

## EDUCATIONAL CHOICE AND THE POLITICS OF INCLUSION

ROBERT H. PALESTINI

*Saint Joseph's University*

*One of the few truly rational arguments against education tuition vouchers is that if implemented on a universal basis they would further separate the "haves" from the "have nots" and create another instance of the so-called neo-conservatives perpetuating the politics of exclusion. Instead, we suggest a voucher plan that would be awarded according to family income and benefit only those truly in need, thus furthering the efforts of those espousing the politics of inclusion.*

Economic inequality in the United States is growing, and it threatens to tear the heart out of our civil society. Given the faith Americans have always placed in education as an engine of material and cultural progress, schools will inevitably be asked to play an ethical role in reversing this destructive trend (Molnar, 1997).

This inquiry examines our role as educators in providing an opportunity in our schools and in our classrooms for *all* children to succeed—not just the White children, not just the brightest children, not only the well-behaved students, or the socioeconomically advantaged students, but *all* students. Inclusion, as defined in this text, is the egalitarian and critical view that there is an ethical responsibility on our part to provide all young people with real and equal access to a quality education. Anything else becomes the politics of exclusion.

Despite the many arguments that diminish the rationale behind school choice, one important way of ensuring that all children have the opportunity to achieve would be for each state to implement a school choice program funded by educational tuition vouchers. However, such a notion is considered



to be heresy by many in the so-called public school establishment. Many opponents to school choice characterize it as the strategy of neo-conservatives to exploit the dissatisfaction of poor, predominantly minority parents who have been left behind by our economy in order to achieve the goal of creating a publicly funded private school system free of public control and oversight. If achieved, they say, this alternative system will inevitably reproduce and legally sanction the doctrine of "separate but equal" on a grand scale, with the primary beneficiaries being middle- and upper-middle-class families. In other words, the politics of private school choice now resembles a high-stakes version of the old "bait and switch" scam (Molnar, Farrell, Johnson, & Sapp, 1996). Unfortunately, such ad hominem, strident, and inflammatory arguments are too often the knee-jerk reactions of many of the school choice antagonists.

Most members of the public school establishment, as well as many academics, see voucher plans as exclusionary, rather than inclusionary, and think that vouchers would ultimately render the public schools as the educators of the lowest strata of our society. Such an extreme and almost fatalistic view, however, defies logic and also defies our limited experience with educational vouchers. The reality is that a well-crafted system of educational vouchers, awarded according to economic need and physical and mental disability, could serve as a vehicle for inclusion that would enable many of the most underserved students in our society to choose a school which they and their parents consider to be superior. And because of the introduction of some healthy competition, all schools, including the public schools, may benefit (Ognibene & Shay, 2000).

The voucher plan suggested here would be limited to a relatively small group of students whose families are economically disadvantaged or have a child with a physical or mental disability. Thus, such a plan would not have a significant negative impact on public school enrollment. The Milwaukee and Cleveland plans come immediately to mind as examples of how such a system could work, although neither of these models includes vouchers for those who have physical or mental disabilities. The outcomes of both the Milwaukee and Cleveland voucher plans have been positive, and neither city has experienced a significant decline in public school enrollment or any of the other Armageddon-like consequences that many predicted (Parry, 1997). Furthermore, it is interesting to note that until recently the majority of the countries that have government monies devoted exclusively to public or state schools were communist or other types of dictatorships. While the majority of democratic countries provide government aid to a variety of schools, including private schools (Coleman & Hoffer, 1987), it is time to reconsider our monolithic paradigm whereby only public schools are funded through taxpayers' dollars.

Three perspectives will be considered in exploring this topic: the market



economy, the liberal tradition, and the critical pedagogy models. The market-driven model is most concerned with efficiency of operation. Its theorists might ask, "How can we deliver education and achieve the 'biggest bang for the buck'?" Those in the liberal tradition are concerned with equality. They might ask, "How can we assure that every student has an equal opportunity to achieve?" The critical pedagogues are concerned with social justice and inclusion. They might ask, "How can we structure our educational systems so that the least privileged and the least powerful are not marginalized?"

## **THE THEORETICAL DEVELOPMENT OF SCHOOL CHOICE**

Assuming some level of government financing, the school choice issue comes down to this: Should students be assigned to schools based upon politically established criteria or should they be able to choose the schools they will attend? Any answer must contain qualifications and caveats. Following is a review of several influential school choice proposals and their accompanying rationales.

### **FRIEDMAN'S MARKET ECONOMY MODEL**

Milton Friedman's voucher model has been enormously influential (Lamdin & Mintrom, 1997). Friedman reasoned that in a society based on voluntary cooperation all individuals must have a basic level of education. Friedman admitted that it is difficult to determine precisely where the public benefits of education stop and the private benefits begin. Yet since there is a public benefit to education, he argued that some public action should be taken to ensure the adequate education of all members of society. Because of noncompliance problems, Friedman said this action must involve more than setting school attendance rules and proposed that subsidies be provided to those families that could not cover the costs of educating their children (Goldhaber, 1997).

