

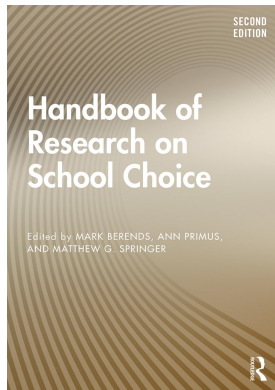
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ACCOUNTABILITY AND SCHOOL CHOICE

Laura S. Hamilton and Andrew McEachin

Over the past several decades, federal, state, and local education policymakers have relied heavily on accountability as a lever for promoting school improvement via choice-based policies and more generally throughout K–12 public education. Although “accountability” covers a wide range of mechanisms for increasing the likelihood that actors will work to achieve desired ends (Lerner & Tetlock, 1999), in the K–12 education sector the term is often applied to systems that link performance on standardized achievement tests and other indicators to specific consequences for schools or educators. Reauthorizations of the federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) have led to changes in the design of state and local accountability policies. But under the current reauthorization (the Every Student Succeeds Act, or ESSA), the requirement remains that states administer standardized achievement tests and use scores on those tests—along with other measures of student outcomes—to create performance indices. This focus on measures of student achievement has solidified the significant role that performance-based accountability plays in school improvement. Moreover, the use of test scores to evaluate teacher performance continues to be widespread (Doherty & Jacobs, 2015; Steinberg & Donaldson, 2016) even in the face of some backlash.

Despite the prominence of performance-based accountability in policy discussions, it is important to recognize the wide range of approaches to accountability and to acknowledge that performance-based systems interact with other accountability mechanisms in their effects on school practices. In the next section, we briefly describe several types of accountability and how they might operate in choice-based systems. We focus on performance-based and market-based accountability because of their prominence in debates about the design and implementation of school choice policies, while acknowledging the significant roles that other forms play.

Approaches to Accountability

Accountability for schools can occur through several approaches that impose varying roles and responsibilities on groups of actors in the system. Roughly speaking, school staff are typically affected by five forms: *political accountability*, which operates through voters holding elected officials, such as school board members, responsible for school quality; *bureaucratic or rules-based accountability*, through which educators and other actors in the system are expected to comply with regulations and mandates that emphasize particular actions; *professional accountability*, which operates when professional organizations or one’s colleagues impose expectations, monitor actions, and provide supports

to promote behaviors that are consistent with professional standards (see Gill, Lerner, & Meosky, 2016, and Adams & Kirst, 1999, for more extensive discussions of these forms of accountability); *performance-based accountability*; and *market-based accountability*.

The first three of these mechanisms operate to varying degrees in K–12 schools. For example, elected school boards oversee operations in many public schools. Board members might impose bureaucratic accountability on school administrators, while community members can use the ballot box to impose political accountability on those board members. In choice-based systems, political and bureaucratic accountability might interact, such as in a recent case in Ohio where the Department of Education faced political pressure to address low-performing, for-profit virtual schools, and eventually applied bureaucratic pressure to close some of them. Teachers are subject to different forms of professional accountability, including through unions and informal structures, such as peer or grade-level networks. Understanding the full scope of accountability in schools requires a recognition of each of these approaches and the ways they interact. For the purpose of this chapter, however, we are focusing on the final two approaches that are particularly salient when examining school choice policies: performance-based and market-based accountability.

Performance-Based Accountability

Performance-based accountability systems, including the state systems adopted in response to ESEA, typically involve four key elements: 1) standards that indicate what students are expected to know and be able to do, or that describe other key outcomes that schools are expected to attain; 2) measures of student achievement or other outcomes linked to standards; 3) targets for performance on these measures; and 4) consequences for achieving or failing to achieve the targets. (See Hamilton, Stecher, & Yuan, 2012, for a more complete discussion of these elements.) Performance-based accountability systems place varying degrees of emphasis on each one. For example, standards typically guide the development and interpretation of student achievement tests but may not be clearly linked to other elements of a performance-based accountability system, such as graduation rates. In addition, the type and intensity of consequences can range from simply publishing results without any explicit rewards or sanctions to significant consequences, such as requirements that schools be reconstituted with new staff.

