

# Educational Opportunity

## What Produces Effective Education?

Parents want a good education for their children. Some may have greater resources or a more precise picture of how to accomplish their goal, but most parents in our society are aware that a good education is fundamental to financial, professional, and personal success. If we can assume that this is true, why is it that so many of our students are doing so poorly? Many feel that poverty, crime, and the breakdown of the family are an important part of the answer. In fact, research consistently reveals that parental income and educational success are the best indicators for predicting the educational achievement of a child. Unfortunately, this is not something that schools can impact easily.

Recent research has discovered that after the socio-economic well-being of the parents, the next most important variable predicting student success is the way in which a school is organized. Research has also discovered that effective schools have similar traits. Such schools have strong educational leaders who possess a clear vision of what it means to be an educated person and who have the authority to assemble a staff of like-minded teachers. These schools set high academic standards and encourage the belief that, with few exceptions, children are capable of achieving at high levels. They encourage collegial and professional staff relationships, and establish a disciplined, and drug-free, educational environment.

An example of an effective school, in one of the most difficult of circumstances, is the Westside Preparatory School in Chicago. Marva Collins has proven that when these criteria are met students from low income, single-parent families can achieve. In describing

her inner city program she states that, "The expectations are as high here as in the most nurtured suburban area." (1) Her motto for the children is that, "we are known by our deeds, not our needs."

If we know what makes a school effective, how do we go about converting the vast number of ineffective schools, many of which are in our nations cities? The expensive reforms of the last few decades have yielded marginal results. Between 1960 and 1990 a great deal of money and effort went into school reforms. Total expenditures went from 63 billion to 207 billion in constant dollars.

During the period of steepest decline in student performance, the decade of the 70s, per-pupil expenditures increased by 44% in real terms. Much of the money went towards two areas often noted as fundamental to better schools: teachers salaries, which increased faster than any other occupation in the last two decades, and towards reducing class size. Most indicators, including SAT scores, reflect little increase in student achievement as a result of these types of reforms. These efforts failed to produce effective schools.

In their recent book *Politics, Markets, and America's Schools*, John Chubb and Terry Moe argue that the greatest hindrance to having effective schools is bureaucracy. Conversely, the most important ingredient for creating effective schools is autonomy. Few public schools have autonomy, many private schools do. The key then to educational reform is to find a mechanism for creating school autonomy while maintaining some form of accountability.

## The One Best System?

Since most Americans understand the need for a good education and more money than ever is being devoted to that end, why are we not more successful in educating our children, especially in urban areas?

Chubb and Moe argue further that government financed schools are by nature bureaucratic and ineffective. The current democratic system of governing our schools exposes them to special interest groups at the local, state, and federal levels. Everything from AIDS education to bi-lingual programs have their lobbyists advocating program expansion and higher spending. Local school boards, state legislators, and the federal government respond by enacting regulations that local schools are required to observe. Instead of being an educational leader, the local principal often becomes a middle manager, much more concerned about following regulations than enacting a personal vision of educational excellence.

One recommended reform aimed at increasing autonomy and accountability in schools is a voucher plan. According to Chubb and Moe, a voucher plan promises much better results because it inverts the way schools are controlled. Decision-making authority would be decentralized, returning local principals to the role of educational leader. The influence of outside interest groups like unions and state legislatures would be diminished. Schools would be held accountable by the market system; if they fail to attract students they will go out of business.

The concept of a voucher plan is relatively simple. The government would determine how much money it is willing to spend per student in the state or district. Parents would then receive a voucher for that amount for each of their children. Once a school is selected by the parents the school redeems the voucher for state funds.

A key attribute of vouchers is that they give parents in our worst school districts a choice of where to send their children. If local public schools are dangerous and fail to educate, a choice or voucher plan gives parents the ability to go elsewhere. Milwaukee, Wisconsin, is an example of an urban center which has adopted a choice mechanism for school reform. Thousands of economically disadvantaged students are receiving vouchers of up to \$1000 per year of public money to attend private schools. Over 1000 students are on a waiting list for future spots, mainly because the program has exempted religious schools from participating, an issue that is now in court.

Although attempts to enact statewide voucher plans in Colorado and California have failed by more than a two to one margin, many are optimistic that some form of choice will be implemented by a state soon. The next attempt will probably be a more limited program aimed at disadvantaged students. The goal of reformers is not to replace public schools, but to make them better. Competition will cause schools to become more responsive to the parents they are serving rather than to outside interest groups.

## **Myths About Choice**

Schools become more effective when they are autonomous from bureaucratic regulations. Educational choice via vouchers has been suggested by reformers on both sides of the political fence as the best way to produce autonomous schools and thus more effective schools.

What then is blocking the school choice reform movement? The greatest opposition to vouchers has come from the teacher's unions: the National Education Association and the American Federation of Teachers. Keith Geiger, NEA president has said,

“Free market economics works well for breakfast cereals, but not for schools in a democratic society. Market-driven school choice would create an inequitable, elitist educational system.”(2) The NEA has worked hard and spent large sums of money to defeat choice legislation in Colorado and California. Let’s consider some of the specific reasons given by those opposing vouchers.

One argument often heard is that vouchers will undermine the unity of America which was created and has been maintained by tax-supported common schools. The original ideal espoused by Horace Mann and others was that students of all socio-economic classes would be schooled together and that this would create mutual respect. Unfortunately, sociologist James Coleman and others have pointed out that this has not become a reality. Public schools are extremely segregated, by race and economics. The wealthy are able to purchase homes in elite suburban school districts, others are trapped in schools that are ineffective and often dangerous. Choice would actually help to re-create the common school notion. Parents could decide where to place their children in school regardless of geography and, as a result, the schools would become more accountable to local control.

