

Why School Choice Fails

NATALIE HOPKINSON Washington

NY Times, December 4, 2011

IF you want to see the direction that education reform is taking the country, pay a visit to my leafy, majority-black neighborhood in Washington. While we have lived in the same house since our 11-year-old son was born, he's been assigned to three different elementary schools as one after the other has been shuttered. Now it's time for middle school, and there's been no neighborhood option available.

Meanwhile, across Rock Creek Park in a wealthy, majority-white community, there is a sparkling new neighborhood middle school, with rugby, fencing, an international baccalaureate curriculum and all the other amenities that make people pay top dollar to live there.

Such inequities are the perverse result of a "reform" process intended to bring choice and accountability to the school system. Instead, it has destroyed community-based education for working-class families, even as it has funneled resources toward a few better-off, exclusive, institutions.

My neighborhood's last free-standing middle school was closed in 2008, part of a round of closures by then Mayor Adrian Fenty and his schools chancellor, Michelle Rhee. The pride and gusto with which they dismantled those institutions was shameful, but I don't blame them. The closures were the inevitable outcome of policies hatched years before.

In 1995 the Republican-led Congress, ignoring the objections of local leadership, put in motion one of the country's strongest reform policies for Washington: if a school was deemed failing, students could transfer schools, opt to attend a charter school or receive a voucher to attend a private school.

The idea was to introduce competition; good schools would survive; bad ones would disappear. It effectively created a second education system, which now enrolls nearly half the city's public school students. The charters consistently perform worse than the traditional schools, yet they are rarely closed.

Meanwhile, failing neighborhood schools, depleted of students, were shut down. Invariably, schools that served the poorest families got the ax — partly because those were the schools where students struggled the most, and partly because the parents of those students had the least power.

Competition produces winners and losers; I get that. Indeed, the rhetoric of school choice can be seductive to angst-filled middle-class parents like myself. We crunch the data and believe that, with enough elbow grease, we can make the system work for us. Naturally, I've only considered high-performing schools for my children, some of them public, some charter, some parochial, all outside our neighborhood.

But I've come to realize that this brand of school reform is a great deal only if you live in a wealthy neighborhood. You buy a house, and access to a good school comes with it. Whether you choose to enroll there or not, the public investment in neighborhood schools only helps your property values.

For the rest of us, it's a cynical game. There aren't enough slots in the best neighborhood and charter schools. So even for those of us lucky ones with cars and school-data spreadsheets, our options are mediocre at best.

In the meantime, the neighborhood schools are dying. After Ms. Rhee closed our first neighborhood school, the students were assigned to an elementary school connected to a homeless shelter. Then that closed, and I watched the children get shuffled again.

Earlier this year, when we were searching for a middle school for my son — 11 is a vulnerable age for anyone — our public options were even grimmer. I could have sent him to one of the newly consolidated kindergarten-to-eighth-grade campuses in my neighborhood, with low test scores and no algebra or foreign languages. We could enter a lottery for a spot in another charter or out-of-boundary middle school, competing against families all over the city.

The system recently floated a plan for yet another round of closings, with a proposal for new magnet middle school programs in my neighborhood, none of which would open in time for my son. These proposals, like much of reform in Washington, are aimed at some speculative future demographic, while doing nothing for the children already here. In the meantime, enrollment, and the best teachers, continue to go to the whitest, wealthiest communities.

The situation for Washington's working- and middle-class families may be bleak, but we are hardly alone. Despite the lack of proof that school-choice policies work, they are gaining popularity in communities nationwide. Like us, those places will face a stark decision: Do they want equitable investment in community education, or do they want to hand it over to private schools and charters? Let's stop pretending we can fairly do both. As long as we do, some will keep winning, but many of us will lose.

Natalie Hopkinson is the author of the forthcoming book
"Go-Go Live: The Musical Life and Death of a Chocolate City."