An additional important design feature of performance-based accountability is the actor or actors whose performance is being measured and who will be most directly affected by any consequences. These two groups are not necessarily the same. ESEA's provisions focus on performance measurement at the school level, whereas district or other organizationally run evaluation systems typically impose consequences on individual teachers' performance ratings. In both cases, students' performance forms a key element of the rating systems used to determine accountability outcomes, whereas the consequences of that performance are imposed on teachers or school leaders. Decisions about whose performance to measure and who faces direct consequences have a large impact on the way the accountability system functions.

Holding actors accountable for factors not directly under their control can lead to negative consequences, such as low morale and performance indicators that lack validity for their intended uses. For example, teachers are often held accountable for student achievement because they have been shown to directly influence achievement growth and other student outcomes (Chetty, Friedman, & Rockoff, 2014). However, teachers typically do not make decisions about funding, curriculum, and other aspects of schooling that influence student performance; these decisions are made by leaders at higher levels in the system (Dynarski, 2018). A system that puts the full onus of accountability on teachers, therefore, does not accurately reflect the range of influences on what is being measured in that system.

Market-Based Accountability

Market-based accountability operates through the decisions that families make regarding where to enroll their children in school. Choice-based policies are designed to empower families to find schools that match their preferences, selecting from a range of options that reflects a marketplace for schooling. Research and theory suggest that to make good choices—ones that will lead to family satisfaction with schools and that will incentivize educators to act in ways that improve student outcomes—several conditions must be in place. Families must have clear preferences about schooling and gather information about the schools available to their children, must explore trade-offs between the attributes of these schools (e.g., weighing considerations regarding distance, safety, and academic quality), and have the opportunity to choose the school that best fits their preferences (Schneider, Teske, & Marschall, 2000). The market-based theory of action would further suggest that once their children are enrolled in a school, families need to monitor its progress and seek a new school if their original choice doesn't meet their children's needs.

The Role of Indicators

Although performance-based and market-based accountability systems operate through different mechanisms, both are premised to a large degree on the provision of high-quality information about schools. Individual components of information can be considered *indicators*, which take a variety of forms that range in complexity (e.g., an average score on an achievement test versus a value-added indicator), breadth (e.g., a measure of a single outcome versus a performance index constructed from measures of multiple phenomena), malleability (e.g., demographic characteristics of incoming students versus growth that those students attain on achievement measures), and other factors. Although most commonly used indicators are quantitative, they can also be developed using qualitative information, such as results from school inspections (Shand, 2017). Indicators can be lagging (e.g., end-of-year student achievement) or leading (e.g., school conditions, classroom practices). In K–12 education, indicators can serve multiple functions including signaling what outcomes or processes are valued, monitoring progress, supporting continuous improvement activities, and informing both performance-based and market-based accountability decisions (Allensworth, Nagaoka, & Johnson, 2018; Hamilton, Schwartz, Stecher, & Steele, 2013).

The development and use of indicators differs between performance-based and market-based systems. In particular, the former approach to accountability generally relies on a set of measures and indicators that policymakers select, such as the state accountability measures enacted in response to ESSA. By contrast, when families make choices in market-based systems, they might refer to published indicators, such as the ESSA-required measures, but they are also likely to construct their own set of indicators that reflects their priorities, such as distance and transportation options or fine arts offerings. To the extent that choice systems rely on families to find and assemble information, lower-income children might be disadvantaged if they lack access to reliable sources. Many parents report that their social networks are a significant source of information about schools, and access to networks that provide high-quality information on important aspects of schools can vary by income level or other family characteristics (Schneider et al., 2000). (For more on parent decision-making, see Chapter 25 in this volume.)

Of course, not everything that matters can be easily incorporated into an indicator system. One important aspect of schooling that is often omitted from published indicator systems is the set of curricula and instructional materials that schools have adopted. Although family members might not have sufficient background knowledge to assess whether the curriculum will meet their children's needs, research strongly suggests that choice of curriculum, including textbooks and other instructional materials, can influence student learning (Koedel & Polikoff, 2017; Jackson & Makarin, 2017).

Because there is no straightforward way to describe schools' adoption of evidence-based curricula, and because teachers' implementation of those curricula is likely to vary in ways that could render school-level information inaccurate, those who are interested in understanding schools' curriculum choices will probably need to seek information that is outside the scope of the published indicators.

