SCHOOL CHOICE: THE ESSENTIAL REFORM

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Introduction

Should parents be allowed to choose the schools their children attend? When parents choose nonpublic schools, should tax dollars go to the chosen schools or continue to fund the schools that failed to win their approval? These questions are easy to ask, yet their answers are difficult and have become the subject of fierce national debate.

Educational choice is not an untried concept. Many states and cities allow parents to choose among public schools within their districts of residence, and it appears inevitable that these opportunities will be extended to allow *inter*district public school choice in the next few years. Indeed, eight states already allow parents to choose public schools outside their districts of residence.

Comprehensive educational choice programs, such as those available to some students in Wisconsin and Vermont, extend choice to *private* schools. Funds that otherwise would go directly to public schools are given instead to parents or their chosen advocates in the form of certificates or scholarships, or as deposits to Education Savings Accounts (Bast and Bast 1991; Blum 1958, 1967; Coons and Sugarman 1978a, 1978b, 1992; Friedman 1962). Parents can redeem education certificates or make withdrawals from the accounts to pay for tuition at participating public and private schools or, with the assistance of education service coordinators, purchase education programs from multiple providers.

Comprehensive educational choice constitutes a partial privatization of education. Public funding of education remains intact, and with it public oversight of the kinds of schools and instruction that

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qualify for public support.[1] Still, such a program of choice represents a significant departure from the usual method of financing and managing public schooling. It raises questions regarding the public nature and benefits of education, the ability of government to produce quality services, and the depth of the state's commitment to using its power to tax to finance education. It could also signal further movement toward privatization at some future date (Lieberman 1989, 1993; Bast and Wittmann 1991).

The public increasingly tends to favor comprehensive educational choice. Gallup Polls conducted in 1981, 1983, 1985, and 1986 asked if the respondent supported an education certificate, or voucher, system that would allow parents to choose nongovernment schools. In each year, more replied "yes" than "no" (Kirkpatrick 1990). Seventy percent of respondents to the latest (1992) Gallup Poll supported comprehensive educational choice. Support among Blacks and Hispanics, who currently have the least or worst choices of failing big-city schools, was a remarkable 86 percent (*Wall Street Journal*, 21 September 1992).

In opposition to comprehensive educational choice stands the public school lobby, consisting of teachers union officials, organized groups of school boards, superintendents, and others with a stake in the status quo. The public school lobby has cloaked itself in powerful symbols such as social democracy, equal opportunity, and national unity. Nevertheless, choice opponents have suffered some high-profile defections from their ranks. Wisconsin State Representative Annette "Polly" Williams, a black liberal Democrat, coauthored and helped pass Milwaukee's landmark private school choice program and now travels the country speaking in favor of educational choice. The usually liberal Brookings Institution in 1990 published *Politics, Markets and America's Schools*, by John E. Chubb and Terry M. Moe, who suggested that their colleagues "would do well to entertain the notion that choice *is* a panacea." They go on to write (Chubb and Moe 1990: 217):

> This is our way of saying that choice is not like the other reforms and should not be combined with them as part of a reformist strategy for improving America's public schools. Choice is a self-contained reform with its own rationale and justification. It has the capacity all by itself to bring about the kind of transformation that, for years, reformers have been seeking to engineer in a myriad of other ways.

[1]Some of the harshest criticism of vouchers comes from persons seeking more complete privatization of education (Chodes 1991, Gottfried 1991, Boaz 1993).

It is likely that, over time, the battle will continue to go badly for the opponents of choice. The National Education Association, once a foe of even public school choice programs, has been compelled to moderate its opposition to choice and now is reduced to using force and intimidation to keep choice proposals off the ballot in California, Colorado, Pennsylvania, and Florida. Other socialist enterprises and economies around the world are collapsing or being sold. Voices for privatizing America's biggest government-run enterprise—education—are getting louder and are coming from ever more respected people. People like Chris Whittle, Benno Schmidt, William Bennett, and Nobel laureates Milton Friedman and Gary Becker are difficult to ignore.