Friedman (1955) next noted that while government financing and provision of education are typically combined, they could and should be separated. The financing function should be achieved by giving subsidies to families through educational vouchers to purchase a specified minimum amount of approved educational services per child per year. Friedman suggested that parents be free to spend the voucher amount and any additional amount. Further, a range of organizations, including for-profit firms and non-profit institutions, could supply the education. The government's role would be restricted to upholding minimum standards, including, perhaps, the teaching of some minimum common content.

Having made this proposal, Friedman (1955) defended it against potential criticisms. Where decentralized decision making could lead to the same



outcome as centralized decision making, Friedman argued that the decentralized route should be taken for two reasons. First, the use of collective decision making tends to strain the social cohesion essential for a stable society. Second, government decision making requires that once decisions are made people must conform to them, even if they disagree. As well as potentially engendering ill feeling, this need to conform also stifles innovation. Friedman argued that a system of education vouchers would allow greater individual decision making and would create competition among educational institutions, a powerful force for promoting innovative schooling practices.

Friedman's proposal was rather simple. Rather than elaborate on the details of such an approach, he chose to show that many arguments against it could just as easily be made against the present system of schooling. For example, Friedman argued that it is disingenuous to claim that vouchers will exacerbate class distinction. In examining the present organization of education in society, we find that there is much stratification, even when schooling is produced primarily in the public sector. Thus, Friedman (1962) claimed:

Under present arrangements, stratification of residential areas effectively restricts the intermingling of children from decidedly different backgrounds. In addition parents are not now prevented from sending their children to private schools. Only a highly limited class can or does do so, parochial schools aside, thus producing further stratification. (p. 15)

Friedman (1955) concluded that the present school system appears to promote inequality, and he saw this as a serious problem in that it makes it all the harder for the exceptional few who are the hope of the future to rise above the poverty of their initial state.

## **SCHOOL CHOICE AND THE LIBERAL TRADITION**

The liberal tradition started with sociologist Jencks, who suggested that private schools could help to remedy educational problems in the inner city. A veteran teacher, Mario Fantini, wrote a book on alternative public schools in which he argued for the use of vouchers within the public school system. Education academics Coons and Sugarman (1978) argued for the use of vouchers to address equity concerns.

Jencks (1966) was motivated by the perilous state of inner-city public schools. In his view, the problems facing these schools originated from the overly bureaucratic nature of the systems they operated within and the low pay levels of teachers and administrators. In combination, Jencks maintained, this has led to the creation of a system of education whose first axiom is that everyone, on every level, is incompetent and irresponsible. As a result, innovative ideas are very unlikely to emerge from the lower ranks in the hierarchy and top-down reforms become difficult to implement.



In developing his argument, Jencks (1966) suggested that government-financed education vouchers, or tuition grants, combined with private-school provision would have two major benefits. First, private control would make it possible to attack management problems. Second, the use of tuition grants would put an end to neighborhood schools. Jencks believed that education involves interacting with others from a variety of socioeconomic backgrounds. However, the neighborhood schools with their specified attendance zones prevent this sort of mixing. Jencks admitted that these actions would destroy the public school system. In response to this, he said, "we must not allow the memory of past achievements to blind us to present failures" (Lamdin & Mintrom, 1997, p. 211).

Having developed this theoretical justification for school choice in association with his colleagues from the Center for the Study of Public Policy at Harvard, Jencks designed a voucher system to transform inner-city schooling. This work led to the Alum Rock experiment, which is discussed later. In contrast to Friedman's relatively simple, straightforward voucher plan, Jencks' plan was very complex. It contained rules to determine how applicants could choose their schools, how schools could choose their applicants, and how lottery systems would operate in cases of oversubscription.

Fantini's (1973) theoretical contribution extended discussion of the ways that education vouchers could promote innovations. He contrasted himself with Friedman and Jencks by arguing that the public school system could reform itself. Fantini called for an "internal voucher" that would allow real alternatives to emerge in the public school system. Fantini did not want vouchers to apply to nonpublic schools for fear that low-quality schools would emerge.

Fantini's (1973) model was designed to give parents, students, and teachers choice among alternative types of schools. He suggested a "house" concept, whereby schools would be subdivided into houses for science, foreign languages, humanities, and so forth, so that greater individual attention could be given. According to some, Fantini stands alone in making an education-inspired case for school choice (Lamdin & Mintrom, 1997). Although his work received considerable interest within education circles at the time it was published, Fantini is rarely cited in contemporary debates. But his ideas influenced individuals who have become important voices in the school choice debate.

Coons and Sugarman (1978) advocated the position that a just society must provide the formal portion of a child's education and placed the primary emphasis on promoting educational equity. This made their plan for school choice complicated because of the substantial differences in income among individuals in American society. According to Coons and Sugarman, educational vouchers should differ in amount depending on family income and on the tuition at the chosen school. Unlike previous theoretical work on school



choice approaches, this approach required extensive data on family size and income in order to be implemented. Because of this effort to ensure equity, the process became administratively cumbersome.

## **A MARKET-DRIVEN LIBERAL TRADITION MODEL**

In 1990, The Brookings Institute published Chubb and Moe's *Politics, Markets, and America's Schools*, a book central to recent school choice debates. Chubb and Moe, both political scientists, worked from the pretext that by most accounts the American education system is not working well. They took an organizational development approach to analyzing the problem and concluded that the institutional arrangements that have evolved in public schools make them unresponsive and ineffective.

