
REVERSING EDUCATIONAL DECLINE: THE CASE FOR EDUCATIONAL CHOICE

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REVERSING EDUCATIONAL DECLINE: THE CASE FOR EDUCATIONAL CHOICE

I. INTRODUCTION

Criticism of American public school education is steadily picking up momentum. The purpose of my paper is to give answers to the following questions:

- Why is criticism of American public education growing?
- Will any of the conventional reforms make a fundamental difference in reversing educational decline?
- Is educational choice the answer?

To make my own viewpoint clear, I will state three beliefs that I have developed over the last year:

1. Public schools are not producing the results that parents and the country have every right to expect them and need them to achieve.
2. None of the reforms that have traditionally garnered high visibility such as funding equalization, teacher empowerment, increased budgets, etc. show much promise. They amount to little more than tinkering with the current system which I believe has fundamental flaws.
3. Powerful arguments support educational choice as a central solution. It is also a controversial solution, particularly when private schools

are included. I believe educational choice should be examined carefully because there is nothing else on the horizon that offers much hope to reverse the educational decline that we have experienced over the last 30 years.

Choice is strongly opposed by the educational establishment, and I encourage each of you to study the issues carefully and to draw your own conclusion on what reforms will really make a difference. Our country does not need another decade of great talk about educational reform with no results forthcoming. That is what we experienced in the 1980s. The major issue of the 1990s will be the debate over choice.

II. WHY IS THE CRITICISM OF AMERICAN PUBLIC EDUCATION GROWING?

Nearly a decade ago, the National Commission on Excellence in Education published its report "A Nation At Risk." The report warned of a "rising tide of mediocrity" that threatened to erode the country's economic future. The report included statistics showing that in math and science the U.S. had not slipped to 2nd or 3rd place in world competition, but rather to 12th or 13th. The last decade has seen a growing tide of adverse comparisons as were included in the report.

When evaluating results over time, average combined math and verbal SAT scores for American students has dropped from 980 (of a possible 1,600) in 1963 to 900 in 1990. While these declines are common knowledge, the comments of Herbert Rudman, Professor of educational psychology at MSU, are less well known. Rudman has carefully studied test scores over time and concluded that in recent years, it is the top 25% of students that has shown "the greatest decline across a variety of subjects." From 1972 to 1989, the

number of high school seniors scoring above 600 on the SAT verbal section dropped from 116,000 to 80,000 - a 30% drop. In 1989, only 1,000 high school seniors scored above 750 on the SAT verbal. This was less than half of the 1981 number.

A frequently quoted study found the average Japanese 18-year-old performs better in math than all but the top 1% of American students. Another recent international study compared the math skills of 13-year-olds in 6 countries. Koreans were first and Americans last. Nevertheless, when these students were asked whether they had strong math skills, 68% of the Americans responded "yes" compared with 23% of the Koreans.

Albert Shanker, the head of the American Federation of Teachers, the nation's second largest teachers' union, has stated: "We should realize that the overwhelming majority of American children - perhaps 90% - are not learning much. Middle class parents are happy with the education their children get because the kids go on to college. They don't realize that most of these youngsters would not be admitted to a university in any other industrialized country. There kids are getting their junior high and high school education in college." This is an amazingly candid statement from the head of a teachers' union.

There is a growing divergence of opinion concerning the quality of our schools between the "consumers" of education, i.e., particularly businesses and the "producers" of education, i.e., the educational establishment. A recent national poll showed that 85% of school superintendents gave American schools a rating of good or very good while 75% of business executives rated

the schools fair or poor. 90% of the executives thought Japan has a better school system while only 35% of the superintendents do.

The mentality of the education establishment is similar to that of most large organizations - there is a great aversion for holding anyone within the organization accountable for performance. Teachers and administrators that are willing to acknowledge that there is a performance problem typically blame external factors, i.e. TV, single families, drugs, etc. While few would not acknowledge that these are contributing factors, the educational establishment dwells on them to the exclusion of any internal, system problems.

In summary, a growing number of educational consumers - businesses and parents - are becoming increasingly dissatisfied with "business as usual" from our schools. It's now time to look at some of the more conventional reforms proposed to turn around educational decline.

