

Competition-Based Models of Public Schooling in a Democratic Society

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Abstract

This paper identifies and responds to criticisms of competition-based public schooling schemes. Particular attention is paid to whether or not such schemes can accommodate the many goals of a public schooling system in a democratic society. Citing evidence, I argue that competition and choice in public schools are not only compatible with a democratic education, but, in fact, may further democratic opportunity and outcomes by responding to societal goals such as equity, autonomy, and personal freedoms. Although a variety of studies have found shortcomings of competition-based public choice schemes, others affirm that the thoughtful implementation of choice strategies can result in outcomes which serve both the public good and the private good.

Introduction

Schools in the United States are failing. This statement is prevalent in a variety of discourse arenas, be it political, social, legal, economic, or academic. While many could argue that it is a broad generalization and simplistic, it remains a common subject of debate, and few venture to argue the contrary. It is credited as the source of economic decline, an impetus for social inequity, and the degradation of democratic ideals, and has therefore become a fundamental target of political reform.

While the focus of reform primarily is related to public education as a whole, its reach extends far beyond the immediate public schooling arena. In many ways, public schools in the United States are seen as an iconic representation of democratic participation. Stakeholders in all realms of public education—ranging from direct recipients, namely students, to less-direct beneficiaries, including parents and future employers, to tertiary beneficiaries, including educators, administrators, politicians, unions, and society in general—not only have an interest in the implications of reformation, but also have a significant hand in the actualization of that reform through the democratic process. Therefore, any reform which occurs must take into account the roles—or perceived roles—of those stakeholders in any model proposing a solution to the problem of failing public schools.

To adequately address those roles—and their corresponding arguments and positions—in their relation to the debate of educational reform, it is important first to address both philosophical and practical issues which are at the core of the assumption of the failing of public schools. In Part I, I examine issues related to the role of education in a democratic society by delving into the broad range of educational goals and outcomes perceived by various stakeholders to be essential components of a successful education. In Part II, I identify criticisms of competition-based schooling schemes related to the concept of democratic opportunity and instruction. In Part III, I call upon the work of Henry M. Levin and Harry Brighthouse to provide a framework that can serve as basis for developing a public schooling scheme utilizing competition to accommodate the varied goals, and democratic participation, of public education stakeholders.

Finally, there are two important considerations to note when reading this paper. 1) Throughout this paper I refer to competition in an institutional context, not in a student context. Therefore, I am addressing not competition *between* students, but rather competition *for* students. Or, more precisely, I focus on *competition between schools* and *competition between teachers*. 2) I am not evaluating existing market theory, nor am I suggesting new market approaches. I point to existing models in the market which can respond to concerns in the public schooling space. Because I am referencing market strategies within the context of public education, and those strategies do not function within a true market system, I will refer to these strategies as “competition-based” instead of “market-based.”

Part I—The Goals of Education in a Democratic Society

To understand the ways in which schools are failing, one must first examine the goals of public education. There exists a tension between the belief that schools are intended to further democratic ideals (citizenship, the public good, promoting social equity, etc.) and the belief that schools are intended for furthering achievement and excellence (academic, personal growth, autonomy, critical thinking, etc.). [Ridenour *et al.*, 66] This poses the question of whether schools primarily should serve the *public good* or accommodate the *private good*. The perceived contradiction between these goals often drives the discourse in understanding the cause of failing schools.

As a public institution, public schooling in the United States serves two democratic purposes. First, it provides an opportunity for *democratic input* through both funding and control. Generally, citizens are the primary funders of public schools through property taxes, sales taxes, and income taxes, and are given the opportunity to actively engage in the democratic process by electing officials charged with creating public school policy and administering the schools.

Public schooling is also seen as fostering *democratic outcomes*, by providing students with an education rich in content encouraging the adoption of democratic ideals as well as a framework with which they can become both active participants in the democratic process and productive citizens.

