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SCHOOLS OF CHOICE: ALTERNATIVE ROUTES TO EXCELLENCE

I want to talk with you this evening about a reform proposal for public education that is very different from a number of the other proposals you have been hearing about and dealing with. But before outlining that for you, I feel I had better fill in a bit of the background from which it emerges. This is especially important, I think, for young people. You have to be over 30 to be able to recall a time when public education was not under attack in this country -- and to be able to remember that up to 15 years ago, public schools were probably our most hallowed institution. They were the keepers of the democratic dream and the institution that enabled all to become eligible for its promise. It may be hard for the young to realize that people really felt that way, and such a relatively short time ago -- so far have we come from that kind of faith in public schooling. But I assure you that this was the belief of a substantial majority prior to 1970. Since that time, however, public support has waned rather steadily. And over the last decade and a half, two kinds of complaints have been fairly persistent. One is that public schools just don't serve lots of youngsters very well. The second is that our schools are increasingly beyond the control of those most immediately affected by them: the families of the youngsters attending school, the youngsters themselves, and the communities of which they are a part. These two themes --

the complaints about effectiveness and control -- have continued virtually without interruption over the last 15 years.

Those of us who are interested in schools, and who spend our days working in them, may have misgauged the depth of the public's disillusionment. Perhaps both teachers and administrators have underrated the import of the growing disaffection -- and the extent of the loss of confidence. We can now look back at the 70s and see that the shape of things to come began to emerge with the enactment of competency test legislation. In one state after another, statewide competency tests were imposed to determine graduation eligibility and sometimes even to determine promotion from one grade to the next. Several messages were quite clearly implicit in the adoption of the competency test requirements, although not all of us read them at the time. One of the messages was that schooling was no longer to be accepted as a guarantee of learning -- or even of minimal literacy. Another message was that teachers and schools couldn't be trusted to ascertain that sufficient learning had really occurred, or to report accurately on that, and/or to do something about it -- to remediate failure as indicated. These assumptions were logically implicit in the statewide testing programs extensively adopted in the 70s. By last year, there were state-mandated competency tests in 40 states,[1] and the handwriting was not only on the wall, but all over the place.

A great deal has happened since, but the shape of things to come was fairly clear a decade ago. The "Excellence Movement" which has gathered momentum in the 80s has filled in the silhouette earlier evident: the public is determined to hold the schools firmly accountable. No longer will it simply assume educators to be willing

and able to do their jobs -- and no longer will it accept their word that they have done so. Moreover, since the traditional mechanisms for holding schools responsible have obviously not sufficed -- and the officials charged with the obligation to run schools effectively have failed to fulfill it -- then school governance arrangements must be supplanted. And that is what has happened in state after state, in the last three or four years.

In almost every state in the union, power has passed from the local school and district level, to the state level -- power to control what goes on in classrooms. Moreover, in a growing number of states, it is not just centralization that has occurred, but a tremendously important shift in just who holds the newly tightened reins.[2] In a number of states, including Tennessee, much of the power has shifted from educators in State Departments of Education to legislatures, and/or to the executive offices of governors.

Yours are not the only teachers, or the only group of educators who are troubled by this. If misery loves company, Tennessee teachers may find it helpful to know they've got lots and lots of company. The problem seems to be that the measures adopted by governors and legislatures all too often reflect very little knowledge about how schools work and what is necessary to getting the educational job done. I am told that there is growing conviction here in your state that that is essentially what is wrong with the career ladders program adopted by your legislature: it did not reflect the realities and demands of the teaching situation or the way good teachers must function. I have much sympathy for the objections teachers and teacher organizations have raised in relation to the career ladders program. If the aim had anything to do with encouraging teacher proficiency and development and

responsiblity, then according to what I have heard the plan seems already to have failed.

