

Choice in Education: Not Whether, but What

Choice. It is a pleasant enough sounding word. In some contexts, “choice” conjures up notions of freedom and democracy, concepts and conditions Americans revere. In specific application to education, choice describes a set of systems or processes by which parents are able to choose the school their child attends. What could be controversial about that? Yet debate surrounding the issue of choice has sparked a war of rhetoric that has reached schools and local communities, corporate boardrooms, state legislative chambers, even Congress and the White House.

Choice is not a new issue. It appears on the education policy agenda in various guises with almost cyclical regularity. But debate about choice has been reinvigorated by the now nearly decade-old school reform movement and continuing frustration with the insufficient academic achievement of American students.

The most heated debates ensue when the conversation turns to recommendations to include private schools in a system of choice—in other words, to appropriate public dollars to nonpublic institutions. Proponents assert that choice—allowing for the natural give and take of the free market system—will foster competition among schools and bring about much needed school improvement (Chubb & Moe, 1990). Opponents contend, in equally strong language and strident tones, that a system of unfettered

choice will squeeze the life out of the public school system and do irreparable harm to the American social fabric. This column will attempt to elucidate some of the questions surrounding the complex topic of choice.

What Is “Choice”?

“Choice” is not a program, but a descriptor of many different educational arrangements. Some choice plans involve only public schools; others include both public and private educational institutions.

Public sector choice plans, which confine school selection options to public school systems, encompass inter- and intradistrict choice programs. Under an interdistrict choice arrangement, students are allowed to cross their normal school district boundaries and attend school in another district. California, for example, allows students to attend school either in the district in which they live or in the district closest to their parents’ place of employment.

In a system of intradistrict public school choice, students remain within their assigned school district but may select among a variety of school options. Intradistrict choice plans include the following (Education Commission of the States, 1989):

- open enrollment, in which families may send their children to their neighborhood school or to any other school in the district that has spaces available

What is controversial is not the existence of private schools, but the provision of public financial support for them.

- controlled choice, a variant of open enrollment, which limits or "controls" students' selections to maintain schools' racial balance

- magnet schools, organized around particular instructional themes (such as mathematics, technology, or foreign language) and designed to attract students whose interests match the school's program

- schools within schools, which maintain magnet-type programs located within larger, more comprehensive schools

- charter schools, designed to be teacher-initiated schools of choice situated within a public school system.

Then there are the choice plans that include private schools. This is the most controversial aspect of choice, or at least the component that sparks the most heated debate. What is controversial is not the existence of private schools, but the provision of public financial support for them.

Private school choice plans generally fall into the categories of vouchers or tuition tax credits. In a voucher system, parents are provided with direct payments redeemable for private school services. Tuition tax credits are in effect tax write-offs designed to offset the cost of private school tuition.

Is There Currently Choice in American Education?

The simple answer is yes, there is choice in American education. In 1925 the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in *Pierce v. Society of Sisters* that private education satisfies a state's compulsory education law, thus constitutionally sanctioning public-private choice in American education. Before *Pierce*, many parents openly exercised choice in determining the form and extent of their children's schooling.

Today, nearly 50 million school-age children in the United States are being educated in one of the 83,000 public schools scattered among 15,400 separate

local school districts or in one of the 26,800 private schools (*American Education at a Glance*, 1992). Many parents choose the school—public or private—their children attend.

Some parents opt to send their children to religiously affiliated schools. Some who are financially able send their children to elite nonsectarian private schools. Within public school systems, parents often are able to select their children's school by choosing a magnet school or a school within a school, or simply by persuading district officials to enroll their children in a school other than the one to which they normally would be assigned.

Under current circumstances, serious issues surround the relative equality of access to educational options. Choice conventionally is limited by a family's ability to pay or a parent's adeptness at working the system. Nonetheless, the contemporary issue of choice in education often is incorrectly framed by the debaters. The question is not whether there will be a system of choice. There is one now. Rather, the issue increasingly is becoming one of the degree and directions of an expanded system of choice. Who will have choice? How much choice will be available? Among what will parents be able to choose?

What Are the Tensions in the Choice Debate?

Tensions in the choice debate fall, though not always neatly, into four categories: (1) equity and access, (2) school improvement and accountability, (3) issues of constitutionality, and (4) family freedom and the needs of the social community. Around each of these dimensions swirls a series of questions; the answers will shape the scope and direction of American school choice.

Equity and Access

Who will have access to which schools and by what means? Equity is of particular concern among those who worry

about issues of social mobility and social cohesion. Will a choice system increase racial and ethnic isolation? Will school admission policies serve as screens for homogeneity or magnets for heterogeneity? Will educational programs be designed to attract students from similar social and economic strata or to draw clientele from across the socioeconomic spectrum?

Embedded in the equity and access dimension are additional issues of information, transportation, and finance. How will parents acquire full and accurate information about the education choices available to their children? What kind of information will be provided to assist parents in making intelligent choices? Low-income and minority parents typically have less access to information than do other parents. How will the system ensure that these individuals have adequate information?

The availability of transportation is often a key determinant of choice. If students do not select their neighborhood school, how will they be transported to their school of choice? In an area in which public transportation is adequate and accessible, this may be a less crucial issue. But if public transportation is unavailable, how will students whose parents do not own cars be afforded transportation to their schools? What about students who reside in sparsely populated, far-flung rural areas? What kinds of educational options will be available to them?

