

We Choose All: Research to Inform Public Education in Los Angeles

John Rogers, UCLA

I. Introduction

More than 160,000 students are enrolled in Los Angeles charter schools today—far more than in any other city in the nation. The four-fold increase over the last decade in Los Angeles charter school enrollment has coincided with declining enrollment in the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD). As a consequence, more than $\frac{1}{4}$ of all Los Angeles K-12 students now attend charter schools. A group of philanthropists and advocates under the banner “Great Public Schools Now” has proposed to expand charter enrollment much further. In 2015, the group called for doubling charter enrollment such that, by 2022, as many students would attend charter schools as district schools.

In early 2016, representatives of UNITE-LA, In the Public Interest, the Advancement Project, the Learning Policy Institute and UCLA IDEA came together with the goal of informing public debate about these dramatic changes in Los Angeles education. We called ourselves, the “We Choose All” coalition, in recognition of our shared interest in supporting an educational *system* that provides high quality education to all Los Angeles students. We entered the conversation recognizing the wonderful work of Los Angeles educators in both district and charter schools as well as the civic energy of labor and community leaders, advocates and philanthropists who grappled with one another to define the future of Los Angeles schools. Yet, we worried that “reform” that emerges without systemic planning and public deliberation could not meet the needs of all Los Angeles students. Further, we believed that such “reform” was likely to further erode institutional stability, cross-sector civility and public confidence.

In spring 2016, the LAUSD School Board passed a resolution calling for *We Choose All* to convene researchers to inform the board about issues associated with the rapid growth of charter schools as well as the conditions necessary to create a system that promotes high quality education for all students. On August 30, 2016, *We Choose All* hosted a symposium at the Los Angeles Chamber of Commerce that featured both presentations from 15 leading national researchers as well as facilitated discussion amongst researchers, LAUSD officials, representatives of charter organizations, leaders of community and labor organizations, philanthropists and other education and community leaders.

The 2016 symposium produced three results. First, it led our coalition to articulate a set of shared values that give meaning to the phrase, “We Choose All.” Second, it highlighted emerging evidence from around the country about charters, choice and competition. Third, it pointed to the need for us to learn more about how different stakeholders in Los Angeles think about these issues.

Building on these outcomes, we have worked closely over the past year and a half with a group of researchers who have developed papers and briefs on the theme of “We Choose All.” We also commissioned a new study exploring the beliefs of Los Angeles charter school operators, philanthropists, labor officials and civic and community leaders. Below, we present our shared values and then summarize the research that has been produced for this project.

II. The Values of “We Choose All” and the Value of Research

In declaring “We Choose All,” our coalition echoes those who have struggled to realize the egalitarian promise of public education since the earliest days of California’s statehood. To take just one example, in the 1850s, the African American journalist J. Holland Townsend documented efforts of San Francisco’s Black community to fight back against pro-slavery forces who rallied to exclude one of the top performing students from the City’s high school because of her race. Rejecting the idea that quality education is the birthright of a few, the advocates instead envisioned “a common school system that shall educate all of her sons and daughters alike.”¹

Our coalition believes that three values should animate today’s system of common schools—inclusivity, interdependence and collective determination. The value of *inclusivity* calls for attending to the interests of all Los Angeles students. As leading education scholar Jeannie Oakes notes, “We need a system to develop all people, not just some, into highly competent and caring community members.” Linda Darling-Hammond, founding director of the Learning Policy Institute, connects this value of inclusivity to a particular understanding of choice. “The central question for a public education system in a democratic society is not whether school options exist, but whether they are good ones, and whether high-quality schools are available to all children.” Veteran Los Angeles educator and scholar Sylvia Rousseau makes a related point, “There is no real choice, unless every child has a high-quality neighborhood school among the choices available.” Dr. Rousseau also highlights the value of *interdependence*, or what Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. termed “the inescapable network of mutuality.”² Quality neighborhood schools, she reasons, sustain strong communities, and such communities are essential to ensuring the holistic development of young people. Precisely because our interests are bound up with one another, we have a responsibility to deliberate together about our shared future. The value of collective determination speaks to the importance of an informed and engaged public that is committed to ensuring every student has access to a high-quality education.

The values of inclusivity, interdependence and collective determination underscore the relationship of public education to democracy. Public education is an enterprise of, by, and for all the people. Yet, part of the challenge facing Los Angeles education today is that contentious school politics make it hard to conceive of ourselves as part of a collective. How do we move from entrenched and divisive positions toward common cause?

We Choose All believes in the potential for public dialogue, informed by research, to establish new relationships that hold the possibility for new understandings. But our vision is modest. The research papers we solicited will not, in and of themselves, resolve deep differences. They are not meant to “win” a campaign or realize a particular consensus. Rather, these papers aim to help civic leaders and the broader public understand a bit more about what divides us and offer shared language and information that might serve as starting points to renew our conversations around public education with more depth, empathy, and sense of possibility.

