

A Way

By Joseph P. Viteritti

School Choice and Educational Opportunity

Out

Education is the keystone to opportunity. Time and again, research has demonstrated that academic achievement is positively related to earning capacity, civic involvement, political efficacy, and a host of advantageous personal attributes.

Without at least a high school diploma in hand, a young man or woman is destined to remain on the margins of life in the skill-based world of the next millennium. Yet millions of boys and girls, a disproportionate number of whom are from

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minority families living in America's inner cities, remain trapped in failing schools.

Since the U.S. Supreme Court handed down the landmark *Brown* decision in 1954, the federal and state governments have instituted a variety of policy measures to improve educational opportunities for minority and poor children. We have sent children on long bus rides to achieve racial balance, invested billions of dollars in compensatory education programs that do not work, and tinkered on the edges of institutional reform to make school systems more responsive to students' needs. Yet race and class remain the most reliable predictors of education achievement in America.

In the past decade, educators have begun to experiment with "school choice" as a way to increase the educational options open to parents in deciding where their children attend school. The range of choice programs has been diverse. Some are limited to public schools. Other, more controversial voucher plans permit children to attend private and religious schools with public support. During this time choice has evolved from a market model concept embraced primarily by conservatives and libertarians to a policy designed to promote educational opportunity for underserved populations that enjoys wider support.

Polls show that minority and low-income communities strongly endorse school choice, while the white middle class, especially in the suburbs, remains divided. That pattern is not difficult to understand. Minority and poor parents, unhappy with the chronically low-performing schools their children are forced to attend, want alternatives. Middle-class parents, who are content with the quality of their children's schools, are less motivated to seek change.

In fact, many middle-class families already enjoy choice under the prevailing arrangement. Not only do they have the means to acquire a private school education, they also have the economic mobility to reside in communities where the quality of public schools is relatively high. According to a National Household Survey released by the Department of Education in 1997, the quality of local public schools is a key factor in determining where people with school-age children decide to live. Poor families usually do not have the luxury of making such decisions.

Today the most compelling argument for school choice is an egalitarian one: some people have it, and some do not; those who do not have it want it; and those who do not have it need it to escape the dreadful schools to which their children are habitually assigned. If we are to realize the goal of equal opportunity in education, the question is not whether to have choice in America, but whether choice should be available to all, regardless of income or social class.

As with previous policies to improve educational opportunities for poor and minority children, a simple declaration of noble intentions is not enough to get us where we need to be. If school choice is to provide educational opportunity to disadvantaged communities, policy must be consciously designed to do so.

Evolution of an Idea

Milton Friedman first put forward the idea of school choice in the mid-1950s. His free-market approach was intended to bring competition into education and reduce the role of government. Friedman and his followers envisioned a Darwinian

