

Municipalities' Different Interpretations of Justice for Families Who Do Not Participate in Local School Choice Regimes

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Abstract: The aim of this paper is to explore differences in how civil servants in Sweden organize and justify their policies towards families who do not make a school choice. We draw on theories about competition as a social construction as well as different notions of justice in education. We present descriptive statistics from a large-scale quantitative data set and conduct a qualitative content analysis of interviews with civil servants to study school choice policies in Sweden, well known for its consumer and market-oriented education policies for the past 35 years. We identify that municipalities that organize mandatory school choice have both different policies and different justifications towards families who, despite information campaigns and other activities, fail or refuse to make an active school choice. The study makes an empirical

contribution to the previously theorized relationship between choice and competition and offers a nuanced understanding of differences in how local authorities organize and justify allocation policies in their school choice regimes. We raise the question of whether extensive localized differences towards families are justified in an educational system that has an outspoken agenda towards equal treatment and equally good education for all no matter of the student's family background.

Keywords: school choice; school allocation; competition; quasi-markets; justice

Las diferentes interpretaciones municipales de la justicia para las familias que no participan en los regímenes locales de elección escolar

Resumen: El objetivo de este artículo es explorar las diferencias en la forma en que funcionarios públicos en Suecia organizan y justifican sus políticas dirigidas a familias que no realizan una elección escolar. Nos apoyamos en teorías que entienden la competencia como una construcción social, así como en distintas nociones de justicia en educación. Presentamos estadísticas descriptivas de un conjunto de datos cuantitativos a gran escala y realizamos un análisis cualitativo de contenido de entrevistas con funcionarios públicos para estudiar las políticas de elección escolar en Suecia, país ampliamente reconocido por sus políticas educativas orientadas al consumidor y al mercado durante los últimos 35 años. Identificamos que los municipios que organizan procesos obligatorios de elección escolar presentan tanto políticas distintas como justificaciones diferentes respecto de las familias que, a pesar de campañas informativas y otras iniciativas, no realizan o rechazan realizar una elección escolar activa. El estudio aporta evidencia empírica a la relación previamente teorizada entre elección y competencia, y ofrece una comprensión matizada de las diferencias en la forma en que las autoridades locales organizan y justifican las políticas de asignación dentro de sus regímenes de elección escolar. Asimismo, planteamos la pregunta de si amplias diferencias localizadas en el trato hacia las familias son justificables en un sistema educativo que sostiene explícitamente una agenda de igualdad de trato y de educación igualmente buena para todos, independientemente del contexto familiar del estudiantado.

Palabras clave: elección escolar; asignación escolar; competencia; cuasi-mercados; justicia

As diferentes interpretações municipais de justiça para famílias que não participam dos regimes locais de escolha escolar

Resumo: O objetivo deste artigo é explorar as diferenças na forma como servidores públicos na Suécia organizam e justificam suas políticas voltadas às famílias que não fazem uma escolha escolar. O estudo se apoia em teorias que compreendem a competição como uma construção social, bem como em diferentes noções de justiça na educação. Apresentamos estatísticas descritivas de um amplo conjunto de dados quantitativos e realizamos uma análise qualitativa de conteúdo de entrevistas com servidores públicos para estudar as políticas de escolha escolar na Suécia, país amplamente conhecido por suas políticas educacionais orientadas ao consumidor e ao mercado ao longo dos últimos 35 anos. Identificamos que os municípios que organizam processos obrigatórios de escolha escolar apresentam tanto políticas distintas quanto justificativas diferentes em relação às famílias que, apesar de campanhas informativas e de outras iniciativas, não realizam ou se recusam a fazer uma escolha escolar ativa. O estudo oferece uma contribuição empírica à relação previamente teorizada entre escolha e competição e proporciona uma compreensão mais nuançada das diferenças na forma como autoridades locais organizam e justificam políticas de alocação em seus regimes de escolha escolar. Além disso, levantamos a questão de saber se amplas diferenças localizadas no tratamento dado às famílias são justificáveis em um sistema educacional que defende explicitamente uma agenda de igualdade de tratamento e de educação igualmente boa para todos, independentemente do contexto familiar dos estudantes.

Palavras-chave: escolha escolar; alocação escolar; competição; quase-mercados; justiça

Municipalities' Different Interpretations of Justice for Families Who Do Not Participate in Local School Choice Regimes

Little is known about the ways in which competition is introduced among and inside organizations; in most cases, it is simply assumed to emerge, as if endemic to human nature. (Arora-Jonsson et al., 2020, p. 2)

Choice regimes are considered fundamental in late modernity, and in many different dimensions of everyday life a range of choices is central to individuals' sense of identity and meaning (Rosa, 2014; Rosenfeld, 2025). One such example is policies about parents' rights and/or obligation to choose a school for their child with the use of vouchers, which has spread in the wake of neo-liberal ideas about a market-oriented relationship between the state and its citizens (Orfield & Frankenberg, 2013; Vandenbroeck et al., 2022). School choice regimes based on vouchers represent a common market-based logic in public service provision, where education quasi-markets are organized by public authorities (Abrams, 2019; DeMatthews et al., 2025; Lubienski, 2003). The concept of quasi-markets refers to "a set of market-based policies in social policy which are often underwritten by public money that introduces market based competition" (Malbon & Carey, 2021, p. 20) that underscores the role of public actors in organizing marketized public services. Quasi-markets are used to explain the intersection of public services and marketization, in which both public and private actors may compete with each other not primarily based on freely negotiated prices but rather on how their services are perceived in terms of quality (Bartlett & Grand, 1993; Dickinson et al., 2022).

