DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 396 365 EA 027 507

AUTHOR Allen, Jeanne
TITLE Nine Lies about School Choice: Answering the Critics.
INSTITUTION Center for Education Reform, Washington, DC.
PUB DATE Feb 95
NOTE 26p.
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Access to Education; Accountability; Conservatism; *Educational Equity (Finance); Elementary Secondary Education; Free Enterprise System; *Politics of Education; Private Education; *Private Schools; Public Schools; *School Choice; *School Restructuring; State Church Separation

ABSTRACT

This document presents arguments to counter nine criticisms, or "lies," most frequently leveled at school choice. The criticisms include the following: (1) the undermining America argument: Choice will destroy the American public school tradition; (2) the creaming argument: Choice will leave the poor behind in the worst schools; (3) the incompetent parent argument: Parents will not be capable of choosing the right school for their child; (4) the nonacademic parental neglect argument: Parents will use the wrong criteria to choose schools for their children; (5) the selectivity issue: Private schools are exclusive and there will be insufficient help for students with special needs; (6) the radical schools scare: Extremists will form schools; (7) the church-state problem: Choice is unconstitutional; (8) the public accountability argument: Private schools are not sufficiently regulated; and (9) the choice-is-expensive argument: There are high hidden costs associated with school choice. (Includes 52 footnotes.) (LMI)

THE Center for Education Reform

NINE LIES
ABOUT SCHOOL CHOICE: ANSWERING THE CRITICS

By Jeanne Allen

INTRODUCTION

> *Diverting public moneys to private schools — schools that are selective in their entrance requirements, serve a strictly private purpose, and are accountable to no one but themselves — will do nothing to upgrade and enhance public education.*[1]

This would come as a surprise to the roughly ten million Americans who choose to send their children to private schools, and the 70% of the populace who support school choice as a means to improve public education.

Such statements make clear that most education special interests, like the National Education Association (NEA), do not have the interests of children first and foremost in mind. Their leaders scorn any plan to expand the choices of parents beyond the school to which their children are assigned. Despite enormous growth and power in the 1980s among anti-choice education leaders and lawmakers, those groups that continue to oppose this popular tide of school reform are finding it more and more difficult to win. Says the Pennsylvania State Education Association, "Our adversaries have organized at the grass roots level to an unprecedented degree. They are communicating forcefully and regularly.... Those who have supported us in the past are finding it more difficult to support us."[2]

This is also the case in dozens of other states, including Arizona and Connecticut, where in 1994 school choice lost by only a three vote margin and a tie respectively.[3] Elsewhere, proponents of choice are clearly gaining on their opponents.

Choice At Work. More children than ever before are going to schools of choice. Hundreds of thousands of children are choosing to go to schools other than that to which they are assigned, with the help of state authorized plans or private scholarship programs. To date, some 28 states — more than half of the United States — have adopted some type of plan, ranging from limited choice among public schools in several states to a program including private schools in Milwaukee, Wisconsin and privately sponsored education

---

1 "School Choice: Questions and Answers," National Education Association, June, 1992.

2 Annette Palutis, "Alert to Mobilize for Public Education," Memo to PSEA Leaders, January 14, 1994.

3 Jeanne Allen, "School Reform in the United States: State by State Analysis, Summer, 1994," The Center For Education Reform, June 8, 1994.

choice (scholarship) programs for inner city children in dozens of cities from New York City to Oakland, California. At least a dozen more states are considering some form of choice for children, with a particular focus on helping the poor, and many of these proposals would give parents the option of sending their children to private schools. Polls over the last ten years continue to show consistent and increasing popular support for school choice among Americans from all walks of life, with high concentrations of support from minorities.[4]

With growing support for and participation in choice programs, it is hardly surprising that the opponents of reform have accelerated their attacks on educational choice. Armed with the facts, supporters can debunk popular mythology and broaden their support even further. The criticisms against choice constitute nine broad categories:

1 — The Undermining-America Argument: Choice will destroy the American public school tradition.

2 — The Creaming Argument: Choice will leave the poor behind in the worst schools.

3 — The Incompetent Parent Argument: Parents will not be capable of choosing the right school for their child.

4 — The Non-Academic Parental Neglect Argument: Parents will use the wrong criteria, such as sports facilities, in choosing schools for their children.

5 — The Selectivity Issue: Private schools are exclusive and there will be insufficient help for students with special needs.

6 — The Radical Schools Scare (or the *Farrakhan-KKK Theory*): Extremists, like Louis Farrakhan or the Ku Klux Klan, will form schools.

7 — The Church-State Problem: Choice is unconstitutional.

8 — The Public Accountability Argument: Private schools are not sufficiently regulated.

9 — The Choice is Expensive Argument: There are high hidden costs associated with school choice.

---

4 "School Choices for Disadvantaged Children," The Center for Education Reform, May 27, 1994.

THE NINE LIES ABOUT SCHOOL CHOICE

1 — THE UNDERMINING-AMERICA ARGUMENT:

Choice will destroy the long tradition of common schools in America by subsidizing private schools at the expense of public schools. These schools, which embody the classless and democratic principles of the United States, are enshrined in the public school system.

Says former Wisconsin Superintendent of Public Instruction Herbert Grover, "[T]he private school choice program is not a solution but a program that is in conflict with the intent of the common schools established for the common good of our society."[5]

While Grover is no longer in office, his sentiment is shared and echoed by countless education leaders nationwide, who often drape themselves in the cloak of the "common school," to avoid any meaningful discussion of school reform through choice.

The term "public education" was first used in 1837 by Horace Mann, the first Secretary of Education for the state of Massachusetts, to describe the goal of an educated citizenry, seen in part as an effective way to knit together the millions of immigrants from many lands who were coming to America. Charles Glenn, educational expert, author, and former director of equal opportunity for the state of Massachusetts writes: "At the heart of this vision was the idea of the common school, a school in which the children of all classes and representing all levels of society would be educated together and would thus acquire the mutual respect essential to the functioning of a democracy."[6] Indeed, opponents of choice frequently invoke the name of Horace Mann.

