

Less Government Is Not the Answer

Response to John Chubb and Terry Moe

Turning schools into a marketplace will
create—rather than eliminate—bureaucratic chaos.

The public schools, the authors of *Politics, Markets, and America's Schools* claim, are afflicted with too much "government." The way to cure this ill, they contend, is not through the American institution of representative democracy at the ballot box, nor by demanding midterm accountability from federal, state, or local elected officials, nor by calling the superintendent to task, nor by working directly with the principal and teachers, either individually or in coalitions with other parents and citizens.

Instead, they suggest, tear down the whole structure and start all over again, using the competitive economic marketplace as a model. But would that end the influence of "government" on the schools? Not by a country mile.

The authors propose that each of America's 45 million students be entitled to receive a "scholarship" stipend (read "voucher") that could be spent at any private or public school of their choice, provided that the school is "chartered." The scholarship funds would be dispensed by a "choice office" in each school district. Parents who wanted counseling about the schools would deal with the "Parent Information Center." And guess who would "charter" the schools and run those voucher-dispensing and opinion-making operations? *Government.*

Chartered schools, including those operated by religious groups, could not discriminate, nor could they charge more for tuition than the

amount of the "scholarship." Where more funding is needed, say for educationally handicapped youngsters or disadvantaged children, "scholarship add-ons" would be granted. Only persons certified to teach could teach. And school buildings and equipment would be acquired and maintained on a fair basis within each district and throughout each state. Who would monitor, evaluate, decide, acquire, maintain, and otherwise administer all this? *Government.*

Each school clientele would select its own form of governance in the form of a person or group. But just because the community of a single school is smaller than a whole school district doesn't mean that everyone at

the school will agree on everything. Disputes—some of them bone-deep—will arise. Thus, the question becomes: "Where would actions taken or contemplated by that ruling person or entity be appealed?" And the answer is: *Government*—in the form of investigating agencies and the courts or some other school appellate entity set up by the state legislature.

It is not difficult for any practical-minded person to see the unbounded opportunity for government—known pejoratively as "the bureaucracy"—to expand through new rules, regulations, guidelines, policies, and executive orders and directives. Moreover, there would be no real measure of what the schools are actually accomplishing with students; true accountability would be a joke.

These problems would be compounded by the huge amounts of public money involved; the proclivity of responsible legislators to watchdog public appropriations and expenditures; the temptations for crooked dealings that beset every economic marketplace; the disruption to education that would be caused by the possible economic "failure" of those schools perceived—however inaccurately—as educational flops (about 50,000 new businesses went belly-up in our economy in 1989); the Madison Avenue hucksterism that some school principals and their staffs would naturally incline toward to survive; and the emotionally charged (read "political")

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environment naturally arising when anyone deals with citizens' three most prized possessions: their children, their rights as Americans, and their tax money.

There is no question that our schools must improve to meet the challenges of a tomorrow that will be wholly different from yesterday. And America's schools are facing up forthrightly to that need for change by addressing the right issues. These include motivating children to learn; mobilizing the whole community in implementing a plan that includes, not just the schools, but the full range of public and private services (such as safe and supervised playgrounds open during evening and weekend hours, libraries that are open when children are not in school, and other social and health services readily accessible to

school children); providing sensible parental choice options within the public schools; and restructuring education from the statehouse to the schoolhouse to involve parents more in educational decision making at the schools, including revised business practices that permit working parents to participate more widely in interactions with their children's schools.

These efforts also include giving teachers more autonomy, improving the professional preparation of teachers and school administrators, and working to persuade state and federal governments to better match society's dollar investment in education with our national, state, and local expectations for school performance.

America's hope for a solid future for education is in the hands of the people, through participatory, account-

able, and representative governance—not in the vagaries and disorder of the economic marketplace that most recently gave us junk bonds, S&L bailouts, and the strange "regulation" of the cable TV industry.

We will have the quality of schools that we want as a society by consciously translating our collective will into action—not by turning education over to shifting, unpredictable economic forces. Our public schools and free economic marketplace have worked well as separate American institutions over the generations to make our nation preeminent in the world. As we improve both as separate institutions, we will enter the 21st century with the tools to remain preeminent. □

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Controlled Choice Avoids the Pitfalls of Choice Plans

Response to John Chubb and Terry Moe

An educational system in which choice and control coexist has a better chance of fulfilling the needs of all.

Freedom and conformity are complementary in human society. Effective communities, institutions, and groups require both conditions in a proper balance. Either unlimited choice, an aspect of freedom, or complete control, an aspect of conformity, can be harmful. Individuals who exercise unlimited freedom tend to be insensitive; and groups, institutions, and communities that require complete conformity are oppressive. Consequently, restraint on choice for

the sake of conformity and constraint on control for the sake of freedom are helpful.

Choice and control are both necessary elements in the dialogue about a reality such as effective schooling. The problem with advocating *choice* as the answer to reform is the supporters' failure to embrace the principle of complementarity, which recognizes the need for an opposing concept like *control*, which also contributes to effective education.

The Importance of Creative Tension

Because of our tendency to think in linear ways, we often attempt to solve complex issues with single or monistic and oversimplified approaches—one of the major pitfalls in education reform. An example of this pattern of thinking is our belief in the 19th century idea that competition, natural selection, and the survival of the fittest are universal laws in social organization. But evolutionary theory is a lin-

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