But there is a second idea for improving schools which evidently interests your governor -- and which is attracting national attention on the part of a number of other governors as well. It is the idea of making choice a standing feature of public education. I suspect you are likely to be hearing a great deal more about it as a proposal, and I urge that you consider it fairly seriously -- not only as a reform strategy you can live with a lot more easily than with many others, but one which you might even welcome quite warmly. In fact, it could prove the readiest solution to the problems generated by the competency testing and Excellence movements -- the best antidote to the centralization that has been occurring. So I hope you will consider the choice idea carefully, and that is what I want to talk with you about.

Let me begin by explaining why I think you are going to be hearing more about choice. It is not brand new, of course, having been around since the late 60s. The provision of student and family choice has for some years now been part of the public schools of many districts -- having been adopted as a response to a wide array of problems and challenges. It is an arrangement viewed particularly responsive to the problems of urban schools, the dropout challenge, enrollment declines, and desegregation -- all of which are fairly widespread and serious current challenges. The White House, as you know, has a choice plan. Its proposal is to encourage the privatization of education by means of financial incentives for sending youngsters to private schools. Several specific administration bills have been introduced to this purpose -- to provide tuition tax credits to parents paying private school tuitions,

and more recently to privatize federal compensatory education programs by making Chapter 1 into a voucher program.

I am not an advocate of this sort of move. I am convinced, however, that unless we can make a choice a regular feature of public schools, vouchers and tuition tax credits are a strong possibility. There are some, I know, who fear that public school choice is a move toward vouchers -- just a first step in that direction. I strongly suspect that the truth of the matter is exactly the reverse: that the availability of choice in public schools would probably be our strongest assurance against vouchers.

There is another reason why I think the choice idea is likely to remain with us -- and why public school educators ought to consider it very carefully. It seems to me that probably the most durable element of the Excellence Movement will be the demand for accountability. I'm not sure how longlived the rest of the Excellence Movement will prove, but the one thing that's not likely to be rescinded is the public's insistence on more direct and extensive oversight and control of schools. I can't see any relaxation of this kind of demand for the foreseeable future. And given that, I think educators will find the choice provision a much easier form of accountability to live with than the other alternatives. We've already seen enough of those other alternatives to know that they involve detailed mandates for what to teach, how, when, and for how long -- and by whom, how prepared, and how recompensed. They also prescribe in great detail just how to ascertain that all of this has occurred as specified. In short, I think we would do well to get behind the choice feature for public schools as a substitute for the detailed input/output specifications that one state

after another has adopted. The ability to select one's school from among several viable and attractive possibilities represents a form of accountability.

Let me explain. To date, we have figured out just three fundamental strategies for holding schools accountable: one is detailed control of inputs (content,instructional materials like textbooks and class assignments, and lesson plans). A second is careful monitoring of outputs (frequent testing, preferably on standardized tests so as to yield comparisons). The third strategy is choice. In my judgment, the input control approach to accountability is more likely to impede than to enhance good teaching. The output control approach inevitably reduces educational effectiveness to a matter of test scores, and that is certainly a disservice to youngsters and to the purposes of educational improvement. The choice approach to accountability, however, is quite a different story. It is a form of accountability far more compatible with the requisite conditions of educating, and of successful teaching, than are all those mandates providing input and output control. When students and their families select their own school, they share with the school's staff the responsibility for success. They have been accepted into partnership and that typically becomes evident in the nature and extent of their contact with the school. Parents are not distanced in schools of choice and they may take unusual sorts of roles within them.[3] Thus, accountability expectations are generally met in the course of frequent contact and interaction rather than by periodic, formalized testing programs. It seems a form of accountability far better suited to the partnership which ought to link home and school than are the formalized output checks more appropriate to consumers who

don't quite trust their service suppliers.

Let me describe for you what a public school choice arrangement might look like and how it might work -- and then I will summarize the kinds of benefits such arrangements have brought to those involved with them.