In their empirical work, Chubb and Moe (1990) built upon the finding of Coleman and Hoffer (1987) that school autonomy was the single most important element in the success of schools in academic achievement. Based on these findings, Chubb and Moe asserted that bureaucracy is unambiguously problematic for school organization. But bureaucracy is an essential for democratic control. Therefore, Chubb and Moe concluded that since the institutions of democratic control work systematically and powerfully to discourage school autonomy they discourage school effectiveness. If public schools are to become more effective, the institutions that control them must be changed. To improve American schools, they proposed a new system eliminating centralized bureaucracies and vesting authority directly in the hands of schools, parents, and students.

## **THE CRITICAL PEDAGOGY EXPERIENCE**

The critical pedagogy perspective grows out of strongly held beliefs that schooling cannot be separated from the social context within which it takes place. Thus, a discourse on ethics, the distribution of power, and the plight of the underserved must be included in any debate on how education should be delivered (Gintis, 1989). Believers in critical pedagogy decry the current emphasis on testing to assess academic achievement. Thus, any notion of educational choice that develops out of a disparity of test scores between public and nonpublic school students is unacceptable. Those espousing this perspective would posit that, in this context, school choice is organized and developed according to the logic and imperatives of the marketplace. Ignoring the primacy of the social, choice appeals to the logic of competitiveness, individualism, and achievement. While these attributes might sound plausible as fundamental elements in the logic of educational reform, they, in fact, are used by neo-conservatives to develop a notion of educational leadership that undermines the responsibility of public service, to rupture the relationship between schools and the community, and to divert educators



from improving education in *all* schools (Buchanan, Tollison, & Tulloch, 1980).

These theorists are also alarmed that the new educational reform movements, including school choice, refuse to develop a critical moral discourse. More specifically, missing from the current neo-conservative emphasis on educational reform is a discourse that can illuminate what administrators, teachers, and other cultural workers actually do in terms of the underlying principles and values that structure the stories, visions, and experiences that inform school and classroom practices. Accountability in this discourse offers few insights into how schools should prepare students to push against the oppressive boundaries of gender, class, race, and age domination. Nor does such a language provide the conditions for students to interrogate how questions and matters concerning the curriculum are essentially struggles concerning issues of self-identity, culture, power, and history. In effect, the crisis of authority is grounded in a refusal to address how particular forms of authority are secured and legitimized at the expense of cultural democracy, critical citizenship, and basic human rights. Refusing to interrogate the values that not only frame how authority is constructed but also define leadership as a political and pedagogical practice, neo-conservative educational reformers consequently subordinate the discourse of ethics to the rules of management and efficiency.

Despite these concerns, however, there are critical pedagogy theorists who posit that a well-crafted choice plan that takes into consideration the aforementioned concerns could be effective. Gintis (1995) is one such theorist. He contends that the analysis of the competitive delivery of educational services has often been couched in terms of an opposition between government regulation and the free market. However, regulation and markets may be complementary institutions that under appropriate conditions interact as a context for cost-effective egalitarian and socially accountable education. The government must provide some services on a monopolistic basis because competitive delivery of services such as tax collection, police protection, and national defense may be excessively costly. In each case, one could make a compelling argument that competitive delivery would not be effective. In the case of education, however, it would be more difficult to make such a compelling argument. In fact, unless structural forces prohibit the emergence of effective regulation or the costs of efficient regulation are excessively high, competitive delivery of educational services should better meet the private needs of parents and children while fulfilling the educational system's traditional social functions (Coleman, Hoffer, & Kilgore, 1982; Morken & Formicola, 1999; Peterson & Hassel, 1998; Viteritti, 1999).

Gintis (1995) maintains that the public has certain expectations of schools: reading, writing, history, math, science, punctuality, and self-discipline. If they are dissatisfied with the results they are getting, it would be



advantageous to be able to leverage their dissatisfaction in support of change by using the threat of "taking their business elsewhere." The existing public school establishment disempowers parents by obliging them to use a Byzantine governance system to effect change. The competitive delivery of educational services, properly funded and regulated, might expedite and circumvent this cumbersome process.

Educators, on the other hand, have higher expectations for education. In addition to reading, writing, and arithmetic, they expect promotion of equality and tolerance; teaching artistic, aesthetic, and spiritual values; and creating community. The idea that these ideals can be promoted in a marketplace model is repugnant to many, but need not be the case if the school choice program is properly crafted. The choice of educational goals could still be debated in the political arena, and the results could be implemented through the proper choice of policy tools. They would be codified in the rules for funding and accrediting schools. The use of the market is in this sense an instrument of rather than an alternative to democratic policymaking (Downs, 1951).

## **A CASE FOR SCHOOL CHOICE**

The widespread and growing appeal of school choice may be attributed to several key factors (Goldhaber, 1997). First, on average, nonpublic school students outperform their public school counterparts in terms of standardized achievement test scores, graduation rates, and the probability of attending college (Gollner, 1993). Proponents of school choice argue that these results can be explained by the greater efficiency of nonpublic schools, which do not have the distended bureaucracy and rigid set of policies that impede good teaching and learning and make public schools less effective. However, an alternative explanation for differences in performance between students in public and nonpublic schools is based on disparities in school resources or in the backgrounds of students (Berliner & Biddle, 1995). For instance, nonpublic school students tend to come from better-educated families with above-average incomes. It seems likely, opponents of school choice argue, that these factors would contribute to a good educational environment in the home. Still, the fact that private school students generally outperform their public school counterparts lends credence to the notion that nonpublic schools are doing a better job of educating students than are public schools (Viteritti, 1999).

