

A ROAD MAP TO CHOICE IN PUBLIC EDUCATION

In choosing alternatives, we must determine whether they represent better plans than the ones being abandoned.

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Contrary to what some may think, the Reagan and Bush administrations did not invent school choice—the notion that students and their families ought to be able to *choose* the schools they attend, rather than being automatically assigned to them. In fact, the idea goes back at least to the 1950s, when parochial school advocates began arguing that government should fund the education of children in religious schools as well as of those in secular schools, and several economists asserted that enabling parents to select and pay for their children's educations would both expand the freedom of individuals and improve the effectiveness of schools.

In the following decade, the choice idea became associated with the free and alternative schools of the 1960s, as advocates argued that there were different and better ways than the conventional ones to do school, and that differentiation—"different strokes for different folks"—would be an improvement over the "one-size-fits-all" model for schools. Although the first alternatives tended to be liberal in orientation, it wasn't long before parents who wanted schools more conservative than the standard variety took up the differentiation argument and began asking for fundamental schools instead.

Then in the 1970s, the choice arrangement got a big boost when magnet schools were adopted in the interests of equity: The launching of themed schools in preference to the standard 'comprehensive' variety was adopted as a way to achieve voluntary school desegregation in preference to forced busing. Inspired by court desegregation orders—or the threat of such orders—mag-

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net schools began appearing across the country, especially in urban areas.

It was not until the 1980s, however, that the touting of choice *per se* took hold. President Reagan's oft-uttered commitment to vouchers never seemed to find a very wide audience. But the choice-within-the-public-sector idea appeared to present a good complement to the clamor for school restructuring. And although neither Reagan nor Bush was ever able to bring about the privatization both sought for public education, they did effectively bring considerable prominence to the idea of choice. By 1991, national surveys found that almost two-thirds of the public favored the right of families to *select* the public schools their children would attend.

Variants of Public School Choice

It is not surprising that today's choice movement has spawned a somewhat bewildering array of variants. There are privatization proposals and public-choice-only proposals and a growing number of hybrids linking the two. There are choice arrangements within schools (schools-within-schools, or mini-schools) and between schools. There are within-district and cross-district choice plans and there are statewide arrangements. Choice plans are in effect at all educational levels, and in some states they involve colleges and universities as well (by permitting high school youngsters to enroll in courses in higher education institutions and to take a proportionate share of their state funding equivalents with them). There are also open enrollment plans and 'controlled choice' systems, magnet schools, alternative schools, governors' schools, career academies, and charter schools.

There appear to be four broad types of school choice proposals. Among those urging choice are, first, *economics-driven* advocates who talk about markets and competition and driving poor schools out of business. Next there are *policy-driven* advocates who have selected choice as the way to realize the dominant educational goals of recent national administrations—first as the way to serve Democratic presidents' equity purposes and more

recently as the route to the Republican presidents' pursuit of excellence.

Third, there are people who have seen choice as the best way to change school governance by altering the power balances among families, bureaucracies, and the other players comprising the education 'establishment.' These are the *governance-driven* advocates of choice. Finally, there are those who are advocating choice primarily on educational grounds, arguing that it is a uniquely powerful way to bring about school improvement. (Ironically, given the *raison d'être* of schools, the *education-driven* case has perhaps to date been the least influential of the four.)

Now, given these four very different approaches to choice, it is hardly surprising that there is quite an array of specific choice proposals. Moreover, it is not surprising that the proposals of some choice advocates are anathema to others. For instance, those who seek choice primarily on an economics-driven model want as open a market as possible. On the other hand, those who look to choice to realize an equity policy want choice to operate within firmly fixed controls (e.g., as to racial discrimination and funding).

And those who advocate choice as a means of improving education are not always in accord with equity-based advocates or with governance-based advocates. (Equity advocates often insist that *all* schools within a given jurisdiction must be schools of choice; yet experience suggests that a choice system that evolves one school at a time may result in better and more differentiated schools. Some governance-inspired choice advocates urge extensive parental participation in operating and controlling schools, whereas education-driven choice advocates are more likely to prefer a different parental role.)

Economics-Driven Choice

Clearly, what one sees as strengths and weaknesses of particular choice proposals depends on the purposes one hopes to realize and the assumptions one brings to the situation. Of the four

general varieties identified here, there is perhaps the least direct evidence to support the economics-driven model, and the evidence that does exist is not particularly positive.

Many have questioned whether educating is sufficiently analogous to production and distribution to justify the market analogy that the economic case for choice demands (and indeed there are major differences—e.g., as to the multiplicity and complexity of goals people bring to education, and as to the length of time it may take to discern the quality of the process). And there has really never been a study of the effectiveness of an educational voucher arrangement in this country, because no such arrangement has ever existed. We have had some privatization variants, but except for the very limited arrangements in Milwaukee, there have been none that would suffice to yield evidence on market advocates' most prominent proposal—vouchers.