When American Federation of Teachers President Albert Shanker claimed that "the evidence shows that vouchers would not encourage excellence or ensure a better education for poor children" (Shanker 1991: 5), his self-interest was painfully apparent. But was then-President George Bush right when he said that "We can encourage educational excellence by encouraging parental choice, [which] will create the competitive climate that stimulates excellence" (Bush 1991: 3)? What evidence is there that choice is, indeed, the essential reform?

Evidence from Educational Choice Experiments

Empirical evidence from experimental programs involving educational choice is very slim, but nonetheless worth reviewing. Milwaukee, Wisconsin, and the state of Vermont have choice programs that extend to private schools. Alum Rock, California, and the state of Minnesota have experimented with public school-only choice programs. And Minnesota has a tuition tax deduction for public and private schools.

Alum Rock, California

Beginning in 1970, the federal government's Office of Equal Opportunity (OEO) conducted an experiment designed to test the effects on student achievement of contracting for instruction, incentive-based agreements, and educational choice (Capell 1981; Lieberman 1989; Witte 1992: 210). Although the experiment was originally intended to include private schools, none ever participated. Parents were given vouchers with which to choose among competing public schools, but the schools were protected from the consequences of competition in numerous ways, including job guarantees for the staff of schools suffering declining enrollments and enrollment limits on the most popular schools. (In a real market, this would be analogous

to capping sales of popular cars and insisting that some consumers buy less-preferred models.)

A wide range of experiments in instructional methods and the size of schools took place during the Alum Rock project. For example, some 45 special programs operated in 13 schools involving such innovations as open classrooms and combined grade levels. Teachers and principals were given greater autonomy, and some degree of parental choice was created. But comprehensive educational choice was not part of the bigger experiment.

Evaluation of the Alum Rock experiment was hindered in many ways. Several innovations were being tried at once, making it impossible to isolate the causes of improved or retarded student performance. The duration of several parts of the experiment, particularly the contracting-out portions, was too short to allow for meaningful evaluation. The OEO was subjected to heavy criticism for its failure to plan to experiment in a way that would make accurate evaluation possible (Lieberman 1989: 255).

Evaluations of Alum Rock that *were* conducted found no apparent effect on reading achievement, students' perceptions of themselves and others, or their social skills (Capell 1981). Lieberman (1989: 98) quotes a 1973 General Accounting Office study of the contracting-out portion of the experiment that concluded, "because of a number of shortcomings in both the design and implementation of the experiment, it is our opinion that the question as to the merits of performance contracting versus traditional educational methods remains unanswered."[2] The Alum Rock experiment, in short, produced no usable data concerning the merits either of privatization (contracting-out) or educational choice.

Minnesota Tax Deductions and Public School Choice

Since 1955, the state of Minnesota has allowed parents to deduct education expenses, such as tuition and transportation, from their state income taxes. In 1992, deductions of up to $650 for elementary students and $1,000 for secondary students were allowed (Nathan 1989a: 8); private schools, including religiously affiliated schools, are allowed to participate in the program.

Tax deductions for tuition lower the financial barrier facing parents who might choose private schools for their children, and so represent a way of encouraging educational choice and competition among

[2]General Accounting Office (1973) *Evaluation of the Office of Economic Opportunity's Performance Contracting Experiment.* Report to the Congress by the Comptroller General of the United States, B-130515, Washington, D.C.

public and private schools. In Minnesota, however, the size of the tax deduction is too low to influence parents' decisions regarding selection of schools. The Minnesota income tax is 6 percent for persons reporting incomes of $13,000 or less and 8 percent for incomes over $13,000.[3] At the 8 percent tax level, a $1,000 tuition payment qualifies a family for only $80 in tax relief. Not surprisingly, studies of the Minnesota tax deduction program have found that it has little influence on parents' selection of schools (Darling-Hammond and Kirby 1985).

Between 1985 and 1988, the Minnesota legislature authorized several additional educational choice programs (Nathan 1989a: 12–14). The two most popular programs, the High School Graduation Incentives and Area Learning Centers programs, permit students between the ages of 12 and 21 who have not succeeded in one public school to attend another public school outside their district. Over 17,000 students took advantage of these two programs in the 1990–91 school year. The next most popular program—the Postsecondary Options program—allows 11th and 12th graders in Minnesota public schools to attend colleges, universities, and vocational schools. About 6,700 students participated during the 1990–91 school year (Schroeder 1993).

