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Durability and Debate: How State-Level Policy Actors Frame School Choice

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Abstract: School choice policies have become a prominent feature of K-12 education in recent decades, reflecting the broader institutionalization of market-based political ideology in education. In this qualitative multiple case study, we draw on framing theory and interviews with 57 state-level education policy actors to explore the nature of the continued debate over school choice in five U.S. states. We find five patterns of framing choice as beneficial, centering around five purported goals—quality, equity, liberty, plurality, and innovation—along with critiques of these frames. Our findings

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illustrate that despite the contested nature of these policies, the broad appeal and flexibility of “choice” helps to explain its durability.

Keywords: school choice; policy analysis; case studies

Durabilidad y debate: Cómo los actores políticos a nivel estatal enmarcan la elección de escuela

Resumen: Las políticas de elección de escuela se han convertido en una característica destacada de la educación K-12 en las últimas décadas, lo que refleja la institucionalización más amplia de la ideología política basada en el mercado en la educación. En este estudio cualitativo de casos múltiples, nos basamos en la teoría del encuadre y entrevistas con 57 actores de políticas educativas a nivel estatal para explorar la naturaleza del debate continuo sobre la elección de escuela en cinco estados de EE. UU. Encontramos cinco patrones de elección de encuadre como beneficiosos, centrados en cinco supuestos objetivos: calidad, equidad, libertad, pluralidad e innovación, junto con críticas a estos encuadres. Nuestros hallazgos ilustran que, a pesar de la naturaleza cuestionada de estas políticas, el amplio atractivo y la flexibilidad de la “elección” ayuda a explicar su durabilidad.

Palabras-clave: elección de escuela; análisis de políticas; estudios de caso

Durabilidade e debate: Como os atores políticos em nível estadual enquadram a escolha da escola

Resumo: As políticas de escolha escolar tornaram-se uma característica proeminente da educação K-12 nas últimas décadas, refletindo a institucionalização mais ampla da ideologia política baseada no mercado na educação. Neste estudo de caso múltiplo qualitativo, utilizamos a teoria do enquadramento e entrevistas com 57 atores da política educacional em nível estadual para explorar a natureza do debate contínuo sobre a escolha da escola em cinco estados dos EUA. Encontramos cinco padrões de escolha de enquadramento como benéficos, centrados em torno de cinco objetivos pretendidos – qualidade, equidade, liberdade, pluralidade e inovação – juntamente com críticas a esses enquadramentos. Nossas descobertas ilustram que, apesar da natureza contestada dessas políticas, o amplo apelo e a flexibilidade da “escolha” ajudam a explicar sua durabilidade.

Palavras-chave: escolha escolar; análise de políticas; estudos de caso

Durability and Debate: How State-Level Policy Actors Frame School Choice

By the early 21st century, many prominent education policymakers viewed school choice as a primary solution to the problem of low-performing and inequitable schools, particularly schools serving Black and Latinx students in low-income urban communities (Horsford et al., 2018; Klein et al., 2010). School choice policies allow families to select from publicly funded school options, as opposed to traditional practices of automatically assigning students to a neighborhood school based on their home address. However, activists and scholars have long critiqued school choice. In the past decade, national debates on school choice have become quite visible. For example, the NAACP called for a moratorium on charter schools (NAACP, 2016), and similar policy demands were featured in a wave of teacher union strikes during 2018-2019 (Will, 2019), which were widely supported by the public in national polls (Cheng et al., 2018).

Despite these debates, school choice remains remarkably durable. For instance, in the wake of COVID-19, school choice has expanded its reach. For instance, in many contexts families are not only allowed options for different school types, but also online modalities. In some states, legislators have passed new policies offering greater choices (e.g., public funds for private school tuition) to families opposed to health-related measures and curricular offerings in traditional public schools (Olneck-Brown, 2021; Ujifusa, 2021).

What explains this durability? To help answer this question, we address an understudied aspect of school choice policies: the specific messages policymakers employ to advance them in varied political and geographic contexts, and the responses to these arguments. Such communication is worthy of empirical investigation, as scholars have long argued that the way policies are constructed in political discourse matters for how such policies are designed and implemented (Mehta, 2013; Shanahan et al., 2013; Stone, 2011). We draw on framing theory (Benford & Snow, 2000; Rein & Schön, 1996; van Hulst & Yanow, 2014) to guide our analysis of school choice debates in five U.S. states. Drawing on interviews with 57 state policymakers, state education officials, school choice advocates and community advocates, this qualitative multiple case study explored the following questions: *What are the contours of the debate over state-level school choice policy? To what extent does this debate vary across states?*

In the end, we found five approaches to framing school choice as a beneficial policy, each of which centered on a different purported goal: quality, equity, liberty, plurality, and innovation. These frames were mentioned by participants in all five states, but varied in salience across different locations. Across the data a set of participants also offered critiques of these frames, yet because these critiques came from marginalized groups or under-resourced organizations, they were ultimately unable to counter the dominant narratives. Our findings illustrate the wide appeal of school choice policies as they can align with a broad array of values and be applied as solutions to just about any problem or issue political actors care about. This broad appeal and flexibility of “choice,” and the power of the actors who advance these frames, help to explain its durability in the U.S. policy landscape.

Literature Review

Pro-choice ideas were promoted by an emergent class of reform-oriented political actors in education, including venture philanthropy organizations (such as the Bill and Melinda Gates, The Eli and Edythe Broad, and Walton Family foundations), large charter networks known as charter management organizations (CMOs), and alternative credentialing and leadership programs (e.g., New Leaders for New Schools; Jabbar, 2015; Kretchmar et al., 2014; Scott, 2009)]. These ideas have aligned with neoliberal policy, emphasizing unfettered markets, consumer freedom, and private ownership. Within education, neoliberals argue that market forces brought about through school choice, such as competition, privatization, and managerialism will result in school improvement (Harvey, 2007; Horsford et al., 2018). Furthermore, these pro-choice ideas and groups garnered widespread support in public discourse and federal policy decisions in past decades¹ (Barnum, 2017; Maxwell, 2009; Sanchez, 2017; Warner, 2011). Here, we consider prevalent forms of choice policies—charter schools, vouchers, and open enrollment—which are all overseen by state governments, but are distinct from choice policies aimed at disrupting desegregation (e.g., magnets, controlled choice).

¹At the time of writing this paper, the Biden administration had proposed changes to regulations over federal charter school funding - intended to prevent new schools with low demand from opening. This move indicates tempered federal enthusiasm for charter schools.

