

TRANSCRIPTION

Center Announcer: Welcome to the Midwest and Plains Equity Assistance Center Equity Spotlight Podcast. This podcast series will feature the Center's Equity Fellows, national scholars from North Dakota, South Dakota, Nebraska, Kansas, Oklahoma, Minnesota, Iowa, Missouri, Wisconsin, Illinois, Michigan, Indiana, and Ohio who are working to advance equitable practices within school systems. Each episode will focus on a topic relevant to ensuring equitable access and participation, and quality education for historically marginalized students, specifically in the areas of race, sex, national origin, and religion, and at the intersection of socioeconomic status.

Courtney M: This podcast builds from our last discussion on the implications of desegregation and school choice. A variety of questions shape how we understand funding the nuances of school choice and the various stakeholders involved. Today we have Dr. Terah Chambers and Dr. Jada Phelps Moultrie, who both have expertise in areas of desegregation, school choice and parent engagement across schools. So we're going to begin with kind of laying a context for why school choice and why parent choice. For our listeners who may be new to the conversation, can you all define what school choice is? And maybe even what it is not?

Dr. Chambers: Well, let me I would just say that school choice is kind of an umbrella term that we use to talk about a lot of different options that we have. But basically, anytime you have a choice to go to a school outside of what your neighborhood assigned school is, there is some kind of school choice involved. Now, depending on where you live, and what statutes are allowable, you might have, you know, the option to go to a public school outside of your neighborhood school, you might be able to go to a charter school, you might live in a place where there are vouchers that allow you to take, you know, take a voucher and go to a private school. All of these are, you know, under the same umbrella term school choice. But all involve

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Dr. Terah Venzant Chambers, MAP Center Equity Fellow – Michigan

some ability to choose the school that your child is going to go to with public dollars. And I know that Dr. Phelps has some additional kind of historical context. This is more what she studies.

Dr. Phelps:

Yeah. So when I was doing my research among African American families who were using school choice as a means to engage. I started trying to explore like where this idea of school choice comes from. It's actually you can say this drawn from Milton Friedman, economic principles, typically around free market privatization. So in that realm, you generally pick what you want to do, the choice of it all. But with that said, a lot of proponents have targeted education. It's like a \$700 billion enterprise a year. And so that's where you would essentially, if you're trying to reduce government spending, then that's been a primary target for the last 20 years or so. And our own Secretary of Education has been a big proponent of trying to take that money out and then put it back into private markets and she's been known to say she trusts families. But what we're saying here, when I particularly look at African American parents is that they're getting the same choices that we said were problematic. So that's high poverty, high minority schools that are typically "underperforming."

Dr. Phelps:

Say like when it comes to choosing private schools, a lot of barriers are there where you have to understand the enrollment process, understand how to get vouchers that Dr. Chambers was describing. And then just knowing how to just do that inner district transfer, trying to flee from one underperforming school and trying to get your child to a more affluent and high performing school. All of those seem like they're part of the choice but it's becoming more problematic on the part of just trying to access those things. But then, now we're saying all this going from one school to another school, not really investing in your own neighborhood school, those

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unintended consequences are something that just keeps reoccurring. And we're seeing this from state to state to state that has these school choice policies in place.

Dr. Chambers: Yeah, I think that's a really good point. And, you know, Dr. Phelps and I are both parents. And, you know, I agree, like I trust parents to make a good decision. I trust myself to make a good decision in theory, but you know, I have a PhD in educational policy, and I'm on our local school board and I consider myself someone who, you know, knows a great deal about education, about schools about what makes for a good educational environment, but getting access to information that will help me make an informed choice is really difficult. And so yes, trust parents, but at the same time, what information do we really have that's giving meaningful information to parents and families about how to make a decision about what's best for their kids. And like you're saying, Dr. Phelps, a lot of times, what kind of choices are really available to families? You know? There is a false idea that there are these choices and I know, you know that even for my own child, like trying to figure out and navigate this landscape can be really challenging.

Dr. Phelps: Yeah, I remember when I first arrived in Michigan. I've only been a resident of Michigan for about a year. But I picked up the Detroit News and there was a story featuring a mother who had to use maybe about three to four hours of her day to commute one child to the next school and to the next school and she had multiple children. She was taking public transportation all because of the education desert that's around where she lives. Some folks would say, "well that's why she should have school choice." Well, I don't think that that's the intention of school choice is to not reinvest in a school that's probably down the street that maybe has suffered some type

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of closure or blightedness. So I don't know if school choice is it. I think the jury's still out. Is it helpful to parents or is it just a hindrance with not preparing the systems that were designed to educate our children.

