Educational Choice: The Stratifying Effects of Selecting Schools and Courses

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The current political climate of educational reform very actively focuses on the positive aspects of increasing parental choice of children's schools, but there is little discussion of (and scant empirical research on) the potentially negative effects of increasing choice. This article examines the rich empirical base on another aspect of choice in education—curriculum choice—to draw parallels between the potentially harmful effects of both types of choice. Specifically, it has been shown that a wide latitude of student choice of courses in high school magnifies the social stratification of educational outcomes. This socially undesirable consequence results from two well-documented relationships: (a) Following a more demanding set of academic courses in high school is strongly and positively associated with higher academic achievement, and (b) less advantaged students are considerably less likely to select such a demanding course of study than are their more academically and socially advantaged counterparts. Additionally, academically and socially disadvantaged students and their families are less likely to seek out, or have access to, information about the consequences of their choices (of either schools or courses). If our society is unwilling to accept any educational reform that increases the inequitable distribution of educational outcomes among diverse social and racial groups, as is argued in this article, then we must take a hard look at the possible effects of school choice in this regard.

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THE ISSUES

This article discusses the issue of educational choice within two contexts: parental choice of schools; and student choice of curriculum.[1] Research papers and policy discussions almost never combine these two issues, but it is argued here that they actually tap several similar theoretical arguments. Further, it may be argued that the logic supporting choice in these two areas leads in quite similar directions. Because popular opinion currently is quite supportive of parental choice of schools but rather skeptical of curriculum choice, it is argued that policy conclusions here could be contradictory.

Curriculum Choice

The curriculum of America's high schools has been subjected to considerable public scrutiny and criticism in the past decade. Beginning with *A Nation at Risk*, the National Commission on Excellence in Education's (1983) study, and other reports on the high school curriculum in the mid-1980s,[2] a movement toward reforming the curriculum by increasing students' requirements for high school graduation has taken hold in many states. Although this reform movement has been implemented differentially, and its aims are not very specific (i.e., it is focused on increasing *numbers* of courses rather than the *content* of courses), its major purpose has been to ensure that high school graduates have taken minimum numbers of courses in the major academic areas identified as the "New Basics." As such, the movement has been directed at influencing what students learn.

The central features of schooling that actually influence students' academic learning, however, are considerably more complicated than graduation requirements. Besides the obvious feature—the process of instruction—learning is also influenced by the school's structures, policies, and routines that determine how this instruction occurs.[3] Recent field accounts on instruction in high schools (Grant, 1988; Lightfoot, 1983; Powell, Farrar, & Cohen, 1985) describe students as passive recipients of teaching that is often routinized and deadening. Moreover, the nature of classroom instruction is highly stratified, with more able and affluent students likely to be found in smaller classes, where the teaching is more stimulating and engaging. The traditional characterization of curricular organization as consisting of a small number of well-defined programs, or tracks, for students of different abilities and interests and with rather limited choice beyond the original track placement, however, does not adequately capture the process at work in today's secondary schools.

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High school students now confront a large array of courses from which they must choose their courses of study. Several recent books have vividly described the enormous expansion of the high school curriculum over the past two decades (Cusick, 1983; Grant, 1988; Powell et al., 1985) into what may be called "the vertical curriculum," which offers a large number of courses with similar titles that are taught at different ability levels. The traditional structure of tracking, an organizational device to guide and constrain students' choices of courses, has given way to today's "shopping mall high school" (Powell et al., 1985). The effect of the availability of such options among which students may choose freely has been to produce great diversity in students' programs of study even in the same high school. Reflecting the change away from formal tracking toward the vertical curriculum, empirical research has begun to focus on actual course enrollments rather than on nominal track designations.

Responding to the movement toward curriculum reform, high schools in many states have tightened their offerings and enrollments in the past decade. For example, the proportion of "core" courses (mathematics, science, language arts, social studies) in the high schools of one state—Michigan—has risen slightly, from 55% to 59% of the total offerings between 1979 and 1987, while the proportion of "noncore" courses (art, business, industrial arts, physical and vocational education) has declined from 41% to 35% over the same period.[4] The biggest gains were in mathematics and science and the largest declines in vocational courses, according to the Bureau of Accreditation and School Improvement Studies at the University of Michigan. Students' credit hours in these courses followed the same pattern.

It was assumed that two consequences would result from such curricular "tightening." First, an increased dropout rate was feared as a negative outcome, as less motivated students were forced into more demanding academic experiences. Second, it was assumed that higher scores on standardized tests would accrue from the academic rigor that such reforms were thought to engender. At least in Michigan, neither outcome has materialized. Neither has the feared increase in the dropout rate occurred over that period, nor are the increased enrollments and offerings in core areas of the curriculum accompanied by higher scores on Michigan's statewide standardized tests (MEAP).[5] However, no information is provided on whether the added core courses are really academic in nature (offerings such as "checkbook math" and "rocks for jocks" are always possible), nor do we know whether disadvantaged students are any more likely to be taking academic courses than a decade ago.

In a broader arena, the conclusions from research in this area over the past two decades are consistent and powerful: Student course-taking and track

placement are actually the most powerful predictors of academic achievement, far outdistancing the effects of personal background and a wide range of student attitudes and behaviors. Although this body of research is not linked to changes in the American high school curriculum as a result of the reform movement, the consistency and stability of the findings are remarkable. Students who take more academic courses in mathematics, science, English, foreign language, and social studies, and courses with more academic content, demonstrate increased learning.