In this spirit, we encourage you to read the full set of eight papers and briefs produced for this project. Four of these papers review research on charters, choice, and competition. Three briefs outline a set of design principles for a system that chooses all. A final paper reports on new research into how key stakeholders in Los Angeles think about school choice and educational change. We summarize the salient arguments of each research brief below and end with a set of recommendations synthesized from these papers.

III. A Summary of the *We Choose All* Research Briefs

Research on Charters, Choice and Competition

1) Building a System of Schools Worth Choosing

Linda Darling Hammond, Learning Policy Institute

In this brief, Linda Darling-Hammond describes an array of approaches to school choice, including charters and vouchers as well as district supported initiatives (such as magnets, language immersion schools and networks of innovative schools). Darling-Hammond provides information on how and why these different approaches to school choice emerged and how they have fared in different contexts. She emphasizes that schools of choice can be of high or low quality and points out that choice can exacerbate inequality when there are insufficient quality options for all. Under such conditions, schools may select students deemed more promising or less costly, thereby excluding the most vulnerable students and families. Darling-Hammond draws on evidence from around the country and around the world to identify school choice policies and practices that support *a system* of high quality public schools available to all. Such policies include regulation of curriculum, financing, staffing, admissions and students’ civil rights. Darling-Hammond also points out that such regulation creates opportunities for productive collaboration across district and charter sectors. In closing, Darling-Hammond

points to a number of conditions that also must be in place to ensure a strong system of public education that guarantees good choices for all—spanning from early childhood education, to supportive child welfare policies, to decent and equitable school funding and more.

2) Charter Schools and Competition-based Reform: Lessons and Recommendations for LAUSD

Kevin Welner (University of Colorado), Janelle Scott (UC Berkeley), and Tina Trujillo (UC Berkeley)

Welner, Scott, and Trujillo’s brief examines how school choice engenders competition and the effects of such competition on equity and access and school quality. Reviewing a broad body of research, the authors find that marketplaces of school choice prompt competition between schools and amongst parents. Educational systems often incentivize schools to enroll particular students—those with higher test scores, more learning supports at home, fewer special needs and less disciplinary problems. At the same time, parents with more knowledge and/or stronger social networks invariably seek the most advantageous placement for their children. These twin dynamics often lead to more stratified opportunities and outcomes across the system as a whole. The authors consider the possibility that competition might also prompt improvement in the system by encouraging innovation or pushing poor performing schools to close. They find limited evidence for such beneficial effects and note that online schools thrive in choice systems even though such schools tend to be of the lowest quality. In conclusion, Welner, Scott and Trujillo point to the need for new policies to reduce the negative effects of competition. Such policies include: 1) Greater transparency and monitoring of charter schools’ recruitment, discipline and finances; 2) Requirements for new charter schools to address identified needs of the system as a whole and attend to their potential impact on existing district schools.

3) Building an Equitable and Excellent System of Schools

Patrick Shields and Titilayo Tinubu Ali, Learning Policy Institute

The brief by Shields and Ali considers what we can learn from the experiences of districts with high charter school enrollment—what they refer to as “charter dense districts.” A high concentration of charter schools means that students and families have a number of choices, but it does not ensure that these are all good choices. In areas such as Detroit and Philadelphia, poor choices have expanded when districts lack a strong charter authorizing and renewal process. Shields and Ali favor such a process, pointing to the Massachusetts example. They also support structures that treat charter schools and district schools on equal footing—in relation to accountability, enrollment and discipline practices. Further, Shields and Ali highlight the need for policies that focus attention on how conditions in the charter sector can affect conditions in district schools. A system in which all choices are good choices must ensure that

students requiring additional supports or teachers who lack sufficient qualifications are not concentrated in particular schools.

4) The Los Angeles Charter War and the Peace Dividend

Charles Kerchner, Claremont Graduate School

Charles Kerchner provides an historical account of how the “charter school war” grew up over the last quarter century in Los Angeles, as well as a framework for how the City might benefit from a “peace dividend.” By grounding today’s battles in the reforms of 1993, Kerchner reminds us of a time when L.A. civic elites, community advocates, union leaders and charter supporters alike embraced a commitment to decentralized governance, professional development and local innovation. Conflict and contention grew over time, as the so-called “LEARN” coalition fractured and some philanthropists and advocates turned to charters to overturn the district’s power. Rather than merely lamenting the pitched battles that have emerged, Kerchner suggests a way forward. He describes a system of public education in Los Angeles (including both district and charter schools) that would foreground personalization, target supports to English Learners, and encourage teacher autonomy and innovation. In such a system, the district would ensure high quality by adopting good metrics, collecting and sharing data and creating opportunities for educators to learn from one another.

