
The Educational Consequences of Choice

BY PAUL T. HILL

There is ample evidence, according to Mr. Hill, that universal public school choice would strongly benefit all children, including the disadvantaged, by promoting candid and demanding relationships among teachers, parents, and students.

MANY MEMBERS of the education establishment claim that universal public school choice would be of little value to the low-income and minority students who now attend the worst schools. They say that the best schools would take advantage of a larger pool of applicants to become even more selective than they are now and that schools that did admit disadvantaged children would not work very hard to meet their needs.

However, there is ample evidence that choice strongly benefits all children, including the disadvantaged. Choice promotes the candid and demanding relationships among teachers, parents, and students that are essential to effective schooling. It can make the difference between schools that are apathetic providers of routine academic courses and schools that are true communities that develop students as whole people.

Much of the evidence for these conclusions comes from my study of a privately funded voucher program, the Student-Sponsor Partnership Program in New York City. Under that program, individual sponsors pay tuition for low-income minority students — many of whom have failed in public schools and are not Catholic — to attend New York City Catholic high schools. The program selects students from the bottom of the New York City public school population. They and their parents have only to accept the opportunity offered. My study compared the educational experiences and achievement of these private vouch-

er students with the experiences of similar students in public high schools in New York City.¹ Other evidence is drawn from Robert Crain's study of nonselective magnet schools in New York City and my subsequent studies of site-based management and foundation-funded public high school reform efforts.²

How Choice Affects Schools

Starting with Milton Friedman, the advocates of choice have argued that competition is a powerful force for school quality. The attitudes and behavior of teachers and administrators in schools of choice show how competition affects schooling. Schools of choice need to attract students in order to survive. Though some can rely on a reputation for exclusivity or superior quality, not all schools can credibly claim to be the best. But every school *can* offer something that gives it an identity — a specific curriculum, social climate, or extracurricular program — that attracts the interest of parents and students. Once a school has established an identity, it must deliver on its promises well enough to keep current students from transferring out, to create “brand loyalty” among families with several children, and to attract enough new families to fill the entering class each year.

The need for product differentiation encourages a number of behaviors that advocates of “effective schools” have tried to promote in public school staffs. School staffs have a strong incentive to articulate a mission for the school and to ensure that all elements of the school contribute to its attainment. The mission must also be easy to explain to parents. That means that it must be focused on what children will experience in school and

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what they will be able to do when they leave — not on subtleties of educational technique that may matter only to professionals.

Once a school of choice has established an identity, the staff has a strong incentive to avoid major disruptions in the program. The demands of sheer economic survival also make teachers concerned about the performance of the school as a whole. If a school is forced to close because too few students want to attend it, all teachers have to find new jobs, no matter how well they have been teaching their own classes. Teachers therefore have strong incentives to keep their own work in line with the school's mission, to help one another, to identify weaknesses, and to ensure that variations in teacher performance do not harm the school's ultimate product and reputation.

All these behaviors are evident in public magnet schools, which must continually justify their existence in the face of pressures for uniformity, and in the financially struggling non-elite religious schools such as those attended by the Partnership students. Staff members in such schools are eligible to work in regular public schools for equal or greater pay, but they stay in schools of choice either out of commitment to the kind of education being offered in them or because they prefer the working conditions. They therefore value their jobs, which they know would go away if their schools were forced to close.

Staff members know that the continuation of their jobs depends on their own performance and that of their co-workers. Thus they are quick to seek advice from other teachers if a particular class is not going well and to alert their colleagues or the school management if another teacher is not pulling his or her weight. They are also very reluctant to give up on a student, knowing that too many stories of failure can wreck a school's reputation. Even when the student population changes because of worsening economic conditions or demographic shifts, teachers and administrators in schools of choice have the strongest possible incentive to maintain the level of student performance.