This same body of research concludes that students' exposure to course work is highly differentiated in American high schools, resulting in students from families of lower socioeconomic (SES) levels and minority groups much more likely to be exposed to less demanding and less academic courses of study. The policy implications flowing from this research appear quite clear: Any effort that seeks to affect either the overall level of academic achievement or—as important—a socially equitable distribution of that achievement must influence the policies and practices that determine students' exposure to subject matter.

School Choice

At present, parental choice of schools is a hotter political issue than changes in curriculum. During the past decade, under Presidents Reagan and Bush, school choice has become a cornerstone of federal educational policy. From the ashes of an earlier movement to "privatize" education through educational vouchers or tuition tax credits, the current movement has attempted to broaden support for public education. In 1986, the National Governors' Association endorsed the goal of providing choice among public schools. In the nation's first "Education Summit" in October 1989, President Bush and the 50 governors agreed on choice as a major facet of the nation's education policy agenda. At least three states (Minnesota, Arkansas, and Iowa) now have statewide choice plans on the books, and dozens of other states have taken formal legislative action to increase the educational choices available to parents. In three locations (Milwaukee, Oregon, and California), choice proposals include both public and nonpublic schools. Several major cities operate choice plans (e.g., New York, St. Louis, Kansas City, Boston, Minneapolis/St. Paul, Baltimore, Milwaukee, Los Angeles, Rochester, Buffalo, and Cambridge [Massachusetts]), with more on the drawing boards.

How is School "Choice" Organized?

"Choice" is a rather amorphous term describing a set of options where parents can choose the schools their children attend (students themselves can, of course, participate in this decision). Many of these options are already in

existence (choice between public and private schools, the choice to attend a particular magnet school in some public school districts). This article describes very briefly the major options included (but not always differentiated) in current discussions of choice. The magnet school approach, where some students may select particular schools and programs but where the majority of students attend neighborhood schools, has offered a degree of choice in many metropolitan areas for about two decades. Although the magnet school concept was put into operation as a primary tool for school desegregation, its operation has provided initial ideas and designs for choice plans. However, the discussion here is limited to school choice plans in which (at least in theory) every family may exercise choice over the school their children attend. As Chubb and Moe (1990a) point out, the current movement for choice is "an extremely fragmented and conceptually shallow one" (p. 207).

A major differentiation between choice plans is whether they are (a) confined to choice among public schools or (b) include choice between all schools in a particular area, including private schools. Typically, choice plans that include public and private schools (Friedman, Coons, and the Bush administration support these) would be accomplished by issuing parents a voucher for each school-aged child that may be "spent" at the school of their choice. These vouchers can take on different values for different children (e.g., high school vouchers could be more than those for elementary school; the vouchers of socially or academically disadvantaged children could be larger, either to cover the costs of the additional services they might require or to make such children more desirable to some schools); however, currently discussed voucher plans suggest a single-value voucher. In addition, for choice plans that include private schools, voucher payments might be supplemented to cover increased tuition costs in some schools (what Roemer [1992] calls "add-ons").

Most functioning choice plans operate among public schools within particular districts, and these plans are certainly the most politically expedient. A major rationale for within-district plans is to increase variability among public schools in order to offer parents and students real choices. Many magnet schools operate on this concept, offering special programs in such areas as foreign language, science and mathematics, health careers, and performing arts (including highly academic programs). Specialized programs operating as "schools within schools" are also based on this philosophy (e.g., District 4 in New York City). Less common are plans that operate across districts, either in contiguous areas (St. Louis and Kansas City are of this type) or among public schools across the entire state (e.g., Minnesota).

An important consideration in choice plans is *racial balance*. A few carefully implemented choice programs (most carefully developed in Cam-

bridge [Massachusetts] but being implemented in Milwaukee and Boston) employ what is known as "controlled choice" (Alves & Willie, 1987). Under this scheme, parents' choices of school are combined with guidelines that call for careful monitoring of the racial composition of each school.[6] Another crucial issue for choice plans is *transportation.* It is difficult to forget the explosive political environment that accompanied forced busing to accomplish school desegregation. School choice plans are portrayed as inexpensive methods of school reform, but were they to include transportation for each child to attend the school of his or her choice, regardless of the distance from home, the costs could skyrocket. However, if transportation was not provided, and this burden was left to parents, certain children would be excluded from choice because of the inability of their parents to deliver them to the distant schools they might prefer or to pay for private transportation.

The choice plans currently in existence all focus on demand, as Chubb and Moe (1990a) point out. That is, they concentrate on choice among parents between currently existing school options. However, the advocates for the choice concept, especially Chubb and Moe and Milton Friedman, argue that the "supply side" should be freed—that is, new schools should be allowed to spring up and others to die away. This sort of freedom within a system of parental choice has yet to be realized.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND TO THE CHOICE ISSUE

Curriculum Choice

An important element in the theoretical and empirical background of curriculum choice is the role of curriculum exposure in fostering an inequitable social distribution of academic outcomes, especially achievement. Increasingly, this work centers on the roles played by schools, through the methods by which they organize their academic programs. In general, this body of research is sociological in nature, methodologically sophisticated, and makes use of data collected in several different milieus (e.g., from large nationally representative longitudinal studies to ethnographic studies in individual high schools). As such, the empirical base of research in the area of curriculum choice is strong, particularly in comparison to the weak research base on the issue of school choice.