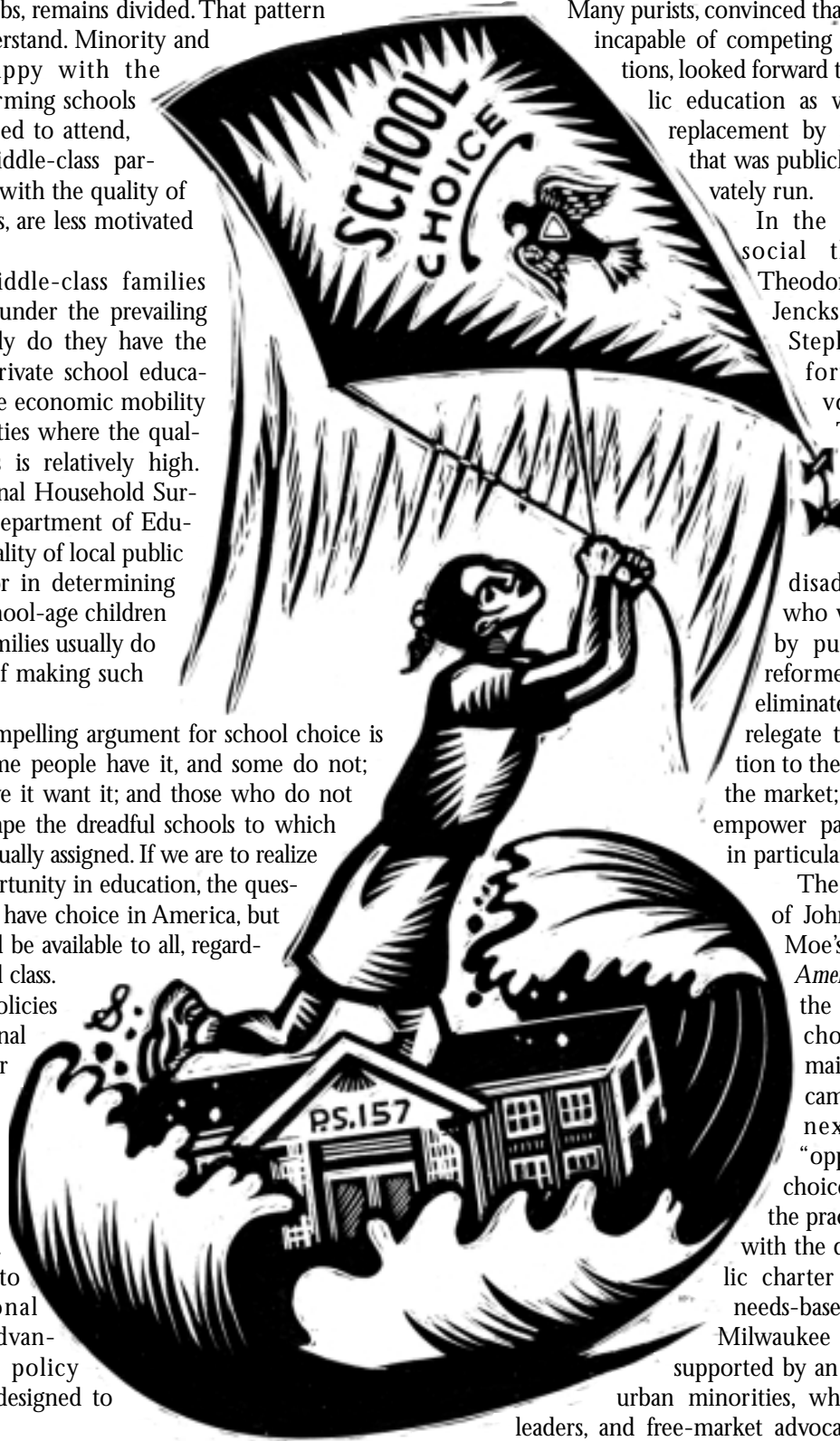
struggle that would force undersubscribed inferior institutions to close and provide the rest with an incentive to improve.

Many purists, convinced that public schools were incapable of competing with private institutions, looked forward to the demise of public education as we know it and its replacement by a system of schools that was publicly supported but privately run.

In the early 1970s liberal social theorists such as Theodore Sizer, Christopher Jencks, John Coons, and Stephen Sugarman put forward their own voucher proposals. The plans differed, but their unifying principle was to extend educational opportunities to disadvantaged students who were not well served by public schools. These reformers did not want to eliminate public schools, nor relegate the future of education to the impersonal forces of the market; but they did seek to empower parents—poor parents in particular.

The publication in 1990 of John Chubb and Terry Moe's *Politics, Markets, and America's Schools* brought the debate over school choice more into the mainstream, but support came slowly. Over the next few years the "opportunity" model of choice gained traction in the practical world of policy with the development of public charter schools, as well as needs-based voucher plans in Milwaukee and Cleveland—all supported by an unusual coalition of

urban minorities, white liberals, business leaders, and free-market advocates. While those on the right were confident that expanded choice would introduce healthy competition to education, those on the left were beginning to come to terms with the reality that traditional public schools, especially the big bureaucratic systems of the inner city, were failing large numbers of poor and minority children.



STEPHANIE SHIELDHOUSE

This cruel fact of life motivated black parents in Milwaukee and Cleveland to demand vouchers in their state legislatures in 1990 and 1995. Unlike the earlier market models, the voucher plans in Milwaukee and Cleveland were specifically targeted to benefit low-income and underserved communities. Earlier this year Florida passed the nation's first statewide voucher law, and it is targeted to children who attend failing public schools.

Although channeling public dollars into private schools raised the ire of many on the political left, voucher programs enabled poor people to enter an education market that until recently was the prerogative of the middle class. In this sense the new voucher programs have as much in common with the redistributive policies of a liberal social agenda as they do with the ideological predilections of free-market advocates.

Publicly supported voucher programs have been complemented by a variety of private scholarship initiatives. Most target poor families, but offer only a partial scholarship. CEO America offers 13,000 scholarships in 38 cities. The Children's Scholarship Fund (CSF) offers 40,000 scholarships in 45 locales. Last spring CSF received 1,250,000 applications, an astounding plea for relief from poor parents who were willing to forgo a free public education and absorb part of the tuition costs for private school. The CSF program was endorsed by many public officials who oppose publicly supported vouchers, including President Bill Clinton. It also received strong public backing by opinion leaders in the minority community such as Martin Luther King III, Andrew Young, Maya Angelou, and Oprah Winfrey. The CSF experience highlights a growing dilemma in the Democratic party, which has always represented itself as a champion of the downtrodden, but at the same time relies on the political support of teachers' unions and other organized education groups that oppose choice.