Regardless of who constructs indicators, effective performance- and market-based accountability systems require that these indicators be designed to support valid inferences about school performance. In a performance-based system, poor-quality measures will result in unwarranted inferences about which schools or educators are meeting expectations and which ones need assistance. In a market-based system, inaccurate or incomplete information can lead to suboptimal choices. Moreover, the high stakes attached to indicators in both performance-based and choice-based systems can lead to unintended consequences, such as corruption of scores on the indicators, narrowing of curriculum, or a focus on instructional practices that raise test scores but do not improve students' longer-term prospects for success (Koretz, 2009; Ferguson & Danielson, 2014).

Although quality of indicators could be measured in different ways, research suggests that well-functioning indicators share several characteristics: They are clear, timely, minimally subject to score corruption, and reflect conditions or outcomes that are related to later student success (Koretz & Hamilton, 2006; Allensworth et al., 2018). In addition, a high-quality system of indicators should include multiple measures that provide complementary information and address a range of activities and outcomes related to the varied purposes of schooling, such as promoting learning, college and career readiness, and civic engagement (Hamilton & Stecher, 2010).

Indicators in the Context of Interacting Accountability Policies

The previous discussion examined ways that performance- and market-based accountability policies rely on indicators to inform accountability decisions, but for the most part it treated these approaches to accountability as separate. In practice, however, they often operate in tandem. Charter schools, for instance, are subject to market-based pressures and are also included in state ESSA accountability systems. Even traditional district-run schools can face some market pressure as a result of residential decisions. Both market-based and performance-based accountability rely on high-quality, accessible information. However, the indicators that are adopted in a performance-based system are not necessarily the ones that would work best for informing school choice, in part because families are likely to care about aspects of schools that are often not captured in formal accountability systems, such as climate and safety (Schneider et al., 2000).

Another way in which these two approaches may conflict is in terms of desired outcomes. Performance-based systems generally intend to reflect outcomes that are desirable from a public-good point of view and, in particular, are often designed to promote equity. Conversely, market-based accountability relies on individual choosers to seek out and respond to information in ways that address their private goals but not necessarily the public good (Gill et al., 2015). One clear concern this raises is the prospect that families will choose schools with children who come from circumstances similar to theirs, resulting in increased segregation along economic or racial/ethnic lines (Bifulco & Ladd, 2006).

Policymakers can design performance-based accountability measures and policies to try to mitigate these negative effects. They can, for example, develop measures of achievement growth or other outcomes that show students from traditionally underserved populations performing relatively well. And they can include a wide range of information in public reporting systems to decrease the likelihood that families will place undue emphasis on factors such as student demographics. However, research suggests that ensuring broad access to information may not decrease, and in some ways might increase, inequity in choice-based systems (Corcoran, Jennings, Cohodes, & Sattin-Bajaj, 2018).

In the next section, we provide a simple framework for examining different approaches to school choice, and we use this framework to describe case studies that illustrate varying combinations of performance-based and market-based accountability mechanisms.

Layers of School Choice

To better understand the roles of various forms of accountability in school choice policies, it is important to consider the multiple layers that make up any choice-based policy. These layers cover the *delivery* of instruction, the *funding* of schools, and the *operation* of schools. In this section we briefly introduce each layer, and then we describe three cases that illustrate how the layers of choice intersect with the design and implementation of performance-based and market-based accountability mechanisms.

Table 21.1 outlines how different types of choice policies and schools fit within the layers of school choice.¹ The first layer in the table covers whether instruction is provided in a traditional face-to-face format or online. The use of online technologies to deliver instruction has grown rapidly in the 21st century, which in turn has given families increased options to choose schools that use online instruction. Of course, both modalities might coexist in a single school (e.g., schools are increasingly offering online courses as options in a mostly face-to-face curriculum), but for the purposes of this chapter we focus primarily on schools that adopt one of the two approaches. The second layer is whether the school is funded by public or private money. Again, although both funding sources can coexist for a single school (e.g., a private school that accepts students with publicly funded vouchers), for simplicity we classify schools into one of two categories. The third layer is the operation of the school by either a public or private organization. The oldest, and most well-known, form of school choice involves privately funded and privately operated schools with traditional, face-to-face instruction, but today families can access a variety of schools that fall into various cells within Table 21.1.

