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ABSTRACT

Determining the value of school-choice programs depends on an assessment of consequences on the differing elements of the school system. The International Conference on School Choice and Educational Change at Michigan State University explored the themes of governance, equity and access, innovation, student outcomes, and accountability from the perspectives of both choice advocates and critics. Each chapter summarizes a conference presentation and assesses the arguments and available evidence on each issue. Chapter 1, "School Choice and Educational Change," introduces key conference themes and argues for the need to move the choice debate to new terrain. Chapter 2, "Does Choice Undermine the Democratic Control of Schooling?" explores perspectives on governance, fundamental assumptions, research, and policy implications. Chapter 3, "Does Choice Enhance the Educational Opportunities Available to Poor Children?" examines the impact of choice on educational access. Chapter 4, "Does Choice Encourage Innovation and Improvement in Schools?" analyzes the effect of Michigan choice programs in stimulating educational competition. Chapter 5, "Does Choice Produce Gains in Student Achievement or Other Outcomes?" provides differing perspectives on the role, impact, and validity of assessment tools to measure achievement. Chapter 6, "Does Choice Make Schools More Accountable for Their Performance?" explores the structure, objectives, and design of accountability elements of choice programs. Chapter 7, "Lessons and Questions for Public Debate," summarizes key issues pertaining to choice programs, and reviews essential research, policy requirements, and program scope considerations. (TEJ)

THE SCHOOL CHOICE DEBATE:

FRAMING THE ISSUES

The Education Policy Center at Michigan State University

The School Choice Debate:

Framing The Issues

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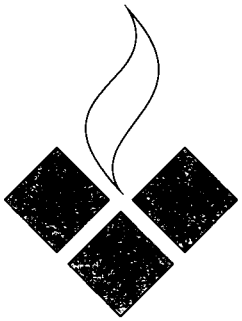

The Education Policy Center
at Michigan State University

October, 2000

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Major financial support for the conference was provided by the Spencer Foundation, and by the Provost's Office, the College of Education, and the Vice President for University Outreach at Michigan State University. Additional financial support was provided by International Studies and Programs, Urban Affairs Programs, the College of Social Science, James Madison College, the Eli Broad College of Business and the Detroit College of Law at Michigan State University.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

When we ask whether school choice policies are "good" or "bad," we are asking what consequences these policies will have for features of the educational system that matter to us. Will school choice policies make the distribution of educational opportunities more equitable or less? Will school choice improve student outcomes or strengthen accountability?

Michigan State University convened an International Conference on School Choice and Educational Change in East Lansing on March 15-17, 2000. Advocates and critics of school choice policies came together during the conference to present arguments for and against school choice and to explore key issues in the policy debate. This report provides a review of their discussions.

Evaluating school choice policies requires careful attention to five critical issues: governance, equity and access, innovation, student outcomes, and accountability. The conference was organized around these five themes. Two speakers were invited to address each theme. One speaker was broadly supportive of school choice policies, the other more critical. This report includes chapters that address these five issues. Chapter authors were asked to summarize the speakers' presentations and to assess the arguments and available evidence on each issue.

The main goal of the conference was to move the debate on school choice policy beyond the simplistic question of whether choice is "good" or "bad." School choice is here to stay. The question now is how to design policies that give parents more choices about the schools their children attend, while simultaneously protecting children against the harm that poorly designed policies can do. Citizens and policy-makers will have to evaluate the competing arguments of advocates and critics and measure them against the available evidence, as they move toward decisions about school choice policies. The goal of this report is to support public discussion of the key issues in this important debate. We hope it will help citizens and policy-makers come to public judgment about the appropriate role of school choice policies in Michigan's education system.

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SCHOOL CHOICE AND EDUCATIONAL CHANGE

Michigan State University convened an International Conference on School Choice and Educational Change in East Lansing on March 15-17, 2000. Advocates and critics of school choice policies came together during the conference to present arguments for and against school choice and to explore key issues in the policy debate. This report provides a review of their discussions.

The main goal of the conference was to move the debate on school choice policy beyond the simplistic question of whether choice is "good" or "bad." School choice is here to stay. The question now is how to design policies that give parents more choices about the schools their children attend, while simultaneously protecting children against the harm that poorly designed policies can do. Participants in the conference were encouraged to think about how to harness the power of choice to improve the performance of the education system.

The term "school choice" covers a wide variety of policy alternatives that expand parents' opportunities to select their children's schools. These policies include:

- **Charter schools.** Charter schools are publicly funded schools that operate independently from traditional school districts. In Michigan, charters can be granted by a variety of pubic agencies including local school districts, Intermediate School Districts (ISDs), community colleges, and public universities. Charter schools may be located anywhere in the state and may enroll pupils from any school district. Their funding comes directly from the state.

- **Open enrollment.** Inter-district transfer policies permit parents to enroll their children in schools outside their district of residence. In Michigan, school districts can choose whether to admit children from other districts, but they cannot prevent resident students from enrolling elsewhere.

- **Intra-district choice.** School districts may offer a variety of enrollment options to their students, ranging from choices among traditional public schools to magnet and alternative schools. Some schools may offer programs with a specialized curricular focus.

- **Dual enrollment.** Many states including Michigan have made it easier for school districts to develop cooperative programs that allow high school students to enroll in college and university courses. A growing number of dual enrollment options are available on-line, including Michigan Virtual University.

- **Vouchers.** Vouchers are public or private grants to parents to pay tuition for children who enroll in a secular or religious private school. Publicly funded voucher programs have been initiated in the cities of Milwaukee and Cleveland and in the state of Florida. Privately funded programs are in operation in many cities, including New York, Dayton, and Washington, D.C.

WHY DOES CHOICE MATTER?

When we ask whether school choice policies are "good" or "bad," we are asking what consequences these policies will have for features of the educational system that matter to us. Will school choice policies make the distribution of educational opportunities more equitable or less? Will school choice improve student outcomes or strengthen accountability?

Answers to these questions depend on the details of policy design. For example, a voucher program targeted to low-income families that paid the transportation expenses of students using vouchers could help to equalize the distribution of educational opportunities. A voucher program open to all families that did not pay for transportation could make the distribution of opportunities significantly *less* equitable.

Depending on the details of policy design, school choice policies may enhance some features of the educational system but weaken others. Allowing many different agencies to charter schools may foster innovation, for example, but undermine the institutions of local governance. Allowing charter schools or voucher schools to select their students may improve outcomes for some students but increase inequalities in the education system.

Evaluating school choice policies requires careful attention to five critical issues: governance, equity and access, innovation, student outcomes, and accountability. The conference was organized around these five issues. Two speakers were invited to address each issue. One speaker was broadly supportive of school choice policies, the other more critical. Each speaker was invited to make the case for or against school choice, as it affects the issue under debate. Questions from the floor and discussion among the participants followed each presentation.

This report includes chapters that address each of these five issues. Chapter authors were asked to summarize the speakers' presentations and to assess the arguments and available evidence on each issue.

- On the theme of **governance**, critics of school choice assert that the introduction of market-based policies undermines the democratic control of schooling. Supporters respond that choice policies empower parents and teachers, and reduce political interference in the education system. The speakers on the theme of governance were Anne Bryant and Terry Moe. **Anne Bryant** is Executive Director of the National Association of School Boards. **Terry Moe** is a Professor at Stanford University and a Senior Fellow at the Hoover Institution.

- On the theme of **equity and access**, school choice advocates argue that choice opens up new opportunities for poor families who find themselves trapped in failing schools. Critics argue that choice policies will do little to benefit the poorest children and may even make them worse off. Addressing the theme of equity and access were Howard Fuller and Amy Stuart Wells. **Howard Fuller** is a Professor at Marquette University and the Director of the Institute for the Transformation of Learning. **Amy Stuart Wells** is an Associate Professor at the University of California at Los Angeles.

- On the theme of **innovation**, proponents of school choice claim that the introduction of market-based policies will spur innovation and improvement in the education system. Critics of choice policies question whether choice will lead to the development of new educational practices and affirm the capacity of traditional public schools to foster educational innovation and improvement. The speakers on this theme were Deborah McGriff and Bella Rosenberg. **Deborah McGriff** is Vice President of Edison Schools. **Bella Rosenberg** is Vice President of the American Federation of Teachers.

- On the theme of **student outcomes**, advocates of school choice argue that increasing choice and competition in the education system will lead to improved outcomes for students, including higher test scores. Critics question the evidence on which these claims are based and argue that large gains in student outcomes can be achieved in traditional public schools. Addressing the theme of student outcomes were Henry Levin and Paul Peterson. **Henry Levin** is a Professor at Columbia University and Director of the National Center for the Study of Privatization in Education. **Paul Peterson** is a Professor at Harvard University and Director of the Program on Educational Policy and Governance.

- On the theme of **accountability**, those who favor school choice policies argue that giving parents choices about the schools their children attend makes schools more accountable to the parents and students who rely on their services. Opponents ask whether the market-based education system foreseen by choice advocates will hold schools accountable for achieving the public purposes of schooling. The speakers who addressed the theme of accountability were Jeff Flake and Bruce Fuller. **Jeff Flake** is the former Executive Director of the Goldwater Institute in Phoenix, Arizona, and a candidate for Congress in Arizona's First District. **Bruce Fuller** is Associate Professor at the University of California at Berkeley and Associate Director of Policy Analysis for California Education (PACE).

These are not simple questions. Speakers at the conference made strong arguments on both sides of each issue. Citizens and policy-makers will have to evaluate these competing arguments and measure them against the available evidence as they move toward decisions about school choice policies. The goal of this report is to support public discussion of the key issues in the school choice debate. We hope that it will help citizens and policy-makers come to public judgment about the appropriate role of school choice policies in Michigan's education system.

DOES CHOICE UNDERMINE THE DEMOCRATIC CONTROL OF SCHOOLING?