Dr. Chambers:

You know, I think another piece of this is that schools that are designated as good schools aren't necessarily good schools for students who come from minoritized backgrounds. That was one of the things that laid the foundation for some of our work last year with the GLEC products that we put together and it came up to some degree too in our podcast on the implications of desegregation and school choice that we did a few weeks ago. This idea that you choose a great school for your child, that's great on all of these metrics, but has a noticeable racial test score gap, or as I study in my professional life, like how students of Color and minoritized students can have a cost involved, a racial cost involved in going to these schools and how they're treated and their access to resources and being over identified in special education and not having their needs met in all of these different ways - like not having access to teachers of Color. These are things that don't show up on typical metrics. And yet, particularly for minoritized students, play a really important role in whether that's a good school for them, you know, and so, this just gets really complicated to me and I think that it's something we need to pay more attention to as well. Are we holding these schools that are supposedly great in all of these ways, are they great for all kids? And how can we assist them in doing better for everyone?

Courtney M:

Right. And so you all touch on parent choice a bit in what you just shared, but could you speak more to what role parent choice plays in the conversations that surround school choice? And what are they being presented with? How are parents making these decisions?

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Dr. Phelps:

Yeah, just to piggyback off Dr. Chambers' research with racial opportunity cost. I think that even though that they may not know the term, they're weighing that costs. So they may look at a school down the street and let's just say, I had one particular parent who refused to send her child to the underperforming school. And so she opted to send her child to a private school that was a little further away from where they lived. As a matter of fact, I think it was about 15 more minutes from where they lived. Now there are some costs to that. Now, the racial opportunity cost I think comes into play where, what school she actually selected and the racial dynamics of that particular school. So you have a school that's largely historically marginalized groups, Black and Brown students that she's avoiding, because of its underperformance status, but then she then places her child into a private school that has on their own metrics, pretty decent test scores. Not the same metrics that you would see on... and that's another thing that we haven't talked about is the criteria that private schools have to meet versus public schools.

Dr. Phelps:

Back to the cost that she foresaw was the cost of racial identity. But what does he confront on a day to day basis being as she would say, the only Black boy in his classroom? And so that's something that she had to figure out how to mitigate. One of the things I noticed was the frequency in which she came to school. Based on certain behaviors that they felt her child was doing. And so she would come up there just to, kind of make a stance that, "my son is just like everybody else's child and you know, there's no reason to demonize him for some of the things he's done. So you had that deficit, ideology kind of carry on, regardless, within a Black or Brown school or at a private, mostly white school. But it was applied to him and that was a cost as well. Yeah. So one other thing that I remember this parent talked about

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was how her mother mitigated some of that for her. She didn't say necessarily, she went to a mostly white school, but it seemed that her mother knew that when she was going to school, there was some kind of culturally specific things that she would be lacking. So her mother would put her into she said the Kwanzaa program. She was in everything that was anything Black she said her mother made sure she put her in it. She applied same thing to her own son. So that was kind of the cost of not another cost...the Euro centered curriculum that she said that was prevalent in this private school. And so you see kind of the flip flop of that with families who choose to put their children in underperforming school with a high Black and Brown population. It tends to be focused more on tutoring, what can we get our child into that's going to make up for some of the barriers that they're facing, and each underperforming school - which is a lot with funding, unqualified teachers. So those are particular things that I would consider a racial opportunity cost, it's just not necessarily playing in that racial dynamics; it didn't have a metric that Dr. Chambers detailing to us. That's problematic. So I think that although we have all these school choice options, we're running into the same thing over and over again, Euro centered curriculum, push out factors, just the things that we see occurring in Black and Brown education with historically marginalized family or groups rather.

Dr. Chambers: That's such a good point, and I think that embedded in what you're saying is that no matter what, particularly parents of Color and parents who care about, you know, these kinds of issues, in addition to test scores, and whatever traditional metrics you're looking at, are going to have to pay a cost, right? Like there is no perfect utopian school for most of us to send our kids to, so we're going to be juggling. What constellation of factors do we feel is most important? And then how do we make up for the things that

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aren't right about the environment that our kids are in? And that's, you know, that's that takes some various kinds of capital to help navigate. But I think underlying what you're saying too, Dr. Phelps is that we have never done a good job of making sure that all schools have the resources that they need to be successful in the first place. Right? Like why should we have to choose schools that don't have; that are working with un-credentialed teachers or who have a high rate of mobility among their teachers, not to mention their students or, you know, you don't have working copiers. Next to, and many cases literally, like schools that have beautiful facilities that are able to pay much more for their teachers and are able to provide resources and other kinds of important educational factors to bolster not just their achievement, but the environment that their children and their teachers are living and working and learning in, like, these are important things, but because we historically have never really figured out how to fund schools equitably, we're left with the aftermath of those pieces and having to compensate for things that, you know, really our government should have figured out long ago.