Design Principles for a System That Chooses All

5) Public Schools for the Public Good: Building an LAUSD Grounded in the Principles of Deeper Learning, Student Centeredness, Equity, Inclusivity, Democracy, and Collective Responsibility

Jeannie Oakes, UCLA and Learning Policy Institute

In her brief, Jeannie Oakes builds on work from the Partnership for the Future of Learning to lift up a set of core values of a system of education in which “we choose all.” The values of *collective responsibility* and *equity* call upon the broader community in Los Angeles to join together and ensure that every student has access to a quality education. The values of *student centered* learning and *deeper learning* define what quality learning is—a process in which young people collectively identify and pursue meaningful questions, apply their emerging understandings to real world issues and develop higher order thinking skills. Finally, the value of *democracy* reminds us that the central purpose of public education is to foster informed and engaged participation in civic life.

6) The Role of Community Schools Partnerships in the Pursuit of Democratic Schools

Sylvia Rousseau, USC

Sylvia Rousseau’s brief highlights the essential relationship of strong schools and strong communities. Community schools are schools that build relationships of trust and understanding among students and between educators and community members. Common features of community schools include community-based curriculum, after-school enrichment programs, parental involvement and wrap-around social and health services. These practices support community well-being, civic-mindedness and democratic relationships among young people and across different groups of adults. Rousseau argues that because such schools serve as the anchor of strong communities, every child is entitled to a quality school in his or her neighborhood.

7) LAUSD and English Learner Policies: Unlocking Opportunities for More Equitable Education

Patricia Gandara, UCLA

In this brief, Patricia Gandara addresses the critical importance of ensuring high quality education to English Learners. English Learners represent a quarter of Los Angeles students at any time, and about two thirds of Los Angeles students are the children of immigrants. A system that “chooses all” in Los Angeles must attend to the particular needs of these young people. It requires a body of teachers who are well-prepared to work with English Learners. And it demands broad access to quality bilingual education that supports students’ academic development and (through two-way immersion programs) builds multi-lingual, multi-racial and cross-class communities. In this way, bilingual education can help construct a more inclusive and dynamic “we” that is committed to choosing all.

Research on How Key Stakeholders Think About Choice and Educational Change

8) “One City, All Kids”: Creating a Collaborative Public Education System for All of Los Angeles’ Students

Jennifer Ayscue, UCLA

Jennifer Ayscue’s article draws on 22 interviews to explore how differently-situated Los Angeles stakeholders understand school choice, charter-district relationships and the possibilities for building a system that chooses all. Ayscue interviewed representatives of charter schools, community groups, labor organizations and philanthropists. For these diverse L.A. stakeholders, school choice represented either 1) a *principle* of freedom; 2) a *strategy* for helping individual students; or 3) a *structural mechanism* for system-wide improvement through competition. While differing on the meaning of choice, all the stakeholders associated the growth of school choice with increased tension between supporters of charters and advocates for district schools. They envisioned possibilities for collaboration across these

sectors—opportunities for shared professional learning, a joint data system and even a common system for enrollment. While most remained unsure of how to move forward toward such collaboration, not a single participant described a vision of an education system without any charters nor did anyone express a desire for a system that is exclusively charter.

IV. Recommendations

The research briefs highlight the need for public actions and public policies which will support a system of public education in Los Angeles that chooses all. We close with a set of seven proposals for next steps.

1. Create forums for leaders of district and charter schools to regularly discuss core design principles of a system that chooses all.
2. Create a “Network of Innovative Schools” (including community schools, magnet schools, early learning centers, expanded school based management model schools, local initiative schools, pilot schools and charter schools) in which educators who are committed to a system that chooses all incubate, support, and share best practices.
3. Create a cross-sector forum with representatives of labor, business, community organizations, university partners, City and County governance, Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD), charter schools, etc. to explore opportunities for joint advocacy around conditions necessary for all Los Angeles students to succeed, such as quality early childhood education, supportive child welfare policies, decent and equitable school funding, sanctuary for immigrant families and more.
4. Establish common rules and shared data collection protocols for school enrollment procedures, transfer policies and discipline practices (with special attention to the experiences of racial/ethnic sub-groups, English Learners and special needs students) and encourage all publicly funded schools serving Los Angeles children and youth to adopt these standards.
5. Develop a common, unified enrollment system for all public schools serving Los Angeles children and youth that adopt the shared standards specified above.
6. Monitor and issue an annual public report on: a) The impact of charter school growth on the fiscal health of LAUSD schools and the well-being of Los Angeles neighborhoods; b) The demographic composition of all district and charter schools; c) Formal outcomes of all district and charter schools, including student academic achievement, graduation rates, post-secondary enrollment and persistence and civic and community readiness.
7. Establish a task force at the State level to review and strengthen charter school authorization, oversight and renewal so that these processes support the goal of a system that chooses all.

¹ Townsend, J. Holland. "The 'Struggle for our Rights' in California." *The Anglo African Magazine*. March, 1859.

² King Jr, Martin Luther. "Remaining Awake Through A Great Revolution. Washington DC: 31 March 1968.

Transcript contribution: Martin Luther King, Jr." *Research And Education Institute, Stanford University*. http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/documentsentry/doc_remaining_away_through_a_great_revolution.