But Mann was not entirely without prejudice. Writes New York University Historian Diane Ravitch: "The rise of the common school during the nineteenth century cannot be understood without reference to the dominant influence of evangelical Protestantism on common schools, and more specifically, to the relentless efforts by evangelical Protestants to deny funds to Catholic schools."[7] The leaders of the common school movement

---

5 Herbert Grover, "The Milwaukee Choice Plan," Wisconsin Choice News, August 1990, p. 4.

6 Charles L. Glenn, The Myth of the Common School, Amherst, MA.: University of Massachusetts Press, 1988.

7 Diane Ravitch, "Somebody's Children: Necessary Steps in Expanding Educational Opportunity," paper prepared for Princeton University conference, May 24-26, 1994, p. 11.

were Protestant clergyman who "spread the gospel of the common school in their united battle against Romanism, barbarism, and skepticism."[8] "The object of the common school movement was not to establish non-religious, secular schools, but to establish schools that were state-controlled, non-sectarian and Christian."[9] In essence, the purpose of this movement, which Grover and his education colleagues embrace, "was not to create secular schools but to assure that all public funds were devoted solely to non-denominational Protestant schools."[10] In fact, many proponents of choice today would not scorn this emphasis, nor an emphasis on secular education, if either were *options*, not requirements.

Defenders of government-controlled schools also invoke Thomas Jefferson, who was a staunch proponent of education for all, arguing that it was the bulwark of a civilized society. "Establish the law for educating the common people," he once wrote. "That is the business of the state to effect." Both Jefferson and Mann believed in education for instilling solid academic rigor in students, and in creating civilized people who would think and act with the best interests of their community in mind.

But as society has vastly changed, so too have the standards of public education from those which its founders first envisioned. First, the founding fathers never intended that only the government could provide an education. Jefferson promoted the use of private institutions to educate the "common people," which many a one-room schoolhouse or church did voluntarily, up until public education was established to reach the huge numbers of new Americans coming into the country in the early 1800s.

Second, if one were able to summon Jefferson and Mann to modern day public education, they would be horrified by its modern-day defenders. They would find that the society they hoped to integrate into a common set of shared values through universal schooling was just as bad as when they left. As University of Chicago sociologist James Coleman has discovered in his research, public schools today rarely conform to common school tradition.[11] They tend, rather, to be the most exclusive and segregated schools. As Robert L. Carter, the NAACP lawyer who argued Brown v. Board of Education and who is now a federal judge, attests, "More black children are in all or virtually

---

8 David Tyack, "The Kingdom of God and the Common School: Protestant Ministers and the Educational Awakening in the West," Harvard Educational Review 36, Fall 1966, p. 450.

9 Ravitch, "Somebody's Children: Necessary Steps in Expanding Educational Opportunity," p.11.

10 Ibid.

11 James Coleman, Public and Private Schools, New York, New York: Basic Books, 1987.

all black schools today than in 1954."[12] Ironically, private religious schools are more consistent with the common school philosophy than are public schools. Inner city Catholic schools in such cities as Chicago and New York bring together children of widely differing social and economic strata.

Choice, in fact, affords Americans the best chance of re-creating the idyllic common school by returning all children to a level playing field and ensuring that schools are representative of diverse communities. Parents of all colors, socio-economic levels, and classes should be able to choose among the widest range of schools possible, rather than being segregated out of a particular school because its cost may be prohibitive.

When opponents argue that "non-public schools separate students on the basis of ... income, race, achievement levels, religion or gender...[and thus] the common school experience will deteriorate,"[13] choice proponents should argue that such a school experience is already extinct. Choice would recreate the good elements of the common school by restoring quality education and accountability for results. In the 19th century, the local public school epitomized the ideals; now they epitomize pre-19th century chaos.

2 — THE CREAMING ARGUMENT:

Choice will "leave behind" the poor and most difficult to educate, while good students will be "creamed" into the best schools.

Argues the New Jersey Education Association's Director of Public Relations, Delores T. Corona, "What they're going to do is segregate people. The private schools will have all the best kids, and the public schools will have the remainder."[14]

The creaming argument supposes that poorer and less able children will tend to be left behind in the worst schools when parents have a choice of schools. Adherents of this view presume that most minority or lower-income parents do not know the difference between good and bad schools and that their children will end up in bad schools. Hence, the argument goes, choice plans are unfair because they separate the "haves" from the "have-nots."

---

12 Carol Feldman, "Civil Rights Leaders Wear Scars of Controversy," Washington Times, May 17, 1994.

13 "Public education vs. vouchers," Advocacy Action, National Education Association, February 1, 1994.

14 Jay Romano, "Plan for Vouchers Seems to Pick Up Steam," The New York Times, January 2, 1994.

While the "creaming" theorists are concerned about inequality under a choice plan, they seem to ignore that today's education system is extremely unequal. The "haves" already have choice because they have the money to choose a private school for their children. The "have-nots," meanwhile, are trapped in major urban school systems in which the quality of education is appalling despite heavy spending by the school districts. Often in public schools, minorities are still relegated to "the back of the bus." In the San Francisco public schools, 20% of the student body is black, but 50% of students assigned to special education programs are black. Says Federal Judge Carter, "classes for the gifted usually mean classes for the white, and special education classes usually mean classes for black males."[15]

Such is not the case, however, at Love Academy, a private school whose student body happens to be over 90% black. The preschoolers are in the top one percent nationally on math and reading scores and the eighth graders are already tackling organic chemistry. These students haven't been "creamed" from the system; they are merely held to a higher standard — acceptance into Harvard University is just one of the school superintendent's stated goals for all her students.[16]

Choice is a tool to reduce inequality. The evidence shows that choice improves all schools, not just a few, and that poor parents are quite able to find the best schools.