A choice system would make it possible for the teachers within a school district -- those who know kids and classrooms best -- to design an education. The most successful choice system I know is in a New York district: Manhattan's Community School District 4. It happens to be an extremely poor district -- Spanish Harlem -- but the idea would work as well or better in almost any kind of district. (In fact, I'm thinking at the moment of another such system which exists in an affluent suburban county outside of Denver. But in order not to confuse things, I'm going to confine my description to District 4.)

District 4 invites teachers to propose and design the kind of program they would like to work in. The result so far has been 25 elementary and junior high programs of very different sorts. That's because teachers have different ideas as to what's most important to good education; for some it's an effective method or pedagogy, and so some of District 4's schools of choice are organized around particular teaching strategies. One, for instance, features the matching of individual learning styles to differentiated teaching styles. For other teachers, the most important thing is to capitalize on youngsters' interests in particular themes and activities in order to engage them in their own education. So there is an Academy of Environmental Science, and a Maritime School, and a Sports School -- each of which develops a full academic program around its particular theme using that as

context. Other teachers have put together schools which feature a particular kind of atmosphere or school climate: a family-like environment, or a well-structured demanding one, or one which actually involves parents extensively in the classroom. Some of these programs are highly traditional, others appear more like open schools or even old fashioned Progressive schools. And why not? We know that there are teachers whose inclinations and beliefs guide them toward these different perspectives. Educators themselves certainly don't agree on a single best 'philosophy' or educational orientation; and there is no clear evidence to recommend one above all others, despite what advocates and critics may sometimes suggest. So why shouldn't teachers be able to choose a program matching their own educational orientation -- and why shouldn't parents be able to choose a program that best accords with their educational orientation and preferences? And why shouldn't youngsters' interests play a part too? We know that people of all ages are more productive when they have an interest in what they are doing. And there is ample evidence that youngsters respond to different educational environments and different teaching styles and activities. So why, then, do we insist on forcing all of them to go through a single standardized program? And why do we waste teachers in schools where even though they are good teachers, they are made to feel like square pegs in round holes? And why do we perpetuate situations in which the school and the home engage in a tug of war over the child, with one representing one set of values and the other really trying to break down those values and protect the child from their influence?

In District 4, to start such a program, a teacher must develop a plan -- not a very elaborate or formal one -- but a plan to show that he

or she is really serious about this and has given it some thought. Preferably the teacher will also be in a position to name one or more other teachers who have been consulted and want to be involved. If the plan makes sense, and the teacher shows evidence of being able to carry it out, a new program opens up. It's that simple. Nobody is forced to do anything and everybody -- teachers, students, and parents -- has a better chance of being associated with a school that does things their way than is the case where there's only one kind of school in the district, with one philosophy and orientation and main educational approach.

Now this is quite foreign to the way schools are run in most of the nation's 16,000 school districts. Can it work? Well it certainly has in District 4. The choice arrangement there is now 14 years old and it has grown steadily, from an original two schools to its present 25. Choice programs are available at the elementary school level, along with neighborhood schools of assignment. But at the junior high level there are only programs of choice: no youngster is assigned to any junior high and with their families each must make a choice. (Sixth-graders get work in decision-making strategies and skills, along with information on the different junior high programs available.)

The choice arrangement has brought some remarkable changes to District 4. It has certainly been an academic success. In 1970, the district had only 15% of its students reading on grade level. It ranked at the very bottom of New York City's 32 community school districts, thirty-second. Today more than half of its students are reading on grade level and the district outperforms almost half of the City's districts -- a remarkable accomplishment in an area poor enough that 82%

of its students are on free lunch programs, and 95% represent inner city minorities.[4] In fact, District 4 has gotten enough of a reputation that more than 1500 youngsters from other districts annually transfer in.[5] -- And transferees into Harlem is far from what one might expect to find.

