

Public Schools of Choice and the Plurality of Publics¹

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THE ills of our public schools are now common knowledge. Why they are in trouble is still a matter of debate and inquiry. The major attempts of the 1950's and 1960's for educational reform—desegregation and compensatory education—have had disappointing results, while problems continue at an accelerated rate, for example: absenteeism, dropouts, academic retardation, drug addiction, unrest, and defeated school bond issues. Further, the latest batch of public school critics has projected an almost macabre tone to the public schools: *Our Children Are Dying, Death at an Early Age, Murder in the Classroom, The Classroom Disaster*. While it is imperative that we emphasize the critical nature of the educational problem, to continue lashing out at the public schools at this time serves little useful purpose, resulting mainly in ill feelings from those trying to make schools work.

We should all realize that education in America is organic to individual, group, and societal *survival*. We have entered the Age of Education. Modern education should be instrumentally tied to the needs of society, of groups, and of individuals, and to the encompassing growth and development of all of these. An obsolete educational institution handicaps *all* learners, teachers, administrators, communities, and the larger society. Thus, we are all disadvantaged.

¹ A full length book by Mario Fantini, Donald Harris, and Sam Nash, tentatively titled *Public Schools of Choice*, will be published by Random House, Inc., in 1971.

Diversity Is Important

In a pluralistic society, diversity is an important value that our educational institutions should express. Yet, our public schools as presently structured cannot meet the growing demands that are being thrust upon them from virtually every sector of our society. Students are demanding that schools become relevant to them and help close the generation gap. Minority parents are demanding a quality of education that guarantees equality of educational performance. Business and industry are increasingly demanding an educational product who is prepared for a technological, service-oriented economy.

We are asking the schools to deal with such societal problems as poverty, alienation, delinquency, drug addiction, pollution, and racism. The result is that, while these demands are legitimate, the schools cannot as presently structured satisfy them. The consequences to our public system of education are loss of confidence, frustration, disconnection, and retaliation by the consumer. It is little wonder that President Nixon started his Education Message of March 3, 1970, with: "American education is in urgent need of reform."

In our society when a major societal

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institution such as the school is in need of basic reform, the public *participates* in the process. Participation is the heart of an open political system. Thus far, the push for increased participation has come from our urban centers, through school governance patterns such as decentralization and community control. These patterns appeal strongly to minorities that have been short-changed through poor education: Black, Chicano, Puerto Rican, etc.

Participation under decentralization can mean that parents and other citizens *share* educational decision making with professionals, at the local level and with central school authority. Participation under decentralization is limited for each citizen to voting for representatives to a local school board. The locally elected board then is responsible for trying to *represent* the interests of those who voted for him. Decentralization can mean a federation of local school boards, each with a limited authority over part of the total school system.

Participation under community control shifts the bulk of authority to a local board elected by the community. In an extreme form of decentralization, a local subdistrict may actually *secede* from the rest of the school system to assume an independent status with the state department of education. Again, participation in direct decision making for *each* citizen is limited to voting for a representative in the local election.

We need a process today in which *each* user of our public schools can make a decision concerning the type of education which makes the most sense for *him*. This means *giving parents, students, teachers, and administrators a direct voice in educational decision making*. Parents, teachers, students, and school administrators—those closest to the learning front—have traditionally been those farthest from participation in educational decision making. We are all familiar with the “top-down” flow of authority which characterizes our educational institutions, in which those farthest from the learner are making decisions about his nature and nurture.

The rise of the parties closest to the

action—teachers, parents, and students—during the sixties has signaled the beginning of a new flow of decision making from the “bottom-up.”

However, the plurality of publics which now relate to the school in direct, vested-interest ways makes the school an arena for power politics. That is, since each public—teachers, parents, and students—wants the school to be responsive to its own concerns and needs, each has had to organize politically in order to have its interests realized.

