

# Introduction

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## School Choice and Traditional School Schemes

Perhaps no school reform has generated as much interest and controversy in recent years as the simple proposal to have parents select their children's school. On the one hand, school choice advocates believe that state provision, oversight, and regulation stifle the creativity that they see evident in the business world and wherever markets are to be found. They believe that choice will create more educational innovation, reduce inequality, and lead to a general improvement in the overall quality of education. On the other hand, many opponents of school choice fear that such programs will put profits before children, further advantage the already advantaged, and reduce the unique potential of schools in creating democratic citizens. Furthermore, they fear that scaling back the government's role in schooling will lead to profit-driven financial scandals as well as societal ills such as sectarianism and increased class and racial isolation.<sup>1</sup>

Why such a seemingly innocuous, commonsense idea would ignite such passionate debate is a question that can best be addressed by understanding the specific details and implications of school choice proposals, policies, and program implementation. Since Milton Friedman first put forward the idea of school vouchers in an otherwise obscure essay in the 1950s, the idea has rapidly gained ground, accelerating particularly since it was embraced by odd coalitions of liberals and conservatives in open-enrollment plans, charter school legislation, and voucher programs in the 1990s.<sup>2</sup> As of this writing, four out of every five states have endorsed charter schools that now educate well over a million children; a growing number of states are considering joining the

handful of places that already subsidize attendance in private schools through vouchers and tax credits; an estimated two million children are educated at home; and countless children enjoy access to schools that are chosen through open-enrollment schemes or by their parents' selection of a home near a desirable school. The school choice movement is quickly maturing. However, the exponential growth of the movement gives pause to critics concerned about the effects of racial and ethnic sorting, the implications for costs and achievement, and the integrity of the public school system.

The severity of opposition to school choice is proportional to the centrality that the market takes in specific proposals and programs. Unlike traditional public schooling arrangements that are based almost exclusively on residency, school choice essentially positions parents as consumers empowered to select from different options—thereby injecting a degree of consumer-driven, market-style competition into the system as schools seek to attract those families. This is a direct challenge to the public education paradigm fashioned by Horace Mann and other common school reformers in the nineteenth century. They argued that the plethora of choices at the time—church schools, private and quasi-public academies, charity schools, town schools, et cetera—was undermining the common civic values of the young republic.<sup>3</sup> While this thinking formed the basis of the locally-controlled district system in the United States, it has more recently been faulted by those who favor choice as a remedy to the government monopoly at the root of the educational malady, trapping disadvantaged families even while the more affluent still have the option of choosing a private school or moving to a better district. Although by no means a pure market innovation, school choice introduces essential market mechanisms, such as consumer choice and competition between schools, into the education sector. The debate around various choice plans then centers on the degree to which a particular program should be situated in the state-run regulatory apparatus. This range includes open-enrollment plans that allow selection, but only between different public schools in a district, or options set in more market-based environments, as when families are given tax funds in the form of vouchers to expand their range of options across the public and private sectors. However, it is important to note that all of the various programs and proposals evince market forces in varying manifestations. Yet, debates about the role of markets and governments no longer exist only in the abstract world of theory as was the case when Friedman first proposed the idea. Choice-based school reforms in the United States and elsewhere have established a track record with which to examine the various claims for and against school choice in its different forms.

