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# Understanding school choice research: Approaches, pitfalls, and missed opportunities

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# Theories in school choice research

- Pro: school choice will spur competition and innovation and produce cost-efficient ways of improving achievement.
  - Con: School choice will increase student sorting, further isolating low-income and minority students.
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# Evidence from school choice research

## ■ Achievement outcomes

- Vouchers have produced gains for African-American students, but these findings are disputed and not easily reproduced
- Charter schools have been shown to under-perform traditional public schools, but have produced shining examples of success

## ■ Student sorting

- School choice does appear to increase segregation by race, but not necessarily income, across large populations of students
  - However, new choice schools are providing new learning opportunities to low-income and minority students
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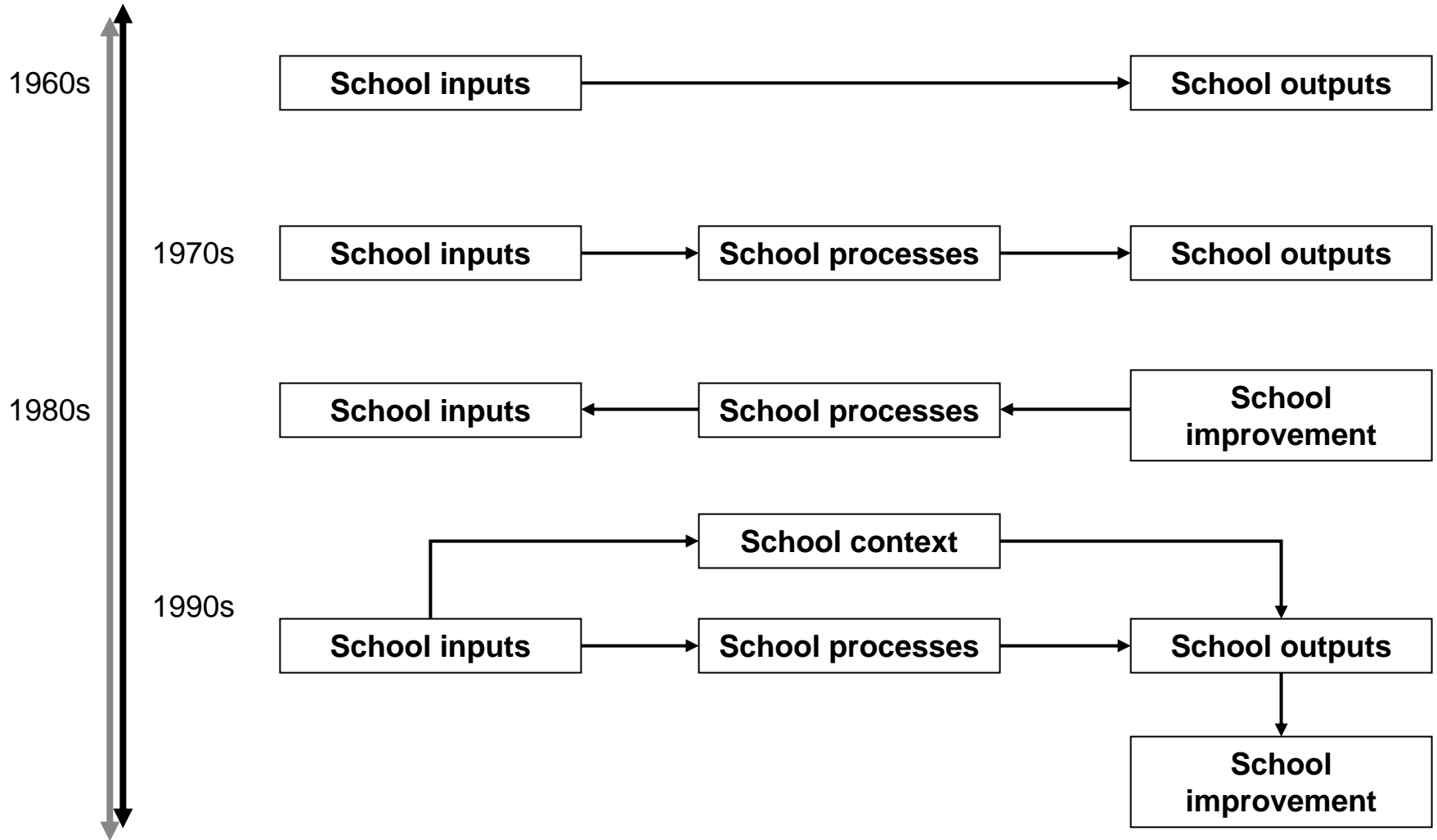
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*Overall, evidence on school choice is mixed and insufficient for supporting the claims of either pro-choice or anti-choice organizations*

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Question: Why hasn't research helped?

