

Testimony to the House Committee on Education and the Workforce
Subcommittee on Early Childhood, Elementary, and Secondary Education

Chair and Members of the Committee,

I am honored to contribute to this critical discussion on school choice, sharing insights from my multifaceted engagement with the charter school sector—as a former charter educator, donor, parent, board member, and now researcher. These experiences, combined with my academic inquiry, have provided me with a deep understanding of the nuances and complexities surrounding charter schools.

In the late 1990s, my research into charter schools began in Michigan, a state at the forefront of the charter movement. This journey continued through an instructional role at Aspire Charter School in East Palo Alto California, and as a board member of a charter school in Austin, Texas. Witnessing my daughter's education within a charter school further personalized my insights into the sector's impact on students and families. As a researcher and tenured scholar, I have published 28 peer reviewed articles, reports and law reviews and other publications about school choice.

The foundational premise of charter schools was to foster innovation and provide an alternative that would spur improvements within the traditional public school system. Yet, the body of peer reviewed academic research, including my own studies, increasingly questions the efficacy of charter schools in delivering on these promises. Data from the National Center for Education Statistics indicates no significant academic advantage for charter school students over their public school counterparts. Furthermore, the Center for Research on Educational Outcomes (CREDO) series of ongoing reports have sometimes noted positive achievement result and other times they've found negative results, often in the hundredths of a standard deviation. CREDO has also faced significant criticism for their methodology from the National Education Policy Center and the Network for Public Education, casting doubt on the significance and replicability of the “days of learning” framing of their findings.

Beyond the question of academic outcomes, charter schools have been shown to exacerbate pre-existing challenges within the public education system. As noted by the 2016 resolution from the NAACP that came forward when I served as California NAACP Education Chair, charter schools on average exhibit higher rates of teacher turnover, decreased teacher quality, serve less special needs students, and have intensified racial segregation and inequitable disciplinary practices. The work of scholars such as Kevin Welner, among others, has illuminated how charter schools' selective recruitment and retention practices contribute to a deepening of educational disparities. My own research corroborates these findings, highlighting the troubling extent of racial segregation in charter schools and challenging the inclusivity and equity of the choice model.

The issue of accountability, or the lack thereof, in the charter sector is particularly alarming. The absence of rigorous oversight in many states has paved the way for

financial mismanagement, conflicts of interest, and a disturbingly high rate of school closures. A recent study by the Network for Public Education found that over 25% of charter schools closed within five years. By year 10, the closure rate was 40%. Millions in public grant funds from the US Department of Education have been spent on charter schools that never opened or closed after a year. These dynamics not only disrupt students' educational paths but also have resulted in the documented misallocation of billions of dollars in public funds. The governance structures of many charter schools, especially those managed by for-profit entities, often fail to align with the broader community interests, undermining the principle of public accountability in education.

Moreover, the unchecked expansion of the charter sector poses significant risks to the public education system, diluting resources and exacerbating the challenges of delivering quality education across the board. This problem is accentuated by the expected nationwide decline in K-12 student populations in public schools, underscoring the urgency of focusing our efforts on improving existing educational infrastructures rather than expanding the charter sector indiscriminately.

Given these concerns, my stance on charter schools has evolved towards a more cautious and critical perspective. While most have heard the original ideal that charter schools would serve as laboratories for educational innovation and to provide families with diverse educational options, it is imperative that we address the profound existing issues of accountability and financial management that currently beset the charter school movement.

In consideration of the predominant perspective of educational research data, it is imperative that we unite in advocating for a strategic reassessment of the charter school model, with a focus on upholding educational excellence, reinforcing the value of education as a public good, and enhancing community involvement. Only through a concerted effort to confront and resolve these challenges can we ensure that charter schools will instead contribute positively rather than negatively to our collective goal of an effective education system for all students.

It is my sincere hope that this testimony serves as a catalyst for a thoughtful and comprehensive reevaluation of the charter school landscape. May it ignite initiatives and policies aligned with our highest educational aspirations, guaranteeing every child access to a quality education that is emblematic of our nation's dedication to excellence in education for all children and families.