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INTRODUCTION

Few political symbols in the United States carry the power associated with the ideal of local control of education. Schools are closely identified with the character of their local communities. Indeed, schools are sometimes taken as defining that character. Potential educational reformers ignore the power of this symbol at their own political peril for the maintenance of local control has long been a standard for evaluating proposed educational reforms by political leaders, educators and citizens.

Over the past several decades, a variety of state and federal education reform initiatives have generated fierce opposition because they were seen as threats to local autonomy. Recently, however, the conventional wisdom about local control has been challenged by advocates of school choice. They argue that the current institutional structure that governs public education actually works against the interests of those with the greatest stake in schools, namely, students and parents.

TWO PERSPECTIVES ON GOVERNANCE

Anne Bryant and Terry Moe outlined key elements of this debate in their comments on the relation between school choice and democratic control of education. Bryant, who serves as executive director of the National School Board Association, presented a defense of what might be called the traditional democratic control model. She argued that the whole community has an important stake in education. Public institutions, like school boards, best resolve competing interests and demands about the nature and scope of education services. Bryant sees a popularly elected school board as providing a capacity for long-term policy development, as well as a mechanism to enhance public accountability.

On the other hand, Terry Moe, who is a professor at Stanford University and a senior fellow at the Hoover Institution, is a severe critic of how our schools are currently organized. He asserts that the institutional structure that currently provides public education has severe negative consequences. Traditional public schools fail to provide adequate educational services because of their insensitivity to the preferences and concerns of parents. Rather than reflecting parent preferences, local education institutions have been captured by stronger and better-organized interests such as school administrators and teachers unions. In addition, the inevitable efforts of a central bureaucracy to enforce coordination and control makes school level innovation nearly impossible. In Moe's view, poor educational outcomes are not the result of incompetence or bad intentions by public educators. Failure is a natural outcome of the way local schools are organized. As he stated, "There are a lot of different ways of running a school system democratically, and I think we have to be flexible. The way we are doing it is not necessarily the best way of doing it, and if it is not then we need to do something else." True reform is possible only with a major reorganization of governance in the education system.

Moe's alternative would replace traditional centralized political institutions like school boards with a more market-driven system. Such a market could be created if parents were permitted to select schools for their children from among a wide variety of alternatives. Individual schools would then be forced to compete with other schools for students. In theory, this would force schools to be sensitive to the preferences of educational consumers. Schools that fail to respond to such preferences will attract fewer and fewer student "customers." As with any enterprise that offers a product in the marketplace for which there is no demand, schools that don't attract a critical mass of students would simply "go out of business."

FUNDAMENTAL ASSUMPTIONS

The issue of whether choice increases or reduces democratic control of education, like the broader debate that surrounds choice policies, occurs on three main levels:

- What is the proper role of education in society?
- Are public institutions or market forces more likely to produce desirable educational outcomes?
- What evidence exists about what particular reforms actually accomplish?

At the heart of the Bryant and Moe debate is a fundamental disagreement about the role of education in American society. Moe adopts a relatively narrow view of education as largely an exchange between student and school. Bryant implicitly argues that local community rather than students (typically expressed through parental preferences) are the actual "consumers" of education services. This difference is important because each provides a different answer to the question of to whom schools should be accountable. Stressing the broad public and community interest in schools, Bryant argues that a variety of organized groups must be given a voice in the design and execution of educational programs. Moreover, Bryant sees the need for some political authority to address broad issues of educational policy that may escape the attention of administrators and teachers who must focus on the day-to-day activities within the school building. Although Moe acknowledges that there are community level interests in how schools perform, he would significantly narrow the range and scope of educational decision-making. On the demand side, parents would be empowered to choose schools that match their preferences. On the supply side, individual schools would have the capacity to mold their programs in ways that attract relatively more students. Absent is most of the current hierarchical authority to set overall system level policy.

Bryant and Moe share a rhetoric that stresses an ultimate goal of educational excellence, but their shared vocabulary masks important differences. For Bryant, the definition of excellence is derived from a community consensus formed through an open political process. Moe is unwilling to accept the notion of a shared public definition, stressing that the evaluation of education is best left to those most involved in the process, namely, students, parents and the direct providers of educational services.

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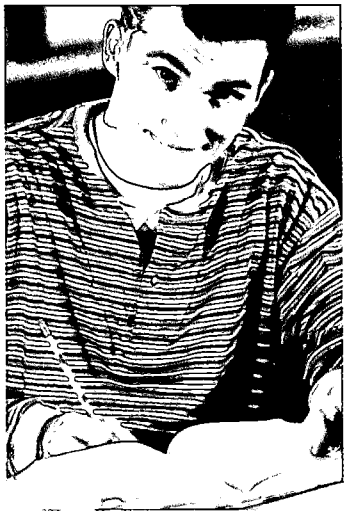
Public support for religious schools is a second issue separating Bryant and Moe. Bryant adopts the view that a public interest in maintaining a separation of church and state overrules any benefit that might be obtained from the public support of religious schools. Moe's view, in contrast, states that public policy should maximize parental discretion. If parents find educational value in religious-based schools, then public financing is reasonable.



THE MARKET VERSUS POLITICS

Embedded in each presentation was a set of theoretical assumptions about how local democratic politics and the emerging "education market" actually works. Both Moe and Bryant see politics as a process that aggregates a set of disparate interests within a community into concrete public policy, but they disagree about some key elements of that process. Moe argues that politics fails to generate good educational policy for two reasons. The first is that political action is driven almost exclusively by narrow self-interest. Moreover, he argues that once a policy coalition is established, innovation is difficult. Thus, he claims that the dominance of administrators and teachers in education policy can be challenged only through the destruction of those institutions that these interests have come to control. He flatly asserts that education can never win out over other priorities in a public system since it is always at the bottom of a hierarchy of local interests. Moreover, the incentives within school systems are always wrong. Poorly performing schools are almost never punished for poor performance. Indeed, they are often targeted for greater public support.

In contrast, Bryant argues that political authorities are sensitive to both the narrow interests of constituents and the collective interests of their communities. Bryant also suggests that governing coalitions can be overturned or at least be persuaded to initiate policy innovation.

The presenters also revealed significant differences in their perception of how an educational market might operate. Although Moe readily admits that no market is perfect, he is clearly convinced that an education market could generate outcomes that maximize consumer preference. In contrast, Bryant is concerned that economic incentives will lead education providers to "cut corners" to maximize return. She suggests this is particularly likely for high needs children, such as those requiring special education services. Finally, she expects that the increased efficiency that might be achieved in a market-driven system will mean little more than reduced wages and benefits for education providers.

EVIDENCE

Bryant argues from classic democratic theory that local school boards will effectively represent views in the community about education. On the basis of market theory, Moe predicts that in a choice environment educational suppliers will provide a range of educational services to match parental preferences. The competing arguments are based on different theories and different assumptions which lead to very different interpretations of the available evidence.

As a champion of traditional public schools, Bryant focused on the capacity of local school authorities to link the schools with the community and devise a strategy that will ensure the implementation of a sound educational program. Without question this does occur in some communities. As Moe correctly noted, however, many districts do not even come close to fitting this model. Certainly it is difficult to argue with Moe's assertion that most large urban school districts are not doing a very good job educating the children in their charge. He cites the failure of past reform efforts in such districts as proof that such outcomes are inevitable given the institutional structure of schools. Unfortunately, he does not consider the counter examples of public school excellence. Nor does he consider alternative explanations for school failure. We need more data if we are to understand when schools and school systems perform well and when they do not.

The evidence about choice schools is even less clear. Moe presented the basic market theory describing how choice schools should behave in a competitive marketplace. Citizens making choices about the organization and governance of the public school system will require evidence about how such a system actually performs, however. This necessarily entails more than a few dramatic examples of policy success. Once again, we need to know when such outcomes are likely to occur and when they are not.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

The presentations by Anne Bryant and Terry Moe highlight the questions at the heart of the debate on school choice. Who should have authority over the education of children? How wide an array of educational options is the public willing to finance? How closely should publicly financed schools be regulated? The two speakers proposed fundamentally different answers to each of these questions.

First, Bryant and Moe disagreed about the institutions of democratic governance in the education system. Bryant defended the traditional organization of the public school system. She defended the legitimacy of public participation in educational policy debates and argued that elected school boards provide an essential mechanism for the articulation and accommodation of competing views on the appropriate goals and strategies of public education. Moe argued on behalf of a different model of democratic governance, in which the voices of parents and individual teachers would be accorded far greater weight than they are now. In his view, schools would continue to be democratically accountable but shifting control to the school level would limit the influence of organized interests and increase the power of those most closely involved in the educational process.

Second, they disagreed about how broad a range of educational choices should be available to parents. Bryant argued for a relatively narrow set of publicly financed options, including magnet schools, as a means to encourage diversity and competition. She insisted that choice schools should be located firmly within the boundaries of the traditional public school system and subject to the authority of public boards. Moe argued that parents should have access to a far wider array of publicly financed choices, including private schools and religious schools.

Third, they disagreed about how much regulation would be necessary in a system that provided more options to parents. Bryant implicitly argued that the present regulatory framework is appropriate in light of the need to accommodate many competing interests in a democratic political system. Moe distanced himself from free-market fundamentalists who would leave virtually all choices about schooling to the market, but nevertheless argued that schools are vastly over-regulated under the present governance system.

These are the disagreements that drive the policy debate on school choice. The challenge for legislators now is to move beyond the "all or nothing" alternatives that have characterized the debate so far. Bryant and Moe both acknowledged that parents should enjoy a range of choices about the schools their children attend, within a framework of regulations established by political authorities. This is the starting point for a more fruitful debate, one that aims at policies that strike a new balance between politics and markets in the governance of the educational system.

The challenge for legislators now is to move beyond the "all or nothing" alternatives that have characterized the debate so far... parents should enjoy a range of choices about the schools their children attend, within a framework of regulations established by political authorities.

GOVERNANCE

Does Choice undermine the democratic control of schooling?