Journalists and scholars have noted that school choice policies have amassed supporters who are often opposed on other issues, resulting in an unusual coalition often described as “strange bedfellows” (e.g., Bulkley, 2005; Collingwood, et al., 2018). For instance, Collingwood and colleagues (2018) described how Washington state’s 2012 school choice policy appealed to both racially minoritized communities and White high-income suburbanites, a coalition that was not necessarily united on other issues. Actors on both sides of the political aisle have claimed that school choice could remedy racial achievement gaps and fix the problem of low-performing urban schools. School choice advocates have argued, for example, that middle-class or affluent families have always had ‘choice’ in schooling, since they are able to move to places with more desirable schools. School choice policy, then, expands these opportunities to low-income families who are either unable to move or have historically been barred access to neighborhoods or districts with high-quality schools through redlining, district fragmentation, and other structural factors (Howell & Peterson, 2002). Indeed, racially minoritized politicians have played a role in promoting school choice (Stulberg, 2014), and a significant number of racially minoritized families support and utilize school choice policies (Wang, et al., 2019).

Market-based reforms have remained popular despite the critiques of critical researchers, labor groups, and certain minoritized communities (Apple, 2006; Ball, 2012; Henig, 1995), including concerns that school choice narrowly focuses on student achievement outcomes and racial achievement gaps, obfuscating broader concerns of systemic racism and the long-term inequities that have shaped public education (Ladson-Billings, 2006; Sondel et al., 2019). Further, factors such as lack of transportation and/or families with social networks with limited information about how to use school choice programs, raise questions about the accessibility of school choice for marginalized students [i.e., students with disabilities, English learners, low-income students (Bulkley et al., 2020; Sattin-Bajaj, 2015)]. Opponents of school choice policies argue there is a need to look beyond school choice and the market to the social and historical context of educational inequality (e.g., housing policy, school finance policy, segregation patterns) and to implement a nexus of policy solutions that address the root causes of education issues (Scott, 2009). Another concern is that market logics, private management of schools, and the positioning of families and students as individual consumers undermines collective and democratic approaches to school governance (Horsford et al., 2018; Lay & Bauman, 2019; Olson Beal & Hendry, 2012).

Scholars have also raised concerns that school choice may have detrimental effects on school districts, communities, and educators. For instance, when students leave traditional public schools to attend privately operated schools, declining enrollment results in financial loss for district-managed schools, exacerbating pre-existing problems of inadequate resources (Baker, 2016; Lafer, 2018). Further, when schools that fail to compete within the educational marketplace close, the loss of longstanding neighborhood organizations can be harmful to the surrounding community (Chapman & Donnor, 2015; Ewing, 2018; Kirshner & Pozzoboni, 2011). As school closures primarily occur in low-income Black and Latinx neighborhoods, this disproportionately harms racially minoritized communities (Buras, 2016).

Furthermore, school choice policies remain politically popular even though the evidence on their impact is mixed (Epple, et al., 2016; Rapa, et al., 2018). A set of research studies provides evidence of mixed and, in some cases, a small and positive impact of some forms of charter schools on student performance (e.g., Bulkley et al., 2020; Clark et al., 2015; CREDO, 2013; Harris & Larsen, 2018). Yet, other research indicates that policies may constrain leaders seeking to advance equity-minded or progressive missions in schools of choice (Castillo, 2020). Furthermore, some argue that the modest impact of school choice is not worth the harm it may inflict on marginalized students, educators, and communities. For instance, the “no-excuses” school model, popularized by large CMOs serving urban Black and Latinx communities, has been widely criticized. Such schools

are characterized by extended school days and years, use of regular student assessments to inform instruction, intensive professional development for teachers, and structured behavior management and discipline policies (Golann, 2015). Researchers have found that such models emphasize deference to authority rather than critical thinking (Golann, 2015), undermine democratic goals of education (Sondel, 2015; Stahl, 2020), create barriers to the development of respectful student-teacher relationships (Lopez, Kershen et al., 2018), and communicate racist narratives that center White educators as the “saviors” of racially minoritized youth (Sondel et al., 2019; also see Hernández, 2016).

Given the mixed evidence and long-standing debates, why does school choice remain such a consistent part of the US education policy landscape? We turn next to a theoretical framework of framing that will help us explore this question.

Theoretical Framework

The concept of frames was initially proposed by anthropologist Gregory Bateson (1955/1972), who drew on observations of animal behavior to theorize human social interaction. When noticing that monkeys would bite each other during play as well as during fighting, Bateson concluded that there was some form of meta-communication taking place between monkeys, framing their interaction as either playing or fighting. Public policy scholars drew on Bateson’s scholarship to theorize about the role of framing in public policy (Rein & Schön, 1991, 1996; Schön & Rein, 1995), suggesting that “intractable policy controversies” (Schön & Rein, 1995) featured fundamental disagreements over the definitions, or framing, of public policy problems. Schön and Rein posited that meaningful resolution of such controversies would require policy actors to turn away from offering solutions and instead critically examine the contrasting framing of policy problems.

Sociologists also took up Bateson’s notion of framing. Goffman (1974) explored how actors collectively constructed shared definitions of their situations. These definitions, or frames, oriented actors’ understandings of their social realities, and informed how they constructed and presented their self-identities within these realities. Drawing on Goffman, social movement theorists examined how actors strategically and collaboratively crafted frames to advance their causes and build movement support (Benford & Snow, 2000).²

In this paper, we draw on van Hulst and Yanow’s (2014) definition of framing as “a process in and through which policy-relevant actors intersubjectively construct the meanings of the policy-relevant situations with which they are involved, whether directly or as onlookers and stakeholders” (p. 97). Frames serve as shared “schemata of interpretation” (Goffman, 1974, p. 21) that organize and assign meaning to experiences. The social process of framing crafts shared understandings of both policy situations and the perceived range of appropriate responses. In social movement literature, this framing process is described as consisting of three interrelated tasks: diagnostic, prognostic, and motivating framing (Benford & Snow, 2000). Diagnostic framing refers to the construction of shared understandings of a social problem, while prognostic framing offers solutions associated with these diagnosed problems. Motivating framing provides a rationale for taking action and enacting these solutions, often by appealing to shared values.

² According to van Hulst and Yanow (2014), the social movement literature has emphasized intentional and conscious processes of framing. The public policy perspective, in contrast, has highlighted framing as situational and intersubjective, rather than intentional or strategic. Here, we elect not to weigh in on the debate regarding the extent to which framing may be intentional. Instead, we use framing as a sensitizing concept (Bowen, 2006) to guide our analysis, drawing on both public policy and social movement literatures.

Framing takes place through linguistic and semiotic communication among actors, and includes processes of selecting, naming, and categorizing (van Hulst & Yanow, 2014). When making meaning of ambiguous situations, actors *select* certain features of the situation to attend to, while disregarding others. These features are *named*, often by invoking metaphors and comparisons, and are *categorized*, defined as “this” and not “that.” This framing process draws on, and is constrained by, actors’ prior knowledge and experiences, as well as a broader cultural repertoire of values, narratives, and ideas (Benford & Snow, 2000; van Hulst & Yanow, 2014).

