

WHAT WORKS IN CHOICE-BASED PROGRAMS AND CHARTER SCHOOLS

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Summary

This is a synthesis of the knowledge base on school choice, with a particular focus on charter schools.

Abstract

Given the growing interest in choice from various racial and ethnic groups, as well as the institutionalization of various choice-based programs across the country, the question is no longer whether school choice will remain. Instead, parents, school practitioners, and policy-makers need to know what effects they can expect to see from the choice options emerging in their school district or state. This synthesis examines the knowledge base on school choice, with a particular focus on charter schools, since these studies are more extensive. It identifies four sets of issues that are critical in the current discussion on what works in school choice: student performance, institutional effects, equal access, and school quality. Overall, school choice offers a promising strategy for school improvement.

Introduction

Public education in most urban districts can no longer be characterized as a “monopoly” (Chubb & Moe, 1990; Friedman, 1962; Wong & Walberg, 2006). Since the early 1990s, when the nation’s first charter school was opened in Minneapolis, the scope and availability of choice programs have substantially expanded. Dissatisfied with low performance in traditional public schools, an increasing number of states are focusing on market-like competition as a driving force to raise student performance (Hirschman, 1971). Focusing on the major types of school choice programs, Jay Greene (2002) developed an “Education Freedom Index” for each of the fifty states. The four categories of choice are: government-funded charter schools, privately-funded vouchers, homeschooling, and public school choice. According to Greene, Arizona provides the highest degree of school choice to families, while Hawaii maintains the least choice. During 2000 and 2001, Florida showed the greatest gain in school choice, while Utah seemed to regress.

Choice has redefined the traditional demarcation between the public and nonpublic sectors, as well as rearranged the relative balance of control between district and schools. With over forty states and the District of Columbia operating a total of over 3,400 charter schools, charter school reform has taken on a national character as an alternative to failing public schools. Although charter schools are labeled as public schools, they are distinctive in several major aspects. The school’s charter or contract explicitly states the conditions and expectations for outcome-based performance that are consistent with the state framework (Bierlein, 1997; Hill, 1997). The authorizing agency can

be the local school board or other legal entities such as universities.

Once established, charter schools enjoy substantial autonomy in setting teachers’ salaries and work conditions, although they are governed by state regulations regarding safety, health, dismissal, and civil rights. School funding follows students to the charter schools, which are operated on a multiyear renewable contract. Enrollment in charter schools accounts for about 2 percent of the nation’s public school student population. In Arizona, California, and Michigan, charter enrollment constitutes a much higher percentage of the public school population. About one-fourth of the public school students enroll in charter schools in Dayton, the highest share of charter enrollment in a single city.

Further, parents in Milwaukee, Cleveland, and Florida can use state-funded vouchers to choose both public and non-public service providers. In Washington, D.C., the federal government has launched its first federally funded voucher program for low-income children to seek alternative schooling opportunities. In all states, homeschooling has become a viable parental option for more than a million school-aged children. In some states, as many as twenty percent of privately schooled students are homeschooled (Lines, 2000). Firms, foundations, and individual donors have supported privately funded vouchers that enable low-income parents to move out of their low-performing neighborhood schools in over fifty cities (Moe, 2001; Howell & Peterson, 2002). Finally, parents have access to a variety of inter- and intradistrict options and magnet programs in many cities.

Recent policy changes may create additional demand for school choice options. The No Child Left Behind Act requires districts with low-performing schools to trigger a series of corrective actions, which must include one or more choice options for parents. Depending on local administrative conditions, students may be given broader schooling options when their schools fail to meet Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) for a second year in a row. In reality, the district’s central administration may delay or limit this enabling process. Further, the Supreme Court’s Zelman decision in 2002 ruled that the state-funded voucher program in Cleveland did not violate the establishment clause of the First Amendment, thereby signaling the Court’s readiness to set standards under which choice programs can pass the constitutional test. In 2003, the Center for Education Reform found that four out of ten charter schools had a waiting list estimated to be as high as approximately 20 percent of the total charter enrollment in the nation. Yet, over 60 percent of the charter states institute some form of ceiling on the total number of charter schools or on the charter appropriations (Vanourek, 2005).

School Choice: What Works?