Second, vouchers would give parents more control over educational decisions. When more control is yielded to the consumers of education, those who presumably have the best knowledge of the educational needs and desires of the children are allowed to use that knowledge in selecting a school. Since most parents believe that they know what is best for their chil-



dren, it is difficult, politically, to argue against this position (Peterson & Hassel, 1998).

Finally, and probably most important, public schools are commonly perceived to be in such a sorry state that many people are willing to try any program that might help improve them (Odden & Massy, 1992). It is widely reported that U.S. children consistently rank lower than those of many other industrialized countries on international tests in mathematics and science (Hanushek, 1996). And, at the same time as these reports have proliferated, expenditures for education in the U.S. have increased greatly. Total K-12 expenditures per pupil, in current dollars, increased 35% in the 1970s and 33% in the 1980s (Goldhaber & Brewer, 1997). Throwing money at the problem seems not to have led to any clear improvements (Hedges, Laine, & Greenwald, 1994). Quite simply, many people have become disenchanted with the current system.

## **A CASE AGAINST SCHOOL CHOICE**

The major concern of those who oppose school choice is the potential for inequities in a voucher program. The danger of a voucher plan is that there could be a significant movement of students from public to private schools, resulting in a loss of tax support and lower per-pupil expenditures in public schools. Vouchers would probably cover only a portion of tuition at many private schools. For instance, the recent California amendment offered a voucher worth \$2600, a figure less than half the statewide average for private school tuition. Thus, even under a voucher plan the majority of private schools would continue to attract students from families with above average incomes and would remain out of reach for many lower-income families. If this were to happen, public schools could become "dumping grounds" for disadvantaged students (Goldhaber, 1997).

Parents might also choose their children's schools for the wrong reasons. For school choice to lead to improvements, the competition between schools should be based on educational quality. However, past evidence provided by Clotfelter (1976) and new evidence that will be cited later suggest that, independent of the quality of the school, the racial composition of a school may be an important factor in parental decisions to send their children to private schools. Hence, choice could lead to greater segregation without improving overall educational outcomes. Vouchers may also open the door for discrimination, since private schools are not required by law to accept all students who apply for admission. Finally, some people object to school choice because they see it as a false panacea that will distract attention from the real problems of funding and equity that now exist in the public schools.



## EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE

We can distinguish two types of empirical evidence that bear on the school choice debate: indirect and direct evidence. The indirect evidence comes from research conducted in situations similar to school choice experiments but not on the actual school districts where school choice has taken place. Generally, this research measures achievement levels of students in public versus private schools. The direct evidence comes from the relatively few school choice experiments that have been implemented in the United States.

### INDIRECT EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE

Studies of the achievement differences between students at public and private schools are numerous. Several studies found that private schools are more effective than public schools (Coleman & Hoffer, 1987). These studies were controversial and generated questions regarding problems such as the focus on standardized test scores as the performance measure; the sensitivity of results to the choice of independent variables; results that were statistically significant but perhaps not substantively significant; and, perhaps most important, selection bias.

Recent contributors to the study of public versus private school performance are aware of these problems and have addressed some or all of them. Evans and Schwab (1996) examine the *High School and Beyond* data but focus on the probability of finishing high school and entering higher education rather than on gains in test scores. With other factors being held constant, Catholic school students have a 12% higher probability of finishing high school and a 14% higher probability of entering higher education than do public school students. Sander (1996) found that Catholic grade schools produce higher vocabulary, mathematics, and reading scores but the same science scores as public schools. Curiously, however, non-Catholic students in Catholic schools drive this positive impact of Catholic schools. Goldhaber (1996) reported that private schools do not use resources more efficiently to produce test scores than public schools. Rather, the difference in test scores in favor of private schools is due to characteristics of the students and the schools' resources. Toma (1996) took advantage of the variety of financing and provision combinations observed internationally to examine their impact on a standardized mathematics examination. She found that in the U.S., Belgium, and New Zealand, private schools outperformed public schools. No difference was found in Canada or France. Kingdon (1996) examined data from India and reported that the privately funded schools outperformed both the publicly funded schools and the publicly funded and regulated but nominally private schools on reading and mathematics tests (Lamdin & Mintrom, 1997). Neal (1997) examined graduation rate, rates of advancement to post-secondary education, and wages; and determined that the superior perfor-



mance by Catholic schools is evident primarily for urban minority students. He attributes this difference to the low quality of the public alternative. In summary, the weight of evidence in the newer set of studies suggests superior performance in private schools (Lamdin & Mintrom, 1997).

