Review Essay

School Choice: The Struggle for the Soul of American Education, by Peter W. Cookson, Jr. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1994, 174 pp.

Peter Cookson has written an interesting and provocative little book about the school choice movement in the United States. Using personal interviews, case studies, and existing scholarship, he sets the school choice movement in a social and political context, describes major choice plans across the country, provides a nontechnical review of relevant research, and examines the assumptions underlying a market model of reform. Whereas other works cover similar ground (notably, The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching's 1992 report, *School Choice*, and Amy Stuart Wells's 1993 book, *Time to Choose*), Cookson's effort differs in that it distinguishes between market-driven and democratic-driven choice policies.

Cookson also approaches the topic of school choice from a sociological perspective, seeing it not simply as an educational reform but as a social movement with broader implications for a democratic society. "School choice," the author writes, "is a grass-roots movement similar to other social movements such as gun control, abortion rights, and school prayer" (p. 9). Like these movements, choice reflects more fundamental moral questions about individual rights and our obligations to others in a democratic society. Indeed, as the title suggests, Cookson believes that the choice movement is nothing less than a moral struggle for the "very soul of American education." Although this characterization of school choice seems a bit sensational (a possibility that Cookson himself acknowledges), it does capture some of the ideological intensity and moral significance at the heart of the choice debate.

The arguments about the origins of the school choice movement constitute the first two chapters of the book. The author concedes that the movement's roots have a long history, but he argues that the social and political context in which choice arose as a policy during the 1980s was "unlike any other period in American history" (p. 13). Foremost among the elements in Cookson's argument is the belief that the United States underwent a cultural transformation in which values supportive of civic ties and obligations were replaced by values associated with personal

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acquisition and self-interest. Although this cultural shift established an environment conducive to choice, the catalyst was the election of Ronald Reagan, which swept into the mainstream of educational policy making and leadership a chorus of conservative voices that was antigovernment and probusiness in pitch.

Cookson provides detailed information about political organizations that emerged to promote school choice during the 1980s, as well as state-by-state summaries of choice legislation. The lists are impressive in breadth and depth. Since Cookson completed the book, the movement has lost momentum. The Democratic administration provided only lukewarm support for choice, even though President Clinton was a vocal supporter as governor of Arkansas. Moreover, referenda on statewide choice plans that were to include private school vouchers went down to smashing defeats in Oregon, Colorado, and California. The rhetoric of school choice has been relatively quiet during the past 2 years, but that may well change with the 104th Congress. Republicans rode a wave of antigovernment sentiment into office. That sentiment appears to be reenergizing the school choice movement and the ideological character of the debate.

The middle two chapters of the book present case studies of major choice plans implemented during the 1980s and a review of research that has informed the positions of advocates and critics of choice policies. Readers may already be familiar with many of these plans and studies. The alternative schools in East Harlem's Community School District 4, Cambridge's districtwide controlled choice plan, and Milwaukee's voucher plan for low-income families have received considerable attention elsewhere. Moreover, research about the consequences of choice plans and policies is so thin that it is difficult to say anything truly new or definitive. For those unfamiliar with the topic, these chapters are a good introduction into the variety of student enrollment options that have been implemented under the banner of school choice. Cookson's research review can also serve as a primer on what we know and do not know about the consequences of school choice plans and policies. Studies cover a range of outcomes, including academic achievement, organizational change, educational equity, and the creation of school communities.

The intellectual challenge to readers grows in the final chapters. Cookson contrasts two competing metaphors for organizing public education in the United States—the marketplace and democracy. These metaphors mirror the contrast made by Chubb and Moe (1990) in their provocative book *Politics, Markets, and America's Schools*. Whereas Chubb and Moe proclaim the marketplace as the "solution" for the problems of American education, Cookson comes down heavily in favor

of the democratic purposes of public education. Indeed, he argues that market-oriented solutions to educational problems "will not lead to educational wonderlands but could quite possibly lead to educational wastelands" (p. 119).