Successful Magnet Schools. This is very clear in the case of magnet schools, which are specialized schools offering unique programs. They are designed to attract children of all races. They constitute a limited form of parental choice, in that parents opt to send their children there in place of the school to which they were assigned. They post significantly better results than other public schools. Large magnet school systems have been functioning for more than a decade in over 100 cities nationwide.

Adherents of the creaming argument contend that magnet schools nationwide can boast success simply because they attract smart children of smart and very involved parents. Yet the evidence on many long-established magnet schools suggests this is not the reason. These schools credit their success to the child's excitement at being in the school and the school's ability to tailor its lessons to the needs of individual students. Magnets do not, in fact, selectively enroll children. Since demand is high, they operate generally by lottery, to ensure that all parents have an equal opportunity at a limited

---

15 Tony Mauro, "School 'tracking' to be challenged as biased," USA Today, May 4, 1994.

16 Steve Stecklow, "Born Again: Evangelical Schools Reinvent Themselves By Stressing Academics," Wall Street Journal, May 12, 1994.

number of spaces. Moreover, refuting the assertions of choice critics, parents of these children are not necessarily the more involved and better educated parents. They are those, however, that the schools have tried very hard to reach, in order to attract customers. Rather than attribute poor judgment to poor and disadvantaged parents, critics could turn this around by ensuring that parents have the information necessary to make distinctions between good and bad schools. When they have the opportunity and are given full information about the choices open to them, all parents are capable of making good choices.

Charter Schools. Choice for more poor and minority parents is becoming a reality through the burgeoning charter school movement, which encourages teachers and parents to start innovative schools freed from cumbersome rules and regulations. The Minnesota legislature was the first to enact Charter Schools, making it possible for teachers to form their own school, and be free from most state oversight. Since then, states including California, Colorado, Massachusetts, Arizona, Minnesota and Michigan have passed strong charter school legislation, and many of the schools materializing are tailored specifically to those who have the fewest choices. For instance, Metro Deaf charter school in Minnesota provides an alternative to the state school for deaf students. Over a quarter of the schools provided for in Colorado's law will service at-risk students, and in Massachusetts, most of the 15 approved charters scheduled to open in 1995 serve the disadvantaged. California has more than seventy charter schools which are designed and operated by parents and teachers, a large number of which serve disadvantaged and underachieving students. The Jingle Town Middle School educates children who have not been served well in existing public schools, and has a heavy concentration of children from Oakland's Hispanic community. Interest is high in these areas, and as with other 'choice' schools, waiting lists are growing.

The answer then is not to stop choice, but to increase the supply of schools available from which to choose, thus ensuring that everyone has an opportunity. Because charter schools must reach out to parents to attract their children and their state allotted funding, these schools must be highly responsive to the needs and concerns of those parents and students. Maintaining enrollment and funding demands that responsiveness. The dedication of those who have started charters is unparalleled.

Harlem Turnaround. Consider the case of East Harlem in New York City. Children in East Harlem School District 4 in 1974 scored the lowest of any New York City school district in state assessments. Central office officials blamed their students' failure on the bad influence and lack of involvement of parents.[17] Then a bold district administration instituted a plan that gives teachers authority to design and run their own schools and gives parents the right to choose among them. Teachers joined administrators in launching a comprehensive outreach program to inform parents about the diversity of options then available. By 1986, students from District 4 ranked fifteenth out of 32 in reading scores. When asked to choose among a variety of schools for their children, the poorest and most desolate of East Harlem parents in fact made good choices for their children, usually based on academic criteria.

Milwaukee Parental Choice Program. The same is true in Milwaukee.[18] There the parental choice program gives low-income students state "scholarships" worth $3,200 (1994-95 school year) to cover tuition at the private, nonsectarian school of their choice. Now in its fifth year of operation, parents of 830 students[19] exercised their choice and sent their children to institutions such as the highly respected Urban Day School, which boasts a 98 percent graduation rate. A majority of parents participating in the choice program are single parents, and many are unemployed. They are virtually identical to their public school counterparts according to most socio-economic measures.

Critics abound despite the district's satisfaction with the program. Richard Kouri, president of the Texas State Teachers Association, proclaimed that the Milwaukee program was a "dismal failure,"[20] but neglected to mention that the choice students' math scores increased significantly in the program's third year, in contrast to the sinking scores of their Milwaukee public school counterparts. While overall results may yet be inconclusive, the state's independent study of the program has found that choice students are, at the least, keeping strides with their public school peers — even though those who entered the choice program averaged in the bottom third compared to public school students nationwide. And there is no question that the program enjoys high parental support and involvement, and the students exhibit better morale, attendance and discipline.

---

17 U.S. Department of Education, "Choosing Better Schools: A Report on the Five Regional Meetings in Choice in Education," December, 1990.

18 "Parents are happy with choice program," The Milwaukee Journal, August 12, 1990.

19 By law participation in the program is limited to 1,500 students — an increase from the original cap of 1,000.

20 Terrence Stutz, "Teachers' association criticizes school choice," Dallas Morning News, March 30, 1994.

Such programs don't leave behind students, but rather reach out to the very students that the public school system has abandoned. Even Keith Geiger, president of the National Education Association, and an avowed opponent to school choice, concedes that it is the poor and disadvantaged, who have had "promise after promise after promise broken" by the public school system, "who see vouchers as their last, best hope to lift their children out of desperation."[21]

Private Scholarship Programs. In 20 privately-sponsored choice programs in cities such as Indianapolis, Newark, San Antonio and the District of Columbia, more than 8,500 low-income children are attending schools of their choice.[22] These are experiments which demand parental involvement, beginning with the application process right through to getting their children to school each day and attending parent/teacher conferences. Parents in these programs are required to pay their share, usually half, of the school's tuition, but for them the struggle to meet the bills is worthwhile. In Texas alone, three new schools were created in 1993 to accommodate the children wanting to participate in these programs, who would not otherwise have been able to afford to attend the school of their choice. Creamists would argue that only the best and brightest would have the wherewithal to participate. In reality, all families are capable of choosing; they just need to be offered.