III. WILL ANY OF THE CONVENTIONAL REFORMS MAKE A FUNDAMENTAL DIFFERENCE IN REVERSING EDUCATIONAL DECLINE?

Many solutions have been offered to reverse the above described educational decline. I would like to review three of the most popular areas, and I have grouped them together under the rubric of conventional reform. I'm calling the reforms conventional because none challenge the fundamental ways that education is provided. The three reforms I will review are:

- A. Teacher empowerment
- B. Increased funding
- C. Funding equalization

A. Teacher Empowerment

On the surface, the notion of empowering teachers sounds appealing. Coming from an organization that prides itself in empowering people at all levels, teacher empowerment seems to make sense to me. However, on closer examination, because of the dominance of adversarial blue collar style unions, primarily the NEA and its statewide affiliates, such as the HEA, teacher empowerment turns into union empowerment, and union empowerment is not the solution to our problems. Too much existing union power is already a major problem.

Most people are astonished to learn that public schools, which claim to be professional institutions, are in fact blue collar operations in which teachers negotiate and are paid as blue collar workers. Payment is based on seniority and alleged academic accomplishments, and performance is not a factor.

There are two significant teacher's unions: the National Education Association (NEA) and the American Federation of Teachers (AFT). The NEA has 1,500,000 teachers as members and is the dominant union in every state except New York. The AFT has 450,000 teachers as members and are primarily concentrated in large cities. For example, Holland is affiliated with the NEA while Dearborn is AFT. The NEA is the most powerful organization in public education, and one of the strongest lobbies in Washington. Since 1980, NEA members have constituted the largest single voting block at every Democratic presidential convention - climbing to nearly 10% of the delegates in 1988. While the AFT, under its forward thinking Albert Shanker, has supported many reforms, the NEA, according to Thomas Toch, the education writer for

the U.S. News & World Report, has not. Toch has stated that "while the NEA has sought to convince the nation otherwise, the organization has fought hard to preserve public school teaching as an occupation defined by industrial trade unionism."

The NEA wields great influence both in Washington and in state capitols. For example, in Minnesota, members of the MEA typically contribute through their PAC, more money to candidates for statewide offices than do all other PACs combined. In many instances, NEA affiliates are working to elect their own members to office. In Alabama, no less than 40% of the state's 140 legislators are teachers, retired teachers, or spouses of teachers.

The NEA's first response to the Nation at Risk study was to deny there was a problem. It was dismissed as "the usual doom and gloom." The NEA then switched to a sole focus on increased funding, primarily for teachers' salaries, as a solution to education problems. The chairman of the Texas House Education Committee has said, "The NEA is for more money, period."

The NEA and its affiliates have opposed virtually all other teacher reforms especially those that would raise standards and reward performance for teachers. They have attacked any attempt to strengthen evaluation systems for use in the dismissal or promotion of teachers. When the United Teachers of Dade, the AFT affiliate in Miami supported an evaluation system to weed out incompetent teachers, the NEA's Miami affiliate took out a full page ad in the Miami Herald blasting the AFT for undermining teacher job security. Weak

evaluation systems are the primary reason that teachers are almost never fired for incompetency. A grand total of 3 public school teachers out of 70,000 were fired in Michigan for incompetency in 1990. That is incredible.

While the NEA has fought nearly every major reform, it has a large PR budget to convince people otherwise. For example, its current president Keith Geiger has regular editorial advertisements in the Washington Post. It has attempted to co-opt the excellence theme. Its annual publication includes articles such as "America's Schools: A Panorama of Excellence," "Planning for Excellence," etc. These articles, according to the U.S. News reporter, are "a skillful assemblage of empty platitudes, cynical self-righteousness, flagrant misrepresentations of fact which are designed to mask the NEA's opposition to reform."

Without a doubt, the major player on the educational field today is the NEA, and Holland Public Schools are directly connected to it through the HEA. Despite all of its rhetoric regarding reform, the views of the NEA were summarized at its 1988 convention when the NEA executive director stated that the NEA "must never sacrifice unionism on the altar of professionalism."

The NEA is fundamentally opposed to all types of educational reform. Its focus is solely on higher teacher salaries and benefits. Educational reform will not be achieved through teacher empowerment when it is done in an environment of militant unionism and a complete

lack of accountability as fostered by the NEA. The NEA is the major barrier for educational reform, period. Teacher empowerment is not the answer.