Competing for power in order to meet group needs can result and, indeed, has resulted in direct confrontation among the “new” publics. We are witnessing collision between parents and teachers—between students and teachers. Ironically, parties who should be natural allies have been trapped into conflict because the current institutional arrangements literally compel this type of behavior. Parents have blamed teachers for the poor quality of education and for the high costs of schooling—teachers have blamed parents for being apathetic and unreasonable about holding teachers accountable without realizing that teachers themselves are constrained by the institution.

The point is that the key publics are blaming one another and losing track of the real “enemy”—the outdated nature of the institution we call the school. The parties need to have access to a new form of participation during this period of school reform if we are to avoid the group power game in which we are presently engaged. How can we enter a new stage of participation in which we are presently engaged. How can publics be protected? What is the direction of reform? It is to these basic questions that we now turn.

The New Reform Efforts

The major task before school reformers now is to offer constructive suggestions and proposals, ones which provide some hope, which are attainable, and which affect the lives of many children, not just a few. What will be the new reform efforts of the seventies? Two movements which started at the

tail-end of the sixties offer us some signs for the seventies.

The first of these is the movement of alternative schools *outside* the public school system. These new schools have increased in number over the past few years as conditions in *urban* public schools—especially urban—continue to decline. It is reform by retreating from public schools into the realm of private schools. New schools took various forms: prep-academic, mini, so-called “open” or free schools (in contrast with “closed” public schools), and others.

The second movement is an attempt to reach the educational consumer directly through a tuition voucher which can be used to purchase quality education. This latter form attempts to generate needed change by altering the economic structure of American education, that is, by increasing the power of the educational consumer to purchase different forms of education in a type of free market enterprise.

Both these movements are extremely significant, not so much for what they offer as programs, but for what they reveal about the fundamental nature of the reform problem and the desperation stage that many of our educational consumers have reached. Alternative schools have pointed out that educational options to conventional public schooling exist and can be vastly superior. However, this movement suffers from the fiscal constraints which victimize new schools. Most new schools have good ideas but find it difficult to “stay alive” financially without resorting to high tuitions (thereby denying many citizens access to this alternative). The tuition voucher approach points out the need for providing the educational consumer with opportunities to make more educational choices.

Together they reveal a need for a new political-economic educational system—that is, a participatory-governance system on the one hand, and a new *supply* and *demand* system on the other. In one sense, the alternative new schools movement has generated attention on the *supply* side of the new economic educational system and the tuition movement has stimulated development on the

demand side. Each, however, is now largely separated from the other and from the public school system which they usually view as the “enemy.”

What is needed is to bring these two developments—supply and demand—and individual decision making into the context of *public schools* where the majority of students are enrolled. What we propose is a new system of Public Schools of Choice. Before outlining our conception of Public Schools of Choice, we should emphasize more fully the shortcomings of dealing with just the demand side of the educational supply and demand question.

Attempts to change the realm of demand do not guarantee that the supply side will also change. In fact, what can happen is that the supply which exists can be further tightened, that is, current alternatives can be strengthened, with marginal increases in new alternatives (and these often are reflected in a compromise with quality).

Those who have reviewed attempts to change the demand structure of other institutions—say health and higher education—have made the assessments that have important implications for us at this time. Medicaid, for example, is a voucher system which provides increased medical purchasing power for the citizen. This health system has not affected the supply system appreciably. The consumer has increased opportunity to purchase what exists. In the case of health services, therefore, some would agree that the real services for the consumer have not been ignored—the service problem being the one that is most crucial to patient welfare.

Another attempt to influence the demand market was the GI Bill which provided opportunities for millions of returning servicemen to enter higher education. This demand structure connected many educational consumers with the *existing* supply of colleges and universities. Many of these colleges were not relevant to the varying needs of the adult populations being served. Of course, we are all familiar with the “fly-by-night” suppliers who, seeking a “fast buck,” provided mediocre or inferior services to the citizen.

