



STEPPING UP

How Are American Cities Delivering on the Promise of Public School Choice?

Executive Summary

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Public school choice is increasingly the “new normal” in cities across the country, creating new opportunities for families to choose from a wider variety of instructional models across a range of school types—from traditional district-run to magnet to charter. But how well are cities delivering on the real promise of school choice, that is, ensuring that all children have access to high-quality educational options that fit their needs?

This cross-sector study of 18 cities shows cities making promising gains, including increased academic performance, as well as encountering persistent challenges and barriers that disproportionately impact the families who could most benefit from choice. The findings show that cities still have far to go to catch up to state averages and address equitable access to educational opportunities. Districts and education nonprofits are improving how families are involved in school portfolio decisions, but they must still repair trust and improve responsiveness. City and district leaders, nonprofits, community-based organizations, funders, and policymakers must do more to provide better information and supports for families, locate more high-quality schools in neighborhoods that need them most, and be more responsive to families and community members.

A Citywide Look at Public School Choice

To better understand how public school choice is working for families, CRPE researchers looked across 18 “high-choice” cities—those with both a robust charter sector and district strategies that provide students with options beyond traditional enrollment boundaries. For each of these cities, we asked:

- Is the education system continuously improving?
- Do all students have access to a high-quality education?
- Is the education strategy rooted in the community?

Researchers identified 23 system reform indicators, collected school data, analyzed public information, conducted interviews with 85 education and community leaders, and surveyed 3,200 parents in eight cities about their own experiences with choice. This work represents the first comprehensive analysis of district and charter sector reforms alongside citywide outcomes.

Promising Gains, But Persistent Gaps in Achievement and Access

In general, basic indicators of academic achievement are on the rise:

- In a majority of cities, low-scoring schools typically moved out of that status over the course of three or four consecutive years.
- In the school years 2011-12 to 2014-15, 11 of 17 of the cities gained ground on their states in high school graduation rates.
- In the same time frame, 5 of 14 cities showed statistically significant improvement in reading and math proficiency rates, *tentative but good news for urban centers working to overcome the challenges of poverty.*

Despite making some school-level improvements, these cities still have a long way to go to meet the needs of students and families, especially low-income families:

- In more than half of the cities, proficiency rates were still at least 10 percentage points below state averages.
- Access to educational opportunities is still not equitable: While low-income students in these cities perform similarly to their peers nationally, in only one-quarter of the cities were all racial and ethnic groups represented equitably in advanced math coursework.

Mixed Results in Systems Change

- About a third of all surveyed families reported no barriers during the application process. But families with annual household incomes below \$35,000 often reported difficulties. Families, especially low-income, want more information about school options—comparable academic information and details about school culture and programs.
- Most cities have implemented policies that support school quality, ranging from strong charter authorizing and replication strategies to greater autonomy for traditional district schools. Yet fewer than half of the districts provide district schools with flexibility to control their budgets to meet student needs.
- Most education leaders interviewed by CRPE do not believe their cities' decisionmaking process for opening new schools is strategic.
- Communication with families and community stakeholders has improved in recent years, but still has considerable room for improvement.

The Charge for Cities

CRPE researchers identified three key areas in which cities and their public education stakeholders must step up to sustain and expand public school choice:

- Informing and supporting parents to help them find schools that fit their needs, so all students have real choices.
- Being more strategic about improving school quality and fit so schools meet students' needs and family preferences for schools in their own neighborhoods.
- Involving community members so they can be part of building a sustainable, responsive education strategy.

Tackling these issues will require cities to develop a cross-city vision for public education, become more data-driven in decisionmaking, and be transparent in order to sustain support for choice.

This analysis identifies a number of innovative approaches to address these challenges and makes recommendations for leaders seeking to expand public school choice. We hope this offers a starting point for conversation among education and community leaders to decide the right path for their cities and ensure that public choice becomes a reality for all students, not just a slogan.

Find the full cross-city analysis, individual Citywide Education Progress Reports, comparative findings of outcomes and reforms, promising strategies from leading cities, and more on CRPE's [Stepping Up website](#).

About the study: The 18 cities in the study provide choice through district and charter schools and hold schools accountable for meeting performance standards. The cities represent a range of policy, governance, geographic, and demographic characteristics. CRPE researchers used publicly available state and federal data. However, the results may not reflect the most recent developments in any city. Over the 2016-2017 school year, CRPE researchers sought publicly available information about district and charter strategies and conducted 85 phone interviews with education and community leaders about what cities are doing and whether it is working. The report also draws from CRPE's 2017 survey of 3,200 parents' experience with school choice in eight cities, as well as CRPE's long history of tracking progress and engaging with education leaders in these cities on portfolio management strategies, district-charter collaboration initiatives, unified enrollment implementation, and other systemwide improvement efforts.