

Possibilities and Problems of School Choice

by Thomas S. Poetter and Kathleen Knight-Abowitz

As the array of school-choice options grows, examining the opportunities from various angles helps to sort them out.

The U.S. "school choice" umbrella has become colorful, if confusing, in recent years. Available options include public schools of choice such as magnet schools, schools-within-schools, alternative schools, and charter schools, as well as school-choice options that promote privatization, such as home schooling and voucher programs. School choice is also a political issue that has and will have an impact on every public school teacher, administrator, and parent. This article explores the impact of the school-choice movement in the United States and its problems and possibilities. As public school advocates, we stake positions as supporters of school-improvement efforts that include school choice. We acknowledge that some choices create new public spaces for groups historically under-served by traditional public schools. However, the choices also come with dangers of re-segregating students and communities based on race and class, further exacerbating rather than addressing the problem of equity.

School-Choice Options

Public and private school-choice options have existed in this country throughout the past century. Sectarian religious and independent groups have built, maintained, and operated their own schools that citizens could choose to attend in lieu of choosing the

local public school. Henig and Sugarman (1999, 25) cited the following figures: "About 5 million children, or around 10 percent of the approximately 50 million children in school, attend private schools; about 85 percent of these attend religious schools." Admission to these private schools has depended on meeting entrance requirements or being able to pay the required tuition. For most of our history, the choice between public and private schools has constituted "school choice." School choice has rested mostly with people who could afford to pay for private education, whose religious or ideological positions or needs were not met by public schools, or who were not initially welcome in public schools, such as Catholics (Kaestle 1983). Some citizens have also exercised choice by relocating to an area based on the perceived quality of local schools. In essence, they can vote with their feet, by fleeing faltering urban districts or by moving across district lines in suburban and rural areas to better public schools (Goldhaber 1999; Henig and Sugarman 1999).

Until recently, these private school-choice options have co-existed as parallel systems with public schools in the United States. Three current movements in the school-choice arena have changed the historical pattern of public/private choice: home schooling, charter schooling, and school vouchers.



Bobbie J. Sutton

Home-schooling participation, for instance, has seen an exponential rise during the past decade, growing at a rate of 7–15 percent per year; estimates put the home-school population at 1.3–1.7 million students (National Home Education Research Institute 1999). The rise in the number of start-up and converted public charter schools has transformed the terrain of school-choice options and

Thomas S. Poetter is an assistant professor of educational leadership at Miami University–Ohio. His field is curriculum studies, and he teaches courses in curriculum and teacher leadership. Kathleen Knight-Abowitz is an assistant professor in educational leadership, also at Miami University. Her field is social foundations of education, and she teaches philosophy of education and cultural studies.

public education during the last decade. Nearly 1,700 public charter schools exist today, serving 250,000 students (McQueen 2000). The first public charter school opened its doors in Minnesota in 1992. The most controversial school-choice option today is the voucher program, which typically offers families public monies in the form of educational vouchers for purchase of a portion or all of a private school education (Manno, Vanourek, and Finn 1999).

Magnet Schools

Magnet schools are public schools that typically focus on particular academic subjects to attract students. These schools are often developed by public school administrators, teachers, or advocates as part of public school districts, typically as stand-alone campuses and to enhance desegregation efforts

(*Cincinnati Enquirer* 2000; Goldhaber 1999). Students typically have access to a magnet school by possessing or demonstrating criteria for admission, such as proficiency in language arts, music, art, or math. Some more “democratic” magnet schools accept students through a lottery. Proponents of magnet schools, especially in urban districts, argue that these schools offer viable choices to families that might consider fleeing to suburban districts as well as to inner-city students whose academic or cultural needs or interests are not being met by traditional programs.

Schools-within-Schools

Schools-within-schools attempt to create school identities and cultures apart from the larger school communities in which they exist. The objective is to offer alter-

native school programs that make school experiences more “real” and “humane” as well as academically challenging for students. Schools-within-schools often offer admission to students inside and perhaps outside district lines; unique academic programs often attract students. Similarly, middle school teams offer unique programs to attract teachers and learners within a larger school program.

