

Choice Programs Found to Help Integration, But Not Scores

BY ERIK W. ROBELEN

A study of several school choice programs in San Diego finds that they are promoting more racial and ethnic integration of students, but do not, in general, have any notable effect on test scores.

The increased integration in public schools results as more nonwhite students seek access to schools with a higher percentage of whites than are attending their local schools. While the actual shifts are relatively modest, the researchers say they would be far more pronounced were it not for limits on space in the schools providing choice.

"On the whole, choice in San Diego is doing a very good job in terms of boosting integration," said Julian R. Betts, a co-author of the study and an economics professor at the University of California, San Diego. But, he said, choice has been "very neutral" in its impact on students' scores on standardized tests, "in the sense that it has neither systematically helped nor hurt."

The study—issued by the Public Policy Institute of California, a private foundation based in San Francisco—also found some evidence that the choice programs help integrate students whose parents have different education levels. At the same time, when taken together, the choice pro-

grams have led to a decrease in the exposure of English-language learners to students whose first language is English, according to the study, released Aug. 30.

The 130,000-student San Diego Unified School District, the second-largest district in California and the eighth-largest nation-



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wide, is a diverse system in race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status. No race or ethnic group comes close to being a majority of the student population, the report says. It notes that Hispanics form the largest group, representing about one-third of students.

Array of Choices

The district's four main types of school choice programs include the Voluntary Ethnic Enrollment Program (VEEP), a busing program with roots in a 1970s court order to desegregate the district. Another, a magnet schools pro-

gram, also stems from desegregation orders. A third initiative, known simply as the "Choice" program, is a state-mandated, open-enrollment program that, unlike the first two, does not provide free busing. As a fourth option, the district hosts a growing number of charter schools. Dur-

ing the 2003-04 school year, the report says, 28 percent of students were attending public schools other than their neighborhood schools.

On integration, the report found a big difference between the actual effect of the choice programs and what it would have been had all students who wished to participate been allowed to enroll in an alternative school.

For example, the report says that, on average, Hispanic students who applied to a choice school under VEEP saw a 10.3 percent increase in the number of white students with whom they

attended school. Had all of these Hispanic students who applied been admitted, the figure would have risen to nearly 39 percent. The report also found increased integration for the magnet and Choice programs, though the effect was much smaller.

The report had fairly similar findings for the integration of black and white students in the same programs. The study did not examine the impact of the charter schools on integration because of limitations in the data set, but it did look at those schools' test scores and other issues.

"Students are applying to schools that are typically 40 percent more white," said Mr. Betts, who was a contributing author to a book published earlier this year that examined how to maximize the benefits of school choice while minimizing the negative consequences. (*See Education Week, Feb. 8, 2006.*)

Scores Unaffected

The study generally found that students admitted by lottery to the choice programs scored about the same on tests one to three years later as those not admitted.

An exception came at the high school level: Winners of lotteries for magnet schools performed significantly better on a California math test two and three

years after the lotteries took place. Also, the researchers found evidence in several cases that lottery winners underperformed in reading and math one year after winning the lottery, but then closed the gap in the second year.

"If policymakers think that integration is a key goal of choice, then providing free busing and regulating choice in a way to provide incentives or preferences for socioeconomic mixing both seem vital," Mr. Betts said.

Brian Gill, a senior social scientist at the RAND Corp., a Santa Monica, Calif.-based research organization, said the report's authors were "asking the right questions" about choice. "I think that one of the issues that's particularly helpful is that they are looking at possibly differential effects of different types of choice programs," he said.

But Amy Stuart Wells, a professor of sociology and education at Teachers College, Columbia University, said she saw the report as overemphasizing the effect of the city's choice programs collectively, even though "these are different policies created with different goals in mind."

edweek.org: A link to "Does School Choice Work? Effects on Student Integration and Achievement" is online at www.edweek.org/links.

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