Proponents of the creaming view assume that there is a static pool of schools and that choice plans will allow good schools to drain away the better students while the bad schools will continue to educate the worst students and deteriorate. They ask, "What will happen to all the other children once the good schools fill up?" This criticism overlooks one of the most fundamental dynamics of choice: the ability of parents to choose schools forces existing public schools to change. Another dynamic is that good schools expand and new schools emerge. If bad schools cannot or will not improve, their students can go elsewhere. The assertions about "bad children being left behind" simply do not take into account the dynamics of a school choice plan.

---

21 James Varney, "Vouchers Maim School System, Lobbyist Says," The Times Picayune, February 6, 1994.

22 A scholarship program serving Los Angeles and Orange counties, California, will provide 1,000 more seats for children beginning fall, 1994.

3 — THE INCOMPETENT PARENT ARGUMENT:

Since some parents are truly incapable of making choices, such as those who abuse drugs, some parents also are incapable of wisely exercising their choice option, thus consigning their children to sub-standard education.

Says Urban Institute scholar Isabel Sawhill: "The emphasis on choice ... conflicts with the rising body of evidence that poor families are often beset with any multitude of problems, making it difficult for them to cope with the added responsibility — such as evaluating different schools or owning a home."[23]

Like the creaming theorists, those who argue parents can't or won't choose good schools ignore the evidence. In the privately sponsored scholarship programs discussed above, the children represent all aptitude levels and span the lower rung of the socio-economic ladder from end to end, but were not performing in their public schools as well as they could. Parents participating in these programs are more satisfied with and more involved in their child's education at their choice schools. Says one parent whose children are part of a program in Atlanta, "The vouchers have developed my family far beyond academics. Being able to attend [a school of choice] has really broadened my children's horizons. They ask bigger questions, and I know that this is directly linked to my family having a choice of schools."[24] A parent from San Antonio wrote, "When I first heard of your program I was determined to enroll my children in it. At that time I had no transportation but took two buses to get to your office.... I am determined to give my kids a fair chance at life through a better education."[25]

The evidence suggests that the opportunity to make a real decision — possibly for the first time in years — can shake an individual out of a life of despair and dependency. This notion undergirds the philosophy of empowerment, and its dramatic effects can be seen in the success of tenant management of public housing and similar empowerment strategies.[26] According to New York University political scientist Lawrence Mead, allowing or requiring the poor to make decisions renders them just as capable of good decisions or work habits as someone who is better off. Writes Mead,

---

23 Isabel V. Sawhill, Raymond J. Struyk, and Steven M. Sachs, "The New Paradigm: Choice and Empowerment as Social Policy Tools," Policy Bites, The Urban Institute, February 1991, p. 5.

24 Testimony by Atlanta Parent Eltanger Trammell to Georgia Lt. Gov. Pierre Howard, October 28, 1993.

25 From parent's letter to CEO Foundation, October 6, 1993.

26 John Scanlon, "People Power in the Projects: How Tenant Management Can Save Public Housing," Heritage Foundation Backgrounder No. 758, March 8, 1990.

"The poor are as eager to work [and participate in decisions] as the better-off, but the strength of this desire appears to be unrelated to their work behavior... Most clients in workfare programs actually respond positively to the experience of being required to work, not negatively as they would if they truly rejected work."[27]

The ability to choose leads to one of two outcomes. In very many instances, as supporters of empowerment contend, it leads to parents gaining the self-confidence to exercise control over their lives. But even if this does not happen, and parents do not bother to choose a school for their children, they are still assigned a school under choice plans. The assigned school is not likely to be worse than the one now attended by the child. Indeed, it is likely to be better because of the improvements forced by increased pressure from other parents.

Deeply troubled or dysfunctional children, meanwhile, are likely to do better under a choice system because it will make available a wider range of schools, especially if private schools are included in the choice program. Explains Abigail Thernstrom, adjunct Associate Professor of Education at Boston University and author of School Choice in Massachusetts, "Already many private schools meet the needs of dysfunctional children."[28] Districts in Arizona, for example, contract every year with private schools to educate about 2,000 children whose needs are not being met by the public school system.

To be sure, a ready availability of information is more important to poorer and less able students than to sophisticated parents. For this reason, well-crafted choice plans would require parent information centers and parent liaisons to help parents who need assistance in making choices. In the case of private scholarship programs for low-income families, where there has been little publicity, there are almost as many children on waiting lists as are participating in the programs. But even if such sources of information were not available, or parents chose not to take advantage of them, the worst that could happen is that children for whom no choice is made would be assigned to a school — which is no different from what occurs today.

---

27 Lawrence Mead, "Jobs for the Welfare Poor," Policy Review, Winter 1988, p. 65.

28 Abigail Thernstrom, "Hobson's Choice," The New Republic, July 15, 1991, p. 13.

4—THE NON-ACADEMIC PARENTAL NEGLECT ARGUMENT:

Parents will use such criteria as a school's location or its athletic facilities, rather than the quality of the education it provides, in deciding what school their child will attend.