Alternative Schools

Public school districts responded to an increasing recognition of student diversity during the past three decades by developing alternative schools to address specific needs of individual students or substantial populations of students. The term alternative schools

broadly refers to public schools which are set up by states or school districts to serve populations of students who are not succeeding in the traditional public school environment. Alternative schools offer students who are failing academically or may have learning disabilities or behavioral problems an opportunity to achieve in a different setting. While there are many different kinds of alternative schools, they are often characterized by their flexible schedules, smaller teacher-student ratios and modified curricula (Editorial Projects in Education 2000).

Unlike magnets or schools-within-schools that use interesting and special programs to attract students, alternative schools often develop as schools of last resort for students and their families. These

schools provide respite from the academic and emotional rigors of traditional public schools long enough for students to “get it together” in time to complete a traditional program. Sometimes they offer a graduation program of their own. Alternative schools often offer a remedial academic or vocational program to meet the perceived aptitudes or interests of students. Alternative schools may serve as weigh stations between the worlds of school and work through co-op programs and other types of vocational programs. Alternative schools can emerge as responses to students who pose a threat to others or who need special academic and social assistance due to exceptional needs. Alternative schools offer “choice” to public school students and their parents, though students may not feel as though these schools offer much promise or choice, especially if they are assigned to the schools as a result of a real or perceived deficit.

Charter Schools

Charter schools are public schools that accept state and local funds to create new schools. The new schools are freed from some bureaucratic regulations but must adhere to state laws, especially those protecting citizens from discrimination (Wells, Lopez, Scott, and Holme 1999; Vergari 1999). Vergari (1999, 390) explained, “As originally conceived, charter schools are legally and fiscally autonomous educational entities operating within the public school system under charters, or contracts. The charters are negotiated between organizers and sponsors.” Charter school advocates often contend that school reform and improvement must be grounded in

“market based principles of competition and choice” (Manno et. al. 1999, 430). This goal involves creating charter school choices to increase competition among public schools, thereby forcing all public schools to improve or close for lack of students. Other supporters defend charter schools as legitimate public alternatives free from bureaucracy, where innovative teaching and learning can occur.

Schneider (1999, 29) named several types of start-up charters, such as “do-gooder” [community] charters, which “are formed by educators passionate about serving at-risk children.” These schools might serve the typically underserved, such as inner-city students and students with disabilities. “Ethnic” charters often serve either poor African-American or Hispanic students and their communities. They are often started by church members or concerned citizens and parents from a poor neighborhood; they often use a multicultural curriculum. “Profit motive” charters—the Edison Project schools, for example—start up or convert schools by gaining charters. Their motive is profit, using public funds to operate schools and generate a profit for the company. Stevenson (1999) has noted that, in 1999, 10 percent of charter schools were founded and operated by for-profit companies. Schneider’s last category is “disgruntled parents” charters, which form when public school parents band together around perceptions of inadequacies in the public schools their children attend.

School Voucher Programs

School voucher programs that use public money to fund private education opportunities are cur-

rently in use in three places in the United States: on a small scale in Cleveland and Milwaukee and on a wider scale in the state of Florida. In theory and practice, voucher programs provide public money for selected families to pay or offset the costs of private school tuition (at either sectarian or independent private schools). Advocates for vouchers contend that these programs offer parents real alternatives to public schools, permitting parents to choose from the "best" educational programs rather than just from among public school alternatives. Many voucher proponents contend that voucher programs offer a means for poor families to access excellent private educational programs that would normally be out of reach because of cost. They also contend that unshackling students and families from the government school system will allow schools to flourish because of enhanced opportunities for innovation in instruction, student achievement, improving school safety, and building community.

Historically, vouchers were a means of providing opportunity for "white flight" in the U.S. South in the wake of *Brown v. Board of Education* (Levin 1999). Contemporary critics worry that vouchers will provide a means for students and their families to abandon public education, leaving behind the poorest and most destitute, creating further economic isolation. Critics also argue that voucher programs violate the constitutional separation of church and state by funneling public money into tuition for religious schools.