In support of state-led system

- The whole community has a stake in education.
- Public institutions, like school boards, are able to balance competing interests and demands about the nature and scope of education services.
- School boards are sensitive to parents and students as well as to the community.
- A popularly elected school board provides capacity for long-term policy development.
- A popularly elected school board enhances public accountability.

In opposition to state-led system

- The current system is insensitive to parent preferences.
- Local schools are captive to strong, organized interests, including administrators and teacher unions.
- The bureaucratic governance of schools makes innovation nearly impossible.
- Poor schools are rarely punished for poor performance.

In support of market-driven system

- Individual schools, competing for students, would be motivated to meet preferences of students and parents.
- Individual schools would be able to create programs that reflect the demands of students and parents.
- School accountability would be at a school level, rather than district level – thus increasing the power of those most directly involved in the education process.

In opposition to market-driven system

- The broader community, not simply individual students and parents, should have a voice in the design of educational programs.
- School administrators must focus on day-to-day problems and can't focus on educational policy issues.
- There are legal and Constitutional obstacles to funding religious schools.

Policy Questions

- Who should have authority over the education of children?
- How wide an array of educational options is the public willing to finance?
- How closely should publicly financed schools be regulated?

DOES CHOICE ENHANCE THE EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES AVAILABLE TO POOR CHILDREN?

David Arsen
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The school choice movement's most potent justification rests squarely on the prospect that it will improve the schooling of poor children. The current public school system is not equitable. Many children from low-income families are concentrated in schools that are shamefully inadequate. The education they receive is vastly inferior to the schooling enjoyed by children from richer families. Will choice policies make the distribution of educational opportunities more equitable?

Equity implies access. All families should have access to schools that permit the full development of their children's abilities. The key question is whether or not school choice policies will enhance the access of poor families to better schools. Will school choice empower poor families to gain access to educational opportunities comparable to those enjoyed by higher-income families?

Howard Fuller is Director of the Institute for the Transformation of Learning at Marquette University. Amy Stuart Wells is Associate Professor in the Graduate School of Education and Information Sciences at UCLA. Both are steadfast proponents of educational equity. They agree that educational policies should serve the goal of increased access and equity for poor children, but they disagree on whether school choice policies will help to achieve the goal.

HOWARD FULLER

..."the quest for equity is an on-going struggle that manifests itself in the push for respect, for dignity, for influence and self-determination."

Professor Fuller addressed the equity aspects of school choice in forceful and moving terms. He portrayed school choice as a key element in the long-term struggle against "racism and economic inequality that is woven deep in the fabric of American society." For him, "the quest for equity is an on-going struggle that manifests itself in the push for respect, for dignity, for influence and self-determination." His comments focused on why he has supported the Milwaukee voucher program.

Professor Fuller appealed to the positive potential of education to promote democratic equality. Public schools too often fail to prepare poor and minority children for success in an unequal social order. In Fuller's view, education is essential to help young people prepare to think critically and creatively about the world they live in, and to participate in its transformation. Freedom requires the capacity to weigh alternatives and to make choices. Democracy depends on education that deepens the insights of the people and reinforces their sense of social responsibility.

Fuller argued that the education of many poor and African-American children prevents them from participating fully in American society. They are forced to stay in schools that are failing them because they lack the power to influence the educational system.

For Fuller, therefore, school choice is first of all a vehicle for the empowerment of poor people. Power comes with control over resources. Vouchers give poor families access to new educational opportunities. They let poor people make choices that now are open only to those with the money to move to wealthy suburbs or pay private school tuition. They also give families more influence over the schools their children attend because their power to withdraw their children and their vouchers creates an incentive for schools to be more responsive to their needs. As Professor Fuller stated,

> *"Consider the power of this right in the hands of families who have little or no power because they control no resources, no levers of influence over the decisions and decision-making process that impacts their children's education. Consider how the absence of this power may mean their children will be trapped in schools that more affluent parents would never tolerate for their own children. The issue is not choice in America. It is who has it."*

Professor Fuller embraced a variety of policy initiatives that give families more choices about the education of their children. He supports charter schools, public/private partnerships, means-tested vouchers, contract schools, home schooling, cyber schools and also innovative governance arrangements in traditional public schools. He drew the line, however, at universal vouchers. In his view, a voucher program that offered support for **all** families would simply reproduce the inequities of the present education system. Fuller supports vouchers targeted to low-income families.

AMY STUART WELLS

Professor Wells was far less optimistic about whether school choice would increase educational equity and access for poor children. In contrast to Professor Fuller, who endorsed school choice policies in many different forms, Wells argued that different school choice programs may lead to very different results. Some charter schools are indeed developing innovative programs and providing new opportunities for poor African-American students. Other charter schools are targeted to wealthier white parents, however, who want to remove their 'gifted' children from racially diverse public schools.

...choice policies are increasing the segregation of students by race, ethnicity and class... choice policies might benefit some poor families, but... they may also make other, more disadvantaged families worse off.

The expansion of school choice policies gives many groups – and not just poor families – the option of withdrawing from the public school system. This is troubling to Wells because of the history of discrimination and inequality in American education. Overall, she fears that choice policy will not support but undermine future efforts to promote educational equity.

Wells made two main arguments to support her reservations about school choice. First, she argued that choice policies are increasing the segregation of students by race, ethnicity and class. Second, she acknowledged that choice policies might benefit some poor families, but she simultaneously claimed that they may also make other, more disadvantaged families worse off.

Wells presented data showing the racial composition of enrollments in charter schools in different states. For the nation as a whole, the percentage of students who are white is about the same in charter schools and the public school system as a whole. At the state level, however, the percentage of charter school students who are white is often much larger or much smaller than the percentage in the public school system. This may reflect differences across states in the degree to which minority and white families are satisfied with their schools.

Wells argued that in states where children are heavily segregated by race and where white students tend to be enrolled in the most desirable public schools, the percentage of charter schools students who are white is disproportionately low. In states like California, however, where many school districts are geographically large and racially diverse, the percentage of white students is higher in charter schools than in regular public schools. In one setting, charter schools appear to provide an alternative for African-American and Latino students who attend separate and inferior schools. In other settings, though, charter schools are especially attractive to white students who may be seeking to escape from racially and socially diverse public schools.

Wells took a dim view of the notion that racially separate schools would provide better or more equal opportunities for disadvantaged students. Her own research has shown that charter schools serving poor students of color often have less challenging curricula, fewer college preparatory courses and inferior equipment and facilities.

Wells raised another issue as well. Even in low-income communities, she suggested, the more advantaged families have greater access to choice options for several different reasons. Schools may require contributions of parental time that poor families cannot readily make. Charter schools may adopt selective admissions practices or informally discourage some families at pre-enrollment interviews. Most people hear about school openings through informal personal networks that may exclude the most disadvantaged of the poor. Choice policies may harm the poorest families by draining off the financial resources and involved parents that could help inner city schools improve.

REFLECTIONS ON THE ARGUMENTS

Fuller and Wells are both right. Educational equity does require the empowerment of poor households to attain better schooling options. It also must guard against measures that would deepen social stratification in American schools. Why do thoughtful advocates of educational equity come down on different sides in the school choice debate? For one, they may be envisioning very different forms of choice policy. For another, they may hold different assessments of how choice policies will change the political landscape and therefore the prospects for other efforts to enhance educational equity.

Educational equity does require the empowerment of poor households to attain better schooling options. It also must guard against measures that would deepen social stratification in American schools.

Highlighting the schooling of poor children, choice advocates focus attention on the existing system's greatest shortcoming. They have seized the initiative and forced the policy debate. In response, defenders of public schools rightly point to the system's many successes. More parents are satisfied than dissatisfied with their public schools. Poverty and racism pose real challenges. Every day, in every part of the country, there are traditional public schools that prove that those challenges can be overcome.

The fact remains, though, that many public schools are failing, and these are often schools serving the poorest children. A growing number of poor and minority families have lost faith in the existing system, and who could blame them? Their children deserve better schools. Change is overdue. If not school choice, then what is the alternative? School choice opponents must avoid the trap of defending the status quo.

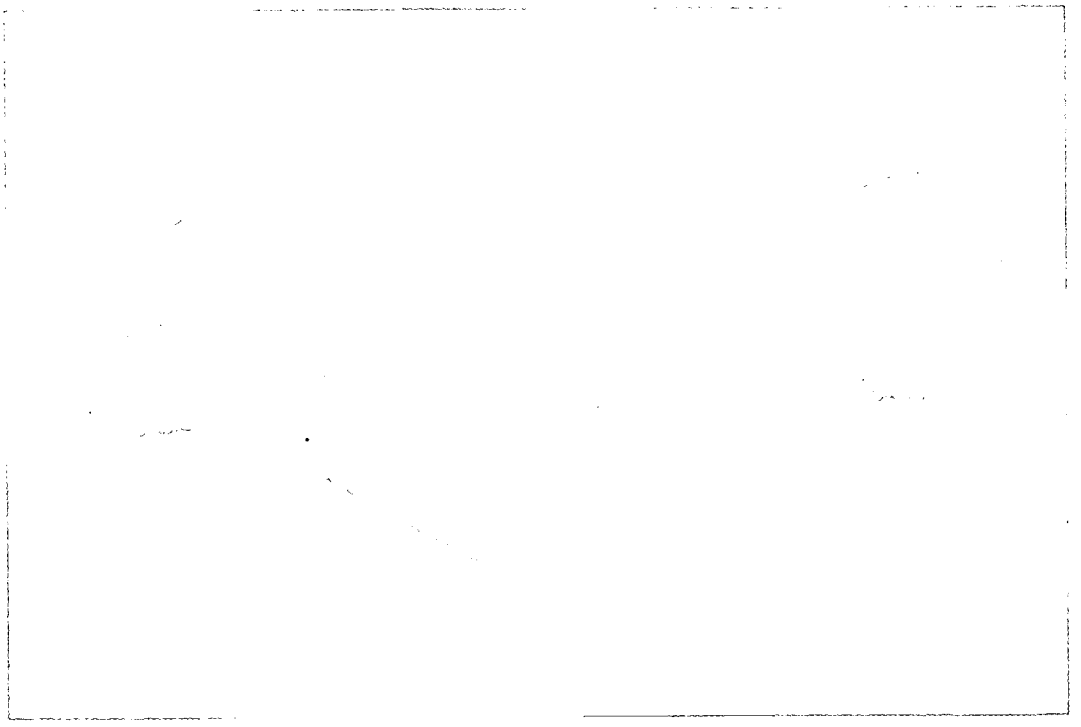
School choice could shake up the system and be a catalyst for positive change. It is worth trying. On the other hand, positive change is not assured. Whether or not choice policy actually enhances equity overall depends on details of program design. These details are precisely the focus of political struggles in state legislatures where choice policy is set. There are fundamental differences between vouchers and charter schools and either can be rigged with provisions that increase or decrease equity.

