

Excellence and Choice: Friends or Foes?

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This paper explores the contrasts dividing the "excellence" and "choice" movements to date. The orientations of both are examined, along with key features and impacts of each. Particular attention is given the predicament and the challenge of "at risk" youngsters. Yet there are developments suggesting a growing mutuality between the two movements. The elaboration of a conception of Excellence that makes educational sense reveals the centrality of motivation to educational accomplishment. This in turn exposes the choice principle as an important aid to the pursuit of excellence.

Titles like this one are often rhetorical devices, and we all know from the start that everything will end well, and the friendship/foe combination will blossom into friendship. It may not be the case with "excellence" and "choice," however—these two sets of reform proposals bidding to redo public education. For the closer one looks, the greater the differences that seem to divide the two. Table 1 summarizes the rather fundamental contrasts between the excellence movement and the schools of choice movement as currently pursued.

CHOICE VERSUS EXCELLENCE

The choice and excellence proposals seem quite antithetical in a number of respects—even though there are people prominently associated with both movements (e.g., the Assistant Secretary of Education, Chester Finn). Is there any hope of more widespread combining of the two reform proposals? Two enthusiasms that have been especially prominent in the excellence movement pose special difficulty for many choice advocates. The first is what one analyst has called "our lust to legislate quality" (Mann, 1985, p. 16). The second is the obsession with accountability that has sired the testing movement. The search for quality has been translated into increased graduation requirements in almost every state. Nationwide, we have increased the total number of credits necessary for graduation, and

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TABLE 1. A Study in Contrasts

	<i>Excellence Movement</i>	<i>Schools of Choice</i>
Goal:	Improve academic performance	Optimize human achievement
Approach:	<u>Uniformity</u>	<u>Diversity</u>
Strategy:	<u>Top-down</u> improvement	<u>School-by-school</u> improvement
Orientation:	<u>Get tough</u>	<u>User friendly</u>
Working assumptions:	The model for the college-bound is the <u>model for all</u>	There is no " <u>one best system</u> " for educating all
	More content means better education	Schools have developmental as well as achievement functions
	Standards require sameness in treatment and requirement minima	Standards require <u>differentiated treatments and requirements</u>
Target:	<u>Curriculum</u>	School <u>organization, climate, and environment</u>
Expectations:	<u>Uniform</u>	<u>Individualized</u>
	Attaining <u>minimal</u> performance standards	<u>Maximizing individual growth and potential</u>
Measures:	More <u>required</u> courses	<u>Added ways</u> to meet requirements
	<u>Detailed control of teacher behavior</u>	<u>Maximized teacher discretionary range</u>
	<u>Narrowed choice range for students</u>	<u>Greater choice and responsibility for students</u>
Success Indicators:	<u>Test scores</u>	<u>The person evolving</u>

within that total we have increased the proportion which must be in traditional academic subjects and reduced the number of electives. In New York, the new excellence program leaves only ten unmandated minutes in the entire school day of seventh and eighth graders! That's ten minutes for lunch, going to the bathroom, socializing, meeting federal mandates—and spending classroom time on matters that local boards or even teachers might think important.

The excellence advocates in my state have done something else, too. They have generated pressures on teachers and principals that ultimately victimize youngsters. When I recently asked a friend how he was doing, he

replied, "suffering from excellence." Pat is a high school science teacher in one of New York City's less desirable schools, and the City has created a "Principal's Report Card" which rates each principal on the number of students passing Regents tests. Principals are thus pressured to program students into the Regents courses which prepare them for the tests—whether or not it makes educational sense for the youngsters. Regents biology, which my friend teaches, is designed for youngsters at a tenth-grade reading level. Last year, as a result of the new pressures, the reading levels of *most* of Pat's students fell below the sixth grade. The result was that after much soul searching and really tortuous wrestling with himself, Pat passed 18% of the students in his classes. (And I want to emphasize that this is a compassionate professional who had soul-wrenching trouble in doing so.) But the story doesn't end there, and if anything it gets even worse.

Pat was hauled on the carpet by his colleagues for failing 82%, when by unwritten agreement the Biology Department fails no more than 50%. It was, he says, the toughest, most unhappy of his 20 years in teaching, and I'm not sure how long he will stay. Meanwhile, on the other hand, the principal wasn't entirely unhappy since putting everybody into Regents science did yield an increase of two in the school's overall passing total in Regents biology. And the fellow was rewarded for his performance with a terrific job offer. He has departed, with a \$20,000 raise, to take excellence to another city.