Given the growing interest in choice from various racial and ethnic groups, as well as the institutionalization of various choice-based programs across the country, the

question is no longer whether school choice will remain. Instead, parents, school practitioners, and policy-makers need to know what effects they can expect to see from the choice options emerging in their school district or state.

This paper aims at synthesizing the knowledge base on school choice, with a particular focus on charter schools, since these studies are more extensive. For analytical purposes, I have identified four sets of issues that are critical in the current policy discussion on school choice and urban reform:

- student performance
- institutional effects
- equal access
- school quality

These issues, to be sure, are interrelated. For the purposes of our discussion, I further identify guiding questions for each of these issues:

- Does choice produce better individual outcomes by raising student achievement?
- Does choice promote institutional effects by
 - ♦ satisfying parents, students, and other stakeholders?
 - ♦ spurring urban districts to change their behavior?
- Does choice expand access to schooling opportunities by
 - ♦ desegregating students in terms of racial/ethnic or income characteristics?
 - ♦ meeting the needs of special education students and English-language learners?
- Does choice improve school quality by
 - ♦ generating educational innovations?
 - ♦ managing political, legal, and funding constraints?
 - ♦ improving instructional and curricular quality?
 - ♦ creating a more satisfactory professional environment for teachers?

While the current literature may not provide sufficient evidence to answer all these questions in full, it does enable us to arrive at some preliminary assessments on the overall effects of school choice (particularly charters) on public education. As Hassel and Batdorff observed, “Charter authorizing has reached the point that it is possible for researchers to study charter school accountability in practice, moving past theoretical debates to determine what is actually happening in the field” (2004, p. 39).

Judging from the proliferation of research on charter schools and school vouchers, it is evident that many agree with Hassel’s assessment. The Center for Education

Reform (2003), a pro-charter think tank, has tracked 75 major evaluation studies since 1997. Christopher Lubien-ski (2003) synthesized the literature on charter school innovation and found 190 published studies. State legislatures are also producing extensive evaluations of their school choice programs (see, for example, Ohio’s Legislative Office of Education Oversight [2003] multivolume report). Other review pieces have looked at school voucher research (GAO, 2002) and charter school teachers (Malloy & Wohlstetter, 2003).

In my own search of empirical works on charter schools, I found 56 major studies between 2002 and 2005 that address student achievement, equal access, and management. The following section provides summaries of empirical evidence on some of the issues identified above.

Key Principles

School choice has the potential to raise student performance

The most intense debates in the literature have been over the effects of school choice on achievement. Much of this debate concerns the methodologies and statistical models employed in evaluation. The most cited recent studies on the effects of school-choice programs have come from a series of voucher experiments. In evaluating these experiments, there has been vigorous debate between a group of researchers led by Paul Peterson and economist Alan Krueger (see the exchange between Peterson and William Howell [Peterson & Howell 2004; Howell & Peterson 2004] and Krueger and Pei Zhu [2004a; 2004b]). The debate over model specification is illustrative of broader methodological challenges that are inherent to educational research, generally, and to the evaluation of school choice, in particular. Goldhaber and Eide (2003) have also summarized this literature on competitive effects. They discuss various statistical approaches and their respective limitations. They caution researchers to “be careful not to overgeneralize results” (p. 230). This is, perhaps, a good way to interpret this segment of the literature – with caution.

Performing an independent review, the Government Accounting Office (2002) described these findings from the voucher research:

- significant improvements from voucher participation for African American students in math and reading;
- significantly higher parent satisfaction among voucher participants, across all races; and
- variation across cities and years in achievement gains.

On empirical studies of student achievement in charter schools, I found 42 studies published between 2002 and 2005. Of these studies, only one employed randomized field control design, where charter applicants who were

lotteried in were compared with their peer applicants who were lotteried out and remained in noncharter public schools. In this study of a sample of Chicago schools, Hoxby and her research team (Hoxby & Rockoff, 2004) found higher test scores for charter applicants who were lotteried in. The difference in student achievement is approximately six national percentile ranks in both reading and math, and these results were statistically significant. On balance, when one considers all the available evidence on student achievement and school choice, the picture remains somewhat mixed. For example, while Hoxby (2001) found higher test scores in areas with a greater number of districts and charter schools, Bettinger (2005) did not see better performance in Michigan's charter schools compared with their neighborhood peers. Jay Greene and Marcus Winters (2003) argued that the Florida voucher system has improved student performance, but they looked at only one year-to-year change. A RAND study of California charter schools (Zimmer et al., 2003) did not find consistent positive gains. The same result was found in Florida in a separate study (Crew & Anderson, 2003).