For example, a carefully designed voucher program targeted to low-income households is more likely to enhance equity than some alternatives. Targeting vouchers to low income **districts,** or providing vouchers for **all** households might simply induce the best-off families to leave the public school system. Such programs are less likely to make the distribution of educational opportunities more equitable.

We already know that school choice is not a panacea for poor children. Given the inequities of the present public school system, properly structured choice policies may be necessary to increase the educational opportunities available to poor families, but they certainly are not sufficient. Choice policies produce both good schools and bad schools. Poorly designed choice policies can make children choosing to stay in their neighborhood public schools worse off by depleting the resources available for their education.

Bad schools need help, whether they are choice schools or traditional public schools. One true risk of the school choice debate is that it will detract attention and energy from other initiatives necessary to improve the circumstances of poor children. Choice policies must be complemented by policies to deliver targeted technical support and improvement in schools attended by the most disadvantaged families.

One important dimension of equity with significant budgetary implications for schools is the provision of services for special needs students. So far, choice policy design has given insufficient attention to this issue. As it stands, choice schools typically have a powerful incentive not to provide expensive services that might attract severely disabled students.



TWO MOVEMENTS

The school choice movement represents an alliance between two distinct strands. One element of the alliance is a poor people's movement, which Fuller described, that counts on school choice to increase equity and improve educational opportunities for poor children. The other is a conservative, free-market ideological movement to limit the role of public institutions in the provision of educational services. Economic equality has never been a central goal of the conservative agenda. Market provision of schooling is embraced primarily as a strategy to promote individual freedom and efficiency. The future terms of the alliance between these two movements will have everything to do with whether school choice serves to enhance equity.

Scarcely any activists for low-income people believe that market forces have worked well for their communities. After all, if market forces worked for low-income people, they wouldn't be poor. Professor Fuller said that he became a supporter of school choice policies not through reading Milton Friedman, but through a lifetime of struggle on behalf of poor African-Americans. His support turns on his assessment of present circumstances and political realities which may change in the future. One such change would be a decision by conservatives to pursue their goal of making vouchers available to families regardless of income. That strategy might broaden the political support for vouchers, at the expense of diluting their potential for advancing equity.

We have passed the point where it is useful to debate the merits of choice in general terms. A more fruitful and interesting debate would focus on the specific guidelines governing choice policy and complementary policies to improve poorly performing schools. Organized interests associated with public education cannot count on the support of low income and minority communities unless they are prepared to engage in that discussion.

We have passed the point where it is useful to debate the merits of choice in general terms. A more fruitful and interesting debate would focus on the specific guidelines governing choice policy and complementary policies to improve poorly performing schools.

EQUITY AND ACCESS

Does Choice enhance the educational opportunities available to poor children?

In support of state-led system

- Traditional public schools serve a diverse population of children and provide service to students of all ability levels.
- Most parents are satisfied with the current school system.

In opposition to state-led system

- The current public school system is not equitable, nor is there evidence that the system is changing.
- Parents have few options within the public school system.
- Public boards are not accountable to individual parents.

In support of market-driven system

- Choice will give poor people more control over the education of their children.
- Poor parents currently have few options because they cannot afford to move to school districts with better resources or pay for private schools.

In opposition to market-driven system

- Reliance on markets may increase rather than decrease inequality.
- Choice allows families to sort themselves on the basis of race, culture and values.
- Choice may reduce financial resources in some districts, which will harm the poorest families who are unable to take advantage of choice options.

Policy Questions

- Should choice options be targeted to poor families or opened to all families?
- How can the interests of high cost (special needs, non-English speaking) students be protected in a market-driven system?
- How can we improve educational opportunities for children "left behind" by choice?

DOES CHOICE ENCOURAGE INNOVATION AND IMPROVEMENT IN SCHOOLS?

Michael Mintrom
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INTRODUCTION

When Michigan's first charter school law was adopted in 1993, two of the original purposes of charter schools were to:

- stimulate innovative teaching methods; and
- create new professional opportunities for teachers in a new type of public school in which the school structure and educational program can be innovatively designed and managed by teachers at the school site level. (Michigan P.A. 362 of 1993)

The charter school movement encouraged the hope that giving parents and students choices would spur competition among schools and lead to across-the-board improvements in the quality of education. Under pressure to meet the needs of their "customers" – parents and students – charter schools would take advantage of their "freedom from bureaucracy" to experiment with curriculum, pedagogy and school management.

Experimentation and innovation in charter schools was also expected to produce improvements in traditional public schools, in two ways. First, competition with charter schools to attract and keep students would create incentives for **all** schools to innovate and improve their performance. Second, traditional public schools might learn from or imitate innovations developed in charter schools. The introduction of charter schools into Michigan's public school system might thus lead to improvements in educational opportunities for students in all parts of the system. Based on what we know so far, have moves towards greater choice and competition led to more innovation?

TWO PERSPECTIVES ON INNOVATION AND CHOICE

Deborah McGriff, Executive Vice President for Charter Schools at Edison Schools, Inc., and Bella Rosenberg, Assistant to the President at the American Federation of Teachers, were asked to discuss whether choice has led to innovative practices. Edison Schools is a for-profit company that administers 79 public schools throughout the United States, including many charter schools. It operates under management contracts with local school districts and charter school boards. More than 38,000 students currently attend Edison partnership schools. The American Federation of Teachers represents more than 100,000 teachers and school employees, primarily in large urban areas.

McGriff and Rosenberg come to very different judgments about school choice policies, but their views on the conditions required to support innovation and improvement in schools are not as different as one might suppose. They agree that public authorities will have to provide incentives and support for experimentation and dissemination if innovation is a central policy goal. They disagree about whether the introduction of school choice policies would foster innovation. McGriff argues that schools will not innovate unless there is competition or the threat of competition. She cites failing schools with declining enrollments as evidence for this reluctance to innovate. Rosenberg argues that without sufficient resources, schools cannot innovate at all, whether or not they face competition. She points to the wide range of innovative practices currently in use in public schools to suggest that competition is not a necessary condition for innovation.

Deborah McGriff notes that some people would say that simply creating a safe, clean, orderly school would be an innovation. States should expect all schools to at least be able to achieve these minimum organizational standards, but many now fail to do so. If state governments expect schools to make serious efforts to innovate in management and in pedagogy, then they should be prepared to provide appropriate financial incentives and support.

In the case of Edison Schools, the company itself has invested large amounts of money in creating a comprehensive, integrated research base to support the development of innovative school programs. The intention has been to determine from past experience what works and what does not work in traditional public schools and to develop programs that combine several effective approaches. In addition, Edison conducts annual assessment sessions where evidence from all of its schools is used to draw out the lessons learned from experience. During these sessions, decisions are made about what needs to be modified, what should be dropped and what additions might be made in the future. Through these efforts to achieve continuous improvement, Edison is evolving models and programs that are distinctly different from anything found in traditional public schools.

According to Deborah McGriff, competition among schools is essential as a spur to innovation. Edison has faced strong incentives to engage in research and development (R&D) to develop a better educational product. In response to the efforts of Edison Schools and other schools of choice, traditional public school districts have begun to engage in a variety of changes in their practices. Many of these changes probably would not have occurred without the introduction of competition. McGriff therefore argues that more efforts need to be made to encourage competition in the school system. For example, states should allow sufficient numbers of charter schools to be developed so that a properly functioning market for schooling can emerge.

Deborah McGriff also notes that even the threat of competition can be sufficient at times to prompt traditional public school districts to change their practices. Competition opens up a variety of interesting fissures in the monolithic governance structures that we observe in traditional public school systems. For example, expanding opportunities for parents to choose their children's schools may give school boards the leverage they need to overcome resistance to change from school administrators and unions.

To illustrate her point, McGriff cites the case of Duluth, Minnesota, where the school board began discussions with Edison Schools with the aim of having the company manage a school in the district under contract. These initiatives were strongly resisted by administrators and union members. The negotiations with Edison broke down. Undaunted, and empowered by Minnesota's charter school law, the Duluth school board established a charter school instead. This school, managed by Edison, now operates in direct competition with traditional public schools in the city.

... competition among schools is essential as a spur to innovation. ... In response to the efforts of Edison Schools and other schools of choice, traditional public school districts have begun to engage in a variety of changes in their practices. Many of these changes probably would not have occurred without the introduction of competition.

In Inkster, Michigan, the traditional public schools have lost a very high proportion of students to nearby charter schools and neighboring school districts. Because of the associated loss of revenues, the district faced the prospect of a takeover by the state. Instead, the members of the Inkster Board of Education decided to invite Edison into the district to manage its schools. According to Deborah McGriff, the dynamic established by choice and competition creates new opportunities at the local level and school boards as well as parents are starting to take advantage. Over time, these dynamics will lead to improvements in quality and expanded opportunities for students.

...it is not at all clear that this competition has spurred the relevant public and private schools to be more innovative or to improve their practices.