I am not convinced that such horror stories are spurious, and I fear that a lot of them are being played out in the name of excellence. My concern is not due to an indifference toward excellence. I suppose I am appalled more often than *most* people I know at what I see in classrooms. But all too often the excellence programs appear more likely to do harm than good. In the final analysis, I am convinced, the real challenge of excellence is quite different from the way in which much of the excellence movement has viewed it. In my judgment, essentially what must be done is to find ways to boost teacher efficacy.

WILL THE EXCELLENCE MOVEMENT DELIVER BETTER EDUCATION?

By virtue of a variety of factors far beyond our control, *most* kids today are a lot more education-resistant than youngsters used to be. This is true not just of the disadvantaged students, but of most youngsters—who have grown up with the instant gratification expectations of TV, the passing of the work ethic, the one-parent homes and the two-employed-parent homes, etc. For such reasons and many more, the challenge confronting schools is increasingly a matter of boosting the teacher's power to succeed with young people. And frankly, a great deal of the excellence movement activity appears either tangential or flatly inimical to that goal.

The extent and specificity of the mandates is one reason; the accountability demands are another. The mandates reflect a "tidiness mania" (Cross, 1984, p. 170) bent on standardizing and homogenizing, buttressed by a

teacher-proofing strategy that exposes noncompliers. In some states, the approach is to reward the successful, and teacher bonuses for test score increases are no longer uncommon. But the more typical way the accountability strategy works is in a punitive direction—to expose, or threaten to expose, the teachers whose students do poorly on the tests.

The public's insistence that schools demonstrate they are succeeding is understandable and there should be sensible ways to go about it. But we do not seem to be finding them. Instead, we have become obsessive about the numbers produced by tests, like the baseball fan so enthralled with reading the box scores that he hasn't time to watch the game (Bencivenga, 1985). More than forty states now require minimum competency tests for all students. New York is going to require what I tally a grand total of 29 state-administered tests of its Regents students before they can graduate. Nationally, we spend \$100 million a year on school tests, and all signs suggest that testing is still a growth industry (Bencivenga, 1985).

One would be hard pressed to find this version of excellence very compatible with the concept of choice. Moreover, however laudable its goals, it creates a situation more likely to intensify than to solve school problems. The dropout problem is of growing nationwide concern. Yet as an increasing number of recent reports is suggesting, the excellence movement may have the odd effect of reducing aggregate education levels—by making school so unattractive that increasing numbers leave earlier (Business Advisory Commission, 1985; McDill, Natriello, and Pallas, 1985; Task Force, 1985). Demographic changes are likely to aggravate this problem also. Minority majorities prevail in virtually all of the nation's cities. The disadvantaged students who are most at risk of not graduating are currently estimated at 30% of the nation's school population. By 1990, they will constitute more than half of the children in California's schools (Levin, 1985). And these are students for whom schools have never proved very successful.

THE CHALLENGE OF STUDENT ENGAGEMENT

So what do you do with and for the dropout prone? It is one of the several accomplishments of schools of choice that they are perhaps the most successful response yet devised for "at-risk" students. School diversification permits the addressing of particular needs, and many of the particular alternatives launched for marginal students have arrived at just the right blends of broad goals, school climate emphasis, instructional arrangements, and success opportunities to turn a number of kids around. They appear by far our best hope for responding adequately to the dropout problem. Certainly the sheer retaining of such students in conventional classrooms is not going to accomplish much. There is little to be gained from forcing them to endure a nonproductive arrangement for a longer period. In fact, there may even be losses in that: there is evidence that the return of the dropout to the same sort of circumstances he or she left may be

psychologically injurious, as well as otherwise unproductive (Cook, 1983).