As we sought to understand the landscape of school choice policies in the five focal states, framing theory helped us consider the ways in which actors were making meaning of these policies, how they defined the problems such policies sought to address, and why choice served as an apt solution. This conceptual tool helped us uncover a rich and contested set of shared ideas both within and across states.

Our work builds on that of other scholars who have similarly used framing theory to analyze how problem framing influences the implementation of K-12 school policies, such as teacher evaluation (Lane, 2020; Woulfin et al., 2016), curriculum changes (Coburn, 2006), and data use (Park et al., 2013). Research utilizing framing often focuses on school or district policies and the role of local leaders in shaping policy conceptions. Coburn (2006), for instance, applied sensemaking and framing theories to study a school’s implementation of a new reading initiative. Coburn found that the staff’s construction of the problem greatly impacted how they approached the program’s implementation, and that school leadership played a significant role in communicating and shaping the problem. This body of work suggests that leaders play an essential role in the framing of education policy at the school and district level (Coburn et al., 2008). However, research has yet to apply the theory to policy at the state level or examine how school choice policies are framed. Understanding how state policy actors frame choice policies has important implications for how they are debated in legislatures, and, ultimately, how they are designed and implemented, with implications for a large number of students.

Study Design

Our multi-case study of choice policy perspectives draws on qualitative data from five states, Colorado, Florida, Louisiana, Michigan, and Oregon (Yin, 2013). These data were collected as part of a larger project examining the enactment of school choice; thus, the selected states all featured a significant school choice strategy. We purposefully sampled these states to provide variation in geography, population, types of choice policies, and the maturity of these policies, as illustrated in Table 1. All five states have charter school and inter-district open enrollment policies (most adopted in the 1990s) that allow students to enroll in district-run public schools outside of the district in which they live, while Florida and Louisiana are the only states with private school choice (i.e., vouchers). We elected to bound our analysis on these three policies in order to facilitate in-depth investigation, though we acknowledge that states may have had other choice programs in place, such as magnet schools.

Table 1*Description of Student Enrollment and Choice Programs, by State*

	All Public Schools					Charter Schools		Choice Programs			
	Total Enrollment	Percent Black	Percent Latinx	Percent White	Percent Low Income	Year policy adopted	Percent of public school enrollment	Year policy adopted	Percent of public school enrollment	Year policy adopted	No. Students
Colorado	911,536 ⁴	5%	34%	53%	41%	1994	13% ³	1994	5% ^{2,5}	NA	NA
Florida	2,846,857 ⁴	22%	34%	37%	55%	1996	11% ³	1997	Not available	1999	1,347,863
Louisiana	717,109 ³	43%	8%	44%	70%	1995	11% ²	2001	Not available	2008	861,222
Michigan	1,485,144 ¹	18%	7%	67%	46%	1993	10% ⁴	1996	12% ⁴	NA	NA
Oregon	580,684 ³	2%	23%	62%	49%	1999	6% ³	2011 (ended in 2019)	Not available	NA	NA

Notes. The years of data varied based on availability for states and choice options. ¹2015-16, ²2016-17, ³2017-18, ⁴2018-19, ⁵“May include students assigned across districts for reasons other than parental choice (e.g. special education services).”

Sources: The Century Foundation. (2016). *Charter Diversity Index Report*. <https://charterdiversity.org/statedata/#Michigan>; Colorado Department of Education. (2019). *Colorado Department of Education Pupil Membership 2018-19*. <https://www.cde.state.co.us/communications/coeducationfactsandfigures>; Florida Department of Education. (2019). *EdStats 2018-19*. <https://edstats.fldoe.org>; Florida Department of Education. (2019). *PK-12 Public School Data Reports*. <http://www.fldoe.org/accountability/data-sys/edu-info-accountability-services/pk-12-public-school-data-pubs-reports/school/index.stml>; Louisiana Department of Education. (2019). *Multiple Statistics By School System For Total Public Students, Feb. 1, 2019*. <https://www.louisianabelieves.com/resources/library/student-attributes>; EdChoice. (2017). *School Choice in America 2017*. <https://www.edchoice.org/school-choice/school-choice-in-america/>; National Alliance for Public Charter Schools. (2017). *Public Charter School Data Using 2016-17 Common Core of Data*. <https://data.publiccharters.org/state/louisiana/>; Michigan Virtual Learning Research Institute. (2018). *K-12 Virtual Learning Effectiveness Report*. <https://mvlri.org/research/publications/michigans-k-12-virtual-learning-effectiveness-report-2017-18/>; National Center for Education Statistics. (2016). *Common Core of Data*. https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2018/2018052/tables/table_02.asp; National Alliance for Public Charter Schools. (2016). *Charter Law Database*. <https://www.publiccharters.org/our-work/charter-law-database/states/michigan>; Oregon Department of Education. (2018). *Statewide Report Card 2017-18*. <https://www.oregon.gov/ode/schools-and-districts/reportcards/Documents/rptcard2018.pdf>; Oregon Department of Education. (2018). *Charter Data*. <https://www.oregon.gov/ode/learning-options/schooltypes/charter/Pages/default.aspx>; ReadyColorado. (2018). *Open Enrollment Fall Report*. <http://readyeducation.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/ODODfinal.pdf>; RedefinEd. (2018). *Florida PK-12 Education Landscape 2017-18 Florida snapshot*. https://www.redefinedonline.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/Changing_Landscape_2017_18.pdf

The states also vary in their demographics and in the extent of engagement with school choice options. For example, Florida is the largest of the five states with more than 2.8 million students enrolled in public schools, whereas Oregon is considerably smaller with approximately 580,000 students. Louisiana serves significantly more low-income students, and the student body is fairly evenly divided between Black and White students with a much smaller Latinx student population. In Michigan and Oregon about two-thirds of public-school students are White, whereas in Florida a little more than a third of students are White.

As for school choice programs and student enrollment or “market share,” in 2017-18, fewer than 6% of Oregon students attended charter schools and the state did not offer public funding to attend private schools. By contrast, 23% of students in Louisiana (including 100% of those in New Orleans) were enrolled in either charter schools or participated in private school choice in 2016-17. The demographic profile of students enrolled in charter schools also varied across states. Black students in Louisiana and Michigan were substantially more likely to attend charter schools than were White students, while White students in Oregon were more likely to attend charters than were racially minoritized students. In Colorado and Florida, the demographic profiles of students were more similar between those attending charters and students in the state overall.

Data Collection

In 2019, a team of researchers conducted 57 interviews across the five states with policymakers and policy influencers (Patton, 1990). The term influencer suggests that policies are not shaped solely by legislators and state bureaucrats but also by other key stakeholders such as community organizations and lobbying groups. As such, we purposefully selected interviewees based on key statewide leadership roles, such as policymakers, advocacy group leaders (including choice advocates and community organizations), teachers’ union representatives, and state school board members (see Table 2).

