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Alternative Route(s) to Excellence

The Excellence Movement has now reached the age of four, if one dates it in customary fashion from the appearance of *A Nation at Risk*. Given the nation's attention span for social issues and the recent history of education reform movements, four is not young. Some fear the movement is beginning to wane; others exult at any signs of weakening or backtracking. Meanwhile, throughout all the debates, the idea of education alternatives—of diversifying public schools and inviting people to choose among them—has been a part of the Excellence Movement. It has stood in the anomalous position of antithesis to its thesis and as prospective antidote or corrective to the Excellence measures.

To date, the notion of alternative schools has been linked to the Excellence Movement more by happenstance than by logic. It is plausible to assert, as some have done, that a serious commitment to excellence renders alternatives essential—with human diversity necessitating different routes if all youngsters are to pursue excellence or any other common goal. By and large, however, the particular sponsorship of alternative schools has probably played a far more substantial role in the recent juxtaposition of excellence with choice among schools than has this or any other argument.

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The primary source of the connection between excellence and choice has been the White House. A staunch advocate of family choice in education, President Reagan has occasionally mentioned choice among public schools, but he makes no secret of the fact that his real interest lies in enhancing opportunities to choose private schools and in encouraging competition among schools. William Bennett, however, his current Secretary of Education, has often spoken of choice in the public sector as well. The driving force behind the Bennett–Reagan position is the idea that just as freedom of consumer choice and free market competition in the commercial sector spawns superior consumer goods, so choice plus competition assures excellence in the educational sector. Together Reagan and Bennett have managed to keep the concept of choice before the public.

The two have done little to show how the excellence plank in their education platform relates to the choice plank, beyond making the assertion that choice leads to enhanced school quality. Nevertheless, since it is administrative policy to promulgate both, choice is now appended to the Excellence Movement. Interestingly, Terrel Bell, Reagan's former Education Secretary—who is credited with assembling the Excellence Movement, but who showed little interest in choice—has predicted that choice will figure very prominently in the "second wave" of reform he finds now under way.

In one sense, it is ironic that a number of alternatives, or schools of choice, have stood for things the Excellence Movement has strongly opposed. In fact, so sharp are some of the contrasts that it is possible to say the alternative-schools movement of the '60s generated the Excellence Movement of the '80s as its antithesis! The alternatives of the '60s arose in reaction to an earlier excellence movement, as an attempt to humanize the schools, to render them more relaxed and informal, to rid them of bureaucratic priorities and procedures, and to substitute freedom for coercion. There are some who say that it was the excesses and absurdities of the reform in the '60s which summoned the dialectical opposition in the '80s. This interpretation, of course, would make alternatives contradictory to the Excellence Movement, certainly not part of it.

Possibly for that very reason, though doubtless due to others as well, some perceive the idea of education alternatives as the ideal antidote for the weaknesses of the Excellence Movement and as the best way to get us past the problems we have generated in the name of excellence.

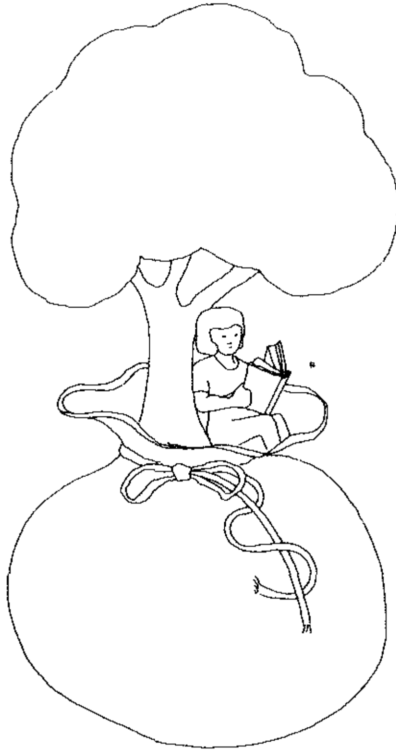
Concerns about the Excellence Movement. Critics have focused extensively on all the homogenization and uniformity which seemed implicit from the first of the reports. Would it really improve things, some asked, to force all schools to teach exactly the same content? Some critics worried about the added requirements the new uniformity sought to impose, fearing their impact upon the growing numbers of disadvantaged students, while still others despaired over the prospects of the new order that would be imposed on all of today's youngsters.