In Sweden, the provision of welfare service has undergone both extensive privatization and marketization since the beginning of the 1990s (Blix & Jordahl, 2021). This included the introduction of school choice and vouchers based solely on public funding to both public and private providers of schools. The policy logic of school choice has not changed much in national regulation over the last 30 years and the Education Act (SFS 2010:800) today states that parental preferences are paramount:

A student must be placed in the municipality's school unit where the student's guardian wishes the student to attend. If the desired allocation would result in another student's legitimate demand for allocation in a school unit close to home being overridden, the municipality must place the student in another school unit. The municipality may otherwise deviate from the student's guardian's wishes only if the desired allocation would result in significant organizational or financial difficulties for the municipality. (Chapter 9, 15§)

The Swedish compulsory school system is non-selective and inclusive, and the regulation states that schools are bypassed in the enrollment process in favor of parents and municipalities. While this national regulation sets the overall frame for school allocation and choice, Sweden allows far-reaching local autonomy for its 290 self-governed municipalities to ensure local democracy and policies are adapted to local needs, circumstances and conditions (SFS 1974:152). Hence, the 290 municipalities organize and design their school allocation and choice systems as they see fit, which means that they interpret "a school unit close to home" and "significant organizational or financial difficulties for the municipality" in various ways. Local authorities are key actors in constructing and organizing competition and choice. In Sweden, schooling is compulsory, and municipalities are responsible for providing all children with a school allocation regardless of whether choices are made. While educational and public administration scholars have previously described how citizens are increasingly seen as consumers on welfare markets (T. S. Karlsson, 2024; Roberts-Holmes & Moss, 2021) and extensive previous research focuses on the experience of parents in school choice systems (Ball et al., 1996; Bergström et al., 2026; Hogan & Barnes, 2024; M. Karlsson et al., 2013; Lilja, 2015; Olson Beal & Hendry, 2012;

Raveaud & Zanten, 2007; Reay, 2017), fewer studies have focused on the role of civil servants as actors within the system organizing for choice and competition (for exceptions see e.g., Bomark et al., 2021; Dabisch, 2022; Mawene, 2025). Local authorities act as market stewards in quasi-markets, where their contextual knowledge is essential. Nevertheless, their role in school choice regimes is still poorly understood. While many studies have focused on parents' perception of school choice, we argue that not enough is known about the role of municipalities in these systems. The present study contributes with a comprehensive mapping of policies on the whole of Sweden and is the first study of its kind.

Our focus in this paper is to explore differences in how local authorities in Sweden organize and justify their policies towards those who do not make a school choice. We ask: 1) Which policies exist in Swedish municipalities towards families who do not make a school choice, and how do policies vary between municipalities with different contextual characteristics? and 2) How are different policy choices in the municipalities accounted for with respect to educational justice?

It is essential to understand how relations between citizens and state authorities unfold in different school choice regimes, as they often have substantial impact on individual families. Previous work from Sweden showed, through binary regression, a strong connection between urbanity and mandatory school choice (large cities and their commuter municipalities are 8.5 times more likely to enforce mandatory choice, while medium and smaller towns and rural municipalities tend to assign placements without emphasizing competition). Municipalities with independent schools are over three times more likely to have a mandatory school choice system, and municipalities with more highly educated parents and, to a lesser extent, more pupils with foreign backgrounds, are more likely to organize school allocation through mandatory school choice. Political coalition at the local level did not make a statistically significant unique contribution, indicating that political ideology holds less relevance than the other contextual dimensions in relation to how municipalities shape national school choice policies and design their school allocation systems (Carlbaum et al., 2026).

The paper builds on previous findings and adds a contribution to the empirical literature on competition, quasi-markets, and public consumers, as “explorations of the acceptability of the public consumer in a distinct Scandinavian context remain scarce” (T. S. Karlsson, 2024, p. 7). To conduct the analysis, we first draw on literature of how competition as a social construct emerges or fails to do so (Arora-Jonsson et al., 2020). Our data show that municipalities vary in how they handle parents who do not choose schools. Of particular interest is how local authorities make sense of and respond to citizens who may not view themselves as consumers in an educational market. This is a particularly thorny issue in an education system with compulsive schooling. Thereafter, we turn to theories on different understandings of justice in education (Resh & Sabbagh, 2016; Sabbagh & Resh, 2016).

Contribution to the Field

Competition in relation to school choice policies has been researched in education policy (DeMatthews et al., 2025; Duarte, 2023; Jabbar, 2015; Jabbar et al., 2022; Lenhoff et al., 2025; Lubinski, 2003; Uttermarck et al., 2024) and within the field of economics (Böhlmark & Lindahl, 2015; Epple et al., 2017; Hoxby, 2000). A strong and recurring theoretical argument for school choice regimes is that competition between schools for students will raise the quality of education within a given system (Jabbar et al., 2022). The empirical evidence for this theory is mixed. A review article from 2022 that compared results from 92 research studies found a small but insignificant positive relationship between school competition and student achievement (Jabbar et al., 2022). Due to the large variety of system designs and contextual variables that exist, it remains difficult to compare systems with each other in a meaningful way. And, as Jabbar et al. (2022) point out, “the theory of competition in schools is underconceptualized” and

“variations have not been systematically analyzed” (p. 251). DeMatthews et al. (2025) argue that voucher policies, and the academic discussions surrounding them, have repeatedly failed to acknowledge the long history of school vouchers that time and again show how “education and markets are not a match” (p. 23). We believe that careful empirical studies of how competition is constructed in local school-choice settings contribute to a more nuanced understanding of how policy operates in local choice regimes.

In recent years, organizational studies have contributed to the literature on quasi-markets and competition within education (Arora-Jonsson & Edlund, 2024; Brunsson & Jutterström, 2018; Edlund & Westergren, 2025). According to this literature, the critical role of local managers or bureaucrats in creating quasi-markets and competition is often overlooked (Arora-Jonsson et al., 2020). One key aspect that has been overlooked is how choices and school allocation are organized, and whether the information provided to parents and legal guardians construct the situation as competitive. Consequently, decisions and actions involved in organizing school allocation may or may not position parents as consumers (actively selecting among different providers and schools in a competitive setting). How competition is constructed is therefore important to study empirically (Jabbar et al., 2022; T. S. Karlsson, 2024).