Private schools are usually shown to be less costly than public schools. For example, Lott (1990) reports that public school teachers are paid 20% more than their private school counterparts, and that operating expenditures of public schools exceed those of private schools by 80%. Based on another source, public school teachers are paid 50% more than private school teachers (Lott, 1990). Tuition data provide a convenient estimate of the cost of operating a private school. Recent average tuition figures are: \$2138 for elementary schools, \$4578 for secondary schools, \$4266 for combined schools, and an overall average of approximately \$5000 for districts with 20,000 or more students (Lamdin & Mintrom, 1997). Levin and Kelley (1994), however, are circumspect about private and public school cost comparisons. One reason for this is that differences in the service mix increase the relative cost of public schools. Tuition may not include costs that are included in public school costs. These might include textbooks and supplies, transportation, and additional fees for specialized services. Also, tuition underestimates costs insofar as contributions and endowments are used to reduce tuition. Hoxby (1996) reports that 56% of Catholic elementary school income and 19% of secondary school income are from these sources.

## **DIRECT EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE**

The history of tentative, geographically limited steps toward school choice in the United States began in the 1970s, with the Alum Rock, California, voucher program experiment. Parents in voucher school attendance areas were allowed to choose among several "minischools," alternative educational programs organized within schools; and during the five years of the experiment the number of programs increased from 22 in six schools to 51 in 14 schools. These parents were allowed to choose among programs in any voucher school; parents and students in non-voucher school areas were treated as controls. For voucher participants, free transportation was provided to non-neighborhood schools, and transfers were permitted during the year. Students who attended in the past or who had siblings enrolled in a given school were granted preferential access. A lottery was used to assign admissions to over-subscribed programs (Capell, 1976).

The Alum Rock voucher experiment was studied using a systematic, across-time research strategy. Surveys administered during the demonstration showed that voucher parents were consistently more knowledgeable about program options, transportation, and transfer rights than nonvoucher parents were. Parents with children in voucher schools were more satisfied with their schools than in the past. Parental appreciation may have resulted from the



substance of the new programs or simply from being offered a choice, but whatever the reason the opportunity to choose seems to have been welcomed (Weiler, 1977).

The results of the Alum Rock experiment were mixed in terms of student performance and provided no basis for supporting or criticizing voucher initiatives. Results from the California state testing program showed a decline in voucher-student reading scores compared with their own age-adjusted performance prior to the experiment. Scores also dropped in comparison to the scores of students in nonvoucher schools. However, results from the metropolitan achievement test (MAT) showed that voucher-students' scores increased commensurate with those of students in Alum Rock Title I schools (i.e., schools eligible for federal funding to help poor children), who received the same test. Other evidence regarding student behavior was more positive. Unexcused absence rates dropped slightly for voucher-school students during the demonstration and student attitudes toward school also appeared to improve (Lamdin & Mintrom, 1997).

Following the Alum Rock venture, other school districts experimented with school choice schemes, relying upon alternative schools and magnet schools to break with traditional procedures for matching students with schools. However, it would be incorrect to conclude much from this research. Access to these specialty programs and magnet schools is often highly competitive and restrictive. An important exception, however, is District 4, located in the Harlem area of New York City.

The factors shaping the District 4 of today can be traced back to the late 1960s, when the administration of New York City's public school system was decentralized to allow for greater local control. In 1972, the district consisted of 22 schools. But during the late 1970s and 1980s, about 30 alternative schools were developed so that over 50 schools now exist. After 1982, all families of incoming seventh-graders had the opportunity to choose a school. There have been no systematic studies of the effects of school choice in District 4, although some analyses have been conducted and the results have been widely discussed (Heneg, 1994). In the early 1970s, the district was ranked the lowest in the city for mathematics and reading scores. Although some controversy surrounds test score measures, student performance in the district appears to be significantly improved over performance in the district before changes started being made in the mid-1970s. Schools in District 4 also seem to enjoy greater levels of parental involvement than schools in districts with less well-developed choice programs (Schneider, Teske, Marscall, Mintrom, & Roach, 1996). Thus, District 4 has received much critical acclaim from outside observers. For instance, Chubb and Moe (1991) have suggested that "If there is a single school district in the country that deserves to be held up as a model for all others, it is East Harlem" (Chubb & Moe, 1991, p. 4).



Since the late 1980s, there have been many proposals for greater use of publicly funded vouchers. All but two of these proposals had been defeated until school choice was approved in Milwaukee in 1994 and Cleveland in 1996. The Milwaukee parental choice program probably comes closest to approximating the voucher model that Friedman had in mind, although it is not nearly as universal as he envisioned.

The program provides an opportunity for students meeting specific criteria to opt out of the Milwaukee Public Schools and attend private schools in the city. Recently, this opportunity was extended to religiously affiliated non-public schools. Students must come from households with an income less than 1.75 times the poverty level. They may not have been in private schools or in a school district other than the Milwaukee school district in the previous year. In selecting students, the schools cannot discriminate on the basis of race, religion, gender, prior achievement, or prior behavioral records. In oversubscribed schools, selection must be made randomly. Further, choice students can make up a maximum of 49% of the student body. No more than 1% of the students can enroll in a given year. The choice students receive the state's contribution to the cost per student to carry with them to the private school.

Political scientist Witte (1992) and his associates at the University of Wisconsin at Madison have evaluated the Milwaukee parental choice program. Over the course of a five-year study, Witte has traced five outcome measures: achievement test results, attendance data, parental attitudes, parental involvement, and attrition from the program.