Says Albert Shanker, President, American Federation of Teachers (AFT), "A good location or a day care program or top-notch sports facilities are more likely to dictate the choice of a school than a first class academic program."[29]

Many choice critics argue that most parents would not bother to choose a school or, if they did, they would do so on the basis of non-academic concerns. In 1992 the New York City-based Carnegie Foundation added its voice to this mantra and claimed that parents choose "mostly for non-academic reasons." Initially, some parents who have never had to judge a school before may cast their votes on the basis of non-academic factors. However, studies of two states where hundreds of thousands of children have an opportunity to choose a school demonstrate that academic reasons are a priority for most parents. A recent study of Massachusetts choice programs shows that the overwhelming majority of families chose schools for academic concerns; issues such as athletics or convenience are of minor importance in their choice.[30] Since choice has become an option, studies show that academics quickly supersede all other factors.

An independent evaluation of Minnesota's public school choice program, now in its eighth year, also confirms that parents choose first and foremost for academic reasons.[31] Schools, in turn, have responded to parent and student demands and made significant changes in response to competitive pressures. Since the introduction of post-secondary enrollment options in 1985, more than 50,000 high schoolers have used this program to go to local colleges for their courses, for both high school and future college credit. The number of advanced placement courses offered in Minnesota high schools has quadrupled in the years since the program began as the high schools strive to gain back the students (and their education dollars) who have gravitated to college campuses to seek more challenging course work. The post-secondary enrollment option is just one of the state's choice programs; in all, over 113,000 Minnesota students every year — nearly 15% of

---

29 Albert Shanker, "No gain without pain: Solving our Education Crisis," Advertorial, New York Times, September 15, 1991.

30 "School Choice in Massachusetts: Why Parents Choose Choice," The Executive Office of Education, MA, April, 1994.

31 Michael C. Rubenstein, Rosalind Hamar, and Nancy E. Adelman, "Minnesota's Open Enrollment Option," Policy Studies Associates, Washington, DC, 1992.

the state's enrollment — participate in the state's various school choice options.

There are some states who neither provide enough information to parents, nor create an incentive for schools to market to parents. Thus there may be parents whose choices appear to be made on the basis of more social considerations, like proximity to their home or work, or extracurricular activities. Parents should not be considered neglectful, however, under these circumstances. Certainly there are academic benefits to be gained for the child who does not have to endure a long commute to her district-assigned school when a suitable school is just two blocks away.

Conversely, states such as Iowa offer open-enrollment to parents but do little to encourage their participation. They are doing communities a disservice. Still, without the inclusion of private schools to spur competition, there is little incentive for the people of Iowa to demand that public schools respond to consumer needs for information. In Minnesota, the state encourages participation, and as a result there are dozens of published books and pamphlets about people's choices from district to district. And within weeks of the opening of the Los Angeles, California choice program, schools had already assembled and distributed publications and aired public service announcements about their schools.

Gauge for Achievement. The same people who criticize choice programs and actively suppress the good news from state to state also fight moves to make academic testing information readily available to parents. The NEA, AFT, National School Boards Association and others, for example, are opposed to mandatory state and district level reporting of the scores of the National Assessment for Educational Progress, commonly known as the Nation's Report Card. State efforts to institute rigorous testing and report cards for schools meet with fierce opposition. Thus when Al Shanker, President of the American Federation of Teachers, cynically asks: "Do most [parents] — rich, poor or in the middle — really want rigorous standards for their children? And if they don't, would they choose rigorous schools?" he should be reminded that the efforts of many of his colleagues sometimes keep parents from being able to make informed choices.

Shanker's argument in any case unwittingly underscores the need for choice. The fact is that parents routinely are kept in the dark about how well public schools perform because hard performance information generally is unavailable. The need for such information has led an increasing number of choice advocates to support calls for voluntary state and national testing to give schools performance standards and to give parents a gauge by which to measure their children's achievement.

Once an accurate and dependable system of accountability is in place, parents will become smart consumers and can demand improvements — even if they choose not to change schools. Of course, even with clear academic assessments and with precise information on which to make choices, some parents may, as Shanker fears, decide that a neighborhood school or a school with an emphasis on team sports is better for their child than one which excels in mathematics. But that should be their choice to make as parents. It is a choice made routinely by affluent parents, such as President Bill Clinton, who chose to send his daughter to the elite Sidwell-Friends School in Washington, DC, to allow her to escape some of the intense pressure she might meet in the public schools. Choice plans simply allow poor parents the chance to make that same decision. And whether or not the parent is selecting a small, no-frills Catholic school or a fancy sectarian private school such as the Clintons have, the evidence suggests that children in both environments will thrive because *they* are the main concern of the school, not government mandates or job saving.

5 — THE SELECTIVITY ARGUMENT:

Private schools in the choice plan will admit only easy-to-teach children, leaving difficult, less academically gifted children in the public schools. Such selectivity is the reason for the private schools' vaunted ability to outperform public schools.

Claims Chicago 6th Ward Alderman John Steele, "Every other school system other than the public school system can shed off anybody that does not do well. If you go to a Catholic school and you have a discipline problem, the school will put you out. If a student is retarded or has a learning disability, the public school has to work with that child, where the other schools do not."[32]

Opponents of choice make a living out of characterizing all private schools as elite academies that charge exorbitant fees and cater only to high-achieving, low-maintenance kids. The fact is that the average tuition among private elementary schools is $1,700 and for private secondary schools it is $3,650. Most religiously-affiliated schools do not set admissions standards that would keep poor or disadvantaged children out. While some private schools set high admission requirements, and should have that right, the fact is that parochial schools — the private schools serving most children in cities with or considering choice plans — actually are less selective than public schools. Explains Reverend Vincent Breen, superintendent of education for the Roman Catholic Diocese of Brooklyn and Queens, the claim

---

32 Billy Montgomery, "Council Considers School Vouchers," Chicago Citizen, December 12, 1993.

that selection is normal at Catholic schools is "a completely false statement that's repeated over and over again. Catholic schools are just as open to the needs of the urban child."[33]

