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Public schools of choice, representing deliberately diversified educational programs and environments, can contribute substantially to academic excellence and indeed are already doing so. They contribute to excellence in three major ways. First, as every teacher knows, you cannot productively treat all youngsters the same way. In fact, an increase in uniformity with respect to content and expectations may prove a lot more inimical than helpful to educational quality. Alternative schools recognize this by deliberately designing educational settings, programs, and activities responsive to what different kinds of youngsters need. In this way, they are matching schools to students -- and eliciting higher interest, performance, achievement, and maturation levels from all types of youngsters, the ablest to the most marginal.

Secondly, schools of choice contribute to educational quality by serving as a much needed mechanism for teacher rejuvenation. The productivity, morale, and satisfaction levels of teachers in alternative schools are remarkably high in relation to other schools. The reason is that the conditions typical of alternative schools enable them to function at a more professional level than is possible in the usual comprehensive high school. Diversification has proved an effective way to change the size and organizational structure of the public school -- which so many current studies are viewing absolutely essential to educational improvement.

The third way in which schools of choice contribute to excellence is by enabling families to choose the sort of education they want for their children. Such a choice is important to the nation's political excellence

-- to rendering this most critical of public institutions responsive and responsible to its constituents. It is also vital to restoring confidence and trust in the public institution closest to a number of citizens. This year's just-released Gallup Poll on education reveals that public confidence has fallen to new depths, with less than a third of our citizenry -- only 31% -- willing to give the schools a grade of A or B. In striking contrast, virtually every study shows parent satisfaction rates extremely high in schools of choice. They like and think well of what their children are getting. This sort of support in turn conduces to better performance on the part of their children.

Thus, schools of choice make three distinct and crucial contributions to educational quality. I believe that the best way to pursue excellence is to create alternatives and make all of the schools within every district, schools of choice.

There are several vital contributions the federal government can extend to making this happen. In the first place it can fund useful research -- useful, that is, to practitioners in learning what works and what is unlikely to. If the brevity of my statement has suggested that alternative schools guarantee success, that would be a disservice to all of us. The sad truth is that no educational arrangement can come with such warranties. What is urgently needed is research identifying the correlates of success in schools of choice. And it is no accident that almost the only reliable information we have on such matters comes from federally-funded studies.

A second vital contribution the federal government can make to quality education is to sponsor initiatives that will interest school administrators in decentralizing authority and responsibility within their districts. Teachers must be the central element in substantial, durable edu-

cational reform. We must generate the conditions inviting them to function as effective professionals.

Some criteria seem paramount for steps I hope the federal government will take. First, government at the national level should focus on parameters, not prescriptions. Federal attention directed at education can prove most helpful, and it is certainly appropriate that government at this level espouse an education policy. The commitment to academic excellence seems just such a policy and a welcome and appropriate one. But federal measures implementing that commitment must recognize the polio-centric nature of the governance of American public schools: states, local communities, and parents must also be able to contribute to the final policies governing their children's education. This is what recommends the framing of federal measures in terms of parameters instead of prescriptions. Given the current press toward uniformity as a solution to our educational problems -- and a growing stack of normative studies, each with its own list of precisely what's good for us all -- it may take real statesmanship to resist prescribing in great detail. I do hope this can be avoided. Otherwise, it will simply set the stage for failure -- for requirements that are contextually irrelevant or worse for many schools, and for a replay of the reform attempts of the 60s, with as little lasting impact as they delivered.

Finally, I hope that federal measures to enhance educational quality will themselves encourage the local generating of alternative and optional solutions to educational challenges. If we are to avoid locking people in to obsolete solutions, we must encourage and support them in continuing reflective examination of what they do. This means that the teachers most immediately responsible for educational environments and practices must be

provided with encouragement in the continual assessment of these. There simply are no one-shot panaceas like curriculum decisions that will deliver educational improvement. And there can be no productive end-running of teachers if we seriously seek excellence in our schools.