Bella Rosenberg is more skeptical about whether choice and competition will lead to improvement in schools, for two main reasons. First, she argues, there has been a considerable degree of competition between private schools and public schools in many cities. Yet it is not at all clear that this competition has spurred the relevant public and private schools to be more innovative or to improve their practices. Second, we can find more variation within sectors than across them. Some public schools are highly innovative and some are not. The same is true for private schools.

Rosenberg argues that we should not value innovation for its own sake and that we should not see innovation as necessarily being associated with improvements in schools. Innovation may not have large effects when compared with the effects of other changes, including improvements in teacher quality or increased community and parental involvement in schools. She also points out that, "There is not a huge appetite for innovation out there." In fact, she suggests, many parents have been fleeing public schools and placing their children in charter schools as a way to escape what they perceive as too much experimentation and innovation in the traditional public schools.

Little systematic evidence currently exists regarding the effects of choice and competition on school practices. Bella Rosenberg suggests that the relationship between choice and school improvement will necessarily depend upon a variety of factors. These include, but are not limited to, the following: the rules under which schools compete with one another; the amount of information that parents base their choices upon; the nature of the suppliers and the degree to which schools offer truly distinctive choices to parents; and the ways that individual schools and broader school systems make use of available information.

In her comments, Bella Rosenberg acknowledged that Edison Schools is one of the better examples of private companies entering into the education sector. She went on to say that the amount of spending on R&D by Edison Schools would not be tolerated in a traditional public school system. This statement was not intended as a criticism of what Edison has been doing but rather to underscore the limits of what can be done in the present public system that is so closely scrutinized by politicians and tax-cut hungry citizens. Responding to this comment, Deborah McGriff pointed out that it is not uncommon for companies like McDonald's to spend $50 million developing and advertising new kinds of burgers. Given that education is obviously more socially important than the fast food industry and that education involves more complex sets of social relations, we should be devoting a lot more money to educational R&D, as Edison Schools has been doing. McGriff went on to note that when compared with the huge sums of money that are spent annually in traditional public schools on programs of dubious merit, R&D spending of the sort done by Edison is hardly exorbitant.

The relative importance of competition as a spur to innovation is an issue of dispute. ...competition alone will not be enough to drive major quality improvements in education.

Although Deborah McGriff and Bella Rosenberg come to the issue of school choice from quite different perspectives, two common themes can be found in their views. First, both see that careful information management is crucial for ensuring that systems develop and disseminate effective innovations. Second, both see that quality improvements cannot be made without appropriate resources being devoted to that end. The relative importance of competition as a spur to innovation is an issue of dispute. McGriff sees competition as crucial for encouraging innovation, although she still sees a strong role for the state in supporting research and development and disseminating information about successful practices. Rosenberg notes that innovation can, and has, occurred in the past in traditional public schools, even in the absence of competition. The point of commonality here is that both speakers see that competition alone will not be enough to drive major quality improvements in education.

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY

In a recent study involving interviews with over 270 principals in Michigan's charter schools and a matched set of traditional public schools, I asked the people who should know best what makes their schools distinctive, what innovations they have adopted, and the timing of the changes in school practices. The responses revealed two striking facts.

- First, some charter schools are doing innovative things, such as offering all-day kindergarten, ensuring all students have access to computers at school and at home, and offering unique curricular content. But, with a few exceptions, the innovations adopted to date are fairly unremarkable. Most have been in the education literature for a number of years and many are in current use in the traditional public schools.

- Second, there is little evidence that nearby public schools have been systematically changing their practices in response to competition from charter schools.

Why aren't charter schools more innovative? Why aren't traditional public schools responding to competition by improving their own practices? Neither the organizers of charter schools nor the personnel in traditional public schools are to blame; the failure is one of policy design. If innovation remains an important goal, policy makers should consider the following options that likely would increase innovative practices.

- **Institute incentive programs.** The state could provide explicit incentives for schools to develop innovative practices. One way to offer these would be for the state to create innovation grants for which schools could compete. Under this system, both charter schools and traditional public schools could be rewarded for the development of promising new practices. In addition, the state could learn a lot from the R&D efforts that Edison Schools have undertaken.

- **Create a well-funded central information exchange.** State legislators concerned about the quality of public schooling should consider creating well-financed central information exchanges. This information exchange would monitor practices in charter schools and traditional public schools, facilitate learning across school sites and provide advice to local decision makers such as school boards and principals. Left to themselves, markets force people to be innovation misers. Those who develop successful innovations naturally want to capture the benefits themselves, rather than sharing them with their competitors. This may produce gains in particular schools, but it will not lead to improvements in the education system as a whole. A state-sponsored information exchange would encourage cooperation between traditional and charter schools and provide fresh ideas on school practices for implementation by personnel from all schools.

- **Minimize additional administrative responsibilities put on schools.** Where possible, efforts should be made to introduce these new functions in ways that build upon positive current practices and avoid disruptions or the imposition of additional burdens on the school personnel concerned.

We need to think more carefully about the relationship between the dynamics set up by school choice and competition and the likelihood that major improvements will emerge out of institutional reforms of this sort. The contributors to this session were in agreement on this point. Efforts to extend the market's "hidden hand" into the realm of public education must be supported by visible nudging from smart government. Competition by itself will not lead to innovation in educational practice. If this remains a goal of state policy, then state government will have to provide incentives and support. The challenge is to design a policy framework that ensures that greater competition among schools fosters a climate of innovation, organizational learning and excellence in individual schools and in the educational system as a whole.

INNOVATION

Does Choice encourage innovation and improvement in schools?

In support of state-led system

- Public schools have a wide-range of innovative practices currently.
- There is already competition between public and private schools in many cities.
- More variation exists between public schools within the traditional system than between public and private schools.
- There is little demand for innovation from parents.

In opposition to state-led system

- Schools will not innovate unless there is competition or the threat of competition.
- The worst schools are the least likely to innovate.
- The system is not responsive to parents who want specialized programs for their children.

In support of market-driven system

- Competition will create incentives for all schools to innovate and improve their performance.
- Traditional public schools will learn from or imitate innovations developed in charter schools.
- R & D spending by the private sector will spur innovative practices.

In opposition to market-driven system

- There is no more innovation in charter schools than in traditional public schools.
- Schools compete to attract the best students, not to offer the best programs.
- Innovation and dissemination are expensive and require public investment.

Policy Questions

- What incentives should be offered to educators and others to encourage innovation and experimentation in schools?
- What mechanisms exist for disseminating information about innovation in traditional and choice schools so all children can benefit?
- Who should pay for research and development in education?

DOES CHOICE PRODUCE GAINS IN STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT OR OTHER OUTCOMES?

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INTRODUCTION

Many education reforms seek to change the way schools work. They focus on changing key characteristics of schools – increasing the length of the school day, reducing the number of students in a typical class, ensuring that teachers have majored in the subjects they teach, or shifting control over school budgets. The "success" of these reforms is often determined by whether these structural and process goals have been met. Has average class size been reduced to 24? Are all students being taught by fully certified teachers?

In most cases, though, the reformers' real goal is not to change the way schools work, but to enhance student performance. Reducing class size may seem like a good idea, but it is only worthwhile if small classes are better for students. The "success" of reforms depends on the extent to which students benefit.

A variety of student outcomes can be measured, but current discussions of standards and accountability have focused on student scores on state tests like the Michigan Education Assessment Program (MEAP), on college entrance exams like the SAT, or on other standardized tests. In the current policy environment, the bottom line for identifying "worthwhile" reforms is whether they raise students' test scores.

Henry Levin and Paul Peterson were invited to discuss the effects of school choice programs on student achievement, and to assess the substance, credibility and significance of the available evidence. Levin is Director of the National Center for the Study of Privatization in Education at Teachers College, Columbia University. Peterson is Director of the Program on Educational Policy and Governance at Harvard University.

Do the test scores of students in choice programs improve? This is a critical question for participants in the school choice debate. As Paul Peterson pointed out, "That's what the public wants to know. That's what the media want to know." What does the evidence indicate?

CRITERIA FOR EVALUATING EDUCATIONAL CHOICE

Levin asserted that educational choice initiatives should be evaluated with reference to four sets of criteria, which can be posed in terms of the following questions:

- **Freedom of choice:** To what extent does an education system allow parents to place their children in a school that mirrors their own child rearing practices? Here, freedom of choice is seen as valuable, not because it promotes a market for education services, but because it allows families to place their children in schools that support the values and way of life they have tried to instill in their children.

- **Productive efficiency:** To what extent does an education system produce the maximum result from the available resources? The "maximum result" could be measured by reading and mathematics tests for individual students, or it could include a wider range of outcomes, measured at the individual, school or system levels.

- **Equity:** To what extent does an education system provide universal access to the benefits of schooling? The benefits could be student outcomes including, but not restricted to, test scores. Typically, however, discussions of equity also include attention to equality of inputs: levels of funding, opportunities to learn challenging content and the adequacy of school buildings and materials.

- **Social cohesion:** To what extent does an education system provide children with a common experience that supports public communication and a set of shared values? Levin notes that the virtues of common experience are acknowledged by people of all political persuasions, from conservatives like E.D. Hirsch who wish to build cultural literacy to progressives like John Dewey who see common schooling as a basis for community.

In addition, Levin cautioned that care must be taken when generalizing about the effects of school choice policies. Choice initiatives are not all alike. They may differ widely on at least three important design dimensions: finance, regulations and support services. In giving parents financial resources to support choice, for example, a program may offer each family the same amount or offer larger subsidies to families with lower incomes. Programs can also vary in the degree to which they permit parents to use their own resources to pay school fees.

Choice programs also vary in the degree to which participating schools must comply with regulations in areas including admissions, curriculum and student testing. Finally, choice programs may vary in provision of services such as student transportation and information about local schools. Given this variety, evidence about the effects of any specific choice program must be used cautiously in drawing conclusions about the effects of choice policies in general.

