

CHOICE AND CONTROL IN AMERICAN EDUCATION

VOLUME 1

THE THEORY OF CHOICE
AND CONTROL IN
AMERICAN EDUCATION

WILLIAM H. CLUNE &
JOHN F. WITTE (EDS)



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Preface

Choice, Community and Future Schools

James S. Coleman

This preface explores the contradictions that arise out of two simultaneously held values that are very relevant to most Americans. The first is the autonomy and choice of parents to do all they can to raise their children to adulthood. The second is the value we place on having a society that is not fragmented by divisions imposed by segregated or exclusive upbringing. In attempting to answer how our society might choose between these two values, I argue that while a single common school made sense in the context of 1890, it does not make sense in 1990. The more appropriate answer, both within the public sector, and in a system of education including private schools, is to expand parental choice and control at the school level. This will lead to increasing diversity and innovation in education, and will enhance community, an element that we seem to have lost in our current public education system.

Educational choice is an issue that throws into opposition two values that are deeply held by most Americans. One, favoring choice, is the value we place on parents being able to do all they can do for their children as they raise them to adulthood. Given the way modern society is organized, with production outside the household, and the future occupations of children different from those of their parents, one of the things parents can do for their children is to select for them the kind of environment which is best. School is one of the most important aspects of that environment. I suspect that for many university faculty members, the choice of university is in no small part affected by choice of an environment in which to raise their children.

But my point here is not merely that each of us wants to do best for our children; it is that collectively we regard that as important. We would

not want to live in a society in which parents were unconcerned about the social, moral, and intellectual development of their children. Nor would we want to live in a society in which parents, though having these concerns, were unable to do anything to implement them. For it is this concern, this deep involvement of parents with their children's development, that is the most precious asset of every society as it makes its way into the future. To lose that asset, or to impede its effectiveness, is to willfully deprive children of their birthright.

The value that we simultaneously hold which opposes choice is also strong. This is the value that we place on having a society that is not fragmented by divisions imposed by segregated or exclusive upbringing. It is this value which has always led us to look with some disfavor at the elite private boarding schools attended by children of the well-to-do. It is this value which, seeing religion as one of the potentially divisive elements in a religiously diverse society, is the basis of opposition to public support of church-affiliated schools, even to the extent of interpreting the Constitution as forbidding it. It is this value that adds strength to the forces for affirmative racial integration of the public schools to overcome the segregative effect of residence. It is this value that leads us to be suspicious of those bilingual education programs that appear intended to maintain a non-English linguistic subculture. We hold this value strongly because we do not want to live in a society that is compartmentalized, subdivided, segregated, whether by religious, racial, economic, or linguistic barriers.

There are, of course, other sources of support for or opposition to choice in education. Educational administrators prefer a compliant population of children, each of whom can be assigned to school to fit administrative convenience, and none of whose parents will object, or request a transfer. Choice upsets all this neat administrative order. But if I am correct, the major wellsprings of support for choice and of opposition to choice are the two deeply held values that I have described.

Before examining these matters further, a personal note about the earliest sources of interest in these matters on my part: I worked, one summer while still in high school, as a counselor in a summer camp. Exploring one day, I found, in the woods near a cliff which overlooked the Ohio River, a beautiful house built entirely of cedar wood. A more idyllic rustic setting would have been difficult to imagine. But the house was vacant. When I inquired about it, I learned that the owner was an artist, who had lived in the house with his wife and children. The family had left, moving to a different state, because of a conflict with state law: he and his wife had wanted to educate their children at home, but the state law required them to send their children to school, either a public school or a

state-approved private school. The family, strong in its convictions, left the house and moved to a state in which home-based education in lieu of school attendance was legal.

I was unprepared for this experience. I had attended small-town public schools in rural Ohio which approximated the 'common school' that was Horace Mann's ideal. I scarcely knew of private schools, and certainly not of education at home. True, some of the farmers grumbled about having to send their able-bodied sons to high school during planting or harvest when they were needed; but even they fully accepted the principle of the public school. The public schools I attended were dictated by the exigencies of parental economic constraints, not by preferences among schools. In the 10th grade my parents moved to Louisville, Kentucky, and I attended a central-city school drawing from all parts of the city. At that move, there had been alternatives; but except for a choice between the two city public high schools, there was only the Catholic school which was not relevant for me as a non-Catholic.

