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OVERVIEW

CONDITIONS THAT PROMOTE EXCELLENCE

Educators and policymakers are vigorously debating a variety of plans that permit parents to choose the school their child attends. I've been in favor of the idea for a long time, even though a lot of people I respect don't agree with me.

I find choice attractive because I like to see people doing what they want rather than what they are required to do. I think diversity and choice are characteristics of modern society: people choose their occupations, their religions, their foods, their leisure time activities; they expect to be able to decide things for themselves. And as educators we know that when people make choices, they are more highly motivated.

Most persuasive to me is that, although I know something about the effectiveness of various educational approaches, I wouldn't presume to say which are best for every student. Of course I have preferences and can sometimes cite data supporting them, but even the most desirable practices have drawbacks. So why not play the role of educational travel agent and help parents select the form of education they think is best?

Most practicing educators reject this argument. I think a major reason is that in some places choice programs have been thrust on school systems by state legislatures, which is a sure way to make anything unpopular. But most of the doubters are not just defending themselves; they are concerned about the welfare of children. Strongly committed to equality, they are not convinced that "the market," which thrives on inequality, is the answer to social problems. Many are deeply suspicious that, without tight controls, choice programs will further segregate an already divided society.

An ASCD panel formed to analyze the issue noted concerns such as these in a report they meant to be objective. In a brief review of the available evidence, they condemned superficial slogans like "choice works." Instead, they concluded that "schools that develop distinctive instructional programs" apparently have positive effects, but that these positive effects cannot be attributed

to choice alone (ASCD Panel 1990, p. 4).

To better understand the issues involved, I talked with Sy Fliegel (p. 20) former administrator in New York City's District Four. Posing some of the questions that everyone seems to be asking about choice these days, I found his answers both witty and sensible.

I also talked with John Chubb (p. 57), co-author of a research report he says shows the need for a radically different governance structure for American education. Chubb would do away with bureaucratic control of schools through state and local boards, giving individual schools nearly complete freedom to manage their own affairs—but he would also give parents the right to choose their child's school. A political scientist, Chubb argues for choice on the basis of his painstaking analysis of an immense body of data that he says strongly reinforces earlier findings about the characteristics of effective schools.

Chubb's findings are good news to supporters of school-based management, principal leadership, teacher professionalism, and parent involvement, all of which have been ASCD themes for years. He believes, though, that under present arrangements these important ideas will get only lip service. Most ASCD members, on the other hand, are probably ambivalent about his proposal and expect to continue to work within the system. If so, what should be their position on choice?

Most of the authors for this issue—supporters and critics alike—agree that choice in itself is not the panacea some advocates claim. The question is whether, in systems striving to promote "the full set of conditions that promote excellence" (ASCD Panel 1990, p. 32), schools should be encouraged to differ from one another, and parents should be able to choose among them? I say they should. □

References

- ASCD Panel. (1990). *Public Schools of Choice*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

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