In this paper we turn to Sweden, a country that serves as a striking example of rapid introductions of voucher reforms and market-mechanisms in education. More broadly, the provision of welfare service has undergone extensive privatization in Sweden since the beginning of the 1990s, accompanied by an “extensive use of market forces” (Blix & Jordahl, 2021, p. 1). Sweden’s transition from a country characterized by very few private options to a society characterized by public choices makes its context a particularly interesting case for exploring how and to what extent competition and the notion of the public consumer is adopted in local governance (e.g., T. S. Karlsson, 2024).

In what follows, we introduce our theoretical foundation to argue that organizational research is necessary for understanding competition. In this section we also introduce the notion of procedural and distributive justice in education related to school allocation.

The Construction of Competition and Ideas of Justice in Education

There is no competition without actors, or where the actors lack desire, or if they desire only what is not scarce, or where actors are not aware that there are other actors with the same desire to which they relate themselves. [...] Competition, one may conclude, then, is a fragile social arrangement whose emergence and maintenance cannot be taken for granted. (Arora-Jonsson et al., 2021, pp. 16–17)

Competition is fundamental for markets to function, and the theoretical literature stemming from organizational studies on competition suggests that “[i]nstitutions are fundamental to the construction of the elements of competition” (Arora-Jonsson et al., 2020, p. 8). Here, competition is defined as a relationship in which “a focal actor desires something that this actor perceives as scarce, because of a belief that other actors have the same desire” (Arora-Jonsson et al., 2021, p. 12). For competition to emerge where it did not exist before, relations might need to be changed in a way that is perceived as competitive, and requires a “fourth actor” (Arora-Jonsson et al., 2020, p. 11) dedicated to that of organizing the competition. When it comes to school vouchers and school choice, that actor is typically civil servants in public organizations.

In Sweden all children must attend primary school, and home education is only permitted on very rare occasions. Municipalities around Sweden are tasked with the responsibility of making sure that all children within each jurisdiction are allocated to primary schools, whether or not their parents make a choice. The literature suggests that this situation might be understood as one of “diffuse” competition in the sense that “there are cases in which

only the competitors construct the situation as competition, only the organizer sees competition, or only the third party believes that there is competition” (Arora-Jonsson et al., 2020, p. 15). Competition will only emerge if all actors (municipalities, schools, and the different families) understand and interpret a specific relation as competitive. In the theoretical literature on how competition emerges, competition is assumed to appear if there are actors who understand that there is a scarcity of goods and a desire for something scarce; “its emergence requires the social construction of actors, their relationships and the desire for something scarce” (Arora-Jonsson et al., 2020, p. 15). In this paper, we focus on how municipalities and their respective civil servants, as the fourth actor, construct competition through their school choice policies. The construction of competition includes how policies change relations so that parents and legal guardians start seeing the allocation of school places as a competition over the scarcity of placements at desired schools and hence act in a way that further contributes to constructing competition.

First, this theoretical framework on competition (that emphasizes the necessity of actors, their relations, desire, and a sense of scarcity) is used as a framework to analyze how civil servants in Swedish municipalities handle diffuse or failed competition, hence situations when parents and legal guardians do not make an active school choice, an act that we regard as them not interpreting school selection as competitive. A deliberate limitation of our study is that we did not measure the families' perspectives of their actions or inactions. Rather, we present how civil servants perceived and interpreted these actions.

Second, we inductively coded arguments, motives and reasons stated by civil servants for the different policies towards families who do not make a school choice and related these to ideas of justice. The two versions of justice in our data were first inductively identified and later related to two different notions of justice in education. Specifically, we draw on Sabbagh & Resh (2016), who have compiled different accounts for justice in relation to school allocation. Procedural justice refers to “the processes by which the outcomes are allocated, independent of the outcomes justness or favorability” (p. 6). Procedural justice, one could say, focuses on the fairness of the processes rather than the outcomes of the same processes. Distributive justice, on the other hand, refers to how resource distribution is allocated and highlights the outcomes of the distributions (e.g., school places). Distributive justice “implies differential rewarding, so that the disadvantaged students and social groups could be compensated” (p. 5). While justice in education probably is a value that most people would subscribe to, we find the different conceptualizations to be instrumental in highlighting that the definition of just treatment in local governance models of school allocation has more than one answer.

Methods

Our empirical focus is on school allocation and school choice for children who are about to start primary school in Sweden. We analyze data from an ongoing study¹ where we 1) map how families, who are obliged to make a school choice, but fail or refuse to do so, are allocated a school by municipalities and 2) analyze qualitative interviews with civil servants on how they reason around and justify their local policies. We draw on both large scale quantitative data and qualitative interviews to study the policies in municipalities in Sweden. In this section, we will present the two data sets that we draw from to conduct the analysis.

Descriptive Statistics

Our set of quantitative data on how municipalities organize school allocation and school choice was obtained from official websites of the respective 290 municipalities in Sweden during January-April 2024. Our focus was on the information provided to families about the municipalities' local governance models of school allocation. This included data on opportunities

¹ This work is supported by the Swedish Research Council under grant no. 2023-03616.

for school choice, allocation procedures, selection criteria for schools, number of eligible choices, and management of non-choice. In cases where information on school allocation and choice was found but full information was not available on the websites, project members contacted the municipalities via e-mail to obtain supplementary information. The data was then qualitatively analyzed via inductive coding. The first two authors participated in a collective coding process, analyzing the data separately and using the iterative process of qualitative consensus (Barnett et al., 2016). This process resulted in four school allocation categories: 1) Mandatory school choice—choice is required; 2) Municipal allocation requiring parental activity—families required to say yes or no to their allocation provided by the municipality; 3) Municipal allocation with possibility for choice—families are not expected to be active in the process; and 4) Municipal allocation—choice is not required. In this paper, we focus on the 116 municipalities that were categorized as using mandatory school choice systems, i.e., they clearly state on their websites that families need to make a school choice and there is no prior school allocation. While all families are strongly encouraged to make these choices in this way, not all of them do. Thus, we focus on how non-choosers are allocated, to learn more about when competition fails. We have chosen to include only municipalities that have the policy of mandatory school choice, as these are the only ones who are faced with the problem of allocating non-choosers who were expected to make a choice. In the other municipalities this is not a problem as all students are allocated to a school, for example through catchment areas, and families are neither required nor expected to make a choice. The data are explored mainly through descriptive statistics, presented in tables. Additional statistical exploratory analyses are presented in conjunction with these tables.