In contrast, staff members in a compulsory attendance public school need not fear for their jobs if their school fails to perform. As long as there are students in the neighborhood, they will be assigned to attend the school. Even if (as can happen in New York) the state intervenes to close the school, the teachers and administrators will be assigned to a similar school in the local system. The school's reputation may be a source of pride, but people's livelihoods do not depend on it. Though most teachers want to do a good job, they are not driven by economic necessity to question their own performance or to confront others who are not producing. Students who fail do not constitute a particular threat to the school. Staff members, knowing that serious self-assessment can lead to painful adult confrontations, have strong incentives to assign the blame for declining student performance or rising dropout rates to factors over which the school has no control.

A small number of schools of choice may have so many applicants that they can reject a student who shows the first sign of becoming an academic or behavior problem. But in a competitive situation, such as that faced by the New York City Catholic and nonselective magnet schools, schools of choice have no such luxury. Such schools must be, in Robert Slavin's term, relentless in improving their own performance and in helping students achieve. Contrary to the claims of the antichoice edu-

cation establishment, schools of choice cannot survive by hand-picking the easiest students to educate. They must, instead, work to influence the attitudes and motivations, as well as the academic performance, of their students.

Staff members in schools of choice must treat all students as if they are educable, not frozen in either their academic abilities or their attitudes. This difference between schools of choice and compulsory attendance public schools is epitomized in a sign displayed in a private school classroom: "Attitude is a choice."

How Choice Affects Parents

Most of the literature promoting choice stresses the importance of making parents consumers, courted and feared by school staffs. As the preceding section shows, the possibility that parents will withdraw their children from a school of choice is a powerful motivator for teachers and principals. That same possibility also means that parents can intervene effectively if schools mistreat or neglect their children.

But the connections between parents and schools of choice are more complex than this raw economic relationship. For all but the most opinionated and aggressive parents, the choice of a school is more akin to the choice of a family doctor or pastor than to the choice of a car dealer or grocery store. The parent's status as a consumer is important, but it is only the foundation of a much richer set of trust relationships between parent and child and child and school.

As James Coleman has pointed out, parents who choose a school for their child give the school a grant of parental authority. Parents who could have chosen any number of schools have selected this one. For whatever reason — religious conviction, educational taste, confidence in the school staff, or personal convenience — the parents want the child to attend a particular school. Though the parents might change their minds if things go especially badly, the child knows that a change of school can upset and inconvenience the parents. Most children, not wanting to risk an upheaval at home, have a strong incentive to succeed in the school their parents have chosen for them.

As the experience of Partnership students demonstrates, this grant of parental authority greatly increases the school's leverage over its students. As one student put it, "My mother says that I am lucky to be going to this school, and I had better not mess up." Another reported, "My uncle said [the public school the student previously attended] was no good, but if I couldn't do good here, there is something wrong with me." A student who skips school, does not study, or displays a sullen attitude is risking a confrontation with a parent. Though a few children will endure such a confrontation, the vast majority will not. School staff members are therefore able to use the parent's grant of authority to make demands on the student, as did one principal in the Partnership program who told a student, "Your mother didn't send you here to hang out in the rest room. She sent you here to learn."

Chosen schools also have leverage in dealing with parents. The threat of rejection that motivates teachers and principals cuts both ways: the school can likewise decide not to continue educating a student. Once they have chosen a school and adjusted their transportation plans and schedules accordingly,

parents do not like to make changes. Unless the school has failed to keep its part of the bargain, parents are also reluctant to see their children's education disrupted. Schools can, consequently, make demands on parents — to monitor homework, ensure student attendance, and see to it that the student comes to school fed, rested, and ready to learn.

Schools in the Partnership program unhesitatingly made such demands on parents. They understood that parents lacked the time and money to make donations, raise funds, or attend frequent meetings. But the schools were direct and demanding about what parents had to do if their children were to succeed in school. Partnership schools found foster homes for students whose families were disrupted by death, unemployment, illness, or imprisonment. But they expected the family to support the educational process whenever it was physically possible.

Much of a school's influence is based on the parents' trust in the school's competence and concern for its students. Schools of choice, like family doctors, are influential because they are trusted. Patients follow their doctors' advice primarily because they believe it will make them healthier and only secondarily because they fear that the doctor will refuse to see them again if they do not take the medicine prescribed. The same is true with families. Because parents have chosen a school and because the school has an incentive to be as helpful as possible, a relationship of trust is created. Families that deal with the same school over a long time, especially those that have sent several children there, develop particularly strong bonds of sentiment and loyalty toward the school.

