

Thirty Years of School Choice: What Do We Know About Its Impact?

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Keynote Address to "Choosing Better Schools" Conference
Atlantic Institute for Market Studies
Fredericton, New Brunswick
May 4th & 5th, 1997

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Let us begin by reflecting on three big and fundamental questions that become especially interesting in thirty year perspective, at least with respect to U.S. education. (I won't pretend to appraise the Canadian scene. You will decide for yourselves which portions of what I have to say today are relevant and useful to Atlantic Canada.

First, what is a public school?

Second, for whose benefit do we have schools?

Third, in a democracy, what are our rights with respect to schooling?

Thirty years ago, the answers to these questions were reasonably clear. Today, I submit, they're again clear--but they're also very different from 1967.

What is a public school? Thirty years ago, we took for granted that it was a school run by the government, a more-or-less uniform appendage of a state bureaucracy, staffed by government employees, run by government regulations and administrators.

Today, in the United States, we're coming to view a public school as a school open to the public, financed by the public, and accountable to public authorities for its performance, but not necessarily one run by government. A team of teams, a group of parents, a community organization, even a for-profit firm, may run it. It may be very different from the public school a mile away. Government employees do not necessarily staff it. Certainly it is not necessarily answerable for its procedures and actions to a team of government bureaucrats.

For whose benefit do we have schools? Thirty years ago, there were lively debates among economists about the relative portions of education gains that should be classed as "private" benefit or "public" benefit but we rarely doubted that schools, overall, existed for the benefit of the society.

Today we have considerable reason to doubt that. There is ample evidence that, in their day-to-day workings, their budget decisions and their policies, our public schools are run primarily for the benefit and convenience of their employees, their staffers and their bureaucratic managers.

What are our rights with respect to schooling in a democracy? Thirty years ago, we were preoccupied with vouchsafing everyone the right to attend school - and not to be barred on account of skin color, disability or other such characteristic. But those were primarily "group rights", access opportunities for once-victimized groups, and we didn't pay much attention to individual rights or parent rights. (Nor did we pay half as much attention to quality as to equality.) We also tended to trust the state to be fair and just and to look after our interests and our rights. If it wanted to tell people which school to attend, or move children from one school to another, we simply took for granted that it knew best and was looking after our, as well as the public's, interest.

We had, I think it's fair to say, forgotten the long-ago admonition of John Stuart Mill, the great civil libertarian, who wrote that "The State should leave to parents to obtain the education [of their children] where and how they please, and content itself with helping to pay the school fees. [If this were done] there would be an end to the difficulties. About what the State should teach, and how it should teach, which now convert the subject into a battleground for sects and parties".

Today we have come to see schooling as a different sort of civil rights issue, a matter better entrusted to individuals and families than to the tender mercies of bureaucrats, politicians, judges and experts. The battles among "sects and parties" have worn us down. The stranglehold that self-interested "stakeholder" groups within the education field have gained over government decisions bearing on education has left millions of people doubting that the state is looking after anyone's interests save those of its employees. Particularly in our minority communities, we see that state-run education often fails to meet the most basic, even rudimentary, expectations of parents, namely that their children will spend their days in a safe place where they will be looked after by people who care for them, who love them, and who expertly teach them to read and write and cipher.

We've also become keenly aware of the oddness of this vitally important service having emerged as essentially the only one in our free society where the normal rules and rights of a democracy do not apply.

We can live where we choose, even if we're on welfare.
We can eat what we like, even if we depend on Food Stamps.
We can go to the doctor that we favor, even if we rely on Medicaid.

We can attend the college of our preference, even if we must look to a Pell Grant or government-subsidized loan to pay the tuition

We can travel when and where we wish, even if we use public transportation to get there.

We can even send our letters and parcels through the means of our choice, patronizing Federal Express or U.P.S. if the postal service disappoints us.

Why, then, should we suppose that in primary and secondary schooling, almost alone among the essential services of a family's life, we must succumb to a state monopoly? State regulation? State control?

Why, above all, must we submit to a state enterprise that spends vast amounts of money and yet for most children delivers very meager results?

So, no, in response to the third fundamental question, we no longer assume, as we did three decades back, that the state is the primary protector of our rights with respect to education. We're much more inclined to expect to exercise those rights for ourselves, as individuals and families.

Something else of great significance has happened over these same thirty years. In almost every other domain, vast bureaucratic monopolies have been shown to be woefully inefficient and ineffectual.

This is most vivid in the private sector, where virtually every successful enterprise has transformed itself, dispensing with top-down control, sprawling middle management, weighty books of rules and manuals of procedures.

