

Disrupting the Common School: Understanding Public Opposition to School Choice in the United States

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Abstract

This paper examines three decades of charter schools and school choice reform in the United States through the lens of resistance to change, asking why policies designed to expand educational opportunities for students and families have generated sustained and often intense public opposition. While school choice aligns with broader cultural preferences for consumer autonomy, charter schools have become a flashpoint in local, state, and national political debates. Drawing on policy history, public opinion trends, and interdisciplinary research on organizational change, this analysis explores the social, psychological, and institutional factors that contribute to resistance. These include perceived threats to community identity, distrust of market-based reforms in public institutions, concerns about equity and resource distribution, and the destabilizing effects of policy change on long-standing schooling systems. The article situates school choice and charter school debates within a broader theory of change aversion, arguing that opposition is not merely ideological but rooted in deeply held beliefs about the purpose of public education and the risks of systemic disruption. By reframing charter school resistance as a predictable response to complex change rather than simple policy disagreement, this work offers a more nuanced understanding of why school choice remains one of the most contested issues in American education.

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