The closest thing we have had to a voucher arrangement has been the proprietary schools funded by federal educational and job-training programs. These have been private, for-profit trade schools attracting largely disadvantaged young people seeking to become beauticians or truckers or computer repairmen. Both federal and state investigations have attributed considerable abuse of various sorts to such schools: failure to maintain standards, failure to staff announced classes, failure to keep job assurance promises.

Governance-Driven Choice

Those who have argued that choice would change school governance have emphasized that it represents direct and immediate empowerment—the chance to “vote with one’s feet,” and thus to simply abandon a sufficiently undesirable situation in favor of a more desirable one.

But obviously such a prerogative rests on at least two contingencies: first, that there is somewhere else to go where one can get in; and second, that the alternatives are more desirable—that they represent better and more appealing schools than the ones being abandoned. Neither of these contingencies is always met, particularly in inner cities where the situation may call most desperately for it. But in suburban as well as urban choice systems, admissions requirements or a lack of space may deny access to those arguably most in need of an effective education. And the alternatives that are available

may be little different from those offered by the school one wants to leave.

A great deal depends on the extent of the choice opportunities: if a system has 10,000 students and only 3,000 seats in choice programs, then the *schools* rather than the students may become the choosers, and the power balance and governance arrangements will not have changed at all for the bulk of the students.

Governance-driven choice arguments have sometimes maintained that choice leads to decentralization and greater school-level autonomy, since these factors are necessary to sustain the school differences and distinctiveness that are essential to choice. This has not always been the case, however, and some choice systems have operated as tightly articulated top-down bureaucracies. Interestingly, however, even where these constraints remain, for those who become affiliated with their schools as a matter of choice, the evidence seems to point toward a clear *sense* of empowerment on the part of all (students, teachers, and parents).

Survey after survey suggests that all constituents *feel* they are empowered by the choice arrangement, whether or not it is accompanied by policy-making and other prerogatives. It is uncertain whether such feelings are primarily just a psychological accompaniment of the power to choose, or whether they ensue from being treated differently in a setting one has the authority to reject. But for whatever reason, it seems fairly clear that the power to choose a school alters one’s sense of empowerment within it.

Equity-Driven Choice

The evidence is both more extensive and more definitive with respect to the equity-based argument for choice. Although desegregation success has varied considerably, depending on the details of individual plans (e.g., how extensive they have been and in particular whether they have sought to desegregate districts or schools), researchers have concluded that choice systems are likely to yield more interracial exposure than traditional school assignment plans. So the desegregation advantages of choice seem clear, although some equity advocates insist that choice is less successful in bringing about socioeconomic than racial desegregation.

Education-Driven Choice

There is a fair accumulation of evidence bearing on the education-driven

case for choice: schools of choice tend to generate high satisfaction rates and strong senses of commitment on the part of all constituents, students, teachers, and parents. Behavior changes, along with attitudes, and the more positive orientation appears to enhance effort. Not surprisingly, then, higher achievement is often the result. Comparisons find schools of choice uniquely able to provide the conditions of self-actualization for both students and their teachers.

Other Considerations

If this brief summary of the evidence on choice suggests a mixed picture, that may say less about the evidence than about the variability of choice arrangements. To put it another way, probably the effectiveness and desirability of a school choice program differs more in consequence of its particular features than as a result of its sheer provision of choice. There are choice systems that have functioned almost magically to transform failing schools into exemplary ones. But there are also choice arrangements that have changed very little—and others that have brought about undesirable changes. These examples provide a warning to look carefully at the details of a choice plan: like most other proposals hotly debated in the political arena, ways have been found to render choice as forward-looking and beneficial, regressive, or totally innocuous. So the big question to ask is not *whether* to have school choice, but exactly *what kind* of choice system to have.

Is choice, then, a uniquely precious or fragile scheme, in its dependence on details and supporting conditions for success? Not at all. Foregoing pages suggest that choice is no panacea. We do not immediately and automatically solve educational problems by adopting it. But the same is true of any reform proposal. It would be amazing for any sort of magic bullet, packaging all the necessary and sufficient conditions for success, ever to appear. Schools are complicated, multifaceted social organizations made up of numerous structural, political, and cultural components and dimensions. It is probable that the success of any improvement strategy will continue to hinge on a great many supportive conditions and contingency details. It may well be that the frequent failures of school improvement efforts of any and all types have been due to a failure to recognize and attend to those conditions.

Specific Choice Plans

Some specific strengths and weaknesses have often been noted in connection with three popular choice plans.