...evidence about the effects of any specific choice program must be used cautiously in drawing conclusions about the effects of choice policies in general.

EVIDENCE ON TEST SCORES AND PARENT SATISFACTION

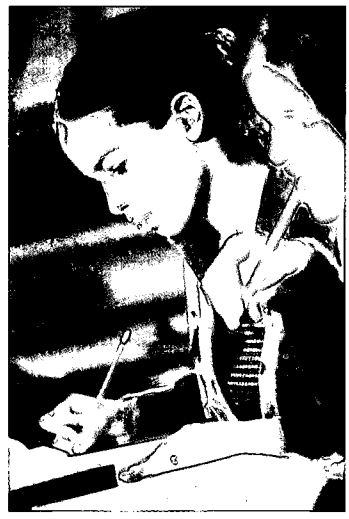
When people say that school choice should be judged by its effects on student outcomes, they call up the simple image of a horse race, where choice comes in either ahead of or behind the current system. Levin and Peterson both make clear that the effects of choice are not so simply summarized, even when looking at a single design, such as the voucher programs that Peterson has studied.

In these programs, parents in Dayton, Ohio, and Washington, D.C., volunteered to participate in an experiment intended to assess the effects of vouchers. In return for a chance to get a voucher, each volunteering family agreed to allow data to be collected about them and their child. From the group of volunteers, families were selected at random to receive a voucher of $1,500 which could be used toward tuition at a school of the parents' choice. Peterson and his colleagues collected information on the students and their parents, including results on achievement tests taken at the end of the school year.

The results Peterson reported were complex. There were not across-the-board gains in test scores for students with vouchers. Peterson found no effect of vouchers for non-African Americans. For African Americans, he found that students with vouchers had higher test scores in some subject areas, lower in others. Moreover, results differed according to grade level. Only the mathematics scores, in early grades, of African American students with vouchers were positively affected. In addition to test scores, Peterson presented results showing that parents in the group receiving vouchers were significantly more satisfied than those in the group that didn't receive the vouchers.

EVALUATING THE EVIDENCE

Test Scores



What do these results mean? Peterson believes they show that vouchers have positive effects in an area of great national concern: early mathematics achievement for African American children. He argues that these experiments offer the best available evidence on the effects of vouchers. In particular, he notes the use of random selection in deciding which families receive vouchers and which do not. A common weakness in other research on choice programs comes from confusing the effects of choice with already existing differences between the participating and non-participating students. If, for example, most of the students participating in a choice program come from higher income families, differences between students in choice programs and other students may be due to advantages gained from family circumstances, rather than from the choice program. The use of random selection avoids this problem. Levin agreed that the results show some positive effects, but did not believe that they are a sufficient basis for rapid moves toward a voucher system. The results, he said, should be considered in comparison to the effects of other educational changes. He estimated that the positive effects of vouchers on test scores were quite a bit smaller than the effects found in a large randomized study of class size reduction and the effects found in a study of the Accelerated Schools program that Levin established. Peterson pointed out that the effects he has identified are observed after students have participated in the voucher program for only one year. If the students receiving vouchers were to make similar gains over a number of years, these programs could bring about dramatic improvements in the academic achievement of poor students.

Levin also commented that the test scores only address some of the criteria for evaluating choice programs mentioned earlier. In particular, evidence on the criterion of social cohesion is not available. Voucher programs might substantially reduce cohesion if separate cultural groups each formed their own schools, with little contact between groups. In addition, he noted that the voucher program studied is only one of the many design possibilities he discussed, so care is needed in generalizing from these experiments to other choice programs.

Parent Satisfaction

Peterson's results also show that vouchers make parents more satisfied with the schools their children attend. These results must also be interpreted cautiously, however. Peterson suggests that the higher satisfaction of parents receiving the voucher is evidence that expanding voucher programs would increase parent satisfaction with their children's schools. The differences in parent satisfaction that he observes, however, might be specific to the experimental situation rather than something that would be realized in a sweeping change in policy. The volunteers in the experiment indicated, by the act of volunteering, that they were unhappy with their current schools. Moreover, the number of parents receiving vouchers was small enough that the existing private schools were able to absorb the additional students without much difficulty. The parents receiving vouchers had won the opportunity to move their children away from a school they didn't like and into an established private school. The comparison group was parents who had been dissatisfied with their children's school and did not receive a voucher. It would be surprising if the parents in the comparison group were not less satisfied than those who received vouchers. In short, the increased parent satisfaction in the experiment may be little more than the pleasure that comes with winning a lottery.

If a voucher program were adopted system-wide, however, it would affect many parents who are currently satisfied with their schools. These parents might be unhappy if the voucher program pulled resources from their schools. Existing private schools might not be able to accept all students who wished to switch, so many parents might be forced to enroll their children in schools that were not their first choice. New schools might be built, or existing schools expanded, but there is no guarantee that the new or expanded schools would make parents happy.

POLICY CONSIDERATIONS

Peterson and Levin would probably agree that the evidence to date of choice on student effects is inconclusive. Contrary to the predictions of many choice supporters and opponents, the evidence does not show dramatic effects. As Levin said, "The earth didn't move." Despite the lack of conclusive evidence, either for or against choice programs, two main conclusions can be drawn from the discussion concerning choice policies:

...evidence to date of choice on student effects is inconclusive. Contrary to the predictions of many choice supporters and opponents, the evidence does not show dramatic effects.

- The evaluation of the effects of choice programs on students should not be restricted to test scores. Both Levin and Peterson recognize that effects on student test scores, while important, need to be supplemented by other evidence about the value of choice. The current political emphasis on test scores may limit dialogue about the effects of choice. As Peterson noted, "If you don't have test scores, nobody wants to talk to you." Expanding the types of student outcomes examined will lead to more fruitful discussions concerning the effects of choice programs on students.

- Alternative uses of resources should be considered. Are other programs more or less beneficial to students than choice? In Peterson's view, the relatively modest positive effects that can now be attributed to choice are an argument for larger experiments with school choice policies. The experiments that have been evaluated thus far provide some initial information about results under specific circumstances, but more evidence would be needed to justify substantial changes in policy. Levin agreed that experimental designs are useful in the evaluation of educational policy innovations. He questioned why we should experiment with changing the system, though, when it appears that larger positive effects on student achievement can be accomplished by making changes within the present system.

STUDENT OUTCOMES

Does Choice produce gains in student achievement or other outcomes?

In support of state-led system

- Traditional public schools with adequate resources and highly trained teachers produce good outcomes.
- There are many ways to improve student outcomes in traditional public schools, including stronger curricula, professional development for teachers and increased parental involvement.

In opposition to state-led system

- Many children are failing in traditional public schools.
- Traditional system offers few incentives for schools to improve outcomes.
- Traditional system rewards failure by providing more resources to schools where outcomes are poor.

In support of market-driven system

- Competition will spur improvement in all schools.
- Choice encourages parents to get involved in their children's education, which is a powerful resource for learning.

In opposition to market-driven system

- Outcomes may improve for some children but not for all children.
- Choice policies may leave some children behind.
- If schools compete on the basis of non-academic characteristics, outcomes may not improve.

Policy Questions

- What incentives are in place to encourage schools to focus on improving student outcomes?
- What incentives are in place to encourage schools to improve outcomes for all students, including those who are hard to educate?
- Is the focus on student test scores consistent with other policy goals?

DOES CHOICE MAKE SCHOOLS MORE ACCOUNTABLE FOR THEIR PERFORMANCE?

Brenda Neuman-Sheldon
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In the United States we hold schools accountable in a variety of ways. Public schools are traditionally administered under the direction of an elected school board. The members of the board are democratically accountable to voters. If the members of the community are dissatisfied with their schools they can replace the board. Other elected officials also play a role. In response to political pressure from their constituents, federal and state governments have enacted a growing body of laws and regulations that influences schools. These range from federal laws requiring educational services for students with disabilities to state laws requiring schools to close on the Friday before Labor Day. Schools and school boards are legally accountable for compliance with these regulations.

In recent years, many critics of the public school system have questioned whether the traditional institutions of democratic and legal accountability hold schools to a sufficiently high standard of performance. Pointing to the success of markets in improving other areas of our lives, they have called for increased choice and competition in the public school system as a way of making schools more accountable to parents. With the introduction of a market-driven accountability system, parents who are dissatisfied with their schools can enroll their children elsewhere. Schools that consistently fail to meet high standards of performance will lose students and revenues, and eventually close. Schools that satisfy parents' expectations will grow and prosper.

Jeff Flake and Bruce Fuller addressed the conference on the question of how school choice affects accountability in the education system. Flake is the former Director of the Goldwater Institute in Arizona. He argued that competitive markets are a far more powerful and effective mechanism for holding schools accountable than regulations or periodic elections. Fuller is Associate Professor at the University of California at Berkeley and Co-Director of Policy Analysis for California Education (PACE). He raised doubts about reliance on markets as a strategy for improving schools. He also acknowledged problems with the institutions of democratic and legal accountability, which he characterized as "state-led" accountability mechanisms.

FOR WHAT ARE SCHOOLS ACCOUNTABLE?

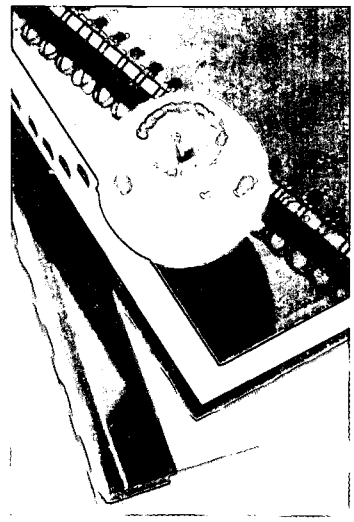
Fuller introduced his discussion of choice and accountability by posing four questions. Do state-led or market-driven accountability systems do a better job of:

- ◇ advancing the goals of common schooling?
- ◇ encouraging innovative teaching and learning?
- ◇ providing incentives and sanctions that will lead schools to improve their performance?
- ◇ responding to issues of child and family poverty?