In our opinion, the problem is *not* the demand but the supply system. Public schools already have a built-in demand system—a voucher system if you will—through taxation. Further, increasing numbers of parents and students are dissatisfied with the educational services being provided them, that is, with the supply system. The problem is to provide more alternatives for those dissatisfied educational customers who are demanding more choices, not to increase further the demand capability. As we have suggested, increasing the demand capacity does not necessarily guarantee a renewed supply capacity.

On the other hand, creating a new supply system outside the public school system in the long run accomplishes little. In this case, the supply system—new educational options—exists outside the demand structure of the masses who need these options and are requesting them most. Moreover, those leading the new school movement find themselves in continuous fiscal difficulty and must ultimately turn to public support.

The trick is to get a system of educational options with consumer choice to take place *inside* the public school system.

Lessons from the Past

Certainly we now have a backlog of experience in dealing with public school improvement. It is now time for us to review the lessons of the past and apply them directly to the present.

From our perspective, the pertinent lessons from the past, including the voucher plan and alternative schools, are:

1. Any reform effort *cannot be of a superimposed variety*, that is, the days of a small group planning for or doing to others are fading out.

2. Reform considerations *must respect the rights of all concerned parties and must apply to everyone*—they cannot appear to serve the interests of one group only. Thus, for instance, if decentralization plans of urban school systems are interpreted to serve only minority communities, then the majority community may very well oppose such efforts.

Similarly, if plans appear to favor professionals, then the community may be in opposition.

3. Any reform alternative *must demonstrate adherence to a comprehensive set of educational objectives*—not just particular ones. Proposals cannot, for example, emphasize only emotional growth at the expense of intellectual development. The converse is also true.

4. Reform proposals *cannot substantially increase the per student expenditure* from that of established programs. To advance an idea which doubles or triples the budget will at best place the proposal in the ideal-but-not-practical category. Further, an important factor for reformers to bear in mind is that the new arena will deal with wiser use of *old* money, not the quest for add-on money.

5. Programs *cannot advocate any form of exclusivity*—racial, religious, or economic. Solutions cannot deny equal access to any particular individual or group.

6. *There is no single model answer*, no blanket panacea to the educational problem. Attempts at uniform solutions are almost never successful.

7. *The process of change must be democratic and maximize individual decision making*. Participation by the individual in the decisions which affect his life is basic to comprehensive support.

The above “learnings” become not only the criteria for developing any new proposal, they are the ground rules for the operation of any new plan. Using them, we can see, for example, how such current proposals as big city decentralization and community control are in trouble. Both these reform efforts collide with the criteria. Consequently, unless new reform alternatives can adhere to these criteria, there is no reason to assume that these will be any more successful.

At present, those who aspire to influence the schools must of necessity resort to the political process based on representative government, that is, officials elected or selected to govern the local schools. While such tactics as decentralization and community control do increase the voice of communities in educational affairs, they do not guarantee that *each* parent, student, or teacher can make

decisions, or indeed have options. Further, the decisions reached by the elected representatives usually do not reflect the desires of important segments of their constituency.

Public Schools of Choice

A Public Schools of Choice model provides the opportunity and the means for developing alternative education forms within the framework of the public educational system. Let us illustrate: one set of agreed-upon educational objectives has to do with mastery of the basic skills and academic proficiency in history, reading, writing, and mathematics. The chief means for achieving these objectives is the standard age-grade mode presently offered in public schools. We are familiar with the normal sequences of separate grades one through twelve. Students who do not meet their expected grade "norm" are usually forced to keep "down" with the others.

One option to the age-graded system is the ungraded, continuous progress approach. In this scheme, the learner proceeds at his own rate, and there are no age grades as such. How can this option be made available to the parents and teachers who might be interested? The ungraded alternative may be known only by *one* of the parties of interest, the professionals.

Awareness of such alternatives is achieved by reading professional publications or attending professional conferences. These are more available to administrators than to teachers. Administrators have more time to pursue professional activities. Students and parents usually have no access to professional information. Consequently, those farthest from the action are most knowledgeable about alternatives. Teachers, students, and parents, closest to the action, are the least likely to be aware of existing alternatives.