...two possible purposes of public education, according to Labaree, are democratic equality (producing competent citizens who can make valid judgments about democratic life and who have a common set of social experiences) and social efficiency (basically producing a productive workforce.) [Ridenour *et al.*, 72]

Educational reform efforts have been prevalent in the United States since the mid-19th century, beginning with the establishment of common schools. Since that time, political debate has ensued over the goals of education and "aspects of the common school reforms—including centralization and standardization, bureaucratic oversight, compulsory attendance, assimilation, republicanism, and a common curriculum, for instance—were and are open to criticism on many fronts." [Lubienski 646] What was, in the 19th century, an attempt to cure all social and economic ills through public education, became a steadfast tradition. Over the next 150 years, public schools were the target of many attempts at social, political, and economic reform, but that reform generally manifested itself not through concrete and substantive changes, but rather

through a top-down layering of additional goals and outcome expectations upon an overly-burdened system.

...governance of education is becoming more complex. Concepts such as bureaucratization and centralization imply clear hierarchies of control that do not exist. A political system with everybody and nobody in charge, pulled in different directions, will continue to trigger recurrent cycles of "crisis," as the too numerous goals of the system—goals that cannot be reached simultaneously—create public discontent with the performance of the public schools. [Kirst 14]

As the demands of society changed, each new reform measure held the public education system accountable for responding to those demands and demonstrating positive change. Issues ranging from socioeconomic equality to increased productivity in a global economy to personal health and psychological well-being to universal literacy became the responsibility of American public schools. With each new focus came additional burdens. High-stakes testing, increased performance and content standards, and financial penalties and rewards related to achievement, all of which were defined by stakeholders with competing interests.

I point to the *Child Nutrition and WIC Reauthorization Act of 2004* as an example of non-education related interests utilizing public schools to further a social objective. This law is binding for any local education agency participating in a program authorized by the *Richard B. Russell National School Lunch Act* or the *Child Nutrition Act of 1966*. The program, generally referred to as the "School Lunch Program," includes a provision that provides reimbursements to schools for students who receive free or reduced price lunches. It also ensures that any meals provided to students in the program would meet certain dietary guidelines. However, Section 204 of the *Child Nutrition and WIC Reauthorization Act of 2004*, required participating schools to establish an additional "wellness policy" which:

- includes goals for nutrition education, physical activity and other school-based activities that are designed to promote student wellness in a manner that the local educational agency determines is appropriate;
- establishes a plan for measuring implementation of the local wellness policy, including designation of 1 or more persons within the local educational agency or at each school, as appropriate, charged with operational responsibility for ensuring that the school meets the local wellness policy; and
- involves parents, students, and representatives of the school food authority, the school board, school administrators, and the public in the development of the school wellness policy. [Child Nutrition and WIC Reauthorization Act of 2004 Section 204]

While the goal of increasing wellness is an obvious public good, one could argue that tying a social welfare program to curriculum objectives—with a non-compliance financial penalty which could disproportionately affect disadvantaged students—is beyond the purview of public schools. Considering the added burden of producing an internal means of measuring the success of the agency's wellness policy and the additional staffing required to do so, one must question how school budget and instructional time are sacrificed to implement these programs. A national survey of school nutrition district directors, completed by the School Nutrition Association and the School Nutrition Foundation, confirms this. One year after districts were required to implement their wellness policies, only 45.4% had successfully completed implementation into classroom nutrition education. [School Nutrition Association 12]

Structuring a public institution around competing interests ultimately results in a highly politicized environment. When combined with the facts that public schooling is compulsory and a government-run and -administered monopoly, it is easy to see that the current measures of reform likely will not result in the promised outcomes. Chris Lubienski, citing Chubb & Moe (1990), acknowledges the existence of this reasoning as it applies to public school reform in Michigan:

In the Michigan case, influential policy elites are in a position to frame the problem in education as one of a government monopoly, and to locate the solution in the redefinition of "public" education—thereby limiting other possible alternatives. Bureaucracy is the problem, in this line of neoliberal reasoning, and bureaucracy is the result of political processes; therefore, the only alternative is to depoliticize the system according to public choice theorists. [Lubienski 640]

If public school politicization and bureaucracy are sources of competing goals, how can public education in a democratic society accommodate the democratic ideal of the *public good* while at the same time demonstrating positive results for individuals? Some argue that prioritizing the public good over the private good may be less important than in the past.