Nearly every successful private enterprise, even the largest among them, has reshaped and restructured itself. Typically, it is now managed according to what some theorists call a "tight, loose" strategy. By that I mean it is tightly controlled with respect to the goals it sets, the standards it honors and the results it much achieve. But it is loose with respect to the means by which those

results are produced. Individual units within the firm are given great freedom to organize and operate themselves as they see fit, to deploy their resources as they judge best, so long as they produce the desired "bottom line".

Loose with respect to means; tight with respect to ends. A recipe for private sector success, yes. Yet government typically follows the opposite formula: it's tight with respect to how it does things but relaxed to the point of heedlessness about whether those things achieve the desired result. Results aren't the government's obsession; procedures, intentions and resources are.

To change this, we have begun to talk of "reinventing government", of government units that "steer but don't row", of outsourcing public services and functions to private providers held accountable to and by government for their effectiveness and their efficiency but not for obeisance to elaborate bureaucratic norms. It's a hard sell and progress is slow, but movement is visible.

Of late the impulse to reinvent has reached the primary and secondary schools of the United States, with very similar patterns visible in Britain and New Zealand.

The most prominent example of reinventing public education American-style is the innovation we have come to call "charter schools". The concept is admirably explained in the conference book by Joe Freedman and Fred McMahon, so I won't dwell on the theory, except to say that charter schools are independent public schools, a phrase in which equal weight should be given to the words "independent" and "public".

Today, in the United States, we have about 500 such schools operating, a number that will likely reach 700 in the 1997-98 school year. Twenty-six states have thus far enacted charter legislation (though their statutes vary considerably). The movement hasn't been with us for long. The oldest charter schools--a handful in Minnesota--are completing their fourth year. The great majority has been operating for just one or two years. (Operating as charter schools, that is. Several states permit the "conversion" of pre-existing public and, occasionally, private schools to charter status.)

How are they doing? They're too new to have reliable data on student achievement. But we know two things about them for sure:

First, the demand for them hugely exceeds the supply. Most charter schools have waiting lists. And in the states that have "capped" the number of schools that can be chartered, there's also a queue of people and organizations waiting to start more of them.

Second, the people in them are very, very pleased with this educational innovation. We have just retrieved from the computer centre the results of a large, Hudson Institute-sponsored survey of some 5000 students, 2500 parents and 500 teachers in U.S. charter schools in 1996-97. There are exceptions, of course, but the overwhelming pattern of evidence suggests great satisfaction--perhaps most poignantly among youngsters (and parents of youngsters) who had done poorly in their previous schools.

Come with me on a brief tour to Arizona, the widest open and fastest growing of our charter states, a state where, in the second year of the program, two percent of all schoolchildren are now attending some 140-charter schools. Let me briefly sketch for you five of those schools.

Pine Forest is an elementary school in Flagstaff that follows a Waldorf - style curriculum, designed by the German education thinker Rudolph Steiner. It serves about 160 mostly lower middle class youngsters, has bought its own building, and expects its teachers to be Waldorf-trained.

Greyhills Academy serves 450 Native-American high school students on the Navajo Reservation in northeastern Arizona. Many of its pupils board at the school. It's one of the few "conversion" charters in the state, having previously been operated by the Bureau of Indian Affairs. It has been working hard to renovate its curriculum to make it more thematic, more project-based, more helpful to the transition from school to work. Considerable attention is also paid to drug/alcohol crisis intervention counseling and health care.

Esperanza Montessori School, also known as NFL-YET Academy, has its main campuses in one of the toughest parts of south Phoenix. (There's also a small branch in a rural community many miles away.) Virtually all its students are Hispanic, mostly of Mexican origin. It's a large k-12 school that is trying for a Montessori curriculum, though it also finds itself dealing with the basic skill deficits and social problems of its students and neighborhood. It was established (in temporary buildings) as part of an ambitious community development scheme for this impoverished and much-troubled neighborhood.

Mesa Arts Academy is a middle school in suburban Mesa that was founded by the local Boys and Girls Club, which realized that it had a fine facility that went essentially unused before 3 p.m. The charter school has an arts focus, serves a mixed student body, and has enjoyed a close working relationship with the local public school system, which has supplied both the core academic curriculum and many of the teachers.

The Success School operates on ten sites scattered around the state. It has undertaken a major challenge: the educational (and personal) rehabilitation of adolescents who have been in trouble with the law and in many cases have been rejected by conventional schools. Using a tutorial/mentoring model more than conventional classrooms, Success takes youngsters who have been on probation or parole and seeks to educate them at least to high school "equivalency".

