

Choice and A

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Education runs second only to health as a public concern. Less than half of the Canadian public is satisfied with the education their children are currently receiving. Critics charge that our public schools are failing to improve the basic skills of students, that they are failing to meet the needs of poorer children in Canada, particularly among the First Nations, and that students are shockingly ignorant of Canadian history and culture. This concern is widespread across North America and in parts of Europe as well. Everywhere, public education is facing fundamental challenges.

Responding to dissatisfaction with public schools, the last decade has seen a strong push to introduce market-like thinking into education. The insistence on competition and the capacity to “exit” the public system is a reflection of deepening concern about performance and accountability.¹ Competition, the argument goes, would make schools more efficient, more accountable, and would provide greater opportunities for children who are currently disadvantaged. The current public education system, critics also allege, does not do well at providing equality. Proponents of competition argue that families living in inner cities can afford neither to buy private education nor to move to neighbourhoods whose public schools provide higher quality public education. Their children are trapped in failing schools. In short, the support for competition, through vouchers, charters, and tax credits, is the rallying cry for those who argue that public education needs a “shock” to the system.²

What do we know about a decade of experiments with choice through vouchers? The evidence is mixed, but there is no significant evidence that voucher students, studying in private schools, perform better than those who remain in their local public schools.³ Market-like structures have not improved “efficiency,” or, for that matter, enhanced

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accountability. Given the absence of strong evidence, it is all the more surprising that the last Ontario government introduced a tax credit, the equivalent of a voucher, for students to use to attend private schools of their choice. There is real irony here. Governments are now prepared to use public money to subsidize parents to remove their children from the curriculum in the public schools that they have imposed and that they insist is more effective.

It is all too easy, however, to dismiss the experiments with vouchers and tax credits as a flawed response to the problems of public education, as an opportunity for the more affluent to flee the public system. Supporters of public education do so at their peril. First, vouchers receive their strongest support from minority groups, often less affluent, who feel that the public system is not serving their children well. Recent polls in the United States show growing support for charter schools among Latino and African-American parents, the populations now in the majority of many large cities. They have given up on

"voice," and prefer "exit" from existing public schools.⁴ Second, the support for "exit" from public schools should sound a cautionary note about the need for improved performance, better accountability, and much greater flexibility within the public system. Public education must become its own best critic.

Those who propose vouchers for public education couch what they say in the language of efficiency. But they also speak the language of choice, autonomy, and responsibility – the language of more and more citizens. Proponents of voucher programs in education draw on a language that is only now beginning to be explicitly heard: choice as a fundamental right of citizens. Thomas Thompson, when he was Governor of Wisconsin, put it explicitly: "School choice is more than a program . . . it is a philosophy. It is a belief that poor parents have the same right to choose that other parents do. . . . That's education serving the public."⁵

It is important to recognize that experiments with choice *within* the public system have had some successes. Coming together to found, organize, and sustain a charter school within the public system, for example, has increased citizen engagement around a public good. Individual choice promotes collective as well as individual benefit. The process of building a charter school forges community ties that in turn sustain the school and improve the performance of children in the school. The community builds the school and the school builds the community.

Unfortunately, it is not difficult to imagine how a larger charter school movement could contribute to segregation and fragmentation. Schools can define the requirements of the curriculum in community terms and make it uncomfortable for students who come from different traditions. The imperatives of the educational market push toward product differentiation, rather than toward civility and inclusiveness. And the evidence is strong that parents do give weight to the kind of subcommunity in which they wish their children to be socialized. Many charter schools are indeed niche schools that appeal to communities with homogeneous values.

This is a troubling pattern. It is troubling for many who see public education as a unique place where children from all backgrounds come together to share common experiences, create collective memories, learn a common vocabulary, and develop democratic values. The local public school is the place where parents and children from diverse communities come together to agree on how the common school can be



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constructed in a democratic society to educate citizens for a civic society. It is the place where we construct a concept of “shared citizenship” that builds bridges across cultures. The public school, for many of us, is the glue of civil society.

But the local public school is not serving some of its minorities well. It is not serving the poorest children well, largely because schools do not have adequate resources to respond to greater needs. As we know well, the fundamental causes of low student performance are persistent inequalities in school financing and stubbornly high rates of child poverty. There is a troubling political paradox here: as the communitarian impulse for charter schools grows, and political pressure grows for more funding for radically decentralized schools, support for the state in its attack on these causes of poor performance diminishes. The constituencies who traditionally supported a strong state that could attack the inequalities that drive poor student performance are now increasingly supporting radical decentralization of education and charter schools.⁶ School choice, even within the public system, raises hard questions, with no easy answers.

How can we explain the support for choice in education? Given the record so far, the passionate support for school choice that we hear in public conversations cannot be about improved performance. How then can we understand the growing importance of the language of choice?

The demand for choice, for the capacity to “exit,” is a barometer of dissatisfaction with public schools. When we unpack this dissatisfaction, we find contradictory imperatives at work. Parents want improved performance and they want easily accessible measures of that performance, widely reported, so that their local public school can be held accountable. These demands push logically in the direction of standardized testing of students so that results can be compared across schools and over time. But standardized testing also increases the pressure for uniform curricula, for mandatory courses, and at the extreme, for “teaching the test” so that students will perform well. Variation, experimentation, and creativity can slowly leach out of the public system as it responds to pressures for “results” that can be measured.