Hobson's Choice? Breen is right. Not only do Catholic schools accept children from every background, class, color, and religion, but hundreds of private schools are sent disruptive or learning disabled children that the public schools can no longer handle. In Wisconsin, Arizona, Minnesota and other states, school districts actually contract with private education organizations to provide remedial schooling or to educate at-risk students — teen parents and pregnant girls, chemically dependent students, those with behavioral problems, and those otherwise in danger of dropping out of the system — often at a fraction of the cost. When dropout rates in public schools are sometimes double those of private schools, particularly in urban areas, the charge that private schools dump problem kids on the public school system gets turned on its head. Even Ernest Boyer, president of the Carnegie Foundation, realizes that the availability of private education is beneficial to inner cities in particular. While he views private school choice as a diversion from other educational reforms, he supports the choice program proposed for Jersey City because "the continuing decline [i.e. closure] of Catholic schools presents an even greater threat" than funding school choice plans.[34]

Catholic schools, along with other non-public institutions, also offer training for the deaf, the blind, and the physically and mentally disabled — all at a fraction of the cost that public schools charge for the same service. When all the arguments are filtered and laid bare, the magic of choice for inner city children comes down to one essential fact: students succeed as their schools improve. In the words of sociologist James Coleman, "The proximate reason for the Catholic schools' success with less- advantaged students from deficient families appears to be the greater academic demands that Catholic schools place on these students."[35] Catholic schools in particular boast success in raising the academic achievement of population groups that do poorly in public schools, including blacks, Hispanics and children from poor socio-economic backgrounds. A study by William Sanders, Professor of Economics at DePaul University, finds that "Catholic schooling reduced the odds that sophomores did not graduate with their class by 10 percentage points. Further, we found that Catholic schools had a significant positive effect on the test scores of African-Americans and Hispanics."[36]

---

33 Edna Negron, "Regents debate voucher plan," Newsday, July 24, 1991.

34 Barbara Pape, "Jersey City, NJ: Mayor goes for vouchers and more," Daily Report Card, January 31, 1994.

35 James Coleman, Public and Private Schools, Basic Books, New York, 1987, p. 148.

36 William Sanders, "Catholic Schools Show Value of Choice," Chicago Tribune, January 1, 1994.

Research by Brookings scholars John E. Chubb and Terry Moe further shows that private schools in general excel because of their organization, not because they weed out less-able students through set admissions criteria. After controlling for all of the variables used to explain away the performance of private schools such as selection criteria, as well as socio-economic status, student ability, and the influence of peers, Chubb and Moe find that private schools still out perform public schools, particularly as concerns the less advantaged.[37]

To encourage all schools to accommodate handicapped children or those with pronounced learning disabilities, many choice plans, such as that currently proposed for Texas, offer more valuable scholarship certificates for such children to encourage schools to create programs suited to their needs. As shown earlier, many school systems already contract with private centers to provide extra assistance to public school children with special needs, indicating that private institutions by no means shun such children. Most choice advocates believe in these sorts of incentives. There are many examples of private schools, of all different sizes, accommodating children with special needs, sometimes better than the public schools despite no public funding to create special programs.

6 — THE RADICAL SCHOOLS SCARE:

A choice system will lead to "fly by night" schools which take public funds without providing adequate education. Worse still, schools espousing radical or extremist dogmas would emerge, perhaps even those run by the Ku Klux Klan or by black extremists.

Says California Assembly Speaker Willie Brown, "Can you imagine a KKK group, Skinheads, witches or other cult groups setting up schools to teach their philosophy and using taxpayers' dollars to do so? This country has a history of blocking religious and dangerous cult groups from using public funds which must be continued."[38]

---

37 John E. Chubb and Terry M. Moe, Politics, Markets, and America's Schools, Washington, D.C.: The Brookings Institution, 1990, p. 129.

38 Willie L. Brown, Jr., "Voucher business is bad business," Sacramento Observer, September 15, 1993.

Such heresy gets tremendous political mileage for opponents to choice. What they do not say is that most states *have* imposed minimum civil rights and academic standards on private schools. Most education choice proposals, moreover, require the government to play some role in enforcing federal anti-discrimination laws and ensuring contractual obligations to students. Critics who try to scare the public with depictions of extremist schools and the return to the segregationist academies of the south not only overlook the character of today's private schools, but also mislead the public into believing that private schools are unregulated, unmonitored bastions of intolerance.

A few facts about private education — and new potential schools — expose these arguments as uninformed at best. Dr. Charles O'Malley, who handled private education issues for three U.S. Secretaries of Education, has found that "approximately 96% of private school children attend schools which are accredited or evaluated by national, regional or state private school organizations. These organizations maintain standards which have been accepted or recognized by federal, state and local education agencies, as well as by foundations and corporations."[39] Those schools that are not accredited are typically affiliated with an established institution — such as Catholic or Protestant churches. The minority of schools that are entirely independent of both accreditation and other established entities still have one main and very important degree of accountability — to parents, whose hard-earned money funds the tuition.

Many critics also suggest that discrimination is rampant in private schools. They know, however, that both public and private schools today, like all society's institutions, must abide by federal civil rights laws with regard to discrimination on the basis of race. Choice programs in place (and good proposals) all emphasize enforcement of anti-discrimination laws. In addition, where court-ordered desegregation efforts are underway, many choice plans specifically state that choices will be granted unless there is no space at the school, or unless the choice interferes with state-mandated racial balances. Some districts have even turned to choice as a means of achieving desegregation, though voluntary rather than forced means.

---

39 Charles O'Malley, "Who says private schools are not accountable?" prepared for Temple University and Manhattan Institute, presented at the Western Regional Science Association conference, February 21, 1993.