Drawing from Reisman's 1950 classic, *The Lonely Crowd*, Cookson describes market-driven models of reform as outer-directed, and democratic-driven models of reform as inner-directed. Whereas inner-directed reforms are concerned with the content of education, outer-directed reforms focus on the form of education—in the case of school choice, the governance and control of schools. Supporters of the latter reason that the content will take care of itself, because people are "utility maximizers" who should make rationale choices that will promote good schools.

We fully support Cookson's view about human choices, that they are by nature culturally bound and thus cannot be truly relied upon to promote either educational excellence or equity. Despite Americans' discomfort with notions of class and privilege, social status is intimately intertwined with beliefs about school quality and education. "If we do not recognize the structural inequalities that shape educational decision making," Cookson argues, "we are likely to produce educational systems that increase inequality rather than provide channels of mobility for youngsters from poor and disadvantaged homes" (p. 111). Our own work (Lee, 1993; Lee, Croninger, & Smith, 1994) suggests that Cookson's warning is well worth heeding, particularly in metropolitan areas that are already highly segregated, like Detroit.

Cookson concludes with a loosely sketched proposal for what he calls "inner-directed school reform," one that draws its energy and motivation from a democratic rather than market orientation toward education. His proposal includes three central notions: (a) creation of an educational trust fund for every American child; (b) managed or controlled public school choice; and (c) formation of charter schools that might serve as models of innovation. Although Cookson argues in his proposal against unrestricted vouchers, he would include inner-city private schools (including sectarian schools) that enroll high proportions of poor children. Such schools (the majority of which are Catholic) "deserve public support because they are educating disadvantaged students at a time when the local public schools are in disorder" (p. 128).

A gratifying aspect of the proposal is its unwaffling support of the need for an equitable distribution of educational resources—"the poorer the child, the greater the share" (p. 130). That is, as compared to more affluent families, poor children would carry larger educational trust funds to the schools that they would attend. Thirty percent of the revenues for public

schools would have to come directly from families in the form of trust funds, and any public school receiving shares must have at least 20% of its enrollment made up of disadvantaged children. This, Cookson reasons, would make children from disadvantaged families more desirable to schools.

Many who have followed the debate about school choice, however, have come to the conclusion that the devil is always in the details. For example, Cookson cites the controlled-choice plan in Cambridge—which includes mechanisms to prevent racial segregation and an active program for informing parents about their options—as a choice plan that works. The success of the plan is a major justification for elements in Cookson's proposal. However, Cambridge is somewhat unique, and the plan would probably not be as successful in localities with different demographic characteristics. Such a plan would have little meaning in a large metropolitan area like Detroit, where over 90% of the city's public school enrollment is minority, compared to only 9% in the surrounding suburban communities (Lee et al., 1994).

Cookson's book is not the last word on school choice, but it is a refreshing and promising new direction for debate and policy development. The book demonstrates that choice need not be tied to a market orientation to school reform. On the contrary, components of choice can be used to reaffirm democratic principles and quite possibly revitalize public education in the United States. Although we have lingering questions about what schools might look like under the plan that Cookson puts forth, the general outline suggests that choice can be used to create schools that are innovative, effective, and just. This will not happen, however, if reform is simply left to the marketplace. It will only happen if choice policies are inner-directed, to use Cookson's phrase, that is, directed toward "the real needs of children and committed to the preservation of democracy, the advancement of social justice, and the creation of schools that are oases of hope and intellectual ferment" (p. 121). No small task for any school reform movement—but certainly the right one!

Cookson's book seems to be directed at an audience that is primarily interested in the school choice movement, but it deserves a wider readership. If Cookson is right, and we believe that he is, the school choice movement is symptomatic of broader and deeper problems in public education. The discussion of schools as "oases of authenticity" is recommended reading for anyone interested in defining an appropriate direction of school reform in the United States. Cookson's endorsement of a justice-driven model of reform, one based on economic disadvantage rather than a learning deficit of some sort, is courageous and worthy of

consideration. Most important, Cookson urges us to consider carefully the purposes of education and how those purposes relate to broader democratic principles of liberty, equality, and community. Whatever the future of school choice may be, the future of school reform and public education in the United States depends on how well we address these issues.

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