

No Easy Answers to the Complex Question of Choice

Response to Raywid

The ASCD panel has attempted to provide thoughtful guidance on an issue for which—despite the zealous claims of choice advocates—there are no clear-cut answers.

Mary Anne Raywid is a thoughtful, knowledgeable scholar and advocate of public school choice. She brings considerable insight to her reading of ASCD's *Public Schools of Choice*. She quite accurately portrays the report as skeptical in tone, though she wishes it were more positive. She correctly argues that the broad policy question underlying public school choice is not whether policymakers should "allow" parental and student choice. People with resources—money, information, and power—in our society already have considerable latitude in their choice of schooling. The real question is how to equalize opportunities for choice. Nor is the issue whether enhancing public school choice carries too many risks, since the risks of any policy innovation need to be balanced against its potential benefits and the costs of staying with the status quo. On these points, I would say, Raywid is in agreement with the authors of the report.

Debatable Reasoning

In her zeal to make a more positive case for greater public school choice, however, Raywid makes a number of highly debatable arguments.

First, she takes issue with the report's argument that the choice de-

bate is fundamentally about the balance of public and private interests in public education. This is not an important issue, she claims, because public school choice programs "designed by teachers, within parameters set by boards of education, need not sacrifice one bit of the public

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interest." She overlooks, of course, the facts that (1) leading choice advocates—including John Chubb and Terry Moe in their recent book, *Politics, Markets, and America's Schools*¹—would like to get local boards of education out of the business of setting the kind of "parameters" she takes for granted and that (2) these advocates manifest little concern for how the broader public interest will be represented in new arrangements that increase private choice. Responsible students of public policy have discussed the problems of designing choice policies to assure adequate information, equal distribution of opportunities, and quality education. My own reading of this literature is that we don't know nearly as much as choice advocates think we know about how to assure adequate attention to the public interest in the design of public school choice policies. Simply asserting that these problems don't exist in well-designed policies begs the central question of what a well-designed policy is. It is on this question that the authors of the report tried to shed some responsible light.

Second, Raywid argues that the report's call for further evidence on the effects of choice arrangements is, in

effect, a call for rigorous social experimentation, a form of research she regards as unnecessary, inappropriate, and misguided. Nowhere does the report recommend social experiments of the kind Raywid describes. Raywid is led to this conclusion by her own conception of social science. Whatever the merits of this argument, however, I would hope that she would not advise against rigorous research on the effects of choice just because it turns out to be inconvenient, expensive, and at odds with the preconceptions of choice advocates. I should think that it would be worth investing considerable resources to determine, for example, the extent to which the effects of public school choice can be attributed to selection and/or educational programs, as well as to determine the spillover effects of individual choices on non-choosers or inactive choosers. These are serious empirical questions that bear in important ways on the design of public policy. They may or may not require experimental research, but if we are serious about the stakes involved in altering current conditions of choice, they are surely worth addressing.

Thus far, advocates of choice have based their claims mainly on evidence that purports to show the benefits to students of attending private schools or alternative schools within the public system. Despite their claims, it is far from clear that this evidence provides a particularly powerful case for the contribution of choice to success in schooling.

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Evidence contrasting public and private schools is useful in estimating the effects of choice only if one assumes that those attending private schools have choice and those attending public schools don't. This is a highly debatable assumption. For example, does a family that pays a \$50,000 premium to purchase a residence in order to enroll its children in a public school system with a good reputation really exercise less choice than a family that pays \$3,000 per year tuition to send a child to a local parochial school? Likewise, evidence on magnet schools and alternative schools implicitly attributes choice to those who attend such schools and non-choice to those who don't. Does a family that uses its own resources to purchase supplementary education for a child enrolled in a so-called regular school really exercise less choice than a family that sends its child to a magnet school? Could it be that those who attend alternative schools sometimes do so for reasons that have little to do with active choice of an educational program? Do these people count as "non-choosers" in studies of choice?

The advocates of choice would have us believe that schools and school systems divide neatly between those that offer choice and those that don't. For some peculiar reason, when choice advocates summarize the evidence, systems that offer "choice," by their definition, always come out looking better than those that don't. If we are to design more responsible choice policies, then surely we need more sophistication in analysis than this. Direct evidence on the effects of choice policies, as the ASCD report amply demonstrates, is quite equivocal and complex. If this evidence doesn't portray choice in as positive a light as advocates would like, then that, as they say, is tough.

Finally, Raywid concludes that the report carries "a substantial negative bias" toward public school choice because it raises questions about the underlying assumptions involved in choice plans and the evidence that supports them. She overlooks the fact that by far the longest section of the report—14 of the 32 pages in the body of the report—provides positive guidance to educators and policymakers who might be actively considering the

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adoption of choice plans in a way that attempts not to prejudice the outcome of the decision. Further, in formulating this guidance, the report relies heavily on the written work of choice advocates. If this approach is perceived as embodying "a substantial negative bias," then I fear that the public school choice issue has become so ideologically loaded that reasoned public debate is impossible.

The Panel's Contribution

ASCD decided to undertake this project because it felt that it could play a constructive role in helping educators and policymakers grapple with the difficult issues underlying public school choice. I agreed to serve on the ASCD Panel on Public School Choice on the condition that the panel would be charged to offer constructive advice on the issue. In a political climate that makes most policy debates into ideological litmus tests, thoughtful, reasoned, and constructive advice is often mistaken for partisan advocacy. The ASCD Panel has made an important contribution toward cooling down the overheated debate on public school choice and focusing it on important basic questions. □

¹J. Chubb and T. Moe, (1990), *Politics, Markets, and America's Schools*, (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution).

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