Parents and students are generally satisfied with choice-based programs

In marked contrast to the literature on student achievement, there are consistent, robust findings that schools of choice make parents and students more satisfied with their educational experiences. Howell and Peterson (2002) report significantly higher parent satisfaction rates across the board and in all study sites in their randomized voucher experiments. A recent study of satisfaction among New York charter school parents also shows very high levels of satisfaction (McCully & Mahin, 2003).

In a Texas study, students also reported having higher levels of satisfaction with their present (charter) school than with their old (traditional) school (Barrett, 2003). These findings match theoretical expectations. With the freedom to better meet the needs of their specific clientele, charter schools can do things for their “customers” that traditional schools cannot. One example is arts education (Gratto, 2002).

When parents are more satisfied but test scores have not risen, the school-choice system is placed in a quandary. Such situations seem to be arising. Lance Fusarelli's (2002) study of Texas charter schools suggests that, while they are meeting “client accountability” needs for students and parents, the same may not be true for administrative accountability to the state. Fusarelli observes that the Texas process involves political, not just academic, performance. A new focus on charter school authorizers, as promoted by Vergari (2001), seems appropriate. Hassel and Batdorff (2004) have taken this a step further by actually looking into the authorization process.

As framed by Hess (2004), if the charter authorizers want to close a school that is still drawing students, the authorizers must in effect “tell the school's supporters that they are either ignorant (unable to judge school quality) or

misguided (unconcerned with quality)” (p. 510). The question is: Which standard should we use in evaluating charter schools: an objective standard such as the percentage passing the state achievement exam, or a subjective test that emphasizes client (parent and student) satisfaction?

Ronald Opp, Lynne Hamer, and Svetlana Beltyukova (2002) offer one example of what other considerations might be relevant, beyond test scores. In their study of Ohio charter schools, they conducted focus-group interviews with parents and teacher in four schools. Here, the definition of “successful” is expanded to include categories such as enthusiasm about school and learning, high self-esteem and self-efficacy, respect, self-discipline, ownership, and creativity.

Walberg and Bast's (2003) survey of the evidence suggests that there is strong empirical support for the supposition that parents (as opposed to government planners) are better able to choose the schools that are best for their children. Buckley and Schneider (2003) identify the “activist consumers” as the driving force behind improvement in school quality in a quasi-market environment (also see Manna, 2002; Stambach, 2001). But political pressures and a push for accountability may limit the extent to which state legislatures will allow subjective parent satisfaction to play a part in the reauthorization process. It remains to be seen how states and school districts will negotiate this terrain.

Urban districts are not keen to respond to competition

The question of competition between schools of choice and traditional public schools has been a persistent one. Evidence on this aspect of institutional effect remains limited. While there are certainly sporadic examples of district reaction to new pressures, there is limited evidence that shows a systematic response (Hess, Maranto, & Milliman, 2001).

There are many reasons why the “competition” mechanism may not operate very well in the context of school choice. Ferraiolo and colleagues (2004) and Hess and colleagues (2001) point out that the attitudes of public school teachers about school choice can limit the impact of choice. Using survey data, they find that many public school teachers are hostile to reforming in response to school choice. Some teachers feel that this is just another passing reform. Others consider choice as competing away their jobs.

An interesting question is also the geographic patterns of charter school attendance. Location, relative to traditional schools, may influence the competitive effect. One study of reference comes from Britain. Parsons, Chalkey, and Jones (2000) found that students did, in fact, move out of their standard “catchment area” to attend schools in different geographical areas. They found this to be especially true of inner-city students going to schools outside the inner city.

Design of choice-based programs affects stratification

Perhaps the most researched topic regarding schools of choice has been their potential to stratify (or perpetuate stratification) along racial or class lines. How one evaluates the segregation effect depends on what one expects charter schools to do. Given that the public school system is already quite segregated by race, is it enough for charter schools simply to not make things worse?