Marginal students require different educational circumstances, and schools of choice are able to hone in on these. One of the things most needed by many such youngsters, for instance, is direct developmental assistance. It has long been recognized that most schools do not typically offer much of this. They do not *help* youngsters to develop abilities like thinking skills, or the capacity to sustain positive and productive relationships with others, or the willingness to assume responsibility for one's conduct. Instead, they just *assume* or require the presence of such capacities and in effect test for them by placing youngsters in situations demanding them. Schools of choice tend to differ in this regard. They are a good deal more like private schools in their broad concern with the student's total development, and they address it more specifically and extensively. This is exactly what the weaker student typically needs most, and rarely gets. This certainly does not mean such a focus is superfluous for the able youngster. But it is the disadvantaged one whose needs and predicament most point up the contrasts between the present excellence and choice movements. There is reason to believe that the choice approach is preferable for average and able students also.

In contrast to the school of choice orientation, however, the excellence movement seems to have heightened the conventional school's indifference to individuals. This appears both in the homogenized curricula and in the "get tough" standards. Ironically, this is happening in schools at the same time that a lot of industrial research is confirming the connection between satisfaction and productivity on the part of workers (Peters and Waterman, 1982; Wirth, 1983). And in schools, of course, it is students as well as teachers who are supposed to be the workers. But those responsible for designing the excellence programs seem oblivious to the signals.

A recent study at the University of Oregon has found that the average high school student cuts 100 classes a year—not the "bad kid" or the drop-out prone, but the *average* student (deJung and Duckworth, 1985). And when John Goodlad's Study of Schooling team asked adolescents to name the one best thing about their school, the fourth most frequent reply was "Nothing" (Tye, 1985). It should have proved instructive to excellence advocates that by far the most frequent best thing named was "friends," and that "sports" came next. But what interests students seems to have been found irrelevant or worse. It seems curious that the excellence developers in industry have learned how to capitalize on worker interests, while the excellence advocates in education appear hung up on ignoring or *suppressing* them. Those working on *industrial* excellence are talking about things like worker autonomy, sense of ownership, and identification and commitment. Those working on *educational* excellence are applying pressure, limiting access to extracurricular activities, and refining ways of blocking collaborative activity.

Meanwhile, another major study has concluded that for most students the system that excellence advocates are shoring up instead of redesigning

is one that simply fails. These investigators have likened the high school to a giant shopping mall with interesting specialty shops for "special" customers; but with very little for the unspecial, who often receive a generic-brand education which never manages to engage them very extensively in the process (Powell, Farrar, and Cohen, 1985). This possibility appears at least as educationally significant as the reports that the excellence programs have taken hold and the test scores are rising. If most students remain only minimally involved with the courses they take, it is not clear that the curricular rearrangements and the scores are such victories. After all, no evidence has yet refuted the findings of the famous Eight-Year Study which rendered indefensible "the notion that preparation for . . . college depends on the study of certain prescribed subjects" (Aiken, 1985). And those subjects may be even less defensible for the non collegebound.

EMERGENCE OF THE CHOICE MOVEMENT

But enough of the excellence movement. Let us turn now to the choice movement, which has grown during the same period. As most are aware, the public school alternatives movement got started in the late 60s. It stood initially for a particular new orientation toward keeping school, rather than for the idea of providing various types of choices for responding adequately to diverse youngsters. It proved much easier, though, to generate enthusiasm for particular alternatives than for the choice principle, so not much of a choice movement developed in the 60s. In fact, according to one advocate, it still looked in the 70s like "an idea in search of a constituency" (Doyle, 1977). The 80s have changed that, however, and we now have a lively and growing choice movement. In fact, according to the latest Gallup Poll, 68% of public school parents would like to have the right to select their children's school (Gallup, 1986). In recent months the idea has been attracting increased educator interest. City systems are looking increasingly to choice as the best way to create effective schools.

The idea is receiving considerable press attention and is being featured and explored at meetings. Its support comes from a number of sources, most recently from the much heralded report of the National Governors' Association, *Time for Results*. The report criticizes the lack of choice in public education as a denial of the nation's diversity, and it explicitly proposes "in the great American tradition . . . that you increase excellence by increasing the choices" (p. 12). Over the next five years at least, NGA will be monitoring progress on its recommendations, assuring continuing prominence for the choice proposal over this period.

Virtually all educators who have been associated with schools of choice are strong advocates of the arrangement, while those who lack such experience are typically hesitant and wary. Nevertheless, an increasing number of educational leaders are coming to recommend the establishment of diversified public schools, and schools-within-schools. Such figures as Ted Sizer

and Ernest Boyer are offering related support. Albert Shanker of the American Federation of Teachers has been explicit in his approval of choice, as has Minnesota's Education Commissioner Ruth Randall, and a number of superintendents from New York to California have endorsed the choice concept.