B. Increased Funding

The primary reform for liberal politicians in general and school administrators and teachers' unions in particular is to spend more money on education. The traditional message is that, "If you love your children, send money and we will do the rest."

The problem with this solution is that it has been tried to a massive degree over the last decade and we have virtually nothing to show for it.

A highly respected economist at the University of Rochester, Eric Hanushek, specializes in the economics of education. A recent survey of his summarized the findings of 187 studies that examined the effects of specific reforms and pupil performance. His survey makes quite clear what doesn't work. The Wall Street Journal summarized the findings, "He looked at 65 studies that examined whether increasing per pupil spending improved student performance. Three quarters of these studies showed no improvement. He looked at 74 studies that examined whether better school facilities improved education. 85% of those studies said such improvements made no difference. He looked at 152 studies that examined whether lower student-teacher ratios affected performance. 82% said it had no impact. Overwhelmingly, studies show that increased teachers' salaries doesn't mean better schooling."

Hanushek stresses that while there is a lack of a relationship between spending and performance, that this does not mean that there are not large differences among teachers and schools. There are large ones. Hanushek believes that the fundamental problem is not a lack of money, but a lack of incentives for better performance. Bad schools and teachers simply have no incentive to find out and apply what the successful schools and teachers are doing. The importance of incentives is obvious to business people and most professional people, but they simply do not exist in the education world. There will be more on this in the next section on choice.

Per pupil expenditures measured in 1989 dollars have grown from \$2,200 in 1966 to nearly \$5,000 in 1989. This is more than a doubling in real expenditures during a dramatic decline in educational performance. The major reason that real expenditures rose during this period is that the NEA and AFT were successful in getting large real increases in wages and benefits for their members. These items account for more than 60% of the budgets of most school districts.

Per pupil spending is higher in the USA than in any other country except Switzerland, and we have already discussed that educational performance in this country compares unfavorably with less well funded countries such as Japan and Germany.

An analogy may be the best way to summarize all of these findings. You don't get a car with a broken crankshaft moving by simply filling up its gas tank. A lack of money is not the only or even most important problem for our schools.

C. Funding Equalization

Andy Mulder's prophetic paper last year described very well the nationwide movement to equalize funding for schools within states. The range of spending within districts varies in Michigan and nearly all states from as little as \$2,500 per pupil to over \$8,000 per pupil. Since Andy's paper was delivered, Michigan has adopted the so-called "Robin Hood" law which calls for modest steps to transfer funds from rich districts to poor districts in order to narrow the spending differentials. Holland will transfer approximately \$60 per pupil out of its budget of approximately \$5,000 per pupil.

This movement of funding equalization has received much support from a recently published and widely publicized book by Jonathan Kozol entitled "Savage Inequalities." The basic thesis of Kozol's book, according to the New York Times review is that "public schools are public facilities, which means they should offer the same quality of education to pupils in every part of the nation." Kozol describes a number of inner city schools where facilities are in advanced stages of overcrowding and decay and shortages range from history books to toilet paper. Kozol argues for a level playing field where not only funds are transferred into poor districts, but spending caps are put on the wealthy districts.

This concept has been tried in California and the results have been, as one commentator put it, "a wondrous illustration of the law of unintended consequences." Since the mid 1970s, state money has been funneled into the poor California districts to bring them to within \$200 per pupil of the state average. Proposition 13 in the late 1970s

capped and slashed property tax revenues which then shifted the school financing burden to state income and sales taxes. This made funding equalization easy, but it also greatly eroded support for public education. It's not easy to motivate people to spend money on education unless they can see the results down the street. Spending per pupil in California has slid from sixth in the mid 1970s to 25th today, and it ranks last among the industrial states.

Another unintended consequence of funding equalization in California has been that interest on the part of businessmen and taxpayers to run for the school board has sharply declined, because local boards no longer set tax rates. A growing number of California school boards have fallen under the control of the group with the greatest interest in school finances - the teachers' union. The union-dominated school board in Los Angeles gave in 1989 a three-year 27% increase to its teachers. A number of major California districts have so overcommitted their available funds that state-appointed trustees have had to take over.