Qualitative Interviews

Out of the 116 municipalities with mandatory school choice, we chose a total of 14 for qualitative interviews. The municipalities where we conducted the interviews were selected to represent a broad range of policies identified through the descriptive mapping of all 290 municipalities, including municipalities of different sizes and with different demographics. All the municipalities had at least one independent school. With respect to the local political coalitions, two municipalities were governed by left-wing parties, six were governed by right-wing parties, and six were governed by center coalitions. A total of seven municipalities were large cities and municipalities near large cities, five were medium-sized towns and municipalities near medium-sized towns, and two were smaller towns/urban areas and rural municipalities.

We interviewed the civil servants in charge of primary school allocation of children within their respective jurisdictions. All interviewees have been asked to estimate the amount or share of non-choosers. Each interview lasted for approximately 60 minutes, and the interview questions concerned the municipalities' local design of the school choice system, how the systems had been developed and had changed over time, how the municipalities informed parents about school choice, what works well and what needs to be improved in the systems, and how the systems operate in practice. All interviews took place via the video conference services Zoom or Teams, and the conversations were audio-recorded. All participants consented to participate in the interviews. The interviews adhered to the Swedish Research Councils ethical guidelines (Vetenskapsrådet, 2024) and The General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). The study design was approved by the Swedish Ethical Review Authority². All interviews were transcribed, and the transcripts were reviewed to explore differences in how Swedish municipalities with mandatory school choice systems organize and justify their policies towards families who do not make a school choice.

Interviewing local elites defined as “high level bureaucrats with influence over government policies” (Siritarungsri et al., 2013, p. 70), is an important methodological tool for

² Swedish Ethical Review Authority, reference no. 2024-00118-01.

grasping the views on issues currently under political attention, such as school choice and allocation. In this case, we view civil servants as local elites. All interviewee quotations are translated from Swedish into idiomatic and readable English.

We adopted an abductive analytical approach, combining empirical grounding with theoretical framing (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). This involved an initial qualitative content analysis, identifying expressions related to non-choosing parents and guardians which we later categorized according to different justifications. Secondly, we revisited the categorizations and related them to ideas of justice (Resh & Sabbagh, 2016; Sabbagh & Resh, 2016) enabling a deeper conceptual understanding for different policies. Initial coding and analysis of the interviews were a joint effort between the authors, while the first author was responsible for developing the analysis further. The first and second authors developed the analysis of justice together in dialogue, to ensure inter-reliability.

Results

The results are structured into three sections. First, we present descriptive statistics to discuss differences in the administration of school allocation among the 116 of Sweden's municipalities that use mandatory school choice policy regimes. The first section draws on the quantitative data set and answers the question: Which policies exist in Swedish municipalities towards families who do not make a school choice, and how do policies vary between municipalities with different contextual characteristics? The second and third sections answer the question: How are different policy choices in the municipalities accounted for with respect to educational justice?

The analysis of the interviews focuses on the different justifications by civil servants about allocating children from non-choosing families, i.e. families who do not make a school choice despite the municipalities' mandatory school choice policies. The one municipality that has an ambivalent policy towards non-choosers is excluded in the analysis below, as they did not have a clearly stated policy towards non-choosing families. It is worth noting that the civil servant in this municipality claimed that all parents make a school choice, so they have not yet been faced with how to allocate schools for the children of non-choosers.

On Aggregate: The Organization of School Allocation for Non-Choosing Families

From a dataset containing all 290 municipalities, 40% ($n=116$) of Swedish municipalities were found to have mandatory school choice—where choice is required, 8% conducts municipal allocation requiring parental activity (families are required to say yes or no to their allocation provided by the municipality), 35% have municipal allocation with possibility for choice—without expecting families to be active in the process, and 17% conduct municipal allocation, not requiring choice.

Differences in the administration of school allocation and non-choice was inductively categorized into two outcomes: children of non-choosing parents are placed after all active choosers have received their school allocation, what we refer to as *Places after choosers* ($n = 58$) and children of non-choosing parents are placed in schools near their homes, what we refer to as *Places close to home* ($n = 57$). These two approaches are almost evenly split between the two types (Table 1).

The policy of Places close to home is more prevalent in small towns. Respectively, Places after choosers is more common in large cities compared to rural settings and small towns. This result is unsurprising given that in rural settings, being closer to home might be preferable for parents as fewer schools within a reasonable distance to home are available, indicating that the necessary conditions for constructing competition are difficult to achieve under such circumstances. If only one school is within reasonable distance of a family, the desire to choose between different schools is likely to become redundant. However, Places close to home is used

in more urban places as well, which requires qualitative methods to investigate further (see below). Lastly, there is nearly no discernible difference between how municipalities which have independent schools handle non-choosers (i.e. Places after choosers=49 and Places close to home=52), although independent schools often are assumed to enforce market-based logics in local settings (Westergren & Schunnesson, 2025).