Delivery

Most of the education policy and research that guides the design of school choice today was built on the traditional format of instruction delivered in person. Online education is fast rising as an

Table 21.1 Functional Layers of School Choice Policies

<i>Delivery</i>	<i>Funding</i>	<i>Operation</i>	<i>Examples</i>
Face-to-Face	Public	Public	Publicly operated charter schools; magnet schools; inter- and intra-district choice
		Private	Charter schools operated by for-profit providers; publicly funded vouchers
	Private	Public Private	Philanthropic funding to support programs in public schools Private schools and privately funded vouchers that are used at those schools
Online	Public	Public	Publicly operated online charter schools
		Private	Online programs that are part of a district but operated by for-profit providers; publicly funded vouchers that are used at online private schools
	Private	Public Private	Philanthropic funding to support programs in online public charter schools Online private schools and privately funded vouchers that are used at these schools

alternative to instructing a wide range of K–12 students from diverse backgrounds. Transportation has long been a constraint in school choice policies (Lincove & Valant, 2018). Students from less resourced backgrounds or students living in less populated areas may not take advantage of choice-based policies due to the time and financial transportation costs of attending schools of choice. Online or virtual schools reduce this constraint by allowing students to “attend” school in any location with an internet connection.

Although enrollment in online education has dramatically increased in the past 20 years, we have much to discover about the reasons students attend online schools and the learning environments they experience there. In many locations, students come to online schools already several years behind academically (Ahn & McEachin, 2017; Center for Research on Education Outcomes [CREDO], 2015). Moreover, they often enroll after struggling in traditional schools with bullying and other social or psychological or physical factors. Recent studies also suggest that the typical student in an online school experiences self-paced learning with limited student–teacher interaction (Gill et al., 2015).

With these distinctions in mind, it is clear that online education poses unique challenges to the design of performance-based accountability policies, especially when embedded within a typical public education structure. If one role of online schools is to serve students with unique challenges within the public education sector, then policymakers need to decide whether the system needs an alternative set of standards that include nurturing students’ socioemotional outcomes. Further, if online education offers a break from traditional geographic and temporal barriers (e.g., a standard eight-hour school day), then performance-based accountability policies may need to maximize instead of infringe on the ability of these schools to develop new learning structures.

Simple performance measures and teacher evaluation procedures might also need to be adapted for online schools. Policies for such schools may need to consider, for example, the definition of attendance and attendance requirements. (We discuss this more below). And they will need to implement new measures of teacher quality. Traditional systems rely on observational rubrics and value-added models. Implementing those in online settings will require modifications to the approaches, such as in-class observation rubrics that are currently in widespread use.

Online education also has implications for other forms of accountability. The removal of geographic constraints from attending schools of choice potentially increases market-based accountability for brick and mortar schools. For example, traditional public schools and charter schools now face competition through losing student enrollment to online schools. While the evidence on whether traditional public schools feel pressure from charter schools to attract students is mixed (Bettinger, 2005; Buddin & Zimmer 2005; Bifulco & Ladd, 2006; Booker, Gilpatric, Gronberg, & Jansen, 2008; Imberman, 2011), it is unclear how adding a new delivery model affects the competition among school offerings. Further, online education is often caught in political and bureaucratic debates as many states have allowed for-profit operators to run them.

Finally, mode of delivery is likely to have implications for the curriculum and instruction that students experience. Although numerous vendors have created online courses and full-year curricula, the kinds of interactions that students have with their peers, teachers, and instructional content may be limited when instruction is delivered exclusively online. Evidence regarding the extent to which online curricula can be designed to foster the development of skills that are typically addressed through in-person instruction (e.g., whether students’ collaboration skills benefit to the same degree from online discussion boards as from in-class discussions) is needed to better understand the instructional implications of different delivery modes.

Funding

Table 21.1 lays out a binary funding structure for K–12 education: public or private. Public schools in the United States are funded through a combination of federal, state, and local dollars, with the

latter two making up the vast majority of the total. Although the share of revenue from federal sources is typically between 10 and 20 percent, the majority of the performance-based accountability conversations since the implementation of NCLB in 2002 have focused at the federal level. ESSA stipulates that states create performance-based accountability policies with strong academic standards, test and non-test measures of student outcomes, annual and multi-year performance targets, and consequences based on how schools perform relative to these targets. These policies affect any K–12 school receiving federal Title I dollars.