Table 2

Interviewees by Interviewee Type and State

Respondent Type	Number of Interviewees (<i>N</i> = 57)				
	Colorado	Florida	Louisiana	Michigan	Oregon
State Legislators/Governor/Staff	1	2	1	3	1
State Board of Education	2	-	-	1	1
State Department of Education	1	1	5	-	2
Administrator/School Board/Teacher Associations	3	2	1	3	2
Parent/ Community Advocates	2	3	4	1	3
School Choice Advocates	3	3	2	2	2
Totals	12	11	13	10	11

The semi-structured, one-hour interviews asked about the design and implementation of school choice policies within the state, and participants were encouraged to evaluate how these policies served marginalized students. For this analysis we focus on a set of questions aligned with framing theory that asked respondents about the goals of particular choice policies, the problems and root causes these policies sought to address, how choice was expected to address those problems and root causes, and the intended beneficiaries. We asked respondents to consider these questions both from the perspective of policymakers and based on their own views or critiques. All but one interview was audio-recorded and transcribed. One participant declined recording, and the interviewer instead took notes to capture the content of the conversation.

Data Analysis

As part of a larger study, the data were first uploaded into Dedoose and coded using a set of 17 structural codes (Saldaña, 2013). This included codes for data pertaining to different types of choice policies (e.g., charters, open enrollment, vouchers); state political context; dimensions of choice policy (e.g., enrollment, oversight, transportation); and groups of minoritized students (e.g., low income, students with disabilities, students of color, English learners). Researchers then used the coded data to author detailed reports on each case, averaging 42 pages, which summarized and presented data regarding the state's social and political context and the nature of choice policy design and implementation. At this time, the research team became interested in further examining how choice was framed and critiqued by political actors in each state. Analyzing the reports, we developed a tentative set of categories to describe the different framing processes observed (e.g., diagnostic, prognostic), and we used these categories to guide an additional round of data analysis. We reviewed transcripts and case reports to prepare profiles on framing processes in each case, averaging 43 pages, which described and organized data regarding the different approaches to framing choice as a desirable policy and the critiques. We used open, inductive coding to identify patterns across both the positive framings and critiques, collapsing emergent patterns into categories. Through this process, we identified seven key codes representing choice frames: quality, equity, liberty, plurality, innovation, survival, and critiques. To investigate patterns we also kept track of the frequency of codes and their association with different choice policies and actors within and across states, using spreadsheets and data visualizations (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

For validation of our findings, we engaged in regular peer debriefing sessions and used peer feedback to refine our emerging findings (Creswell, 2007; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Finally, we sought out disconfirming evidence that challenged our claims and revised our findings as necessary throughout data analysis.

Positionality

Our team included faculty and graduate student researchers with a range of experiences with school choice policy. Some have taught in charter schools, some came with critical perspectives on school choice policy, and others have studied these issues for many years. Based on these varied experiences and view-points, we prioritized a data-analysis process driven by the theoretical framework and utilized regular peer debriefing sessions to check our assumptions and biases.

Findings

Across cases, we identified five common approaches to framing choice as a desirable policy. These approaches each centered on an espoused goal: quality, equity, liberty, plurality, and innovation. As Table 3 illustrates, each approach emphasized both a diagnostic framing of the problem and a prognostic framing of the ways in which choice policy solves that problem. It is

important to note the overlap in these categories, as we often heard one frame discussed alongside another. In each state, we also spoke with leaders who expressed opposition to school choice policies, including teachers' union leaders, state government officials and staff, and leaders of community and policy advocacy groups. The critiques questioned the validity of the positive frames and at times suggested ulterior motives on the part of choice supporters.

Table 3*Frames Supporting School Choice*

Frame: Quality	
Diagnostic Framing	The problem is failing schools/lack of quality schools due to bureaucracy or organized labor
Prognostic Framing	The solution of school choice improves quality via flexibility and autonomy; creates greater motivation to improve
Example Quote	"[W]e have school systems in the state ... that are objectively and by every measure not providing an adequate education for students. Without certain [school] choice policies, charter schools being one part of that, school of choice being another, ... parents had nowhere else to go for their kids, right. You're sticking your kids in a failing school system with no other option. And so ... I think the state has a moral, kind of fiduciary responsibility to allow parents to find their options for their kids. I think competition's a good thing, but more of a secondary responsibility" (Michigan State Official).
Frame: Equity	
Diagnostic Framing	The problem is a lack of quality options and access for underserved/marginalized students
Prognostic Framing	The solution of school choice levels the playing field; allows families to attend better schools or improve school quality in the neighborhood
Example Quote	"In Denver, I think that for the most part folks are trying to solve the challenge of the achievement gap and educational opportunities for low income kids and for kids of color in Denver" (Colorado School Choice Advocate).
Frame: Liberty	
Diagnostic Framing	The problem is constraints on families' rights to send children where they think is best
Prognostic Framing	The solution of school choice frees families from attendance zone constraints and gives them the liberty they deserve
Example Quote	"But a lot of it I think was just the basic principle that parents ought to be able to control where their kids go to school. The school district shouldn't be able to control, the parents should be able to control it. ... I've gotten the old argument, I'm sure you've heard this too, that if you want to talk about local control, nothing is more local than a parent and a student making the choice they want to make" (Colorado State Association Leader).

 Frame: Plurality

Diagnostic Framing	The problem is lack of “fit” between schools & children’s needs
Prognostic Framing	The solution of school choice allows for greater plurality of options and matching of needs
Example Quote	“[I]n the last 20 years, the goal has been to empower families with educational opportunities so they can find the best educational fit for their child. That’s the overarching goal of all of the choice policies in the state. Even the things that you’re not really covering like public school, intra and inter district choice, the online and virtual options and so many other things. So that I think always started as the overarching goal. Families make better decisions about their own children. They need a plurality of options so that they can find the best ones to fit their child’s educational needs” (Florida Advocate).

 Frame: Innovation

Diagnostic Framing	The problem is a lack of creativity in current schools, due to bureaucracy/regulation, etc.
Prognostic Framing	The solution of school choice helps motivate improvement via flexibility/autonomy
Example Quote	“In the law, it specifically talks about that charter schools are an experiment, and that the experiment is intended to allow for greater innovation. Some have taken the word experiment and made it a dirty word. That experiment denotes that it’s something not proven, that it’s risky, that you should be afraid of it. I don’t believe that was the spirit of the law. I think the spirit of the law was, “Can we do better? Is it worth us looking at other methods to deliver education to Louisiana students?” And I go further and say that that innovation shouldn’t be limited to just how you teach, or what’s going on the classroom, but that innovation trickles down to how we govern these schools, our finances, HR. I think innovation and changing the face of K 12 public education looks like a lot of different things, and not again, solely the teacher in a classroom. And I think that many charter schools are delivering on that piece of the law, by trying to develop innovative practices that we may not be currently seeing in traditional districts, and/or other charter schools” (Louisiana Charter Advocate).