Tracking

This research has focused on several aspects of curriculum choice: the mechanisms by which students are mapped to course content, how students' social background relates to these decisions, the effects of these processes on student outcomes (especially achievement), and how these effects are

distributed with regard to such characteristics as race/ethnicity, and social class (e.g., Alexander, Cook, & McDill, 1978; Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Cicourel & Kitsuse, 1963; Heyns, 1974; Jencks & Brown, 1975; Oakes, 1985; Oakes, Gamoran, & Page, 1991; Rosenbaum, 1976; Shafer & Olexa, 1971). This overall pattern has been termed "the social distribution of achievement" (Lee & Bryk, 1988, 1989). Much of this research focuses on tracking in secondary schools and how schools control students' opportunities to learn through tracking. The findings are consistent. Tracking has little effect on aggregate measures of learning. High-track students appear to learn equally well in homogeneous or heterogeneous classes, whereas low-track students are seriously disadvantaged by their experiences. Thus tracking has serious negative consequences on educational equity. It increases stratification of educational outcomes because minority and lower-class students are more likely to be in nonacademic tracks where less academic learning occurs.

Opportunity to Learn

More recent research has focused on differential learning opportunities provided by schools and on the role these opportunities play in structuring the social distribution of achievement. A comparison between the academic organizations of Catholic and public high schools by Lee and Bryk (1988) and the variation in students' academic experiences resulting from these organizational differences is useful here. After taking students' social and academic status into account, they found considerably less internal differentiation in track placement and course-taking in Catholic schools. In other words, whereas all students in Catholic schools—regardless of ability, race/ethnicity, or social class—follow almost the same largely academic course of study, public school students' course selections were related to their family background characteristics.

Although some of this difference is surely related to the types of students enrolled in public and Catholic schools, the assembled evidence strongly indicates independent effects of school organization whereby students in Catholic schools have almost no choice in their course of study but public school students have wide latitude. This is supported by another study investigating mathematics and science course-taking in four high schools (Garet & Delaney, 1988), which found substantial school-by-school differences in the probability of taking advanced courses for schools in the same geographic area, once student background and ability were taken into account. The study concluded that stratification in students' opportunities to learn results from schools' attitudes on student choice in course and section offerings.

In sum, this line of research demonstrates the ability of schools—through their organizations—to influence students' opportunities to learn, a conclusion which is also fundamental to the arguments favoring parental choice of schooling made by Chubb and Moe. There is substantial agreement that it is *schools* (rather than districts or states) where decisions are made that influence profoundly the learning of their students, and the equity of learning outcomes, by means of their decisions and policies to organize instruction.

Guidance Counseling

The role of guidance counseling in channeling high school students into courses and tracks is important here. Although it has been advocated that guidance counselors should take a more proactive stance in "being attentive to the process by which students make educational choices [about courses] to eliminate the impact of sex, race, and class socialization on such choices" (National Coalition of Advocates for Children, 1985, p. 115), the reverse appears to operate. One study found that social class, ethnicity, and educational aspirations are associated with access to counseling about curricular programs and courses (Lee & Ekstrom, 1987). Students most likely to need counseling, because they were least likely to have access to good advice at home (i.e., low-SES, minority, and students with low aspirations), are least likely to get advice from counselors about what courses they should take or what track might be most appropriate. These findings are consistent with field accounts that report students' having extensive individual choice over their courses of study, with the consequences of such choice for individuals and for society not deemed a school matter (Cusick, 1983; Grant, 1985; Powell et al., 1985).

The "Common School" Effect

Direct empirical investigation of the role of curricular organization in affecting the social distribution of achievement is provided by Lee and Bryk (1989). First reported by Coleman, Hoffer, and Kilgore (1982) but independently confirmed by many other researchers (see Jencks, 1985, for summary), this notion holds that contemporary Catholic schools more closely embody this ideal—a diverse student body coming together for common learning experiences, which results in rather homogeneous academic outcomes—than do today's schools. Important here are the Lee and Bryk results, whereby both the higher achievement levels and the more socially equitable distribution of that achievement in Catholic schools are explained largely as a result of differences in curricular organization in the two sectors. In brief, the constrained academic structure in Catholic schools acts both to induce a higher achievement overall and to minimize the social differentiation of

learning that accompanies wide latitude in course choices and to maximize learning.[7]

School Choice

Theoretical Arguments

The intellectual underpinnings of current notions of educational choice have appealed variously to liberals, libertarians, radicals, and conservatives, starting with Thomas Paine and Adam Smith in the 18th century (Coons & Sugarman, 1978; Elmore, 1987). The idea of educational vouchers, introduced to Americans by conservative Milton Friedman (1962; Friedman & Friedman, 1981), was adopted by a liberal Democratic government as a 1970s demonstration project in Alum Rock, California (Bridge & Blackman, 1978; Cohen & Farrar, 1977; Wells, 1990). President Reagan vigorously backed tuition tax credit proposals throughout his administration and introduced a plan to reorganize the federal government's major compensatory education program, Chapter 1, as a voucher plan. Although these proposals have been consistently unsuccessful in Congress, vigorous advocacy for educational choice continues from the current administration and state governments.