It appears, however, that the choice proposal still enjoys more support from political leaders than from educators. President Reagan is a strong supporter, and at least one Democratic presidential aspirant, Gary Hart, has announced in favor of the idea of choice. Governor Rudy Perpich of Minnesota went for it on the grandest scale, making choice the crux of his "Access to Excellence" plan. Governor Lamar Alexander of Tennessee appeared almost as strong a supporter. He recommended that by 1990, all of his state's public schools should be schools of choice. Colorado's ex-Governor Lamm is an advocate of choice for the least successful students, while New York's Cuomo is one of four or five governors who have sponsored regional magnet high schools, called "Governor's Schools," for the ablest. And in South Dakota, Governor Janklow espoused the right of choice for youngsters in small high schools. As this suggests, not only is the choice idea acquiring a following; it is also being seen as the solution to an array of problems, which augurs well for the political prospects of any proposal. It thus seems to be gathering momentum, and to appear a substantial movement on the educational scene.

THE CHOICE MOVEMENT AND PURSUIT OF EXCELLENCE

But now, having seen something of both the excellence movement and the choice movement, what can we say of their relations? Are they friends or foes? The most positive rendering, I suspect, could make the excellence movement and the choice idea in education ships that pass in the night. They have represented very different orientations—different sets of goals and different strategies for achieving them. But that is certainly not how matters need be. There are no fundamental incompatibilities between the choice principle and the pursuit of excellence. Indeed, they can be very closely allied. Some of the more recent contributions in the excellence literature are beginning to display such connections. One very important indication is the growing interest in school organization and structure.

The early excellence movement literature made curricular change and standards the full secret to school improvement. The newer reports and analyses are beginning to emphasize school structure. It began, perhaps, with California's Commission on School Governance and Management, which proposed a number of changes in school governance including some which would enable each school to control its own program to a far greater extent than is possible now. A similar thrust is evident in the report of the Committee for Economic Development (1985) and the middle-level schools report of the National Association of Secondary School Principals (1985). It appears increasingly evident in the National Governors Association Report (op. cit.) and the Carengie Forum report on teaching (Task Force on Teach-

ing, 1986). Chester Finn, the Assistant Secretary of Education, who holds impeccable excellence credentials, has a nine-point program for arriving at "strategic independence" for schools. He sees such a move as essential to enhancing school effectiveness (Finn, 1984). And a number of reports and studies are now focusing on a very closely related by-product of governance arrangements: they perceive school climate to be the crucial element in enhancing the commitment and performance of both teachers and students (Cross, 1984; Goodlad, 1984; Raywid, Tesconi, and Warren, 1984).

I am convinced of the centrality of climate in improving schools. It appears perhaps the single most important success secret of alternative schools, and it is positive to see it claiming some attention in the excellence literature. That suggests a growing mutuality between the choice and excellence movements. But before we can go much further in examining the compatibility of excellence and choice, it seems desirable to get a bit more specific on the nature of the two.

It is pretty clear what choice means in current discussions. It entails the right to affiliate with a school or program as a matter of selection rather than assignment. Such an opportunity calls, too, for the existence of more than one viable possibility to choose among, and that the selection be uncoerced, that is, not a "last chance" or "back-to-the-wall" choice. (Some not entirely sympathetic folk used to say that comprehensive high schools had plenty of choice because students chose their classes. We've made a bit of progress since then in understanding people, and have shifted the choice idea to attach specifically to the selection of schools—or schools-within-schools—not just to classes.)

ON DEFINING EXCELLENCE

But what is excellence? It is the biggest educational buzzword of the decade, and we have given precious little time to figuring out what it is. We are clearly supposed to be *for* it though, which warrants some attention to meaning.

One rendering of school excellence associates it with the very highest of accomplishments, with that kind of achievement that the valedictorian exhibits, or the National Merit scholar, or those admitted to Harvard. It is what we label "outstanding"—sometimes without realizing what that means in relation to others. This kind of excellence is lovely to behold, but by definition can be open only to a few. We can't all be way above average (like the children of Lake Wobegone). So excellence defined competitively or statistically means it is a scarce commodity in the nature of the case. It seems something of a cruel hoax if that is what all the shouting is about. It casts all that rigor and curricular standardization in a harsh light. I'm not sure I want my youngster subjected to a set of grueling, unsuccessful experiences just to enable yours to make the 99th percentile.