To analyze achievement test results, Witte (1992) matched students in the choice program with a random sample of students from low-income households enrolled in the Milwaukee public schools. He then performed cohort tests as well as analyses of the change scores of the test performance of individual students. Witte has observed that the students coming into the choice program were clearly behind the average Milwaukee public school students and also behind a large random sample of low-income students. From the cohort tests, which do not report the same students from year to year, Witte concluded that there was no significant difference in reading and mathematics between choice students and public school students. However, in the areas of attendance, parental involvement, and parental attitudes, Witte found a significant difference in favor of the choice schools.

In summary, then, his study demonstrated that there was improvement at the choice schools in nonacademic areas but not in the academic areas studied. But, as proponents of school choice are quick to point out, even though both student samples achieved at the same rate, the choice group did so at a significantly lower cost to the taxpayer (Witte, 1992).

One researcher who has reanalyzed Witte's data and reached a more positive conclusion is Paul Peterson (Viteritti, 1999). Peterson and his colleagues



found that students who participated in the Milwaukee program for four years scored 5 percentage points higher than their public school counterparts in reading and 12 points higher in math (Peterson & Hassel, 1998).

### **The Minnesota Choice Plan**

In 1987, Minnesota introduced a statewide public-school-only choice plan, allowing students to attend any school district, subject to space limitations and adherence to desegregation plans. Although some analysis has been undertaken, there has been no systematic effort to evaluate the Minnesota initiative by making comparisons across experimental and control groups of students and parents. Thus, no information is available on the changes in individual student academic performance that might have occurred as a result of exercising school choice. During the 1989-1990 school year, however, Tenbusch (1993) conducted a survey of parents who had exercised their choice option and those who had not. He found parents to be "active" enrollment decision makers, regardless of whether they chose their local schools or exercised their choice option. He also found that parents who exercise the choice option tend to be more highly educated than those who do not and that they tend to have more influence than others with school administrators.

Delaney (1995) analyzed the reasons why parents of gifted and talented children have exercised the choice option in Minnesota. He concluded that the option is used primarily because they anticipated that their children's needs would be better met and their children would receive more personal attention in the choice schools. Lau (1994) reported similar results from a more limited study. Ysseldyke (1994) found that parents of students with disabilities who exercised their choice option also did so because they anticipate that their children's needs will be better met and their children will receive more personal attention in the transfer schools. Analyzing aggregate statistics, Colopy and Tarr (1994) concluded that use of the enrollment option has increased with time and that minority students and families use school choice at the same rate as White students and families. The authors also found that use of open enrollment is more likely in smaller, suburban, and rural districts and in higher poverty districts.

Tenbusch and Garet (1993) found in a survey of school principals that open enrollment has stimulated changes in curricula and support services in schools and has promoted more parent and teacher involvement in school planning and decision making. It has also increased the ethnic and cultural diversity of schools. Funkhouser and Colopy (1994) reported findings from interviews with school administrators in districts that had lost the most students through open enrollment and administrators from a set of comparison school districts that did not lose significant enrollment. They found that districts losing large numbers of students were more likely to take steps to attract students and to discourage others from leaving than districts that had few



losses and few gains and those districts that had net gains in students.

The Minnesota open enrollment plan has proven to be an influential policy innovation. Since 1987, over 40 state legislatures have considered a similar form of school choice, and variations of the Minnesota approach have been adopted by at least 18 other states. While it is true that the Minnesota approach seems a pale shadow of the plans proposed by Friedman (1955) and Chubb and Moe (1990, 1991), it is important to recognize that, in combination, the various choice approaches now operating in the state are changing the way that public education is delivered. Further, these approaches raise important questions for parents, such as whether to exercise their choice options and what schools to consider if they are making a choice. Although Minnesota has had the longest statewide experience of school choice and has been the focus of considerable research and media attention, many important questions about school choice remain to be addressed. For example, longitudinal research designs could explore the long-term behavior and attitudes of parents and students who make use of the open enrollment option compared with those who do not. Similar designs could also explore the short-term changes that schools make as a consequence of losing or attracting students and the longer-term sustainability of these changes. Studies could also explore whether open enrollment has led to a decline in the use of private school as a means of avoiding local public schools.

There are a number of other voucher programs, for example, the Albany, New York, Giffen private voucher program (Ognibene & Shay, 2000), but they are either too small or too new to draw any valid or meaningful conclusions.

### **New Indirect Empirical Evidence**

There are a number of educational voucher programs now being implemented, including those in Cleveland, Arizona, and, most recently, Florida. However, these plans are too recent for any direct empirical evidence worth noting to be cited.

Although not directly involving school choice students, Goldhaber (1997), a research analyst with the CNA Corporation, has recently conducted a related study that may be helpful in assessing the viability of school choice programs. The underlying assumptions made by those who support school choice are that nonpublic schools are more efficient than public schools, that parents can distinguish between schools of differing quality, and that parents will select schools that perform well. In 1997, Goldhaber completed a study of a nationwide sample of public and private high school students, using data drawn from the National Educational Longitudinal Study of 1988 (NELS), which addresses these issues. He found the evidence mixed with regard to these hypotheses.