A related early concern was the "get-tough" stance assumed by the Excellence reports, which equated education success with will and work, and failure with absence of initiative and unwillingness to work. The challenge to achieve excellence, then, was one of building moral fiber—as opposed, for instance, to creating new education procedures adequate to handling today's youngsters.

Still others worried about the effects of all the testing. Surely these tests would constrain teachers and block the adaptation of material to particular groups and individuals. Testing would probably also limit the time left to explore matters of local concern or of particular interest to youngsters. Testing would also be likely to skew classroom emphasis toward the memorization of data.

Many focused their concern on the impact of the Excellence Movement and the reforms that followed on the proliferating number of disadvantaged students. With minority majorities now prevalent in the schools of most cities (and soon in some states as well), this is an urgent concern. The nation's classrooms are increasingly populated by those students with whom formal schooling has most consistently failed. What will happen, some asked, as a result of making schools even more demanding and thus less responsive to the interests and immediate needs of such populations?

There has also been considerable objection to the blatant way in which many of the early Excellence proposals seemed to take the nation's youth first and foremost as prospective economic assets. It has been charged that the reformers shamelessly ignored the notion—and denied the possibility—of education as self-fulfillment or as maximization or as a liberating endeavor or, indeed, as having any goal or meaning beyond preparation for the individual's prospective contribution to the economy.



Finally, from the start, with the appearance of *A Nation at Risk*, some critics have faulted the Excellence Movement's largely content-oriented prescriptions as inadequate for its own diagnoses. They have claimed that if things are truly as bad as charged, the recommendations cannot possibly suffice to correct them. As *Harper's* senior editor Mark Danner commented in a symposium on "How Not to Fix the Schools," the proposals amount only to more of the same. They "take the schools as they exist for granted, arguing that we only need add more"—more curricular requirements, more tests, more hours. "A gross disparity seems to exist," he pointed out, "between the urgency of the crisis situation described . . . and the comparative . . . superficiality of the proposed remedies."

The recent call for changes in school structure is now addressing such concerns (as last year's Governors' *1991 Report* and the Carnegie Forum report on *Teachers for the 21st Century* make plain). The spotlight seems to be shifting from classrooms and the content teachers offer to the front offices and the way administrators organize and deploy resources to carry out their mission. School administrators will absorb the most immediate impact of this concern with school structure, and the arrangements and processes for which they are directly responsible will now be the objects of scrutiny. It is too early to predict outcomes, but certainly this turn in the course of the Excellence Movement will yield fundamental questions about the governance of schools, the number and function of administrators and other specialists, and the way the school day is designed.

Alternatives as Antidote. To what extent might the provision of alternatives within the public sector respond to the problems critics have associated with the Excellence Movement?

Certainly the proposal that we differentiate public schools offers a direct reply to the first fear identified above, about the uniformity we are generating. Advocates of choice urge such differentiation on two fundamental grounds: first, that youngsters urgently need it; and second, that families want and are entitled to it. The first of these cases is strongly supported by the extensive evidence of school failure and the substantial dropout rates. The fact that a number of youngsters appear to undergo remarkable transformations in a new and different school environment lends substantial support to the idea of differentiation—as does the epidemic of boredom which pervades classrooms and the frequency of the "treaties" or "bargains" struck in classrooms in the interest of maintaining order and avoiding insurrection. There is substantial evidence that youngsters do find schools of their own choosing far more interesting places to be.

Advocates make an equally persuasive case for school differentiation on the grounds that families want and are entitled to it. According to the latest Gallup Poll, 68 percent of the parents of public school children express a desire to be able to select their child's school. The total, significantly, included large numbers of satisfied as well as disgruntled parents, suggesting a general commitment to a control they wanted to be able to exercise as necessary. The case that they should be in a position to exercise such control has been built by analysts who contend that the choice arrangements may provide the best mechanism for retaining democratic control of schools under changed circumstances.

