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SCHOOL CHOICE

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**The Carnegie Foundation
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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 ^{of 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 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~~, ^{in the 1993-94 school year} respectively. 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,

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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 your~~ said
The goal of education is getting
better

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

TABLE I

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

Very satisfied	57%
Somewhat satisfied	36%
Somewhat dissatisfied	8%
Very dissatisfied	5%
Don't know	1%

TABLE II

In your opinion has the
Quality of Education at your
child's school been better
better or worse or has it
stayed about the same?

Better	30
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.² 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."³

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."⁴

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 ^{usually} 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~~ ^{parochial} 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 ^{of programs} 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 ^{newly created choice initiative, the} "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 ^{that} 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 ^{overcome} ~~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.

Yes - Public School	97
Yes - Private School	197
No	707
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?~~ *try make a school* ⁷
- ~~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 choices 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.⁵ 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. . . ."⁶ 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"⁷ 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

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choice distrib. cannot be
4. ~~the~~ school districts with
the largest history of school
choices have required
additional funds for it to
maintain the operation.

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3. The process of school
choice relates dramatically
to those districts where
schools are in close
proximity to each
other and where
parents make them
available to all.

6) State choice plans
have on the whole
been ineffective mainly
because they are poorly
planned. One mistake
is, without doubt, the
lack of a choice plan
in the
return

7) Fring, we
found that
states where
choice worked
the gap
between the
percentage of
disadvantaged

6. School choice ignored
on an inequitable program
system with
strong evidence the gap
between the advantaged &
the disadvantaged

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