Meanwhile the simultaneous growth of charter schools—public schools of choice that operate outside the legal jurisdiction of regular school districts—made it possible for many supporters of public education to sign on to choice without having to support vouchers. Nearly 1,200 such schools now operate in 36 states and the District of Columbia. Charter

schools have the potential to provide stiff competition for private schools as well as for traditional public schools.

What Have We Learned?

Demand for choice, especially among minorities and the poor, is high. We know this from the size and composition of the waiting lists of applicants who have expressed interest in existing voucher programs, charter schools, and private scholarship initiatives. Even charter schools that do not specifically target poor children tend to attract a disproportionate number of minorities who see them as an escape route from failing schools.

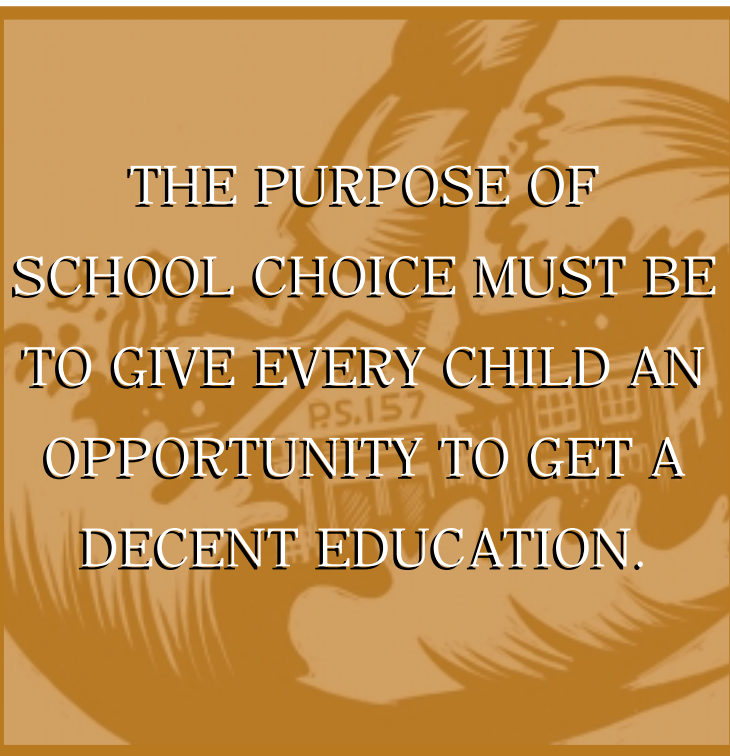
While these long waiting lists confirm the demand for choice expressed in polls, they are also a function of deliberate public policy engineered as legislative compromises between combatants on opposite sides in the political struggle. From the outset the state laws that created choice in Milwaukee and Cleveland

placed strict caps on the number of students. During the first four years of its operation, the program in Milwaukee was capped at 1 percent of student enrollment. (It was raised to 15 percent in 1995.) The Cleveland program, which began with 1,800 students, was capped at 3,700 last year even though applications exceeded 17,000. The latter's future remains altogether uncertain because of legal challenges launched by its opponents.

All but a few charter school laws impose rigid limits on the number of schools permitted. Most charter schools are also underfunded. They do not enjoy financial par-

ity with other public schools regarding operational funds and are especially handicapped by the lack of adequate start-up and capital budgets. This "opportunity tax" imposed in the course of legislative horse trading between supporters and opponents is a serious disincentive to individuals who might be inclined to start charter schools, and it imposes an unfair competitive disadvantage on those who have. A similar bargain was struck in setting the amount of aid appropriated to voucher students in Wisconsin and Ohio. Given the high proportion of disadvantaged children who enroll in choice programs, these cynical deals turn the concept of compensatory spending right on its head.

There is encouraging evidence from Milwaukee, Cleveland, and a half-dozen private scholarship programs that poor children who attend private schools benefit academically.



Although the evaluations of these programs remain mired in methodological debates, increasingly persuasive research evidence indicates that disadvantaged students perform better in parochial schools than in public schools, especially when performance is measured by graduation rates. No definitive evidence yet exists on the academic performance of charter schools compared with regular public schools. A consistent pattern across the board indicates, however, that parents who exercise choice, either public or private, are more satisfied with the schools their children attend. Among the reasons consistently cited are higher academic standards, safer schools, and better opportunities for parent involvement. While skeptics question whether such testimonials are a true measure of school quality, it is apparent that poor parents perceive the act of choosing, in and of itself, to be a form of opportunity—one that, until a short time ago, they had not enjoyed.