This bit of personal history illustrates well the conflict of these two strongly-held values. For many of us, sent without question to the local public school, a school which in many cases was the chief source of cohesion of the community or the neighborhood, the idea of disturbing this through the potentially divisive institution of choice is a strange idea. Yet when we see a conflict between state and parent over a child's education, like the one I described, the merits of choice in education become apparent.

This experience that I have described raised questions for me, questions that are not satisfactorily answered by the institutions of school in American society. It is these questions that I want to raise now.

How might a society choose between the two values I have described, in the conflict in which they are joined? The first step toward an answer, I believe, is to carry out a mental experiment: for each of two alternative policies (or perhaps more than two), to ask: what seem to be the consequences of each of these policies for the two central opposing values, as well as for subsidiary ones? Subsequent steps toward an answer involve extending the mental experiment into an actual comparison of policies in practice. Today we cannot do that, because there are not directly comparable settings in which full choice in education is available. It is clear that there are coming to be policies involving free choice within the public sector (in Minnesota and very likely elsewhere), and I trust that there will also come to be other alternatives in some states, involving free choice across public and private sectors.

In making the mental experiment, the point of central importance is

that the arguments in favor of each of the two values that are in conflict are not independent of the social context, but depend very much on that context. In fact, I will argue here that in the context in which free education began in this country, the value of non-divisiveness, opposing unrestricted choice in free education, had more arguments in its favor, while today, the value of parental choice has more arguments in its favor. I will emphasize this by stating the arguments for assignment to a single common school in the context of education a hundred years ago and the arguments for parental choice in the context of education today. Obviously some of the arguments on each side hold at both times; but stating the arguments in this fashion will focus attention on the change of context, and the effect of that on the balance between these two values.

The Arguments for the Single Common School in the Context of 1890

In 1890, about half the male labor force was employed on farms, and only a little more than half of boys between the ages of 5 and 19 were in school, as Figure 1 shows. Figure 1 shows something else: the proportion of boys of school age very closely mirrors the proportion of men employed in agriculture. Farming and public schooling as we know it have never gone well together, a fact that is brought home recurrently when there are battles between the Amish and the state over education. The farmer's complaint is 'Once he goes to school and gets a little education, he's no good on the farm any more', and the schools complaint is that 'Their fathers keep them out in the spring for planting and in the fall for harvest, and school is relegated to a few winter months'.

In 1890, the population, both rural and urban, was largely uneducated, and the public school, with a curriculum prescribed by educators, constituted a window to the outside world, and cognitive skills to make one's way in that world. Parental choice, if exercised, might be to the long-term benefit of the child, but it might instead be to the short term benefit of the parent.

There was, however, an even more important reason for a strong common school in 1890. America was a land of immigrants, with different languages, different customs, different religions, different ethnicities. The vision of a divided nation consisting of ethnic or national enclaves, each with its own schools perpetuating its language and hardening the religious divisions in society, strengthens greatly the argument against a system of state-supported independent schools, forming without the deterrence of tuition. That argument is not confined to the United States. In some