How will education dollars be apportioned? Will money "follow the student," or will schools (at least public schools) be allocated a set number of dollars on the basis of estimated enrollments? Will students who require special attention and services, such as handicapped and non-English-speaking students, be "worth more" as a way to provide incentives for schools to offer programs for these youngsters? If not, what means will be devised to encourage schools to provide educational programs for these students?

If a voucher plan is enacted, will private schools be allowed to charge tuitions in excess of the voucher amount?

School Improvement and Accountability

Advocates of choice, particularly advocates of extending choice to private schools, contend that competition fostered by the market will spark educational innovation and, more important, will increase student achievement. Yet little empirical data currently illuminate the effects of school choice plans. Persuasive evidence needs to be marshaled if proponents or opponents of choice are to make their case on the basis of facts.

The following are some of the questions that need to be answered: Do students who are able to choose their schools display greater academic progress than students who attend assigned schools? What, if any, achievement differences exist between students educated in private schools and those who attend public schools? Some recent data suggest, for example, that achievement rates differ little for publicly and privately educated students from similar backgrounds (Levin, 1991; Shanker, 1991).

Moreover, how will Americans know if schools are achieving their desired results? How will student achievement be measured in a system of choice? Will all schools—public and private—subscribe to a single assessment system? If measures of achievement differ from school to school, if they are in effect idiosyncratic to particular schools, how will parents be able to compare school results? Will the market, as choice proponents suggest, act as a sufficient accountability mechanism, enabling good schools to thrive and bad schools to go out of business, or is some other kind of school accountability system needed?

Who will be the providers under an expanded system of choice? Will any entrepreneur be able to hang out an educational shingle and declare the enterprise a school, or will some set of

authorized state or federal agencies be empowered to establish minimum standards and qualifications? Will a sufficient number of providers enter the market to offer an array of differing educational options?

Choice is not the only reform strategy on the education horizon. Much discussion under way at the national level revolves around the possibility of a national curriculum (perhaps patterned after California's thematic curriculum frameworks) and a national test. Is it possible to reconcile these reform thrusts with a system of choice? If so, how?

Finally, can choice help create a system that simultaneously is responsive to students' needs and desires, on the one hand, and to external demands for a differently prepared work force, on the other?

Issues of Constitutionality

A system of public school choice does not raise the constitutionality issue, but including private schools does. Would a voucher scheme withstand a constitutional challenge? Does providing financial aid to religiously affiliated schools automatically violate the First Amendment? Could a broad-scale tuition tax arrangement be declared constitutional? (The U.S. Supreme Court already has upheld the constitutionality of Minnesota's limited tuition tax system.) Are there identifiable characteristics of a public-support-for-private-education plan that might meet the constitutional test?

Family Freedom and the Needs of the Social Community

A key public policy issue in the choice debate centers on the purpose of schooling. Parents and students have legitimate desires for educational choice. Society has a legitimate need for cohesion. Within a system of expanded choice, how is it possible to balance the private benefits derived from schooling—personal fulfillment, increased earning capacity—with the public interest associ-

ated with education—preparing individuals to function effectively in a democratic society?

If permitted to choose, is household preference for schooling aligned closely with racial, religious, or occupational status? Are socializing elements outside of school sufficient to engender social cohesion, or do we continue to rely on schooling as a major engine of social cohesion? Alternatively, has the nation grown so complex and diverse that the notion of a common culture and national social community should be abandoned altogether?

Conclusion

Parents today are faced with enormously complicated decisions regarding their children. Among these are the nature and quality of education, the environment in which schooling occurs, and the long-term prospects and possibilities particular forms of education afford.

Schools, particularly public schools, are under intense pressure to do more, better, faster. After nearly a decade of reform, most schools in this nation remain much the same as they were before *A Nation at Risk* (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983) became front-page news. And the chorus of voices advocating wholesale reexamination of the premises underlying the American system of common schools grows louder each day.

President Bush has made publicly financed public-private school choice a centerpiece of his America 2000 education program. Communications mogul Chris Whittle has assembled in his Edison Project an impressive team of educators to design a set of for-profit schools. A private corporation has agreed to run several schools in Baltimore and Miami. A voucher initiative attempting to qualify for the California ballot is seen by some as a test of the depth of support for privatizing a large segment of education in that bellwether state.

Claims of its proponents notwithstanding, it is unlikely that choice alone will solve education's problems. Despite Americans' historical penchant for simple, quick-fix solutions, no single silver-bullet education reform strategy has ever been discovered. H. L. Mencken probably was right when he observed, "Every complex problem has a simple solution—and it's usually wrong."

This, however, should not lull choice opponents into complacency. Those who dismiss the prospect of expanded choice—including expansion to the private sector—with a "This, too, shall pass" sigh do so at their own peril. The question no longer is whether there will be choice in education. Rather, the issue is what kind of choice, how much choice, and for whom? Educators who

are concerned about the direction of education must also care about the issue of choice. They must grapple with questions of equity and access, school improvement and accountability, constitutional balance, and family freedom and the needs of the social community. We all have an obligation to participate in the debate. ■

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