It appears then that, in principle, alternative schools

might well prove an antidote to the uniformity the Excellence Movement would bring. Apparently, some states are already looking to alternative schools as the key to making an end run around the stultifying mandates. Several states with the tightest requirements have already taken the position that departures will be approved for schools that have plausible alternative plans for meeting state goals. The viability of such a solution rests in considerable part on the nature of state achievement tests. If the tests are written at the level of concepts and capacities, then they should permit differentiated content and curricular packaging. If, on the other hand, they remain largely oriented toward facts, then permissions to deviate from the curricular mandates may prove little more than approvals of the right to fail.

Alternative schools might also prove responsive to the fears about testing. The tests grow out of a preoccupation with accountability and the determination to monitor school success in detail. But the choice provision opens other accountability options. Since home–school interaction is more extensive and more positive in schools of choice, and parental involvement may be greater, other sorts of possibilities become available for monitoring school progress. It is possible, for example, even to involve parents directly in the evaluation process—thus lowering the need for and dependence on standardized tests as the major instrument of school accountability.

There seems to be little doubt that alternative schools would respond to the fears of negative impacts on students, since schools of choice tend to emphasize the importance of motivation and a supportive environment over a climate of demands and coercion—i.e., in preference to the "get-tough" posture of the Excellence Movement. The principle of choice is understandably associated with a preference for the carrot over the stick in educational practice. This emphasis on positive rather than negative motivation could be important in dealing with all students. But it is particularly so with disadvantaged students, since the evidence strongly suggests that a highly supportive school climate is the most essential single ingredient of educational success for such students.

How will the school environment respond to demands for change under conditions where parents are allowed to choose alternative schools for their children? The suggestion that people be allowed to choose their schools does not ordinarily come with supplementary proposals about how schools should be organized and operated. But the freedom-of-choice arrangement seems to set some highly pertinent tendencies in motion. In the first place, the very existence of choice contributes to school differentiation. And since the reasonableness of centralized control of schools is associated with their uniformity, then the differentiation erodes the case for centralization and hence for the bureaucracy which that entails. Centrifugal forces are set in motion. Several tendencies have been identified in connection with the power that differentiation shifts to the individual school level. In a number of alternative schools, power is diffused among the staff, rather than remaining concentrated in the principal's office. And the increased authority is often used to introduce much greater flexibility, permitting the school to adapt to particular conditions and cases more readily.

But What about Achievement? Despite these advantages with respect to structural change and flexibility and potential for dealing well with students, it can still be asked whether the alternative-school arrangement can respond to the need for improved educational quality—i.e., to the goals which set the Excellence Movement in motion in the first place. The enhanced achievement of many students after entering schools of choice suggests that it can. Moreover, the performance records of alternative schools show positive evidence in this regard. Consider, for instance, these accomplishments of a smattering of alternative-school programs.

There is a small public school of choice in affluent, suburban Great Neck, New York, with a program sufficiently unorthodox to suggest the very antithesis of the Excellence Movement emphasis on standardization and tough-mindedness. But despite its small size, there is considerable choice among courses, and staff change the curriculum constantly. Created in 1970, the Village School retains many of the qualities of a 1960s-style alternative, with strong student prerogatives and control over policymaking. In 1985, this small alternative school had a graduating class of only seventeen, just 2 percent of its district's graduates. But it could claim almost 20 percent of the district's twelve National Merit finalists.

About seventy-five miles away, in Northern Westchester, there is another program designed expressly for youngsters who have experienced difficulty in the comprehensive high school. Many of its students arrive with abysmal academic histories. Yet most graduate, and with high marks on state competency tests (with 80 percent averaging reading scores in the nineties). Within the school, students pursue a themed curriculum which articulates their learning in English, social studies, and science. The themes change each year, with recent ones including War and Violence, Community, and Stress. The school focuses on building student self-esteem, which shows up in the acronym which serves as its name—ACES.

There is a school of choice in State College, Pennsylvania, whose students recently averaged above the ninetieth percentile on thirteen of Pennsylvania's fourteen indicators of educational quality. The useful thing about outcomes reports from Pennsylvania is that they are accompanied by interpretive recommendations, in the form of reasonable expectations for a given group of youngsters. In the particular alternative high school referred to here, achievement outstripped expectations on more than half of the fourteen indicators. State College's Alternative Program is committed to personalized education and the development of responsibility, both in its inter-age classes and in the community service activities students perform.