But maybe excellence is not restricted to doing *best*, or outdoing others.

Maybe instead it is a matter of succeeding or doing well at specifiable tasks—like spelling a list of words correctly or getting 100 on a true-false test or reading a page perfectly. Such examples expose a couple of features of what is commonly meant by the term excellence. First, it may have been possible for Picasso to dash off an excellent sketch, or Einstein to visualize an elegant proof, effortlessly and in a matter of seconds. But if so, this sort of excellence can be of little use and guidance in education. If this is our meaning, then virtually no youngster can arrive at excellence and that's that.

Moreover, if we try to encourage emulation of the effortless excellence of a master, we can be fairly well assured of producing few masters. For the apparently effortless excellence usually comes only after an apprenticeship that is anything but effortless. Hence, it makes good sense that to be *educationally* useful, any conception of excellence must emphasize effort: To be excellent is to do well something that is difficult. It needn't be difficult for all of us, but it must be for the doer who thereby arrives at excellence. Thus, the three-year-old who ties her shoes well or gets all the buttons buttoned correctly has certainly achieved excellence in my book. And conversely, the lucky youngster who just happens to ace a test—or the testwise one, who effortlessly comes in at the 98th percentile— doesn't qualify for an excellence rating. It has got to be some combination of real achievement and genuine difficulty met and overcome.

Before converting these conclusions into a conception of excellence, one more matter needs attention. Just how *specific* is the excellence to which we are devoting so much rhetoric? Is excellence something that can and should attach only to performance in certain realms or school subjects? Or is it a pursuit or quality we want to cultivate in general? To be explicit, are we interested *only* in excellence as measured by scores in academic subjects, or is excellence something of broader application or even of *general* value? The question is important because it is possible to reach top academic achievement without reflecting excellence as here defined. We have all seen it happen with the bright youngster who sails through school without ever really applying herself.

I am convinced that excellence is something that can appear in a large number of connections other than required courses. It can emerge in courtroom debates, in cabinetmaking, in leadership, in stamp collecting, and in any number of other pursuits. What is more, I think it well worth cultivating as a disposition to be applied to such varied pursuits. Thus construed, excellence represents a particular kind of effort and outcome, and I have no reservations whatsoever about its value, nor about its scarcity. I count myself a real devotee of excellence of this sort, and I am concerned that so few of us—adults as well as youngsters—seem committed to it. In fact, if one wants to find the intensity and commitment and effort that distinguish excellence, the examples are far more numerous among young children than elsewhere. (Just think for a moment about the concentration that goes

into learning to skip or ride a two-wheeler.) There seems something terribly wrong that that sort of singlemindedness and wholeheartedness and determination tend to disappear as children grow older, and that they are rather rare among adults.

When we add up all the elements established thus far as necessary to a desirable notion of excellence—a notion defensible to pursue in schools—here is what emerges:

1. Excellence is not something that only top performers can reach but something that can reasonably be pursued by all.
2. Excellence is a quality of a process, of the conduct of a performance or the carrying out of an achievement, rather than merely a particular product or outcome (like a test scored 100).
3. As applied to schools and education, it makes sense to speak of excellence only as a combination of both its components: the doer as well as the performance or accomplishment.
4. The quality of excellence attaches only to performances and achievements of genuine difficulty and challenge to the doer.
5. The quality of excellence attaches only to the yield of honest effort (not lucky accident).
6. Excellence can attach to any number of human pursuits and is not limited to performance in required courses.
7. Excellence is a precious quality, and a most desirable one to cultivate.

Now although such unwrapping may be rare, there is certainly nothing very unique or original about such a conception of excellence. In fact, it seems to bear a striking resemblance to the definition of the National Commission on Excellence in Education. Page 12 of *A Nation at Risk* (1983) says:

We define 'excellence' to mean . . . performing on the boundary of individual ability in ways that test and push back personal limits, in school and in the workplace.

It may not be quite as broad as the view I have been constructing, but it certainly does admit to different kinds of excellence.

HOW IS EXCELLENCE PRODUCED?

