such as education vouchers, education savings accounts (ESAs), education tax credits and deductions, and other alternatives to public schools will result in increased achievement

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and ultimately economic mobility for students currently attending low-performing public schools (Ed-Choice, 2018). However, there are a number of gaps and misgivings in the movement, including among others a lack of consistent or credible evidence that such programs increase student achievement and a lack of directness among the movement's advocates about the reality that school choice reforms redirect public education tax dollars away from an already strapped public education system. Yet even in light of growing public concern and a half century of vocal opposition from teachers unions attesting the need for increased public school resources, teacher salaries, curricular autonomy, and student support, market interests have continued to expand their influence over both the public education system and the federal, state, and local policymakers who govern it.

This chapter examines the growing school choice movement as a key phase of a decades-long privatization effort in the United States that has steadily redirected management of and funding for public services and functions from government to the corporate sector. It warns that despite purporting to advance a more equitable education system, the campaign to replace traditional public education with expanded private options will ultimately exacerbate achievement disparities and opportunity gaps between the wealthy and the lower- and lower-middle class. Public school teachers, administrators, parents, policymakers, colleges and universities, and other public education stakeholders who are not currently engaged alongside teacher unions, public education citizen groups, and community schools personnel in the historic and contemporary struggle to preserve and equitably improve public education are urged to join this critical collective action.

The chapter begins by examining the question *What is School Choice, and What Does It Entail?* This section breaks down the current school choice movement, with specific focus on the charter and voucher expansions being proposed in state legislatures across the country. The second section, *What is Left Unsaid in School Choice Messaging?*, teases apart the rhetoric of “school choice,” honing in on key messages—both spoken and unspoken—which have potential to mislead the public about what the movement actually entails. Because much of the movement seems to thrive on anonymity and the appearance of grassroots leadership, section three, *Who is Leading the School Choice Movement?*, identifies many of the leading advocacy organizations, foundations, and corporate interests involved in or funding the movement. It also examines the role of key “think tank” organizations such as the State Policy Network (SPN) and American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC) in driving privatization legislation and similar reforms such as corporate tax rollbacks, deregulation, and anti-unionism. The fourth section breaks down the ideological position of neo-liberalism, the prevailing logic to which school choice reformers aim their appeals. This section, *What is Wrong with Neoliberal “Choice”?*, uncovers the sleight-of-hand approach that the movement takes by appealing to free-market capitalists on one hand while continuing to collect tax dollars and re-direct them to powerful private interests on the other. For those who would buy into the movement based on the free-market illusion, it attests that even in a free-market economy there are some public institutions that should remain public. The final chapter presents the two-part question, *How Can Public Education Supporters Work Toward Its Preservation and Improvement? and What Can Universities Do?*. This chapter presents collective action considerations for building expansive movements, and specifically speaks to key roles universities can play. It argues for all who value public education as a fundamental component of a functional democracy to join forces in replacing market-driven approaches with policies and resources that close student achievement gaps by addressing structural barriers to opportunity and achievement.

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