Kozol vividly describes terrible school conditions, but the solutions fall short. One reviewer described Savage Inequities as "describing an open and festering sore in society and then prescribing two aspirin and bed rest." Kozol's solution is no more complicated than a massive increase of spending for poor districts with much of it coming from the rich districts. This ignores the extensive array of studies indicating that there is not a strong correlation between spending and educational results. Money will not make much difference unless it is

accompanied by major changes in the organization of schools and incentives for focusing spending on productive uses.

Kozol has highlighted real problems but he only offers failed solutions. Funding equalization will not be a major contributor to reversing educational decline. In fact, it may serve to primarily destroy the remnants of local accountability and support for public education that exist today and only hasten the rate of educational decline.

In order to achieve greater levels of educational performance, we need to look beyond the mainstream prescriptions of teacher empowerment, increased funding, and funding equalization.

IV. IS EDUCATIONAL CHOICE THE ANSWER?

As I stated at the beginning, I believe that educational choice should be carefully considered. While it is simple in concept, there are a wide variety of ways that it could be put into practice, and it will live or die in these details. Before drawing your own conclusions on the issue, I encourage you to study it carefully. There is no question that it would be a dramatic departure from our current approaches. I believe it can be the basis for improved educational performance, and I would now like to share with you why I believe so. My review of choice will cover six areas:

- A. Philosophical Underpinnings: Friedman
- B. School Governance: Politics versus Markets
- C. The Question of Private School Inclusion
- D. Educational Competition in Europe and Japan

- E. Responding to Arguments Against Choice
- F. A Choice Model

Before getting started, I want to warn you that because of my views on choice, I am a racist, at least according to the MEA. An MEA spokesperson stated in August that any organization or individual that supports choice is racist. So if the MEA is your advisor, now's the time to leave.

A. Philosophical Underpinnings: Friedman

Milton Friedman was the first major post World War II writer to raise fundamental questions concerning how schools are organized. As you know, Friedman's philosophy is that markets and competition are almost always preferable for society in terms of efficiency than governmental monopolies. In his 1962 book Capitalism and Freedom he examined education from this viewpoint.

Friedman drew a sharp distinction between the financing of education and the administration of education. He believes it's in society's best interest to ensure that all children are educated. Because per child costs of education are high and some families have a number of children, he believes that the best and fairest way to ensure that all children are educated is for the government to pay for it.

The administration of schools is a different story. While public schools are not governmental monopolies, they approximate them because the no payment for parents fee structure makes it very difficult for other schools to compete. Friedman believes that the waste, inefficiency, and insensitivity to the consumer that most public

schools exhibit is not an aberration, but inherent in their structure due to their quasi-governmental monopoly status. Such performance is characteristic of such monopolies.

His solution was for the government to set minimum standards for schools, and to give each parent a voucher for educational purposes. If parents wanted to spend more on education, they could add on their own funds to the voucher. Friedman believed that this simple change would create a powerfully different dynamic for education. Schools would no longer have a captive consumer base. The existence of each school would depend on its ability to attract and retain students. Competitive pressure would be brought to bear on costly labor practices that had no relation to educational performance. The point is that few organizations go through difficult restructurings to meet customer needs unless they are forced to do so due to competitive pressures. Friedman believes that educational organizations, in that regard, are no different than other organizations. The good intentions of well meaning parents will not keep the public schools from taking on the dismal characteristics of governmental monopolies. Competition is needed.

Friedman gave credibility to the notion of giving parents a right to choose the school for their children without experiencing a severe financial handicap. The philosophical underpinnings of choice saw little further development for almost 30 years.

B. School Governance: Politics versus Markets

The 1990 publication of Politics, Markets and America's Schools has given a strong boost to the growing movement favoring educational choice. The book was written by John Chubb, a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution and Terry Moe, a professor of political science at Stanford.

Chubb and Moe carried out a ten year study of 500 public and private schools and their findings can be summarized in three points:

1. The schools that produced the greatest increase in academic performance had these characteristics; clear academic goals, an ambitious academic program, strong leadership from the principal, and teacher professionalism.
2. The most important characteristic for the emergence of the above characteristics is school autonomy, especially from external bureaucratic control.
3. America's existing system of public education restricts the emergence of effective schools. The institutions of democratic control undermine school autonomy.

