

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

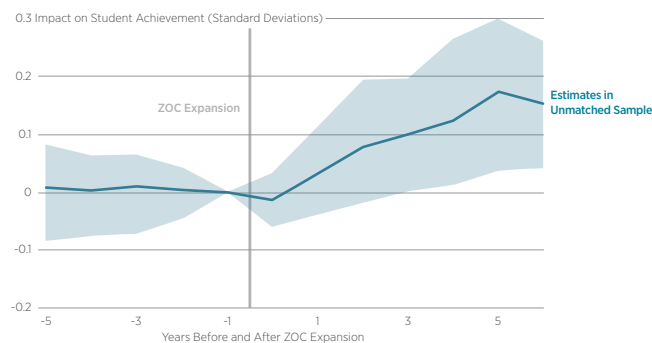
Based on BFI Working Paper No. 2023-89, "[The Impact of Public School Choice: Evidence from Los Angeles' Zones of Choice](#)," by Christopher Campos, University of Chicago; and Caitlin Kearns, UC Berkeley

Student outcomes improved markedly following the introduction of Zones of Choice (ZOC), narrowing achievement and college enrollment gaps between ZOC neighborhoods and the rest of the district. The effects of ZOC are larger for schools exposed to more competition, and demand estimates suggest families place substantial weight on schools' academic quality.

Following his 1955 essay "[The Role of Government in Education](#)," Milton Friedman emerged as an early advocate for school choice. Granting parents greater control over their children's education, Friedman argued, will result in a competitive marketplace for schools that ultimately bolsters their quality. Today, cities including Boston, Chicago, and New York employ district-wide school choice models in which students are assigned to schools based on their families' preferences, rather than where they live.

This paper measures the impact of school choice on student achievement. The authors study the Zones of Choice (ZOC) program, an initiative of the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD), that introduced school choice in roughly 30-40% of the district. The ZOC program combined existing catchment zones into "Zones of Choice" and allowed students residing in a Zone of Choice to attend any school within their Zone. The remaining

Figure 1 • Effect of Zones of Choice (ZOC) Expansion on Student Achievement



Note: This figure shows the treatment effects of the ZOC expansion on student achievement on reading exams, measured in terms of standard deviations. The 95 percent confidence interval is displayed by the shaded region.

neighborhoods maintained existing attendance zone boundaries.

This context offers the authors a unique setting in which to study the market-level effects of choice by comparing changes in outcomes between students

living in Zones of Choice to students in traditional school catchment zones. They use data on students' enrollment, demographics, home addresses, standardized test scores, and college outcomes, along with information on families' rank-ordered preference submissions, and find the following:

- ZOC has large positive effects on students' English and Language Arts exam performance and raises four-year college enrollment by roughly 5 percentage points, a 25% percent increase from the baseline ZOC-student mean. This effect is mostly explained by increases in enrollment at California State University campuses.
- These effects are mostly explained by improvements in school quality, as opposed to improvements in student-school match quality. Lower quality schools tend to improve more, and, as a result, ZOC leads to substantial reductions in neighborhood-based achievement gaps.
- The effects of ZOC are also larger for schools exposed to more competition (measured in terms of households' expected welfare gain from the choice set expansion). This supports the notion that increased competition is a key channel behind ZOC's impacts.
- Parents' reported preferences place a higher weight on school effectiveness compared to other school characteristics, including a school's student body. This finding supports

the notion that parents' choices provide schools incentives to improve student learning.

- Suspensions increase following the introduction of ZOC, indicating a change in disciplinary practices and a possible shift in school philosophy. This result is consistent with other research showing that the "no-excuses approach" predicts positive treatment effects in both charter and public schools.
- Supplemental survey data suggest that, compared to non-ZOC students, ZOC students experienced a greater increase in the belief that teachers help them with their coursework.
- Beyond college attainment, students' intermediate outcomes such as their course portfolios and SAT scores also improved with ZOC.

This research provides one of the first pieces of evidence demonstrating that the increasingly popular district-wide choice reforms can meaningfully improve student outcomes and reduce educational inequality. In addition, the authors provide compelling evidence that competition in the public sector is a key mechanism explaining the improvements in student outcomes. The mechanisms through which schools adjust, the factors contributing to parents' ability to distinguish between effective and ineffective schools, and the long-run effects of the program are important topics for future research.

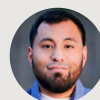
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