There is evidence from District 4 and elsewhere that the choice arrangement works well for all the parties directly involved -- students, teachers, and parents.[6] For all kinds of students, all the way from the weakest and least interested to the most fortunate and highly motivated. What is more, choice is good for students in multiple ways: it not only conduces to their academic achievement, it also contributes substantially to their personal and social growth, and to character-building as well as intellectual development. The reason is that schools of choice are generally smaller and more personalized than other schools, and they are typically committed to far more than just knowledge acquisition. This shows both in the development of the youngsters and in the way they feel about their programs. One of the early experiences that convinced me there was something quite extraordinary in the choice arrangement was hearing the kids talk about their schools. Did you ever hear a teenager earnestly trying to make you understand how terrific his school is? For most of us, that is not a very believable scene. Yet I've now witnessed it dozens of times in schools of choice. It's not choice alone that does it, of course. It's choice plus the other dynamics that get set in motion. But more about those in a couple of minutes. First, I'd like to say something about the way in which the choice arrangement affects two other groups with an important stake in education: teachers and parents.

Teachers reflect and respond to the same things one hears from the

students. A lot of teachers apparently find in such schools the kind of environment and arrangements they had envisioned in being attracted to teaching in the first place -- conditions which are not often found in other schools. Teacher morale is extraordinarily high in schools of choice, and there is even evidence that teachers who didn't choose them initially don't want to leave, once there. Teachers report that they can be far more effective in schools of choice -- can make a real difference. And that, in turn, seems to have extraordinary effects on their dedication and commitment, and willingness to try. Thus, the evidence suggests that teachers in schools of choice work harder -- but that their morale is extraordinary. The same thing seems to be true, incidentally, of administrators in these schools.

Parent response is similarly positive. A part of the widespread disaffection with schools has been growing doubts on the part of parents that the school always keep the best interests of individual youngsters at heart. And a parent wants to feel sure about this. However much they may talk about standards, parents want to be certain their child is viewed and treated compassionately and not just as a dispensable cog in a very large wheel. Thus, parents respond in an extremely positive way to schools of choice. Survey comparisons invariably find far greater parent satisfaction in such schools than in others. And it appears that attitudes also change for other adults: a recent study found that the establishment of a choice system within a school district is usually followed by perceptions of improved educational quality on the part of non-parents.[7] So choice evidently contributes to the restoration of general public confidence in schools -- a sorely needed change.

In case you are wondering whether the simple change of letting people choose their schools can explain all these benefits, the answer is No. What does happen, though, is that the choice feature typically brings others, which collectively yield the benefits. In the first place, choice is likely to bring together people who share educationally significant views. This means that schools of choice are likely to reflect the coherence -- the fundamental agreement as to the school's mission -- that researchers are finding so crucial to school effectiveness. In the second place, schools of choice are usually much smaller than conventional schools -- and that makes possible a degree of personalization that's virtually impossible in a school of several thousand.

The size and personalization in turn yield a responsiveness to the individual rarely found in larger schools. Smaller ones can afford more flexibility of structure and operation. Then, too, it is important that schools of choice typically represent exceptions to the rule: they are unlike other schools (by design) and therefore must be handled differently. This usually results in more school level autonomy than generally prevails. And the increased decision-making power is usually shared among teachers rather than remaining in the principal's office. It is often somehow shared also with students in an attempt to involve them more actively and purposefully in their own education.[8] Whether or not this happens, however, students have a new dignity and sense of fate control in a situation they feel they can depart. It is a sense of empowerment which is just what seems most critically lacking in the students who need the greatest amount of help.

A series of dynamics also get set in motion for teachers, following an opportunity to choose a school and program matching their own

educational philosophy and approach. School-to-school differentiation goes hand in hand with the choice arrangement, of course. There is no point in having choice, and it remains meaningless, unless schools differ from one another. So the choice arrangement assumes and cultivates school uniqueness and diversity. And this is incompatible with standardization. External mandates from district and state offices can only standardize and homogenize. But if differentiation is to be encouraged then a school must make a lot of its decisions from within. This means in turn that teachers must make them. Thus teachers make more professional decisions in schools of choice: they typically write curriculum, design activities, make their own plans. But this usually occurs in collaboration with colleagues rather than isolation. The evidence suggests that teachers in schools of choice operate in far closer collegial interaction with other teachers than in conventional schools. This means they get more collegial support and there are more occasions of joint exploration, analysis, and critiquing of plans -- which in turn can only enhance the quality of those plans.