The NELS data set is based on a survey conducted by the National



Center for Education Statistics (NCES). NCES sampled more than 20,000 8th-graders nationwide, many of whom were surveyed again in the 10th and 12th grades. NELS includes teacher, administrator, parent, and student responses on a variety of survey questions. At several points NCES administered standardized tests in math, reading, history, and science. In addition, NELS is unique in that it allowed students to be linked directly to their particular classes and teachers. For example, it is possible to determine the actual class size for a particular student rather than just an aggregate measure such as the average pupil-teacher ratio in the school, which is typically the case in other data sets.

In the sample for this study, Goldhaber (1997) drew school, teacher, and class information from the 1990 NELS first follow-up survey and student and family background variables from both the 1988 and the first follow-up surveys. He focused on achievement on the 10th-grade reading and mathematics standardized tests. The main sample consists of 3,347 10th-graders, of whom 451 were in private schools. The reading-English sample consists of 3,190 students, of whom 399 attended private schools.

On average, the private school students outscored their public school counterparts by 7.5 points on the 10th grade test in mathematics and by 3.8 points on the reading test (Hanushek, 1996). However, the fact that the parents have consciously chosen private schools brings up an important statistical problem in trying to determine how effective private schools are relative to public schools. Known as selection bias (Hedges, Laine, & Greenwald, 1994), this phenomenon may occur when there are important unobservable characteristics of students that influence achievement and are systematically related to the school sector in which the student is enrolled. These characteristics might include student motivation or the educational environment of the home. Selection bias could have impacted this study and may have accounted for many of the differences observed (Gill & Michael, 1992).

In Goldhaber's analysis, he estimated four models of educational achievement based on standardized math and reading tests in public and private schools (Berliner & Biddle, 1995). These achievement models employ an education production function methodology, in which achievement in the 10th grade is modeled as a function of 8th-grade achievement, student and family background variables, schooling variable, and correction for selection bias (Hedges, Laine, & Greenwald, 1994).

The results of these achievement models were used to answer questions about the relative efficiency of public schools as opposed to nonpublic schools. If the arguments for the greater efficiency of private schools are accurate, we should observe a higher return on schooling resources in the private sector than in the public sector. Put another way, we might find that a teacher teaching a given set of students in the private sector would be more effective than that same teacher teaching the same set of students in a public



school with comparable resources. Statistical tests fail to confirm this hypothesis. In fact, "corrected differentials" show that much of the raw mean difference between sectors disappears when a comparison is made between students of equal ability who have teachers and classmates with similar characteristics (Goldhaber & Brewer, 1997). Controlling for differences in individuals, families, and schooling resources, Goldhaber and Brewer found no case in which there is a statistically significant effect of private schools on math and reading test scores.

Although private school students have higher mean test scores than do public school students, the great majority of the mean differences between school sectors can be attributed to differences in the characteristics of students attending schools in those sectors rather than to differences in the effectiveness of these schools. Essentially, private schools attract students who are from better-educated, wealthier families and who enter school with above-average standardized test scores. These are students who would do well in either private or public schools.

These findings imply that, with a given set of schooling resources, there is no reason to believe that an average private school would do a better job of educating a group of students than an average public school. However, it is important to note that parents making these choices very often encounter situations where there are marked differences in the resources available in each school (Clotfelter, 1976).

To determine whether parents do, in fact, select schools based on educational quality, achievement differentials can be calculated that incorporate differences between the sectors in school resources, student bodies, and so on (Goldhaber, 1997). These achievement differentials can be used to estimate a model of public-private school choice. The hypothesis is that parents are more likely to send their children to private school when estimated private school achievement is greater than the public school, and the probability grows as that gap increases. Conversely, they are more likely to send their children to public school when estimated public school achievement exceeds estimated private school achievement, and the probability grows as the gap increases. Included in this model are controls for family background and for racial and income composition of the schools in each sector.

The results of the study show that parents, as expected, respond to these differences in estimated achievement. They are more likely to send their children to private schools as private sector achievement rises relative to public sector achievement. Thus, parents appear to be educated consumers in the sense that they select schools that benefit their children academically. This finding tends to support the proponents of school choice who argue that choice would create competition between schools based on school quality (Hanushek, 1996).



## POLICY IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

What do all of these findings tell us? Both the direct and indirect evidence yield mixed results. There is no compelling empirical evidence that leads us to believe that school choice in any form will be a panacea for addressing the problems in our schools. On the other hand, to expect empirical evidence from such short-lived programs to be compelling is unreasonable. What we can reasonably conclude, however, is that school choice has not had the catastrophic results that some opponents have predicted. In fact, there have been some very encouraging signs that both public and nonpublic schools alike have been improved by the process (Ognibene & Shay, 2000).

In the September 15, 1999, issue of *Education Week*, a front-page headline read, "Schools Hit by Vouchers Fight Back." The article speaks of changes that have occurred at the Spencer Bibbs Advanced Learning Academy in Florida as a result of competition from "voucher schools." Spencer Bibbs has incorporated a new dress code as well as curricular and instructional changes. "The new dress code is a visible reminder of the less tangible changes staff members at Spencer Bibbs have made following their recent branding by the state as a failing school" (Sandham, 1999, p. 1). But Bibbs also became one of only two Florida schools where students were offered vouchers to attend another public or private school of their choice. So, as much as they loathe the new state policy, staff members say that they are determined to overcome the stigma and improve in the future. Interesting what creating a little "sense of urgency" in an institution can do. Thus, a carefully crafted school choice program could be an important component, albeit only one of several components, in a much-needed and multi-faceted plan for education reform.

