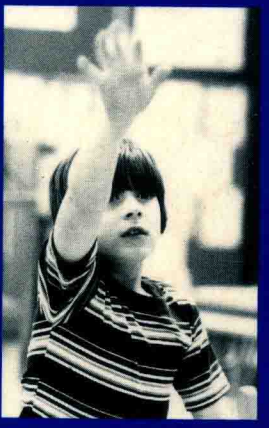
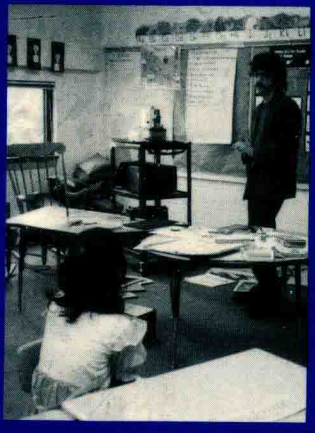
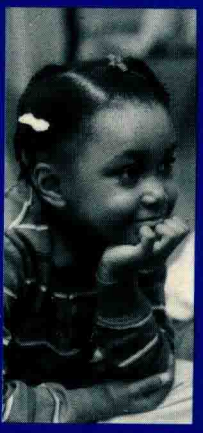
SCHOOL CHOICE

Examining the Evidence

Edith Rasell & Richard Rothstein
Editors


FOREWORD BY ERNEST L. BOYER

Economic Policy Institute

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Foreword

Ernest L. Boyer
Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching

The decade-long struggle to reform American education suddenly seems to hang on a single word: choice. Just a generation ago, freedom of choice was the rallying cry of those who clung to their self-proclaimed right to attend single-race schools. These days, school choice is a crusade with different meanings—and vastly wider appeal. Americans, it is argued, should be given a far greater voice in selecting the schools their children attend. From the nation's most respected political and academic pulpits, advocates of choice are promoting this option, driven by the conviction that public schools are in deep trouble and that bold, creative steps are needed to shake up a lethargic education system.

Without question, choice has emerged as the single most rousing idea in the current school reform effort. In less than five years, thirteen states have established "choice" plans of one kind or another. Minnesota led the way in 1987. Michigan and Ohio passed laws on school choice that are scheduled to take effect in 1993. A dozen other states are debating the pros and cons of choice. Scores of individual districts, too, have introduced a variety of school choice arrangements. And shining above them all is Community School District 4 in the East Harlem section of New York City, proof for some that choice can benefit even the nation's most downtrodden districts.

It comes as no surprise that school choice has not found enthusiastic support among many public school educators. Albert Shanker, president of the American Federation of Teachers, takes this position:

> Choice views education as a consumer good—as something that I, as a parent, buy for my children from some vendor. . . . That goes against the tradition and values that have made our democracy the envy of the world. Education is a public good that communities have provided for all children because they are our future citizens. (Shanker 1992)

Skeptics notwithstanding, school choice continues to be promoted aggressively by those who are convinced that school reform can only come about by "sweeping away the old institutions and replacing them with new ones"—"break-the-mold schools," as former President Bush called them.

But before existing institutions are "swept away," it seems appropriate to pause long enough to examine the underlying assumptions about school choice and discover just how theory relates to practice. Is it true, for example, that parents feel trapped in an "undemocratic system" and that they are eager to transfer their children to other schools? What evidence is there that school competition will revitalize public education? Does choice assure that the academic performance of students will be improved? And what harmful consequences, if any, are generated by school choice?

I believe that the papers in this volume take us an important step closer to addressing many of these questions. Just as crucially, they also help chart a new, more wholesome course for less passionate discussion. Written by some of the nation's foremost researchers representing the various sides of the debate, this book includes some of the clearest, most thoughtful analyses of choice programs now in place, from Milwaukee to New York City to Scotland. The distinguished authors and researchers gathered in this text deserve our gratitude for informing and enriching the choice debate.

We at The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching undertook our own year-long study of current choice plans, which was published in 1992 as *School Choice: A Special Report.* We concluded that school choice can no longer be dismissed as an arcane textbook theory. Choice at its best empowers parents, stimulates teachers to be more creative, and most important, gives students a new sense of attachment to their schools and to learning. We saw such achievements in school districts across the country in programs where choice has truly made a difference.