Thus, it is not the choice feature alone which accounts for the remarkable success of schools of choice -- although the capacity to choose is no small advantage in and of itself. But choice introduces further changes and these collectively bring the benefits. The evidence is already clear that when these other changes are blocked, the benefits are far less pronounced. For instance, were you to start a school of choice but manage to block increases in teacher autonomy, you would have cut the gains substantially. If you introduced choice but took steps to prevent school differentiation, or teacher collaboration, you would have very effectively trimmed the benefits. It is the total package, then,

which holds the promise, not just bits and pieces of it. And that is important because I have seen schools attempt to borrow parts -- and learn only later that what they have omitted was crucial.

Those of you who are most familiar with the Excellence Movement in education may already have found yourselves contrasting its approach with the whole idea of choice. There are certainly some fundamental differences. The Excellence Movement has been marked by an attempt to legislate improvement by mandating increased requirements, higher standards, more homework, and more tests. As I suggested earlier, its approach is to seek quality improvement through detailed input control -- curriculum, instructional materials, textbooks -- and output monitoring -- in other words, of what students have learned. The choice movement takes exactly the opposite approach: instead of trying to mandate and force quality, it features inviting and facilitating it: the carrot in preference to the stick. Instead of top down control, it insists on individual school control. Instead of educational standardization it cultivates diversity. Instead of holding schools accountable to state legislatures and other officials, it wants to see them more responsive to the families directly associated with them.

Are the choice proposal and the excellence commitment then simply incompatible? Is it a matter of selecting either quality or responsiveness, but not both? Or are the two simply different orbits which just seem to have loomed into view at the same time? Actually, despite their present differences, I think the interests of quality improvement and responsiveness have quite a common ground. The National Commission on Excellence in Education defined excellence this way:[9]

> 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.

Now let me ask you from your own experience: How do you get someone to perform on the boundary of that individual's ability, testing and pushing back personal limits? It seems clear enough to me that the first thing necessary is motivation. Consider any virtuoso performance you can recall -- maybe most of us will remember the runners in Chariots of Fire. Perhaps 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 we'd 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.

And what this means is that schools of choice -- which offer the individual the possibility of working at what most interests, and proves most motivating, for that person -- offer the greatest hope of eliciting excellence from the largest number of individuals. The point is not, of course, to please and entertain or pander to kids. It is to enlist them in their own education -- so as to render teaching effective; to increase the likelihood that particular learnings will build into human traits and qualities we can admire; and to make good our intent to produce people of widening interests who will thus go on learning. But none of this is very realizeable unless and until we can get youngsters truly engaged with what we want them to learn.

Motivation is not a very popular theme these days. It's not an 'in' topic and surely not a buzzword. So I want to spend a minute or

two on the extent to which it is currently missing. Let me cite some statistics for you: Dropout rates in most of our cities hover around the 50% mark. In some it is much higher, as in Detroit where 75% of the students leave school before graduating.[10] More than half the dropouts cite their dislike for school as the main reason they left.[11] But we err in concluding that it's just the poor kids, the inner city minorities who feel this way. The evidence suggests that a lot of middle class kids who will see it through and graduate are just putting in 'seat time' and have beguiled their teachers into 'no hassle' bargains: treaties whereby teachers don't ask much and students don't make much trouble for them.[12]

Kids drop out of school psychologically before they actually leave. They are, in effect, 'in-school dropouts.' It appears that we are loaded with in-school dropouts. 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 dropout-prone, but the average student.[13] 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." There's <u>nothing</u> good to report about school. It should have proved instructive to Excellence advocates that by far the most frequent best thing named was "friends," and that "sports" came in second.[14] But what <u>interests</u> students almost seems to have been found irrelevant by much of the Excellence Movement.

