School Choice Policies and Practices in The United States, South Africa, Spain and Canada

Ann Allen
Ohio State University

School choice.

It is seemingly both reasonable and right to provide options for parents to choose the school their children attend. Proponents of policies that favor school choice argue that school choice creates equity in access to quality education, and that the competition created from parents actively making attendance decisions will necessitate improvements and innovations in schools across the board. Poor-performing schools, in other words, will not attract students. However, school choice research across the globe indicates that the implementation of school choice is much more complicated than the theory allows.

From a public policy perspective, the implementation of school choice creates significant tensions in the delivery of primary and secondary education to all students. As noted in the articles in this journal, these tensions appear to transcend countries and continents, and include concerns about access to quality education for all students, segregation effects, and the influence and power of private organizations in public education. The public policy challenges raised by these tensions include questions about the use of the market as a mechanism for the provision of public education, and the barriers that competition creates to equity and innovation. Despite these concerns, school choice programs appear to be popular among policymakers. In this issue of *Global Education Review*, authors discuss school choice policy in South Africa, Spain, Canada and the United States.

We begin by examining some of the fundamental questions regarding the purpose of public education and the philosophies that undergird different approaches to its delivery. Both Brian Fife and Daniel Laitsch consider important historical and philosophical underpinnings of school choice in the United States. Fife presents an examination of the *common good* approach to public education advocated by Horace Mann and others, in light of today's push for greater choice and a market approach to public schooling. Fife considers whether Mann's basic premise that education is a *social good*, one that should be available to all children and paid for by all citizens, is still a relevant model today. Ultimately, he concludes that market approaches to education place the common schools approach at risk, and that if, in fact, all children are to receive a quality education, Mann's proposal is still worth defending.

Similarly, Laitsch examines the idea of vouchers, as envisioned by Milton Friedman more than 50 years ago, as a means of providing government schooling. Laitsch argues that the move to focus more on the *private good* approach to education

Corresponding Author:
Ann Allen, College of Education and Human Ecology, The Ohio State University, 301-A Ramseyer Hall
Email: Allen.952@osu.edu

 Citation: Allen, Ann (2016). School choice policies and practices in The United States, South Africa, Spain and Canada. Global Education Review, 3 (2). 1-3

poses a threat to society's public goals if care is not taken in the way market schools are designed and governed. Laitsch offers cautions regarding the damage the development of large private management organizations as major providers of public education, and a market approach, can do to the neighborhood effects of schooling.

Tensions are raised again by Bekisizwe Ndimande, who offers a critical look at school choice in post-Apartheid South Africa. Although policymakers in South Africa looked to school choice as a way to create more equity in educational access, Ndimande presents his research with parents of children in poor neighborhoods as evidence that the neoliberal philosophy undergirding South Africa's school choice policies perpetuate and exacerbate, not alleviate, the unequal distribution of resources resulting in the segregation and marginalization of poor Black children.

Marytza Gawlik looks at the market approach through the American charter school program, examining both strengths and challenges of charter schools since they began in the United States in the early 1990s. With more than 6,000 charter schools in the U.S. and more than 40 states with charter school laws on the books, Gawlik points out that charter school policy appeals to a broad range of policy actors for different reasons. Using a model of charter schools as a framework for change, Gawlik considers whether the charter schools in the U.S. are effectively attending to some long-standing problems with public education, including the ultimate goals of increasing academic achievement and parent satisfaction, and more intermediary goals such as increasing teacher autonomy and creating innovation. Gawlik explores the history of U.S. charter school growth, reviews research on the effectiveness of charter schools, and like other authors in the journal, confronts the issue of segregation and other challenges school choice creates for public goals of education.

Regina Umpstead, Benjamin Jenkins, Pablo Ortega Gil, Linda Weiss, and Bruce Umpstead offer a look into two approaches to government funded school choice by comparing the charter school program in Michigan in the U.S. with the use of publicly funded private schools in the Valencian Community in Spain. Interestingly, as Umpstead and her colleagues report, Spain relied on publicly funded private schools to help provide public education as the country transitioned to a democratic government. Already existing private schools, in other words, provided a much-needed resource for the new government to provide public schooling. In the United States, the development of charter schools came out of an interest to create more choice in schooling and break down what was largely seen as the government's monopoly on public education. Other differences include the role of the Federal government in each program, the religious aspect of Spain's private schools versus the freedom from religion in U.S. schools, and the barriers that may exist in attempting to provide government funded school choice.

Finally, Lynn Bosetti and Philip Butterfied, examine the charter school movement in Alberta, Canada, and suggest ways charter schools might move forward toward the goal of educational innovation. Unlike the U.S., Canada has taken a more tempered approach to the school choice movement, limiting the charter school program to the Alberta province. The program in Alberta has been operating for 20 years, with a focus on providing choice in educational programming. As in the U.S., political tensions exist between traditional school districts and charter schools. Bosetti and Butterfield note that these politics may be holding charter schools back. The authors argue that the potential for charter schools does not lie in their focus on competition but rather on their

potential role as "incubators for innovation."

Though proponents of school choice policies claim that it will improve education through a market approach to education that offers options for consumers (i.e., parents) and pressures suppliers (schools) to improve their offerings, research suggests that competition brings a variety of other issues that policy makers should consider. Below are a few of those considerations:

- What are the goals for public education and how do new educational policies fit within those goals?
- What barriers does a market approach to education create, and how can public policy mitigate or eliminate these barriers?
- What mechanisms might a government put in place to ensure quality of all schools?
- How can government-funded education provide for choice without exacerbating segregation?
- What is the role of innovation in a program of school choice, and how can policy be designed to foster innovation and dissemination of innovation across school types?
- What can policy makers and governments learn from each other regarding the implementation of school choice policies?

These are just some of the questions raised by the research presented in this issue of *Global Education Review*. After more than two decades of school choice policies and research on school choice, it is time to for policy makers, practitioners, and scholars to move beyond the promise of the market as a means toward equity, and to delve deeply into the complexities that choice policies create, particularly if we aim to make quality education an option for all students.

About the Author

AnnAllen, PhD, is Associate Professor and Program Chair in Educational Policy in the Department of Educational Studies at The Ohio State University. Her research interests include school governance, charter schools, democratic representation in education, and the intersection of educational politics and policy. She earned her doctorate in Educational Policy from Michigan State University.