Most relevant to the discussion here, however, is Minnesota's state-wide public school choice program enacted in 1987 and implemented in the 1987–88 school year. Under the Enrollment Options Program, parents of children between the ages of 5 and 18 may transfer their children to public schools outside the district in which they live (Nathan 1989a: 14). Public funds follow the student to the new school. Parents pay for transportation of their children to the boundary of the receiving district, whereupon the receiving district takes responsibility for transporting the child to his or her school.

In the 1989–90 school year, 3,218 students of 731,455—less than one-half of one percent—took advantage of the Enrollment Options Program (Witte 1991a). In the 1990–91 school year, the number of students participating in the program increased to over 5,900 students—roughly three-quarters of one percent of the state's total enrollment that year.

Despite the low level of public participation in the program, opinion polls indicate that the Minnesota open enrollment program is popular, with some 63 percent supporting the plan in a 1988 poll (Nathan 1989b: 208). One hundred percent of families with students

[3]An additional rate of 0.5 percent is collected on certain upper-income classes.

participating in the program report that they are satisfied with it (Nathan 1989a: 14).

The problem with drawing any lessons from the Minnesota program is that, for all its significance as the nation's first state-wide open enrollment program, the actual impact of the program on schools and students is likely to be small and difficult to measure. In the words of one observer, the Minnesota plan "appears to be radical and gains enormous press but in practice ruffles few feathers and costs almost nothing" (Witte 1991a: 14).

Nevertheless, the Enrollment Options Program has had a dramatic effect on a few individual school districts in the state. In Brooklyn Center, for example, 390 of the district's 1,659 students open-enrolled from outside the district. District superintendent Doug Rossi reports "the district gains more than $1 million in revenue per year and employs 16 to 20 more teachers because of open enrollment" (Schroeder 1993: 6). On the other hand, when 10 percent of the Herman school district's 261 students decided to open-enroll out of the district, officials nearly voted to close the high school and bus students to another district for the 1993–94 school year. The motion failed on a tie vote (Schroeder 1993: 7).

These anecdotes suggest that, in a few years, the Minnesota open enrollment program could begin producing measurable results for large numbers of students and schools. Until then, it is not a significant source of empirical data on the benefits or pitfalls of choice.

Milwaukee's Parental Choice Program

Unlike the Alum Rock and Minnesota experiments, the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program is a potentially valuable source of empirical research on the effectiveness of educational choice. The program was enacted in 1990, the result of a remarkable alliance between Wisconsin State Representative Annette "Polly" Williams, a liberal Democrat representing Milwaukee's inner city, and Wisconsin Governor Tommy Thompson, a conservative Republican. The program allows up to 1 percent of students in the Milwaukee Public School system to receive state aid of approximately $2,500 per student to attend private schools. The program is available only to low-income students, and sectarian schools are not allowed to participate.

Although often called a voucher program, the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program does not give guardians certificates or vouchers with which to pay tuition. Instead, funds go directly to schools that sign up for the program and report qualified student enrollments. The program is limited in other ways: no more than 49 percent of a private school's enrollment may consist of pupils attending the school with

state aid, and only newly enrolled students or students who qualified for aid in the previous year are eligible for the program. Participating schools may not charge tuition in excess of the $2,500 state grant, and they are required to submit reports on academic achievement, daily attendance, percentage of dropouts, percentage of suspensions and expulsions, and evidence of parental involvement in the schools' programs. Thus, they share some of the regulatory and reporting burdens of public schools, but must get by on about half of the funding public schools receive.

The decision to exclude sectarian schools means there were relatively few schools in the city eligible to participate in the program. Enrollment in September 1990 stood at 341 in seven schools; another 217 students were refused admission because of space limitations. In September 1991, enrollment was up to 562, but participating schools had fallen to six due to the closing of one school (Juanita Virgil Academy). One hundred thirty-three students were turned away for lack of space in 1991.

John Witte, professor of political science at the University of Wisconsin, completed the first in-depth study of the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program (Witte 1991b). His generally favorable evaluation is made especially significant by the fact that he approached his investigation highly skeptical of the program; indeed, the Wisconsin Policy Research Institute complained the program evaluation was "mismanaged" because Herbert Grover, the state's Superintendent of Public Instruction, "chose an evaluator who has been critical of choice" (Mitchell 1992: 2).