The problem with the public school system is that it is bureaucratic and political. Formal control of public schools is achieved through election to school boards. The "winners" have the right to set policy binding on everyone, the "losers" must accept these policies.

The constituency of a public school is heterogeneous. It includes politicians, at the local, state and federal level, administrators, and the teachers' union. Parents and children are a small part of the constituency.

Bureaucracy is spawned in this system because the "winners" have an uncertain future. Future elections may see them ousted. Therefore, the "winners" attempt to develop policies and rules that will outlive their control of the political process. Over time the collection of rules that is developed takes away the autonomy of the individual school and principal which is critical for a school to be effective.

Chubb and Moe study in public schools the development of bureaucratic rules in a number of areas, one of which is personnel; "unions do not favor school autonomy. They favor teacher autonomy which is very different indeed. They want teachers to be free from control by organizational superiors, including principals . . . their pursuit of autonomy thus leads them to wage a war of formalization against principals -- restricting their discretion, and stripping them of managerial and policy-making power . . . For unions, the path to teacher autonomy is the bureaucratization of the schools. The alleged leader of the school, the principal, is purposely prevented from staffing the organization, and arranging incentives according to his best judgment. The principal is stuck with the teacher the system gives him, and they are stuck with him . . . There is no team. All these people simply happen to work at the same school." This drive for autonomy leads to "formal contracts that specify in excruciating detail and at spectacular length (100+ pages) . . . the structure of

teacher's jobs, right down to the number of minutes of preparation time, assignments to lunch or hall duty, participation in extracurricular activities, and anything else that teachers might be asked to do (or want to avoid doing)." Unions do best in noncompetitive, protected, regulated settings like government and the way education is currently organized -- where costs can simply be passed on and ineffectiveness has nothing to do with survival.

This contrasts with a school that has autonomy and where a principal can recruit the kind of teachers he wants and weed out those he doesn't. Through this process principals can develop a team -- a group of teachers whose values, talents, and priorities mesh well together - and promote pursuit of organizational objectives.

For Chubb and Moe, democratic control of schools inherently leads schools away from being effective. In that system for a person to significantly influence the schools, he must attempt to influence the school board. But that process inherently works through top-down bureaucratic control which moves away from an effective school based upon autonomy. The alternative to political control is market control. Instead of joining a coalition for political purpose, parents choose a school. In order for a school to survive, it must meet the needs of parents and students. That moves parents and children way up the "pecking order" from the current situation and makes them the number one constituent that the school must serve. People would have the right to start schools if they believe that the needs of many parents are not being met in a particular geographic area.

Chubb and Moe reach the same conclusion that Friedman did even though theirs is an institutional orientation as opposed to an economic one. All agree that there are fundamental, intrinsic problems with our educational system based upon public schools and that parental choice is a far superior alternative.

C. The Question of Private School Inclusion

The variety of choice plans that are possible is very large. One critical dimension is the type of schools that parents can choose from. Possibilities range from choice limited to public school options to choice amongst any type of school, public, private, or religious, that meets certain minimal government standards. Engler's plan in Michigan is starting with choice amongst public schools within a district --- a very modest start. Bush's education reform plan, introduced in April 1991, supports full-blown choice including for religious schools.

When choice includes the option for religious schools, controversy is increased and concerns are heard along a couple of key themes -- it's un-American and/or it's unconstitutional. These concerns will be addressed in a few minutes. However, for the leading theorists of choice, Friedman, Chubb, and Moe, it is critical that choice is much broader than simply the existing public schools. For them, presenting the consumer with choice amongst public schools is analogous to allowing consumers to choose only amongst different McDonald's restaurants. For real competition to drive improvement and force schools to change if they are to survive, diversity is needed. Choice

amongst public schools is simply far too limiting. Freidman, Chubb, and Moe believe it is critical to include religious schools.

Another argument for allowing choice amongst a broad array of schools is simply that private schools do a better job of educating students and they do so at a far lower cost. Private schools put 10%-15% more of their students at appropriate grade level than public schools do according to NAEP studies for 4th and 8th graders. Many studies have pointed out the success stories of inner-city Catholic high schools with poor, minority children where budgets are well less than 50% of nearby public schools.

For choice to be effective it must be broad-based, including public, private, and religious schools.