Note that four of these five schools are essentially new while one is a conversion. (Strictly speaking, Pine Forest grew from a private preschool that already existed, but absent the charter law it would have remained just a pre-school.)

In other states - notably California - a much larger fraction of the charter schools are conversions, the result of existing public schools seceding from their local systems.

According to our data, roughly primarily parents started a third of U.S. charter schools, approximately a third by teachers or other educators, and the final third by a wide array of other organizations.

Yet these are public schools, not private. They're publicly financed, open to all comers and accountable to public authorities (as well as to their "customers") for their success or failure. They don't charge tuition. They can't turn anyone away. But they don't answer to a platoon of assistant superintendents, either. They're essentially self-governing.

What makes charter schools so promising an education reform strategy is that they are accountable for results rather than following rules. A charter typically lasts five years, at the end of which it is renewed if--and only if--the school has reached the goals it set for itself. Public authorities thus retain final say over their fates. But charter schools are spared from day-to-day bureaucratic supervision and are encouraged to be different. Most of those we have visited are different indeed. A few I would not send my own children to, but in most of the schools that we visited, my colleagues and I felt the walls all-but-vibrating with high quality teaching and learning.

Yet charter schools have more enemies than allies. Some opponents are to be found "on the right", people who believe that any "public" school is inevitably tainted by association with government and that any reform of the public education system, however superficially appealing, will only slow the quest for complete privatization, preferably in the form of vouchers.

Most charter foes, however, see themselves as liberals. Their motives are mixed, often including self-interested protection of the government (and union) monopoly that is the current public education system. But self-interest customarily wears the fig leaf of concern for needy children--and sometimes that concern is authentic. By far the most frequently-voiced criticism of charter schools is that they will "cream" the ablest, most fortunate and best-parented kids, "leaving behind" the poor, the disabled and the minorities in "regular" public schools that will become "dumping grounds", etc., etc.

Perhaps the most important finding of our charter school research is that this allegation is a fantasy. The 34 schools on which we obtained student data were a reasonable cross-section of last year's charter universe; here is what we learned about the 8400 youngsters who attended them in 1995-96:

- 63 percent were non-white.
- More than half were poor, i.e. eligible for the federal free-and reduced price lunch program.
- 19 percent had limited English proficiency.
- 19 percent had disabilities that affect their education.
- 4 percent were former dropouts.

Far from enrolling the "best and brightest" or "richest and whitest", we've found that charter schools are attracting kids in acute need of alternatives, youngsters who were ill-served by the regular schools and failed to thrive therein. We came to think of them as "square peg" students who do not fit into the round holes of conventional public (or private) schools.

Far from creaming, one might say that charter schools are dealing with a lot of "skim milk" that the regular dairy cannot or will not handle. Yet despite this early evidence of their responsiveness to some of the neediest children in the land, charter schools still have dogged enemies in the education establishment. These enemies have striven with fair success to keep charter schools few and weak: capping their numbers, cramping their autonomy and limiting their funds. That is why many charter laws still make it difficult to launch viable schools. And for those schools that do manage to get launched, far from being handed a bucket of public funds to do whatever they like with little or no accountability (as critics also allege), charter schools in most states remain burdened by myriad rules and procedures. Nor they fully funded. Most lack access to capital funding and start-up funding and many are given less than their full share of per pupil operating funds, or are forced to hand substantial chunks of their budgets back to the local district in a rent or overhead payment. The upshot is that the majority of charter schools must make do with less money than conventional public schools, while being expected to produce superior results.

A tall order indeed. That's one of the reasons nobody should view charter schools as an education panacea. Even if we achieve Bill Clinton's stated goal of 3000 such schools by century's end, there will still be some 80,000 public schools in the United States that are not charter schools.

Moreover, there are some significant uncertainties about the future of charter schools, some reasons not to be over-confident.

The charter barrel contains a few bad apples. Several schools have closed--or been closed--either because they lost their market or because they did something egregiously wrong, like divert the school's budget to private gain. Critics like to cite these examples as evidence that the whole barrel is tainted. That gives them an argument either for repealing the whole charter program or for re-regulating the schools so that "this can never happen again". Some of this re-regulation could well occur.

Nor have charter schools managed entirely to jettison the tired school designs that we inherited from the Nineteenth century. Many are variations on the two classic patterns of schooling: the content-based school and the child-centred school. A few interesting hybrids have tried to create a combination.

While we cannot yet know where the natural limits of charter school growth may lie, surely there are such limits. I think they'll be the product of a timorous, non-entrepreneurial education profession on the one hand and complacent consumers on the other.