Witte's evaluation, while not without criticism of the program, nevertheless can be considered a firm endorsement of educational choice. While the program is too new for a researcher to draw strong conclusions, several of Witte's findings are notable. He found that, "rather than skimming off the best students, this program seems to provide an alternative educational environment for students who are not doing particularly well in the public school system" (Witte 1991b: iv). Just 25 percent were at or above the median in reading and 36 percent in math, vs. 35 percent and 43 percent, respectively, for all Milwaukee Public Schools (MPS) students. Moreover, "Choice families appear to be considerably less well off than the average MPS family in terms of employment, income, and being on public assistance or AFDC. They are also less likely to come from two-parent families" (Witte 1991b: 5).

Regarding student achievement, Witte found little change in test scores that could be attributed to the choice program. Choice students improved slightly relative to a national population on reading

but fell slightly in mathematics; on the same tests, MPS and low-income students declined slightly in both areas. Reports Witte (1991b: 19):

> If there is any firm conclusion from these results, and we are not sure if there is much of one, it is that when students begin as far behind as the students apparently did in the first year of this program, seven or eight months will not produce dramatic changes in test scores.

Though they came from poorer socioeconomic backgrounds, Witte found that choice students had slightly higher attendance rates than their MPS counterparts. He also found evidence that choice was motivating students and parents: "Student attendance, parental attitudes toward choice schools, opinions of the choice program, and parental involvement were all positive" (Witte 1991b: 23). Involvement by choice parents at home and at school was higher in "every category of parental involvement except belonging to a parent/teacher organization," with the exception explained by the absence of formal PTO-type organizations at some of the choice schools (Witte 1991b: 16). Parental satisfaction with the choice schools is very high, "On every item, not only are the choice parents considerably more satisfied than MPS parents, they are much more satisfied than they were with their prior (public) school" (Witte 1991b: 19–20). Witte's description of the schools helps explain why parents are so happy (Witte 1991b: 17):

> The schools were more than adequate educational institutions. In general, they have elaborate and refined organizational structures that heavily involve parents in the schools. The students have a positive attitude toward their environment and teachers. Classes that we observed were generally small, with a high proportion of time spent on task. The curricula in the schools were relatively rich in terms of arts, music and dance, languages, and computer use. The cultural emphasis in several of these schools was distinct and seemed positive. And most of the instruction we observed was very similar in substance and style to instruction in ordinary public schools.

Witte concludes his report by recommending that the legislature remain committed to the principle that "parents can best exercise accountability and determine the adequacy of educational outcomes by making free choices among schools" (Witte 1991b: 24).

Comment

At just two years of age, the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program can hardly be asked to provide sufficient evidence to end the educa-

tional choice debate. And indeed, the short duration and small size of the program have produced unreliable and ambiguous findings regarding student achievement—arguably the one measure of success that outweighs all others combined. But already the Milwaukee experiment has answered some critics of educational choice.

- A carefully designed choice program need not "skim" the best students from the public schools, leaving the children of less-sophisticated parents behind in even worse learning environments. In fact, choice can have just the opposite effect, benefiting the students who need help the most.
- A choice program can inspire and motivate students and their parents. The private schools participating in the Milwaukee program involved parents much more extensively in school activities than did their public school counterparts. Parents and students responded by valuing the schools and having more positive attitudes toward the learning process.
- The private schools in a choice program will not all be perfect—witness the closing of Juanita Virgil Academy —but they tend to be "more than adequate educational institutions" that create an environment of close cooperation and trust among teachers, students, and parents. Many parents and educators will recognize "the cultural emphasis" that Witte discerned as a very valuable component of a successful classroom, and something too often missing in public schools.

Vermont

Vermont has had a little-known voucher program for over one hundred years, involving thousands of students each year (McClaughry 1984, 1987; Bryan and McClaughry 1989; Cobb 1992: 163). Like the Milwaukee program, it sheds some light on how educational choice works in practice.