...even if [common school reformers] were correct in linking control of education to the future of the Republic, it is quite possible that the socioeconomic and cultural conditions that justified that relationship then have now changed to such a degree that direct democratic control of schooling is no longer appropriate...it is possible that people simply now wish for a different 'mission' for schools—a purely academic one, as opposed to a primarily social one that purportedly requires public control. [Lubienski 657]

Therefore, the idea that the purpose of public schooling is first to serve the public good, and second to serve the private good, may be an outdated and unnecessary view. A more contemporary vision and organization of public schooling should be considered in order to fully meet the needs of the individuals it serves.

Part II—Criticisms of Competition-Based Schemes in Public Education

If one subscribes to the idea that minimizing government influence over public schooling will result in a less bureaucratic and more efficient system, one must examine the alternative structures to replace it. To that end, I turn to market theory. In particular, I examine the effect that introducing competition at the institutional level of public schooling can have on student achievement and the realization of the competing goals of a public education.

The past two decades have seen a dramatic increase in market and competition-based models in public schools. District and state-wide experiments with charter schools, school choice, magnet schools, and voucher schemes have yielded significant empirical data related to student achievement, administrative efficiency, and educational innovation. However, they also have exposed some significant underlying philosophical debates concerning whether these experiments can also meet the demands of the public good.

Public Good, Private Good, and Zero-Sum

A notable source of debate regarding the goals of education relates to the question of whether public schooling is a public good or a private good. Schooling, as a public good, is characterized as emphasizing the inputs and outcomes which will lead to a general public benefit (e.g., fostering equality.) Schooling perceived as a private good emphasizes the benefits to the individual stakeholder (e.g., contributing to individual student achievement.) This debate has been an underlying current in reform measures over the past 50 years, in particular.

An argument which has arisen with the introduction of competition-based schooling reform is one which suggests that when parents are offered a choice in their children's education, they become consumers. Consumers, by nature, are interested in the private good, not the public good. Therefore, parents will make decisions that not only are in their children's self-interest, but, in doing so, also contribute to the inequity of other students. [Ridenour *et al.*, 72]. This is described as being a "zero-sum" result. In order for students to have social-mobility—in order for students to achieve and excel within a system with limits—they invariably will be stripping other students of opportunities.

School choice is viewed as a legitimate way that parents as consumers can act on behalf of their own children even to the neglect of the common good. Parents, critics suggest,

have a right to seek what is best for their children even at the risk of compromising an educational system oriented to the public good. [Ridenour *et al.*, 73].

Consequently, the zero-sum theory can have a tangible, reciprocal effect if choice is not a key element in educational reform. As described in Part I, schools and students are overwhelmed with curriculum, performance, and assessment requirements throughout the school year. The end-product is diffused curricular content and a reduction in the amount of instructional time that can be dedicated to any particular learning objective. Students are sacrificing *quality* for *quantity*. In doing so, the measure of school success becomes an inaccurate snapshot of a selection of performance and content requirements, and cannot adequately provide the general public with a true measure of a school's overall quality.

This, in turn, leads to a general misconception when considering school choice. If one assumes that all schools can be measured on a simple continuum of "good" to "bad," it is hard to refute the argument that students ultimately will be either *winners* or *losers*. However, when one considers that different schools in a choice scheme can offer *different*—but not necessarily *better* or *worse*—educational opportunities to students, one can understand that school choice need not necessarily result in a zero sum.

Moreover, what constitutes the "best school" for a child is fraught with complications, starting with the implication that there exists a single best learning environment for every student (doubtful) and uniform agreement on the purpose of schooling and most valuable outcomes (definitely not). [Bast and Walberg 432]

As has been demonstrated with private schools in the United States, embracing a competition-based system can create opportunity by affording not only more efficiency and achievement, but also by meeting the specific needs of each individual. A competition-based system can respond to students' beliefs, skills, goals, and needs by allowing educational offerings to mold to trends and societal needs more efficiently. An essential ingredient in fulfilling the public good is producing high-achieving individuals, and competition fosters this.

This entire debate centers on the assumption that there are winners and there are losers. It's posited in a way which suggests that it's impossible to consider public education as a private good *and* a public good. However, some educational theorists argue the opposite. By providing opportunities for one student, results can be transferred to other students. This "positive-sum" approach is detailed by Harry Brighouse:

Many of the intrinsic benefits of education have a positive-sum structure. So any given child will get more out of the educational experience if others, too, are getting more out of it. My enjoyment of Jane Austen is enhanced by having others around to discuss her with; they, similarly, gain from my enthusiasm. [Brighouse 624]

Therefore, by allowing students the opportunity to further their own learning by pursuing educational experiences which provide them with substantive and personal meaning, they may, in fact, be positively affecting their peers' learning experiences, as well.

