

Charter Schools

Rending or Mending the Nation

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The real safeguard of democracy is education.

—Franklin D. Roosevelt, “Message for American Education”

School choice has always had some appeal in the United States. We are a society based on freedom of belief and expression, and schools are an extension of that freedom to choose options for our offspring. To the degree that families want to mold their children to their own values and goals, the concept of school choice overlaps with family rights to child rearing. School choice enables families to use schools to achieve their private purposes. Of course, if school choice improves general schooling outcomes through matching educational needs or the effects of school competition, broad social benefits might also be achieved through better academic results for society. However, such a finding is not common in the research on charter schools and choice (Epple, Romano, & Zimmer, 2015; Urquiola, 2016), although some studies for particular localities have shown advantages in student achievement for certain types of charter schools (Angrist, Pathak, & Walters, 2013).

Beyond the private purpose of education, schools also have a more universal, public purpose, one that accounts for their rapid historical adoption by governments and the establishment of compulsory education laws. That purpose is to prepare students to participate in and reproduce the very institutions and practices that enable our freedoms (Callan, 1997; Gutmann, 1986).

In this chapter we discuss both private and public purposes of education in the context of charter schools, highlighting the challenges and possible ways forward.

PUBLIC VERSUS PRIVATE PURPOSES OF EDUCATION

Public education stands at the intersection of two legitimate rights (Levin, 1987). The first is the right of a democratic society to assure its reproduction and continuous democratic functioning through preparation of all of its members to understand and accept a common set of values and knowledge required for societal equity and cohesion. The second involves the rights of families to decide the manner in which their children will be guided and molded and the types of influences to which their children will be exposed. To the degree that families have different personal, political, social, philosophical, and religious beliefs and values, a basic incompatibility might exist between their private concerns and the public functions of schooling.

In terms of private benefits, it has long been known that schooling enhances individual productivity and earnings (Becker, 1962). In addition, schooling contributes to the trainability of workers, enhanced health, efficiency in consumption, access to information, and a wide variety of other private results (Lochner, 2011). School-based education also contributes to greater personal efficacy in political participation and the inculcation of civic values. Finally, schooling can contribute to social status, technical and cultural literacy, and promotion of personal values.

Schooling also serves the nation, region, and community by creating an institutional and legal environment that provides opportunities and protections. To develop democratic participation, schools must prepare the young to understand and participate effectively in their social, economic, and political institutions. In this respect, schools are charged with contributing to the formation of an equitable and stable society. Empirical research demonstrates that educational attainment can increase voter participation and support for free speech and increase civic knowledge (Dee, 2004; Niemi & Junn, 2005). In the aggregate, schools contribute to society in many broader ways (McMahon, 2004), including economic growth and employment for the country and its regions. Schooling is also viewed as developing the skills for cultural and scientific advances in discovering and developing latent talents that benefit all of society.

Government funding of education is mainly justified by its public benefits. Even Milton Friedman, the foremost champion of using private markets to increase school choice, argued that schooling serves a public function that justifies funding by government: "A stable and democratic society is impossible without a minimum degree of literacy and knowledge on the part of most citizens and without widespread acceptance of some common set of values" (Friedman, 1982, p. 75). He was also concerned that some parents could not afford to pay for the schooling of their children, so the public pursuit of equity also depends upon government funding. He concluded that the government role was to provide funding for every child to obtain a minimum level of schooling in a school that met the approved requirements for democratic preparation.

A nation must reconcile the differences between private and public benefits, providing a common framework to prepare the young for their public roles in their

overall political, economic, and social context along with the freedom to pursue individual goals. To some degree, public and private goals of schooling can be reinforcing. For example, worker productivity and wages are higher for less-educated workers in enterprises and regions that have higher *average* worker education (Moretti, 2004). But, the private goals of families might also undermine public goals such as social cohesion and civic collaboration if the education that is sought seeks political, religious, and philosophical exclusion rather than an embrace of democratic processes in addressing social needs and addressing social differences.

THE CASE OF CHARTER SCHOOLS

The concept of charter schools is one that combines the public sponsorship of schools and the promotion of private differences that correspond to family preferences and perceived educational needs. Although funding and regulation of charter schools are subject to government authority, these schools are awarded considerable autonomy with the waiver of many laws and regulations that constrain traditional public schools.

A note of caution is warranted about overly generalizing the specific features of charter schools (National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, 2016), since their operations have been defined under the authorities of different laws in each of the 43 states and the District of Columbia that sponsor them. States have employed widely different requirements for establishment, funding, waivers from existing state and local requirements, and sponsorship. There are almost 7,000 charter schools, attended by 3.1 million students, constituting an enormous variety of educational situations. What gives charter schools a common theme is the overall frame of governance conferred by their states, not the specific organizational forms, goals, or activities that they sponsor. These schools vary from sponsorship of traditional educational practices with a centralized curriculum and teaching methods to highly experimental institutions with considerable teacher and student voice. They can employ unionized teaching staffs with considerable employment protection or nonunionized teachers on annual contracts or even teacher-managed schools. They can adopt traditional curricula from commercial publishers or teacher-developed curricula or embrace student participation in the establishment and implementation of learning activities. They can take the form of virtual learning institutions with heavy use of technology or even schools where all instruction is done exclusively through the Internet with little teacher guidance or student accountability. They can embrace a student body representative of the diversity in a geographical area or limit their appeal to a particular demographic. Some states permit a wide choice of sponsorship and organizational approaches, while other states are more restrictive. At the heart of all of these schools is a focus on attracting families with distinct educational preferences.