# 1) Education is a complex endeavor

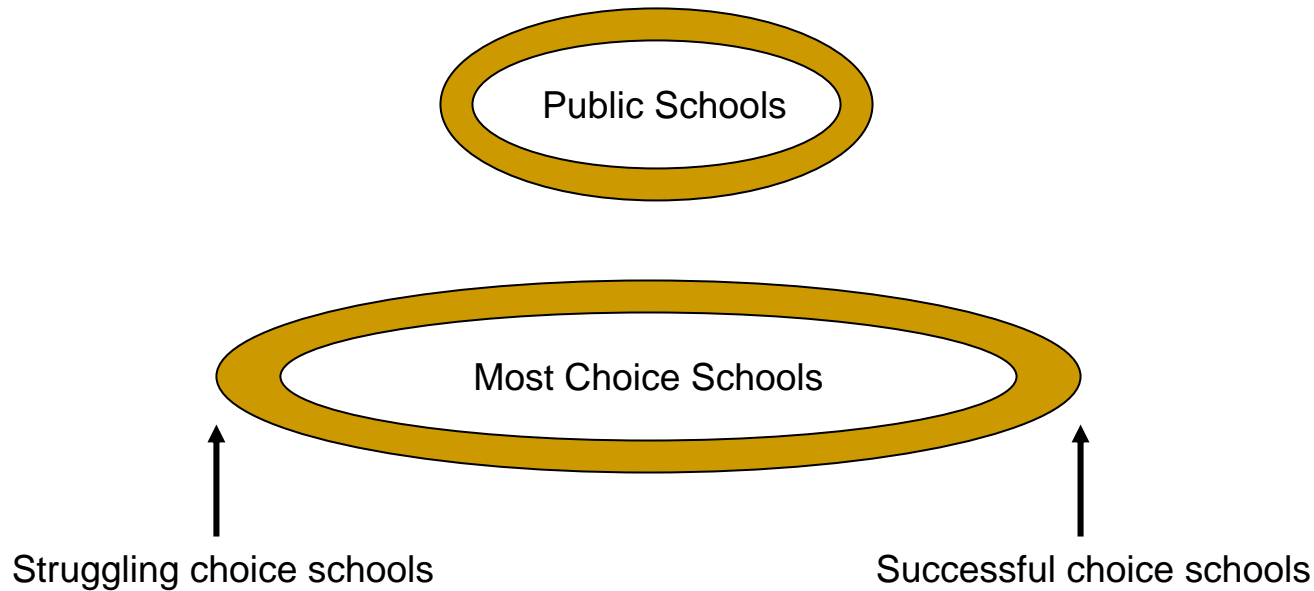


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## 2) Research varies in scope and purpose

- Level of inquiry:
    - Variations in state laws and local regulations lead to variations in educational outcomes
  - Student comparisons:
    - Test scores cannot be used to infer school quality when students' background characteristics differ
  - Test scores:
    - Meaningful test scores are measures of the same students over an extended period of time
  - Statistical significance:
    - A “significant” finding signals an observed difference between two groups, NOT an item of importance or substantive influence
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### 3) Choice schools vary in purpose and design



*School choice does not introduce specific practices, but rather alters the conditions under which schools operate.*

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# New directions for research

- Does changing the organizational structure of a school really impact educational outcomes?
    - Government regulation and support
    - School mission and purpose
    - Teaching pedagogy and curriculum design
    - Teacher hiring practices and compensation
  - Are recent successes among choice schools sustainable over large populations and extended periods of time?
  - Is school choice a viable solution outside low-performing school districts in need of radical policy solutions?
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# A comprehensive framework for evaluation

(National Center for the Study of Privatization in Education, 2007)

- Analytic Framework
  - **Freedom of Choice:** Does the program offer parents choices?
  - **Efficiency:** Does the program use cost-effective strategies?
  - **Equity:** Does the program provide equal access for all children?
  - **Social Cohesion:** Does the program promote citizenship?
- Questions for implementation
  - **Finance:** How will the program be funded and how will shifting dollars impact students and schools?
  - **Regulation:** What are the eligibility requirements and how will education providers be monitored and assessed?
  - **Support Services:** What services, such as transportation or information dissemination, are needed to ensure success?

# Good reads

- Bulkley, K. E. and Wohlstetter. (2003). *Taking Account of Charter Schools: What's Happened and What's Next?* New York: Teachers College Press.
  - Gill, B. P., et al. (2001). *Rhetoric Versus Reality: What We Know and What We Need to Know About Vouchers and Charter Schools*. Santa Monica, CA: RAND.
  - Goodwin, R. K. and Kemerer, F. R. (2002). *School Choice Tradeoffs: Liberty, Equity, and Diversity*. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press
  - Miron, G. and Nelson, C. (2002). *What's Public About Charter Schools: Lessons Learned About Choice and Accountability*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press, Inc.
  - Buckley, J. and Scheider, M. (2007). *Charter Schools: Hope or Hype?* Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
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- d'Entremont, C. and Huerta, L. (2007). Irreconcilable differences? Education vouchers and the suburban response. *Education policy*, 21(40): 40-72.
  - [www.ncspe.org](http://www.ncspe.org)
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