*School Choice Policies and Outcomes* brings together both empirical and philosophical research on the issues, examining both the philosophical justifications for choice and the evidence on its track record as its various manifestations have evolved over the last decade. While examining choice of schools, this book focuses on what we might call formal choice programs—things such as charter schools and vouchers that represent explicit efforts by policymakers to create or expand options and opportunities in education by introducing market-style mechanisms into the education sector. This means that other forms of educational choice in the broader but more informal sense—course selection, purchasing a home in a particular school district, or even the popular homeschooling movement—fall largely outside the scope of this book. The decision to assume this focus reflects our interest in the forms of choice that have risen to the top of the political and policy agendas in the United States. Consequently, we solicited contributions from authors who represent a range of philosophical perspectives on the different varieties of formal school choice reforms, including advocates who see choice as a promising development that has the potential to improve education for all and skeptics who are more concerned about the possibility of negative ramifications of school choice programs. Furthermore, we sought scholars representing a range of disciplinary perspectives on choice, from ethicists to theorists to empiricists who could offer insights in their interpretations of the growing body of knowledge on the many choice programs in the United States and elsewhere. However, before summarizing the state of knowledge on school choice, it makes sense to review some of the main justifications for these reforms. This will allow us to understand how choice has assumed different forms in various programs and to understand the basis on which these policies are to be assessed.

#### *School Choice and Liberty*

Advocates of choice emphasize the importance of individual freedom. School choice is advanced as a form of freedom best accessed in a free marketplace.<sup>4</sup> In this line of thinking, public provision of education is rejected as a coercive government monopoly, often equated with the old Soviet Bloc, or illustrated by comparisons to the Berlin Wall.<sup>5</sup> Since markets represent free, voluntary action, market mechanisms bring freedom to the education sector. This is a particularly appealing argument when applied to disadvantaged families trapped in failing public schools. Choice is thought to offer an alternate route to education, between the inherent inequalities of local district control and the coercive constraints of centralized bureaucracies. This justification has two distinct strands:

(1) an institutional element that champions moving tax-supported schools into the private sector (what some call privatization, but what might be better termed marketization), and (2) an individualist-libertarian element best reflected in the homeschooling movement.

While some criticize choice as antidemocratic because it removes public education from direct control of elected entities, proponents argue that it is simply an alternate form of democracy.<sup>6</sup> That is, instead of relying on a public composed of often disinterested voters whose wishes are manifest through elected representatives and entrenched bureaucracies, choice appeals directly to a public composed of consumers—those immediately using the services. This view is advanced by a number of prominent scholars and has now received considerable traction. It is also supported by the activities of important organizations such as the Brookings Institute, and the Olin, Bradley, and Walton family foundations (see Janelle Scott, chapter 7).

Yet, imbedded in this view are some very critical assumptions that need to be examined carefully. Consider the terminology as an example: Is a school whose students raise their average test scores by fifteen points in a given year, but still do not meet a given cutoff point, a failing school? And if the students who attend the school are in a crime-ridden area, with rampant poverty and unemployment, is it the school that is failing? Possibly, but other factors are involved as well. Or, bear in mind the idea of a government monopoly in education. Is a system where thousands of different public school districts exist together competing for teachers and families the same kind of monopoly the post office once was?

In examining the merits of different choice schemes, it is critical to consider some of the intricacies buried in the assumptions behind this thinking. Indeed, the rhetoric of freedom, which classical liberals from Mill to Friedman promote, can ignore the trade-offs inherent in a complex, pluralistic society of multiple constituencies and competing claims. If a choice scheme offers more opportunities for parents to control the education of their children, does that necessarily entail the rollback of the responsibilities and prerogatives of the broader public interest in education? What about the rights and freedoms of children whose parents fail to choose, or fail to choose wisely? Or the voice of those childless individuals and couples who pay taxes and support schools but are themselves no longer direct consumers of schooling. Even the most committed libertarian might want to place limits on parental choice in order to insure that children have an opportunity to become autonomous adults.<sup>7</sup> Given that the liberal state has an interest in fostering autonomy, schools may sometimes need to loosen the

bonds between parent and child, not to destroy the family, but to challenge generational cycles of inherited privilege, resources, and other less tangible factors that contribute to the autonomy of an individual.<sup>8</sup> This notion would put the idea of parental choice in a more negative light, and emphasizes the fact that government has a special role to play in the education of children and to see to it that their future autonomy is nurtured and protected. Finally, critics have argued that this consumer-driven view is a very thin conception of democracy.<sup>9</sup> For example, some parents complain that forced choice really destroys the neighborhood school and with it the opportunity for children to learn alongside neighbors. It is possible that this may actually have the effect of reducing the collective influence of parents on their schools, and thereby reducing the coherence of neighborhoods. While we do not know of any studies that have tested this possibility, the advocates of choice seem not to have considered it.