Next, we examine these key patterns, presenting first an analysis of the positive frame followed by the critiques that emerged.

Framing School Choice as Desirable

Positive frames emerged in all five states, but with some variation. As noted in Figure 1, some of these positive framings were more prevalent in certain states. For example, plurality emerged quite strongly in Oregon relative to all other states and quality dominated discourse in Louisiana. Moreover, we found clear geographic-demographic differences associated with frames in Colorado, and consistent association of innovation with only one type of school choice policy (charters) across the states. We find that the participants sharing these pro-school choice frames tended to be elite political actors such as members of pro-school choice advocacy groups and lawmakers. Next, we examine these key patterns.

Figure 1*Prevalence of Positive Frames Across Cases*

	Colorado	Florida	Oregon	Louisiana	Michigan
Quality	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Equity	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Liberty	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Plurality	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Innovation	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

Note: Large green check marks indicate a frame was more prevalent in our interview data (multiple individuals expressed it). Black check marks indicate less prevalence, but mentioned by at least one interviewee.

Quality Frame

When employing the quality frame, participants suggested that school choice was necessary due to a lack of quality public schools. Actors blamed a myriad of factors for poor school quality, such as bureaucracy and organized labor, and suggested that school choice improved educational quality by providing educators with more autonomy and a greater motivation to improve. School choice advocates and lawmakers were the most likely to evoke quality framing. The quality frame was particularly prevalent in Colorado, Louisiana, and Michigan. All three policy types— charter schools, open enrollment, and voucher policies—were discussed using this framing.

For instance, actors in Louisiana consistently voiced the quality frame above all others (9 of 13 interviewees cited this compared to 4 or 5 for the other frames). Louisiana state leaders and choice advocates argued that school choice policy, particularly charter schools, sought to address the low academic performance of “failing schools.” While they cited different root causes of that failure—such as “an elected board that was failing our kids” or a lack of “good leaders” in schools and districts—they were unified in their understanding that choice would improve educational quality.

Yet, Louisiana actors also differed in their explanations for how and by what mechanisms choice would lead to improvement. Some conveyed a systems-level perspective, noting that choice created competition that motivated improvement in both traditional and charter sectors. “I think the competition in a sense is good,” said one advocate, “because it does make schools raise their bar in how they’re serving students.” Similarly, a state leader explained,

I think it’s complicated why the schools are Ds and Fs, so at the end of the day I think districts have the tools to improve their schools, and I think often are pushed to use them if competition exists in the system. Or at least, attempt to use them better.

A few noted that charter schools gave leaders autonomy that could improve school practices.

Other actors in Louisiana adopted the perspective of individual families: school choice provided families the ability to “get out” of a lower performing school and attend a higher quality one. This perspective was true for individuals discussing both charter schools and vouchers. Some recognized the limitations of viewing school choice in this way, as perhaps a temporary solution to the larger question of school quality. One state leader acknowledged that this debate occurred during the first development of the state’s voucher programs:

We have a lot going on to improve low performing schools across the state, but we all know that takes time, and we also know that as much as we would like to have 100% success rate in that endeavor, 100% is not likely to happen. We have to have something available for families in the meantime.

Equity Frame

Across all five states, participants suggested that school choice was necessary due to the lack of quality education options for marginalized students. Under this framing, school choice leveled the playing field and allowed low-income and non-White students to attend higher quality schools outside of their neighborhood. Participants in all five states framed charter schools in terms of equity. Participants in Florida framed the state’s voucher policy as a solution to inequities and Michigan participants tied open enrollment policies to equity, as well.

For instance, in Colorado, interviewees conveyed equity frames when referring to urban districts such as Denver and some rural areas. In these cases, school choice policy was seen as a means to create a better, more just educational system for lower-income and minoritized communities. According to one charter advocate, this equity framing asserted that:

The existing system has not been up to the task of adequately educating some of our kids, particularly some of those from our most historically underserved communities and so we need charter schools to be able to create a higher bar of accountability.

Respondents described particular networks and schools in Denver “trying to address educational inequity, and ... explicitly serve underserved communities” and “solve the challenge of the achievement gap and educational opportunities for low-income kids and for kids of color.” Another advocate associated equity-oriented school choice with rural areas, where charter schools were designed to serve “at-risk students”:

You'll see charter schools filling that role in a lot of rural Colorado... So, yeah, I would definitely say it's across the state. Down in Colorado Springs, there are some pockets of very serious poverty and neglect, and I know the charter space is serving those kids.

Liberty Framing

Another positive framing suggested that parents needed school choice to free them of the constraints imposed by the traditional public school system. Under the liberty framing, school choice released parents from attendance zones and restrictive enrollment policies. The liberty frame was particularly strong in Colorado and Michigan. Participants in every state except Florida discussed liberty in terms of charter schools. In Florida, voucher policies were framed as expanding liberty. In Michigan participants also attributed the liberty frame to open enrollment policies. The data also suggest that participants evoked the liberty frame mainly when discussing White and suburban parents and their needs for choice and rarely applied it to racially minoritized communities.

In Colorado, the majority of interviewees (8 of 11) conveyed a liberty framing of choice policy, depicting families “stuck” and “trapped” in neighborhood schools against their will and deserving of their right to send their children elsewhere. When asked what lawmakers had in mind when creating open enrollment policy, one state leader responded:

A lot of it I think was just the basic principle that parents ought to be able to control where their kids go to school. The school district shouldn't be able to control, the parents should be able to control it.

Similarly, an advocate described the rationale behind charter schools as “you want the choice to really be in the hands of the parents, not in the hands of the system.” A state elected official echoed this sentiment: “It's just automatically assumed that parents make the best choice. Therefore, they should be free to go anywhere.”

In Michigan participants discussed how the open enrollment policies took the government out of decisions that should be made by parents and families. As one state bureaucrat shared:

At least in our view, when we start drawing and building these unpassable walls that parents view as completely, completely arbitrary, and students view as completely arbitrary, we're doing a disservice to the taxpayers and the parents of Michigan.

The open enrollment policy took down the “walls” of zip-code-determined school assignment and gave families freedom to choose the best educational option for their children.

The liberty frame was closely associated with discussions of choice in suburban areas and White, more affluent parents. In fact, many individuals spoke about “White flight” charters as an example of how choice policy was adopted to advance suburban White parents' perceived rights to “better” options for their children, such as schools with more advanced courses or “core knowledge” curriculum.

Plurality Frame

In the plurality frame, participants asserted that school choice was needed to address the lack of fit between assigned neighborhood schools and children's needs. Here, school choice provided parents with deserved options and the ability to align educational programs with their children's targeted needs. Participants conveyed this framing when discussing all three policy types— charter schools, open enrollment, and voucher policies.