Related to the voucher movement are private scholarship programs providing money for stu-

dents from low-income families to attend private schools or schools of their choice (Henig and Sugarman 1999). More than 30 cities have privately funded scholarship programs that target low-income families, and several municipalities and states have extended public/private choice programs through tax credits for educational expenses at public or private schools (Goldhaber 1999).

Impact of School Choice

There may be more heat than light to the school-choice outcry. Yes, magnet schools and charter schools are popular options in cities across the country. Yes, vouchers are making headlines. But public support for the public schools is strong, as a number of studies have recently shown. The annual Phi Delta Kappan/Gallup Poll (Rose and Gallup 2000, 42), shows that support for public schools is approaching its all-time high in the 32-year history of the poll: "Seven in 10 public school parents now assign the school their oldest child attends an A or a B." When given a choice between reforming the existing public school system and finding an alternative system, 75 percent of respondents chose reforming the existing system.

As Loveless (1997, 138) argued, the pattern of support may well be cyclical: "Public support may fluctuate within tolerable limits, generating just enough public support to keep fundamental institutions afloat and just enough disenchantment to motivate ongoing institutional reform." Approximately 86 percent of the children enrolled in the nation's schools attend traditional public schools (Levin 1999).

School choice has the most dramatic impact in urban areas.

Manno et al. (1999, 430) noted, "More than 25 percent of charter schools are in large cities, compared with 15 percent of regular public schools." Magnet programs and public schools of choice typically exist in urban districts seeking to desegregate and provide specialized areas of study for students enrolled in larger public schools with basic programs of study. Although most citizens see their public schools as satisfactory, urban public schools are more often viewed as in crisis.

Some advocates of voucher programs contend that these opportunities will raise student academic achievement and cause the public schools to compete more efficiently and voraciously for students, thereby improving them. These arguments for vouchers rely on the belief that families will rationally choose the "best" schools for their children. Studies show, however, that parents often use an array of indicators to choose a school, many of which are unrelated to academic achievement or curricular quality, including race and class makeup of the student body (Levin 1999). Therefore, it isn't necessarily the best schools that will stay open, but the most popular.

Problems of School Choice

School choice is controversial due to some of the significant problems that these policies raise in their different forms, including: 1) the encroachment upon church/state separation that vouchers represent; 2) the danger of re-segregation by race and class inherent in school-choice plans; and 3) the unsolved problems of equity that will likely not be addressed by most existing choice plans.

Voucher plans have been subject to court challenges since they came on the scene in the 1990s for violating the Establishment clause barriers or barring public financial assistance to parochial or sectarian schools. Thus far, voucher supporters have won, but the final outcome of these debates is far from clear.

The thorny problem of segregation is one that has consistently haunted school-choice advocates, and preliminary evidence suggests that there is some cause for worry, especially in the area of class-based segregation. The data on whether or not school-choice plans increase racial and ethnic segregation is mixed and inconclusive at this time, though we know that U.S. public schools have experienced increasing segregation along racial and ethnic lines. Orfield and Eaton (1996) found that current racial segregation in some U.S. schools is at levels equal to or surpassing the levels in existence when the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision was handed down. Whether choice plans will further segregate U.S. public schools by way of race and ethnicity is unclear, but evidence exists that class-based segregation is a more uniform outcome of choice policies. Studies of magnet programs show that poor children remain more highly concentrated in non-magnet than in magnet schools; similar findings are discovered in studies of voucher programs (Levin 1999).

The evidence of class-based segregation points to the ways in which school choice will likely deepen rather than solve the equity problems facing public schools. U.S. schools have not solved their problems with inequality of funding and quality of education, and

it is unlikely that school-choice plans alone will solve these problems. Sugarman (1999, 115) has noted, "As of the beginning of 1999, supreme courts in at least sixteen states have declared their traditional school finance systems unconstitutional on either equity or adequacy grounds or both." In states like Ohio, where a school-finance system that passes constitutional muster has yet to be approved by the state legislature, charter school policies and voucher experiments have moved forward. School choice may allow those in power in some states to avoid equity issues by focusing on the flash and appeal of choice plans while failing to direct their attentions and resources to the most powerless in our society.