Yet our examination of the choice "landscape"—from Milwaukee, Wisconsin, to East Harlem, New York, and from Minnesota to Massachusetts—also leads us to conclude that the possibilities of choice should not be overstated.

Professor Nathan Glazer, of Harvard University's Graduate School of Education, in a thoughtful review of the constructive changes in East Harlem, correctly acknowledges that choice was crucial. But Glazer noticed something deeper. Glazer writes

> Choice was the term selected to describe the character of the revolution in East Harlem, but parental choice was only part of the story. Indeed, the story begins with educational innovations rather than choice, which was entailed only because the innovators had to find students on which to try their ideas. A key characteristic of the innovations was that they came from the teachers, not from top administrators. (1992)

Advocates of choice are correct in stressing that we must return teachers, parents, and students to the center of the enterprise. But if the true goal of "choice" is to discover the best fit between the educational process and the student, then this vision should be pursued by every institution.

The time has come to move beyond the school choice rhetoric and shape a more comprehensive approach to school renewal. It is time for educators on both sides of the debate to focus not so much on school *location* but on student *learning*.

What I propose in the school choice debate is a search for common ground—a plan for school renewal on which all educators might agree. The stakes are far too high for policymakers and school leaders to divide into warring camps, driven more by ideology than by ideas. It is possible to break the bureaucratic gridlock and extend the educational options for parents and students, making every school a school worth choosing.

Finally, reflecting on the current school choice debate, I am impressed by how little attention is being given to the history of public education or to the large body of thought about the role of schooling in building a democratic nation. We are, after all, not the first generation to address issues of educational policy. One hundred and sixty years ago, young Abraham Lincoln of Illinois described education as "the most important subject which we as a people can be engaged in." I believe that it is essential to consider the ideas of the past as we shape educational policy for the future. The alternative is to grapple with crucial issues in a historical and intellectual void and to allow high-decibel rhetoric to substitute for reason. A point of special concern is that school choice arguments often are framed almost exclusively in terms of the alleged benefits to individuals. This one-sided approach, one that stresses only the *private* benefits of schooling, departs sharply from a vast body of work by well-regarded thinkers and writers underscoring the social imperatives of education and recognizing that schools also promote *the common good*.

Obviously, school choice proponents are not oblivious to the social dimensions of public education. The fact remains, however, that in the current debate, public education often is disparaged and its history neglected. Adopting the language of the marketplace, school choice advocates portray education as a solitary act of consumerism. To frame the issue in these terms is to distort the vision of public education beyond recognition. From the very first it was understood that the nation's schools should serve both private benefit

and the public good. And this was to be accomplished, at least in part, by the way we organized our schools. Local citizens joined together to build schools and hire schoolmasters, and the very fact that children from a wide range of social and economic backgrounds came together in the common school richly enhanced the dimensions of public education. The schools were social anchors and served the ideals of the nation.

Here, then, is the essential point. The school choice debate is best pursued not by brandishing unexamined ideological slogans. Nor is it advanced by accumulating endless data and statistics, important as these are. Rather, we must enlarge the discussion to focus on the goals of public education. Participants in the discourse must begin to extend their intellectual reach backward in time and outward from the lone individual to society. We must draw from the full, complex history that has informed the American educational enterprise, and not single out one strand of that discourse.

The nation's public schools collectively remain one of America's most vital institutions, with the mission of sustaining a democratic nation as well as serving the individual. When all is said and done, we dare not permit the current debate about choice to blur this vision. The goal must be to make every public school a source of national strength in pursuit of *excellence for all.*

We must choose nothing less.

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Introduction

Richard Rothstein
Economic Policy Institute

Many policymakers agree that America's elementary and secondary school system is failing. Many see greater parental choice as an effective way to help fix it. But there is disagreement about the form of choice to implement. Most Republicans advocate a voucher system to enable private school choices for all children. Many Democrats reject inclusion of private schools and advocate expanded parental choice within public school systems. Many conservatives seem to feel that choice is the most needed educational reform. And liberals tend to see choice as a small part of a broader reform package.

Despite these differing emphases, liberal and conservative choice advocates apparently agree on two propositions: First, if parents could choose the schools their children attend, schools would have incentives to improve in order to attract students. Second, equality of educational opportunity could be enhanced if poor families had a choice of schools; wealthier families already have choice, exercised either by sending their children to private schools or by purchasing more expensive housing in areas with higher quality public schools.