D. Educational Competition in Europe and Japan

In evaluating the choice idea, it is beneficial to review the experience of other countries which are much farther down the road with choice than we are. Critics of choice such as Albert Shanker, president of the American Federation of Teachers, have stated recently that "none of our industrial competitors uses competition between public and private schools as a way of attaining excellence". This simply is not true as the following brief review will indicate.

1. **Netherlands**

Dutch education is the most highly-evolved system of parental choice in the world. 70% of the elementary students attend schools operated by nongovernmental organizations. All operating costs of schools, whether public or religious, are

funded by the local government. It is possible to start a denominational school with as few as 80 students and get 100% funding from public funds. It's also possible to choose amongst public schools.

2. France

Significant financial aid to private schools occurs in France. The election of the socialist Mitterand in 1981 brought a challenge to such funding. Proposals from the new government and strongly supported by the teachers unions called for much tighter control of all schools receiving state funding. Included in the proposals were requirements that principals and all teachers be selected and trained in public institutions. These proposals led to gigantic demonstrations in Paris in 1984 with over 1 million supporters of private education marching in the streets. Soon after the head of the Education Ministry resigned and the proposals were dropped. Public and private schools continue to compete on a fairly level playing field in France.

3. Great Britain

Parental choice was a major goal of the conservatives in Britain in the 1980s. This direction was supported also by the liberal Social Democrats. Public funds do flow to denominational schools and it has become easier for teachers and/or parents to start new schools and receive public funding.

4. Japan

The Japanese system is based on a combination of parental choice and admissions decisions made by schools at all levels. The competition between students to get into schools is intense.

Tough, objective entrance tests are used all along the way beginning in elementary school on to college. The better schools, including elementary, only accept one-third of their applicants.

Compared to the rest of the education world, America is at low-end of the spectrum, measuring parental choice and competition.

E. Responding to Arguments Against Choice

I would like to briefly respond to three common concerns about educational choice:

1. **Choice is unconstitutional for denominational schools**

Many people believe that including parochial schools would violate the separation of church and state described in the First Amendment to the Constitution which begins "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion . . ."

Over the years, the Supreme Court has drawn distinctions between direct funding of religious schools, which is clearly forbidden, and aid given to parents which they choose to spend at a religious school for educational purposes. In 1983, the Court let stand a Minnesota law that permits parents to deduct parochial school tuition from their state income taxes. Harvard law professor, Lawrence Tribe, has stated that "Given the existing doctrine about the separation of church and state, I do not see a serious First Amendment problem in a reasonably written voucher program."

Some state constitutions more explicitly rule out even voucher programs. Michigan has such a constitution and plans are underway to put on the ballot a constitutional change in 1994.

2. Choice is un-American

This is probably the biggest obstacle. Many people have what seems a stronger emotional attachment to an egalitarian image of the current system of education than they do to quality education. The original advantage for the public school was that all strata of society would mix and that common civic values would be promulgated. The reality of today is that the public schools in and around most major cities tend to be the most exclusive and segregated schools. In fact, the Republican suburbs of Detroit want nothing to do with choice because they have no desire for blacks from Detroit entering their schools. Choice is aimed at improving the quality of education and opening up options for particularly the lower end of society.

3. Choice will leave the poor behind in lousy schools

This assumes a static pool of students and that choice plans will allow good schools to drain away the better students, while the bad schools educate the worst students. This criticism overlooks the dynamic aspects of choice -- the ability of parents to choose forces exiting public schools to change. Another dynamic is that good schools expand and new ones emerge. If bad schools do not improve they will lose their customer base.

F. A Choice Model

Chubb and Moe have proposed the following model for school choice.

1. The Supply of "Public" Schools

- a. States will set minimal criteria for what constitutes a "public" school; e.g., graduation, health, and safety requirements.
- b. Any group that applies to the state and meets the minimal criteria would be chartered as a public school and granted the right to accept students and receive public money.
- c. Existing private and religious schools could receive "public" charters.
- d. Local school districts could continue running their present schools, but they would have no authority over any other schools in their district.

2. The Funding of Public Education

- a. Every child would be designated with a scholarship fund depending on where he lives, degree of economic deprivation, or any physical handicap.
- b. Funds would transfer from wealthy districts to poor districts to ensure that all students had equal base scholarships.
- c. Parents would not be allowed to make personal "add-ons" to scholarships, however, if a district voted to spend more per child than the state required, there could be a collective "add-on".
- d. Students with special economic or physical difficulties would have "add-ons" from state and federal funds.