A Call to Action

As public school advocates, we recognize the need for public schools to continue to improve, to find better ways of meeting public demands for excellence in producing academic achievement and building school community. However, school-choice options are not going away. We believe that school-choice options that allow special programs to emerge out of community interest or concern could tap resources and know-how not flourishing in the current system. Increasing freedom for local initiatives to enable schools to organize themselves for better teaching and learning and less for the sake of efficiency and standardization reflects the values that many public school parents and advocates bring to the table. However, we remain skeptical and cautious with regard to school-choice options that funnel public monies

into private hands, including those public charters that employ for-profit companies to run schools. These options threaten the democratic values and public trust embedded in the public school ideal. We encourage school leaders—administrators, teachers, parents, students, and citizens—to get involved in shaping school-choice policies and plans that reflect democratic values such as equality and diversity.

References

- Editorial. 2000. Magnet schools: New way to sign up. *Cincinnati Enquirer*, 11 September, A6.
- Editorial Projects in Education. 2000. Alternative schools. In Glossary of terms. Bethesda, Md.: EDE. *Education Week on the Web*. Available at: <http://www.edweek.org/context/glossary/altersch.html>.
- Goldhaber, D. 1999. School choice: An examination of the empirical evidence on achievement, parental decision making, and equity. *Educational Researcher* 28(9): 16-25.
- Henig, J., and S. Sugarman. 1999. The nature and extent of school choice. In *School choice and social controversy: Politics, policy and law*, ed. S. D. Sugarman and F. R. Kemerer, 13-35. Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press.
- Kaestle, C. 1983. *Pillars of the republic: Common schools and American society, 1780-1860*. New York: Hill & Wang.
- Levin, B. 1999. Race and school choice. In *School choice and social controversy: Politics, policy, and law*, ed. S. D. Sugarman and F. R. Kemerer, 266-99. Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press.
- Loveless, T. 1997. The structure of public confidence in education. *American Journal of Education* 105(2): 127-59.
- Manno, B., G. V. Vanourek, and C. E. Finn. 1999. Charter schools: Serving disadvantaged youth. *Education and Urban Society* 31(4): 429-45.
- McQueen, A. 2000. Charter schools increase 40%. *Cincinnati Enquirer*, 12 February, A8.
- National Home Education Research Institute. 1999. Home schooling on the threshold: A survey of research at the dawn of the new millennium. Salem, Ore.: NHERI.
- Orfield, G., and S. E. Eaton. 1996. *Dismantling desegregation: The quiet reversal of Brown v. Board of Education*. New York: The New Press.
- Rose, L., and A. Gallup. 2000. The 32nd annual Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup poll of the public's attitudes toward the public schools. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 82(1): 41-58.
- Schneider, I. 1999. Five prevailing charter types. *School Administrator* 56(7): 28-31.
- Stevenson, K. R. 1999. Privatization of public education: Panacea or Pandora's box? *School Business Affairs* 65(11): 14-18.
- Sugarman, S. D. 1999. School choice and public funding. In *School choice and social controversy: Politics, policy, and law*, ed. S. D. Sugarman and F. R. Kemerer, 111-39. Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press.
- Vergari, S. 1999. Charter schools: A primer on the issues. *Education and Urban Society* 31(4): 389-405.
- Wells, A. S., A. Lopez, J. Scott, and J. J. Holme. 1999. Charter schools as postmodern paradox: Rethinking social stratification in an age of deregulated school choice. *Harvard Educational Review* 69(2): 172-204.

A vertical yellow bar with a red diamond at the top, located on the left side of the page.

COPYRIGHT INFORMATION

TITLE: Possibilities and problems of school choice
SOURCE: Kappa Delta Pi Record 37 no2 Wint 2001
WN: 0134905886002

The magazine publisher is the copyright holder of this article and it is reproduced with permission. Further reproduction of this article in violation of the copyright is prohibited. To contact the publisher:
<http://www.kdp.org/>.

Copyright 1982-2002 The H.W. Wilson Company. All rights reserved.