...state-led accountability systems do well in advancing common cultural values, while markets do well in respecting social and cultural differences.

With respect to the question of common schooling, Fuller noted that state-led accountability systems do well in advancing common cultural values, while markets do well in respecting social and cultural differences. He pointed out that citizens and state governments continue to affirm common goals for schooling, even as they expand school choice. In California, for example, a recent ballot initiative requires the public schools to teach in English and state legislation has laid down strict guidelines for instruction in reading and mathematics. In many states including Michigan, state governments have introduced curriculum standards and statewide tests in an effort to ensure that all children master basic academic skills. School choice policies seek to increase the power of parents and local communities to make choices about the education of their children, but efforts by the state to assert or protect common values may conflict with their preferences. California parents who would choose bi-lingual or Spanish language instruction for their children, for example, can no longer choose schools that offer these options.

Flake was relatively unconcerned with the goals of common schooling. He argued that under state-led accountability structures "curriculum and standards are watered down too much to do anyone any good." Administrators and teachers must seek out the least common denominator among the diverse preferences of parents and community members even when these are in conflict. This makes it virtually impossible for them to innovate or to impose high standards. In his view, therefore, the state should stop trying to advance common values through the education system. In a market-based system, multiple and conflicting goals and ideas about education could flourish. Parents would be free to choose schools that reflect their own beliefs and values. Schools and educators would no longer have to satisfy all parents. Instead, they could define their own goals and work to achieve them in concert with like-minded parents.



...under state-led accountability structures "curriculum and standards are watered down too much to do anyone any good." ...This makes it virtually impossible to innovate or to impose high standards.

On the question of innovative teaching and learning, Fuller asserted that in a state-led accountability system "we hold schools accountable for what we can test." In a market-driven system, in contrast, we delegate responsibility to parents and ask **them** to hold schools accountable. According to Fuller, neither approach promises much in the way of educational improvement. In a state-led system, "what we can test" is inevitably less than what we want schools to do. Reliance on standardized testing as an accountability mechanism is often a disincentive to innovation in curriculum or pedagogy. In a market-driven system, on the other hand, parents have very little information about the quality or performance of the schools they choose for their children. Lacking this information, they will choose schools on the basis of other factors, including location, attractiveness of facilities or composition of the student body. When these are the features of schools that parents reward in the marketplace, however, these – and not academic excellence – are the features that the market will supply.

Flake agreed that educators and public officials "just don't know, and we can't tell" which schools are effective and which are not. He nevertheless acknowledged that the state has a responsibility to define at least minimum standards for student learning and to assess whether schools are meeting those standards. "We're spending the money," he said, "and we need to be sure that these kids are learning." Beyond this, however, he would leave judgments about school effectiveness to the market, relying on parents to choose which schools are effective for **their** children. State-led efforts to guarantee effectiveness are likely to produce uniformly low standards for all students, while a market-driven accountability system allows for and may even encourage unpredictable successes.

On the question of how to improve school performance, Flake asserted that markets are the only effective means of rewarding and punishing schools. In a market-based system, schools that provide the services that parents want will thrive and those that do not will fail. Over time, the spur of competition will improve performance throughout the education system as schools strive to meet parental expectations and attract new students.

Fuller framed this question in a different way, focusing on academic performance rather than parental expectations. He argued that improving the performance of schools depends on changing the interactions between teachers and students. Schools will get better only if teachers teach better or students work harder. Market-based accountability systems rely primarily on monetary incentives to encourage school improvement. State-led accountability systems rely mainly on regulations and standardized testing. In Fuller's view, however, neither monetary incentives nor state regulations have much direct influence on what happens in classrooms. He therefore expressed skepticism about whether either state-led or market-driven accountability systems can be expected to bring about significant changes in teachers' behavior or in the performance of schools.

Fuller's final question asked whether state-led or market-based accountability systems are better at responding to social and educational inequalities. Flake did not address this issue directly. In his view, schools should only be held accountable for meeting the expectations of parents and other clients, not for accomplishing grand social objectives. Opening up space for innovation and experimentation may support the creation of schools that better meet the needs of disadvantaged students, but reducing inequalities is not one of his explicit policy goals.

Fuller commented that the potential of markets to provide opportunity cannot be ignored, but that reliance on markets inevitably generates inequalities which are likely to reflect and perpetuate the present distribution of opportunities and rewards. At the same time, he cautioned that the traditional institutions of state-led accountability have not been highly effective in reducing social and educational inequalities. If ensuring equality of opportunity is an important goal of educational policy, neither state-led nor market-led accountability mechanisms will be sufficient. Complementary strategies will be required.

In summary, Flake's response to the question of whether state-led or market-driven accountability systems are more effective was emphatic. In his view, markets are more effective and more efficient in almost every respect. Acknowledging the state's obligation to ensure the education of its citizens, Flake proposed that the state act as a purchaser rather than a provider of educational services. Rather than maintaining and managing its own schools, the state should "contract out" to other agencies, who would have to prove their worth in the educational marketplace.

Fuller's view was more equivocal. He acknowledged the power of markets but questioned whether markets by themselves will make schools accountable for the kinds of outcomes that citizens expect from the education system. He also acknowledged that state-led accountability does not always work very well. Recent efforts to "fine tune" state regulations, for example, have not been especially successful in improving effectiveness or quality in public schools.

TO WHOM ARE SCHOOLS ACCOUNTABLE?

Accountability systems reflect political decisions about the appropriate goals and objectives of the education system and about who has the power to hold educational organizations and the educators within them accountable for achieving those goals. Reforms that are intended to "increase" accountability may, in fact, empower some educational stakeholders at the expense of others.

Current policy arguments about choice and accountability reflect a judgment on the part of some critics of public education that the traditional institutions of state-led accountability give too much power to professional educators and other public officials and too little to parents and other clients of the education system. The introduction of choice and competition into the public school system shifts this balance. When we ask whether choice can make schools more accountable, we are in effect asking whether schools should be more directly accountable to the preferences of students and parents. In a market-driven system, where parents can "exit" from unsatisfactory schools, educators must conform to parental preferences or see their schools fail. In a state-led system that relies on democratic and legal accountability, schools are shaped by the political judgments of voters and legislators. They are less likely to respond to the interests and concerns of individual parents.

The question whether state-led or market-led mechanisms will "increase" the accountability of schools and teachers thus raises two critical questions. First, who should have the power to determine the ends and means of schooling? Second, who should be accountable to whom? These are not technical but political questions. The move toward markets and choice in the education system changes the answers, in response to changing political dynamics. School choice policies increase the influence of parents and other "consumers" of educational services on decisions about the goals of schooling. They make educators accountable to these groups in new and potentially powerful new ways. This does not necessarily mean **more** accountability, but it does represent an important shift in the character of the accountability system.

DESIGNING AN ACCOUNTABILITY SYSTEM

Bruce Fuller and Jeff Flake presented the issues surrounding choice and accountability very differently. They finally agreed, however, that an effective accountability system must include both state-led **and** market-driven accountability mechanisms. Flake affirmed the power of markets to enforce accountability on schools, but he simultaneously acknowledged that the state must continue to play a key role in ensuring that students have equal access to educational opportunities, in setting performance standards for schools, and in measuring students' and schools' achievement. Fuller expressed doubts about whether reliance on market mechanisms would produce the kinds of improvements that Americans hope to see in their schools, but he conceded that giving parents choices is an effective strategy for making schools more responsive to their preferences.

...an effective accountability system must include both state-led and market-driven accountability mechanisms. ...[the] challenge is to create an accountability system that combines the power of markets and the authority of the state to foster steady improvement in Michigan schools.

Policy-makers do not face a simple choice between market-led and state-led accountability mechanisms. Their challenge is to create an accountability system that combines the power of markets and the authority of the state to foster steady improvement in Michigan schools. Market-based accountability mechanisms are an increasingly important part of the state's accountability system, but other mechanisms including the traditional institutions of state-led accountability will continue to play a role.

Two key principles should guide the further development of Michigan's accountability system. The first is that the rules and incentives embodied in different accountability mechanisms should be as closely aligned as possible. School choice policies should create incentives that are consistent with state and federal regulations and that encourage all schools to pursue core objectives. In Michigan, for example, the requirement that charter school students participate in the Michigan Education Assessment Program (MEAP) creates an incentive for all schools to align their curricula with state standards. Where school choice policies create inconsistent or perverse incentives for schools, however, the introduction of market-based accountability mechanisms is unlikely to produce improvements in school performance.

The second is that the accountability system should hold all schools to the same standards. It is unfair to require some schools to achieve standards or requirements that others do not have to meet. This is as true of charter schools as it is of traditional public schools. Just as it is a mistake to increase the regulatory burden on charter schools beyond that in traditional public schools, it is unfair to exempt charter schools from regulations that impose a competitive disadvantage on traditional public schools.

Designing an accountability system that creates a consistent set of incentives for all Michigan schools will not be easy, but it is a critical step toward the goal of improving the performance of the state's schools and students.

ACCOUNTABILITY

Does Choice make schools more accountable for their performance?

In support of state-led system

- Schools are currently accountable through elected boards that oversee public funds.
- The public receives information on student achievement, educational costs, and school policies and practices through the media and school publications.
- School board members can be voted from office.

In opposition to state-led system

- Current school standards are too watered down to meet demands of technology driven economy.
- Standards are not currently high enough for all students.
- No incentives exist for teachers to change behavior.
- Current system of accountability gives too much power to those currently working in the schools.

In support of market-driven system

- Schools should be more accountable to parents and students.
- Parents should be able to determine performance standards.
- Competition will lead to higher standards for all students.
- Competition, merit pay and collective school rewards or punishments will transform teacher behavior.
- Teachers should be sanctioned if children do not meet achievement standards.