Thank you for considering my perspective and research on this critical issue. I look forward to the possibility of collaborating to foster a more equitable and responsive education system for every student.

Sincerely,

Julian Vasquez Heilig
Professor and Founding Board Member Network for Public Education

School Choice Scholarship

FIRST AND SINGLE AUTHORED ARTICLES IN PROFESSIONAL JOURNALS (*REFEREED/PEER-REVIEWED)

Vasquez Heilig, J., Brewer, J. and Williams, Y. (2019). Choice without inclusion?: Comparing the intensity of racial segregation in charters and public schools at the local, state and national levels. *Journal of Education Sciences*, 9(3), 1-17.*

Vasquez Heilig, J. & Clark, B. (2018). New insights and directions: Considering the impact of charter school attributes on communities of color, *Journal of Transformative Leadership and Policy Studies*, 7(1), 3-9.*

Vasquez Heilig, J. (2013). Reframing the refrain: Choice as a Civil Rights issue. *Texas Education Review*. 1(1), 83-94.*

Vasquez Heilig, J., Williams, A., McNeil, L & Lee, C. (2011). Is choice a panacea? An analysis of black secondary student attrition from KIPP, other private charters and urban districts. *Berkeley Review of Education*, 2(2), 153-178.*

FIRST AND CO-AUTHORED ARTICLES IN LAW REVIEWS

Vasquez Heilig, J., Nelson, S., & Kronzer, M. (2018). Does the African American need separate charter schools? *Law & Inequality: A Journal of Theory and Practice*, 36(2), 247-267.

Vasquez Heilig, J. Holme, J., LeClair, A. V., Redd, L., & Ward, D. (2016). Separate and unequal?: The problematic segregation of special populations in charter schools relative to traditional public schools. *Stanford Law & Policy Review*, 27(2), 251-293.

CO-AUTHORED ARTICLES IN PROFESSIONAL JOURNALS (*REFEREED/PEERREVIEWED)

Portales, J., & Vasquez Heilig, J. (2015). Understanding universal vouchers and urban public schools in Santiago de Chile: Educational administrators' responses to choice. *Multidisciplinary Journal of Educational Research*, 5(2), 194-237.*

Portales, J. & Vasquez-Heilig, J. (2014). Understanding how universal vouchers have impacted urban school districts' enrollment in Chile. *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, 22(68). Retrieved from <http://epaa.asu.edu/ojs/article/view/1427/1314>*

BOOK CHAPTERS

Vasquez Heilig, J. (2021). Scrutinizing the school choice Equity Ethos for Black parents. In D. Berliner & C. Hermanns (Eds.), *Public Education: The Cornerstone of American Democracy*, (pp. XX-XX). New York, NY: Teachers College Press.

Vasquez Heilig, J., Brewer, T.J. & White, T. (2018). What Instead?: Reframing the debate about charter schools, Teach For America, and testing. In R. Ahlquist, P. Gorski and T. Montano (Eds.), *Assault on Kids and Teachers: Countering privatization, deficit ideologies and standardization of U.S. schools*, (pp. 201-217) New York: Peter Lang.

HANDBOOKS

Vasquez Heilig, J., Brewer, J. & Adamson, F. (2019). The politics of market-based school choice research: A comingling of ideology, methods and funding, In M. Berends, A. Primus and M. Springer (Eds.) *Handbook of Research on School Choice*, 2nd (pp. 335-350). New York, NY: Routledge.*

EDUCATION POLICY REPORTS, BRIEFS, AND FIELD PUBLICATIONS

Vasquez Heilig, J. (2018). *NEPC Review: "Bigger Bang, Fewer Bucks?"* (University of Arkansas Department of Education Reform, February 2018). Boulder, CO: National Education Policy Center.

Vasquez Heilig, J., LeClair, A.V., Lemke, M., & McMurrey, A. (2014). *Remarkable or poppycock?: Lessons from school voucher research and data*. Austin, TX: Texas Center for Education Policy, University of Texas at Austin.