Equity and Equality

Equity and equality are at the heart of the zero-sum argument, and this is particularly salient in the context of a competition-based system. There exists general skepticism about the ability to achieve equality in a competitive environment. It is thought that competition always results in winners and losers, which seems inherently unequal. Education, therefore, becomes a positional good and provides certain groups of students with a competitive advantage. [Swift 13]

However, that is not to say that competition cannot foster equality. Again, I remind you that when I speak of competition, I am not referring to competition *between* students. By having students compete for a finite amount of "education"—either educational opportunity or the final product of education—you would be, in some way, exacerbating or redistributing inequity. But, in a situation where the competition occurs at the institutional level, students are *determining*, in effect, the winners and the losers. And those winners and losers are the actual educational institutions. If implemented appropriately, competition will ensure that valuable institutions thrive and failing institutions expire.

Much like ensuring democracy in education, ensuring equality can also be accomplished through both *inputs* and *outcomes*. Generally speaking, public schools manage inputs and outcomes in order to ensure equality between students, as well as to achieve equality between previously unequal students. Much of the focus on equal inputs and outcomes is placed on equity in spending. There are two primary approaches to achieving equality in spending. The first is to equalize all spending (i.e., schools are provided with a standard per-pupil expenditure). This approach can be problematic as some students (especially economically disadvantaged and physically or mentally challenged) require more financial resources in the classroom. The second is to provide differentiated funding based on the student population (e.g., weighted student funding). While the purpose of weighted student funding [WSF] is to ensure equal outcomes

(i.e., a full and appropriate education for all students), it can also be viewed as inequitably affecting students without special needs.

The crux of this debate is apparent when we reconsider the goals of education. As a democratic society, do we want to provide equal opportunity (inputs) or do we want equal results (outcomes)? Although the two sides of this equation are not entirely independent of each other, when examining the debate through this lens, some interesting questions arise. Are schools 100% accountable and responsible for the outcomes of education, or are students subject to influences outside of the public school's control? Obviously, there are other significant influences, such as intrinsic motivation and talent, family values, living environment, etc. But to what degree should the public school manipulate and control those circumstances?

Some educational theorists and politicians argue that public schools should have agency over such decisions and mitigate the effects as much as possible through the public schooling experience. However, it is often forgotten that many of these variables are not necessarily *negative* influences, but rather are *positive* influences. If our ultimate goal in educating students is to equalize outcomes, that necessitates not only providing additional resource and opportunity to those who come to the schools with negative influences, but also results in removing resource and opportunity with "unfair" positive influences.

Adam Swift, a proponent of school choice options, reaches an alarming conclusion when considering the morality of private school education for students raised in financially prosperous households.

More to the point here, however, parents are not justified in giving their children the best education currently available to them under the existing options. Doing that is likely to be contributing to the educational injustice, buying their children unfair advantage over, and thereby making things worse for, others. I do, however, think that parents are justified in making sure that their children's education is *good enough*. Though it is wrong to aim for the best, when that contributes to or is complicit in injustice, it is right to aim for *adequacy*." [Swift 17]

To the contrary, I argue that relegating our most talented and motivated students— independent of their financial means—to "adequacy," when we have the opportunity to provide them with "exceptionality" in education, is as unjust as ignoring the unique needs of special education students.

The solution is not to limit experiences outside of the classroom, nor to remove parental autonomy from securing additional opportunities for their children. Rather, schools must provide

students and their parents with a reason *not* to seek alternate sources of educational opportunity. If valuable opportunities are found within the public schooling system for *all* students, and parents have input into which experiences they would like for their children to have, the effects of inequality would diminish.

Compounding the issue, there are those who argue that the market has no interest in ensuring equality. There is an assumption that the market is self-interested and will strive only to achieve economic gains.

