

The Point Is: Choice Will Help

Response to Heckman and Elmore

The monograph's shortcomings diminish its ability to further the dialogue about choice.

The responses of Professors Heckman and Elmore tempt me to enlarge our dialogue, but time and space limitations recommend sticking with my initial reservations about *Public Schools of Choice*: It overlooks the urgency of the present context and the inadequacy to date of alternatives to choice; it makes unfulfillable research demands; it denies a bias that it nevertheless appears to bear; and it ties equity risks to choice in ways that are challengeable.

Of course, no one wants to say, "Forget about rigorous research." But what that consists of, and what more is needed before trying choice, are legitimate questions. The debate hinges upon conceptions of the reasonable and the possible and the appropriate in social scientific inquiry, but it also involves just how seriously one takes our present predicament. In treating AIDS today, the patient's requirements for warranted knowledge may reasonably differ from the kind of warrant those same patients seek in connection with a treatment for acne. The difference in appropriate response is partly a matter of just how serious and urgent the presenting problems appear and partly a matter of just how many adequate remedies are available. I obviously believe

that schools are in acute and serious difficulty.

I agree with Heckman that values as well as facts belong in a policy argument. But genuine dialogue makes it important to acknowledge which is at stake when. I detect no value differences between us about the importance of equity and the unacceptability of increasing still further the stratification in schools. Rather, our differences over equity seem empirically and logically oriented: about the relevant con-

sequences of choice and presumably about the present extent of stratification. It seems to me that what a real commitment to equity obligates is not a rejection of choice but an immediate end to the practice of neighborhood school assignment!

Finally, my reservations about the contribution of *Public Schools of Choice* to furthering the dialogue and cooling down the debate over choice remain strong. To do that would call for bringing to bear substantially more of the analytic sophistication of which Elmore speaks in examining what a well-designed choice policy would look like. Short of asking just how the public interest is determined and reflected in various choice proposals, or just where equity concerns arise and are treated under different choice plans, or how the various options are designed and made available in varied choice arrangements, the monograph can deal only with the misleadingly simple generic question of Choice versus Not-choice. This is a limitation that will restrict its potential for informing deliberation and debate. □

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