The demand for accountability has historically led to the centralization of authority and decision-making at ever-higher levels in the political chain of command. Across North America, intermediary educational bodies have lost authority as governments have expanded their capacity to command and control the public system. The centralization of power in the public education system runs counter to the general trend of the last two decades of devolving political responsibility downward to the lowest possible level to increase flexibility and responsiveness. This process of centralization, argues David Matthews of the Kettering Foundation, “systematically roots out the public as a real force in the life of schools. Citizens are replaced with a new group of professionals, true guardians of the public interest, there to do what it is assumed citizens can’t or shouldn’t do.”⁷ This is a high price to pay for

accountability defined only through standardized and quantified measures of achievement.

Parents want not only accountability but also variation and flexibility in the education of their children. It is well established that children learn differently, through different styles and at different paces. The capacity to identify and accommodate these different learning styles, to respond more generally to the needs of communities, and to adapt curriculum to suit different needs has been systematically eroded as governments have imposed mandatory curricula and standardized testing, in pursuit of enhanced performance of basic skills and “accountability.” In Canada, the United States, England, Wales, Northern Ireland, and New Zealand, governments have imposed more and more stringent curriculum requirements. They have restricted choice of what students learn in order to increase what they know. Parents have less and less choice about the knowledge and skills their children acquire in the public school system, and schools have less and less choice about how they respond to individual children and to communities.

There are, of course, several obvious contradictions here. Governments have restricted choice about what students learn *within* the public system, in the name of improved

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Celles et ceux qui proposent que l'école publique adopte des méthodes plus proches de celles du monde des affaires parlent toujours en termes d'efficacité. Ils utilisent aussi des mots comme choix, autonomie et responsabilité, un vocabulaire qui rejoint de plus en plus de citoyennes et de citoyens. L'école publique, pour nombre d'entre nous, est le ciment de la société civile, mais elle répond mal aux besoins de certaines minorités. Les parents et le grand public exigent une imputabilité accrue de l'école grâce à des épreuves de rendement normalisées mais aussi à un assouplissement de la façon qu'elle traite l'enfant individuel et répond aux attentes de diverses collectivités. Or, ce sont là des attentes antagonistes. Chacune nuit à la capacité du système scolaire public de répondre à l'autre.

performance and greater accountability, but have simultaneously introduced choice *among* schools by enabling "exit" from the public system. This is a very curious concept of citizen choice, one that does not advantage the public school system. Parents and the public have demanded greater accountability through easily reported, comparative, standardized measures of performance but simultaneously demand greater flexibility in the way public schools treat individual children and accommodate communities. These two demands push in opposite directions, and each one restricts the capacity of the public system to meet the other.

The challenge for those who defend public education as a central institution of our democratic society is to think hard about how public schools can provide citizens with enhanced accountability and appropriate choices *within* the public system. Is standardized testing the most effective way of measuring performance? Are there other ways of tracking performance over time, measuring improvement, and evaluating a broader range of skills than current testing does? The way we define and measure performance within the public system is important not only to hold schools accountable. It is important also because it inevitably speaks to other values that Canadians have and to their expectations about public education. What we hold schools accountable for matters.

Proponents of public education also need to give much more careful attention to the role of choice. It is difficult to defend the proposition that a single model of public education fits all children and all communities equally well. We know it does not. How then can choice within schools be increased? Should parents be able to choose a public school within their neighbourhood, or even within their city? Should urban public schools be encouraged to develop special programs and profiles and admit students from across the city? When is it appropriate for communities to establish an "alternative school" within the public system?

These kinds of questions deserve serious attention if the conversation is not to remain, as it is now, a largely unproductive debate between unquestioning loyalty to and

increasing exit from the public school system. Educators must become not only the most serious critics of public education but also its most imaginative innovators. 

- 1 The classic work on "exit" and loyalty" is Albert O. Hirschman, *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty: Responses to Declines in Firms, Organizations, and States* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1970).
- 2 John Chubb and Terry Moe, *Politics, Markets, and America's Schools* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 1990).
- 3 John F. Witte, *The Market Approach to Education: An Analysis of America's First Voucher Program* (Princeton, N.J. Princeton University Press, 2000), and Cecilia Rouse, "Private School Vouchers and Student Achievement: An Evaluation of the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program," *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 113, 2(May 1998), pp.553-602.
- 4 David Bositis, "School Vouchers Along the Color Line," *New York Times*, August 15, 2001, p. A27.
- 5 Gov. Thomas Thompson, State of the State Address (Madison, Wisconsin: January 1995), cited by Witte, *Market Approach to Education*, p.163.
- 6 Bruce J. Fuller, *Inside Charter Schools: The Paradox of Radical Decentralization* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000).
- 7 David Matthews, "Public Government/Public Schools," *National Civic Review* 85, 3(Fall 1996), pp.14-22, 15.

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