Support for these notions has alternately come from right and left, but the common thread that binds them together is a deep disillusionment with an unresponsive and bureaucratic public school monopoly—Tyack's (1974) "one best system" (see also Peterson, 1990; Raywid, 1985). Support among the American public for the concept of school choice is strong. In a 1989 Gallup poll, American households, 66% of which had no children in school, voiced strong support for parental choice of public schools (Elam, 1989). Three fifths (60%) of the sample supported choice, with somewhat stronger support from parents of children in school. This support was even stronger from non-Whites (67%) and younger respondents (67% of 18- to 29-year-olds supported choice). Most people thought that the choice option would improve both the satisfaction and achievement of students who attended schools of choice. Paradoxically, the same respondents supported, by a wide margin, a standardized national curriculum, national standards and goals for the public schools, and national tests to measure achievement. As discussed below, these views are not consistent.

How clients improve the services delivered by monopolies has been the object of some theoretical inquiry. Hirschman's (1970) seminal work, *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty*, presents an interesting approach. If clients (i.e., parents) are dissatisfied with their local public schools, they have the options of either *exit* (i.e., to move away or choose private schooling) or *voice* (i.e., trying to

change the school). For low-income parents, exit is not a real option.[8] The availability of school choice would provide the exit option to everyone. However, as Hirschman observes, "the presence of the exit alternative can . . . tend to *atrophy the development of the art of voice*" (p. 43). Moreover, in relating the general case to public and private schooling, Hirschman makes a convincing case that "those clients who would be the most active, reliable, and creative agents of voice are . . . those who are most likely to exit first in the case of deterioration" (p. 47). He argues that voice is the most effective way to improve poorly functioning organizations and that easy access to exit constrains voice. Hirschman's argument focuses on choosing private schooling, but the logic appears equally applicable for public schools where choice is an option. Dissatisfied parents who choose a different school for their children (exit) exert little effort (through voice) to improve the present school.

There is considerable theoretical work questioning the long-term viability of monopolies. Public schools today, particularly those in metropolitan areas, are close to monopolies. The 20th-century political history of public education shows, in fact, a steady march toward monopolistic control in both structure and financing (Peterson, 1985, 1990; Tyack, 1984). Monopolistic bureaucracies have little need to be responsive to pressure from their clientele as they need not fear losing them. Instead, such bureaucracies are more concerned with maintaining themselves in power. American public schools, argues Peterson, have come closer to monopoly power than most institutions. Monopolies are, however, difficult to maintain over the long run. He characterizes the contemporary public education enterprise as essentially two different systems—center-city quasi-monopolistic schools surrounded by a suburban belt of small districts that are responsive to public pressures.[9] The introduction of choice is a movement to change the first of these systems and could be seen as representing public pressure to dismantle monopoly control of schooling in large cities.

The problem of improving public schools has been greatly compounded by the move of the middle class from large cities, mostly to avoid desegregation (Peterson, 1990). The middle class discovered it could have both choice and high-quality free public education in the suburbs. Suburban superintendents are motivated to offer services that parents want (respond to voice, instill loyalty) or the parents will leave (exit). Central-city school administrators are less responsive to parental pressure because the exit option is unavailable to most of their constituent families. In fact, Hirschman (1970) makes a point that services of a poorly functioning monopoly (read center-city public schools) may actually deteriorate in response to exit as the strongest voices favoring improvement disappear. If exit is only selectively

available, then those with the most effective voices will probably exercise the exit option.

Arguments in Favor of School Choice

The word "argument" is used advisedly here because the base of empirical research on school choice is weak, especially in comparison to the research on curriculum choice. As Manski (1992) states, "the policy debate has been long on advocacy and short on analysis" (p. 4). Strong advocates of educational choice, such as Chubb and Moe (1990a), Coons (1990), Lieberman (1989), Nathan (1987), and Boyd and Kerchner (1987), argue that choice is the only way to affect needed school reform, as serious reform from within the public school bureaucracy is virtually impossible. Underlying the argument favoring choice is a series of assumptions about its likely effects on parents, students, and teachers. They argue that more satisfied parents would support their schools and their children's learning, more engaged students would result when their own learning style is matched to a particular school, and more committed teachers would result when they have chosen their setting and been active in designing their own school programs. It is argued that all of these outcomes would combine to increase student achievement, attendance, and educational attainment (Elmore, 1987).

Although there have been claims that such positive student outcomes have accrued in cities with choice, closer examination of these claims shows them to be largely unsubstantiated.[10] For example, Witte (1992), evaluating the second year of Milwaukee's controversial plan that provides a $2,500 voucher to up to 1,000 poor students to attend nonsectarian Milwaukee private schools, found no significant gains in achievement for these students and considerable attrition from the program.

There is some evidence that the idea of school choice is particularly favored by disadvantaged and minority parents. The logic is that these are families who currently have access only to the lowest-quality public schools. The Gallup poll discussed above showed somewhat greater support for choice from non-Whites (Elam, 1989). Presenting indirect empirical evidence from existing survey data, Coleman, Schiller, and Schneider (1991) concluded that minority and economically disadvantaged parents would most probably take advantage of expanded choice if it were available.[11] A recent survey in the Detroit metropolitan area showed that Black parents more than Whites supported several forms of choice, with Blacks advocating especially strongly choice plans that were either cross-district or statewide, as opposed to within-district (Strate & Wilson, 1991). Most Black parents in that study (75%) also rated the quality of their public schools as "poor" or "fair," compared to only 26% of White parents. In a study in which the effects

of a tuition tax deduction plan on choice behavior in Minnesota were investigated by interviewing parents, Darling-Hammond and Kirby (1985) found that whereas low-income parents, "who cannot afford to 'choose with their feet' " (p. 81), were more likely to consider alternatives to their local public schools, upper-income parents generally used the high-quality schools in their residential locations. For neither group was the tuition tax deduction an important factor in making such decisions.