That public education can continue to serve the public good if governed by the invisible hand of the market is questionable: Such a shift means that those most at risk have the most to lose; it also means a kind of Baskin-Robbins approach to education, with a multitude of "vendors" offering education but few who are compelled to look beyond self-interest to the broader public good. When families are customers and self-interest a desired end, the value for the common good fades. [Ridenour *et al.*, 71]

This, of course, assumes that parents have no interest in promoting the public good or ensuring equality. According to this argument, only the government is capable of providing a just educational experience—all others would fail to desire such an outcome. However, this argument begins to break down when one considers that parents are members of the very society which holds these values true. In fact, they may be the most vocal advocates for equality in education. If so, the market, not a government monopoly, provides the most efficient means to the realization of equality, particularly when applying the laws of supply and demand. If achieving equality—and supporting that endeavor through public education—is a goal of the majority of the members of our society (and parental stakeholders, in particular), then the market will respond with "educational products" which meet that demand.

If, suitably regulated, the market can supply educational pluralism without objectionable injustice, then, other things being equal, the market is justified. [Swift 15]

I'd like to emphasize that the *justification* of utilizing market forces to ensure equality isn't the only consideration. Educational theorists who oppose choice schemes are quick to identify the potential flaws in using market strategies as a means to educational equity, but such schemes have yet to be implemented to the extent that would demonstrate the anticipated effects. That said, few could argue that the current policy in the government-run monopoly of public schools, rooted in unequal spending and unequal opportunity, *is* the solution to inequity. Even reform measures which attempt to address issues of inequity—and for this I point to the *No*

Child Left Behind Act—demonstrate that equity is an important goal for those we deem disadvantaged, but less so for those we do not. According to guidelines for implementing NCLB, low-income students receive priority in alternate school placement when enrolled in a low-performing school.

In implementing the option to transfer, however, certain circumstances may require an LEA to give priority to the lowest-achieving students from low-income families. For example, if not all students can attend their first choice of schools, an LEA would give first priority in assigning spaces to the lowest-achieving low-income students. Similarly, if an LEA does not have sufficient funds to provide transportation to all students who wish to transfer, it would apply this priority in determining which students receive transportation. [Public School Choice *Non-Regulatory Guidance* 9]

Policy which attempts to equalize opportunities by way of ensuring those opportunities for only certain individuals is inherently unjust.

Parental Choice and Autonomy

When considering the consequences of public schools serving both the public good and the private good, policy must resolve which stakeholders should determine the best interest of students.

My concern is with principles—concerning parents' rights, the extent to which parents may legitimately pursue their children's interests, and so on...on the one hand, those who govern the public realm, properly informing the way one should vote on matters of policy, seeking the common good, when acting as an impartial citizen; on the other, those appropriate to one's private decisions, concerning one's nearest and dearest, when acting as a loving parent. [Swift 9]

From a normative perspective, should parents retain autonomy and have agency in determining the values and experiences their children are taught, or at a minimum, exposed to? I propose that with compulsory education, autonomy is a *necessary* component in the realization of democratic ideals.

In what other realm of the public sphere does the government compel its citizens to demonstrate tolerance, democratic principles, and concern for the public good? As citizens, we enjoy the freedom of decision-making (within the bounds of the law), regardless of whether those decisions are perceived by the majority as being right or wrong. By disallowing those same freedoms within the context of public schooling, we jeopardize the very democratic principle that the policy (i.e., common school schemes) is meant to secure.

There are compelling reasons to give parents not only the right to transmit their values to their children, but also the right to reject schooling that promotes values contrary to their own...liberal democratic societies characteristically renounce the use of coercive state power to impose even reasonable conceptions of the good life on persons who adhere to other—but likewise reasonable—conceptions...On this understanding, the state acts illegitimately when it promotes some reasonable conceptions of the good at the expense of others by mandating the values children must be taught in school. [Gilles 939]

As I detailed earlier, the assumption that only the government is capable of making decisions which achieve the public good provides a precarious foundation for this argument. Further, as Ridenour describes, "The market-based educational approach works only if parents exercise choice consistent with the way predicted by those who conceived the policy...In essence, parents may become consumers but they may not be skilled educational choosers." [Ridenour *et al.*, 75] Assuming that Ridenour is correct in her assertion that there is *one correct choice*, can we determine whether parents will make the right choice?