#### *School Choice and Academic Achievement*

Another prominent perspective holds that school choice engenders the market forces necessary to increase school efficiency and effectiveness. This view, based in neoliberal economic theory, sees a general malaise in the government-run public education sector. As articulated by public choice theorists, it is not only public funding, but subsequent government administration of schools, reflecting direct democratic control, that leads to a startling uniformity of curriculum and organization.<sup>10</sup> According to this line of thinking, the monopoly claim that government schools make on public funding also deprives public education of the competitive incentives needed to encourage efficient use of funds, as well as organizational effectiveness. In using school choice to animate competitive incentives, schools would be forced to improve their performance or risk losing students and funding (or go out of business) as consumers choose higher performing alternatives. As advocates often observe, these dynamics work in many consumer-oriented markets, where choices drive innovation and quality improvements.<sup>11</sup> In education, such improvements would appear in increased efficiency and academic achievement.

While many see such competitive forces as integral for getting schools to focus on the basic core academic function, one potential problem is that such competition around a narrowly defined role, measurable academic achievement, largely negates the many other, less tangible responsibilities we place on schools (building social cohesion, teaching marketable or critical skills, environmentally conscious citizens, health conscious consumers, etc.). Furthermore, although this view is set firmly

in a strong empirical tradition, the claims made in this regard must still be viewed largely as hypothetical. Even after well over a decade of voucher and charter programs, compelling evidence of significant achievement gains is lacking. Studies of voucher programs in Milwaukee, Cleveland, and other cities have found little or no (or even negative) effects for children using vouchers to attend private schools, or have found larger gains, but have been fiercely contested on methodological grounds.<sup>12</sup> Research on the more prolific charter school movement has indicated relative academic benefits from these types of schools in some states, but detriments in others; studies of national samples have not been too promising.<sup>13</sup> In fact, early optimism regarding the potential advantageous effects of competitive forces on academic achievement have more recently been tempered by the argument that they at least do not appear to do much harm,<sup>14</sup> a far cry from the panacea that was claimed earlier.<sup>15</sup> Moreover, on the question of efficiency, charter school advocates are now asking for additional money on par with other public schools, despite early promises of doing more with less.<sup>16</sup>

The lack of clear evidence for the academic benefits of choice should be surprising because up to now choice schemes like those in Milwaukee and Cleveland have operated under certain advantages. This is because choice should work best where all choosers are voluntary as they are in most choice situations in operation today. Voluntary choosers are parents who decide to choose and who might be expected to be more concerned about education. They may be perceived to be better judges of quality than similar parents who do not take advantage of choice schemes. Given this difference, we should expect students who move to choice schools to do significantly better than students who remain behind. Even though randomized field trials have attempted to control for these unobservable factors, it is far from clear that this is the case. Under the expanded choice schemes that some reformers and foundations would like, in schemes where everyone must choose, every parent would be compelled to choose. Thus, while some parents, who would have chosen even without compulsion, can be seen as voluntary choosers, those who exercise their right to choose (only because compelled to do so) can be seen as involuntary choosers. It would seem reasonable to expect that involuntary choosers will be less concerned or less knowledgeable than voluntary choosers. Given the differences between voluntary and involuntary choosers, we need to pause when considering the fact that the benefits of the present systems of voluntary choosers are unclear, when we consider claims that more choice will automatically make things better.

