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**SCHOOL CHOICE**

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## **SCHOOL CHOICE**

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**CHAPTER ONE:****The Choice Debate: Promises and Realities**

The decade-long struggle to reshape America's schools seems suddenly to hang on a single word: "choice." Just a generation ago, "freedom to choose" was the rallying cry of those who clung to their self-proclaimed right to single-race schools. These days, school choice is a crusade with far different meanings, and vastly wider appeal. Advocates proclaim its virtues from the nation's most respected academic, corporate and political pulpits. ~~And~~ behind the soaring popularity ~~for~~ <sup>of</sup> school choice is a near-universal conviction that America's public schools are in trouble and that drastic steps are needed to jump-start a sputtering school reform movement.

In less than five years, thirteen states have established far-reaching choice plans that purport, ~~not~~ <sup>to</sup> not only to give parents the right to flee unsatisfactory schools but also to swat the stubborn mule of public education with the two-by-four of good old fashioned competition. Minnesota led the way in 1987. Michigan and Ohio have passed choice laws that take effect ~~this fall and next, respectively.~~ <sup>in the 1993-94 school year.</sup> A dozen other states are in various stages of considering choice plans. Scores of individual districts have embraced or are considering far-reaching choice schemes. Shining above them all is East Harlem in New York City, which has gained legendary status from advocates who proclaim it as proof that choice can send even the nation's most downtrodden districts to new heights of excellence.

But just what is this idea that has caused such a stir? At its core, school choice is challenging the long standing arrangement in which children are assigned to schools in communities where they live. The neighborhood school tradition began as parents started schools to educate their children. It expanded as the nation moved to universal education and serves today as a convenient, and some would insist,

necessary way to accommodate the 41 million children who now attend the nation's public schools.

Throughout most of our history this neighborhood based approach to public education was accepted as a very democratic way to providing public education for the public good. All citizens were expected to help finance education and parents who were most concerned understood that when they moved into a neighborhood a school assignment would occur. If parents were disappointed with the school they work for change or <sup>if possible</sup> even move to another district. But the school assignment procedure was rarely challenged. *It was deeply rooted in the concept of local school control which has been a centerpiece of American education.*

Today, most parents seem satisfied with this arrangement. Recently, The Carnegie Foundation surveyed parents from coast to coast asking them about the school their children were attending. They overwhelmingly were satisfied with the quality of education being offered at the school.

Still, a growing number of policy makers and politicians have become convinced that the current arrangement restricts excellence. They rest their case on three interlocking propositions. First, giving parents the right to choose a school for their child will invigorate a lethargic, monopolistic system. A recent Heritage Foundation report states their <sup>argument</sup> case this way: "Transforming parents into education consumers will force the school(s) to shape up or lose customers." "It forces teachers and school administrators to improve instruction and toughen standards if they are to retain students—and with them funding." And President George Bush on June 25, 1992, upon unveiling a \$500 million federal choice proposal that would grant poor and middle-income families \$1,000 scholarships to attend any public, private or parochial school they wished, put it this way: "For too long we've shielded schools from competition and allowed our schools a damaging monopoly of power."

Advocates also insist that school choice will give to poor and middle class students educational options that are currently open only to the more affluent,

*In this context it seems strange to argue that the current system reflects the monopolistic control of education. Conservatives more concerned about their own children's education than the children of the poor.*

*Local school boards control it for state legislators to increase school choice in this country.*



(2A)

How far 85?

~~But~~ The parents said they were somewhat or  
"very satisfied" with the quality  
of education your child got  
at this school ~~the~~ last  
year, ~~36%~~ Father, ~~when~~  
~~asked about parents said~~  
~~The quality of education is getting~~  
~~better~~

Parents overwhelmingly say the  
quality of education ~~at~~ the  
school their child attends  
has stayed about the same,  
he is getting better

### TABLE I

How satisfied are you with  
the quality of education your  
child got at this school  
last year?