Courtney M: So, then how are parents navigating this system? What is the research showing? We have emerging trends, but what are they exactly?

Dr. Phelps: Well, I think first I wanted to... when you asked that question, I said to myself, which parents? That are navigating this? What we do know is that white and wealthier parents tend to navigate this process in a much different way than Black and Brown historically marginalized families do. So, one thing that I think is important to point out is that what we're noticing is that the voucher system typically is used by white and affluent parents. And that's something that historically had happened right after desegregation. I think Dr. Chambers could probably speak more to that, it's

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kind of her area. But then, in terms of Black and Brown families, I think it's a markedly different thing that's happening there. So one example is when there were large amount of schools closing in Detroit, what I remember from several stories was that they sent them this newsletter to parents and gave them a list of schools that they can call and go to. And then from there, the parents had complained that when they would call the schools they were saying they're not going to accept Detroit Public Schools' students. And the same thing you see around charter schools and special education students. We suspect that there are some things that are happening there, where maybe they're not able to serve special education students and they're turned down so those parents of special education, students are also facing something different as well. So I would suspect, and I'm not necessarily the school choice guru, but I'm noticing that more students of historically marginalized groups are being marginalized in some point of the process of school choice. Whether it be enrollment or when they actually get there and choose this school there's something more happening and I don't know the research around white parents and how they're experiencing school choice like from their perspective, but I wonder what they would say. How would they be experiencing school choice right now?

Courtney M: Dr. Chambers can you add to that? Especially with this element of what's happening post desegregation?

Dr. Chambers: Yeah, I mean, I think, for me, everything that happens in schools today are a consequence of things that we have done in the past or not done in the past. And so, you know, for me, I very much see the context of choice and particularly the implications for families of Color as a legacy of how we approach desegregation. Like not doing a good job of creating a clear policy

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for how things would unfold like, you know, many Black teachers lost their jobs in the aftermath of desegregation. Many Black schools were closed in the aftermath of desegregation or continued operating but never and still have not to this day, gotten the resources that were needed to bring those under resourced schools up to par. So we have been limping along, what the system that is really broken for all of these 50, 60, 65 years post Brown. You know and we're seeing the consequences of that in schools today for how our kids are experiencing their educational environment. So when I hear questions like, is school choice, good or bad? Are charter schools good or bad? Was desegregation good or bad? These are false questions, right? Like it is much more complicated than just to say yes or no to these when we're dealing with a system that has never really come around from these historic challenges. You know, we had the opportunity to do something really meaningful, and we dropped the ball. And now we're dealing with the aftermath of all of that lack of action. That's my spin that I put on the conversation we're having today.

Courtney M:

So as we close, I'd like to know what you all want parents to know about school choice and their role in school choice? If you had to summarize it, because you're both parents as well. What do you want parents to know?

Dr. Chambers:

Yeah it's a good question. You know, Dr. Phelps and I are both looking at each other. I want parents to have choice. I do trust parents like that part is right. What we need to do is live up... well my hope would be is that we live up to the expectations that parents that have all parents have for their kids to want to have the best educational environment possible for them and for those decisions to be made based on a host of factors that aren't just about test scores, right? Like, I want to know, lots of things about the schools that my kids can go to. But I also want to make sure that all schools have what

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they need in order to be successful, you know, and we are not doing well. And it feels like a shell game, right? Like, oh, we're gonna have choice. But really, it's just, you know, like I'm choosing, like Dr. Phelps said earlier, like my choices, I'm choosing the best of a host of bad options as what a lot of families of Color are, are facing, and that that is where I feel a deep sense of regret, and remorse and let down. These parents. And I'm not going to go on my whole historical diatribe about how if any group in our nation has ever exemplified a love and passion for education, it would be the Black community, historically overcoming such tremendous odds, because of their belief in education. And so that legacy that they have given us to this day does not meet the expectations of what we are providing for them in terms of choice. And that to me is my biggest disappointment.

Dr. Phelps:

So the question was, what do we think parents need to know about to school choice?