Along with the federal ESSA requirements, states and school districts may add performance-based accountability measures and requirements. These policies often have components that drive market-based accountability mechanisms. Under ESSA, many states and districts are implementing school grading systems using an A–F (or similar ordinal) ranking. Extant research has suggested that parents and educators respond to the pressures induced by the consequences and disclosure of performance measures (Figlio & Lucas, 2004; Cullen, Jacob, & Levitt, 2006). Examples include donating more money to higher-performing schools (Figlio & Kenny, 2010) or valuing houses closer to higher-performing schools more than homes closer to lower-performing schools (Black, 1999; Figlio & Lucas, 2004). However, it is worth noting that the implementation of charter schools may reduce the link between home prices and school quality, because geographic location and school attendance are not as intricately linked (Brehm, Imberman, & Naretta, 2017). Parents' satisfaction with local schools is also sensitive to the design of school grading systems (Jacobsen, Snyder, & Saultz, 2014). In short, schools that receive public funds often face detailed accountability pressure from federal, state, and local performance-based accountability policies, and these policies often have a complementary effect on market-based accountability.

This often stands in stark contrast to the private funding of schools. The oldest examples of private funding are religious private schools, though the U.S. has a large number of secular private schools. In general, these schools do not receive public federal, state, or local revenue and therefore often exist outside of public school performance-based accountability policies (with a few exceptions, like publicly funded transportation). Their academic standards vary widely, as do their use of performance measures and targets. On the other hand, private schools face more market-based accountability pressure than most publicly funded schools. Private schools do not have local catchment zones to guarantee funding. They must compete to keep up their enrollments by offering a service that parents are willing to pay for. At the same time, many do not participate in statewide accountability testing or produce other indicators required under that system. Thus, the availability of comprehensive and consistent information about school performance to inform families' choices can be limited, leaving families to rely on other factors, such as religious affiliation or concerns about who their children's peers will be.

The lack of statewide accountability system pressures on privately funded schools can also affect curriculum and instruction. Research has demonstrated that pressures to increase test scores often lead to shifts in curriculum both between subjects (e.g., increasing time spent on math at the expense of untested subjects such as social studies) and within subjects (e.g., replacing novels with short passages that resemble state test items) (see Hamilton et al., 2012, for an overview of this research).

Operation

The final layer of school choice policies outlined in Table 21.1 covers the operation of the school. In general, schools are either operated by public or private organizations. A variety of public organizations run schools in the U.S. The most common is a school district that oversees at least one school. Public school districts typically operate under federal and state performance-based accountability systems, and even implement their own systems. Notable examples include Washington, D.C., the

CORE districts in California, and New York City. More important for this chapter, however, is the role operation of schools plays in school choice.

Charter schools are one of the most common approaches to school choice in public education. As discussed in Section II of this volume, charter schools were implemented to bring new, exciting practices into public education and to promote competition within school districts. Charter schools often operate within networks run by both non- and for-profit organizations. They are authorized by public entities that have the role of reviewing applications, selecting which schools to open, overseeing their performance, and deciding whether to renew the charter on a regular basis (e.g., every five years). Which public entities are allowed to authorize charters varies across states, and include school districts, county offices of education, state departments of education, and universities (National Association of Charter School Authorizers, 2018).

Both charter schools and traditional public schools vary in their degree of autonomy to select curricula and to determine other aspects of school operation, such as scheduling. Some traditional districts mandate specific curricula for all schools, whereas others allow curriculum decisions to be made at the school level. Similarly, while some charter schools have extensive freedom to select curricula, charter schools that are run by a charter management organization might be required to follow central office curriculum guidelines. In general, however, charter schools typically have greater flexibility than traditional public schools to adopt curricula that are aligned with their visions and needs (Berends, 2015).

Examples of the Intersection between Accountability Mechanisms and School Choice

In this section we review three cases that illustrate the intersection between school choice policies and accountability mechanisms: charter schools, vouchers, and online schools. For each of these topics, we discuss how performance-based and market-based accountability influences the design and implementation of these choice policies. While they are by no means exhaustive, they provide useful examples of how to think about the intersection of accountability and school choice.