In Jackson, Mississippi, there is an alternative elementary school that is meeting with comparable success. This informal, nontraditional school emphasizes individuality, self-discipline, and the excitement of learning. It offers an integrated curriculum and claims the unusual feature of dismissing students for half a day

each week to permit a continuing staff-development program for its teachers. With a student body that is representative of the city's population as to race, socioeconomic status, and ability levels, this school produces the highest standardized score averages of any of Jackson's thirty-nine public elementary schools.

Can the conditions of such successes be recreated in other schools? Are there in fact ways to extend them throughout school *systems*? Experience with magnet schools—the sort of alternative most frequently found in cities—suggests that combining school differentiation with choice can bring distinct benefits on a larger scale. The stunning examples such as those cited may sometimes prove more elusive in large options systems, but

substantial reform and quality improvement have been linked to magnet schools. The most dramatic example of a successful choice system, as distinct from a single alternative school, is probably Manhattan's Community School District 4.

District 4 consists of one of New York's poorest inner-city ghetto areas, Spanish Harlem. The district is approximately two-thirds Hispanic and one-third Black, and more than 80 percent of its students qualify for free or reduced-cost lunches. In the early '70s, only 15 percent of its students were reading on grade level, and on reading achievement the district ranked thirty-second among New York's thirty-two districts. Schools of choice were introduced in 1973, and today there are twenty-two different education programs at the elementary and junior-high levels for families to choose among. Two-thirds of the district's youngsters are enrolled in the "alternative concept" schools and approximately two thousand come from outside the district to attend them. Today, more than half the youngsters in these schools are reading on grade level, and the district's rank has risen from thirty-second to eighteenth among New York's districts.

Perhaps these examples will suffice to suggest some of the extraordinary academic accomplishments associated with alternatives or schools of choice. Such performance is not tied to any particular grade levels. Nor is it tied to any particular kinds of students. Alternative schools serve the ablest students, the weakest students, and the often-overlooked large numbers in between these two groups. Nor does the success seem to be associated with any single education orientation—traditional, "open," etc. One thing that seems common to most, however, is that they are recognizably concerned with a much broader spectrum of human development than most public schools.

Alternative schools tend to take on a fair share of responsibility for the broad intellectual and character development of their students. This means that staff will not settle for test achievement in lieu of personal growth, and youngsters are helped to develop new capacities as well as to master content. It also means that there is likely to be a fairly strong concern with the sort of person each youngster is becoming and with the social responsibilities of individuals to one another. (Studies typically show a stronger civic orientation on the part of students in such schools.) The developmental emphasis necessitates a degree of personalization in alternative schools that is atypical in other public schools, particularly at the secondary level. This in turn enables students to feel that schools are responsive to their concerns. Thus, alternative schools are likely to be perceived by those associated with them as needs-meeting, supportive, "user-friendly" institutions.

A New Synthesis? Might the alternative-schools arrangement then prove to be a way to "have it all," as John Goodlad expresses the public's hopes for the schools? Certainly as the examples cited show, they offer possibilities. It would be far preferable to seek such a fusion of concerns and advantages than simply to switch from one set of reform priorities to the other.

Education is marked by fads in apparent cycles of style: The replacement of one with another seems to proceed as a series of repudiations and reversals. Some have called them pendular swings, from one extreme to another. A concern with the quality of education and academic rigor repudiates and reverses a prior concern with students as human beings who have their own needs and agendas and entitlements. But so narrow and extreme must each reform's concern often appear under the circumstances—an almost fanatic display of single-mindedness—that none of the successive movements to date have found it possible to respond to the *multiple* requisites of good education.

Thus each reform cycle has set the stage for its own demise and replacement. Such a pattern—which fits the reform efforts of the last forty years—seems to be a foolish and fruitless way to proceed. Given the precariousness of public confidence in the schools and the tenuous commitment of an aging population to support them, it may even be a *dangerous* way to proceed.

Are there alternatives to such a progression in education reform—or have the excesses and singlemindedness of the Excellence Movement too well set the stage for its successor movement? If not, then the choice-of-alternatives idea might prove a compatible supplement. Have we reached the stage in education reform where syntheses might at least occasionally replace the theses and the antitheses? Given the record on the durability of fashion in education, it should not be long now before we see the answers. ■

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