Actors in Oregon emphasized the plurality frame to a much greater degree than did actors elsewhere. In fact, 8 of 11 interviewees conveyed this idea, that traditional public schools are “not meeting the needs of all our students”, that students “need to have other options” and that school choice provides the “best education possible to a variety of different families and situations and circumstances within those to each student in Oregon.” When asked about the goals of the state's charter school policy, one advocate replied, “to provide different models of education for students that might need different ways of learning, and might do better with a different kind of structure as opposed to the sort of traditional public school structure.” Another respondent noted that providing a variety of options allowed parents and students to determine “Where's the best fit for you? ... [and then] choose where they think they would be most successful.” Open enrollment in particular provided families even greater access to different school types, further expanding “fit” options, “because one district offers something the other doesn't.”

This frame was particularly salient in discussions of virtual charter schools, which were more common in Oregon than in the other states studied. Multiple individuals noted that not all students succeed in traditional “brick and mortar” settings. Virtual charter schools provided alternatives to meet different needs and circumstances of students, some of whom thrive in online settings—such as students with extreme health needs (e.g., receiving chemotherapy), pregnant teens or students

with their own children, students with disabilities, students being bullied, and students who can advance more quickly or need more time than other students. (It is, of course, important to note that our data were collected in 2019, prior to the enactment of widespread virtual learning in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.)

Innovation Frame

A final framing suggested that school choice was necessary due to the lack of creativity in traditional schools. Under this innovation frame school choice motivated innovation by decreasing bureaucracy and increasing autonomy. While actors conveyed most frames for all choice policies, they articulated the innovation frame only when referencing charter schools. Unlike voucher or open enrollment policies, charter schools brought a unique orientation around ideas that traditional schools were “entrenched” and constrained by bureaucratic regulations and that greater freedom would lead to “testing out” or “incubating” more creative instructional, management, and governance practices. One Florida respondent noted,

My understanding of the problems that they're trying to address [in the charter school policy] are lack of innovation, lack of creativity, being too tied to the structures of high stakes testing. ... if you're asking what do they think they're trying to do? That is certainly the message.

For some, the innovation-induced benefits were intended to simply improve outcomes for students in the charter schools. Others, however, adopted a broader theory of action in which charters were meant to be “learning labs” producing innovations that would flow back into and improve the traditional public system. According to one Oregon state leader, the original intent of state charter law was to create schools “to serve as models and catalysts for improvement of other public schools in the public school system.” Several individuals associated this broader conception with former American Federation of Teachers president Al Shanker’s initial vision for charter schools in the late 1980s.

Unlike the other frames, innovation brought educators explicitly into the conversation as agents of change. By removing restrictions and bringing decisions closer to the school and classroom level, charter school policy would allow educators to be more “nimble,” “flexible,” and creative in serving students. “The idea of charters,” said a Michigan choice advocate, “was meant to be an opportunity to innovate and have life be less regulated but more accountability and innovation.” Similarly, a charter leader in Oregon explained:

Innovation has been a big part [of the intent], district leaders wanted the opportunity to try different educational models and the charter school law is what gave them the flexibility to do that. To get out from under a lot of regulatory policies that hindered that.

Critiques of Frames

Above, we discussed patterns in how actors framed the school choice policies, describing how these framing practices centered five key values: quality, equity, liberty, plurality, and innovation. These five patterns in framing all positioned school choice policies as a solution to a perceived problem. However, our research indicates that these frames were not universally espoused or supported. In each state, actors – teachers union leaders, state government officials and staff, leaders of community and policy advocacy groups – contested these assertions, suggesting the frames were misguided, inaccurate, or, at worse, duplicitous. These disputes referred to all three policy types (charters, vouchers, open enrollment). In Table 4, we give an overview of the critiques of the frames supporting school choice.

Table 4*Critiques of Frames Supporting School Choice*

Frame: Quality	
Critique	Evidence does not support schools of choice perform better than well resourced public schools
Example Quote	“Charter operators...want the same things that the public schools want. They want more money, more focus, and more time.... I don't think they're doing anything that public school couldn't do given the same opportunity than charter-like prescriptions, which is give us the money, give us the time, we'll give you the performance” (Florida Teacher’s Union Leader).
Frame: Equity	
Critique	School choice policies fail to serve, or actively harm, the marginalized students involved
Example Quote	“Unless the program is designed to serve [marginalized] students, they tend to not be representative in those schools relative to the neighborhood schools” (Oregon State Board Member).
Frame: Liberty	
Critique	Families and students do not truly have liberty to access meaningful school choices because of a lack of transportation and access to information about school options or selective enrollment practices
Example Quote	“If you are a parent, and you want to get your child out of school A, and you want to take a [voucher] and go to school B, which is on the other side of town, how do you get the child there? They have no car, bus transportation is limited, city transportation, how do you get the child there? Does that parent have a choice? No” (Florida State Leader).
Frame: Plurality	
Critique	With more funding traditional public schools could cater to the learning needs of more students
Example Quote	“We haven't ever really fully funded our actual [traditional public] schools, so maybe if we provided sufficient support, and counselors and teachers, we'd find that those schools could accommodate lots of different learning styles” (Oregon Community Advocate).
Frame: Innovation	
Critique	Charter schools have largely failed to be innovative
Example Quote	“Even if we do think that creativity and innovation are the most important issues to address in public education, this [school choice] is not the best way to do it” (Louisiana Community Advocate).

 New Frame: Ulterior Motives

Critique	While advocates advance school choice policies on the basis of other goals and values (e.g., quality, equity), their true motives are to ensure fiscal solvency or to dismantle public education
Example Quote	“I think there are an awful lot of people involved in the school choice movement whose goal is to destroy public education, and certainly to destroy unionized public education” (Michigan Labor Leader).

As depicted in Table 4, we found critiques of the five main frames identified through our analysis: quality, equity, liberty, plurality, and innovation. Our analysis highlighted an additional frame used by critics, which we termed “ulterior motives.” This frame suggested that some actors’ motives for advancing school choice policies fall outside the five frames. For instance, some educators might find school choice helpful for fiscal solvency, and certain reformers may advance school choice policies to harm the institution of public education.

Overall, critics acknowledged that the diagnostic frames of pro-choice arguments were largely true. In other words, participants critical of choice often agreed that low quality schools, inequitable access to good school choices, and lack of variety and/or innovation were issues facing K-12 schools. However, critics doubted that school choice policies were the solution to these issues. For instance, individuals agreed that there were underperforming schools but disputed assertions that choice would improve quality, citing empirical evidence that charter schools do not uniformly perform better than well-resourced public schools (a challenge to the *quality frame*). Similarly, critics agreed that many families lacked the ability to send their children to good schools but disagreed with the assertion that choice policies would remedy this problem. They argued that a lack of transportation and access to information about school options, or selective enrollment practices denied families access to meaningful school choices under such policies (a challenge to the *liberty frame*). Often, critics suggested that with adequate funding, traditional public schools could address education issues just as well, if not better than choice systems.

