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Upfront

The Teacher Parents Want **When parents have a choice, teachers are better**

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EDUCATION

The Teachers Parents Want

When parents have a choice, teachers are better

Harvard economist Caroline M. Hoxby, a well-known school choice proponent, has published a new study suggesting that when parents have more school districts to choose from, schools are forced to hire teachers with more math and science skills who work harder and come from more selective colleges.

Writing in the fall 2002 *Journal of Human Resources*, Hoxby argues that the positive effect of parental choice on teaching is apparent in the traditional public school system.

Using the number of school districts in a metropolitan area as a measure of competition among public schools for students, she finds that, other factors being equal, areas with more districts (Boston, for instance, where there are 70 within a commute

of downtown) tend to have teachers that went to better colleges, have more math and science skills, and work longer hours than they are required, as opposed to areas with fewer school districts (such as Miami, where there's only one).

Combining data on more than 47,000 public school teachers – on the colleges they attended and the courses they took, and the number of overtime hours they worked per week – and data on metropolitan school districts, Hoxby found that in areas where there are more districts competing for students, more is demanded of teachers.

Where parents have more districts to choose from, those school districts hired teachers that attended more selective colleges (SAT scores were



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about 4 percentiles higher). Roughly 10 percent of teachers from these areas had one more math or science class under their belt compared to teachers from areas with fewer districts. These same teachers also worked approximately 45 minutes extra per week.

Why should attending better colleges, taking more math and science courses, working extra hours, and shouldering extra responsibility be better indicators of teaching quality than being certified or having a master’s degree in education? Because, Hoxby says, these are the qualities that matter to parents. Districts that face more competition better allow parents to express what they want in teachers. She reasons that researchers can uncover what parents want not only by looking at how prevalent these qualities are in areas with more districts, but also by how well those districts pay for those particular skills. Her data shows that teachers in areas with more districts earn 0.2 percent more for every SAT percentile; 3.8 percent more for every Barron’s college ranking point; 0.4 percent more for every math course; 0.5 percent more for every science course; 0.4 percent more for extra work hours; and 3.8 percent more for taking on extra responsibility. Why do schools in areas with more districts hire more people with these skills and pay more? Districts pay more, Hoxby



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says, because when parents have a choice of where to send their children, districts are forced to compete for teachers with these skills – result-

ing in higher salaries.

But, Susanna Loeb, professor of education at Stanford, cautions that factors other than competition contribute to the differences in teacher quality. She notes that better teachers are attracted to areas with higher-performing students, making it “not surprising that Boston has a more highly educated teaching force than Miami.”

Hoxby finds that charter schools, the newest competitors to traditional public schools, are the most responsive to the qualities that parents want in teachers. Comparing public school data with survey data from a large sample of charter schools, she finds that charter school teachers outperform their public school counterparts on those same qualities – higher SAT scores, attending better colleges, taking more math and science courses, working extra hours, and taking on more responsibility. The fact that charter school teachers are also paid more than public school teachers for these qualities again bolsters her argument that charter schools are more responsive to parental demand.

The implication of the study is that the fears many public school teachers have of greater choice are unfounded, says Hoxby. “If you are a good teacher, or you want to be, you shouldn’t be afraid of more school choice because you’d be rewarded more,” says Hoxby. “They [the teachers union] need a leap of imagination. If they had the imagination to envision themselves in a more demanding environment where, yes, they have to be more of what parents want, they’d be better rewarded and treated like professionals.”

–Kari Lydersen

HOW THEY COMPARE

	Public School Teachers	Charter School Teachers
College Math	2.1 courses	3.5 courses
College Science	0.7 courses	2.4 courses
Quality of College Attended	46.1 percentile	54.3 percentile
Extra Work	6.36 hours / week	10.82 hours / week