Let us turn to the matter of how you produce it. How do you grow excellence—generate it in classrooms and inculcate it in youngsters? Much that we have said suggests that excellence is a quality that can be associated with peak performances. We might not want to limit it to such performances because they are so very rare. But they certainly epitomize and display excellence at its clearest. Peak performances represent intense effort and top doer achievement, and what is more, the doer is keenly aware of both these features: of trying one's hardest and of triumphing. There is a

very important message in this for excellence cultivators. Consider any virtuoso performance you can recall. Perhaps most will remember the runners in "Chariots of Fire." Possibly the clearest single attribute of that sort of performance is that it cannot be dictated or coerced. It displays a kind of concentration and intensity that can come only from inside the performer. In teacher language one could say those runners represented the utmost in motivation, a motivation level reflected not only in the peak performance but also in all the labor and self-discipline that goes into producing it.

What this suggests is that motivation plays an absolutely critical role in excellence. Without it, you simply do not get the necessary dedication and sustained effort. And here, of course, is where the prospective affinity of excellence and choice become clear. Schools of choice make motivation their pivotal feature: One is not there in the first place without some motivation to be. And because this is the case, because choice is the organizing feature of alternative or optional schools, it exerts a major and continuing influence that permeates their program. For teachers in such schools, the continuing importance of student interest and commitment remain a constant never very far from consciousness. They are less often tempted to surrender to the captive audience response, that is, to conclude, "I've given it my best shot and now you've just got to knuckle down and learn this whether it interests you or not." This is a luxury alternative school teachers simply cannot afford very often. Student interest and motivation must remain too prominent a feature of the alternative school classroom to permit it. (Lest this be misunderstood, the point is not to please and entertain or pander to youngsters. It is to enlist them in their own education, so as to render teaching effective, increase the likelihood that particular learnings will yield traits and qualities we can admire, and to make good on our intent to produce people of widening interests who will thus go on learning.)

The emphasis on motivation is one of the strongest features of the choice arrangement. Choice is probably one of the best mechanisms yet devised for assigning prominence to motivation and assuring that it will remain centrally important to a school's operation. Psychologists tell us that the search for commitment—for ideas striking the adolescent as worthy of dedication—is one of the defining traits of the age group. This means that finding and pursuing motivational objects is in itself an important part of the growth process for adolescents. It is certainly desirable that schools try to attach those commitments to education instead of distancing themselves from what youngsters care about.

This seems absolutely essential to producing achievements of excellence in schools, and equally important, to generating a commitment to excellence on the part of the young and to cultivating the habits associated with excellence. Such a commitment seems a major challenge—and more and more evidence suggests that most schools are not meeting it very well. The excellence report on the middle school already cited notes that "the young adolescent is interested in 'virtually everything, but nothing very much'"

(N.A.S.S.P., 1985). Sadly, the negative part of that remains true of older adolescents, too—and indeed, of large numbers of middle-aged adolescents. And more and more studies describe the “bargains” that are struck or the “treaties” reached between students and teachers, tacit agreements to the effect of “you don’t demand too much of me, and I won’t hassle you” (Powell et al., 1985).

One highly respected analyst has concluded that dull classrooms where most are bored are absolutely inevitable (Sarason, 1983), and another sadly concedes that we simply have to acknowledge the limited appeal of “positive knowledge” for many students (Cusick, 1983). A recent study estimated that in the high school population perhaps as many as two-thirds “have disengaged from the academic learning process” (Sedlak et al., 1985). TWO-THIRDS! That is a monumental indictment. It is like the high school where 93% failed or dropped out. At *some* point, I think the figures have got to be interpreted to show there is something wrong with the *school* and not just with the *students*. At some point, aggregated individual failures become school failures. If two-thirds of the students have disengaged from the academic learning process then we simply had better redesign that process. And fast.

And that’s exactly what schools of choice have done. They have made student engagement a central feature of their programs. Not only is it a key ingredient in the pursuit of excellence, but it has some other benefits that are worth noting too. The focus of genuine student engagement has made schools of choice today’s “keepers of the dream”—the dream that effective education need not be a get tough, crack down proposition where people are forced to do what’s best for them; but on the contrary, that it can be a decent, caring, challenging and satisfying, even a happy endeavor. Thus in the long run, the choice advocates could prove the best friends that the cause of excellence has got. More and more people are beginning to discover that.

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