Open enrollment has been politically popular with a number of legislators, and 14 or more states now have open enrollment choice plans enabling families to enroll their children in any public school in the state. Such plans would appear to meet the conditions of market-inspired choice enthusiasts and to offer considerable advantages to families. However, they appear to be the least used of all choice provisions and to provide the fewest benefits: they are likely to have minimal impacts on school improvement or effectiveness, they do not change school governance, and they may often function primarily as a safety valve permitting the most dissatisfied to escape from an unsatisfactory school. For choice to improve a school, all students (not just some) must be there as a matter of choice, and the school must have a distinctive focus which serves to attract like-minded students and staff.

Magnet schools, a second prominent choice plan, have served not only to meet desegregation purposes but also as a powerful means of extensive school improvement. They can change enrollment patterns substantially, overcoming the segregative effects of the neighborhood school arrangement. Under the right conditions, they can also transform failing schools into strong ones and transform previously apathetic students into academic achievers. The right conditions include sufficient planning time to design and sustain a strong program, a theme carefully chosen and implemented so as to draw all kinds of students, and a determination to use the switch to 'magnetization' as the chance to restructure rules, roles, and relationships throughout the school. Under such conditions, the 'magnetizing' of a school—the adoption and implementation of a particular focus or theme—can prove a pivotal lever in school transformation.

A third prominent variety of choice program, *teacher-led mini-schools*, is the sort pioneered in Manhattan's East Harlem and now being pursued elsewhere in New York and other cities. This is an arrangement inviting the evolutionary development of a choice system, by having interested groups of teachers design and then operate programs reflecting their own visions of schooling. No teacher is forced into carrying out some-

one else's convictions, and no program is saddled with skeptics whose objections must constantly be met and overcome. The transition to an extensive choice system occurs slowly in this sort of arrangement, as individual programs emerge.

Such a system claims the considerable advantage of eliciting from its teachers the best performance of which they are capable. (At least it would so appear, given the number of teachers it has reportedly transformed from clock-watchers into creative and dedicated educators.) Its disadvantages are that it takes time for such a system to become a complete choice system, and except for the risktakers who step forward immediately, it may take time to convince other teachers to trust the offer to design their own schools. One assurance that may be necessary, for instance, is that a change in school administrations will not mean that teachers' time and efforts have been in vain.

Final Considerations

People familiar with the contemporary school reform scene and with efforts to "restructure" education recognize some familiar proposals in strong choice plans. For instance, the East Harlem version of schools of choice is usually well received by those who hold the professionalization of teaching to be the key to lasting educational improvement. This type of choice arrangement clearly represents an effective manner of placing teachers in roles that demand more professional performance. No longer are teachers cast as subordinates carrying out an administrator's ideas and directives about sound practice. Instead, teachers are asked to assume responsibility for the design and operation of their own programs.

Nor is *school-based management*—another major current restructuring proposal—alien to the choice idea. As suggested several times here, for a choice system to be meaningful, school-to-school uniquenesses and deliberate variation are necessary. For the diversity to emerge, there must be a commitment to decentralization. Otherwise, standardization and uniformity continue. Thus, a choice system in effect demands decentralization and the return of many educational decisions to individual school management.

The choice idea differs considerably from the school-based management approach, however, as to focus and se-

quence. First, choice invites teachers to focus directly on mounting new educational programs and redesigning classrooms, while school-based management asks them to join others in examining new school governance and administrative practices. Second, the choice arrangement assumes that right from the start—*right from the first day teachers begin to operationalize their new schools*—students will be there as a matter of choice. School-based management advocates tend to say that choice should be introduced only after school-based management has led to substantially differentiated educational programs. Choice advocates claim not only that such programmatic change can be too long in coming under school-based management—but also that this sort of sequence denies choice the catalytic role in achieving change that is one of its major advantages.

Schools of choice also incorporate a number of other contemporary reform proposals, including the personalizing of education, the insistence that large schools must be downscaled in order to provide the kind of environment most youngsters need, the conclusion that most teens will fare better in schools with a particular theme or focus than in comprehensive high schools, and the conviction that enduring school improvement is going to require sustained collaborative interaction on the part of teachers. Thus, the choice notion appears not just the creature of recent White House incumbents, or of market enthusiasts or school governance restructurers, but also a proposal that can claim research support, and one that embodies many of the features being urged by a number of other educational reform plans as well. ■

Suggestions for Further Reading:

Nolan Estes, Daniel Levine, and Donald R. Waldrip, *Magnet Schools: Recent Developments and Perspectives* (Austin, TX: Morgan Printing, 1990).

Joe Nathan, *Public Schools by Choice: Expanding Opportunities for Parents, Students, and Teachers* (Minneapolis: Free Spirit Press, 1989).

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Mary Anne Raywid, "Public Choice, Yes; Vouchers, No!" *Phi Delta Kappan*, June, 1987, pp. 762-769.

Timothy Young and Evans Clinchy, *Choice in Public Education* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1992).