

CHOICE AND NATIONAL STANDARDS CONFERENCE

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In principle it sounds desirable to have national standards that can be applied to choice and, indeed, to any other major proposal for American schools. After all, the day is not so long past when we feared regional injustices that national authority was needed to reverse. Moreover, we thought that more wisdom was likely to be tapped and reflected in decisions reached at the national level. Local decisions were assumed more often prey to ignorance and provincialism. So many would have felt national standards might be a good idea in the interests of better and more just decisions.

There is also what appears an additional strong current reason for national standards in education. It is the nation's increasing diversity and the growing number of youngsters who, by virtue of present experience as well as background, appear to be getting little of the flavor and substance of what this country has been about. As the challenge is sometimes stated, we've got lots of *pluribus* and not enough *unum*. What better voice to supply the *unum*, then, than the voice of the nation?

Yet another reason why national standards have appeal in principle is that they may provide a desirable balance among the several levels and power constituents, and perhaps most particularly in a choice system. The most effective forms of choice shift power from state and district levels to school and individual levels. Perhaps a balance is needed, a centripetal force as a check on the centrifugal pulls which choice exerts.

But these are arguments in principle -- and whatever their merits, the realities of practice have not always been encouraging. The history of

federal efforts to state goals and standards for school treatment of the handicapped is a case in point. The result has been a giant separate system operating parallel to that of the system which controls the rest of the students, dual authorities and officialdom and guidelines and monitoring plans, untold expense, and worst of all, a system that seems to be exploiting the very youngsters it was created to help. (I'm thinking of a nice residential district close to where I live that's recently been discovered to have declared 29% of its Black students to be handicapped -- a self-fulfilling prophecy and a permanent stigma.)

Another equally telling example is the federal Chapter 1 program -- which, again, despite good intentions and undoubtedly some very positive accomplishments, makes it close to imperative to operate educationally inferior arrangements. I'm thinking of the pullout programs that are the safest way -- the only assured way devised to date -- to meet Chapter 1 guidelines. But pullouts represent highly questionable educational arrangements, often widening the gap between regular and remedial students instead of narrowing it.

Thus, while I strongly support both special education and compensatory education in principle, in practice one needs to approach the prospect of new national responsibilities carefully. In part, of course, my misgivings are a matter of a Democrat's suspicions about a Republican initiative -- especially one that's unprecedented in the nation's history, and perhaps most especially about one that represents such a stunning reversal of Republican Party doctrine of almost 50 years standing.

Choice is, of course, even more vulnerable to external manipulation than special or compensatory education in that both the ends and the means associated with choice feature school level control and

school-to-school diversity. Thus, among choice's more extreme fans -- the more committed market advocates and those most adamant about government intrusion into education -- even very vague and abstract national standards might be anathema. An observer has pointed up the incompatibilities in the British system, which has choice, along with a national curriculum and national tests. "Is this 'real' choice?" he asks: (Ball, 1992: 7)

Is this a market? It certainly has the effect of a market in creating competition between schools but the possibilities of invention and entrepreneurship and expressions of minority interests or commitments among parents are severely limited by political control of the market. Is this the worst of both worlds -- a political market?

Of course not all choice advocates operate on a market paradigm and the incompatibilities may not appear as fundamental and extensive on other views, as we shall see. But as a prior consideration, I want to explore two kinds of relationships or connections observable between choice and national standards -- first empirical sorts of connections and then logical. Some might conclude, as the announcement of this conference suggests, that the major link between choice and national standards espousal is ignorance -- i.e., that to urge both is simply not to understand the operation and requisites of either. It is to lack understanding of the way national standards would restrict the permissible options, as well as of the way genuine choice might clash with such standards or reflect different priorities. Those who seek choice in the interests of broadly diversifying schools might certainly conclude that the espousal of both stems from ignorance. Even those who are interested in a fairly modest reorganizing and repackaging of content,

rather than in substantially revolutionizing it, express concern about the constraints national standards would probably impose.

But there are cynics, on the other hand, who would say that the espousal of both choice and national standards is a fairly typical sort of ploy well calculated to please both the centralizers and the decentralizers and to leave both claiming victory. The extensive talk about the unfettering that will accrue from substituting output for input controls has so muddied the waters that centralizing intentions might well be met simply by having a national testing program without even bothering to announce standards or curriculum. In any event, the choice - national standards combination is well calculated to yield considerable activity without disturbing essential balances too substantially. Many would find it thus to be quite a sound political move -- something of a sham, perhaps, so far as real change or reform is concerned, but good image material suggesting that the initiators represent movement, accomplishment, responsiveness, and perhaps even flexibility and compromise.

A third sort of empirical connection articulating the two also reflects a political purpose but a somewhat different one. It is suggested in a British official's reflections on the purpose of their Education Reform Act of 1988 which established choice and a national curriculum, and promised national testing. He mused: (Ball, p. 16)

I don't think the ... [Act] ... is all that much about ... parental choice, more parental power. The ... [Act] ... is undoubtedly about the curriculum, there is no question about that.... in addition, the ... [Act] ... is about reducing the power of Local Authorities, that's what the ...[Act] ... is about.

Many others have noted, too, that the revolutionizing legislation stemmed from Mrs. Thatcher's commitment to markets in preference to

governance, and her related determination to eliminate the bureaucracy that in Britain is lodged largely at the local educational authority level. (Whitty &, p. 2) Such paired intentions are quite a plausible possibility so far as agendas in this country are concerned also, to the purpose of ending the dominance of school districts and their officials in controlling schools.

There are at least two additional empirical connections between intentions and the espousal both of choice and national standards, both equity-related. Some might well see the choice plus national standards combination as a way around equity requirements -- as likely to permit substantial selectivity on the part of schools, for example. Chubb and Moe (1990), for instance, recommend that their new 'public' schools be barred from discriminating but able to select their own students. On the other hand, "controlled choice" advocates may see the choice - national standards combination as a way to highlight the inequities of ineffective schools and force their improvement.

The empirical connections mentioned reflect several of the interesting features about the simultaneous espousal of what appear to be a centralization measure and a decentralization measure. One is the range of contemporary purposes to which the combination responds. The other is the fact that some of these purposes appear contradictory (e.g. enhancing or defeating the interests of equity).

Now there are several possible logical relationships between the choice and national standards proposals. The two have advocates like Checker Finn and Denis Doyle who appear to see them as entirely compatible. Those who do so tend to envision an ends/means division of function and authority reminiscent of the Tyler Curriculum Rationale, whereby national goals and standards reflect the ends all schools ought to pursue. Families

ought to be free to choose among multiple programs for doing so, however. Thus, whatever diversity the choice system generates is a matter of means, not ends. It follows that this sort of conception of the relation between national standards and choice puts a real cap on diversity.

At the other extreme one might claim the logical relation between choice and national standards to be diametric opposition -- a classical instance of a Marxist (or Hegelian) thesis and antithesis. The license for autonomy and diversity immediately generate the denial in the form of a call for constraint and uniformity.

A third possible logical connection between the two seeming opposites is that they call for some sort of compromise between antinomies, the rights of individual and collectivity, and the claims of local and national interests. One way to situate such a compromise is to find the espousal of choice within the limits imposed by national standards to be reflective of one of our most fundamental and enduring traditions, that of checks and balances. On this view, to embrace both choice and national standards in education is merely to give contextual application to that principle. To espouse the pair is to sustain the division of authority among multiple levels of government and across agencies or institutions. It is to continue our tradition of cautious inter-agency and cross-level constraints.