It also needs to be noted that, with interesting exceptions, the charter school concept (like other forms of school choice) is more difficult to adapt to thinly populated rural regions than to metropolitan areas. The main exceptions I've seen involve "virtual schools" that youngsters attend without having to be there physically, part-time schools, and a handful of situations--as in the Colorado mountains--where the charter law has enabled a small town to retain its own school or to withdraw from a vast district that was making its youngsters spend many hours on school buses.

Why, then, with all these enemies, obstacles, limitations and unanswered questions am I so enthusiastic about the charter school idea? We don't yet know for certain that their pupils are learning more. They're too new to have produced hard achievement data. But we know from sitting in many classrooms and interviewing hundreds of students, parents and teachers that these schools radiate learning. They fulfill parents' demands for safety, order, basic skills and dedicated, caring teachers. (The teachers like them, too. Most charter schools

have a line around the block of people keen to work in them.) They are mostly small schools in which everyone knows everyone else's face, schools with clear missions and distinctive philosophies, schools full of adults and children who want to be there. Not a bad recipe for educational success.

My focus on--and enthusiasm for--charter schools ought not obscure the fact that they are but one of a number of forms of school choice that are spreading across the United States today. Ten other forms deserve brief mention:

1. Intra-district choice among existing schools. It's not uncommon, today, for a public school system to allow youngsters to opt in any, or almost any, of its schools.

2. Magnet and alternative schools. Again usually district based, this pattern of choice involves the purposeful creation of new, specialized schools with particular themes, foci or clienteles, particularly for youngsters who are poorly served by or unhappy in the conventional schools. (There's some early evidence that competition from charter schools is spurring some U.S. school systems to respond to "consumer demand" with more such magnets and options.)

3. Schools within schools. This is nothing neither more nor less than the installation of more than one school or program within a single building. East Harlem's District 4 is well known for creating many such institutions.

4. Inter-district / statewide choice. Minnesota led the way by declaring that any youngster living in the state could (space permitting) attend any public school in the state. About a dozen other states have embraced the same principle.

5. Private management. Close to a dozen firms are in the "school management" business in the United States, undertaking--via charter or management contract with the school system--to run public schools and to make a profit along the way. The best known among them are Educational Alternatives, Inc. and the Edison Project, with which I was affiliated for a couple of years. Though it remains to be seen whether investor profits will follow, it's apparent that public education in the United States is at least partly amenable to "outsourcing".

6. Non-school and after school options. Partly because of changing family patterns and parent work schedules, and partly because of dissatisfaction with the schools, more and more families (and churches, community organizations, etc.) are supplementing children's schooling with a wide array of other programs

and offerings. Some are technology based - software programs, for example-- while others resemble the "juku" of Japan. Many are non-profit, but commercial firms own some of the fastest growing.

7. Home schooling (and partial home schooling). The statistics are slippery but it appears that somewhere between one and their parents now teach four percent of U.S. children at home. An intriguing variant of this approach involves youngsters who attend school part-time and are taught at home part-time. Several charter schools make this kind of arrangement easier to obtain.

8. Post-secondary options. Minnesota again led the way in allowing high school students to take some of their courses at local universities, thus obtaining a wider (and perhaps more challenging) array of educational opportunities while also completing their formal schooling.

9. Privately-funded vouchers. More than thirty U.S. cities have scholarship programs paid for by private donors and philanthropists that assist low-income children to shift from bad public schools to better private alternatives. Some 10,000 youngsters currently benefit from these programs, which are hugely popular. (When a group of wealthy New Yorkers announced that they would pay for 1300 such scholarships, several telephone operators had to work round-the-clock to handle the calls from eager parents. Some 17,000 submitted preliminary applications.)

10. Publicly-funded vouchers. Two U.S. cities (Milwaukee, Wisconsin and Cleveland, Ohio) presently have state-funded vouchers that permit some low income youngsters to attend private schools at public expense. Though there remains a lively constitutional debate about whether church-related schools can participate in these programs, early evidence suggest not only that demand for this form of choice is keen but also that the academic achievement of participants is superior to that of their age mates who remain in troubled urban public schools

Those are ten forms of school choice--in addition to charter schools--that are operating in the United States today. No doubt there are others that I've failed to notice or to mention. Virtually all forms are spreading in response to high demand from "consumers". And those for which we have data suggest that the educational results are generally positive. I don't believe the choice genie will ever go back into its bottle. That is because, above all, we've developed different answers over the past thirty years to the three fundamental questions with which I began today. Let me restate them:

What is a public school?

For whose benefit do we have schools?

In a democracy, what are our rights with respect to schooling?

How you answer those questions in 1997 will, I submit, shape just about everything you think about practically every important issue facing education in your country as well as in mine.

Thank you.