

had previously worked with them in Cambridge, Massachusetts, where the controlled choice program they designed was implemented successfully.

Controlled choice is a method of desegregating and improving schools at the same time. The assignment of students is based on space availability and racial guidelines that guarantee the desegregation of all schools. In Cambridge, controlled choice led to the total voluntary desegregation of the school system and the enhancement of the elementary schools in that district. Cambridge subsequently experienced significant growth in academic achievement, greater parental satisfaction, a higher percentage of students attending Cambridge public schools, and strong financial support from the citizens of Cambridge.<sup>1</sup>

The most important features of the controlled choice plan, which led me to consider it for Milwaukee, were the program's insistence on the improvement of all schools and the equitable treatment of all students. In February 1990, after extensive examination, Willie and Alves submitted their recommendations in the Long Range Educational Equity Plan for the Milwaukee Public Schools (LEEP). The main features of the plan were to:

1. Provide a timetable for the improvement of the Milwaukee Public Schools.
2. Establish specific racial percentages and representation for all racial groups.
3. Provide for parent selection of any schools within the two zones created in the plan (as Willie says, all the schools belong to everyone).
4. "Grandfather" all students into their present schools and suggest a timetable for student assignment.
5. Suggest specific plans for replication of successful specialty programs in the two zones and/or the creation of new programs to meet student needs

### **The Community Responds**

Over the next five months Charles Willie and I met with countless groups to explain the benefits of LEEP and to gather their consensus for my ultimate recommendation to the board. By June 1990, it was obvious that the

community did not support LEEP. This lack of support stemmed from many community perceptions, including (1) loss of access to quality specialty programs, (2) lack of faith that the school district would replicate or create additional specialty programs, (3) decreased rather than increased access

to schools of choice, and (4) fears of mandated transfers under the new student assignment plan.

The proposed plan would not have caused any of the above, in fact, quite the opposite. But the public perception and reaction were such that the board and I chose to pursue another

### **Private School Choice Is Wrong**

Herbert J. Grover

We in Wisconsin hold the dubious distinction of having the first private school voucher program in the nation. The Milwaukee Parental Choice law provides that the state will pay participating private schools about \$2,500 for each student they accept under the transfer program. This program raises important philosophical and policy issues about local school governance, public accountability, and the role of public education in our society. In my view, it fails each test.

The amount of money the state will give to private schools that accept public school students adds up to more equalization aid per pupil than that received by a majority of the 428 public school districts in the state. Yet the participating private schools need not be accountable for the quality of their educational program, staff, or services. There is nothing of substance in the program to ensure even a modest level of accountability.

Private school choice misses the mark because it addresses poor academic achievement in the urban public school as if it were simply a result of the school's failure. But poor achievement is more than that; it is a result of the urban condition itself. Sixty percent of Milwaukee pupils come from low-income families. In addition, 28 percent of minorities are unemployed, the teen pregnancy rate is double the national average, 7,700 cases of child abuse are reported annually, 2,500 children are homeless, and 35 percent of the pupils change school each year because of family housing or employment situations. How can children learn when their lives are in such turmoil? Against these problems, private school choice is a sugar pill that doesn't deal with the real challenges of urban education.

It all comes down to a fundamental attack on the common school. We are so intoxicated with the notions of competition and deregulation that we fail to ask the basic question, "Will a private voucher system guarantee a high-quality and equal educational opportunity for all children?" I think not. I agree with California State Superintendent Bill Honig, who says, "What this nation should be discussing is how best to . . . accelerate reform—not how to dismantle public education."

Minority group proponents of this program argue that the participating racially isolated private schools are the answer. But private schools were not the answer when some whites fled the public schools after *Brown v. the Board of Education*, and private schools are not the answer now. We simply cannot abandon the institution best able and most likely to provide an equal educational opportunity for all children.

If you look closely, you can see the social fabric of America beginning to unravel. Private school vouchers permit us to flee one another, to surround ourselves with those who look and think like we do, and—in so doing—to abandon our commitment to pluralism and diversity. This was not what Horace Mann had in mind, and it decidedly is not my vision for education in the America of the 21st century. Our social institutions (and our public schools in particular) must be the instruments that bring us together.

I will support and vigorously defend public education. I know it's not perfect; it must continue to improve. But public education is where our future can and must lie.

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