From a practical perspective, there are many who assert that parents do not have the requisite knowledge or experience to make the right choice. Among these are both critics and supporters of school choice schemes.

Not all parents are inclined or capable of becoming informed and judicious consumers in the education marketplace...The question is whether the benefits to the privileged/skilled choosers are worth the social costs to either the less well-prepared choosers or to those who are socially disconnected. [Ridenour *et al.*, 75]

Empirical evidence supports the interpretation that choice schemes in education, whether market or public, will tend to favor more advantaged families. [Levin 150]

However, economic theory supports the hypothesis that parents can make comparable or better choices when selecting schools in a school choice scheme. First, parents have a personal interest in carefully weighing the costs and benefits (incentives) for their children and their families when considering choices. And, although they may not have the same industrial knowledge as school administrators, parents have the benefit of "domestic intimacy." Conversely, bureaucrats' interests, according to economic theory, lie in personal gain and recognition, where the student is at risk of becoming "inputs in a production process." [Bast and Walberg 432-434]

The notion that parents would do a better job choosing the schools for their children than experts in government agencies is well grounded in economic theory. Parents have the right incentives and access to the information needed to make correct choices. Allowing schools to compete gives parents the opportunity to discover the best schools for their children. Government agencies in the education arena, on the other hand, are

burdened by conflicts of interest, control by special interest groups, and a tendency to adopt one-size-fits-all remedies to complex problems that require greater variation and specialization. [Bast and Walberg 438]

Bast and Walberg also cite a variety of studies support their hypothesis. Those studies evidence that in public choice schools, parents and experts rate schools similarly. In charter schools, parents' ratings are also similar to expert ratings and parents were found to choose schools based on academics. Similarly, in voucher schools, parents prioritize academics over convenience. [Bast and Walberg 434-435]

Student Achievement and School Success

Even if we were to resolve issues of equity and parental autonomy, the question of achievement in choice schemes remains. Do choice schemes result in higher student achievement? For this, we must examine the issue through both theoretical and practical lenses.

The primary economic theory supporting school choice poses that competition *for* students will result in greater school efficiency and improved student outcomes. Choice schools are directly accountable to students and families, and prospective students and their families weigh academic outcomes (as evidenced in the previous section) when selecting schools. If autonomous choice schools' income—and ability to compete in this quasi-market—is tied directly to student enrollment, the incentive for efficiency and improved performance increases. In economic terms, parents are able to utilize *exit* and *voice* to affect positive change. In other words, since parents value academic outcomes in choice schemes, and they remove their children from schools that don't provide adequate opportunities for academic success, schools will be motivated to increase student performance.

In a monopoly, *exit* and *voice* are effectively lost, and in turn, increasing student achievement can become secondary to bureaucratic concerns.

Lack of direct accountability results in an over-regulated and non-diversified provision. The different needs of local markets, schools and individual pupils are neglected in favour of a common curriculum and assessment system designed in part to enable the central monitoring of school performance. This provision of standardized state schooling imposes welfare burdens on those parents and students whose optimal level and quality differs from the uniform level...Exit and voice mechanisms are either absent or distorted. [Adnett and Davies (2002) 8-9]

Economic theory asserts that when you apply institutional competition to the public schooling space, you can achieve a greater diversity of curricular offerings. "If schooling were

provided in a competitive market, we would expect to see greater diversity in size and location as entrepreneurs tailor the traditional school and classroom to meet the interests and needs of parents and students.” [Bast and Walberg 433] In doing so, choice becomes not an end-product, but rather a process that will enable parents and students to further explore their own values systems, which should result in increased achievement.

Empirical evidence supports this, even though the metrics used to measure achievement do not account for the differentiated learning objectives that arise in a competition-based scheme.