Researchers such as Frankenberg and Lee (2003) say that it is not enough to avoid making things worse and argue that, as currently implemented, charter school enrollment procedures are missing opportunities to reduce segregation. They argue that unregulated choice (e.g., with no additional desegregation requirements) will simply perpetuate the racial segregation that is already prevalent in the public school system. They analyzed enrollment at charter schools in states where at least 5,000 students are enrolled in charters and found that minorities are concentrated in charter schools even more than in the public school system. They suggest that legislation designed to reduce segregation has not been enforced adequately by state authorities.

Other studies have found marginal increases in stratification (e.g., Dee & Fu, 2004; Fuller et al., 2003). Dee and Fu innovate with a panel-data approach, but their study remains sensitive to the control group chosen. Fuller et al. (2003) emphasize throughout that there are differences between charter schools. Some types of schools may be more apt to segregate than others. Wamba & Ascher (2003) summarize this literature as well, and note that a number of studies have found that charters do not improve “equity” in the sense that they remain racially stratified.

In a study of California, Michigan, and Texas, Wong and Shen (2001) found a strong, positive relationship between charter school racial/ethnic characteristics and the demographics of the school’s surrounding neighborhood (using zip code as the unit of analysis). This relationship suggests that charter schools may not be drawing students from across the district; rather, they appear to be serving a student population that roughly mirrors the neighborhood surrounding the charter school. Further, we found that in California, the achievement level of charter schools was sorted by race. In Michigan, there seemed to be less of a stratification effect.

These differences between the two states may be due to the extensive involvement of higher-education institutions in Michigan and the large number of “homeschool focused” charter schools in California. The broader implications of these findings may not be straightforward. On the one hand, if charter schools are drawing their student populations primarily from the neighborhood surrounding them, it may not reduce socioeconomic isolation. On the other hand, drawing students from the neighbor-

hood may prevent charter schools from becoming magnet schools that cream the best students from across the district.

At issue in the discussion of choice and stratification is that the goal of reducing segregation may be at odds with the simultaneous goals of reaching out to at-risk populations and encouraging charter schools to locate in at-risk neighborhoods. To the extent that the at-risk population is disproportionately composed of minority students, charters with an at-risk focus would (indirectly) be segregating students. Gregg Vanourek (2005) reported that 49 percent and 59 percent of the charter students were eligible for free and reduced-price lunch and were members of minorities, respectively, in 2003. In other words, because charters are entering a public school system and a society at large where race is heavily correlated with wealth, it is difficult to expect them to accomplish multiple societal goals all at once. From the perspective of desegregation, two civil rights legal scholars argued that choice, as a component of the public education system, “has the potential to help disadvantaged urban children, and we should shape and support choice policies that best tap that potential” (Liu & Taylor, 2005). Clearly, the design of choice has policy consequences with regard to who benefits.

Tension may arise in addressing the needs of special education students

A number of studies suggest that charter schools, and increased school choice generally, may be detrimental to special needs students. The National Council on Disability (2003) has raised a series of concerns about public school vouchers.

Estes (2003, 2004) has studied the Texas charter school movement and weighed its progress in the framework of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. Concerns in the literature are generally of three kinds: discrimination, lack of funding, and lack of expertise. Estes finds that, while there is no overt discrimination, a lack of funding and variations in expertise both exist. This is consistent with two other observations on charter school operation: charter schools operating with less money, and charter schools specializing to ‘niche’ markets. The problem, again, is one of competing goals. Are charter schools to provide specialized services? Or are they to avail themselves to everyone (e.g., the disabled), as well? This is precisely the tension that Rhim and McLaughlin (2000) identify. On one hand, charters are intended to cater to specific populations. On the other hand, special education requirements insist that they remain open to all student populations.

In the British context, Bagley, Woods, and Woods (2001) argue that “privileging the academic” (e.g., emphasizing test scores) can be detrimental to those families whose children are handicapped. Such families may place more emphasis on the suitability of the environment for disabled students. Again, schools of choice have their hands tied because the consumers want different services than

the state wants. How these tensions work out may, in large part, determine the future of charter school success in the United States.

While innovations are limited, teachers are satisfied

At the institutional level, charter schools have enjoyed substantial autonomy from state and district regulations, including collective bargaining provisions on teacher hiring and compensation (Podgursky & Ballou, 2001). Charters also encourage new governance arrangements. In Michigan and in Chicago's south side, for example, universities are operating charter schools. The Chicago International Charter School embodies a multicampus entity that contracts with several educational management organizations to deliver the curriculum and instruction at the seven sites (Koret Task Force, 2004).