Providing information about alternatives to all concerned must be a key function in public school systems of choice. Hence, based on sufficient information, teachers, parents, and students could make a thoughtful choice of continuing the present graded system or developing an ungraded system.

We now come to a critical aspect of our discussion. Suppose 10 percent of the parents, students, and teachers in a school wanted to explore an ungraded system. Under normal circumstances, the 90 percent would simply overrule the 10 percent. The 10 percent might possibly impose their will on the 90 percent by manipulating them, or, if influential, they might convince the board of education to make the change they desire. It is all-or-nothing for both sides. Imposition either way makes for much hostility and little good sense. All suffer since the discontented—whether parents, teachers, or students—will, even unwittingly, undermine the unity and harmony in the school. Under a Public Schools of Choice system, both can have their programs implemented. This point deserves further explanation.

Under the present structure a program develops when a new educational means or approach is "pushed" by a particular group or an influential administrator. If there is opposition to the new approach, a struggle develops. Someone must win; therefore, someone must lose. The idea we are proposing displaces this obsolete winner-take-all process. It channels energies aroused by conflicting views into the constructive action of building new educational possibilities side by side with the existing program. The choice process legitimizes various options, each geared to a common set of established objectives.

Further, alternative approaches need not take place at different schools. American education already has broad, successful experience with "schools within a school." Consequently, if the ungraded approach has sufficient support, then those teachers, parents, and students in the school who have chosen this alternative would be free to develop a "nongraded school within a school."

Choice must be seen as a basic human right. Enabling people to make informed, intelligent choices must become a basic responsibility of school systems. What this free choice process does is to go beyond making choices legitimate; it succeeds in making them operationally possible. Also, each new approach becomes an opportunity for com-

munity learning. Those involved must decide whether it really is what they wanted. Those not involved may decide whether or not it would be better for their children. This learning would take place without stress or antagonism since no one can be imposed upon. This process is extremely important in terms of protecting the rights of people in our educational system.

Access to Options

Public Schools of Choice can only work when all interested parties have adequate access to educational options. Unless they are aware of the great variety of educational alternatives, they are left with only those few with which they are already familiar. Thus, they are very effectively forced to "play" by the ground rules established by the existing system. Hence, in a public school system based on choice, a key responsibility of the board of education and the central office staff is community education and information about educational possibilities. Since the system has freed them to act on their beliefs constructively, such information becomes vital without becoming disruptive. We would anticipate that the thirst for information would lead to innumerable meetings, small and large, informal and formal, of parents, teachers, and students, alone and together.

We hardly need stress the irreplaceable role of professional educators in developing alternatives. They have, and only they can really carry out, the responsibility for the substance of the curriculum. The choice of school, however, is another matter. Parents must be responsible for determining the kind of education they want for their children. They must be provided, therefore, with the opportunity and conditions to enable them to perform this crucial policy role. Consequently, a new standard of professional and lay cooperation would evolve. Under this model, parents, teachers, and students, aided by educational experts, could develop harmonious conceptions of quality education.

The schools we envision, then, could create and develop their own characteristics and styles. Some may ask, as examples,

whether a Nazi School, or a school for blacks that advanced the notion that all white people were blonde-haired, blue-eyed devils and pigs, could exist within the framework of a public system of choice. Plainly, no. Our concept speaks to openness; it values diversity; it is nonexclusive; it embraces human growth and development and is unswerving in its recognition of individual worth. Within these bounds, however, is an infinite spectrum of alternative possibilities in creating new educational and learning forms.

Among the alternatives available are many which already have a substantial number of supporters. The following are only a few examples:

School #1. The concept and programs of the school are traditional. The school is graded and emphasizes the learning of basic skills—reading, writing, numbers, etc.—by cognition. The basic learning unit is the classroom and functions with one or two teachers, instructing and directing students at their various learning tasks. Students are encouraged to adjust to the school and its operational style. Students with recognized learning problems are referred to a variety of remedial and school support programs. The educational and fiscal policy for this school is determined by the central board of education.