Charter Schools

As previously stated, charter schools originally had two broad aims. The first was to remove them from the traditional public school bureaucracies to allow for greater experimentation in exchange for greater performance-based accountability (Berends, 2015). The second was for the schools to apply market-based pressure on their public school counterparts (e.g., Imberman, 2011; see also Chapter 11 in this volume). In practice, however, a number of factors related to the broader operation of charter schools have affected their ability to meet these aims. One has to do with the charter authorizers. That is, the location and level of charter authorizers play a particularly important role in the accountability of their schools. Authorizers often control, at least in part, the performance measures and targets to be collected and disclosed to the public. This in turn influences the information available to parents when making decisions about where to send their children to school.

In California, for example, charter organizations first try the local school district as authorizer, and if the district turns down their application, they try the county and then the state. Charter schools in California have the potential to be authorized by one of three different governing bodies. This structure poses a number of complicating factors. A charter school may be situated within a school district's boundaries but may be authorized by a different entity (e.g., the county or state). So while it is competing for the same students as the local district (i.e., market-based accountability), it does not have to operate under the district's policies (i.e., performance-based accountability), although it still must comply with state accountability policies. In this example, parents may not

have access to similar information between the two systems. Further, a charter network may have schools authorized by all three entities. If the schools have different reporting requirements depending on their authorizers' levels, it is more difficult for the charter organization to promote common practices across its network. California's structure is not unique; many other states allow multiple public agencies to serve as charter authorizers.

The second—and likely more important—consideration for charter schools is the role of market accountability. Markets rely on easily accessible, detailed information to consumers to make informed choices. Related to charter schools, policymakers have to think through not only the type of information available to parents but also how parents can use it to enroll students in schools.

Parents use a variety of resources when making educational choices for their children, and these resources often vary along socioeconomic dimensions. Indirect evidence of this occurs in research that has documented that low-income and low-performing students choose to attend lower-quality schools, on average, than their higher-income and higher-achieving peers within the same district (e.g., see Welsh, Duque, & McEachin, 2016). While families tend to value schools with higher-quality peers (as measured by test scores) (Abdulkadiroğlu, Pathak, Schellenberg, & Walters, 2017; Harris & Larsen, 2017), families also value other dimensions of school experiences, such as safety, extra-curricular activities, and distance (Harris & Larsen, 2017). To aid the communication flow within a local education market, this information needs to be readily measured and available to all students and families.

Providing detailed information about the quality and mission of charter schools is a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for market-based accountability. Parents still have to use the indicators and other performance measures to make enrollment decisions and navigate the enrollment process. To this end, a number of school systems, such as New Orleans and Denver, have implemented unified enrollment systems. These systems centralize timing and processes, allowing parents to more easily register their student for a school of choice. Reducing the information frictions often associated with multiple application cutoffs, enrollment forms, and other requirements more easily allows the market to place competitive pressure on the system.

However, even when information systems are well defined, readily available, and accessible to parents, other barriers may still inhibit market-based accountability. Transportation is an especially salient barrier. For example, in Detroit most students access schools by car, and yet the highest performing schools exist outside of the city limits (Urban Institute Student Transportation Working Group, 2018). This is true for many school systems. Without access to inexpensive transportation, many students in a potentially choice-rich environment have far fewer realistic schooling options.

Voucher Programs

Vouchers sit in an interesting intersection of Table 21.1. Private school vouchers, as discussed in detail in Section III of this volume, use public funds to provide parents with a tuition grant redeemable at a private school. The majority of public education funding goes toward publicly operated schools, and these schools generally fall under some form of performance-based accountability. However, the private operation of voucher schools complicates the use of performance-based accountability.

Private schools typically enjoy a large amount of autonomy in their instructional design, length of the school day, tuition amount, and so on. The variety of options within the private sector is a big reason families choose these schools. Where voucher programs are concerned, sustainability requires that a large number of private schools participate. But the four key aspects of performance-based accountability policies (i.e., standards, measures, targets, and consequences) work against many private schools' desire to enter the voucher market. Such schools, especially religious ones, enjoy the ability to set their own academic standards and pacing. Further, given that they generally have

varying academic standards, their instruction is likely not well aligned with states' typical high-stakes standardized tests. Thus, performance measures used to hold public schools accountable would not be appropriate in many cases. Finally, private schools are unlikely to opt into an accountability system that creates new consequences for their students' outcomes. In short, unless private schools were struggling to enroll students, many would opt out of a voucher program if it meant heavily restructuring their daily routines and operating under a typical performance-based accountability system (d'Entremont & Huerta, 2007).