As to the claim that bizarre or extremist schools will proliferate under a choice system, nothing prevents such schools from opening and attracting customers today in the private sector provided they abide by federal and state laws. The fact is that few exist. Fewer, if any, would be established under choice programs. In addition to abiding by the 14th Amendment, which bans schools from discrimination on the basis of race, any schools accepting government funds under a choice program would be subject to some additional constraints. Such guidelines would not interfere with content, but would ensure that what is advertised is what is provided. In short, all schools should be subject to "truth in lending" requirements, something that most private schools currently do by virtue of having to compete for enrollment, but which public schools rarely do. Because of the built-in accountability that the private sector is subject to, the "witches coven" theory of schools is mere fantasy.

7 — THE CHURCH-STATE PROBLEM:

Choice plans that include private, religious schools are unconstitutional because they violate the First Amendment's establishment clause.

Robert L. Maddox, Executive Director of Americans United for Separation of Church and State, claims that public funds cannot be used at religious schools without "violating the constitutional separation of church and state." He adds that "a long line of Supreme Court cases has repeatedly found that the First Amendment bars the expenditure of tax money to support religion or religious schools."[40]

This claim, though widely believed, simply is wrong. As the Congressional Quarterly reported in an article on school choice: "The federal government already provides Pell grants to students at private, religiously affiliated colleges... The GI bill even covers tuition at seminaries."[41] The journal also points out that Harvard Law School's Lawrence Tribe, one of America's most liberal constitutional scholars, says that the current Supreme Court would not find a "reasonably well-designed" choice plan a violation of church and state. He agrees there may be policy concerns about choice, but that the constitutional concerns have been addressed in a litany of cases.

---

40 Robert L. Maddox, Letter to the Editor, The New York Times, May 10, 1991.

41 The Congressional Quarterly, April 27, 1991.

The Supreme Court generally has applied a three-part test in "establishment clause" cases, to determine whether legislation to support private schools is constitutional. First, the program must serve a secular purpose. Second, its "primary effect" must neither advance nor inhibit religion. And third, it must not foster an "excessive entanglement" between government and religion. In practice, as long as a school choice program puts the decision of where the funds are spent in the hands of individual students or parents, and as long as the program does not discriminate in favor of religious schools, the program is likely to survive any constitutional challenge.[42]

A recent Vermont Supreme Court decision illustrates this point. Overruling a decision issued 33 years earlier, the court unanimously upheld reimbursement of tuition for religious schools under a program allowing students to attend private schools at state expense where no public schools are available.[43] The court observed that "juris prudence has evolved greatly since 1961," and "we must examine the constitutional issues anew in light of more recent teachings."[44]

8 — THE PUBLIC ACCOUNTABILITY ARGUMENT:

Private and parochial schools in a choice system would not be regulated by state and federal laws, and therefore would not be accountable to public authority.

According to critic Isabel Sawhill, "Diploma factories might be established in the inner cities to take advantage of the government funding ... similar to the recently exposed examples of vocational schools that exploit low income students to profit from federally sponsored student loans."[45] Said California Superintendent Delaine Eastin, "Choice ... requires practically no accountability from those schools in return."[46]

---

42 Clint Bolick, "Choice In Education, Part II," The Heritage Foundation, February 18, 1991. The study provides details of key court cases on choice.

43 Campbell v. Manchester Board of School Directors, _A.2d_, 1994, Westlaw 162645 (Vt. Jan. 28, 1994). Information provided by Institute for Justice Senior Litigations Counsel Richard Komer.

44 Campbell at 3.

45 Isabel V. Sawhill, Raymond J. Struyk, and Steven M. Sachs, "The New Paradigm: Choice and Empowerment as Social Policy Tools," Policy Bites, The Urban Institute, February, 1991, p. 5.

46 Delaine Eastin, "A Worm in the Apple: How Vouchers Would Undermine Learning," Voices on Choice, ed. K. L. Billingsley, Pacific Research Institute for Public Policy, San Francisco, CA, 1994, p. 36.

The irony of the accountability argument is that in most cities it is the public schools, not the private schools, that are not accountable to parents or even taxpayers. The private schools, by contrast, are directly accountable to their customers. Critics need only consider the abuses of public funds in New York City schools, occurring hand-in-hand with a decline in educational quality, or the Kansas City, Missouri fiasco in which a multi-million dollar funding increase, amounting to more than $36,000 per student, was actually followed by a drop in achievement scores. Likewise, the schools of Jersey City have been put into receivership (state control) and have received an additional $100 million infusion of funds — with no positive results to show for it. Clearly, limiting the use of public funds to public schools is no guarantee of accountability.

Taxpayers required to subsidize their local school districts should have some say over what occurs in the schools. While choice opponents boast of "public accountability" in the schools, in reality the schools are no longer accountable for their employees, their product, or their daily operations. Choice makes schools accountable directly to consumers. All constructive choice proposals require that schools follow financial and operational accountability procedures. If governments fail to do this effectively, as the federal government is accused of doing for trade schools, this is a deficiency of government, not of consumer choice. As it is, a good number of public schools today would be found delinquent in complying with a government regulation requiring good value for money.

While many for-profit trade schools' abuses have been documented, the vast majority of schools of higher education currently operate in a choice system where state or federal assistance follows needier children to the schools they choose. Unlike its public education system, American higher education is considered world-class.

9 — THE CHOICE IS EXPENSIVE ARGUMENT:

There are large hidden costs associated with school choice programs. Transportation costs, for instance, would be so prohibitive as to offset benefits.

According to the Carnegie Foundation, "School choice, to be successful, requires significant administrative and financial support. It is not a cheap path to educational reform."[47]

---

47 Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, School Choice, A Special Report, "Chapter Two: School Choice: Possibilities and Problems," Princeton, NJ, 1992, p.23.