*School Choice and Equality*

A third view advocating school choice sees choice as an effective mechanism for leveling the playing field and providing more opportunities for minorities and disadvantaged children. This perspective has been embraced over the years by some prominent liberals as an innovative way to promote equality of educational opportunity and outcomes—and is a position for which we here acknowledge some affinity. Going back to the earlier writings of scholars like James Coleman, Christopher Jencks, and John Coons and Stephen Sugarman, policy analysts concerned about equity have often seen choice as a way to offer some opportunities to children who were otherwise disadvantaged in their school or home situations. More recently, this argument has been embraced by what Frank calls market populists seeking to use market forces to solve social problems.<sup>17</sup> This thinking is illustrated in new Democrat or third way groups (see chapter 7) such as the Progressive Policy Institute, Brookings Institute, and Education Sector.

Essentially, in this thinking, disadvantaged students are trapped in failing public schools, while more affluent families enjoy access to a wider variety of quality options. Therefore, by lowering political barriers or subsidizing costs, policies can grant disadvantaged students access to the same high quality options that others enjoy. Particularly in a context characterized by chronic racial, ethnic, and economic segregation, as in the United States or South Africa, such policies could negate the advantages that have been institutionalized in favor of the more affluent, and are thus often popular with some community activists. Furthermore, even if research raises questions as to whether or not these alternatives are necessarily superior,<sup>18</sup> allowing poor children to have exposure to a more academically ambitious peer group would probably be enough to justify such arrangements.

This view combines economic logic on the freedom of the marketplace with moral concerns for the least advantaged. Although we share this concern, it is important to acknowledge problems with this perspective, particularly in terms of how the economic logic tends to play out in the real world as well as in the politicized world of education policy. While some see markets as a solution, others argue that markets, as systems of individual choice, are part of the problem, so that choice may represent a more effective, less visible “sorting machine.”<sup>19</sup> Instances of market failure in areas such as public safety, pollution control, and public health, demonstrate that the market is not always best suited for addressing certain issues that, like education, involve a strong equity concern.<sup>20</sup>

Moreover, the peculiar nature of public education may confound efforts to apply market models in what may fundamentally be a nonmarket enterprise.<sup>21</sup> For instance, as Christopher Lubienski notes in chapter 5, asymmetries of information between schools and parents can put families at a relative disadvantage, giving schools in competitive climates opportunities to select more affluent students. As in other mixed sectors, such as health care, this can encourage adverse selection where private providers avoid more costly clients, leaving them to public institutions that then risk falling into spirals of decline. Indeed, while advocates have argued that competitive incentives would force the supply side to open up additional quality opportunities for disadvantaged students, it may be that the opposite is happening instead.<sup>22</sup> In addition, there is the possibility that the equity concern will be hijacked, as equity-driven efforts around school choice may be co-opted by other interests pushing a more complete, profit-driven privatization agenda. In this regard, equity-driven school choice may simply represent a wedge necessary to marginalize opposition to choice in order to advance more universal, market-driven choice plans. Finally, the distinction between voluntary and compulsory choosers may have a bearing on whether choice leads to greater equity or whether it leads to complacency and acceptance of one's social and economic situation, and reduces collective scrutiny of the economic conditions of poor and working-class children

#### *Communities and School Choice*

School choice appeals to some because of the communitarian elements it exhibits. Schools can and do represent forms of communal association, and can serve as a focal point for building communities of learners, educators, and families. This is perhaps best illustrated by the charter school movement. Groups of like-minded teachers seeking to pursue a particular vision of schooling, for instance, can benefit from the charter school model.<sup>23</sup> Similarly, a comprehensive system of charter schools would represent small communities of preference clusters—families and teachers grouped together around particular views of education.<sup>24</sup> Essentially, such a system allows for diversity of preferences overall, but encourages sorting based on commonalities of preferences. This emphasizes communities of interest and worldview rather than communities based on housing and neighborhood. Indeed, research suggests that shared visions of schooling can be more effective in pursuing academic outcomes, and may help foster valuable social capital.<sup>25</sup> In subsidizing such a system to expand participation, according to this thinking, policymakers could realize efficiencies by reducing political conflict over



the curriculum, and minimizing the bureaucratic apparatus necessary to mediate such conflict.