Arguments Against School Choice

There are two strands of arguments against choice. One strand focuses on what choice *doesn't* do, whereas the other strand focuses on the potential inequities involved in the implementation of almost any of the choice options described earlier. Listed below are examples within each strand that argue against parental choice.

• *Oversights of Choice*

1. *There is no focus on learning.* Advocates argue that school choice is bound to have positive effects on student learning, albeit indirectly, by creating learning environments where teachers, principals, and parents agree on the essential values to be pursued. Although some recent research has provided convincing evidence that such shared values, exhibited in schools organized more as communities, than as bureaucracies, have positive effects on teachers and students (including, but not primarily, on achievement), it is the organizational characteristics of the schools themselves (e.g., small size, diffuse teacher role, shared decision making) that appear to matter, not that parents have chosen them (Bryk & Lee, in press; Bryk, Lee, & Smith, 1990). This same criticism could be directed to programs increasing site control of schools, such as the current reform being implemented in the Chicago public schools.

2. *What happens to the bureaucracy?* Although almost everyone agrees that large bureaucracies have created substantial obstacles to serious reform in public education, recent reform movements have themselves been largely bureaucratic. For example, the drive to tighten graduation requirements was imposed on schools by districts, which in turn were dictated to by the state. These were top-down reforms. Whereas such current reforms as site-based management appear to move real power to schools and teachers and away from the bureaucracy, the movement of power is initiated *by* the bureaucracy itself.

However, choice schemes, by their nature, aim to diminish or eliminate bureaucratic control of schools. Although some functions would surely continue to be controlled by the bureaucracy in even the most extreme choice

plans (e.g., issuing vouchers and deciding their value, record keeping for children with multiple transfers, coordinating complicated transportation systems, monitoring participating private schools for compliance with public regulations, providing information about available choices), the power of the bureaucracy would be seriously diminished. Is it realistic to think that bureaucracies that now hold power would relinquish it? Would teachers' unions comply? It is common for district administrators and teachers' unions to evidence considerable skepticism about choice plans, despite their apparent public support. This may not be bad, but surely the dismantling of the bureaucracy would not be easy. Typically, choice plans make little mention of this obstacle.

3. *"Bad" schools do not disappear.* It is argued that choice would proliferate innovative programs and good schools, resulting in poor schools and programs simply going out of business for lack of clients. Friedman (1980), Chubb and Moe (1990a), and others who advocate choice have argued that schools that are low on most parents' "choice list," and thus underenrolled, would be forced to close their doors. There is no evidence of such self-destruction in "choice" cities, however. Inner-city schools are seldom underenrolled, as families in cities with choice often "choose" the closest school, regardless of its apparent quality. In those instances, poor schools would just continue or, more likely, get even worse because most interested and motivated children and families would be gone. While it could be argued that more freedom within a choice scheme would allow bad schools to close and new ones to spring up in their place, there is no evidence that this has happened within any choice plans in current operation.

• ***Educational Equity***

1. *Inequitable exercise of the choice system.* Rather than enhancing the options for poor and minority parents, say critics of choice, it may be creating new forms of discrimination. A 2-year research study analyzed the implementation of school choice programs in New York, Chicago, Philadelphia, and Boston (Moore & Davenport, 1990). They found that choice has created further social stratification in education in these cities. First, few students ended up anywhere other than in the neighborhood school.[12] Second, Black and Hispanic students, low-income students, low-achieving students, students with absence or behavior problems, handicapped children, and children with limited English proficiency had limited opportunities to participate in popular option programs and high schools. Instead, such students were concentrated disproportionately in schools (in their own neighborhoods) where their fellow students were also minority, low-income, and have learning problems. Moore and Davenport see loosely implemented choice pro-

grams as a new form of segregation, which "cream" the best students (and sometimes teachers) into the best schools, leaving the rest of the student population in even weaker educational environments. Although the supposed existence of choice provides an illusion of fairness, real choices are actually unavailable to a majority of such students.

Although choice might appear equalizing in that less advantaged parents seem to favor this policy in the abstract, a better test of the effect of choice on educational equity is to consider the characteristics of families who actually take advantage of choice if it is available. Two recent studies have investigated this question. In a large American city with a choice plan that allowed residents of the inner-city to attend mostly White high schools in the suburbs, Wells (1992) interviewed random samples of city-dwelling Black students and parents who did and did not choose to transfer. Parents of children who transferred had relatively more education, fewer children, were more likely to be employed, and worked in higher-status jobs. Two other striking findings are noteworthy. First, parents of transfer students took an active role in the decision, often overruling their childrens' reluctance to change schools. Second (reflecting Witte's 1992 findings), many children who transferred subsequently returned to the city schools.

Compared to the Wells study, Willms and Echols (1992) used much larger samples and sophisticated quantitative methods to examine the characteristics of Scottish students and families choosing schools out of their "catchment areas" compared to those who remained in the schools to which they were initially assigned. The study was undertaken to examine response to 1980 legislation by the British government that provided all UK parents with the choice option. Results support findings from the Wells (1992) study, indicating that "choosing" parents were of higher SES (i.e.,better educated, with more prestigious occupations), although there were no initial achievement differences between students in the two groups. Moreover, choosers selected schools with higher average SES and higher average achievement. Once students' intake characteristics were taken into account, however, "choice" and nonchoice schools showed no differences in average attainment. Willms and Echols (1992) conclude that "the choice process [in Scotland] is increasing between-school segregation, which may produce greater inequalities in attainment between social class groups" (p. ii).