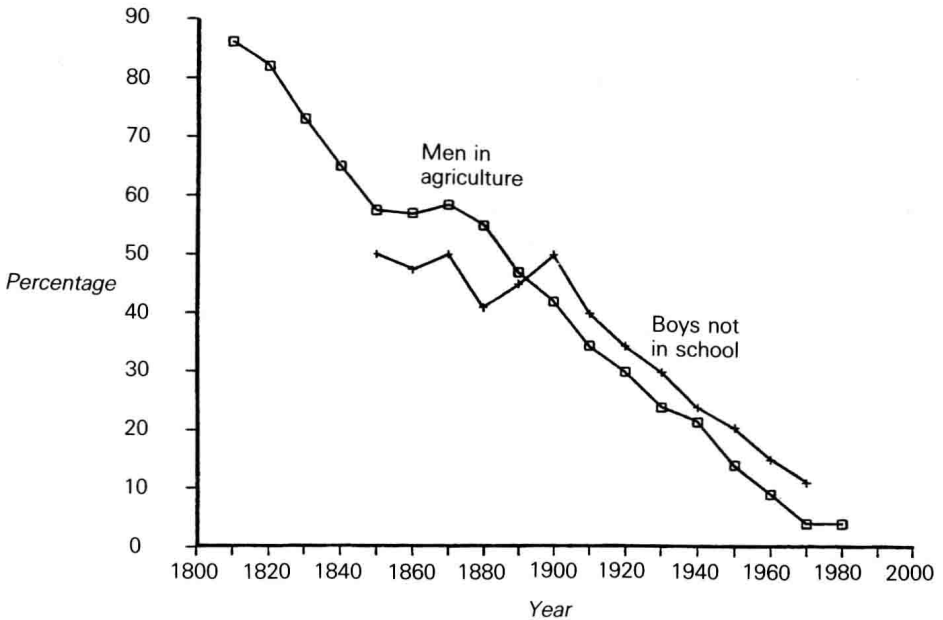


Figure 1: Farming and public schooling 1810–1982

developing nations today, as the US was then, there are even stronger proscriptions against private schools than there were and are in the US banning schools independent of the state — for very much the reasons stated here for the US in 1890: to insure that schools do not perpetuate the existing divisions in society.

The principal arguments against choice in education in the United States of 1890 (apart from the self-serving arguments of educational administrators) are the two arguments given here: that educational choice by parents, rather than by educators, is choice of ignorance, choice in pursuit of parents' interest rather than children's, choice which would restrict rather than widen children's horizons; and that educational choice by parents, in a society of linguistic, cultural, ethnic, and religious minorities, perpetuates and strengthens the division. These, I believe, are in essence the strongest arguments today against parental choice of school; but as is clearly evident, the conditions in America today are not those of America in 1890.

The Arguments Favoring Parental Choice in 1990

In 1890, most families, whatever their deficiencies, had one property that many families do not have today: their members were inward-looking, depending greatly on one another, not only for economic support, but also for social and psychological support. The task of the state (as some educators saw it then) was to break the power of the family over its children; to liberate the children from the narrow horizons, the dogmas, the language, the narrow subcultures, the self-serving power of their parents. One might say, in 1990, that the state has succeeded all too well. It has, of course, been aided by the commercial popular culture and by other elements of society. But it is clear that the task of the school is no longer that of penetrating a dense and recalcitrant family to pry the young into freedom. Many parents are no longer lacking education, and many have more education than their children's teachers. Television, coming into the home quite independently of the school, widens horizons as the school once did. While it could be said that for children of 1890, their environment was information poor, the environment of today's children is information rich.

This does not mean, of course, that in schools of today all is well. Public schools, by seeing their task as *independent* of that of the children's parents, have in some cases come close to losing for the child that most precious asset: the parents' involvement with their children's development. Little attention has been paid by schools to the effects of their policies on incentives of parents. Yet the incentives of parents — to aid, complement, reinforce, and support the school in its task — are not only an asset for children, they are the asset on which schools have always depended. It is in part the concern to maintain and strengthen this asset that is the source of current interest in educational choice.

What are the principal arguments favoring parental choice today? To answer this question requires recognizing that the full replacement of assignment by choice constitutes not merely a new freedom on the part of parents and children. Most fundamentally, it changes the relation between the consumers and the providers of education. It takes from the providers, that is, the schools, a certain set of rights, the right to a fixed allocation of students, and gives those rights to the consumers of education.

The rights, however, are separable into bundles. One way of separating them is to conceive of two levels of choice: first, choice within the public sector, as in the recently-instituted Minnesota plan; and second, choice that includes the private sector without payment of tuition, as found in many countries of Europe.

Choice within the Public Sector

For choice within the public sector, one may be misled by the imagery that the recent Minnesota legislation stimulates, that is an imagery of a set of parents and children now choosing among those institutions to which they were previously assigned. Such an imagery trivializes the potential change, just as the shift from a planned economy to a market economy in the area of housing would be trivialized by seeing that as a shift from a condition in which families that had been assigned to apartments were now given the right to choose among those same apartments.