A few states have implemented a hybrid approach that requires private schools interested in enrolling voucher students to meet structural (e.g., financial stability) and academic (e.g., use of state tests) guidelines. Louisiana is the foremost example of imposing structural requirements on private schools; interestingly, the early evidence is that students who receive vouchers perform more poorly than their public school peers (Mills & Wolf, 2017). It is unclear whether this is related to the structural requirements, which potentially dissuade the higher-quality schools from participating in the program. The evidence, however, suggests that the most recent voucher programs tend to have null to negative effects on student achievement (Figlio & Karbownik, 2016; Mills & Wolf, 2016, 2017; Waddington & Berends, 2018).

Voucher schools also have the ability to apply pressure on the public system, luring away students who otherwise could not afford them (e.g., Figlio & Hart, 2014). The ability for voucher programs to do this relies on a number of factors, including—as stated earlier—a healthy supply of private school options. Along with bureaucratic constraints, supply is affected by the size of the voucher amount. In most cases, private schools cannot charge families for the difference between the voucher amount and the typical tuition. If voucher amounts are small, then expensive private schools are less likely to enroll students (d'Entremont & Huerta, 2007). As with charter schools, private school enrollment may also be mitigated by the admissions process, which may inhibit the ability of families that face information constraints to opt into the private market.

Online Education

It is important to understand how the policy and practical context of online education (in its many variations) may influence students differently in various states. Online education often takes one of two forms. The first is the use of online platforms for supplemental course-taking, such as Florida's Florida Virtual School (FVS). The FVS is a statewide program where students enroll in standalone courses to complement their studies at their traditional public or charter school (Chingos & Schwerdt, 2014).² In this setting, students take online courses surrounded by more typical resources found in a traditional school setting—a physical building, learning materials, and teachers or other adult supports. The one-off nature of the FVS program influences the types of students who typically enroll. These students generally have higher achievement than their peers and choose to utilize FVS for more than one supplemental course (Chingos & Schwerdt, 2014).

However, online education in many other states takes a second form of use, which stands in stark contrast to the FVS mode and introduces a new aspect to its context: school choice. In this form of online education, students fully opt out of their local school district and choose to enroll in an entirely online experience (CREDO, 2015; Ahn & McEachin, 2017). The learning environment for these students is quite different than the FVS model. Typically, they move through it at home or away from a traditional school setting. As such, the experience is more dependent on the resources, structure, and supports available to the student outside of school. And in many contexts, students who select into the fully online experience are quite different than those who choose other options (e.g., Ahn & McEachin, 2017). When it comes to accountability, the first important decision for any online education model is its scale and scope. One-off online courses need different structures, and are less susceptible to market-based accountability than fully online schools.

Usually, publicly funded online schools will be held to the same standards as traditional public schools under state accountability systems. However, as we touched on earlier, performance-based and market-based accountability policies as currently designed start to break down when applied to online schools. Take a simple measure that is often used in formative and summative ways for traditional public schools: attendance. One benefit of online education is that students have the flexibility to attend school at times convenient to their unique schedules as opposed to the traditional eight-hour school day. Traditional public schools often take attendance at least once per day. But would a similar policy be necessary for an online setting? And how should we define attendance in an online setting? Do we simply count the number of hours a student is logged into the system? Is it active time spent within a learning management system? Or should we think more broadly about the ultimate learning objectives for students in an online setting and change the focus to outcome-based policies (e.g., completion rates)?

A seemingly simple solution could be to require that, to receive funding, virtual schools compel their students to attend school at rates similar to their peers in traditional public schools. However, online schools exist in theory to provide students with more flexibility in how, when, and where they attend school. Using the same measures and targets as traditional public schools likely stifles the unique nature of these schools. It is clear given the extant research on the quality of online schools that some form of performance-based accountability is needed (Ahn & McEachin, 2017).

The design of performance-based accountability for online schools is also important for market-based accountability. For the virtual school market to work, families need detailed information about the quality of and experiences in online schools. They also likely need more information than is currently gathered for public schools. One reason online schools exist is to provide students who do not otherwise fit into traditional public school life an option to continue their education in a safe place. For these students, noncognitive or socioemotional outcomes may be just as or more important than traditional measures of academic achievement, though the availability of valid, reliable, and cost-effective measures of these outcomes is limited (Soland, Hamilton, & Stecher, 2013).