Another criticism against choice might be called the Incompetent Parent Argument. Critics feel that parents of minority or lower-income students will not know the difference between good schools and poor ones, thus they will get stuck in second-rate schools. They argue that the best students will be siphoned off and the difficult students will remain creating a two-tiered education system. Others are afraid that poor parents are not used to making important decisions or will make a schooling choice based on athletics rather than academics.

In response, it must be noted that today’s public schools are about as unequal as they can get. Jonathan Kozal’s book *Savage Inequalities* has documented this fact dramatically. Experience

indicates that choice reduces this inequality. Magnet schools have been touted for their ability to attract diverse students bodies and have been achieving better results in over 100 cities nationwide. Choice carries this concept one step further.

Actually, political scientist Lawrence Mead has found that the poor respond well and choose wisely when given the power to make important decisions concerning their children's education. Those who don't participate will be assigned a school, as they are today.

## **More Myths About Choice**

Senator Edward Kennedy has stated that educational choice will be "a death sentence for public schools struggling to serve disadvantaged students, draining all good students out of poor schools." (3) This Selectivity Argument is one of the most used criticisms against private schools and choice.

It is true that many private schools have high standards for admissions. But many also have been serving the disadvantaged for years. Catholic schools have been open to the needs of urban city children for decades, and recently, private schools have opened for students who have failed, or been failed by the public schools—in other words, the hard cases. The Varnett School in Houston is an example, as is the work of Marva Collins in Chicago. Sociologist James Coleman argues that Catholic schools have succeeded in raising the academic achievement of students that do poorly in public schools, including Blacks, Hispanics, and a variety of children from poor socio-economic backgrounds.

Another concern many have about vouchers might be called the Radical Schools Scare. Past California school superintendent Bill

Honig writes that choice, "opens the door to cult schools." (4) He also argues that by placing the desires of parents over the needs

of children we encourage societal tribalism and schools that will teach astrology or creationism instead of science.

Will there be a market for schools that are somehow bizarre or extremist? Private colleges in America are schools of choice, receive government funds, and are considered world class. Having to compete for existence quickly weeds out schools that fail to

educate. Of course, any choice plan would allow the government to protect parents against educational fraud and against schools that

fail to do what they advertise they will do. Although one wonders why this standard doesn't apply to many of our public schools today.

In many minds, the idea that tax money might end up in the hands of a Christian school is enough to cancel any choice plan. To them,

this represents a clear violation of church-state separation. In fact, the church-state argument is not a very strong one. According

to Michael McConnell, a law professor at the University of Chicago, the federal government does not maintain a very high wall of

separation when it comes to education. "The federal government already provides Pell grants to students at private, religious affiliated colleges" and "the GI Bill even covers tuition at seminaries." (5) Lawrence Tribe, a liberal constitutional law professor at Harvard's Law School, states that a "reasonably well-designed" choice plan would not necessarily violate the separation of church and state.

Many Christians feel that government intervention will follow public vouchers. But even if Christian schools refuse to

participate, many other children will benefit from new, more effective schools, which will be competing for their tuition vouchers—schools that Christians may begin as a ministry to those suffering in our troubled cities.

## **Other Mechanisms For Creating Effective Schools**

The threat of vouchers has resulted in the passing of charter school legislation in a number of states. In 1993, Colorado passed the Charter Schools Act which allows the creation of publicly funded schools operated by parents, teachers, and/or community members under a charter or contract with a local school district. A charter school is defined by the legislature as a “semi-autonomous public school of choice within a school district.” Legislators have recognized that for schools to be effective they must be autonomous. As a result, charter schools can request waivers from district and state regulations that interfere with their vision.

California and Minnesota have also passed charter legislation. Minnesota’s program is a good example of why charter laws are more a political response to the voucher threat than a real attempt to free schools from excessive bureaucracy. Their charter schools must be started by licensed teachers who must comprise a majority of the board. They must also meet state education standards called outcomes. Charter schools may establish their own budget and establish curricula, but the goals of individual schools will be dictated by the state. The state-wide teacher union would be a powerful force within these teacher-controlled schools.

Another plan for creating more effective schools is centered around private vouchers. In 1991 J. Patrick Rooney, Chairman of the

Board of the Golden Rule Insurance Company convinced his organization to pledge \$1.2 million for the next three years to fund half the private school tuition for approximately 500 Indianapolis students. To qualify, the students must be eligible for free or reduced-priced lunches according to federal guidelines. By 1993 the program had placed over 1000 students in eighty schools.

Inspired by Mr. Rooney's concept, Dr. James R. Leininger of San Antonio created the Children's Educational Opportunity Foundation which has gathered \$1.5 million in pledges from various Texas businesses. Off-shoot groups are starting in Austin, Albany, Denver, Phoenix, and Dallas. The Center for the study of Education Reform at the University of North Texas has conducted a analysis on the effects of these private voucher initiatives and found that parents are extremely satisfied with the program even though they only fund one half the cost of their children's private education.

Although charter schools and private choice programs both attempt to create more effective schools by encouraging autonomy, both ideas have limitations. Charter school's survival depends on the very bureaucracy that creates ineffective schools, and private vouchers are limited to the good will of corporations willing to invest in them. This leaves publicly funded choice through vouchers as the best hope for real change in schooling for most children.

Our interest in this debate over educational reform should not be driven by our own family's educational needs alone. God told His people, while captive in Babylon, to "seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf; for in its welfare you will have welfare" (Jer. 29:7). Thus, the welfare of all children in our nation should be our concern.

**Notes**

1. Cohen, Deborah I. "Streets of Despair," *Education Week*, 1 December 1993, p. 28.
2. Jeanne Allen, *Nine Lies About School Choice: Answering the Critics*, The Center for Educational Reform, Washington, D.C.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid.

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