On the other hand, communities are defined not only by their internal focus, but also by their boundaries. That is, even an inclusive community has a degree of exclusivity in identifying who is a member and who is not. Community membership under such a model is typically self-selected, which fosters free choice, but also undercuts efforts at integration intended to counteract racial and socioeconomic sorting. This dynamic raises the question of the role of education in a democracy. If policymakers are looking simply to reduce conflict, then it might make sense to divide people up into homogenous clusters so each individual may better pursue a particular, private version of their educational preferences. However, we hold not only private goals for education, such as academic attainment and economic advancement, but also public goals, such as increased tolerance and civic cohesion.<sup>26</sup> Many political theorists have argued, therefore, that education is inherently a public endeavor. As Aristotle notes:

the system of education in a state must be one and the same for all, and the provision of this system must be a matter of public action. It cannot be left, as it is at present, to private enterprise, with each parent making provision privately for his own children, and having them privately instructed as he himself thinks fit. Training for an end which is common should also itself be common.<sup>27</sup>

Education necessarily involves individual conceptions of possible worlds. Since such individual visions will come into conflict, those conflicts will carry over into conflicts about education.<sup>28</sup> But retreating from discussions due to potential conflicts does not diminish the fact that education is a public issue,<sup>29</sup> and providing parents with the opportunity to choose schools for their children does not erase the influence of their choice on the lives of others.

### Choice Reconsidered

While we often hear that public education is failing, in fact, instances of school failure are concentrated largely in inner-city urban and rural areas with high concentrations of poverty. In such cases, it is not just the schools that are failing the children; instead, failure is evident across many social, economic and political institutions. Indeed, sometimes

the school may be the only safe haven.<sup>30</sup> Although many have called for universal systems of school choice, a number of the papers in this volume indicate that such programs, if not thought through carefully, could be detrimental to some of the basic ideas of public education. For instance, universal choice would create not only voluntary choosers, but force unwilling choosers into a marketplace that they would not otherwise engage. Those most likely to benefit are those already in positions of advantage, who can use their resources and rules to protect such positions. Universal choice could also largely undercut the possibility of neighborhood schools serving geographic neighborhoods (although, admittedly, that can be a good thing in cases of residential segregation). However, even universal choice does not guarantee the availability of integrated options. In order for an integrated school to be available, people have to choose it, and there is evidence from many areas that suggest this is not always the case.

Instead, if we are to encourage choice as a policy, and if choice is actually an effective policy mechanism in creating opportunities and closing achievement gaps, many of the papers in this volume suggest that choice programs must be targeted to serve primarily disadvantaged populations. However, two important concerns need to be considered. First, many choice advocates and opponents see targeted choice as a strategic precedent for broadening acceptance of and demand for choice—a preliminary step to broader programs such as universal vouchers. As noted above, we believe such moves would have detrimental effects far outpacing claimed advantages. Therefore, policymakers embracing choice should take this possibility into account when fashioning targeted choice programs that remain targeted. Second, by virtue of being choice programs, even programs tailored to disadvantaged populations may very well fail to serve those most in need of new options, but least likely to utilize them. Past experience shows that it is the most educated and motivated who enroll in choice programs, while parents of the poorest students often forgo the opportunities offered.<sup>31</sup> Choice programs would have to be structured and supported in ways that do not concentrate benefits only for those who are relatively better off.

### *The Meaning of Choice*

As Rob Reich reminds us in chapter 1, choice is more than just a term describing a recent set of educational innovations. It is a fundamental principle of democratic society and a critical component of liberal pluralism. We need choice (with a small “c”) because we need diversity,

and we need diversity because we value liberty. This does not settle the question, whether Choice (with a capital “C”), that is choice as a policy in which public funds are used to support private educational preferences, is ultimately a worthwhile policy. For some, we have always had choice—in the form of private and religious schools—as well as the selection of more expensive housing in better-funded neighborhood public school districts. What we have not had, and what Choice now introduces, is government support for parental preferences outside of the traditional neighborhood public school system.