Although we have limited information about the quality of online schools (as measured by impact on students' achievement), the growing evidence suggests students in online schools perform significantly worse on assessments than their peers in face-to-face traditional public and charter schools (CREDO, 2015; Ahn & McEachin, 2017). With this in mind, it is not clear why parents continue to enroll students in online schools. It is quite possible that some families are not making fully informed choices, either because the information does not exist or they do not have access to it, when enrolling in online schools. On the other hand, it is possible families' preferences, especially for struggling students or for students who are pursuing an outside interest at an intensive level (e.g., an athlete training for national and international competitions), do not solely focus on maximizing student achievement. In other words, it is possible that market-based accountability is working, but parents and policymakers are operating in different markets: One hopes to optimize outcomes other than achievement while the other wants to maximize test scores (Goldring & Shapira, 1993; Bauch & Goldring, 1995; Hastings, Kane, & Staiger, 2009).

As mentioned above, political and bureaucratic accountability also play important roles for online schools. In the past few years, Ohio has dealt with this issue directly with its virtual schools (cf. O'Donnell, 2018). As written in the state education code, these schools initially only had to *offer* the same number of instructional hours as their traditional public school peers. As interpreted by some, the education code did not require that students in virtual schools actually *attend* a minimum number of hours in the online school setting. The Ohio Department of Education audited the activity logs of the nearly 30 virtual schools in the state and found that many had misreported the actual level of student involvement in the learning platform (their measure of attendance). In short, a number of schools had billed the state based on inflated enrollment numbers. The ODE sued a number of online school providers to refund the state, which caused a number of them to close.

Conclusion

The goal of this chapter was to provide a brief overview of how two important topics in education research and practice—accountability and school choice—interact to influence school effectiveness and student outcomes. Although there are many forms of accountability, performance-based and market-based accountability policies and mechanisms play particularly important roles in the design and implementation of school choice policies. In general, any type of schooling option that uses public funding will be exposed to performance-based accountability policies (with the exception of publicly funded voucher programs). Further, the majority of school choice policies break the link between residual location and school enrollment. As such, these policies rely on market forces to equalize the supply and demand of school choice options.

Topics for Future Research

The rapid changes in state and local data systems and information-sharing approaches are creating windows of opportunity to expand the amount and types of information that can be harnessed to support both performance-based accountability policies and systems of school choice. Here we briefly describe some topics that seem especially ripe for research that can inform policymakers' design of accountability systems that help meet the public-good goals for education while also promoting positive outcomes for individual choosers.

First, recent changes in how families can obtain information suggest a need to revisit theoretical and empirical work on how they choose schools. In particular, growth in the use of social media as a source of information about schools could affect what types of information families can access. It could also contribute to either growing or shrinking gaps between economically disadvantaged and wealthier families, or among different racial/ethnic groups, as they access trustworthy and comprehensive information. Research could examine what types of information (e.g., informal reviews of schools, rankings of schools based on test scores) different types of families retrieve and how these differences might contribute to inequity.

A second promising area of research stems from the expanding set of indicators that many states and districts are incorporating into their public reports of school performance. One prominent example is the CORE Districts in California, which use a School Quality Improvement Index that includes measures of factors such as school climate and social and emotional learning (Data Quality Campaign, 2018). As these types of expanded indicators become more available in choice-based contexts, it will be important for policymakers to understand how families make sense of them and how their publication informs families' decisions.

The growing availability of online options, including both virtual schools and courses offered within more traditional schools, provides another opportunity for research that can inform policymaking. It is particularly important to understand why families in particular are leaving face-to-face settings for online schools despite the extant research. These families are sending clear signals that something about the traditional education system is not working for them. Brick and mortar traditional public, private, and charter schools, and online schools can use this information to improve their practice. For example, if families choose online education because of its flexible scheduling (e.g., allowing students to work during the day), brick and mortar schools could incorporate more flexible scheduling options into their instructional delivery, putting market pressure on online schools to improve their practices.

Notes

- 1 To streamline our examples, we ignore interesting hybrids that blend the binary categories provided in Table 21.1. These hybrids, too, have important implications for accountability mechanisms, but they are beyond the scope of this chapter.
- 2 Students in Florida are required to take at least one online course to graduate from high school.

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