To further illustrate these critiques, in the following section we delve into two of the most prevalent in our data: a critique of the equity frame and assertions of ulterior financial motives or the covert survival frame.

Critique of the Equity Frame

Across all the five states, participants took issue with the equity framing, asserting that school choice policies (referring to charters, vouchers, or school choice in general) failed to serve, or actively harmed, the students involved. Participants in each state noted that charter and/or voucher schools provided inadequate services for students with disabilities. Several participants suggested this was a problem of scale—that a small charter or voucher school would lack the resources of a large district in terms of providing costly special education services. A Louisiana union leader explained,

I think that probably the group of kids that is most underserved in Louisiana, both in the charter system and the voucher system, would be those children who have [a] disability. A child that has an individual education plan may or may not be able to get the services within the charter system, or the voucher system... Those services are quite expensive.

In Oregon, several participants suggested charter schools failed to provide appropriate services for students of low-income backgrounds. In the words of one Oregon labor leader,

In Oregon, more than half of our kids are poor. ...Charter schools are not serving those kids...[They are not providing] the wrap around services, mental health support, summer schools for kids who are struggling. Just everything. Food. ... Kids in charter schools are typically not getting [meals] at all, and if they're in a virtual charter school, of course, they don't get any kind of food. So, we're talking about a two-tiered education system: one for the rich and one for the poor.

In Louisiana and Colorado, community advocates advanced race-conscious critiques, explaining that charter schools engaged in racist practices, or perpetuated racist narratives, that were actively harmful to Black students (in Louisiana) or to Black and Brown students (in Colorado). Individuals in both states criticized charters for rigid behavior management and disciplinary systems that sought to control the bodies of racially minoritized youth. “The way, in terms of discipline and how they run a tight ship, to me comes from a really racist outlook,” explained a Colorado leader. “That [they think] that is the only way we can teach Brown and Black kids; that in order for them to learn, we have to have these harsh discipline metrics or practices.” Advocates also raised concerns about the perpetuation of savior narratives that positioned elite philanthropists and White educators as the heroes coming to rescue Black and Latinx students. In the words of a Louisiana community advocate:

The charter schools are accountable to wealthy individuals in the community, and foundations. It's presenting narratives around their needs for people to have saviors and that because you're wealthy, you obviously should be part of the solution. No examination about how the same people may have been part of the problem or have caused the situation. ...And so you get that missionary mentality, you perpetuate racial stereotypes.

In Florida, Oregon, and Michigan, participants also stated that choice reforms exacerbated racial and/or socioeconomic segregation in schools. “Charter schools...have become means for restratification and resegregation of students,” an Oregon labor leader said. Another state leader in Oregon framed school choice as “a vehicle, potentially, to disrupt some of those [resegregation] trends. Unfortunately, my experience is it often has the exact opposite effect.” Indeed, this critique addressed charters, vouchers, and choice in general. As one Colorado labor leader observed:

[Charter advocates] will say that their goal is to serve disadvantaged or students of color, but when we look at the demographics of a lot of our charter schools, that just doesn't come to play. It's not the reality.

The Ulterior Motives Frame

Participants in four of our five case states (Florida, Louisiana, Oregon, and Michigan) brought a different critique that went beyond challenging a particular framing. Several participants characterized policy actors who supported school choice as deceptive or malicious. Here, participants suggested that frames publicly articulated by school choice supporters, purporting goals of equity, quality, and so on, in fact masked covert frames and internal justifications for school choice. As noted above, some espousing ideas around covert frames asserted that advocates might have publicly argued that charters would help improve quality or advance equity or other goals but secretly may have understood and intended the expansion of these policies as a means for undermining public education and pushing for privatization, as evidenced in some of the critiques illustrated above. In other places, the ulterior motives were linked to local districts' financial viability and survival.

In particular, many participants in Oregon suggested that districts internally saw market-based reforms as a means of ensuring districts' financial survival. This was characterized as a departure from the initial intent of such reforms.

Articulated by 6 of 11 participants in our Oregon sample, this approach positioned school choice—particularly charter schools and virtual charter schools—as a means of helping districts “stay afloat.” As one state leader explained,

Sometimes we see schools where districts are finding themselves in changing populations and declining enrollment. They will close a small rural school and that community will rally and convert that school to a charter school. So, we have a handful of those schools across the state where if it weren't for the community forming and charter schools, that elementary school would be closed.

Most reported that such moves were common among smaller, rural districts. According to another state leader, these districts have:

Sponsored a virtual program like the K-12 one or the Pearson one, Connections Academy, and then boosted their student counts up to 5,000, 6,000 kids versus the 125 that may go to school in their district. Then they take a piece of that per capita to keep their doors open. It's basically an income stream for them.

Oregon participants explained that a district converting itself or a school to charter status and/or sponsoring a virtual charter school could offer the district financial benefits associated with increased enrollment (by enrolling students from outside the district boundaries) or make them eligible for federal start-up grants. Interviewees expressed concern that cash-strapped districts were financially incentivized to establish a virtual charter school or convert to charter status. “If you are using this as a money maker,” observed one respondent, “what incentive do you have to regulate them [the virtual school] and police that behavior? Especially given that some of them just pack up and try and get another sponsor.” Others derided districts for converting to charter districts and “stealing kids from neighboring districts.”

We heard similar critiques in Michigan regarding open-enrollment policies. All districts in the state were required to offer intradistrict school choice. However, districts could choose to offer interdistrict choice as well. Participants suggested that the state underfunded schools, which led districts to adopt interdistrict enrollment policies in order to gain more funding, as in Michigan, where funding was tied to student enrollment numbers. For example, when asked to explain why school districts adopted interdistrict enrollment policies, one Michigan teachers' association representative replied: “The reason they do it is to be able to financially run their school district. That's the reason they do it.” However, they noted, wealthier and typically Whiter districts that could sustain themselves on property taxes often chose not to accept students from other districts, further exacerbating inequity.

Discussion

Earlier in this piece, we questioned why such a “strange” group of actors have come to support school choice, despite mixed evidence of its effectiveness and widespread critique of its effects both intended and unintended. While we cannot answer this question fully, the findings of our study help to provide some insight. Drawing on 57 interviews with state-level actors, we examined the contours of the school choice debate in five states: Colorado, Florida, Louisiana, Oregon, and Michigan. Across cases, we found widespread agreement that K-12 education faces a

multitude of problems. We also found that school choice policy—charter school, voucher, and open enrollment policies—could be framed as a solution to many of these problems across a variety of student population and contexts, centering five key values: quality, equity, liberty, plurality, and innovation. We also heard critiques of these frames and strong concerns around invalid claims and ulterior motives.

