A Geographic Analysis of Public-Private School Choice in South Carolina, USA

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ABSTRACT

Despite years of research and debate, household choice between public and private schools is not well understood. This article investigates factors associated with parental choice between public and private schools using unique census-based school enrollment data for school districts in South Carolina and for neighborhoods in the Columbia Metropolitan Area. This study extends the existing literature by examining patterns of public-private school choice for whites and blacks separately in order to control racial disparities in school choice. Results of multiple regression analyses for the whole population and subdivided racial groups generally support the assumption that public-private school enrollment rate is subject to socioeconomic status, racial proportion, and public school quality. Findings of this study not only suggests the reconciliation of the market-based theory and the racial preference theory, but also provides insights into education policies in terms of stemming white enrollment losses and fostering public school education in the United States.

Keywords: Academic Quality, Blacks, Public-Private School Choice, Racial Preference, Whites

INTRODUCTION

Under the traditional education system (kindergarten through grade 12 or K-12) in the U.S., students are assigned to different schools according to their residence. Thus, school choice opportunities for households are limited to the residentially based public schools or non-residentially based private schools (Falconer Al-Hindi & Rawlings, 2007; Henig & Sugarman, 1999). Since the 1980s, through new reform approaches, a wide range of school choice options have become available such as intra-district and inter-district open enrollment, and charter schools in the spectrum of public school choice; and tax credit or vouchers within the range of private school choice (Hanushek et al., 2007; Renzulli & Evans, 2005; Tice et al., 2006). In addition, the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 requires local school districts to provide

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public alternative school options for students who are enrolled in underperforming or unsafe public schools (No Child Left Behind, 2004).

Given the increasing variety of school choice options, choosing between a neighborhood public school and a private one remains the norm. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), in 2003, 74 percent of all U.S. grade 1-12 students attended their neighborhood schools, 15 percent attended other public choice schools, and 11 percent were enrolled in private schools (Tice et al., 2006).

A large body of research has explored the impacts of factors associated with school choice, such as neighborhood characteristics, public school quality and social preference (Godwin & Kemerer, 2002; Henig & Sugarman, 1999; Hess & Leal, 2001a; Lankford et al., 1995; Ledwith & Clark, 2007). However, the existing literature on school choice is divided in terms of the primary reasons that drive households to choose between a public school and a private alternative for their children (Taylor, 2001; Wrinkle et al., 1999). Some scholars suggest that pursuing academic quality is the decisive factor and households choose a private school if the public schools could not meet their academic expectations (Chubb & Moe, 1990; Lee & Fitzgerald, 1996). Others emphasize that academic concerns may not be central to public-private choice and households consider racial or religious preference to be the top priority, thus ensuring their children to be the majority at schools (Smith & Meier, 1995; Saporito et al., 2001).

Another under-researched area in the existing literature is racial inequalities in public-private choice. While research has addressed issues such as loss of white students from public schools across the country and an increasing trend toward school re-segregation in recent years, little is known about how whites and minorities exercise school choice differently regarding the effects of academic quality and residential socioeconomic characteristics (Boger & Orfield, 2005; McDonald, 1997; Saporito et al., 2001).

This article applies multiple regression methods to cross-sectional data on school choice for the State of South Carolina and the Columbia metropolitan area respectively in order to investigate the determinants that account for the variations of public-private school choice. This article is unique in comparison to existing studies on the following two aspects. First, we examine public-private school enrollment of whites and blacks separately in addition to the analysis of data for the whole population. Second, we investigate the factors associated with parental choice at two geographical scales—school districts within a state and census tracts across a metropolitan area, thus enabling us to examine patterns of parental choice in more detail.

**REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE ON SCHOOL CHOICE**

The analytical study of school choice could be traced back to the “Tiebout Hypothesis” or “Tiebout Sorting” (Tiebout, 1956). Tiebout observed that residents congregate in homogeneous neighborhoods by choosing the public goods and services such as public schools that best suit their favorites (Godwin & Kemerer, 2002; Lankford & Wyckoff, 1992, 2001). Many households choose their residences largely because of the quality of the public schools in the neighborhoods. A number of empirical studies found a strong positive relationship between public school quality and house prices (Brasington, 1999; Clark & Herrin, 2000). However, when traditional inner-city neighborhoods experienced substantial increases in non-white population or the local school district underwent racial desegregation, households with economic means might either send their children to private schools or move to the attendance zone of another school or school district. This phenomenon is commonly known as white flight (Clotfelter, 2004; Lankford & Wyckoff, 1992; Lee & Fitzgerald, 1996; Sonstelie, 1979; Schelling, 1971; Schmidt, 1992).
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