3. Choice among Schools

- a. Students would be free to attend any "public" school in the state.
- b. Parent Information Centers would be established in every district with comprehensive information on all "public" schools.
- c. Applications from all students would be sent to the Parent Information Center.
- d. Schools would make their own admission decisions subject only to nondiscrimination requirements. This is crucial. Schools must be able to define their own missions and not have students forced upon them. They must be free to admit as many or as few as they want according to intelligence, motivation, or whatever.
- e. Schools would set their own tuition. They would be free to admit students with different sized scholarships.
- f. All students would be guaranteed a school and there would, in some cases, a second or third round of applications.
- g. Schools would be free to expel students.

4. Governance and Organization of Schools

- a. Each school would have sole authority to determine its governance structure. It could be run by a principal, parents, or a union.
- b. The state would not tell schools how internal work should be organized. There would be no requirements for career ladders, advisory committees, textbook selection, preparation time, homework, or anything else.

- c. State-wide tenure laws would be eliminated. Teachers could demand tenure and the best ones might get it, but it would not be legally mandated.
- d. Teachers could continue to join unions and bargain collectively, but they must suffer the consequences if their dictates put their employers at a competitive disadvantage.
- e. The state would continue to certify teachers, but the requirements would be minimal.
- f. The state would not hold the schools accountable for performance. That would be done by parents and students.

V. THE FUTURE OF CHOICE

Educational choice is steadily gaining grassroots support. A Gallup Poll in July 1991 found 50% responding favorably to the idea of allotting money to parents and allowing them to spend it at public, private, or parochial schools. The groups responding most favorably were minorities, urban residents, and parents already with children in nonpublic schools.

The major choice experiments so far have been in Harlem, Milwaukee, and Minnesota. The Harlem experience has been an unqualified success. The Milwaukee and Minnesota programs are only a few years old. The Milwaukee plan was designed by a black state legislator who was campaign leader for Jesse Jackson's presidential bid in Wisconsin in 1988. The Milwaukee program is the only one that allows parents to spend their vouchers at nonpublic schools. The enrollment in the Milwaukee program jumped from 350 to 550 in the fall of 1991. The teacher's unions are waging a fierce court fight to derail the Milwaukee program.

Much activity is happening at state legislatures. A black state legislator from Houston has introduced a bill that would allow parents to spend vouchers at either private or public schools. In California, there will be an educational choice initiative on the ballot in 1992. A black activist from Watts stated that "the people who have money already exercise choice. It's time that the rest of us have a way of forcing the regular schools to improve."

A choice plan was narrowly defeated in the Pennsylvania legislature in December 1991. The bill would have granted a \$900 voucher to any parent with income of less than \$75,000 if they chose to send their children to a private school. The bill passed the state senate by a 28-22 margin and stunned political observers who had predicted the bill would die in the education committee. The editorial writer for the Philadelphia Inquirer wrote: "The typical opponent of choice is a white, self-styled liberal who lives in a section of the suburbs that he or she has chosen specifically because of its good schools . . . yet somehow they have incredible brass to suggest that some other people's children should be forced to stay in the public schools as a sacrifice to some sort of indefinable larger good that they themselves have no interest in directly supporting. It makes my blood boil." After intensive lobbying by the NEA, the bill was narrowly defeated in the Pennsylvania House.

The choice movement will continue to grow. Bills similar to the one debated in Pennsylvania are currently working their way through many other state legislatures. Public schools, on their own, cannot and will not reform themselves, and without choice bringing accountability to education, educational results across the nation will not improve. Choice will grow,

because as people become increasingly dissatisfied with educational results, they will gravitate to choice as the last, best alternative.

The growth of choice will not come quickly or easily. The entrenched interests against choice are massive and an intense war will be fought, state legislature by state legislature for many years to come. The NEA has successfully blocked minor reforms, and they will not pull any punches in the battle for choice, because they know their survival is at stake.

Nevertheless, I am an optimist and I believe that Americans will understand that preserving the educational status quo is not in their best interest and that choice is the best system for reform.

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