Economists have also become interested in choice and educational equity. In two recent quantitative simulation studies, Roemer (1992) and Manski (1992) examined the implications on educational opportunity of awarding vouchers to public school students to enable them to attend private schools. Roemer (1992) investigated potential effects on the public system of allowing differences in the value of vouchers—awarding vouchers of higher value

to poor families or letting parents provide "add ons" to pay the tuition of expensive private schools. He suggests that the "add on" scheme would surely decrease educational opportunity, whereas real vouchers would be unable to place the "right price" on the cost of educating different types of children. Although he found a "flat rate" voucher system less damaging to equal educational opportunity than an "add on" system, he concluded that any voucher system would hurt the education of poor children by decreasing middle-class support for educational taxes.

Manski (1992) evaluated the effect on students of different income levels of systems with differing voucher amounts in communities with varying levels of affluence. His results suggest that vouchers of any size would "have a negative student-interaction effect on those low-income youth who remain in public schools: as the voucher value rises, the fraction of high-motivation students in public schools tends to fall, especially in poor communities" (p. 39). He concluded that "a systematic choice system, no matter how it was designed, would not come close to equalizing educational opportunity across income groups" (p. 39) and warned that our nation not follow its "political nose" and rush to implement a voucher program.

2. *Inequitable access to information.* Advocates respond that equity problems arise when choice plans are implemented without adequate safeguards. Carefully implemented choice plans that are designed to avoid such stratification, like that in Cambridge, Massachusetts are rare. Besides consideration of racial balance, such implementation depends on a serious commitment on the part of the schools to inform and involve families in the choice process. Preparing and disseminating such information is not simple, according to Elmore (1990). Because education is complex, the information about what schools offer must be similarly complex. Consumers must be rather sophisticated and discriminating to use it profitably, and it is not always in the best interests of administrators to provide accurate information about their schools. Elmore argues, "It seems unlikely . . . that giving clients greater choice in highly complex, inscrutable structures will result in anything other than a reshuffling of opportunity in favor of those who are willing to incur the cost of information-seeking" (p. 302). In the Alum Rock demonstration in the 1970s, voucher parents were found to be much more knowledgeable about program options, transportation, and transfer rights than were parents who chose not to participate (Bridge & Blackman, 1978; Caterall & Levin, 1983; Wells, 1990). Differential access to, and use of, information about schooling options could also increase educational inequities endemic to parental choice in schooling. In the economic simulations described above, both Manski (1992) and Roemer (1992) admit that their estimates of inequity in a voucher system are probably conservative as neither study took into

account differential access to, and ability to make sense of, information about vouchers by families with different income levels.

How Is School Choice Related to Curriculum Choice?

Although choice of schools and choice of curriculum are quite separate conceptual and practical issues of educational policy, the discussions of both were incorporated into a single article for two reasons: (a) the inconsistency of implementing policies reflecting popular opinion about the two types of choice and (b) the implications for educational equity of the implementation of either of them.

First, as stated above, there is considerable support from the American people for more choice of schools and less choice of curriculum. However, the logical conclusions of the implementation of policies reflecting this opinion are rather inconsistent. Let us consider the implications of the implementation of an educational policy advocating a core curriculum of academic courses followed by all students. Research suggests that two outcomes will accrue for students. First, the overall achievement levels will increase. Second, that achievement will be more equitably distributed.

But what are the implications for schools? If all schools offered a constrained curriculum that was highly academic in character, schools would become quite similar to one another. In terms of offerings (and, hopefully, outcomes), center-city public schools would come to more closely resemble their suburban public counterparts. Public schools in general would be more similar to private schools, the large majority of which offer an academic curriculum with fewer options than public schools. However, one of the bedrock assumptions of parental choice schemes is that schools should really be quite different from one another (otherwise, why is one more desirable than another?) and implementing school choice would presumably engender even more variability into the system. Already, magnet schools have developed a wide range of focus on special interests. That is, purposely constraining students' choice of courses leads to schools that are more homogeneous in their offerings and, hopefully, in their outcomes. Under those circumstances, the real options from which to choose would not include curricular variation.

A second reason for combining the discussion centers on the implications of choice in both arenas on educational equity. I would maintain that no social policy—educational or otherwise—should be acceptable to the American public if its implementation has the effect of magnifying differences in educational outcomes between minority and White students, between affluent and disadvantaged students. Although educational choice plans are in their infancy in terms of the research on their effects, what is known engenders reason for serious concern. On the other hand, the research "jury"

is in on curricular choice, the results of which also provide some cause for concern. In both cases, the primary concern expressed here centers on the effect of choice on educational equity. That is to say, both parental choice of schooling—through the concentration of more advantaged students into some schools at the expense of neighborhood schools—and curriculum choice—through the most advantaged students following the most academic courses with the best teachers at the expense of average or below-average students—appear to magnify differences in the quality of education available to children from diverse social backgrounds.

Exercising Choice

Findings from the Alum Rock voucher experiment in the 1970s and from several cities with choice plans in the late 1980s show that more affluent families (and their higher-achieving children) are initially interested in, and ultimately take advantage of, the opportunity to enroll their children in schools of choice. This appears to be the case even within Black families in the inner cities. The removal of such families and children from local schools can have only adverse effects on those schools, unless other equally advantaged children and families move in. This appears unlikely to occur. Quite simply, some schools are likely to improve as a result of parental choice, and some children would therefore get a better education. But it is difficult to see how *all* schools and *all* children could benefit from such a plan. The existing empirical evidence suggests that social stratification in educational outcomes increases as a result of parental choice of schools. The collective social conscience of this society should find this result unacceptable.