While Reich does not take a stand on this issue, he argues persuasively that common ends can be served by private schools and that any school supported by public funds must have the future autonomy of the child as a primary goal. Hence, he concludes that the common school ideal can be compatible with contemporary conceptions of choice as long as common educational purposes are served and student autonomy is respected and developed. Thus, for Reich, the common school ideal can survive in either public or private schools.

### *Equality*

Whereas Reich develops an argument for choice, broadly understood on grounds of plurality and liberty, Harry Brighouse (chapter 2) narrows the focus, arguing that the special character of educational markets requires that government support for parental choice can only be adequately justified in the service of equality. Drawing on a distinction made by Kenneth Howe (chapter 3) between equality-led reforms (i.e., reforms that view choice as a possible strategy to improve equality), and choice-led reforms (or reforms that views choice as a good in itself), Brighouse, argues that choice is good only if it functions to serve equality. Yet, unlike many who reject choice on equalitarian grounds, Brighouse points out that even neighborhood schools employ choice for those who can afford the right neighborhood. The goal then is not to oppose choice but to tame it towards equality. In the process of developing his argument, Brighouse provides a useful measure of the equity levels of different kinds of voucher plans.

While Brighouse and Howe share the same concern for equality, they differ significantly in their view that choice is likely to be an effective vehicle for achieving it. Howe’s chapter is important because it documents the array of conservative foundations and think tanks that are aligned to promote choice for its own sake rather than choice for the sake of equality. He suggests that many states and the federal

government are following their lead. While there is some rhetorical congruence about goals, including reducing the achievement gap, stemming de facto segregation, and the like, the conservative lens through which the data is examined has been so powerful that evidence showing no discernable effect in some areas and harm in others has been ignored. Yet, in spite of the evidence, these programs continue to grow without significant adjustments in the direction of equality.

While there are strong differences in tone between Brighthouse and Howe, they both agree that if choice of any kind is to be justified, then it must serve equality, and serving equality means lowering the achievement gap, providing more opportunities, and decreasing class and racial segregation in real, not just rhetorical ways.

#### *Choice and the Common Good*

Education must take into account not only parents' right to educate their own children, and a child's right to a future of hope and opportunities, but also the rights of children not yet born onto a planet that can sustain their lives and promote hope and happiness. Kathleen Knight Abowitz (chapter 4) explores the role of school choice in promoting a sustainable environmental agenda. Abowitz is concerned that unless school choice policies and the rhetoric that supports them are modified substantially, future generations and planetary life will be harmed. She examines the choice policy in Ohio and uses it to argue that there must be constraints on the rights of families to choose an education for their children. She then explores ways in which choice systems can further environmental goals. Intergenerational needs and planetary well-being, while clearly a part of the common good, may not coincide with the desire of individual parents to maximize the good for their own children. Indeed, the commons may well be seriously hurt as a result of each of us striving to maximize the individual good or our own child without regard for the good of others.

#### *Markets, Information and Preferences*

Markets vary regarding the quality of information, its distribution and the ability of consumers to assess the information they receive. Note, for example, the difficulty many highly educated people have in choosing a health care plan. The issue of school choice then is not just a question about who cares the most, or who is the most knowledgeable about the needs of an individual child. It is also a question of information. As Christopher Lubienski notes in chapter 5, we need to consider what

kinds of information may be needed, how it is distributed, who gets it, and how is it used. Chapters 6 and 7 explore these issues, taking into account the concerns of equity raised in the first section.