I suggest an approach that grows out of both the liberal and critical pedagogy traditions. The tension for me is that as an administrator, a market driven approach is attractive; but as an educator, the liberal and critical pedagogy models are preferable. To an administrator, it would be good to see the broadest possible population benefit from a reform like school choice. In this role one might call for an all-inclusive school choice plan, driven by market forces, which would make vouchers available to all students. However, as an educator, I am concerned about pedagogy, equity, fairness, ethics, democracy, and serving the underserved. For these reasons, it seems best to concentrate limited resources where they can do the most good. Therefore, I am suggesting a modified or limited plan in which only the most needy would benefit.

I recommend, then, that a school choice plan be structured according to the liberal and critical pedagogy traditions mentioned earlier. It should concern itself with cultural, societal, and racial matters, as well as with economic stratification, the distribution of power, and the implied moral imperatives, while being as inclusive as possible. Therefore, any proposed school



choice plan should sound a caution regarding the equity consequences of choice. We cannot allow school choice plans to resegment our schools, although we are currently far from truly integrating them.

Many educational researchers and practitioners suggest that our public schools are underfunded and that adequate funding could eliminate many of the schools' alleged shortcomings. For example, if funds were available to support a class size limit of 10 students, the at-risk and special learners could be given the attention they need and achievement scores might significantly increase. I do not doubt the wisdom of this view. However, the chances of the American public making available the considerable amount of incremental revenue needed to accomplish the above are slim at best. Increased funding of public education does not seem to be something that will happen soon. In the absence of any significant increase in funding for public schools, the school choice plan suggested here might be one of the few alternatives acceptable to most taxpayers to improve our schools. If it does not work, the argument for increased funding of public schools might become more palatable to the American taxpayer.

Studies also show that upper-income families are more apt to send their children to private schools (Hawley, 1996). Thus, these families would be likely beneficiaries of any voucher plan like the one proposed in California. The \$2600 California voucher would probably have been too small to enable low-income families to afford high-quality private schools, but it would clearly have benefited those families whose children are already enrolled in the private sector or those upper-income families for whom \$2600 would be enough incentive to tip the scale in favor of private schooling. In my view, this type of voucher plan would not meet the standards of the critical theorists. One way to counter the potential for greater economic stratification in a voucher plan would be to create a progressive voucher program. Progressiveness could be achieved by simply targeting the voucher to low-income families (as is the case in the Milwaukee and Cleveland programs) or by creating a sliding scale so that the size of the voucher would vary with income or with private school tuition (Viteritti, 1999).

Finally, let us discuss the implications that vouchers could have for the distribution of power in American education. Critical theorists concern themselves with the contradictions that occur in education. For example, the American belief in equality contradicts the simultaneous promotion of practices that create inequality among various groups. Although the educational system's goal is equality, I concur with the critical theorists in believing that the current distribution of power in American education has led to an inequality whereby our most needy students are being underserved.

Currently, the power in American education is concentrated in the hands of politicians, boards of education, educational administrators, and unions. Although well meaning, certain of these decision-makers have virtually



excluded the parents and their children from any meaningful input into their process, and, as a result, have marginalized an entire stratum of people. Among the most underrepresented groups in the education decision-making process are the parents of at-risk, minority, and low-income children. A finely crafted school choice program, limited to low-income families, would redistribute power by placing it in the hands of parents, giving them a chance to determine which education setting best meets their children's needs.

A number of current educational reform movements call for more parental involvement in school. No politically correct member of the public school establishment would speak against such a proposition. But the irony is that the very same advocates of parental involvement would likely be opponents of school choice. In my view, school choice is the epitome of parental involvement.

This inquiry speaks to the need to examine American education through the dual lenses of inclusion and democracy. The democratic ideal implies that the individual, no matter his or her racial background, gender, or socioeconomic status, should be integrally involved in the shaping of public education. Applying the democratic ideal to education requires students and their parents to have a determining voice in where and how they are educated. For all of its significant contributions to American democracy, our monolithic public educational process has not attained the democratic ideal. The modified or mitigated school choice initiatives that we are considering would bring us closer to the democratic ideal of affording more parents and their children the opportunity and ability to decide which type of school, public or nonpublic, best meets their educational needs. The economically advantaged already have that opportunity. The proposed school choice program would extend that opportunity to the poor and move us ever closer to full inclusiveness and the democratic ideal.

In conclusion, then, I hope that this analysis will stimulate and enlighten the continuing discourse on this important issue. Perhaps school choice will make no substantial difference in how our young people progress academically. But at least the decision will be in the hands of those who have most at stake. As it is now, we are not very successful in educating our low-income, at-risk students; but it is those other than their parents who are making the decisions that affect their lives. Our limited experience with school choice indicates that it can make a difference in the schooling of our most needy young people. Why not give it a try?

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