Approximately 95 of Vermont's 246 communities have no public high schools. They choose instead to pay tuition for their high-school age students to attend either private high schools or public high schools operated by another town. Thirty-five towns offer this choice to K-6 grade students, either because they have no public elementary schools or because the public schools do not offer every grade. This program originated in 1869 as a way to enable small and geographically distant communities around the state to provide high school education for students without incurring the expense of building their own public schools. Minimum tuition amounts are set at the average cost of tuition at a Vermont public high school, with parents

usually responsible for paying any additional tuition charges and transportation.

Prior to a Vermont Supreme Court ruling in 1961 (*Swart v. South Burlington*, 122 VT 177, 167 A2d 514, 1961), sectarian schools were allowed to participate in the choice program; since that ruling, Catholic and fundamentalist Protestant schools have been excluded. The state requires private schools participating in the program to offer specific courses, maintain attendance records, assess progress regularly, have a public statement of school objectives, maintain a faculty with adequate training (though not necessarily certified), secure formal support for the United States Constitution and laws by the faculty, immunize students, and submit to periodic approval by the state.

Has the Vermont program worked? We are aware of no attempt to compare the achievement growth of students in Vermont who use versus those who do not use the choice program. Anecdotal descriptions invariably mention strong parental support for the program and popular opposition to attempts to end it. Bryan and McClaughry, for example, report that "educators may disapprove, but from all accounts parents love it. In some cases parents have chosen to move into a town simply because it gives them the right to choose their children's school" (Bryan and McClaughry 1989: 195).

Given the great variety of schools that participate—parents are free to "add on" to the tuition with their own funds, and students can even attend schools outside the state—and the self-selective nature of the program, an evaluation of Vermont's system would be difficult to perform. However, the very fact that the program is so little known outside the state suggests that the many disasters predicted by opponents of vouchers have not come to pass. This program has worked quietly for over one hundred years, providing an efficient and popular solution to the problem of low population densities.

Vermont ranked 6th in the nation in 1989 in SAT scores, 7th in percent of high school graduates taking the test, and 13th in high school graduation rate (U.S. Department of Education 1990). Once a relatively low-income state, ranking 35th in personal income per capita in 1980, Vermont had caught up with the rest of the nation by 1989, ranking 25th. Which of these statistics, if any, can be attributed to Vermont's choice program cannot be known, but enough students participate in the program (approximately 25 percent of all high-school age students) that the program must be having some measurable effects.

The experience in Vermont, like those in Alum Rock and Milwaukee, is a highly imperfect test of educational choice. Critics of choice will point to the state's rural character, racial and ethnic homogeneity, or some other features that might make it difficult to apply the Vermont system to other states or communities. Still, what we know of this system's operation tends to fall into the "pro-choice" column of the debate.

Comparisons of Public and Private Schools

While no large-scale experiment with government-funded private school choice has been conducted, an unintended choice experiment has been going on for many years involving millions of students. Side-by-side with public schools with assigned enrollments are private schools enrolling some six million children each year. These are schools of choice in the strictest sense: every child is in a school deliberately chosen by his or her parents. By comparing the organization and outcomes of public and private schools, we can discern some of the consequences of choice.[4]

The pioneering research on public and private school comparisons was conducted by James Coleman, Thomas Hoffer, and Andrew Greeley (Coleman and Hoffer 1987; Greeley 1981). Coleman and his colleagues helped assemble and analyze the *High School and Beyond* study, a panel study that tracked sophomores from 1980 to their senior years in 1,015 public and private high schools. They found that sophomore students attending Catholic high schools had achievement levels 2.4 grade equivalents above those of government school students.[5] After controlling for socioeconomic background, they found a difference in achievement levels about half as great, a still-considerable difference.

Critics pointed out that Catholic school students tended to start at higher levels of achievement than public school students, so Coleman measured the *growth* in student skills instead of the *level* of

[4]Myron Lieberman has pointed out the danger of viewing the current private school marketplace as a genuine market at all. Most private schools are established to allow religious instruction to take place, and most parents of private school students report that religious instruction or "values" in the curriculum are their primary motivation for choosing a private school. The relative scarcity of for-profit and non-sectarian schools, due to the competitive advantages held by publicly funded public schools, means usual market forces are absent or at least suppressed in the private school arena (Lieberman 1989).