Similarly, the availability of a wide variety of curricular options, and the exercise of choice of those options, acts to disadvantage minority and lower-SES high school students. Such students are less likely to recognize the implications of their choice and therefore might not choose wisely. In general they would avoid courses with strong academic content, courses that demand work at home and frequent evaluation, and instead select less rigorous alternatives. As one would expect, experiencing demanding course work in academic areas has a strong relationship with academic performance. With less strong preparation, disadvantaged students do not do as well in school and on standardized tests as their more advantaged and better trained counterparts do. Again, this should be seen as an unacceptable result.

Seeking and Using Information

There is also reason to believe that unequal information about both parental choice of schools and student choice of courses increases social stratification in education. The availability and complexity of information

about schools where choice plans are in practice, as well as which families actually seek it, is associated with family social background, with advantaged families more likely to seek out all the information they might need and to know which information is important. Given the complexity of the issues surrounding parents making a choice about schools for their children, this unequal allocation of information compounds the serious inequities that result from choice schemes.

In a related vein, less advantaged students make poor educational choices because they are not aware of the consequences of certain courses of study. For example, such students might seriously reduce their chances for a college education by choosing nonacademic courses. Research shows that such students get less counseling in school and are also less likely to get advice about future education from home because their parents have little experience in this domain to bring to bear. Left to choose from a dazzling and confusing array of courses, sometimes actively discouraged from pursuing more demanding work, many students make poor course choices. Later, they are left to bear the burden of these choices in terms of both poor test performance and poor preparation for higher education.

How Do School Choice and Curriculum Choice Differ?

Supply and Demand

Another way to view both school and curriculum choice is as a consequence of supply and demand. On the supply side of curriculum choice, a public school's course offerings are institutionally fixed, with school-level decisions influenced to some extent by policies and resources from the district and the state. However, we know that these offerings are also influenced by teachers' interest, willingness, and qualifications (see Cusick, 1983, and Grant, 1988, for rich descriptions of teachers' influence on the proliferation of course offerings, particularly at the low end, in the late 1970s). Moreover, views of parents, principals, and society about what students *ought* to learn also influence what is offered (and not offered).

In theory, the demand side of curriculum choice is determined entirely by students—by their interests, their abilities, and their preparation. However, it is surely an institutional decision—the school being the institution of interest here—not to offer everything that is demanded. Just because our children might request pizza, potato chips, soda pop, and banana cream pie for dinner does not constrain us from offering them only meat, vegetables, and milk. The major source of inequity in curriculum choice is at the level of supply side, both through what courses are offered and which are not and, in a school with multiple offerings (i.e., the comprehensive "shopping mall"

high school), through advising students with particular attributes toward or away from certain courses. That is, the inequities introduced into the educational system through curriculum choice derive as much from institutional as from individual choice.

Supply and demand in parental choice of schools operate somewhat differently. The assumptions of choice advocates is that this should be a pure market. That is, the supply should expand and change to reflect the demand. Such a system assumes that schools, as independent organizations, would be free to proliferate and to diversify their offerings. However, it assumes that consumers are also fully informed as to what they want and what is available and that they (and society) are willing and able to absorb the consequences of poor decisions. As Willms and Echols (1992) indicated, however, the demand among Scottish parents was for high-SES and high-attainment schools. How can the system suddenly increase the supply of such schools and correspondingly reduce the supply of low-attainment and low-SES schools? Even in theory, it is difficult to imagine most parents desiring *other* than high-attainment schools for their children. As stated earlier, such a demand would logically lead to a less varied set of offerings. The major source of inequity in a choice system, at least among those currently in existence, is in the attributes of those making a choice compared to those who make no choice. Institutional inputs, on the part of any particular school, are only modestly related to equity.

Who Is Doing the Choosing?

In theory, choice of both curriculum and school lies in the hands of the chooser—the student and his or her parents. However, the arguments above suggest that the primary determinant of curriculum choice is what is available to choose *from*. What is offered is primarily a decision that rests with individual schools. Quite simply, students in schools with a constrained curriculum that is largely academic in nature cannot "choose wrong." Although the locus of choice is more clearly with the chooser, it could be argued that school choice is similarly constrained. In single-district choice plans, this is certainly the case. Is it surprising the Black parents in the Detroit area (most of whom live in the city of Detroit) favor cross-district rather than within-district choice (Strate & Wilson, 1991)? It appears reasonable that these parents would like to avail themselves of the higher-quality suburban schools and to exit from the Detroit public schools.

What Are the Alternatives to School and Curriculum Choice?

As stated earlier, the common denominator that binds together supporters of school choice, who come from otherwise rather disparate philosophical

bases, is a deep disillusionment with unresponsive and bureaucratic public schools. Dissatisfaction is particularly strong with big-city systems, where large numbers of minority and disadvantaged children are educated. It is no accident that most existing choice plans are also in large cities. The demographic pattern of America's disadvantaged being grouped largely in cities, surrounded by affluent White suburbs, makes the contrasts in both educational quality and educational outcomes particularly strong. The distressingly low test scores and high dropout rates characteristic of big-city school systems have energized all facets of American society to cry out that "something *must* be done about American education!"