Lubienski explores the claim that parents are in the best position to evaluate the quality of education their child is receiving by looking at the special characteristics of information flow in educational markets. He examines both philosophical and empirical grounds for positioning parents as the exclusive authority over educational decisions, finding that the best arguments, which are largely hypothetical, break down in the real-world context of schools. Lubienski highlights evidence, from choice advocates themselves, that parents are often mistaken about the quality of schools in their areas, and that they often judge schools independently of their academic quality. He analyzes these concerns and traces them to characteristics of the educational market itself, suggesting that the issue is not whether or not parents are able to make the best decisions on behalf of their children, but whether education markets generate and distribute essential information in an equitable and effective manner. The essay concludes by providing a summary of the kind of information readily available to parents and its limitations.

Whereas Lubienski considers the flow of information and the characteristics of markets, Courtney Bell's essay (chapter 6), looks at the way in which social class factors influence the preferences that motivate parents. She raises an important challenge to simplistic theories of choice that make no distinction between the preference formed by a suburban house parent with enough time to scout out the schools in the area, for instance, and an inner-city working parent with little time to spare.

Taken together, these two essays point to serious flaws in the market analogy when used to guide educational policy, both in terms of the information generated and in information consumed. The typical market theorist has the consumer come to the market with a set of preferences that the producer attempts to satisfy in competition with other producers. Information is a mediating factor used by the consumer to decide which competitor's product will best service her need.

In contrast to this model, where preferences are formed prior to and independent of the producer, Bell shows that, in education markets, preferences are shaped by the producer as well as the consumer, and social economic class influences this formation. She shows how, in response to the input of the school, a parent's preferences undergo changes, and how this influence varies depending, in part, on social class factors. Middle-class parents, whose children fell behind, were likely to use their resources to challenge and redirect the school's expectations of their children, while poor and working-class parents found it more

difficult to do so. The expectations of these parents were more frequently lowered by their interaction with the school.

Knowledge, time, skills, and confidence can make a big difference in the way parents shape their preferences in conformity or response to the school's definition of their child. As Bell writes, "parents had different resources for mediating school interaction." Educational markets are unlikely to work in an equitable way unless these different resources are taken into account, and parents who accept the school's definition of their failing child are likely to respond by blaming themselves or their child. Of course, failure need not be an inevitable consequence of lower economic and social status, but Bell's essay is a warning for simplistic advocates of educational markets. If children are to do well under choice schemes, schools will need to understand their role in the formation of parental preferences and find ways to help parents be effective advocates for their children.

#### *Educational Leadership and Minorities*

Janelle Scott shows that the move toward privatization is altering advances made by women and minorities in the 1960s and reasserting the leadership role of white males. At the same time, an educational philosophy that focuses on democracy, inclusiveness, social justice, and critical thinking has been in retreat, with the new leadership emphasizing efficiency, competition, and test scores. One of Scott's important findings is that, while the rhetoric of equality can still be found in these private initiatives, the rhetoric is not always matched by the reality. For example, to improve performance, schools may discourage more difficult students from returning. While research is needed to understand just how widespread this practice is, it should not be surprising if, in the absence of strong regulation, privately-run, publicly-financed schools behave like other enterprises in market-like settings and eliminate poor investments.

#### *Power*

One of the promises that school choice advocates make is that choice will increase the power of parents and local communities, and will thereby provide an education best tailored to meet the needs of individual children. Scott's essay raises questions about the effects of choice on school leadership and the tendency to replace women and minorities with White men. In chapter 8, Liz Gordon expands on this theme, exploring the relationship between choice and power. Gordon reminds us that school choice is a multinational movement that is expressed differently

in different countries, and she draws on research in these countries—with special emphasis on New Zealand and the United States—to assess its effect. She appropriates recent philosophical and sociological works to show that power resides in more than just the political sphere. Gordon's analysis illuminates how power relations work within choice policies, and how choice alters the distribution of power by, among other things, increasing segregation between population types, maintaining hierarchies of rich and poor schools, even when resource gaps are reduced, and by rewarding desirable school communities rather than good schools. The most important factor is the ability of a group to shape the educational landscape, and, Gordon argues, middle-class families hold onto this advantage whether or not they are operating under a choice regime. Gordon makes clear other effects, including less innovation, more conformity, a reduction in regional authority, and a strengthening of the central steering mechanism.