[5]Coleman and other researchers generally exclude private high schools other than Catholic schools from their analysis due to the small number of such schools and problems interpreting their test scores.

achievement. Once again, significant differences between Catholic and public schools were documented, this time with Catholic schools achieving a full-year's extra achievement in a two-year period.

Still the critics were not satisfied, contending now that unmeasured differences—perhaps discipline in the home, or religious conviction—that did not affect sophomore achievement nevertheless were affecting the growth of achievement during the following two years of schooling. Perhaps Catholics tend to perform better in school than non-Catholics even after controlling for the usual socioeconomic variables, and thus Catholic schools (which are assumed to be more attractive to Catholic students) draw the best students away from the local public schools.

Coleman has responded to this latest hypothesis by comparing the achievement of Catholic students attending public schools near a Catholic private school to the achievement of Catholic students attending public schools that are not near Catholic schools (Coleman 1990). Coleman finds that the achievement of the two groups of Catholic students is virtually the same, suggesting that the Catholic school is not "creaming" the best Catholic students away from the public schools.

A final criticism of the Coleman thesis is that the unexplained difference in student achievement between public and Catholic schools, while statistically significant, is so small as to not justify changing the organization of schools (Haertel, et al. 1988; Levy 1986; Witte 1992). According to *High School and Beyond* data, the differences in test scores between sophomore and senior years for most students, whether in public or Catholic schools, is very small: 0.15 standard deviations per year for public schools, and 0.18 for Catholic schools. The difference between the two, just 0.03 standard deviations per year, is hardly so large as to support the contention that one school system is significantly better than the other. These numbers suggest that researchers should be asking why students learn so little in high school, regardless of whether they are in Catholic or public schools.

Perhaps the most economical response to this latest criticism is to step back from the statistics and ask *why* we would expect Catholic schools to outperform, or even perform as well, as public schools. Catholic schools spend, on average, just half as much as public schools.[6] Even if the performance of Catholic school students, after being controlled for socioeconomic background and everything else

[6]Robert J. Genetski (1992) estimates that public school costs averaged $4,841 in 1990 while Catholic schools averaged $1,902.

discussed above, only equals, rather than exceeds, the performance of public school students, Catholic schools are still *twice as cost-effective* as public schools. This, certainly, is a finding with public policy implications.

Coleman has a plausible explanation for why we can expect Catholic schools to outperform public schools. According to Coleman, while the youth revolution of the 1960s and 1970s led many public schools to weaken their curricula and offer growing lists of easy-to-pass elective courses, private schools generally did not lower their academic standards (Coleman 1990: iii). Catholic school students with comparable backgrounds are 7 percent more likely to have taken biology, chemistry, or physics, and 13 percent more likely to have taken specified mathematics courses, than their public school counterparts. Since it is well established that time on task is a major factor in raising student achievement, it should follow that Catholic school students will outperform public school students.

The ability of Catholic schools to retain their strong curriculum derives, according to Coleman, from the fact that they are private, community-based institutions. Such institutions create social capital that parents and educators can use to help support their children during the difficult years of growing up. Coleman explains (1990: iii):

> The students were in school by choice, and families were paying, giving parents an additional weapon in the intergenerational conflict. Second, Catholic schools had few financial resources with which to add courses to meet a new demand. Third, Catholic schools, with a voluntary clientele, could define their mission less broadly. Probably of greatest importance, however, was the connection among parents, and between parents and school. This provided support for parents in resisting the youth revolution; it formed an adult community, and provided for each pair of parents what might be called "social capital" to aid in resisting the revolution.

This sociological explanation for differences in public and private student achievement levels has been reinforced recently by political scientists John Chubb and Terry Moe. Working with an expanded version of the *High School and Beyond* database, Chubb and Moe (1990) find that *how* schools are organized plays a major role in how much and how quickly students learn, a finding supported by other researchers. But Chubb and Moe go on to contend that private schools are more likely than public schools to be organized effectively. They reason that public schools are encumbered by hierarchical and bureaucratic structures that necessarily accompany political oversight, whereas private schools are able to vest most authority

directly in schools, parents, and students. Thus Chubb and Moe have become vocal proponents of educational choice.