There are several limitations of our study that are important to consider when interpreting our findings. First, we acknowledge that, while we sought to interview key influencers in each state, our samples were not necessarily representative of all stakeholder groups, and some perspectives may have been missed. Second, given our focus on school choice policies, we did not investigate the framing of alternative policies that may have been advocated by those opposed to school choice. Despite these limitations, we posit that our findings can yield some theoretical generalization (Yin, 2013), offering a framework for informing future research on school choice and analysis of framing approaches in other contexts.

The Role of Ambiguity and Politics

The multi-faceted approach to framing school choice as a desirable policy illustrates the role of ambiguity and malleability in discourse promoting market-based educational reforms, as our interviewees framed choice as ‘all things to all people.’ Public policy scholars have observed that ambiguity in communication plays an important role in the policy process (Kingdon, 2011; Stone, 2011). Ambiguity allows leaders to seek support from groups who might otherwise disagree with one another, and elected officials find it easier to support policies that are ambiguous and vague, leaving concrete and controversial details up to administrative agencies to resolve (Stone, 2011). Policymaking organizations often reflect the “garbage can model” of decision-making (Cohen et al., 1972), characterized by ambiguous goals, a lack of understanding of organizational technology, and inconsistent participation in decision-making. As school choice is tied to an ambiguous and malleable arrangement of goals, problems, and solutions, it may thus remain more durable within a broader range of decision-making “cans.” For example, consider the argument that school choice had morphed into a means of district financial survival in Oregon, with the solution of choice tied to a different kind of problem than originally envisioned by market-based reformers. Or how choice—framed as liberty—was used to expand school choice policies (e.g., education savings accounts and vouchers) to cater to families who do not agree with COVID-19 restrictions or curriculum aimed at educating on racial awareness and equity (e.g., Aldrich, 2022). The ambiguous and varied goals reflected in our data may help to ensure support from a wide variety of constituencies, thus helping to explain the persistence of school choice policy today.

Furthermore, we argue that ambiguity of school choice policy framing contributes to the politics of distraction. Farley and colleagues (2021) define policy distractions as framings that “obscure a deeper understanding of the policy context and the lived experiences of students, families, and communities; in this way, they divert attention from root causes, complex structural forces, and historical and contextual circumstances” (p. 168). Scholars have argued that policy distractions are achieved by narrowing policy frames and potential solutions (Hattie, 2015). Our study adds nuance to this argument and demonstrates that in some cases, it is not narrowing policy frames but *expanding* them that leads to policy distractions. We argue that the multiple framings of choice act as a distraction where school choice applies to almost every problem, obscuring other solutions and appealing to various stakeholders. As a result, school choice remains a popular policy solution, diverting attention from critiques of the structural inequities within choice systems and broader contexts.

Our findings also speak to the role of broader politics and power relations. Although critics of school choice framing questioned whether choice had led to greater school quality, equity, or

innovation, their ideas were nonetheless not reflected in policy. We posit that these critics did not have the same political influence as those advancing pro-choice frames, as choice was a prominent component of education policy in most of the sites. Is it also possible that aspects of the equity and plurality arguments appealed to some marginalized communities, thus fracturing potential coalitions and collective power to mobilize against choice (Collingswood, et al., 2018; Cooper, 2005). Furthermore, there was little evidence from participants suggesting policymakers were interested in curtailing choice within these contexts. These findings indicate that anti-choice advocates—who, in our sample, were largely educators and racially minoritized community advocates—may have less influence than pro-school choice actors. This finding supports other research which suggests that policymakers may privilege the views of neoliberal venture philanthropists over other communities [e.g., educators, civil rights groups (Horsford, et al., 2018; Scott, 2009; Swanson & Barlage, 2006)].

Other Contextual Conditions and Variation

The variation observed in positive framing and the similarities of the critiques across states raises questions about the contextual factors that shape framing processes. Why were some frames more prominent in certain states and not others? We offer some tentative thoughts based on our data. First, the choice landscape matters. For instance, perhaps Oregon's strong emphasis on plurality was shaped by their relatively small school choice sector (with the lowest percentage of students in charter schools of all our cases), the relatively larger White population of charter students compared to students overall, and the state's emphasis on virtual charter schools, unique among our cases. One might imagine that a push for a small number of charters, including many with alternative virtual models, targeted at a privileged population would correspond with plurality framing, centering goals of an alternative environment and a unique fit for each child. This would contrast with the strong emphasis on the quality frame in Louisiana, which had a relatively large school choice sector that served a relatively high proportion of Black students, and where an entire city's educational system (New Orleans) had been replaced by charter schools. In this case, one could imagine that, rather than focusing on the issue of unique fit, public discourse might instead emphasize the need to replace a system perceived to be failing with a higher-quality system, with little regard for the actual preferences of Black students and parents.

The comparison between Oregon and Louisiana also points to the importance of geographic and demographic context in framing processes. In Colorado, we see a within-state geographic pattern in which the framing of school choice policies in suburban and predominantly White communities emphasized liberty goals, in contrast to the focus on equity and quality goals in the urban center of Denver, with its largely Latinx and Black student population. Finally, policy design may also influence framing processes. For example, the association of innovation framing with charter schools may be the result of the charter policy emphasizing opening new schools, compared to open-enrollment and vouchers focusing on expanding access to previously established public schools (open enrollment) or private schools (vouchers). Other factors that may have played a role in informing framing processes include the state's financial picture. For example, the critique of school choice as a means of district financial survival in Oregon was informed by financial challenges at the state level, a concept that might be explored more deeply in future scholarship.

As for the similarity of critiques across cases, we posit that national forces may be playing important roles. For example, national organizations opposing school choice, such as national teachers unions, may have contributed to the seemingly consistent approaches to critiquing school choice across contexts. These critiques also were largely consistent with concerns voiced in critical scholarship (as summarized earlier in this paper), suggesting the possibility of a reflexive relationship between discourse among activists resisting neoliberal reforms and published research that is critical of school choice.

Conclusion

Our findings suggest several opportunities for continued scholarly inquiry. As discussed above, scholars might further investigate the reasons why framing and critiques vary—or remain consistent—in different contexts. Researchers might also dive more deeply into the relationships between framing, policy design, and policy implementation. How do the framing approaches observed here inform decisions about school choice policy design or enactment at the local level? How do these approaches inform community organizing and resistance to market-based reforms? Further, as our data were collected in 2019, future scholarship might investigate how framing of school choice has evolved in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. Media reports and analyses indicate a resurgence of arguments and political support for “parents’ rights” (Manhken, 2022). How are these liberty frames shaping policy design and enactment? And how are these developments affecting pre-pandemic choice coalitions and “strange bedfellows”?

School choice policy has become a prominent feature of the K-12 educational landscape in recent decades, reflective of the broader institutionalization of a neoliberal political ideology in education. Our findings illustrate how, in our five focal states, school choice is framed in multiple and malleable ways, thus presenting choice as all things to all people. These findings illuminate how ambiguity facilitates the persistence and durability of market ideals in education policy discourse.

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