That's such a complex question. Because when I got the opportunity to get to know, the 16 sets of families from my study, they had their reasons for choosing what they chose, and it was really grounded in their child. Sometimes they would choose different options for different children in their household. Sometimes they felt like one child needed to be at a private school versus another child needing to be at public school. And I, I do trust parents. But I also think that there needs to be some kind of conversation about the unintended consequences of it all here. If most of our nation's children are in public schools, and we continue to take our capital and place it into someplace different whether it be a different school district or private school, then something's going to happen to that local public school that we choose not to go to. And so I think that that conversation I, I wish there was some kind of information session like when I choose this particular school,

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what could inevitably happen? What's going to happen at the end of the day? When my money goes here, then what does that translate into these children that my children are growing up around? So I think I would want parents to at least look into the consequences of choosing something other than your neighborhood school. Maybe they don't all have to value the neighborhood school, but I do think that we haven't had that conversation. I don't think it's been important because we have decided that families know best.

Dr. Phelps:

But I think families need to know all the information before they make that choice. And then I think the other thing I would, you know, want parents to possibly think about is how can they make a difference for the next children that will come through there that look like their children? So if I do decide to send my child to a private school, which is fine. There are reasons why I would choose a private school for my own children, depending on what you know, what they're focusing on and whatnot, but then, am I making it better for you know, the next group of Black or Brown children that want to choose, whose parents were chosen to school for them too. And I know that's a lot to throw on historically marginalized parents. I don't think it's just a job. It's definitely not. It's a system level issue that I do think that they have the power to influence. And I don't think school leaders tap into that, that knowledge and that authentic voice. I think it's, it's crazy that parents decide they're going to choose a particular school, knowing that their child will be inundated with a Eurocentric curriculum, possibly face individual racism and other forms of oppression. And I think it's absurd that they're choosing that. I've chosen it myself for my own children. So there has to be enough parents or young people that need to know. It's the school leaders and educators that also need to know before they decide to come here. I think that they have gone through this process. How many black and brown

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teachers are there? What does the school leadership look like? What's the policy look like that I have to navigate in some way? How long is it going to take me to get there? What's the resources there are? Are they doing college prep? Because on the back end of that I think parents are aware of the things that they can and cannot do, and then using their communities and families to navigate all of that. That has a lot of stress on a parent. When they should have, we should have those expectations on the school in the first place. So I think the conversation does have to stay with parents. What are the unintended consequences of your choice? What are things you can do to make those school districts better? But I definitely think we have to keep the conversation in the schools as well and talk about well because they do have this choice, what are you offering that speaks to the things that we are, that Dr. Chambers has been, you know, talking about going back to that we never acted upon? Extra time to act on it as a school leader. Take those parents in the building who we know probably have some sense of understanding of what you don't have in the school, and what you do have, and then use their voice to kind of improve the system and disrupt those systems that continuously oppress them and have to choose elsewhere to go. I think one important thing to just note was that, although it's a small study 16 sets of parents 44 children altogether, there was only one set that excuse me, one set that stayed in their district, the entire K through 12 experience. Everyone else at least went to two different schools at certain points, and it wasn't because they felt like their children weren't being treated well, it was because of the adversity their children were experiencing. And I think that speaks volumes to the way we've marketed school choice. So, you know, in that respect, I think we've got to do a better job. If choice, if this is a promise, then, you know, I want to know, you know, where do we go from here if this is the things that they

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face on a day to day basis on a year to year basis when they have to choose the school of choice that they want to send their children to.

Dr. Chambers: I think this whole conversation to me just illuminates how much work we still need to do, right? Like we have these conversations, like we've been talking about all through this conversation, actually, from previous conversations about what are the things that we haven't been thinking about? What are these, you know, we've been using the term unintended consequences, right? But it just lets us know that there are a lot of things that we still need to figure out about all of these issues. And so parents are confused about navigating this kind of educational choice milieu. It's for good reason because, you know, we are several conversations and webinars in and you know, supposed to experts on these on these things and still trying to help people sort through all of these different implications, you know, of a system that is, you know, struggling, I would say, to keep up with all of the demands. And so, you know, we're going to continue to have these conversations, we're going to continue to sort it out. But this whole conversation just highlights another pathway of this parent choice landscape that is part of this legacy of desegregation that we've been focusing on.

Courtney M: Absolutely, well, thank you both for this conversation. It was very informative, very enriching, and I learned a lot, and I hope our listeners have too. Thank you.

Dr. Chambers: Thanks, Courtney. Thanks, Dr. Phelps. Thanks, everybody. Thank you.



Implications of De/segregation and School Choice



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