Schools of choice tend to out-perform public schools on a wide range of outcomes and for children from all socioeconomic backgrounds, meaning the act of choosing, for whatever reason, leads to children attending better schools. [Bast and Walberg 438]

Bast and Walberg also cite research conducted by J.P. Greene which confirms that achievement and value-added test scores are “significantly and positively associated with the amount of total weighted choice.” [Bast and Walberg 438]

Conversely, there exists evidence which suggests that competition between schools does not result in increased student achievement. N. Adnett and P. Davies reference studies in the U.K. which show that choice reform did not achieve the desired results and that “some 90% of the variation in student performance is between individuals within an institution, with 8% attributable to the specific establishment attended.” However, they concede that it is possible that competition-based schemes have increased the performance of previously low-performing schools, thereby decreasing the overall range in performance outcomes. Adnett and Davies also note that although students selected their schools, the schools were still subject to “the constraints of a tightly controlled National Curriculum.” [Adnett and Davies (2005) 112]

As detailed in Part 1, common schools tend toward a “one-size-fits-all” model of education. However, in choice schemes, student achievement increases when implementing intra-school competition by tailoring the instruction to meet the individual needs of students and reducing the volume of core instructional goals.

Here we concentrate upon increasing choice within a school over the subjects and syllabi studied. Such increases in within-school diversity could take the form of separate ‘academic’ and ‘vocational’ pathways or a reduction in the core curriculum to enable more optional subjects to be taken by students. Increased intra-school competition can raise educational attainment levels if they enable parents, students, teachers, and heads to improve the match between the curriculum studied and the particular aspirations and abilities of students. [Arnett and Davies (2005) 110]

The research implies that by introducing competition both between and within schools, students can expect to realize increased academic success.

Fear of Privatization and Commodification

Of final note is the importance of addressing the public's "fear" of choice schemes. When considering the many stakeholders in public education, it is important to address the general public's perception of what choice schemes are. A common misconception is that introducing choice results in the privatization of schools. This may be a result of the fact that there are two highly-visible and pervasive schemes in K-12 education: public "common" schools and private schools. It could be perceived that minimizing state authority in public school operations equates to the assignment of that authority to the private sector. However, depending upon how the choice scheme is implemented, this may be an unfounded fear. While it's possible that individual schools in a choice scheme will be administered by private for-profit entities, other schools might be administered by non-profit organizations, community groups, teacher collectives, or any number of organized stakeholder groups.

A second concern is that schools will cease being democratic public institutions and will become commodities that place less value on producing results and more value on being *perceived as* producing results. This smoke and mirrors argument is rooted in the concept that public institutions in a democratic society are free from such distractions. To the contrary, even voting—arguably one of the most basic exercises of democratic participation—is fraught with the commodification of candidates. In the United States, a full 18 months before a presidential election, voters are subjected to an onslaught of media touting one candidate over another. The messages can be positive or negative, accurate or misleading, and informational or propaganda-laden. We are effectively consumers in the election process, and the candidates are the product. My highlighting this is not meant to suggest that it is morally acceptable to produce misleading information about the successes of autonomous schools, but rather that one should not discount the idea of choice schemes because of the potential for unethical promotion of the schools. Much of the American democratic ideal is founded in freedom to choose, and those freedoms need not be confiscated at the schoolyard gate.

Part III—The Democratic Competition-Based Model

Part 1 demonstrated that competition-based schooling and a democratic education can co-exist, while Part II detailed important criticisms of choice schemes. But for choice schemes to work, they have to be implemented with those concerns in mind. To that end, I will draw upon the work of Brighthouse and Levin to define a framework which can be used in developing an effective choice scheme. My intent is not to provide a model which can be implemented, but rather to identify specific measures which can be taken to mitigate stakeholders' concerns.

Levin describes two possible models for choice schemes: market choice and public choice. The market choice scheme allows for greater private market influence by providing families with vouchers to use at a private educational institution of their choosing. The public choice scheme allows for greater state control of the schools by providing parents with the opportunity to select a state-administered public school of their choice. Each model has both costs and benefits to the students, their families, and the general public. Additionally, both of these models must account for implementation considerations such as providing information about the schools to parents, regulatory power of the state, governance, enrollment, funding, transportation, and adjudication.

On one hand, the market choice approach “promises some improvement in micro-efficiency by increasing the range of choices for families and by showing slightly higher achievement test scores,” while on the other hand, it would “require an expansion and centralization of educational activities at the state level that would be vastly greater than public choice plans.” [Levin 155] In general terms, he summarizes “A market approach to education appears to be superior in terms of private benefits, while the public choice approach appears to be superior in terms of social benefits. It is difficult to find an advantage for either system in terms of overall efficiency.” [Levin 137] In conclusion, he finds that “On balance, it is not clear which system of choice is likely to be more efficient, *in toto*, without an explicit comparison of the particular versions of public and market choice that are being posited.” [Levin 155]

In light of his findings, and the articulated benefits to each system, a hybrid model of the two should be considered. Essentially, a public choice system wherein each school is autonomously administered by non-governmental entities may reap the benefits of both systems. If such a system were to exist, the architects of the model should consider the following implementation approaches.