Table 1

Differences in the Administration of School Allocation by Municipality Type

Municipality types	Places after choosers	Places close to home
Large cities	3	0
Commuting municipalities near large cities	19	20
Medium-sized towns	11	7
Commuting municipalities near medium-sized towns	8	12
Commuting municipalities with a low commuting rate near medium-sized towns	4	3
Small towns	4	8
Commuting municipalities near small towns	5	5
Rural municipalities	3	2
Rural municipalities with a visitor industry	1	0
Total	58	57

Municipalities that have the policy of Places after choosers tend to have more inhabitants per square kilometer, more primary schools, more independent schools, and more students overall (Table 2), which is consistent with the prevalence of this school allocation policy in more urban settings (Table 1). To examine whether structural municipal characteristics were associated with the school allocation, a binary logistic regression analysis was conducted including inhabitants per square kilometres, number of primary school units with preschool class, number of independent schools with preschool class, and the total number of students. The model was not statistically significant ($\chi^2(4) = 6.32, p = .177$) and explained only a small proportion of the variance (Nagelkerke $R^2 = .072$). None of the predictors reached statistical significance, indicating that these municipal characteristics were not systematically associated with how non-choice is administratively handled. Additional models estimated separately for aggregated municipality types (large, medium, and small municipalities) likewise produced no statistically significant effects (Table 3). Table 4 shows that stable political majority varies between the two policies, and patterns related to ideological positions cannot be determined on aggregate, i.e., this finding cannot be explained by differences in liberal and right-wing agendas (Singer, 2021; Whitty & Edwards, 1998). By stable political majority we refer to a categorical variable we created to represent stable political coalition bloc over the last two elections of 2018 and 2022 (Table 4). From the above, there are no statistically significant differences in how non-choosing families are allocated a school. There is nearly no difference between how municipalities with independent schools handle non-choosers, and patterns related to political coalitions cannot be determined on aggregate. However, we do see some descriptive patterns, for example that Places after choosers is more common in the largest cities compared to the countryside.

Table 2

Inhabitants per Square Kilometer, Total Number of Primary and Independent Schools, and Total Number of Students per Administration of Non-Choice

Handling of non-choice		Inhabitants per square kilometers	Primary school units with preschool class	Number of independent schools with preschool class	All students, preschool class
Places after choosers	N	58	58	58	58
	Mean	3908.7586	23.67	5.28	9503
Places close to home	N	57	57	57	57
	Mean	3527.8947	15.28	2.60	5289

Table 3

Logistic Regression Results Predicting the Administration of Non-Choice

	Model 1: All Mncps.	Model 2: Large	Model 3: Medium	Model 4: Small
Population density (inhabitants/km ²)	.000 (.000)	.000 (.000)	.000 (.000)	.001 (.001)
Primary school units with preschool	.012 (.043)	.093 (.170)	-.047 (.062)	.140 (.154)
Independent schools with preschool	-.091 (.104)	-.170 (.187)	.012 (.186)	-.039 (.313)
Students F-9	.000 (.000)	.000 (.000)	.000 (.000)	.000 (.000)
Constant	.291 (.320)	.266 (.693)	.589 (.600)	-.678 (.914)
N	115	42	44	29
Model χ^2	6.315	6.485	2.001	1.801
p-value	.177	.166	.736	.772
Nagelkerke R ²	.072	.191	.061	.081

Note: Logistic regression coefficients with standard errors in parentheses. Models estimate the association between municipal characteristics and school allocation.

Table 4

Political Majority at the Municipality Level

2018/2022 combo	Places after choosers	Places close to home
Stable right	15	22
Stable center	26	19
Stable left	2	4
Shift	15	12

Note: Table 4 is constructed from the variable stable political majority that represents stable political coalition bloc over the last two elections of 2018 and 2022 using data and the classifications of governing coalitions from the SALAR (2023).

Justifications for Placing Non-Choosers Last: Justice of Process and Adjustment to the System

Out of the 14 interviews, a total of eight municipalities with mandatory school choice systems allocate the children of non-choosers last. Within these eight municipalities the number of schools varied; three municipalities had a total number of 31 primary municipal schools or more, while three municipalities had 21-30 primary municipal schools, and two had 6-10 primary

municipal schools (the numbers are generalized for confidential reasons). All municipalities had at least one independent school. After the 2022 election, one was governed by left-wing parties, four by right-wing parties, while three were governed by center coalitions. A total of five were large cities and municipalities near large cities, two were medium-sized towns and municipalities near medium-sized towns, and one was a smaller town/urban area and rural municipality (see Table 5 for a summary). We conclude from the descriptive statistics that the specific policy of placing non-choosers last is a phenomenon that is more common in urban settings. We then display and analyze select quotes from the interviews that express the different ways in which these policies were justified among civil servants in municipalities that place non-choosers last.

Table 5*Interviews in Municipalities*

Municipality pseudonym	Policy	Municipality type (SALAR) ^a	# of municipal schools ^b	Political majority	Stable political majority	Independent schools ^d	Share of non-choosers (interview estimates)
1A	Places after choosers	Large cities and municipalities near large cities	≥ 31	Left	Shifting	Yes	9%
1B	Places close to home	Large cities and municipalities near large cities	21–30	Right	Right	Yes	35%
1C	Places after choosers	Medium-sized towns and municipalities near medium-sized towns	≥ 31	Center	Shifting	Yes	4%
1D	Places close to home	Medium-sized towns and municipalities near medium-sized towns	≥ 31	Left	Left	Yes	17%
1E	Places close to home	Medium-sized towns and municipalities near medium-sized towns	21–30	Center	Center	Yes	0,5%
1F	Places close to home	Smaller towns/urban areas and rural municipalities	11–20	Center	Center	Yes	6%
1G	Places after choosers	Smaller towns/urban areas and rural municipalities	6-10	Right	Right	Yes	1%
1H	Uncertain	Large cities and municipalities near large cities	11-20	Center	Shifting	Yes	100%
1I	Places after choosers	Large cities and municipalities near large cities	21–30	Center	Shifting	Yes	7%
1J	Places after choosers	Large cities and municipalities near large cities	6-10	Center	Center	Yes	6%

Municipality pseudonym	Policy	Municipality type (SALAR) ^a	# of municipal schools ^b	Political majority	Stable political majority	Independent schools ^d	Share of non-choosers (interview estimates)
1K	Places close to home	Medium-sized towns and municipalities near medium-sized towns	≤5	Right	Shifting	Yes	11%
1L	Places after choosers	Medium-sized towns and municipalities near medium-sized towns	≥31	Right	Shifting	Yes	1%
M	Places after choosers	Large cities and municipalities near large cities	21–30	Right	Right	Yes	10%
1N	Places after choosers	Large cities and municipalities near large cities	6–10	Right	Right	Yes	4%

^a: Based on the classification from Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions (SALAR, 2022): Large cities—municipalities with a population of at least 200 000 inhabitants with at least 200 000 inhabitants in the largest urban area. Medium-sized towns—municipalities with a population of at least 50 000 inhabitants with at least 40 000 inhabitants in the largest urban area. Small towns—municipalities with a population of at least 15 000 inhabitants in the largest urban area.