A better imagery is that suggested by an incident of a few years ago. The incident involves the general manager of the Pontiac Division of General Motors who in 1980 raised a question for himself, about quality of the bodywork on automobiles. He asked why it was that the quality was so much higher on Hondas than it was on Pontiacs. He discovered that Honda's assembly lines were organized very differently from those of Pontiac. Pontiac employed what I will call forward policing, and Honda employed what I will call backward policing. Pontiac's assembly lines had assembly line workers, foremen, supervisors, and managers, organized in the usual hierarchical fashion. Defects were found by inspectors at the end of the sub-assembly and assembly lines, the defective cars were tagged, and repaired at the end of the line. In Honda's assembly lines, each sub-assembly line had the right to reject the incoming part, and each worker had the right to reject out-of-specification input parts — even if that rejection required stopping the assembly line. Each sub-assembly group not only had these rights of rejection; it was held accountable for those of its outputs that were rejected by the next group, for whom its outputs were inputs. The next group was in effect its customer, with the customer's right to accept or reject its inputs. Accountability to superiors was replaced by accountability to customers, that is the recipient of its products. This accountability reverberated backward through the organization from the finished product back to the initial stages of production. It constituted a backward policing that produced high quality, simply by giving each of the work groups in the organization the same rights that the final customer had — which in turn made each of the work groups accountable for its products.

How is backward policing at Honda relevant to choice in education? Taking the rights to reject inputs away from supervisors and placing them instead in the hands of the consumers of that input is analogous to taking the rights to determine school attended away from administrators and placing them in the hands of parents. But the result in automobile

manufacture is not merely a reallocation of rights: it is an improvement in quality of the product. This improvement arises because the new holders of the rights are both better motivated and better able to police the products they receive than are supervisors in a hierarchy. This in turn creates an incentive on the part of their suppliers to improve the quality of their product. The principle behind parental choice is similar: the parents are both better motivated and better able to judge the relative quality of the schooling their child receives than are administrators.

In the case of schooling, however, there are additional differences between the two allocations of rights. Because school attendance is compulsory until age 16, assignment to school imposes a requirement on the school to keep students it would otherwise dismiss on disciplinary grounds. As many public school principals who have spent long days in court well know, the law upholds the child's right to attend school, even if the child ruins the chances of other children to learn. Why do private schools not have this problem? Because as any public school administrator can quickly point out, they can expel their problem students to another school.

If, however, children are not assigned to school but can choose, then there is no reason why public school principals should have less freedom to expel students than does a private school headmaster: the child has a right to attend school at public expense, but not a particular school.¹ With a voluntary clientele, a public school can establish rules and require that students live up to them, just as can a private school. The stifling embrace in which school and student are locked would be broken, and both would benefit.

I have described only some of the arguments for choice of school within the public sector — and I have said nothing about the budgetary devolution to the school level necessary to give the school the resources and the freedom to shape its program to attract and satisfy customers. But I turn now to choice beyond the public sector.

Choice Beyond the Public Sector

The kinds of changes made possible by the second level of choice go beyond those made possible by the first level. The second level, choice including the private sector, allows a diversity of offerings less encumbered by the legal and administrative constraints that affect public schools.

Let me illustrate this by the topic of single-sex schools. American public schools are coeducational by law, though it was not always so. The presumption on which this is based is that single-sex schools, from which

students of the opposite sex are excluded, do not provide equality of educational opportunity, while coeducation does so. But is that presumption valid?

Fortunately, the diversity of values among American parents is reflected in a diversity in the private sector that is missing in the public sector. There are single-sex schools among the schools affiliated with religious bodies: Catholic, Protestant, and Jewish.² Also fortunately, coeducation is not as highly regarded in all countries as in the United States. Because this diversity exists, and because some large-scale data-collection efforts make comparisons possible, certain questions about single-sex and coeducational schools may be studied scientifically. Research has been carried out recently comparing single-sex and coeducational Catholic high schools in the United States; and comparing single-sex and coeducational colleges, also in the United States; and research has been carried out comparing single-sex and coeducational public schools in Thailand. The Thailand analyses were carried out using the International Educational Achievement second mathematics study, the US Catholic analyses were carried out using the 1980 *High School and Beyond Study*, and the US college analyses were carried out using the 1972 National Longitudinal Survey of high school seniors, followed fourteen years beyond high school (Jiminez and Lockheed, 1988; Lee and Bryk, 1986; Riordan, 1990).

The results of these analyses are consistent: boys in coeducational schools seem to do as well as or better than comparable boys in single-sex schools, in academic achievement. Girls seem to do distinctly better in single-sex schools, an effect that is most pronounced for mathematics and science. Furthermore, they appear to show better emotional and social adjustment, and better occupational growth in the years following school and college.