Similarly, Bekisizwe Ndimande looks outside the United States for insights on the role of choice in power relationships. He underscores the emerging patterns surrounding opportunities for poor and Black students to attend better-resourced schools in South Africa. Ndimande juxtaposes the individual freedom to choose with the institutional autonomy of wealthier public schools to adopt policies that essentially exclude poorer students. He suggests that demands for options are insufficient when expressed in the context of power relations of social class. If those seeking expanded options are poor, then more desirable educational organizations may seek to exclude, rather than accommodate them. In fact, institutions do not simply respond to accommodate consumer demand. Ndimande situates issues of resources and access within the larger neo-liberal emphasis on privatization, and within the neoconservative effort to undermine diversity and multiculturalism.

### *Rights and Obligations*

In chapter 8, Liz Gordon observes that advocates of choice have been successful because they associate choice policies with private initiatives and contrast them to more public forms of schooling—which are then associated with bureaucratic lethargy. She questions this by reminding us of the dynamic role schools often play in the life of a community, a role choice tends to eviscerate by disempowering teachers and directing attention away from the social and economic causes of success and failure.

In chapter 10, Walter Feinberg examines the normative side of choice, and explores the basic principle—that parents have a right to determine

the education of their children—that makes the idea appealing to many different groups. He argues that this principle needs to be reconciled with another, seemingly competing one—the obligation of society to provide a level educational playing field for all children. Feinberg believes these principles can be reconciled if we begin to unpack the public and private distinctions they entail.

Feinberg distinguishes between choice on the retail level and choice on the wholesale level and shows the problems that arise from confusing the two. He argues education cannot be reduced to market considerations alone, and that choice on the wholesale level must be evaluated with the ideals of a fair and equitable social system in mind. He explains how the presence of private schools create problems for proposals that want to use choice to advance equality, and suggests ways in which these two principles can be reconciled by reconceptualizing the idea of public and private schools. Feinberg argues that a fair, sound policy must consider the multiple interests involved in the education of the young. These include interests of advantaged parents to advantage their own children, the interests of disadvantaged parents not to reproduce their disadvantages in their own children, the interest of society in maintaining solidarity and enhancing the quality of life by the fair and impartial selection and development of talent, and the rights of children to an open future. He argues that these interests can be balanced by rethinking the way in which education is supported, and by providing incentives for advancing public goods such as inclusion and democratic accountability.

### Conclusion

The history of education is full of failed panaceas. On the one hand, the idea of choice seems to dampen this utopian spirit and introduce a necessary dose of realism into the educational debate. It allows that children are very different from one another and that parents want many different kinds of things from their children's schools. The idea is simple: allow parents to choose the school their children will attend and make that choice easier. If parents are unsatisfied with the child's school, they should not be required to buy a house in a new neighborhood to find a more satisfying educational experience. It is very difficult to argue with this reasoning. It makes intuitive sense. Most parents would like the right to move their children out of failing schools and into better ones. Yet choice, as it has been advanced, promises much more than a satisfactory educational experience for all children. It promises greater equality, more innovation, more effective parent control, less bureaucracy, higher



efficiency, et cetera. In other words, it is offered not just as a solution to the extreme dissatisfaction of some parents, but as a panacea to cure all of the problems of American schools. Granted, as its advocates will argue, choice is relatively young and the idea is still growing. But we have yet to see the research that suggests wholesale choice is likely to live up to all of these claims. In the meantime, it is important to remember that American schools, public and private, exist in a context of growing inequality in many areas—health care, housing, mental health, income, and that all of these influence the state of education.

### Notes

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