^b: Number of municipal schools with preschool class (primary) for the school year 2023/2024. A scale rather than exact numbers is used to guarantee confidentiality (SNAE, 2024).

^c: Based on the classification of governing coalition from (SALAR, 2023) after the 2022 general election. Right: including at least one of the political parties the Moderate Party, the Center Party, the Liberals, The Christian Democrats, and the Sweden Democrats). Center: a cross party governance coalition where at least one of the five right/center parties is included together with at least one of the three left parties. Left: including at least one of the Social Democratic Party, the Left Party, and the Swedish Green Party.

^d: Share of independent schools with preschool class for the school year 2023/2024.

In Municipality 1J and Municipality 1M, two commuting municipalities near large cities, and in Municipality 1L, a medium-sized town, the justification regarded prioritizing families who make “active choices.” These municipalities tried to have everyone make an active choice. For example, they conducted information campaigns, arranged meetings, contacted the principals of preschools attended by the children of non-choosers (to ask if parents need help with the choice and application system) and emailed reminders to parents. In these municipalities, the civil servants expressed satisfaction that almost everyone made a choice. At the same time, they justified their treatment of non-choosers:

...it becomes difficult to justify if someone has not made an active choice themselves, given that we make so many efforts for them to make an active choice. It is difficult to justify that someone who has not made a choice should be allocated before someone who has actually made an active choice.
(Municipality 1L)

The civil servants in these municipalities put in extensive work to have every parent/family make an active choice and for families to see themselves as consumers and actors in a competition for school places. The civil servants estimated that 1% of families do not make a choice each year. The extensive efforts put in by the municipality so that parents understand that they need to compete for school places seems to justify the policy that those who make

active choices should be prioritized first. It is a policy that affirms the action of 99% of all families and aligns with an idea of justice tied to the making of an active choice.

The civil servants in Municipality 1A, a large city with a left-wing majority, reported that they experience that parents within their jurisdiction either fail to make a choice or make choices that are unrealistic (in the sense that they are unlikely to get their choice of school, often due to a lack of knowledge of how the system works). The civil servants estimated that about 9% of the parents do not make choices each year. When these situations occur, the municipalities need to arrange a school allocation for the child without knowing the preference of the families. They justified their school allocation decisions in this way:

First, we allocate places according to the regulations, based on the selection criteria, and then it is those who actively chose who are allocated a place based on our possibilities and to meet their wishes. Then we have a group that may make an unrealistic choice, then they may not be allocated a place, and then we have those who do not make any choice at all. (...) We cannot give them a place at a school that is fully occupied with students according to the selection criteria. And then in our [municipality], the schools are so close to each other, there are school units practically everywhere where there are always available places in some way. And then these students are allocated a place manually. (Municipality 1A)

Despite a mandatory framing of school choice in this municipality, and even though the children of non-choosers are allocated last, the civil servants accounted for families failing to choose based on unrealistic or unidentified wishes. By understanding the situation with the help of the theoretical literature on competition, where “[c]ompetition requires that those who are expected to compete develop and maintain an identity as an actor with certain capacities: to strategize, to make decisions and to implement those decisions” (Arora-Jonsson et al., 2020, p. 16) it is possible to interpret that the 9% non-choosers do not see themselves and act in the situation as competitors. Parents might not desire a specific school or think they share the same desire of school as other parents, or parents might believe there are enough school places near their residence, independent of whether they make a choice. In other words, the necessary conditions for successful competition do not seem to fully be in place in the municipality, according to the civil servants. In addition, the contextual setting does not “punish” non-choosing families in relation to proximity in a noticeable way, since they always get allocated a school close to home whether they make a choice or not. Yet, the justification favors—to some extent—the ideal of the active chooser.

The civil servants in Municipality 1G, a smaller town with 6-10 municipal schools and with a right-wing political majority, used to assign schools in such a way that guaranteed every student was allocated a school close to home. They came to understand, however, that the Board of Appeal for Education (an authority similar to a court of law to which students or their guardians can turn to appeal certain decisions) had ruled this organizational solution out:

A guaranteed school [for every student] that we had before reduced the risk of segregation and reduced the risk of discriminating against those who did not make active choices. (...) If you have not made an active choice, you are assigned to a school last. Of course this could disadvantage some. (...) But we have also understood from the ruling we have seen from the Board of Appeal that active choice is given a very prominent role in school choice, almost as if it trumps proximity. (Municipality 1G)

The organization of competition, in the name of choice, is in this municipality enforced as a type of procedural justice by the Board of Appeal for Education. In this specific case, the organization of competition is effectively an adjustment to a situation that ideally *should* be seen

as competitive (according to the Board of Appeal for Education) but may in practice not be seen as such by all parties. In this municipality, not all actors understand the situation as competitive as not all families make a choice. While the civil servant estimates that a negligible 1% families do not make a choice, the potential problems of allocating non-choosers are related to an ideal of distributive justice and a favorable outcome for those who do not make a choice. In this case, The Board of Appeal for Education seems to function as an important actor to reinforce a procedural justice that prioritizes choice over proximity and hence is an actor that enforces and constructs competition for school places. As the civil servant expressed, the system worked better in reducing discrimination before Places after choosers was, out of necessity, enforced upon the municipality.