Enter choice. Given the disillusionment with the current state of American education, choice appears to be a rather simple (and, as President Bush pointed out, economical) way to restructure schooling. As Chubb and Moe (1990b) claim, we cannot leave reform to the education establishment. Even if we all share this dissatisfaction with the current state of American education, and we think some fundamental restructuring or reorganizing efforts are in order, it is difficult to see choice as the panacea it is thought to be by many of its supporters. Although I agree with choice advocates that large bureaucracies are poorly equipped and inadequately motivated to improve schooling, and also agree that most decisions about staffing and instruction should be made at the school site in cooperation with parents, I argue that all reforms must be scrutinized in regard to their effects on *what* is being taught and learned and on *who* is receiving what instruction. That is to say, it is my view that all reforms must focus on the double aims of raising achievement and the equitable distribution of educational outcomes. As social policies, neither curriculum choice nor parental choice of schooling passes those fundamental tests. Both would appear, rather, to raise smokescreens that cloud our ability to address the fundamental problems: increasing student learning and simultaneously increasing educational equity. It appears likely that there is considerable unanimity on what American parents want from the educational system for their children: namely, solid training in academic subjects in preparation for their academic and professional futures coupled with character development and acculturation.

Recommendations about curriculum choices are easier. In the interest of reducing social inequity in education, high schools can and should exert a profound influence on the educational course of study pursued by their students, and that influence should be directed toward a more constrained and more academic course of study. This means that the educational establishment must adopt a normative stance on what is good for children. It has been shown that such a program pursued by *all* students, regardless of social and academic background, can simultaneously raise outcome levels on

average and also ameliorate the socially differentiating effects that commonly occur within these institutions. Too many choices among courses exacerbate social differences in schools. At a minimum, all students (and their parents) should be informed about course sequences and requirements for both graduation and college entry. Better would be a core curriculum.

The Catholic high school, with its focused curriculum emphasizing common academic pursuits for all students and its normative environment supporting those ends, has much relevance to those interested in reforms that engender both quality and equity. It appears reasonable to postulate that many disadvantaged young people would benefit from attending public schools organized in similar ways, with a strong institutional pull toward academic pursuits. Although the curriculum reforms that reflected the recommendations from *A Nation at Risk* have been implemented quite widely *on average*, it is not clear that this has really had much influence on the content of courses or on who takes what courses. It is hoped that there is strong belief in America's educational establishment that all students can really master an academic curriculum. However, the substantial public support of educational choice suggests that Americans may not really advocate the improvement of education for *all* its citizens.

NOTES

1. The choice of words here—"parental" choice of schools and "student" choice of curriculum—is quite arbitrary. The phrases employed are those common in the literature. Actually, it is likely (or at least desirable) that both parents and students participate in both types of choices.

2. See Boyer (1983), Powell, Farrar, and Cohen (1985), and Sizer (1984).

3. The arguments about curriculum choice and the academic organization of schools made here draw heavily on two works: Bryk, Lee, and Smith (1990) and Lee and Bryk (1989).

4. All courses in the curriculum of Michigan high schools were collapsed into these two categories for the purpose of this analysis. Although the proportional changes over time are not large, they are in the expected direction.

5. There are several other possible explanations for the null findings. Analysis was at the aggregated level, which did not allow investigation of the effects *for each student* of increasing his or her program. Moreover, these analyses compared cohorts, the demographic composition of which could surely have changed over time.

6. These "controlled choice" plans are successful in cities where the school population is racially and economically rather varied. In many large cities, however, the vast majority of students are poor and Black or Hispanic. It is difficult to imagine how one could "control" the enrollment of schools to insure either racial or social balance other than by including suburban districts in the area from which school choices might be made. The latter, while socially appealing, appears rather unlikely politically.

7. The smaller school size in the Catholic sector acts as an organizational "accomplice" here. Quite simply, it is easier to create a more internally differentiated academic structure in a larger school.

8. Disadvantaged parents do not have an effective "voice" to change the schools their children attend because most of them live in large cities, where the school bureaucracy is unresponsive. As Peterson (1990) and Chubb and Moe (1990a) argue, these school systems operate as monopolies—aware that their "clients" are unable to exit. As a result, inner-city parents' lack of voice may be misinterpreted as another of Hirschman's (1970) important concepts: loyalty.

9. Middle-class families choose their residences on the basis of evidence about the quality of the public schools. Peterson (1990) provides considerable evidence to support the correspondence of local property values to aggregate community test scores.

10. It is instructive to examine District 4, which is in the Harlem area of New York City. Although reading score gains have been impressive, critics argue that they accrue mainly from higher-scoring students who came into District 4 schools from more affluent areas of the city. Even District 4 personnel argue that it is the large infusion of money coupled with a push toward innovation, that has accounted for the strides. Choice alone, they say, cannot improve schools (see *Education Week*, November 1, 1989).

11. Coleman, Schiller, and Schneider (1991) employed the NELS:88 data base on eighth graders, and focused on the possibilities that these children were considering for high school. The inquiries center on children in public and private middle-grade schools considering private high schools.

12. For example, New York City families have full choice among public high schools. In the 1984-1985 school year, 90,000 students entered high school. Although registering some 380,000 choices about the schools they wished to attend, less than 10% (32,000 applicants) received and accepted any choice and thus did not attend the neighborhood school (Moore & Davenport, 1990). Even though the proportion of students in "choice" high schools has increased over time, the pattern of stratification endures.

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