We've even got educators who seem to have given up altogether on making youngsters willing participants in learning. One respected analyst, for instance, has concluded that dull classrooms where most are bored are simply inevitable.[15] And another sadly concedes that we just

have to face up to it and recognize the limited appeal that knowledge holds for many students.[16] A recent study estimated that perhaps as many as two-thirds of the nation's high school population "have disengaged from the academic learning process."[17] TWO-THIRDS. That's a monumental indictment. It's like the school where everybody fails or drops out. At some point, I think the figures have got to show there's something fundamentally 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 in our high schools have disengaged from the learning process, then we'd better redesign that process. I don't think the Excellence Movement as currently constituted is going to make it in that respect. Essentially its strategy has been to mandate more of the same. It has assumed that by requiring more homework and tests and stiff courses, we're going to arrive at greater educational accomplishment. As some of the Movement's critics have noted, its diagnoses render its prescriptions inadequate: if things really are as bad as we are told, how can we accept that doubled doses of exactly the same medicine are going to do the trick? I join those who believe that a lot more is necessary: we are going to have to make fundamental changes in the structure of schools in order to make them operate differently. The disappointments of the 60s showed quite conclusively the almost unlimited capacity of schools as presently constituted to diffuse and absorb and coopt reform measures. Success is going to require something far more fundamental than more of the same. The choice feature is a relatively small but critical change that might just do it. It just could succeed in making students and their families -- and teachers, for that matter -- genuine partners in our public schools. I urge that you consider it.

Footnotes

1 Jim Bencivenga, "Students and Teachers Face More Tests - But What Do Results Mean?" Christian Science Monitor, September, 1985. (Reprinted Educational Excellence Network, September, 1985)

2 See Mary Anne Raywid, "The Coming Centralization of Education," in The Great School Debate: Which Way for American Education? edited by Beatrice and Ronald Gross (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1985), pp. 400-404.

3 See Rolf Blank et al., Survey of Magnet Schools - Final Report: Analyzing A Model for Quality Integrated Education (Washington: James H. Lowry, 1983)

4 "Educational Choice in New York District 4," manuscript report from Pelavin Associates, Washington, D.C. Revised draft distributed in March, 1986.

5 According to official figures compiled by District 4 as of April, 1984.

6 See Mary Anne Raywid, "Synthesis of Research on Schools of Choice," Educational Leadership, April, 1984, pp. 70-78.

7 Blank, Op. cit.

8 Mary Anne Raywid, The Current Status of Schools of Choice in Public Secondary Education (Hempstead, NY: Project on Alternatives in Education, Hofstra University, 1982)

9 A Nation At Risk: The Imperatives for Educational Reform (Washington: U.S. Department of Education, April 1983), p. 12

10 "School Reform: What About the Dropout?" The Journal-Gazette, December 15, 1985 (Reprinted Educational Excellence Network, December 1985/January 1986)

11 See Dale Mann, "Can We Help Dropouts: Thinking About the Undoable," Teachers College Record, Spring, 1986, p. 308. (Actually, 51% is the figure for male dropouts; it is lower for females.)

12 For reports of such bargains, see, e.g., Arthur G. Powell et al., The Shopping Mall High School (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1985); and Michael Sedlak et al., "High School Reform and the 'Bargain' to Learn," Education and Urban Society, February 1985.

13 John de Jung and Kenneth Duckworth, "New Study Looks at High School Absenteeism," Perspectives (R & D Center for Educational Policy and Management, University of Oregon), Summer/Fall, 1985, p. 4.

14 Barbara Benham Tye, Multiple Realities: A Study of 13 American High Schools (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1985), p. 180.

[15] Seymour Sarason, Schooling in America: Scapegoat or Salvation (New York: Free Press, 1983)

[16] Philip A. Cusick, The Egalitarian Ideal and the American High School (New York: Longman, 1983)

[17] Michael Sedlak, Op. cit.