Municipalities with mandatory school choice systems can be viewed as extensive market stewards. Through these systems, they seek to ensure that competition emerges and that families perceive themselves as consumers in a market where schools compete for the same desired students. As the above analysis shows, in most cases they succeed in constructing such competition. However, it is also clear that it is not all encompassing as civil servants still need to handle those that are not able or do not want to act as consumers in this quasi-market. Leaning on ideas of procedural justice to justify the policy of allocating children of non-choosers *after* the active choosers can be seen as a policy in line with efforts to construct competition, rewarding those that act as competitors and disadvantaging those that do not. This can be seen through the above three different justifications for allocating non-choosers last: 1) That policies must follow rule of law, no matter the effects in the local community, 2) a conviction that school choice is the responsibility of families, and 3) that the municipality is already giving everyone enough of a chance to choose. While ideas of procedural justice are central to the justifications for placing after choosers, other ideas of justice are present in the justifications for placing close to home, to which we now turn.

Justifications for Placing Non-Choosers Together with Everyone Else: Justice of Outcome and the Protection of Individual Children's Interests

Of those interviewed, a total of five municipalities with mandatory school choice systems allocate the children of non-choosers together with everyone else. Within these five municipalities, one had a total number of 31 primary municipal schools or more, while two municipalities had 21-30 primary municipal schools, one had 11-20 primary municipal schools, and one had five or less schools. All municipalities had at least one independent school. After the 2022 election, one municipality was governed by left-wing parties, two by right-wing parties, while two were governed by center coalitions. One was a large city/municipality near a large city, three were medium-sized towns and municipalities near medium-sized towns, and one was a smaller town/urban area and rural municipality (see Table 5 for a summary).

The justification for the choice of policy within this group is expressed in rather similar terms, across the five municipalities. The civil servants stated that children of parents who do not make a school choice in mandatory school choice systems shouldn't be "discriminated" against, that the "children's interests" need to be protected, that children shouldn't be "punished" or "suffer" if parents are "sloppy with deadlines" or if they do not have enough "language or cultural skills" to make a school choice for their child. A common theme is that the policy is justified based on the idea of protecting children from their parents' inability to choose. This justification can be related to an idea of distributive justice which highlights the outcomes of the distribution (e.g., school places) and allows for compensation of disadvantaged students and social groups.

In Municipality 1B, a commuting municipality near a large city, with a right-wing political majority, a civil servant brought up the dilemma that parents do not read information about mandatory school choice from the municipality:

The biggest dilemma we have is that the [guardians] do not read the information. (...) We must not discriminate against them (...) even if they have not made a choice, but we would have wished that everyone had made a choice because it would have made things so much easier. (Municipality 1B)

The civil servants estimated that typically about 35% of all parents did not choose a school in this municipality, despite a mandatory framing of school choice in the information from the municipality. Not reading the information or not participating in mandatory school choice could imply that parents do not want to act as consumers, or do not see the situation as competitive, or have no desire for a specific school thought to be desired by many others. There might be other reasons for not making a choice, such as trust in default allocation or satisfaction with local schools. Despite organizing competition through mandatory school choice, the civil servants perceive that competition to some degree fails to emerge.

In Municipality 1D, a medium-sized town with more than 31 schools, governed by a left-wing political majority, the policy was justified based on the idea that children shouldn't have to suffer due to their parents' inability to understand the importance of making a school choice.

Yes, but it is to protect the child's interest in this matter that a child should not have to travel farther than their friends on the same street to their school because the guardians have not understood, there are quite a few who are not native Swedish speakers, for example, and come from another culture. Such a child should not suffer because of the guardians, or if they have difficulty meeting deadlines, or similarly, it should not affect the child. So far, that is the stance. (Municipality 1D)

In Municipality 1D, the civil servants estimated that about 17% failed to make a choice last time they ran the process. The argument for allocating children of non-choosers together with everyone else was justified based on the idea that children's interests should be protected against parents that lack qualities that are important in choice-driven systems, namely understanding information and the dominating cultural scripts and meeting deadlines for making the school choice in time. Here the conditions for competition fail and are recognized as a conflict of potential interest between parents' inabilities and children's opportunities to attend a school near home. On the other hand, the justification of the policy leans on an idea of distributive justice where disadvantaged actors are compensated by the outcome of the policy.

Municipality 1E is a medium-sized town governed by a center coalition with 21-30 municipal primary schools. Here, a civil servant talks about *not* punishing the children of non-choosing parents:

If they get places after everyone else? No, because then we think we are punishing the kids. It is not their fault that they have parents who do not choose, it is rather the opposite, we include them, we look at and analyze it earlier than the school choice is finalized based on how it looks for that child. (Municipality 1E)

According to the civil servant, very few families fail to make a choice in this municipality (approximately 0,5%). Yet, the local authority allocates the children of non-choosers before they allocate all others, as the civil servants express it. The justification here is that if parents fail to recognize competition, their children shouldn't be affected negatively.

In Municipality 1F, a small town with 11-20 municipal primary schools governed by a center coalition, the organization of non-choice was justified with the argument that the children of non-choosers shouldn't be punished if their parents were unable to make a choice because of language barriers or "not having the ability or the right resources to make a school choice":

It's about the fact that not all parents will make an active choice, and we don't want the child to suffer because there can be various factors affecting this. It could be parents who do not agree, or language barriers, or not having the ability or the right resources to make a school choice. To ensure that a child does not suffer because the process has not been fully completed, they are then assigned to their catchment area, which also provides the security of knowing they will follow the majority of their group from before. (Municipality 1F)

The civil servants estimate that about 6% fail to make a school choice in Municipality 1F. Here, the policy towards non-choosers is justified based on an unwillingness to have children suffer from their parents' inability to make a school choice. Municipality 1F assigns students by catchment areas in the case of non-choice and justifies this policy based on the importance of safety and predictability for children. The municipalities do not seem to see themselves as market organizers and the catchment area does not seem to spark an understanding among families of the *scarcity* of school places since they will be placed in the catchment area school anyhow.

In contrast to the justifications above for the organization of school allocation Places after choosers, the justifications for Places close to home is done with reference to individual children's interests and needs in families who were unable or unwilling to make a choice. The common theme within Places close to home seems to be that civil servants do not see themselves mainly as market organizers, but as protectors of individual children's interests. It seems likely that the justification of the policy, on distributive grounds, will make the development of more competition improbable.