However, innovation seems to be limited in the area of curriculum and instruction. Lubienski (2003) has performed a comprehensive review of 190 published works on educational practices in charter schools. His meta-analysis reveals that increased competition from charter schools has not sparked educational innovation in teaching and learning. Most charter schools are using a mixed, somewhat pragmatic approach, combining existing practices that are proven successful instead of creating their own signature features. In other words, choice offers instructional practices that are "different" – but not "new."

While innovations are limited, teachers in charter schools are satisfied. Courtney Malloy & Priscilla Wohlstetter (2003), in an extensive review of the literature, find that charter school teachers generally work longer hours and are paid less. Teachers and principals stay with charter schools because they enjoy the professional life charter schools offer.

Political constraints can be a challenge for choice reformers

Limitations on innovation may be closely related to the nature of the quasi-market in education. The market for educational services is substantially regulated by legislative and administrative authorities. After all, charter schools exist because of enabling state legislation. It has long been recognized that the market for educational services is a "quasi-market" which does not necessarily function as a well-working market (Hoxby, 2003; Adnett, Bougheas, & Davies, 2002).

Recent work in this area has pointed us toward the political aspects of the educational market. Charter schools are not simply firms supplying educational services. Jeffrey Henig and his colleagues (2002) have provided some evidence that charter schools act not only as economic agents, but as political agents as well. Henig and his colleagues also have evidence suggesting that the locational

pattern of charter schools is affected by political and practical considerations. In short, charter schools are linked in many ways to the politics and bureaucracy of their surroundings. Exactly how that interaction will take place will depend upon the context of local and state politics, but it could very well play a significant role in the effectiveness of teaching and learning.

Competitive effects of charter schools are often constrained by legislative compromise. Based on interviews and policy/legal analysis in four states, Bryan Hassel (1999) found that laws that cap the number of charter schools, cushion the financial blow to traditional district schools, or reduce the autonomy of charter schools all contribute to reducing the impact a charter school can make.

In a study of five urban districts, Teske and his associates (2001) attributed the modest effects of competition to several factors. The effects of charter school competition are lessened by financial cushioning and by a lack of school-level penalties for losing students to charter schools. Growing student populations may also reduce the competitive effects; even though traditional public schools are losing relative market share, the absolute number of their students remains constant. In districts where charter schools did have an impact, piecemeal rather than system-wide changes were made, which were mostly concerned with expanding the school day by offering new add-on programs.

Political effects have been recognized in other contexts as well. Hess and McGuinn (2002) analyze the Cleveland voucher program and note that competitive effects can be "muffled" by existing bureaucratic and political structures. Hassel and Meagan Batdorff (2004) have recently shown that the charter reauthorization process can also be influenced by politics and a lack of needed information. Both of these limitations can hamper the way in which the market operates. Always operating in the background are the politics of school choice, which often break down along traditional partisan lines. Gokcekus, Phillips, and Tower (2004) have shown that political factors also impact support for vouchers. Politicians with stronger links to teachers' unions are more likely to vote against such proposals, while representatives of districts with larger African American or Republican populations are more likely to vote in favor.

Conclusions

Overall Assessment and Policy Implications

Having reviewed the available empirical evidence, I provide a tentative overall assessment on the effects of school choice. Figure 1, which summarizes this assessment, is not meant to be static or definitive. Rather, the overall assessment offers an empirical basis for further discussion on the design, implementation, and effects of choice. With

new data continuing to become available, it is likely that research on the effects of school choice will continue to expand in the coming decade.

Key issue	Guiding questions: Does choice...	Tentative overall assessment from the literature
Student performance	...raise student achievement	Mixed results
Institutional effects	...satisfy parents, students, and other stakeholders?	Yes
	...spur urban districts to change their behavior?	Limited, with some exceptions
Equal access	...desegregate students along racial/ethnic or income class lines?	Likely doesn't reduce stratification
	...meet the needs of special education and ELL students?	Limited
School quality	...generate educational innovations?	Yes, in management
	...manage political, legal, and funding constraints?	Yes
	...improve curricular and instructional quality?	Likely yes, but uneven
	...create a more satisfactory professional environment for teachers?	Yes

Figure 1. School choice: Summary assessment from the literature of key issues

In light of this current knowledge base, three policy implications become apparent.