One final note regarding comparisons of public and private schools may be worthwhile. A recent survey article published by the World Bank looked at studies of public and private school performance in Colombia, the Dominican Republic, the Philippines, Tanzania, and Thailand (Jimenez, et al. 1992). Each study controlled for student socioeconomic background, and two (the Dominican Republic and Thailand) used panel data similar to the U.S. *High School and Beyond* study. With just one exception—math instruction in the Philippines, where public and private schools tied—private schools outperformed public schools on student achievement. When the researchers incorporated per-pupil spending to estimate cost effectiveness, they found that private schools were more cost effective in every case. Table 1 summarizes these findings.

Comparing public and private schools sheds some light on the question of whether educational choice is an essential part of creating successful schools. But the light is not nearly so bright as we might hope.

- Students attending Catholic schools learn more than students attending public schools, even after socioeconomic background is taken into account. How *much* more they learn, though, is debatable. The difference may not be enough to justify changing the organization of schools.
- Catholic schools educate their students at a fraction of the cost of public schools. That they are able to at least match the performance of public schools, while spending so much less, indicates that they probably have lessons to teach us.
- The governance structures of private schools and the incentives facing parents of children attending private schools are more likely to produce strong curricula and the "social capital" that families need to pursue educational excellence. These structures and incentives do not arise without cause. They arise when students voluntarily choose a school and parents make a commitment to support that school.

Research on Effective Schools

Research on the qualities of effective schools provides another opportunity to measure the effects of educational choice. There is an emerging consensus on the qualities of an effective school: strong educational leadership by the principal, high expectations, parental involvement, and a sense of teamwork shared by teachers and

TABLE 1

RELATIVE AVERAGE COST AND EFFICIENCY OF PUBLIC AND PRIVATE SCHOOLS

Country	(1) Ratio of Private to Public Effectiveness	(2) Ratio of Private Cost to Public Cost	(3) Ratio of Relative Effectiveness to Relative Cost
Colombia	1.13	0.69	1.64
Dominican Republic	1.31	0.65	2.02
Ordinary			
Prestigious	1.47	1.46	1.01
Philippines	1.00	0.83	1.40
Math			
English	1.18	0.83	3.17
Pilipino	1.02	0.83	1.20
Tanzania	1.16	0.69	1.71
Thailand	2.63	0.39	2.62

SOURCE: *World Bank Policy Research Bulletin*, January–February 1992: 4.

administrators (U.S. Department of Education 1986: 45; Schultz 1983; Lanier 1982; Walberg, et al., 1988: 89–103). Effective schools often exist side-by-side with schools that, though equally or better funded, exhibit few of the traits known to accelerate learning.

The role of parental involvement in schools has been especially well-studied and found to be a major influence on student achievement. Deliberate cooperative efforts by parents and educators to modify academic conditions in the home have an outstanding record of success in promoting achievement. In 29 controlled studies of the past decade, 91 percent of the comparisons favored children in such programs over nonparticipating children. The average measurable effect of these parental involvement programs was twice that of socioeconomic status, and some programs had effects that were ten times as large. Since few of the programs lasted more than a semester, the potential for programs providing sustained parental involvement is great (U.S. Department of Education 1986: 19; National Conference of State Legislatures 1991: 21; Bast and Wittmann 1991).

Is allowing educational choice more or less likely to create schools that have the characteristics of effective schools? The empirical record in this regard is clear: Catholic school teachers are more likely than public school teachers to report satisfaction with principal leadership (59.1 percent vs. 49.8 percent), staff cooperation (67.9 vs. 52.4), teacher control over school and classroom policy (81.1 vs. 65.9), and overall teacher morale (84.4 vs. 74.1) (U.S. Department of Education 1987: 74).

Private schools also have higher expectations than public schools, as indicated by the number of years of coursework required for high school graduation. Private high schools in 1985–86, for example, required an average 2.8 years of mathematics vs. 1.9 years required by public schools. In science, private schools required 2.5 years vs. 1.8 for public schools; in English, 3.9 years vs. 3.8 years; and in social sciences, 3.1 years vs. 2.8 years (U.S. Department of Education 1987: 85).

Research by Coleman and the recent experiences with the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program suggest that private schools do a significantly better job encouraging parental involvement, too. Mary Anne Raywid also has reported that educational choice promotes parental involvement and the other characteristics of effective schooling. She writes (Raywid 1991: 18):

> There is abundant evidence that public school parents want choice; that they are more satisfied with and have more confidence in schools that provide it; that parent choice increases the commitment and cohesion within schools extending it; and that these attributes combine to improve school quality and make schools more effective.