We can see that the two different ways of handling non-choosers have overlapping elements that prevent competition from becoming all encompassing; not all actors understand that they should compete, and desire for school places is not always scarce. In general, it is much more common that families do not make an active choice in municipalities that place children close to home, no matter whether the families make a choice or not. Hence, despite mandatory school choice systems in these municipalities, selection criteria and overcapacity of school places seem to prevent the construction of successful competition.

Discussion

Our focus in this paper was to explore differences in how municipalities in Sweden organize and justify their policies towards those who do not make a school choice, by asking which policies exist towards families who do not make a school choice, how policies vary between municipalities, and how different policy choices are accounted for with respect to educational justice. School choice policies appear, at first sight, to be clear examples of a market-based logic in public service provision. In examining school allocation and choice in Sweden, where quasi-markets are organized by civil servants, we found that municipalities that expect families to conduct a mandatory school choice differ both in their policies and in their justifications toward families who do not make an active choice. Municipalities in Sweden are responsible for ensuring that all children are allocated to a school, and this is true even when attempts fail to have all families making a choice. Thus, how civil servants make sense of families who do not make a choice can give insights into how failed competition is made sense of in municipalities who attempt to organize quasi-markets.

The results from the mapping of all Swedish municipalities showed that non-choosing families are managed in two different ways: About half of the municipalities with mandatory choice system place children of non-choosing parents in schools near their homes, for example, by estimating what school they would have chosen if they had made an active choice. The other half of the municipalities place children after all active choosers have received their school allocation. Hence, municipalities regard non-choosing families differently in their school choice

systems and written policies. Municipalities that use Places after choosers have more inhabitants per square kilometer, more primary schools, more independent schools, and more overall students. This result indicates that civil servants in municipalities with smaller populations might have more discretion to make school allocation decisions on an individual family basis, possibly due to the fact that they manage fewer students.

We also conducted and analyzed interviews with civil servants, to get a better qualitative understanding of the contextual differences. The municipalities were strategically selected for interviews and covered a range of contextual circumstances to get a broad picture as possible of the local differences that exist in Sweden today. The qualitative part of the study contains 8% of municipalities mandating mandatory school choice, meaning that there could be even more variety in the population. The interviews represent qualitative findings of existing differences that are valuable for teasing out depth in different positions rather than counting the frequency of difference.

Through the qualitative analysis of the interviews with civil servants, we found that the two main policies (Places after choosers and Places close to home) are related to two different ideas of justice in the local governance models of school allocation: procedural and distributive justice. The first policy favors the active choosers and disadvantages the passive families based on reasons related to rules of law, and the hard work done by civil servants in informing parents about school choice. All in all, the justification for their policies of school allocation is focused on maintaining a functional system rather than a just outcome for individual disadvantaged families. The latter policy highlights the vulnerable and disadvantaged position of individual children of non-choosing families and takes their perspective in the process of allocating children to different schools. These different reasons tend to be grounded in assertions about legal certainty, responsibility and child welfare rather than ideological positions.

It is worth pointing out that a deliberate methodological limitation is that families' own perspectives are missing in our analysis, and the interpretation we make of parental motivations are based on the civil servants' perceptions and our interpretations. We hold that families' positions have been substantially analyzed elsewhere (e.g., Ball et al., 1996; Bergström et al., 2026; Hogan & Barnes, 2024; M. Karlsson et al., 2013; Lilja, 2015; Olson Beal & Hendry, 2012; Raveaud & Zanten, 2007; Reay, 2017).

No matter the type of policy or the justification for it, elements of failed and diffuse competition can be found in all municipalities and are commonly related to a lack of scarcity or desire for specific school places. In the eyes of the civil servants, the different justifications—based on either procedural or distributive ideas of justice—highlight different values related to school allocation, where one is centered on a functional system and the other on care for the individual child. As noted in previous studies, “competition and choice do not necessarily go hand-in-hand” (Bomark et al., 2021, 89). Repeatedly, policies designed from market theory have been proven to be a difficult fit with education (DeMatthews et al., 2025). As we have shown above, sometimes choice policies seem to exist without successful competition. In such instances, the organization for competition appears to be more of a job-intensive lip service rather than a deliberate policy. This observation could be investigated in more depth, for example through a case study.

Apart from the different conceptualizations of justice in education, we have developed our analysis drawing on the theoretical literature on competition from organizational studies, which suggests that “failed competition” is an understudied phenomenon (Arora-Jonsson et al., 2020) also in studies of educational policy. No matter how much work municipalities spend on information and other types of activities to inform families about mandatory school choice, all municipalities experienced some kind of failure in their arrangements of competition. This failure had to do, seen through the theory of competition as a social construct, with a lack of recognized scarcity as well as a failure to make actors see themselves as competitors. The result of our study shows that competition in local governance models of school allocation is not a stable and set

idea, and scholars need to study this phenomenon in local contexts. Our study contributes with a multifaceted empirical account for the relation between choice and competition, by paying attention to how failed competition is made sense of by civil servants. This contribution highlights the importance of a nuanced understanding of the contextual differences in how municipalities merit active and passive families in their (more or less) competitive school choice systems. A key insight from our study is that both the local context and the choice of local design of school allocation and choice policies may influence the extent and nature of competition in different systems. It is clear from our analysis that not all families and municipalities view parents and children as public consumers. This insight brings nuance to the literature on public consumers that often take for granted that the public consumer is an established identity in public policy (cf. T. S. Karlsson 2024).

We maintain that it is important to further understand how relations between citizens and state authorities unfold in different school choice regimes, as these relations often have substantial impact on individual families. Drawing from our analysis, we can see a clear tension related to different ideas of justice that we believe needs further attention from stakeholders. Therefore, we would like to end this paper by bringing up one last question for further reflection: Are extensive local differences in school allocation justified in an educational system that allows for extensive local self-government, while having an outspoken agenda towards equal treatment and equally good education for all? We believe that question needs to be addressed in a public sphere.

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