Very satisfied	51%
Somewhat satisfied	36%
Somewhat dissatisfied	8%
Very dissatisfied	5%
Don't know	1%



## TABLE II

In your garden has the  
 Quail of Edinburgh at your  
 child's school been kept  
 better or worse or has it  
 stayed about the same?

Left Better	30
Left Worse	15
Stayed About the Same	48
Don't Know	7

especially when choice includes private schools: "What better could we do for the poor, for those trapped in school systems that aren't working very well than giving them a little scholarship to vote with their feet, and send their kids to a good school," says former Delaware Governor Pete du Pont who has campaigned on behalf of choice.<sup>2</sup> Adds U.S. Secretary of Education Lamar Alexander: "What we're simply trying to do is give people without money more of the same choices of schools that people with money already have, and that would include all schools—public schools, independent schools, private schools and religious schools."<sup>3</sup>

Finally, school choice is defined by some as a fundamental right. Parents, not the state, should be final arbiters of where their children attend school. It is unacceptably restrictive, even un-American, advocates insist, to force on parents a decision that affects so consequentially the family's future prospects. "In all aspects of our life we want choice," writes Ruth Randall, who as Minnesota's commissioner of education during the 1980s was instrumental in designing that state's trailblazing open enrollment plan. "We can choose the religion we want to espouse. We can choose our grocery store and other shops depending on our needs and desires . . . The one place in our lives where we have not been able to choose is education for our children from the time they start kindergarten through grade 12 unless we have money to pay for private school or for tuition to a different public school."<sup>4</sup>

On the wings of such acclaim, choice has risen from the musty pages of theory to become a full-fledged popular movement. More than two out of three Americans endorse public school choice in opinion polls, and nearly that many minority citizens back more radical choice plans that include private schools. The nation's governors endorsed it in 1986. Even teacher unions have given qualified support to public school choice.

But what is this plan that is being proposed with such urgency to the policy makers and politicians? The debate really involves three separate, yet interrelated,



plans. First there is *district-wide* choice that allows parents to select a public school inside their home district. Under such plans specialty schools are <sup>usually</sup> established and parents are asked to list several school choices. The local school board then grants or denies those requests on the basis of available space and the need for achieving racial balance. Cambridge, Massachusetts, Montclair, New Jersey, Buffalo, New York, Prince Georges County, Maryland., and Minneapolis and St. Paul are leading examples of these programs which are really variations on the magnet school idea originating from voluntary desegregation programs. During the 1980s, the rationale for controlled choice programs was broadened to include not just racial balance but district-wide school betterment and diversity.

Second, there is *statewide* choice. Students and parents under this arrangement are permitted to select public schools outside their home districts, most often limited by available space and, of course, by the ability of the student to get to the school. Generally speaking, funding follows the student to the chosen district, meaning that a school district which loses students suffers a financial penalty, while those gaining students are rewarded with aid dollars. Until about five years ago, interdistrict choice plans almost exclusively involved cities and neighboring suburbs which entered voluntary student transfer programs in order to head off or settle desegregation suits. But under the vigorous prodding of national choice advocates, more than a dozen states since 1987 have adopted sweeping open enrollment plans whose driving motive was not racial balance, but school improvement.

Third, there is *public-private* choice which is by far the most hotly disputed form. Under this plan parents are permitted to send their children to private ~~or~~ <sup>parochial</sup> schools, using public funds. Thus far, only the city of Milwaukee has such a plan, on a limited basis. But this is precisely the program now being vigorously pushed by the Bush administration.



President Bush, who early in his term indicated opposition to public support for private schools, has since proposed a succession <sup>of programs</sup> that would extend choice to private schools as well. As a central part of its "America 2000" school reform package, the Bush administration requested \$230 million in fiscal 1992 to support a variety of choice programs involving private schools. This was scaled back to \$30 million pilot program targeted at poor families, but the Senate still defeated it in January 1992 by a 57-36 vote. The administration's <sup>newest choice initiative, the</sup> "G.I. Bill for Children," then, keeps alive a ten-year effort by the last two occupants of the White House to use federal taxing and spending programs to promote the spread of public and private school choice. The proposed "G.I. Bill for Children" contained in the administration's fiscal 1993 budget request would, if enacted, offer school vouchers usable at public or private schools to as many as 500,000 families across the country.