Suppose these initial inferences turn out to be correct: that coeducation is beneficial to boys, but harmful to girls. This would be a cruel irony: the very institutional arrangements required by law on equal opportunity grounds are providing greater inequality of opportunity than the institutions they replaced.

The example of single-sex schools merely illustrates the possible errors that a monolithic public school system can institutionalize. The implication is not that single-sex schools are better for everyone (or even for all girls) and thus ought to replace coeducational schools. It is, rather, that choice beyond the constraints imposed on state-provided institutions can bring about institutions that function better, for particular children and youth, than do the state-provided schools. As in the earlier case of backward policing, this is in accord with the general principle that con-

sumers of education are not only better judges of the comparative merits of different educational programs than are administrators, but also that the choices of consumers are more fully guided by the educational merit of the program than are administrators, whose choices must reflect the need to satisfy various interests in their organizations.

This example of single-sex schools illustrates the greater diversity achievable in a private sector of education as compared to the public sector. The private sector is not a *single* sector, but many: there are military schools, there are Quaker schools; there are schools with religious foundations, and schools that are aggressively secular. There are schools in which, like Eton in England, uniforms are required, and schools which, like Summerhill in England, make the absence of constraint a guiding principle. There are day schools, boarding schools, and schools that are mixed; there are coeducational schools and schools for one sex only; there are Montessori schools and there are schools like that at Telluride. Major educational innovations ordinarily begin outside the public sector, and many can survive only outside the public sector, where they need not clear the majoritarian hurdle. In a majoritarian democracy, the public schools must be creatures of the majority. If there is a single public school, it must reflect those values that the majority holds in common, a requirement that encourages blandness. If there are several, as is true where most people live, then the majority can initiate some diversity of offering. But this diversity is far less than the diversity, and the vigor in its pursuit, that arises from subcommunities in the larger society who share common values about educational environments for their children.

Altogether, the arguments for choice in schools of today are strong ones. Those very forces from which schools of 1890 were in part designed to protect children, that is parental interest and parental values, now constitute an asset to be nurtured and encouraged, lest it be lost. The way in which schools are organized can strengthen that asset or weaken it. It is clear that one of the aspects of school organization that does most to strengthen the asset of parental involvement with their child's upbringing is choice among schools which range widely in the values and principles on which they are built. This choice exists when parents are free to choose, not only within the public sector, but also among the diverse array of schools that lie outside the public sector.

The arguments for the single common school in 1890 are not entirely absent a hundred years later, and any system of school organization must deal with these arguments. But the arguments in favor of choice today are sufficiently strong that the 1890 arguments, rather than being decisive, should serve merely as constraints on the kinds of systems of choice that are created. One of those arguments concerns community, and it is to that argument that I will now turn.

Community, the Common School, and Choice

In 1890, community was built around neighborhood, and the common school was both a reflection of that community and an important element in strengthening it. Most Americans lived in small towns and rural areas (remember that about half the total male labor force was in agriculture); the common school was the focal point of the community.

Today, men do not work where they live, and increasingly, women also do not. Most persons live in relatively dense metropolitan aggregations, and the common school has given way to an array of schools, stretching from central city to distant suburb, which serve distinct and different segments of the population. The public school no longer serves to bind these distinct segments together, but because of the freedom of residence and of movement that automobiles and affluence create, it serves to keep them separate.

The conquering of space through personal transportation and electronic communication also means that the local community, though more homogeneous in economic level than ever before, is no longer a functional community of men and women who are bound together with the multiple ties of neighborhood, work, and ethnicity. Nor is it even a value community of people who share common values. The communities of adults are no longer built around ties that are neighborhood-based, but express some other common bond, and some other institutional locus. It may be a religious group, it may be a social group based on workplace, or it may be neighborhood. But neighborhood is no longer the common locus of all these ties; it is merely one among the several bases for such ties. The value communities are even less coherent; persons share values with others they do not know personally, and diverge in values from their neighbors.