With apparent agreement on the merits of some form of choice, states and localities are proceeding to implement school choice plans. In 1987, Minnesota established the first plan permitting students to choose to attend any school in the state. In New York City, East Harlem's District 4 gained a national reputation for excellence based on a plan which, since 1980, has allowed middle school students to attend any school in the district. Since 1990, Milwaukee has given vouchers to inner-city low-income parents, which has enabled their children to attend private schools.

By the beginning of 1993, thirteen legislatures had adopted some form of public school choice as statewide policy. Local school districts throughout the country have implemented new public school choice plans, while the movement has gained further momentum as many districts began to label existing options programs, such as "magnet schools," forms of school choice. Even though Colorado voters rejected a voucher plan to permit parents to use public funds for private schools in 1992, a similar voucher proposal in California garnered one million signatures, qualifying it for the California ballot in November 1993.

School choice seems simple, straightforward, and inexpensive, a relatively easy way to fix our education system and make parents and students more satisfied. It is also politically appealing because it appears to cost little and is consistent with the recent popular trend of privatizing public services and relying on markets to solve a variety of social and economic problems.

But despite the apparent consensus, critics of school choice have raised a number of troubling questions. Will all parents be equally able with sufficient time and sophistication to choose the best school for their children? Will choice further stratify an already stratified educational system? In the past school choice led to segregated schools; will outcomes be better this time around? Finally, twenty years ago, giving students more choice in types of classes they attended in "shopping mall" high schools led to less rigorous academic coursetaking; will choice of schools have the opposite result and raise academic achievement in the 1990s?

Hearing these questions, researchers at the Economic Policy Institute (EPI) wondered if, with such widespread discussion of school choice, there was empirical evidence to support its advocates' claims. To explore the school choice issue in more detail, EPI decided to organize a seminar, and in early 1992 Edith Rasell and I began to identify scholars engaged in empirical investigations of choice plans who might present their work. We were surprised to find that with so much attention focused on school choice reform and with so many plans being implemented, relatively few scholars had attempted empirical tests of the reform's central propositions—that choice would enhance equity and raise achievement.

While public policy debates almost uniformly assume that some degree of school choice will improve education, scholarly investigation, limited though it is, has thus far found little support for this assumption—with John Chubb and Terry Moe's 1990 a book, *Politics, Markets, and America's Schools*, a conspicuous exception.

Keeping all of these issues in mind, we identified three key education issues which were also major areas of disagreement among choice advocates and opponents. The October 1992 Seminar entitled *Choice: What Role in American Education?* focused on the following points:

- The effects of school choice on the educational, racial, and economic integration of students: Does school choice promote equality of opportunity?
- The effects of school choice on schools' academic effectiveness: Does school choice raise student achievement?
- The relationship between choice and school system reform: Is choice the way to reform American schools?

This volume demonstrates that these questions cannot be easily separated, and in addressing these three primary questions, the authors raise other important issues, such as the following: How do parents and students choose schools when they have the chance to do so? Are parents and students in choice schools more satisfied with their education, irrespective of academic results? Are there private school characteristics which public schools should adopt? Is school choice an "all or nothing" reform, or should choice be restricted, controlled, or regulated?

The seminar included a technical discussion of Chubb and Moe's statistical methodology. In addition, participants heard a discussion of the role of choice in U.S. education between Chester Finn, former Assistant Secretary of Education and Founding Partner of the Edison Project, and Michael Cohen, then adviser to candidate Bill Clinton and now counselor to current Secretary of Education Richard Riley.

For the most part, this volume follows the outline of the seminar. A set of papers is presented, followed by remarks from discussants, at least one of whom examines the evidence from a policymaker's perspective. Then we present excerpts from a discussion with the invited audience. This volume presents the conference papers and discussion in the chronological order in which they actually took place. However, the issues are intertwined and we believe the reader can enter the debate at almost any point to address the central question of the role of choice in American education.