Universal Implementation: Various experiments in choice schemes in the past several decades have yielded conflicting data concerning the success of the models. According to economic theory, it is imperative that in order for a competition-based system to reach its full potential, the application of that strategy must be comprehensive in its market. Individual schools cannot wholly compete with large public school districts without introducing unnecessary consequences. For example, if a school district serving 20,000 students has only five charter (choice) schools, issues of equity and access will arise. In that same school district, if the charter school students come from geographically distanced communities, additional public funding for transportation would be required. By implementing a universal model, issues related to access and geography would be minimized.

Administrative Autonomy: In order for a school to fully benefit from competition, it must be released from the binds of bureaucracy and governmental micro-management on an operational level. To accomplish this, schools should be provided with funding (either through a per-pupil fee or a weighted student funding [WSF] approach) which is managed entirely by the school. All matters related to curriculum and instruction should be under the authority of the school management, as this is a necessary ingredient of the successful implementation of an instructional model (e.g., Montessori or Waldorf). Finally, each school should have final authority in hiring, firing, and compensation policies.

Governmental Regulatory Power: While schools should be autonomous in operations, there are some necessary protections which can only be guaranteed with some governmental oversight. While these are important to ensure equity and overall accountability, the hand of the state should be minimal. Specifically, the regulatory role should be limited to providing funding, developing or endorsing a process for accreditation, and measuring outcomes.

Funding should be tied directly to the enrollment numbers for each school. The specific amount per pupil, as previously described, can be accommodated within a hybrid model, but it is safe to assume that some schools may have higher operating costs than others, even when accounting for WSF. For example, a secondary school specializing in hands-on science instruction may require additional funds to procure the required equipment. However, these could be offered through incentive grants to encourage the establishment of a school where the supply doesn't yet meet the demand of the community.

To ensure that new schools are adequately prepared for educating students, it's important that the state establish or adopt accreditation guidelines. However, these guidelines

need not be drafted by the state. When considering autonomously-run schools with varied educational objectives, implementation plans drafted by each prospective school entity should be included in the accreditation process.

Finally, the state must ensure some level of achievement by developing minimal performance standards to measure the school's overall success. Although the market will, over time, allow for this, there is an interest in the state minimizing the time between school failure and departure from the market. Again, since the schools likely will have varied educational objectives, the measure of their success also should be directly related to meeting their implementation plan's goals. Any common or core performance goals should be reflected in each school's implementation and accreditation plan.

Educational Advocates: There are many who believe, and many studies which support, that proper student placement is key to a student's academic success. As shown in Part II, many fear that parents do not have the necessary experience or access to information to make an educated school choice decision. To mitigate any truth in this assumption, school districts should provide access to "educational advocates" or counselors who can assist parents with the school choice process.

Stakeholders' Roles Revisited: In any model that is developed, the stakeholders' (students, parents, government, and the general public) roles must be redefined. A significant criticism of competition-based schools in a democratic society is that only parents and autonomous schools would have authority over educational goals and policy. This criticism can be mitigated by the fact that the public has the option to elect officials who will manage school regulations to ensure adequacy. Similarly, market forces will support the gravitation toward meeting the public good if those are goals valued by the stakeholders. Therefore, democratic input and the public good can be secured while not impeding the private good.

Conclusion

Democratic ideals and competition-based schooling do not inherently contradict. Public schools have long catered to a variety of public interests and have provided ample opportunity for democratic participation. Introducing a competition-based scheme can result in improved educational outcomes by allowing the varied goals of public school stakeholders to be realized. The public good, (including equality, democratic opportunity, and the development of a globally competitive workforce) and the private good (including academic and personal achievement)

both can be met as long as policy addresses both public *and* private needs. Effective, democratic, competition-based models can exist through the thoughtful implementation of choice policies which respond to the concerns of all stakeholders.

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