In nearly every legislative or popular initiative where choice has been brought to the public eye, opponents charge that it will be a drain on the budget. What they conveniently overlook is that the United States is once again in a baby boom, and schools have already begun to see a dramatic increase in school enrollments. That increase is predicted to rise: enrollment in grades K-8 is expected to increase from 35.2 million in 1992 to 39.7 million by the year 2004, an increase of 13 percent. Over the same time, a 24 percent increase in enrollment in grades 9 through 12 is expected.[48] To handle this, State Education Departments will have to expend billions of dollars in construction, and communities nationwide will face exorbitant tax increases. For example, opponents to a choice program proposed for California attack what they purported to be its high price tag — despite findings by the state legislative analyst that the program could actually *save* the state $1 billion[49] — and in the next breath declare that the state's public education system "probably need[s] an additional $5 billion to $7 billion. We need to build one new classroom every hour probably for the next two years."[50]

In contrast, successful choice programs would lead to cost savings — not only in school efficiency but in welfare benefits. Some California charter schools are reporting cost-savings and improved service delivery after less than a year of operation, and such savings will be passed right into the classroom in the form of more teachers, special programs and books and supplies. And well run choice schools can also lead to savings for the whole of society over the long run. Says Deborah Meier of Harlem's District 4, "We have less teenage pregnancy, less absenteeism; we maintain virtually all of our students regardless of handicapping conditions, and thus refer fewer students to expensive, self-contained special education classes."[51] Higher attendance rates mean less kids on the streets. Fewer dropouts mean better educated students who can go on to higher education or obtain more meaningful jobs.

Not only does choice not imply higher over-all costs, but neither does it lead to higher transportation costs for large districts. "A system of educational choice need not cost more than current educational systems, and might cost less," says Brookings' John Chubb. "If the supply of schools is allowed to respond to demand, the supply is likely to expand, with relatively small numbers of large comprehensive schools being replaced by larger numbers of small, specialized schools. This expansion could easily occur

---

48 National Center for Education Statistics, Projections of Education Statistics to 2004, Washington, DC, U.S. Government Printing Office, 1993, p. xi.

49 Nanette Asimov, "Public school system put on trial," The San Francisco Chronicle, September 15, 1993.

50 Willie Brown, Evans and Novak Show, CNN, October 2, 1993.

51 Seymour Fliegel with James MacGuire, Miracle in East Harlem, Times Books, NY, 1993.

without the construction or acquisition of new facilities if several schools shared a building."[52]

Chubb's view is firmly grounded in experience. The choice program in East Harlem's District 4 in New York City was created among 20 pre-existing school buildings. Today students can choose from 52 alternative schools, many of which share a building with other schools. Thus wider choice does not necessarily mean increased overhead or transportation costs. This schools-within-a-school concept would be very appropriate for rural areas where transportation costs could indeed mount if students needed to travel farther to their chosen school.

In many large school districts today, school boards have already approved higher transportation budgets to accommodate more buses for additional children or bus routes. Thus in most districts that transport a majority of their students, the costs *are* exorbitant. Yet parents and long-time school observers report that what has increased costs is not the number of children or schools, but the desire of the employees to limit their bus routes for convenience. Students sometimes ride in a virtually empty bus, when many routes could be combined and thus save millions of dollars in costs when salaries and equipment are taken into account. Transportation plans should be reevaluated yearly to account for differences in student resident zones. Yet public schools only review such plans every few years at best.

Choice plans actually may reduce transportation costs as the increased and diversified demands of parents lead to the creation of new schools. And overhead administrative costs very likely would fall since, as Chubb explains, "There is every reason to believe that the administrative structure of a choice system would be less bureaucratized than today's public school systems, and look more like private educational systems, where competition compels decentralization and administrative savings."

Rather than expanding an existing system that is not working, giving parents the opportunity to use the money allocated per child to choose among both public and private schools would help alleviate current burdens on the system and instead create a system that responds directly to demand.

---

52 John Chubb, "Educational Choice, Answers to the Most Frequently Asked Questions About Mediocrity in American Education and What Can Be Done About It," The Yankee Institute for Public Policy Studies, July 1989, p. 22.

CONCLUSION

There is ample evidence that school choice would spur improvements in the way schools operate, and thus improve education for America's children. Despite this evidence, critics -- and misinformation -- abound. Most opponents are motivated by the challenge choice poses to their bureaucratic power. Others, though, are motivated simply by misunderstandings and misplaced concerns.

Some critics worry that parents are unable, or are not equipped with the necessary information, to make wise choices about their children's education. This view enormously underestimates the common sense and parental intentions of ordinary Americans.

To the extent that information is unavailable to parents, this has been the explicit policy of public school districts determined to cover up their failure to educate and to use money well. In New York City, for example, few parents know that of the $7,600 allocated per child, only one-third ever reaches the classroom.

Other worries stem from the belief that some schools, particularly if private schools are included in a choice program, will cream off "profitable" students or discriminate in other ways, and may shortchange students. These worries too are baseless. Not only do schools participating in choice programs abide by non-discrimination policies, but they have a history of providing a more integrated environment and a higher caliber of education than traditional government schools. Many actually cater to the at-risk children the public schools can't handle.

Even though such concerns may be erroneous, they are in most instances sincerely held. Yet when presented with the facts, most Americans see that the arguments raised against school choice are spurious. Without the facts, however, Americans can be taken in by fallacious arguments that suggest that parents do not take their children's schooling seriously enough to make good decisions. It is precisely such sentiments that have led to the downward spiral of American education — a decline that school choice could halt and even reverse.

— February, 1995

Jeanne Allen is the President of The Center for Education Reform.

This paper was first published as Nine Phony Assertions About School Choice in September, 1991, The Heritage Foundation, Washington, DC. This is an updated and revised version by the original author. For the most recent information and developments, please call The Center for Education Reform at (202) 822-9000.

The Center for Education Reform is a national non-profit clearinghouse for reforms, research and action in education.

1001 Connecticut Avenue, NW • Suite 920
Washington, DC 20036
Tel. (202) 822-9000
Fax: (202) 822-5077