School #2. This school is nontraditional and nongraded. In many ways it is very much like the British (Leicestershire) system. There are lots of constructional and manipulative materials in each area where students work and learn. The teacher acts as a facilitator—one who assists and guides rather than directs or instructs. Most student activity is in the form of different learning projects done individually and in small groups rather than all students doing the same thing at the same time. Many of the learning experiences and activities take place outside of the school building.

School #3. This school emphasizes learning by the vocational processes—doing and experiencing. The school defines its role as diagnostic and prescriptive. When the learner's talents are identified the school prescribes whatever experiences are necessary to develop and enhance them. This school encourages many styles of learning and teaching. Students may achieve equally through demonstration and manipulation of real objects as well as by

verbal, written, or abstractive performances. All activity is specifically related to the work world.

School #4. This school is more technically oriented than the others in the district. It utilizes computers to help diagnose individual needs and abilities. Computer assisted instruction based on the diagnosis is subsequently provided both individually and in groups. The library is stocked with tape recording banks and "talking," "listening," and manipulative carrels that students can operate on their own. In addition, there are Nova-type video retrieval systems in which students and teachers can concentrate on specific problem areas. This school also has facilities to operate on closed circuit television.

School #5. This school is a total community school. It operates on a 12- to 14-hour basis at least six days a week throughout the year. It provides educational and other services for children as well as adults. Late afternoon activities are provided for children of varying ages from the neighborhood, and evening classes and activities are provided for adults. Services such as health, legal aid, and employment are available within the school facility. Paraprofessionals or community teachers are used in every phase of the regular school program. This school is governed by a community board which approves or hires the two chief administrators, one of whom is in charge of all other activities in the building. The school functions as a center for educational needs of all people in the neighborhood and community.

School #6. A Montessori school. Students move at their own pace and are largely self-directed. The learning areas are rich with materials and specialized learning instruments from which the students can select and choose as they wish. Although the teachers operate within a specific and defined methodology, they remain very much in the background, guiding students rather than directing them. Special emphasis is placed on the development of the five senses.

School #7. Patterned after the Multi-Culture School in San Francisco, the seventh school may have four or five ethnic groups equally represented in the student body. Students spend part of each day in racially heterogeneous learning groups. In another part of the day, all students and teachers of the same ethnic background meet together. In these

classes all learn their own culture, language, customs, history, and heritage. Several times each week members of one ethnic group share with the others some event or aspect of their cultural heritage that is important and educational. This school views diversity as a value. Its curriculum combines the affective and cognitive domains and is humanistically oriented. Much time is spent on questions of identity, connectedness, powerlessness, and interpersonal relationships. The school is run by a policy board made up of equal numbers of parents and teachers and is only tangentially responsible to a central board of education.

Distinctive educational options can exist within any *single* neighborhood or regional public school. The principle of providing parents, teachers, and students with a choice from among varying educational alternatives is feasible at the individual school. In fact, this may be the most realistic and pervasive approach, at first. For example, in early childhood a single school might offer as options: (a) an established kindergarten program; (b) a Montessori program; (c) a British Infant School program; (d) a Bereiter-Englemann program.

The high school could offer: (a) a prep "school"; (b) a community "school"; (c) a "school" without walls.

Again, parents, teachers, and students will have to "fully understand" each program.

Daily, fresh educational alternatives are offered to the public. Conferences on "new schools" are in constant session in one city or another. In one instance, a conference was heralded as a "Festival of Alternatives in Education." Some alternatives are certain to be transient flashes in the pan. More seriously, if not tragically, many fine alternatives are likely to be ignored because there exists no process for their orderly introduction or testing by public school systems.

We think that a Public Schools of Choice system can assume this task and contribute significantly to a process for renewing our public school system without imposition on parents, teachers, or children. In making their choice, these publics will accept the risks and the possibilities of their dreams. Should it be any other way?

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