There is no question <sup>that</sup> school choice, at least in theory, is the single most rousing idea to emerge from a decade of national reform efforts. This is hardly surprising given the reverence we Americans have for choice in so many spheres of daily life. "The luxury of choice" neatly defines, in a single phrase, the twentieth-century American experience. Choice symbolizes our bounty and our most cherished freedoms. There may not be a formal constitutional "right to choose." Yet we as a society have invested choice with awesome powers, capable of its own brand of prairie justice: what is chosen is by definition "better." What is unchosen had better shape up, or disappear.

Each day, we choose among scores of breakfast cereals brands, cable television stations, even long-distance telephone carriers. We reassure ourselves that any limits on the transforming powers of choice can be <sup>overcome</sup> ~~vanquished~~ simply by adding more choices. Failing that, we assert that choice is at the essence of what it means to be free. As Secretary Alexander put it as he introduced the administration's latest choice initiative: "How we ever got the idea in this country of telling people where they had to go school, I'm not sure I know. I think it's an aberration, an alien thought, really un-

American. The whole process of choice in education would create competition, as it does in every other area of American life, and that would tend to improve all schools—not only for the rich, who already have choice, but for those without money as well."

Still, in some areas of high priority public service, we ~~often~~ recognize that choice is not a panacea. For example, we ~~just~~ accept the idea of a public roadway system and most of us are content to have one good public fire department, not six competing private ones, answer our 911 call. After a power blackout, few of us clamor for a half dozen electric companies to replace publicly-regulated power utilities. ~~Furthermore,~~ we understand that services like fire departments and public power utilities have paramount public purposes—to put out fires and bring energy to rich and poor, urban and remote. We realize that such purposes might go unmet or badly met if profit or competition alone drove them.

Surely if some leader were to promote choice and competition as the answer to our nation's energy or fire prevention problems, we'd demand very careful study of the risks, trouble and costs before replacing our existing systems with ones operating on wholly untested set of principles and assumptions. ~~But~~ nowhere does such care and study seem more in order than in the realm of public education. We are talking, after all, about the welfare of 41 million students, 80,000 neighborhood schools and 15,000 school districts. Yet nowhere do policymakers seem so frequently immodest about the limits of their knowledge, so ready to toss aside caution and deliberation to embrace a policy so untried and so scantily understood.

We're told, for example, that \$1,000 vouchers from the federal government will make the kind of top-quality education now available only to the rich suddenly available to the poor. What isn't clear is where are these top-flight inner private schools that can operate at one-fifth the cost of the average public schools, just waiting to welcome the nation's most problem-plagued students. And even if such







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### TABLE III

Do you see some other school to  
which you would like to  
send your child. This school could  
be public or private, inside or  
outside of your district, ~~or~~

Yes - Public School -	97
Yes - Private School -	19%
No -	70%
Don't know	22



- Third, do quality school options exist on a wide scale? Will the proposed arrangement be available to all? Will most parents have available to them two or more schools from which a real selection can be made? Does affordable, safe transportation exist to put school options within the grasp of all parents and students regardless of their economic circumstances?
- Fourth, upon what basis will decisions about school selection be made? What would it take to make parents of all backgrounds and circumstances informed and wise school choosers?
- Fifth, who should decide whether or not to adopt school choice as a reform tactic—should that be a federal, state or local question? At a time when most agree that the best school reforms are spawned at the grassroots, is it effective or wise for Washington or state legislatures to mandate school choice from the "top down?"
- Sixth, how does choice represent a departure from the historic role schools have played in preserving the vitality of local communities and of our nation as a whole? At a time when traditional community mainstays such as churches and libraries are imperiled, what implications does choice have for the long-term survival of neighborhood schools which in many cases stand as the last stabilizing institutions many poor or isolated communities have left?