Managing accountability and other competing goals

First, and most fundamentally, are the questions of accountability, goals, and expectations for charter school and voucher programs. For instance, do we expect choice-based programs and charter schools to decrease racial and

income stratification in the public schools, or only to avoid making it worse?

The questions become increasingly vexing when faced with competing goals. The goal of allowing charter schools autonomy to cater to the market is in tension with the goal of providing equal access to students with disabilities. It also remains an open question as to who should be the final judge of charter school performance. In a true education market, the parents/consumers would cast their judgment via their decision to enroll their children or go elsewhere. As currently implemented, however, such client accountability is constrained by accountability to a state charter authorizing board.

The question of expectations is again central. Do we expect schools of choice to raise student achievement or simply to make students and parents more satisfied? Nonetheless, under pressure from No Child Left Behind to measure student proficiency, an increasing number of states and districts are placing charter schools within the same accountability framework that applies to traditional public schools.

Rethinking Research Design in Program Evaluation

Second, and very much related to the first, is the question of research methodology. Choosing a methodology depends in large part on what one wants to measure, which in turn depends on the goals one has for the particular school-choice program. The push in recent educational research has been toward a more “scientific,” experimentally based approach (see Shavelson & Towne, 2002). Randomized field trials are now frequently referred to as the “gold standard” in education research, and they have drawn wide interest in the social science community (see Mosteller & Boruch, 2002; Howell & Peterson, 2002). Indeed, in selecting proposals to evaluate the District of Columbia’s new voucher program, the Department of Education was clear that they will base their decision on the scientific rigor of the proposal (Hendrie, 2004). Randomized control field study is seen as the most effective approach to overcome the self-selection bias that is commonly found in educational settings.

The push toward experimental methods, however, has met with strong resistance in parts of the educational research community. As I mentioned earlier, only one out of 42 recent empirical studies on student achievement and choice used randomized control design. Maxwell (2004) and others provide a defense of alternative methods that aim at “opening up the black box” for school improvement. Maxwell adopts a “realist” position and argues in favor of a research approach that recognizes more complicated forms of causation. Olson (2004) has also critiqued the move toward experiments. In response, Slavin (2004) pointed out that, since 2000, only slightly more than 5 percent of the studies published in *American Educational Research Journal* reported experimental-control results. Thus, Slavin argues, more controlled experiments are necessary to balance the field. As put by Slavin, “there is

no substitute for the well-designed experiment” (p. 27). This tension between experimental and nonexperimental studies will not be resolved in the near future.

Integrating research and practice on an ongoing basis

A third policy implication is the need for integrating research and practice in the school choice community. In the context of accountability and transparency, there is a growing need to conduct self-assessment on an ongoing basis. Self-assessment must be systematic, including not only diagnostic study for fine-tuning school practices, but also proactive analyses that would form the basis for renewing the charter’s vision in the future.

Several major charter organizations are making efforts to address this challenge of sustainability. For example, in spring 2005, the Charter School Leadership Council created a task force that focuses on accountability and quality issues. Seeing the charter-school universe as consisting of schools with a wide range of performance levels, the task force explores ways to support charters that are in need of improvement. Both formal and informal constraints are examined. From a regulatory perspective, the growth of the charter sector can be constrained by state caps, inequitable funding on a per student basis, and limited access to physical facilities. At the same time, school quality is often shaped by other organizational factors, such as an inadequate “pipeline” of innovative leaders, complacent governing boards, and the inertia of “risk-averse” decision-making behaviors.

Equally important is the task force’s efforts to define and measure the concept of school quality. The questions that it raises include:

- How do charter schools identify, measure, and report school quality in ways that include conventional indicators (such as standardized-test scores) but also highlight the “diversity of charter school missions, structures, and clients”?
- Do different stakeholders (particularly parents) hold similar views on school quality?
- Can accountability measures be used to support charter expansion?
- As states’ No Child Left Behind standards continue to escalate toward 2014 and, if these standards are uniformly applied to charter schools, will potential charter developers have enough incentives to enter the educational market?

Clearly, research and development on these kinds of questions will be critical to our ongoing efforts toward systemwide redesign and improvement.

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