Any relationship of trust can be misused, and some schools of choice may retain parents' confidence longer than their performance merits. But in most cases major benefits accrue to all parties. The Partnership schools felt confident in exhorting parents to become more important forces in their children's lives and to reinforce the school's opposition to the harmful elements of students' peer culture. One Partnership school principal required that parents attend only one meeting each year, before classes started in September, so that she could urge parents to hold their children to traditional family standards, no matter how much children appeared to reject them.

These conditions are not impossible to achieve in compulsory attendance public schools, but there they require a great deal of personal effort, whereas they are intrinsic to choice schools. An attendance-zoned school, to which children are assigned because they are of mandatory school age and live in the neighborhood, has no definite grant of parental authority. As a result, teachers in regular public schools all over the country complain, "We can't teach these kids if their families don't care."

Choice affects the relationships between schools and parents even if a chosen school falls short of a parent's ideal. As long as the parent thinks the chosen school is better than any available alternative, the parent has reason to feel commitment to it. Schools need not be highly distinctive to get the benefit of a parent's choice. Even though educators may think low-cost parochial schools are all quite similar, the parents who choose among them usually think the differences are important. The longer a family stays with a school, the more importance history and personal relationships assume.

Compulsory attendance schools can build personal loyalties, and a parent whose children attend such a school can come to

believe that it is just the right one. In such cases, the school probably gains an important grant of parental authority. But choice may play an important part even then. Higher-income parents, who always have the capacity to remove their children from compulsory attendance schools, are the ones most likely to develop close relationships with teachers and administrators. Lower-income parents, who have little choice about where their children attend school, seldom develop strong feelings of confidence and loyalty. Parent advisory councils and other mechanisms for parent involvement in school governance affect only the few parents who participate.

As experience with the Partnership program shows, however, choice gives low-income parents the same sense of commitment and loyalty that higher-income parents enjoy. The schools' religious identity obviously builds some trust. But the fact that the parents have been able to accept or reject the scholarship creates a sense of mutual commitment between parent and school.

How Choice Affects Students

Many of the effects of choice on students are implicit in the foregoing discussion. Students in schools of choice benefit from the teachers' and principals' need to create a defined image and reputation. Students also benefit from their parents' commitment to the school and from the school's consequent ability to make demands on their parents and themselves.

Beyond these advantages, students derive two other benefits from being in schools of choice. First, they gain from being in a situation in which they must make commitments and take them seriously. Second, they gain from observing adults working in a common enterprise in which performance matters and both success and failure have real consequences.

Student commitment. Students may prefer not to attend any school at all, but if they have a preference for the school they attend over other alternative schools, they are susceptible to influence by the chosen school. This is true even if the school preference is based on nonacademic factors, such as location, sports teams, or presence of friends. It is especially important if students have knowingly chosen a school that offers a particular academic emphasis or makes special demands on effort and performance. When students make such a commitment, they implicitly affirm that the chosen school is more attractive than the alternatives. Though they may prefer not to do everything the school requires, they know that acting on those impulses could result in their being forced to leave the chosen school and go to another one that is less attractive to them.

Students in the Partnership schools frankly admitted that they had made a tradeoff in accepting scholarships to attend private schools. All knew that leaving public school would separate them from friends and neighborhood and would subject them to firm demands about attendance and academic effort. They accepted the scholarships for many reasons — because the private schools were safer, because they hoped (along with virtually all high school students) to attend college someday, or because they liked the schools' traditions and sports teams. But they all understood what the schools would demand of them because the school admissions counselors and the Partnership program itself made sure that they knew.

Once they accepted the schools' demands, they had given the schools leverage: teachers and administrators could assign homework, take attendance, grade performance, and administer consequences just as they had said they would. Armed with this power, the Partnership schools exercised their authority confidently — not in a harsh or morally superior way, but matter-of-factly, as the simple consequence of a well-understood bargain.

