DETERMINANTS OF CHARTER SCHOOL POLICY
ADOPTION IN U.S. STATES: A CASE STUDY OF
COLORADO SCHOOL DISTRICTS

JEONGHO (JOHN) LEE
University of Colorado Denver, USA
&
SOON-YANG KIM
Yeungnam University, South Korea

The purpose of this article is to inquire into the determinants of charter school policy adoption at the local level of the U.S. state, through a case study of Colorado school districts. This article established hypotheses by introducing seven explanatory variables influencing a dependent variable: charter school policy adoption of Colorado school districts. The seven explanatory variables are diffusion effect, race, poverty, residents’ education level, student population size, students’ educational performance, and alternative innovation. The target of analysis is 178 Colorado school districts and a logistic regression model is employed to test the hypotheses. The results of analysis showed that, of the seven explanatory variables, only the following three variables were statistically significant: residents’ education level, student population size, and alternative means of innovation. The influence of the variable “alternative innovation” was particularly strong. This article concludes with debate as to why some variables were significant, while others were not.

Key Words: policy adoption, charter schools, Colorado school districts

INTRODUCTION

Promoting public educational performance has always been a critical agenda in U.S. education policy, and for that purpose, a new theoretical approach was introduced by Chubb and Moe (1990) two decades ago. They pointed out that non-competition and direct control in the conventional public school system (hereinafter CPSS) could not satisfy the customers of education in terms of students’ educational performance. Following their lead, many school choice theorists have participated in advocating the charter school system (hereinafter CSS) as a way to reform the CPSS and improve students’ achievements in the public education sector.

A key rationale for the school choice movement is the poor performance of the CPSS. That is, the motivation behind the charter school system lies in the fact that the CPSS is less faithful to the accomplishment of its intended educational goal. Accordingly, school choice advocates argue that the command-and-control system of the CPSS fails to achieve its educational goal, and suggest the necessity of renovating the CPSS in order to attain its intended goal (Buckley and Schneider 2007; Chubb and Moe 1990; Schneider et al. 2000). In particular, for those pursuing market-oriented reform of public education, the CSS is a very popular vehicle for improving the performance of public education. To charter school advocates, market-oriented reforms can foster a strong public education system through the
encouragement of a competitive environment in public schools, in contrast to the traditional bureaucracy-oriented characteristics of the CPSS (Schneider et al. 2000). They believe that competition plays a positive role in improving the performance of public schools, because it may force the schools to satisfy school customers – students and their parents – so as to prevent students from transferring to other schools (Stoddard and Corcoran 2007). In the effort to improve the performance of the CPSS, along with magnet schools, the CSS has become a distinctive tool of educational innovation in America, and has rapidly spread nationwide since Minnesota first adopted it in 1991 (Buckley and Schneider 2007; Mintrom 2000; Vergari 2002).

However, notwithstanding the recognized advantages of the CSS, its adoption has not entirely prevailed in all U.S. states. Currently, 40 states and Washington, D.C., have legislated charter schools (Renzulli and Roscigno 2007), while others do not pay sincere attention to the CSS. In the meantime, this binary phenomenon of a selective adoption of the CSS in American states has motivated researchers to investigate the determinants of charter school policy adoption, by making use of diverse sets of research techniques, including logit, probit, and event history analysis.

On the other hand, despite numerous precedent studies, most research has focused only on comparing charter school policy adoption among different states (Mintrom 1997, 2000; Mintrom and Vergari 1998; Renzulli 2002; Renzulli and Roscigno 2005; Stoddard and Corcoran 2007; Wong and Langevin 2005, 2007; Wong and Shen 2002). It is hard to find relevant studies that analyze charter school policy adoption at the local level within a particular state. Marando and Reeves (1991) argue that scholars should use proper theoretical approaches for each case when studying similar social phenomena at both the county and city level, because counties and cities have different characteristics and environments. Their view suggests that there might be different explanatory factors at the state level and the local level when examining the adoption of charter school policy. Thus, it is meaningful for us to study school districts in Colorado to understand the dynamics for the adoption of charter school policy. Moreover, only 45 of 178 school districts adopted charter school policy, even though Colorado has the eighth strongest charter school law. We can expect that this study will provide the state of Colorado with good information that will enable more school districts to adopt charter school policy.

This article first describes the general features of charter school policy adoption across the nation and looks at the contemporary situation of charter schools in Colorado. The next part conducts a literature review for the development of the variables to explain charter school policy adoption. The third part establishes hypotheses, designs a research framework to test those hypotheses, and briefly mentions the methods of data analysis. The final part of this article analyzes research findings and discusses the acceptability of the hypotheses.

THE CONTEXT OF CHARTER SCHOOL POLICY ADOPTION IN THE U.S. AND COLORADO

Several studies (Buckley and Schneider 2007; Chubb and Moe 1990; Mintrom 2000; Schneider et al. 2000; Vergari 2002) prove that the CPSS, based on command and control, is ineffective in promoting students’ educational achievement, as its top-down structure is irresponsible to demands for innovation and change. To cope with this inefficient structure of the CPSS, school choice advocates allege that the CPSS should be forced to become more competitive by introducing market-driven innovative school systems, such as charter schools, magnet schools, open enrollment, and vouchers (Chubb and Moe 1990; Schneider et al. 2000). Among these tools of school innovation, this article is interested in the adoption of charter school policy in Colorado school districts.

Since Dr. Budde and Mr. Shanker first introduced the CSS in the late 1980s and Minnesota heralded its adoption in 1991, 40 American states and Washington, D.C., have legislated charter schools (Vergari 1999, 2007). Charter school laws place the CSS in the center of public education reform to enhance the performance of public schools without weakening their roles in the public education system. Among many advantages of the CSS, the following two are the most distinctive: providing students and their parents with better chances to improve educational performance and offering public schools greater opportunities for school innovation (Schneider et al. 2000; Vergari 2002). Charter school advocates argue that the CSS is a primary initiative to