There is also across-the-board evidence that, among the poor, those who exercise choice tend to be better educated and marginally advantaged. The pattern is most pronounced in private scholarship programs where parents are expected to pay part of the tuition. Although this does not necessarily detract from the finding that poor children who attend choice schools gain academically, it does raise the question of whether the poorest of the poor would stand to benefit from choice. It introduces a phenomenon that some people refer to as “skimming,” a problem that needs to be addressed through intelligent policy design.

Policy Design: The “Three R’s”

If choice programs are to enhance the educational opportunities of disadvantaged students, they must be designed around three basic principles: Real Choice, Real Competition, and Real Standards. Poor families should have access to as many schools as possible: regular public schools, charter schools, private schools, and parochial schools. No arbitrary limit should be set on the number of charter schools or vouchers allowed.

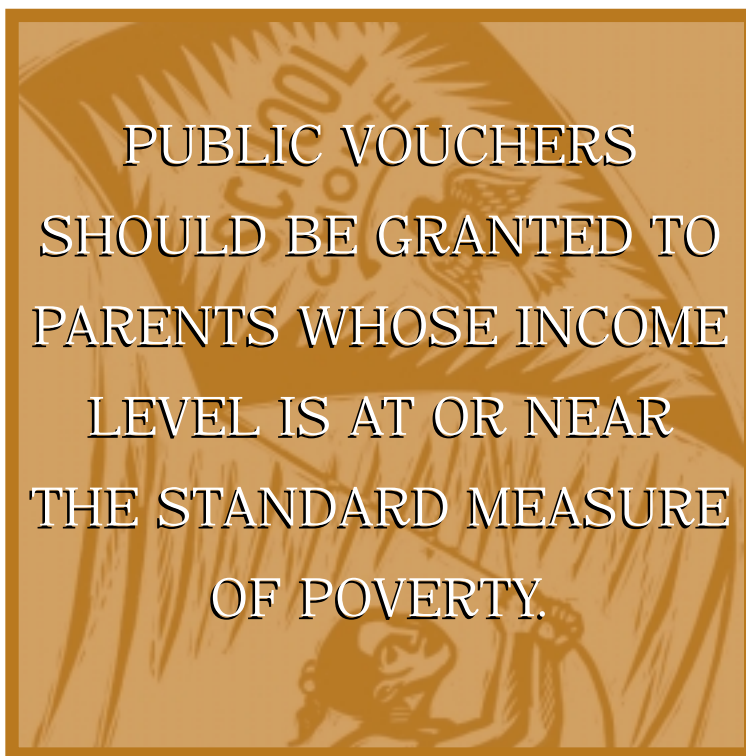
In principle, public charter schools should be available to all students on a first-come, first-served basis. Until enough charter schools exist, however, priority should be given to students from failing schools. The per capita allocation for students who attend charter schools must be equal to the

amount appropriated for students in regular public schools in a given school district.

Public vouchers should be granted to parents whose income level is at or near the standard measure of poverty. The maximum value of the voucher should be equal to the per capita expenditure that a child would receive in public school. Any private or parochial school that participates in the voucher program should be required to accept a voucher as full payment for tuition, and the charge should not exceed the per capita cost of educating the child. To remove all economic barriers to choice, participating families should not be expected to contribute toward the costs of the program. Participating schools should be required to accept all applicants. If the number of applicants exceeds the spaces available, students from failing schools should have priority.

As is always the case, some parents will be less able or moti-

vated to identify the schools most appropriate for their children’s needs. To prevent children from being left behind in failing schools, public authorities must enact policy that is intolerant of failing schools. Today the policy in most states is to limit the number of charter and choice schools and to let failing schools remain open. Instead, states must set curricular and performance standards that all public schools are required to meet—or be liable for closure. Non-public schools participating in a public choice program should be held to the same standards of accountability and



expected to administer the same standardized tests. Although market purists may perceive such accountability as an intrusion on the autonomy of private institutions, it is wholly justifiable and appropriate for institutions that want to participate in a publicly financed program. This does not mean that nonpublic schools would be unable to develop their own curricula beyond the minimum requirements set by the state or that sectarian schools would be prohibited from incorporating religious values.

The purpose of school choice must be to give every child an opportunity to get a decent education. Before that can happen, public authorities have an obligation to define what that means, develop criteria for determining when it is achieved, and enforce the standards for every school that participates in the common effort to succeed. ■