

EdChoice Policy Toolkit

Admissions: School Missions or Open Admissions?

QUESTION

Should choice programs require participating private schools to adopt open-admissions policies, similar to district or charter schools?

ANSWER

School choice is about finding the right fit. In order for families to have a diverse variety of schools to choose from, private schools need the autonomy to determine their own admissions policies.

The central purpose of educational choice is to empower families with a wide diversity of options so that they can find the learning environment that's the right fit for their child. But, some argue, if schools have their own admissions policies, isn't it the schools that do the choosing? In that case, the argument goes, school choice policies should require participating private schools to adopt open-admissions policies.

The frank reality is that there is no system that will make all options open to all families. There will always be some sort of trade off. A system based on residential assignment will mean that children only have access to the school assigned to them based on the location of the home their parents could afford. So-called "public" schools are only open to the "public" who can afford to live in their district. School choice policies open far more doors for families, but not all doors. Even imposing open-admissions requirements entails trade-offs because some schools will not participate if it means jeopardizing their specific mission.

At their best, schools are voluntary communities. A great many of them strive to be open to all. Others have particular missions to serve particular communities or types of students—often minorities or those who are otherwise unserved or underserved in the district system or other schools that try to be all things to all students. For example, some schools serve certain religious communities with a shared set of values and beliefs. Some serve students with particular special needs, disadvantaged students who require smaller classes and intensive counseling and so on. Some are single-sex schools. Some employ non-traditional pedagogical methods, like Montessori or Waldorf. Some focus on the academically gifted or students who want to specialize in STEM or drama and the arts. Families knowingly select these schools because of their particular mission or specialty. Pursuing their particular missions or specialties requires the autonomy to set their own admissions standards.

Imposing an open-admissions requirement on a school choice program does nothing to expand access to schools that do not participate. Research has consistently found that open-admissions requirements dissuade private schools from participating. A survey by the American Enterprise Institute found that among Louisiana private school leaders who opted not to have their school accept voucher students, three-fourths cited concerns about the effects of the open-admissions requirement.¹ Similarly, a 2018 study found that open-admissions requirements significantly reduced the likelihood that private schools would participate in a hypothetical voucher program in Florida.² The likelihood that a private school principal was "certain to participate" in a voucher program decreased by around 17 to 21 percentage points, or 70 to 84 percent, if the program included an open-admissions mandate. A follow-up study of private school principals in New York and California found that open-admissions requirements reduced the likelihood of private school participation in a hypothetical school voucher program by 19 percentage points, or 60 percent.³

Open-admissions requirements do not achieve their purported goal. It is no wonder then that publicly funded school choice programs for higher education, such as Pell Grants, do not impose open-admissions mandates. No system can provide access to all schools, but educational choice programs that respect private schools' autonomy can provide access to a meaningfully diverse set of education providers, greatly increasing the odds that a given family will be able to find the right fit for their child.

¹ Brian Kisida, Patrick J. Wolf, and Evan Rhinesmith, "Views from Private Schools: Attitudes about School Choice Programs in Three States," American Enterprise Institute, January 2015, www.aei.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/Views-from-Private-Schools-7.pdf/.

² Corey DeAngelis, Lindsey Burke, and Patrick Wolf, "The Effects of Regulations on Private School Choice Program Participation: Experimental Evidence from Florida," EDRE Working Paper No. 2018-08, October 22, 2018. Available at SSRN: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=3273428> or <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3273428>

³ Corey DeAngelis, Lindsey Burke, and Patrick Wolf, "The Effects of Regulations on Private School Choice Program Participation: Experimental Evidence from California and New York," EDRE Working Paper No. 2019-07, March 12, 2019. Available at SSRN: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=3349453> or <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3349453>