- Seventh, is it possible to promote the best features of choice while still strengthening the neighborhood school?

In the 1830s, Mann envisioned the "common school" which "would be open to all and supported by tax funds. It would be for rich and poor alike. . . . And by receiving children of all creeds, classes and backgrounds . . . it would kindle a spirit of amity and mutual respect that the conflicts of adult life could never destroy.<sup>5</sup> Today, we find ourselves debating a radical new conception of American education, one where the "common school" framed by Horace Mann is replaced by schools ruled by the laws of the marketplace and consumerism.

Thirty years ago, during a reform era spawned not by Toyotas but fear of Soviet missiles, President John F. Kennedy rallied the nation behind public education, calling it "the keystone in the arch of freedom and progress. Nothing has contributed more to the enlargement of this nation's strength and opportunities than our traditional system of free, universal elementary and secondary education. . . ."<sup>6</sup> Today, by contrast, we've grown used to hearing public education assailed as the nation's problem, not its salvation. Public education is condemned as a "failed monopoly"<sup>7</sup> concerned more with protecting jobs than the education of our children.

~~In seeking answers to these questions we at The Carnegie Foundation~~  
~~concluded that the time had come to study choice~~—not from the standpoint of ideological assumptions but through a careful look at states and districts where choice has actually been introduced. We spent eight months contacting parents, students, teachers and administrators in states with extensive choice systems: Minnesota, Arkansas, Massachusetts, Washington state, Iowa and Nebraska. We surveyed all 50 state superintendents for their views on the merits and mechanics of choice. For three months we visited districts with some of the nation's most highly-developed systems of

choice: from Milwaukee to rural Minnesota, from suburban New Jersey to East Harlem, Cambridge, and several other cities in Massachusetts. *which we describe in some detail*

We report in the chapters that follow are findings—but the possibilities and pitfalls of school choice and in a concluding chapter \_\_\_\_\_ options that should be carefully examined by all of those who wish to adapt the model for the nation. *in the long run*

Finally, we cannot ignore the question of how choice might alter the historic function of public education as the initiator of the young into American life. For two centuries, educational theorists like Thomas Jefferson, Horace Mann, and in later generations, John Dewey and James B. Conant, each saw a powerful public stake in schooling, inseparable from the imperatives of nationhood, democracy and community. None of these leaders ever conceived of the pursuit of knowledge as merely a solitary act of consumerism. Education, wrote Jefferson, "engrafts a new man on the native stock, and improves what in his nature was vicious and perverse into qualities of virtue and social worth." With the help of public education, he said, "tyranny and the oppression of the mind will vanish like evil spirits at the dawn of day."

- Before report in these case studies we had 2 summary and findings*
1. *most states a point who ~~fail~~ of salpate in school choice program full good about the report*
  2. *At the same time the school choice has remarkably limited appeal. ~~that~~ for the vast majority of parents were satisfied with their current school arrangements*
  3. *The educational impact of school choice is ambiguous at best. East Harlem, the most celebrated success story is still a difficult situation and now, in real terms, is losing ground* (bdk)

Fourth

- the gains made in school choice debate cannot be
4. <sup>1</sup> ~~The~~ school districts with the largest history of school closures have required additional funds for it to ~~be~~ be effective.

attributed to choice alone. For example

5. The process of school choice relates dramatically to those districts where schools are in close proximity to each other and where parents make more choices to all.

6) State choice plans have on the whole been ineffective mainly because they are poorly planned. In fact, the worst choice plan is the one that is not in place.

7. Finally, we found that states where choice was implemented the gap between the poorest and wealthiest districts was

6. School choice ignored or in a ghetto of many states ~~with~~ saying within the gap between the poorest and the wealthiest



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