Less than 10% of the students who were offered scholarships rejected them, and less than 5% of the students admitted to private schools left, either voluntarily or at the schools' initiative. The vast majority of students understood the bargain they had made, and they accepted, albeit grudgingly, the schools' rigorous execution of it. When students failed to complete assigned work or broke school rules, teachers consistently said, "You made an agreement when you came here — now live up to it." For the vast majority of students, the need to abide by their prior commitments both influenced their behavior and changed their attitudes. In surveys and interviews, virtually all students said that their effort, attendance, and attitudes about schooling had all changed since they joined the Partnership program.

Emulation of adult working relationships. During the fieldwork for my study and in subsequent work in urban high schools, I saw students encounter a hidden curriculum, taught not didactically but by example. The example is provided by teachers and administrators, the only people whom students routinely see at work. It can send a powerful message to students about whether or not the work of adults is informed by clear goals and requires or rewards collaborative effort, initiative, reciprocity, or risk-taking.

As Carl Glickman and others confirm, teachers in compulsory attendance schools often feel that they have little control over the conditions of their own work and think that they and their colleagues are neither rewarded for diligence nor punished for negligence. For adults in such situations, the apparently rational response is to do exactly what their formal job descriptions require and not take responsibility for the overall product of the organization in which they work. Albert Shanker's quote from an urban teacher, "I taught them but they didn't learn it," sums up the phenomenon. Many teachers and administrators in compulsory attendance schools think differently, but they are not rewarded by the organization or, in many cases, appreciated by their co-workers. For students, who seldom observe any adults other than teachers at work, the message can be powerful: large organizations that employ adults do not have clear goals and do not require or support effective work.

The hidden curriculum in schools of choice is different. The adults in such schools are not necessarily more virtuous than teachers and administrators elsewhere, but because they are linked in a common enterprise they have incentives to work together and to hold one another accountable. The version of adult life and responsibility modeled in such schools is very different from that evident in schools that lack a clear mission and

in which staff members do not have to perform in order to keep their jobs. The message to students is that adults depend on and influence one another and that they care about whether they and others are contributing to the success of a broader enterprise.

Students get the message. One student interviewed at a compulsory attendance school stated bluntly what other students had said less directly: "Nobody here does any more than you have to do. I'm not going to be a chump." Students in Partnership schools, to the contrary, saw how hard faculty members worked to make the school succeed. As one Partnership student who had recently transferred from public school told me, "In public school the teachers say, 'I get paid whether you learn this or not.' Here they say, 'You are going to learn this if it takes all day. I don't care how long it takes: I live upstairs.'"

It does not take a private or religious school to teach these lessons. Many of the nonselective magnet schools in Crain's and my studies provide similar examples of earnest adult collaboration. There are, furthermore, many teachers and administrators in compulsory attendance schools who offer sterling personal examples. But these individuals are forced to overcome the context in which they work, whereas teachers and administrators in schools of choice are reinforced by everything about their working environment.

Conclusion

Several current educational reform movements — going under such names as decentralization, charters, and school contracting — all hope to create the conditions under which public schools can develop these attributes. Doing so will require profound change in the missions and operations of public schools. It surely requires choice — choice of schools by teachers, students, and parents; choice by schools concerning how long to stick with a student who will not fulfill the school's work requirements; and choice by public officials regarding whether to continue supporting a failing school or to close and recommission it with a new staff and management.

As educational environments, schools of choice are profoundly different from compulsory attendance schools. Even when their academic offerings are not much different from those of compulsory attendance schools, schools of choice become places in which parents and teachers are collaborators, bargains among adults and between adults and children are made and kept, effort is rewarded, and actions have consistent consequences. Such environments motivate student effort in the short run. In the longer run, they socialize students into the values and attitudes required in real adult life.

1. Paul T. Hill, *High Schools with Character* (Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, 1990).

2. Robert Crain et al., *The Effectiveness of New York City's Career Magnets* (Berkeley, Calif.: National Center for Research on Vocational Education, 1992); and Paul T. Hill and Josephine J. Bonan, *Decentralization and Accountability in Public Education* (Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, 1991). 