This introduction briefly presents some of the findings of each of the papers in this volume and highlights some of the discussion. In addition, it presents other empirical evidence on school choice programs gathered from a variety of sources. Thus, it is a summary of much of what is known about the effects of school choice. In the next section of this introduction, we examine whether parents' choices of schools would be an adequate means of driving schools to improve their academic effectiveness. The third section examines the effects of school choice on the educational, socioeconomic, and racial integration of students. In the fourth section, evidence on the effects of choice on academic achievement is presented. In this connection, we review a few points from the debate surrounding John Chubb and Terry Moe's assertion that academic progress is superior in high schools that are freed from democratic control and subjected to market pressures. In the fifth section, we review the evidence that

shows private schools are not academically superior to public, although some characteristics of private schools could be adopted by public schools to their benefit. Finally, in the last section we summarize the views of many seminar participants that choice cannot successfully drive school reform, but might be an ingredient (many would say a minor ingredient) of multifaceted school reform efforts.

Will Parents' and Students' Choices Drive School Reform?

Choice plans give parents authority to choose the schools their children attend, instead of relying on school districts to assign children to schools based on residential attendance areas. Choice advocates argue that parents can accurately evaluate schools' relative academic performance. After completing such an evaluation, parents will then select a school based on the quality of its academic programs. Therefore, these advocates argue, to attract students, schools must provide the highest quality academics. In this way, school choice will force schools to improve their academic effectiveness. Several of the papers in this volume examine why, when given school choice, parents choose the schools they do. Researchers find that academics are not always (or even often) the major factor determining choice of schools. Parents and students frequently choose schools for reasons that have little to do with achievement.

In the first essay of this volume, **Amy Stuart Wells** examines the logic of school choice proponents who argue that parents' choices will force academic improvements in schools. Wells calls this argument an "economic metaphor" since it relies on the concept of a market mechanism. Even if it were true that schools would respond to the market pressures of parents making choices, Wells' research suggests that parents do not necessarily make choices based on an evaluation of schools' relative academic quality. If, in fact, parents make choices based on other factors, or fail to make considered choices at all, then schools would not face market pressures to conform to consumer (i.e., parental) sovereignty by initiating academic improvements.

Wells examined a public high school choice program in the city of St. Louis that allows inner-city African-American students to choose to attend predominantly white schools in more affluent suburban communities. In her chapter in this volume Wells reports that

> several factors, including expectations, racial attitudes, sense of efficacy, and alienation and isolation from the larger society, affect the amount of information parents and students have access to and the kinds of decisions they make. These factors . . . lead to educational decisions far removed from tangible measures of school quality.(p. 30)

She found no evidence that these families' choices would lead schools to improve their academic effectiveness. She shows that many families chose schools based mainly on race. Some chose suburban schools because they believed schools were better if they included more white students (despite the fact that these families may have had no specific information about school curricula, program, or resources). Some families chose urban schools because they felt more comfortable with other African-American students. Families also chose schools based on convenience of location or because they did not have the self-confidence to choose a school in an unfamiliar area. In short, education consumers did not signal producers that market success would depend on academic improvement.

In contrast to economists' notion that consumers act to maximize their self-interest, Wells (a sociologist) suggests that decisions are constrained by the self-image of the decisionmaker and that actions are shaped by habit, tradition, or duty to meet others' expectations. This "bounded rationality" shapes decisions and acts to conform to the decisionmaker's perception of the world, whether it is accurate or not. Wells' work shows that many factors influence both families' decisions to participate in a choice program and their choice of school. Many of these factors, especially for the least-advantaged families, have little to do with academic quality. In fact, the decisionmaking process might not be improved even if families were provided with more factual information about school options.

In their study of Scotland's school choice program, **Douglas Willms and Frank Echols** also examine the reasons for parents' and students' choices of schools. Scottish families are allowed to choose schools outside their neighborhoods, and schools are required to publish information on their curriculum, school discipline, and examination results. Willms and Echols find that parents who chose schools tended to select schools in communities with higher socioeconomic status (SES) than their own. The chosen schools also had higher average test scores (unadjusted for SES) than assigned schools. However, when chosen and designated schools were compared for their expected effects on student achievement, holding constant students' social and economic backgrounds, achievement differences were trivial. Parents did not choose schools that were particularly effective, given the schools' social-class enrollments. In this situation, if resources flowed to schools based on the market signals of parent choices, schools in higher SES communities would receive more resources, even when there was no evidence that these schools produced better academic results. If parents flee a school solely because of the socioeconomic characteristics of its student body irrespective of the school's academic outcomes (adjusted for SES), then parents' choices would send misleading signals to educators, and high-quality schools might not be well attended.