In opposition to market-driven system

- Parents alone should not be able to determine standards for all children.
- Parents do not have the information they need to be able to make good choices.
- Schools will focus on selected populations rather than the interest of the community as a whole.

Policy Questions

- Are all schools held to the same standards?
- Who is accountable when schools fail to produce satisfactory outcomes for students? Who is responsible for improvement?
- How should we measure the effectiveness of a teacher or school?

LESSONS AND QUESTIONS FOR PUBLIC DEBATE

David N. Plank and Gary Sykes
College of Education, Michigan State University

School choice is a central theme in contemporary strategies for education reform. Across the United States and around the world, governments are turning toward markets in their efforts to improve the performance of schools and students. By giving parents more choices about the schools their children attend and opening the education system to competition from new actors including the private sector, policy-makers hope to make schools more efficient and more effective.

The move toward market-based approaches to education has already brought about significant changes. School choice policies have given educators and parents new options and they are responding. In Michigan alone, more than 50,000 students are now enrolled in charter schools. Many more are enrolled in schools outside their home school districts. Across the United States, thirty-six states have adopted charter school legislation. Nearly 2,000 charter schools are now in operation, with more than one million children enrolled.

Participants in the conference at MSU explored the arguments for and against school choice policies and considered the available evidence on how choice is affecting students and schools. Both advocates and critics recognize the need for additional evidence before firm judgments can be reached. We nevertheless have enough experience with these policies to identify some critical questions and to draw some preliminary conclusions.

EVIDENCE IN THE SCHOOL CHOICE DEBATE

...virtually all of the evidence that is available thus far suggests that the effects of choice on achievement are relatively modest... Test scores cannot tell us whether choice "works" or not.

School choice policies are new and it is still too early to tell what their lasting consequences will be. The first charter school opened in 1991 and most have been in operation for less than five years. The relatively few voucher programs that have been implemented are of even more recent vintage. All of these programs have been studied intensively, but assessment of their effects remains provisional at best. For now, the available evidence suggests that choice has neither had the dramatic positive effects that its advocates promise nor the devastating negative effects that its critics fear.

Student Achievement

One of the most closely watched questions in the policy debate over school choice is whether allowing parents to choose the schools their children attend will bring about improvements in student achievement. Standardized test scores are the focus of public and media attention. As Paul Peterson noted, "No one wants to talk to you if you don't have test scores."

Despite calls from all sides for more evidence on the effects of choice on student achievement, however, the role of student test scores in the school choice debate is likely to be small, for two main reasons. First, virtually all of the evidence that is available thus far suggests that the effects of choice on achievement are relatively modest. Most (but not all) effects appear to be positive, but by themselves they are simply too small to justify calls for radical changes in the institutions of public education. In addition, as Henry Levin pointed out, similar or larger achievement gains appear to be available from reforms that can be made within the traditional public school system, including changes in class size or the adoption of new strategies for curriculum and instruction. If improvement in student test scores is the goal of educational policy, it is uncertain why policy-makers should prefer school choice over other, more familiar strategies.

Second, in Michigan and other states, the introduction of school choice policies has coincided with the introduction of a variety of other educational reforms. Among many other changes, most state governments have moved toward a much more rigorous and consequential reliance on curriculum standards and standardized testing. Because these reforms have been implemented simultaneously, it will never be possible to identify the unique effects of choice on student achievement. If student test scores rise in Michigan over the next few years, for example, this effect may be attributable to choice, or to enhanced standards, or to something else. The same is true if achievement falls. Test scores cannot tell us whether choice "works" or not.

Innovation and School Improvement

One of the strongest arguments for school choice policies is that freeing schools and teachers from the standardizing pressures of state regulation and bureaucratic administration will lead to innovation and improvement in educational practice. Jeff Flake argued that schools in the current public school system must seek out the "lowest common denominator" among parental preferences in order to keep all parents reasonably satisfied. In a market-driven system, in contrast, schools would be free to pursue unique missions and parents could seek out schools that closely matched their own values.

So far, however, there is little evidence that school choice policies encourage schools to innovate or to adopt distinctive missions. Most "choice" schools feature curricula and instructional practices very much like those used in traditional public schools. Innovation is as likely, and as widespread, in traditional public schools as it is in charter schools, as Bella Rosenberg pointed out. Insofar as schools have adopted distinctive missions, these generally emphasize ethnic or cultural traditions rather than novel instructional strategies.

Deborah McGriff notes that schools that are safe, clean, and successful in teaching children to read look like an important innovation in some public school districts. School choice policies and the competitive pressures that they bring to bear may support the emergence of successful schools, inside and outside the traditional public school system, even if these do not look much different from "traditional" schools.

If the development of new and more effective instructional strategies is among the goals of educational policy, however, then policy-makers will have to provide incentives that encourage experimentation and differentiation in schools. On the basis of the evidence that is now available, it seems unlikely that they can rely on the market to do it for them.

So far ... there is little evidence that school choice policies encourage schools to innovate or to adopt distinctive missions. ... Innovation is as likely, and as widespread, in traditional public schools as it is in charter schools...

The Rules Matter

The outcomes of school choice policies depend decisively on the rules that govern the choices of parents and educators. Different rules create different incentives and different incentives produce different outcomes. An earlier Michigan State University report on school choice policies in Michigan discussed the many ways in which the rules matter.[1] School choice policies may make the distribution of educational opportunities more equal or less equal, depending on the rules that are put in place to govern the choices of educators and parents. Some rules may encourage innovation and experimentation, while others may discourage them. Good rules can help to make the education system function more efficiently and effectively. Poorly designed rules can do serious damage to schools and students.

The challenge for policy-makers is to design a framework for school choice policy that harnesses the power of markets to improve educational opportunities while protecting against the harm that simply "unleashing" markets can do. This will require careful attention to the alignment between rules, incentives, and the goals of educational policy.

Policy and Politics

In the end, the debate about school choice policies is a political debate. The arguments that motivate the debate are rooted in competing beliefs about schooling in a democratic society. When Anne Bryant affirms the importance of locally elected school boards in educational governance, for example, she calls upon a political tradition that identifies school board members as the legitimate arbiters of community preferences. Terry Moe calls upon a competing political tradition when he argues for more direct control of schools by those who work in them or send their children to them. Evidence about rising or falling test scores is unlikely to alter these beliefs. Decisions about school choice policies are therefore likely to turn on such other questions as these:

- Should school choice policies target poor families or expand choices for all families?
- What kinds of schools should be eligible for public funding?

Finding answers to these questions will require continued public dialogue to clarify the issues at stake and to identify potential areas of agreement and common interest.

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[1] David Arsen, David N. Plank, and Gary Sykes. ***School Choice Policies in Michigan: The Rules Matter.*** East Lansing, Michigan. October 1999.

SCHOOL CHOICE FOR WHOM?

Americans have always had choices about the schools their children attend. The choices that households make about where to live are also choices about the schools to which they will send their children. Those who are dissatisfied with public education are free to send their children to private or religious schools or to educate them at home.

Not all parents have the same choices, though. The best choices are reserved for those with the money to buy a house in a desirable school district or to pay tuition in a private school. Poor families are unable to take advantage of these alternatives. Many must send their children to poor schools because no other choices are open to them.

As Howard Fuller stated, "The issue is not choice in America. The issue is who has it." The most powerful argument in favor of school choice policies is that they will provide new options for poor parents trapped in failing schools. Voucher experiments in Milwaukee, New York and other cities are explicitly designed to make it possible for poor families to choose better schools for their children. Charter schools in Michigan and some other states are mostly located in school districts where family incomes and average student achievement scores are relatively low.

Not all school choice policies open up new options for poor families, however, and choice policies do not benefit all poor families. In contrast to Michigan, charter schools in California are mainly located in suburban and small town school districts, as Amy Wells explained, and they enroll a larger percentage of white children than traditional public schools. Policies introducing charter schools and tuition tax credits in Arizona do not target poor children at all. One key question that will have to be answered about school choice policies is whether they offer access to better schools for families who have previously been denied such options.

HOW MANY CHOICES?

Many choices are available in the American education system but only some of these choices are publicly funded. At present, families who want to send their children to religious schools or to educate their children at home must pay for these choices themselves. Families who wish to send their children to segregated schools or to schools taught in a language other than English may find that the choices they prefer are simply not available.

The policy debate on school choice raises fundamental questions about the variety of educational options that should be provided in a democratic society. Should decisions about the schooling of children be left up to parents or does the state have an appropriate role? Should parents be free to choose religious schools or Spanish-language schools for their children? Should the state pay to support these choices?

Reasonable people will disagree about the answers to these questions. Some will favor greater discretion for parents, while others will seek to advance a common interest and a common tradition through the public school system. For example, Bruce Fuller expressed the fear that "the advocates of school choice are being a little reckless in slowly eroding the power of the state." Terry Moe argued strongly that parents should have more authority over the schooling of their children.

The practical question for policy-makers is where the boundary between parental discretion and the public interest should be drawn. Current moves toward the introduction of market-based mechanisms in the education system mark a significant shift. These policy changes seek to make schools more responsive to parents and their concerns. They do not eliminate the need for state regulation and assessment, however. As Jeff Flake pointed out, "We're spending the money, and we need to be sure that these kids are learning."

COMING TO PUBLIC JUDGMENT

The fundamental question in the policy debate over school choice is how to harness the power of choice to serve the key goals of Michigan's public school system. This will require ongoing public discussion of the many issues at stake, and close attention to the details of policy design. Citizens and policy-makers must have opportunities to weigh the arguments of advocates and critics as they move toward considered judgments on the directions in which the educational system should move. Michigan State University's conference on "School Choice and Educational Change" provided an occasion to explore some of the crucial issues that will have to be addressed in this public discussion. We hope this report will support continued exploration of these questions as the citizens of Michigan move forward with their efforts to improve the performance of the state's education system.

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