Vasquez Heilig, J. & Portales. (2012). *Are vouchers a panacea?: Data from international implementation.* Austin, TX: The Institute for Urban Policy Research and Analysis, University of Texas at Austin.

School Choice Scholarship Descriptions

FIRST AND SINGLE AUTHORED ARTICLES IN PROFESSIONAL JOURNALS (*REFEREED/PEER-REVIEWED)

Choice without inclusion? (2019) by Vasquez Heilig, J., Brewer, J., and Williams, Y. explores the extent of racial segregation in charter versus public schools across various geographies. This study critically examines whether school choice leads to inclusive educational environments or exacerbates segregation.

New insights and directions (2018) by Vasquez Heilig, J., & Clark, B. analyzes the impact of charter school policies on communities of color, offering a nuanced look at how these schools affect diverse populations and suggesting pathways for creating more equitable educational opportunities.

Reframing the refrain: Choice as a Civil Rights issue (2013) by Vasquez Heilig, J. argues that school choice should be viewed through a civil rights lens, challenging the notion that choice inherently leads to better outcomes for marginalized communities and calling for a reevaluation of choice policies.

Is choice a panacea? (2011) by Vasquez Heilig, J., Williams, A., McNeil, L., & Lee, C. scrutinizes the effectiveness of charter schools and KIPP programs, particularly focusing on attrition rates among black students, questioning the efficacy of choice as an educational reform strategy.

CO-AUTHORED ARTICLES IN PROFESSIONAL JOURNALS (*REFEREED/PEERREVIEWED)

Understanding universal vouchers and urban public schools in Santiago de Chile (2015) by Portales, J., & Vasquez Heilig, J. investigates the response of educational administrators to school choice in the context of Santiago, Chile, providing insights into the global implications of voucher systems.

Understanding how universal vouchers have impacted urban school districts' enrollment in Chile (2014) by Portales, J. & Vasquez-Heilig, J. examines the effects of voucher systems on school enrollment patterns in Chile, offering a comprehensive look at the consequences of market-based educational reforms.

FIRST AND CO-AUTHORED ARTICLES IN LAW REVIEWS

Does the African American need separate charter schools? (2018) by Vasquez Heilig, J., Nelson, S., & Kronzer, M. critically examines the proposition of African American-specific charter schools as a solution to educational disparities, analyzing the legal, social, and educational implications.

Separate and unequal? (2016) by Vasquez Heilig, J., Holme, J., LeClair, A. V., Redd, L., & Ward, D. delves into the segregation issues within charter schools, comparing them to traditional public schools and highlighting the challenges special populations face in these environments.

BOOK CHAPTERS

Scrutinizing the school choice Equity Ethos for Black parents (2021) by Vasquez Heilig, J. critiques the equity claims of school choice advocates, focusing on the experiences and perspectives of Black parents navigating these systems.

What Instead?: Reframing the debate about charter schools, Teach For America, and testing (2018) by Vasquez Heilig, J., Brewer, T.J., & White, T. challenges mainstream narratives around educational reform, proposing alternative frameworks that prioritize equity and inclusion.

HANDBOOKS

The politics of market-based school choice research (2019) by Vasquez Heilig, J., Brewer, J., & Adamson, F. critically examines the intersection of ideology, methodology, and funding in school choice research, unpacking the complexities behind the push for market-based reforms.

EDUCATION POLICY REPORTS, BRIEFS, AND FIELD PUBLICATIONS

NEPC Review: "Bigger Bang, Fewer Bucks?" (2018) by Vasquez Heilig, J. offers a critical analysis of a report promoting the cost-effectiveness of charter schools, disputing the underlying assumptions and methodologies that charter schools are more cost effective than neighborhood public schools.

Remarkable or poppycock?: Lessons from school voucher research and data (2014) by Vasquez Heilig, J., LeClair, A.V., Lemke, M., & McMurrey, A. debunks common myths about the effectiveness of school vouchers, providing a data-driven critique of voucher policies.

Are vouchers a panacea?: Data from international implementation (2012) by Vasquez Heilig, J. & Portales. explores the global impact of voucher systems on educational equity, drawing lessons from various countries' experiences with school choice.