In such a society, where residence, and thus the once-common school, have become economically and racially stratified, and where neighborhood no longer implies functional community nor a set of shared values, the school populations defined by geographically-defined catchment areas are no longer common schools, and the parents of these students no longer constitute communities. In this kind of society, parental choice of school cannot destroy the common school; it has already been destroyed by residential stratification. Parental choice can no longer destroy the community, which has been destroyed by ease of movement and communication. It can, under some circumstances, create or strengthen a community that reinforces parents' values. The circumstances are most fully met in the case of religiously-based schools, for the school is part of an existing functional community based on a religious institution. There are some other institutional loci that serve as the basis for a community, but in the absence of free private schooling, these have developed only in unusual

settings. Many universities and colleges have 'laboratory schools' attached to them, with the university as the institutional basis for the community. A few schools, beginning with day care, nursery school, and kindergarten, have been established in workplaces, but these are rare, in the absence of free private schooling. The circumstances are least well met in the case of general-purpose independent schools, whose clientele may share a set of values about education, or may share only the aspiration that their son or daughter go to a 'good' school.

The case of religiously-based private schools illustrates another point: it is the very existence and strength of the religious community that is the basis for the fear of free religious schools, and the basis for the interpretation of the Constitution to prohibit public support for education in religiously-grounded schools. At a time when nearly everyone had an active religious affiliation, the fear that this could lead to a religiously-divided nation may have had some grounding. But what is lost by this prohibition is an opportunity to strengthen that strongest asset of the child: a parent's interest, involvement, and attention to the child's growth. The prohibition may be, in fact, highly regressive, most harmful to the least advantaged. Religious involvement is and has been stronger on average for those who are less advantaged, white and black, than for those who are more advantaged. And it is the children of the less advantaged who are most at risk of being harmed by drugs, crime, alcohol, delinquency. The possibility of having their children under the care of a church-related school offers a far greater benefit to these parents than to those whose children are less at risk. And it does so because the church constitutes a basis for community that builds upon, reinforces, and extends the most worthy of the values the parent holds and would transmit to the child.

Although the church is one basis for community that can serve as the central focus of a free private school, it is not the only one, and among the secular majority of the population, not the most important one. Anyone who scans the summer camp advertisements in the New York Times Magazine section each spring cannot help but be impressed by the diversity of goals that young people and their parents want to realize. There are camps for weight loss, swimming, sailing, horseback riding, computers, science, remedial schoolwork, baseball, basketball, tennis, and a host of other activities. The specialization that these camps provide is, of course, an overlay upon the classroom instruction in academic subjects they receive in school over the winter. It does not take too much imagination, however, to see the flourishing of schools that would combine some specialty that served as a common focus with regular classroom learning in standard subjects.

Future Schools

The visions of schools that I have encouraged in what I have just described can serve as a useful way of introducing the question of what schools of the future will be like. These visions ranged from church-related schools replacing the public school in the lives of many children who are most at risk to harmful influences, to schools focused around some special skills or goals for students from more secular families. I make no claim to be clairvoyant in predicting the nature of future schools. Thus these are only visions (and visions that could be realized only if free publicly-supported private schools were to come into being), and not predictions of the schools of the future.

I believe, however, that certain predictions can be made. Schools as currently constituted are coming close to being non-viable institutions, from junior high school upward. The school captures a declining fraction of the adolescent's time and attention, which is directed more toward part-time work for pay, participation in popular culture in the form of music, hanging out at the local shopping mall, and other out-of-school adult-oriented consumption activities. The period of 'the school', a single monolithic institutional structure within which children spend their pre-school and elementary years, and within which young people build an adolescent society, may be a period that is passing. As children and young people spend more of their time, beginning at birth, out of their parents' household, the institutions we construct to care for them and occupy their attention should probably be more diverse, more differentiated, more partial, with each possibly covering a shorter span, either in years, in months of the year, in days of the month, or in hours of the day. But the question of what form these schools of the future will optimally take is perhaps the wrong question. A different and perhaps more appropriate question is this: what way of organizing the education (and more generally the lives) of children and young people will best allow their evolution toward optimal forms? The answer I would give is that a provision of resources to parents, to free the opportunities they can provide for their children from their own level of income, will allow the growth and evolution of those institutional forms that fit optimally with the evolving structure of modern society.

The way in which this provision of resources is done cannot be careless or without design. Tuition tax credits are probably the least well designed way that has been proposed. Vouchers for education can take many forms, and these forms are important, because of the incentives they shape for parents and children. But the proper design of such a resource distribution is far more likely to lead to good environments for children