Chubb and Moe linked the absence of choice in education and lower levels of parental participation when they wrote (Chubb and Moe 1990: 34):

> Lacking feasible exit options, then, whether through residential mobility or escape into the private sector, many parents and students will "choose" a public school despite dissatisfaction with its goals, methods, personnel, and performance. Having done so, they have a right to try to remedy the situation through the democratic control structure. But everyone else has the same right, and the determinants of political power are stacked against them. Democracy cannot remedy the mismatch between what parents and students want and what the public schools provide. Conflict and disharmony are built into the system.

State governors in the United States recognized how compulsory attendance at assigned schools discouraged parental involvement in their 1986 report on education (National Governors Association 1986: 67):

> Too often, parents of students in the public school system recognize that they have no choice, and they reason that they have no responsibility. They assume that a societal institution called public school in their neighborhood has a monopoly on the education of their children. Our model of compulsory, packaged education, as it now exists, is an enemy of parental involvement and responsibility simply because it allows no choice.

The strong tendency of private schools to better reflect the characteristics of effective schools than do public schools, combined with a strong theory linking choice to the adoption of these characteristics, is evidence of the benefits of allowing parents to choose. This evidence, while appearing to be less direct or convincing than test score data, may actually be stronger, as it does not rely on questionable testing methodologies and difficult-to-control-for background factors affecting student achievement. In any event, it adds to the body of evidence we have that choice, where it is already exercised, results in superior schools and learning environments.

Conclusion

The definitive test of educational choice has not been conducted, and probably never will be. Inaccuracies in testing are probably sufficiently great that it would be a mistake to base major policy decisions on the answers to tests administered to a small number of randomly selected students. Every choice experiment will be haunted by questions of selection, out-of-school influences, and difficult-to-quantify differences in teaching styles, student aptitudes,

and the influences of peer groups. For these reasons, it is probably necessary, as well as wise, to base our evaluation of educational choice on broader evidence.

The limited choice experiments taking place in Minnesota, Milwaukee, and Vermont give us some assurance that choice programs are not disruptive, expensive, or a source of social inequality. That comprehensive educational choice extended to private schools can work in two vastly different environments—a largely minority inner-city, and a largely rural and nonminority state—is significant.

That private schools, both in the United States and abroad, are more cost-effective than public schools has been demonstrated convincingly by many researchers. This finding is consistent with research on a wide range of other services that have been contracted-out to private companies or otherwise privatized. If choice could enable us to raise the efficiency of existing public schools to the level of existing private schools, we could achieve current student achievement levels at half the cost, or perhaps twice the current levels of achievement at current levels of investment.

Schools that must compete for the loyalty of students and parents seem to find ways to organize themselves for success. Research on the characteristics of effective schools, and empirical investigations of the schools that have these characteristics, tell us that schools of choice are more likely to succeed than today's public schools based on forced assignment. This, too, is a reassuring finding.

Allowing students to attend sectarian or independent private schools supported by public funds is considered a radical idea in the United States. Japan, however, has a large private sector for upper-secondary and tutoring schools. Western Europe has long publicly funded religious and non-sectarian private schools. As few as three dozen parents are required to start a new school, eligible for state funds, in Denmark and The Netherlands. In these nations, the consumers of educational services are sovereign. Their empowerment is a major reason why their educational systems, while less well funded than our own, nevertheless routinely and easily outperform our own.

For over 100 years, Americans have attempted to deliver high-quality education through taxation, elected school boards, and geographic assignment of students to schools. Most other countries have pursued a different method of organizing schools, one that allows schools to compete for parents and students armed with the power to choose. Quite frankly, schools in other countries, and even the small and under-funded private school market in the United States, work better than do our public schools. We rely on markets in the

United States to provide the food we eat, the clothes we wear, and the houses that shelter us. It is time the education community paid more attention to the markets that deliver these essential goods to us so reliably and efficiently. And it is time, too, for us to admit that our educational system, based on so different and outdated a model, will not meet our needs and expectations unless it is fundamentally changed.

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