A Consideration of the Idea that
School Choice is an Overdue Idea

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Abstract

This project is a compilation of written comments used to discuss (debate) the idea that school choice is an overdue idea. Chondra Molson argues for the idea; Wendy Guthrie argues against the idea; and John Washatka moderates the debate. The debaters focus on the main issue of social justice in attempting come to some sort of conclusion and solution. Assumptions are also identified, as well as application to the areas of special education, educational psychology, and character education.
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Chondra Malson

A variety of options have long existed in American schools; Magnet, Alternative, Charter Schools, and Home Schooling. Today’s choice is “how” and “how much” rather than whether. Public schools are failing to meet the core value of education which is for all children to be thoroughly educated, so that they may pursue their own dreams and contribute to society.

Choice allows parents to decide which of two or more schools their child will attend. Families choose schools in order to gain better instruction and a more supportive school environment. It is the poor who are trapped in inferior schools. Choice already exists for most Americans, who have the economic wherewithal to live in or move to communities where the schools are at least adequate. (National Working Commission on Choice in K-12 Education, 2003)

“From the perspective of educational equality, these are the most compelling arguments for choice: the fact that some Americans have it and some do not; the realization that the availability of choice is very much a function of economics and social class; the sad admission that the lack of choice has placed an entire segment of the population to schools that most middle-class parents would not allow their sons and daughters to attend” (Viteritti, 1999, p. 11)

Choice can help turn things around if it is designed to do so; the best way to ensure that no child is left behind is to adopt policies that don’t tolerate failing schools. Arizona has the most pro-choice policies in the nation with approximately 375 charter school sites enrolling about 65,000 students. Evaluation of Arizona’s charters finds that
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the schools are made more accountable to parents and has empowered many teachers. Opponents of school choice would argue that it takes away from public school districts. However, charter enrollment growth has slowed in Arizona. Nearly 95% of Arizona public school students remain in district schools; charter enrollment is expected to stabilize at 7% to 15% of district enrollments. Charter schools don’t replace district schools, but they push district schools to compete. They compete through opening magnet schools, changing the curriculum, and offering electives, etc. Without school choice there isn’t an immediate incentive to provide an adequate education for students (Armor & Peiser, 1997, p. 15).

The University of Minnesota-Twin Cities reported that parents had a higher than average rates of satisfaction with the state’s charter schools. These schools had lower than average rates of suspension, and enrolled “greater concentrations of nonwhite, disabled, poor, and limited English proficient students than other public schools in the district” (Armor & Peiser, 1997, p. 28).

In the case study of inter-district choice conducted by David J. Armor and Brett M. Peiser, they found that a majority of schools responded to choice losses or gains in ways predicted by market situation. Districts which lost students made programmatic changes in an attempt to prevent or recover the student population which they lost. The changes made were effective in recovering some if not all of the losses (Armor & Peiser, 1997, p. 143).

Communities can decide whether to make expansion of choice a conscience decision or they can let it happen to them. Choice is a new way of providing public
education. Research shows that parents that choose are more satisfied than parents that do not. School choice will eliminate inequitable policies that plague district run schools.
School Choice an Overdue Idea
Wendy Guthrie

School choice is a controversial topic that has been at the forefront of heated education debates for the past quarter of a century. The passing of the No Child Left Behind Act and the subsequent voucher program enacted by President Bush have galvanized the discussions. At the heart of the problem is the failing of many public schools to educate the children entrusted to them. Proponents of school choice believe it to be an overdue idea, particularly with regard to the inequity that exists in many public school districts. For too long, they lament, underprivileged students have suffered through a system that forces them to remain in sub-standard schools because their families lack the financial means to move to suburban areas where the quality of education is better. While the impetus behind their cause is just, the solution does not lie in providing a means for escape from the issue. Rather, the solution calls for mass support of a public education system that has proven to be the champion of equality for all students.

Proponents of school choice, as Viteritti (2005) identified, have placed the issue of social justice at the helm of their argument. “School choice should not be a privilege restricted to a few,” they cry, “while poor children languish in schools that do not educate” (p. 144). Unfortunately, giving parents the right and means to choose any school they want for their children does not automatically translate into a better education. Parents in Washington, DC—a city noted for some of the worst public schools in the country—have access to federally funded vouchers, yet out of the seventeen independent schools in the District of Columbia, “all but one have enrolled very few voucher students in the last two years” (Chartrand, 2006, p. 35). While
Chartrand (2006) cited cultural and logistical problems as some of the “barriers” inner-city students face in trying to access the private sector of schools, the overwhelming reason they are denied access is they do not “fit” academically. “A voucher is not automatic admission” (p. 36). Thus, one has to ask whether school choice does in fact bring equity to disadvantaged students.

For over a century, public education in America has been the catalyst for much of what is right in this country. While the system is not perfect, it has worked well and deserves support and effort in correcting its problems, not neglect and apathy. In a recent article for *Phi Delta Kappan* Wraga (2006) reminded readers of the “three fundamental ideals” of American education: (1) it “promotes unity in a democracy,” (2) it “promotes citizenship,” and (3) it is a “primary function of the state” (pp. 426-428). At the heart of unity is “shaping the social identities of future citizens by cultivating or changing the common culture” (Gutmann, 1987, p. 72). History is full of incidents where public education has birthed this common culture. Two prime examples are the overwhelming prejudices that existed in this country toward Roman Catholics in the mid 1800s (Gutman, 1987) and toward African-Americans in the 1900s (Wraga, 2006). As Gutmann (1987) revealed, it is in large part because Roman Catholic and Protestant children were within the “common culture” of the classroom that tolerance for religious differences developed among the people of this country. Had parents been given the choice of sending their children to another school, it very possibly could have resulted in the polarization of the two religious groups, which would have only heightened the prejudice. Likewise, over fifty years ago, black and white students attended separate schools, lived in separate parts of town, and shopped at separate markets. Today, thanks
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in large part to *Brown v. Board of Education*, children of all ethnic backgrounds attend
school together, play together, and live together.

