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## *SECTION ONE: COMMENTARIES*

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### A Brief Modern History of Choice

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I've been interested in school choice for a long time—for about 30 years now. When I first began writing about it in the 1970s, people were reluctant to take at face value the argument that it was good for education—that one size really could not fit all. In the 1970s, the most frequent rationales for the school choice recommendation were a market argument featuring a lot of competition talk, or an equity argument featuring desegregation talk.

Rarely did the choice advocates of the 1970s argue the need for school diversity and choice on the basis of the diversified pedagogical needs and interests of children. But that is exactly what I was trying to argue. It won me some friends among people interested in at-risk kids and dropout prevention, and those middle class folk desiring more innovative and challenging schools, and eventually those seeking urban

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school reform—particularly in Spanish Harlem where a young, Hispanic superintendent was busy launching an educational revolution.

The choice idea got a big boost from the desegregation folks when the feds picked it up in 1976 with magnet school legislation. They offered considerable incentive (in the form of money) to open schools of choice with themes that would prove sufficiently attractive across racial and socio-economic class lines to lure students from one school to another.

Although there were efforts to privatize the management or sponsorship of choice possibilities, this did not gain much popularity during the twentieth century, and the voucher idea was defeated repeatedly in one locale after another. So although the idea of school diversification began to gain some prominence as of the mid-1970s, the idea of choice among providers took longer. That first emerged in the 1990s with charter schools. And it seems to have been no accident that it coincided with a period of considerable criticism of public schools.

Charter schools were really intended as an alternative to management by school boards, as they take control away from school boards. Thus, it is not surprising that school boards are rarely very kindly disposed toward them. The charter school proposal was an indictment of the way boards were operating schools and of their lack of success with them. The first charter school laws were passed in 1991-1992, and it did not take long for charter legislation to be passed in a number of states. Both directly and indirectly, charter schools have greatly increased the amount of choice available in public education.

As charter schools began making choices available to the community, public school systems that had not previously offered choices began to do so. In some school systems, it was made quite explicit that they were responding to a challenge. In Boston, for instance, the teachers union proposed that the school system respond to the charter schools under way there by launching a set of innovative schools. Thus Boston began a collection of special "pilot" schools which are available by choice. These are special schools the city has freed from a number of regulations binding other public schools, and the "pilot schools" now total 19 and are due to grow to 28. Elsewhere there has been talk of "charter districts" and some would say that Boston's "pilot" schools are the equivalent of a "charter district." New York's current Chancellor has an "Autonomy Zone" which operates free of many of the restrictions regulating other districts, and some might say this is the equivalent of a "charter district."

But even short of such arrangements, we have come to have a considerable amount of school-to-school diversity. Especially with the small

schools movement, we now have schools and academies that are themed on the basis of differing philosophies or approaches, on the basis of academic disciplines, prospective career choices, hobbies, learning styles or methods, or learning locations (e.g., museums, stores, construction sites). And now with charter schools, we have schools that are run by individual proprietors, corporations, unions, teacher groups, churches, coops, hospitals, research organizations, banks, civic organizations, television stations, and military organizations.

So in the relatively brief time of three decades, we have moved from virtually no diversity and choice within public education to quite a range of choice, both as to programs and as to providers.

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