

The Impact of Public School Choice Evidence from Los Angeles's Zones of Choice

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In recent years, school choice systems have become increasingly popular for allocating K–12 students to schools, a shift away from traditional neighborhood-based assignment. Research has shown that this alternative approach expands students' access to effective schools and introduces potential improvements in student-school match quality and that under certain conditions, competition can lead to improvements in the quality of education. Large school districts, such as those in New York City, Denver, and New Orleans, have adopted such systems. However, existing research is unclear on how student outcomes compare under the two systems. Does a public school district that expands school choice provide better outcomes for students than a neighborhood-based assignment system?

Our research tackles this important question by studying the Zones of Choice (ZOC) program, an ongoing initiative of the Los Angeles Unified School District. The program's design provides a natural experiment in which roughly 30–40 percent of the district operates under school choice

systems mirroring expansions in other districts while the remaining neighborhoods operate under the status quo of neighborhood assignment. In particular, the program creates small local high school markets of varying sizes in some neighborhoods but leaves traditional attendance zone boundaries in place throughout the rest of the district. Students in the ZOC program are eligible to attend any school within their neighborhood-based zone, even if it is not the closest one, and a mechanism rations access to oversubscribed schools.

Our research finds large positive effects of the ZOC program on student achievement and four-year college enrollment. By the sixth year of the program, the English language arts exam and math exam performance of students in the ZOC program improved by 0.16 standard deviations relative to comparable non-ZOC-program students. The program also improved students' college preparedness, as measured by changes in course portfolios and SAT score improvements of about 0.16 standard deviations.



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Furthermore, the ZOC program raised four-year college enrollment by roughly 5 percentage points, a 25 percent increase from the average among students participating in the ZOC program before it began, an effect mostly explained by increases in enrollment at California State University campuses. These effects led to vast reductions in inequality of educational outcomes between neighborhoods. Our results reveal that improvements in school quality (rather than improvements in student-school match quality) mostly explain the effects, which led to a substantial reduction in neighborhood-based achievement gaps. Indeed, improvements in school quality are concentrated among the lowest-performing schools. Additionally, our research finds that the beneficial effects of the program are larger for students given access to more popular schools. Moreover, educational quality has improved most at schools that now must compete with more popular schools for students. These findings suggest that the competition-induced incentives generated by the ZOC program are a key mechanism for its effects on school performance.

Our analysis rules out certain alternative explanations for the effects discovered in ZOC neighborhoods. First, other sources of competition from charter and magnet schools do not differentially affect ZOC neighborhoods, alleviating concerns that these alternative schooling models drive our results. Second, the composition of students with respect to race, gender, poverty, and special education status did not differentially change in ZOC neighborhoods after the program's introduction.

Our research investigates the mechanisms through which the ZOC program may have improved student outcomes and finds that changes in schooling practices played a role. Specifically, schools in the ZOC program experienced an uptick in suspensions, suggesting that these schools pivoted toward a schooling practice related to the no-excuses approach to urban education, which research has shown elevates the outcomes of black and Latino children in other settings. Our results add to the growing body of evidence suggesting that no-excuses disciplinary practices elevate

student outcomes in urban settings. Also, our work shows that students in this setting generally had a positive attitude about the resulting changes.

Finally, our research analyzes the rank-ordered preference lists of schools submitted by parents participating in the ZOC program and finds that parents place a higher weight on school effectiveness compared with other school characteristics, including a school's student body. This finding supports the notion that parents' choices provide schools with incentives to improve student learning, especially given recent evidence that families' beliefs about school quality are close to reality. This result contrasts with evidence that parents care more about the characteristics of a school's students and with evidence that lower-income families are even less sensitive to school quality.

We argue that certain features of the ZOC program may explain this discrepancy. First, the ZOC program allows for relatively personalized interactions between administrators and parents, making it easier for parents to acquire information. Administrator-led information sessions provide parents with a potentially rich opportunity to learn about differences in school quality. Moreover, because choice is within zones rather than district-wide, parents within a zone face a manageable number of options, which may help them avoid the choice-overload issues present in other school choice settings. These features create a setting in which acquiring adequate information about schools is more likely. Lastly, as ZOC neighborhoods are highly segregated by income and race, the options available to families differ minimally in terms of student-body composition, potentially nudging parents to select schools in terms of other characteristics more associated with school effectiveness.

NOTE

This research brief is based on Christopher Campos and Caitlin Kearns, "The Impact of Public School Choice: Evidence from Los Angeles's Zones of Choice," *Quarterly Journal of Economics* (October 10, 2023).



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