In his First Annual Message to Congress on January 8, 1790, George Washington
stipulated that “civic education . . . was a first order of business for the new national
government” (quoted in Pangle & Pangle, 2000, p. 59). Jefferson went on to intimate
that a “free nation” could not “persist and prosper” if its citizens were not educated
(quoted in Gill, 2001, p. 186). Thus, the second ideal upon which public education is
based is that of “citizenship.” The founding fathers knew full well that if this experiment
in democracy was going to work, America had to do something no other county had done
to that point—educate the masses. Jefferson envisioned a government “of the people,”
but he knew education was the key to that government. Those who were going to “guard
the sacred deposit of rights and liberties of their fellow citizens” could do so only through
the “enlightenment” acquired through education. It is interesting to note that Jefferson
was convinced that those “whom nature hath fitly formed and disposed to become useful
instruments for the public” would most likely come from the “poor” and not the rich
(quoted in Pangle & Pangle, 2000, p. 28).

Ultimately, the responsibility for education lies with the public. It is the job of the
state, exercised through the populace, to oversee education in America. This is the glue
that holds everything else together. When parents are involved in their children’s
education, the “common culture” extends beyond the classroom, and, as Cremin (1961)
discussed, society acts as a check and balance to assure “no child [is] ever . . . banned for
poverty, and no partisan political, economic, or religious group [will] ever control the
school for its own private purposes” (quoted in Wraga, 2006, p. 428). In addition,
parents who have a stake in the education of their children are better citizens themselves. As Gutmann (1987) observed, parents who become involved in school policy not only become more supportive of the schools, they also participate in “political activities beyond the simple act of voting” (p. 74).

Public education has done so much more for this country than simply teach children “reading, writing, and arithmetic.” It has embraced the diversity of its people and given them a sense of community. It has nurtured a democracy that beckons those who are oppressed to its arms. It has empowered each man, woman, and child. Public education has shaped the future of not only America, but to a certain extent, the world as well. When one stops to consider all that public education has achieved for the people of this great nation, how sad it is to think that there are those of her citizenry who would vote to abandon her.
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John Washatka

Introduction, pre-debate

The purpose of this project is to discuss, in a debate format, the topic of school choice, more specifically, the proposition “School Choice is an overdue idea,” which is taken from an essay written by Viteritti (2005). Our speaker defending the proposition is Chondra Malson and our speaker opposing the proposition is Wendy Guthrie. My name is John Washatka, and I’m acting as moderator.

Before we let our debaters have at it, I want to narrow the focus of the proposition. In his essay, Viteritti (2005) proposes two types of arguments, or models, supporting school choice: the market model, which says that competition in education breeds educational competence; and the moral argument, which says that school choice is a moral obligation if we want to be fair and equitable about education. Both of his respondents support school vouchers – one uses the market argument, the other uses, among other arguments, the moral argument.

For the purposes of this exercise, we are focusing on a consideration of the moral argument primarily because Viteritti seems to imply either that the United States is there right now or that is where we are headed.

Post-debate Follow-up

Assumptions

A number of assumptions have been made by the debaters:

1. Our children deserve the best education they can get.
2. Access to public schooling is the right of all Americans.
3. Our public education system needs fixing.
4. Social justice is best executed through political policy in a democratic context. It seems that, if any of the assumptions are shown not to be true, there is no debate. That is, the debate rests on the truth of the four assumptions.

*Common Ground*

Common ground is developed by the shared assumptions. If our debaters agree on the relevance of the four assumptions, then a solution becomes possible, regardless of what that solution may look like.

*Potential Solutions*

At this point, without wanting to appear simplistic, we see three solutions, each of which could be done to support the moral argument: issue vouchers, either unrestricted or restricted (McEwan, 2004), reform the public schools, (Waring, 1996), or a combination of issuing vouchers and reforming public schools (Mac Iver, 2000).

*Impact on each Cognate Area*

Addressing school choice and special education, Glatter, Woods, & Bagley (1997) write “A study of the special education system highlights fundamental issues relevant to all aspects of education: namely, the organization of teaching and learning, patterns of selection, exclusion and categorization, and relationships between professionals and parents” (p. 103). Social, cultural, and financial resources are crucial in determining the nature of educational provision received. While parents of special needs children have been given increased powers of choice through federally mandated laws such as IDEA, social position dictates resources and educational services. School choice will require parents of special needs students to be critical consumers.
Addressing school choice and educational psychology, there is a plethora of research available concerning how students learn, conducted in both the private and public arena. The answer to the overarching discussion concerning the state of education in America is not school choice. Rather the answer is to channel the resources of those in the public and private sector with regards to the “best practices” in education and present a united front that truly reforms public education.

Addressing school choice and character education, Glenn (1999) proposes an argument that character education is best done in those schools which have programs which are not defined by either the state or federal government, and that those programs flourish best when school vouchers are available or in charter schools. In other words, public schools are inherently flawed when it comes to character education. Washatka is not convinced by his arguments.
References


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