Clearly, a tension can arise in school policies that focus on choices emphasizing family beliefs and values at the expense of a more common set of practices

that prepare all children for a unified democratic society. Even when schools focus on the perceived educational demands of democracy, the translation of these principles into school practices can differ immensely. Differences can be further exacerbated by student and family perspectives that are reinforced by the ubiquitous reliance for information on social media that reflect a restricted perspective on social issues. Any political solution is always temporal, as the forces that push for greater choice and those that push for greater cohesion and solidarity are potentially in conflict, sometimes at an ideological level (Belfield & Levin, 2005). The search for balance between choice and uniformity in charter schools has constituted a part of a larger historical struggle in U.S. education between public and private goals.

At each point in history, the search for educational reforms has yielded primacy to one side or the other, but the underlying determinants of the struggle do not evaporate and play themselves out as long as the political tensions between public and private goals are still present (Carnoy & Levin, 1985). In the rural America of the 19th century, schools were village or community based and premised on local values (Katz, 1968; Tyack, 1974). With the increasingly urban consolidation of the nation in the 19th century, accompanied by massive waves of immigration, school organization and governance became more centralized, with powerful political pressures for a more universal experience to unify educational practices for national cohesion. This was followed by the struggle for increased equity and social cohesion in schools throughout the 20th century, with a push for racial integration, school finance equalization, gender equity, and educational rights for students with disabilities.

By the end of the 20th century, political forces had risen to challenge educational uniformity and standardization, with calls for radical decentralization, deregulation of schooling practices, and the expansion of school choice. The establishment of charter schools and school vouchers was the leading edge of this movement, promoting an education that could differ substantially from school to school according to family preferences. These historical shifts can best be understood by the continuing struggles between forces favoring the public or private purposes of education.

In the case of charter schools, the shift from public to private purposes of education has taken two forms that have increasingly threatened to undermine the public goal of democratic preparation. The first is that as charter schools take different approaches to education, there is less of a common focus on preparing students for a shared democratic experience. Second, the charter mechanism has led to increasing stratification of school populations, reducing exposure of students to children from different social classes, races, values, disabilities, and cultures. This is true even when comparing charter school enrollments to those in existing public schools in the same neighborhoods (Whitehurst, Reeves, & Rodrigue, 2016). Exposure to peers with different backgrounds, races, and educational needs is considered to represent an important part of preparation for democracy (Gurin, Nagda, & Lopez, 2004).

Stratification is not a stated purpose of charter schools as much as a collateral impact of choice. Studies of parental preference show that distance from home is negatively related to selection of a school, so that schools have an incentive to locate near the types of families that match their appeals (Glazerman & Dotter, 2016). Further, parents tend to choose schools for their offspring with students of a preferred social class and race. Thus, it is no surprise that charter schools have been found to be more racially and economically segregated than traditional public schools (Whitehurst et al., 2016). Charter schools also commonly have fewer English-language learners or students with disabilities, particularly severe disabilities.

THE CHALLENGE

The challenge is how to accommodate diverse choices that parents may seek for the education of their own children with an educational experience that serves to prepare all the young for a common set of social, political, and economic institutions. As stated earlier, we can expect a tension between these two goals because they are not fully compatible. When societies are highly homogeneous, there can be considerable consensus on the common educational experience with only minor adjustments to embrace educational choice, but when large differences in the religious, political, cultural, and philosophical beliefs of populations lead to substantial differences in educational accommodations (Wilson, 2017), educational choice can conflict with the inculcation of common values and beliefs required for democratic functioning. The risk is that if charter schools are designed to affirm the specific beliefs of the families they serve, their educational programs are unlikely to reflect the diverse views of a pluralistic society.

Further challenges relate to the degree that major public goals of education include equity across populations and social cohesion. Parents are motivated to give their children a unique advantage for success in life, and the right school might offer educational advantages that they do not wish to share with others. These motives can exist even in a traditional system, where higher income provides greater access to neighborhoods with preferred schools. Even if a family is also committed to the democratic goals of equity and social cohesion, those goals are not readily attainable by an individual family, but are the products of public policy and government action. Such families must work through collective, political solutions, which require strong social involvement and substantial time and effort in a complex political environment. Thus, school choice through charter schools favors private preferences relative to educational needs for creating a society in which democratic participation is enhanced.

As an advocate of choice, Milton Friedman confronted the challenge of how to obtain democratic and public benefits under a framework of parental choice of schools. He proposed a voucher system that would encompass—at least theoretically—both sets of goals. Although the main mechanism would be a voucher

system of payments to parents that could be used for educational choice, he would require all schools to meet minimal government regulations that would ensure the values and behaviors necessary for democracy. His analogy was deceptively simple: “The role of the government would be limited to insuring that the schools met certain minimum standards such as the inclusion of a minimum common content in their programs as it now inspects restaurants to ensure that they maintain minimum sanitary standards” (Friedman, 1982, p. 78). This is an inappropriate analogy, as it compares the substance of education not to a restaurant’s product but only to basic hygienic standards. Further, a restaurant meal can be judged more easily and quickly than the quality of an education. In many cases, quality can be ascertained only after a lengthy educational experience, months or years, in a specific school.

Unlike hygienic practices, training for democracy requires substantive effort to ensure preparation of the young with a common educational experience for a productive and sustaining role in a democratic society. This education entails not only the obvious focus on knowledge of political institutions and processes, market and government roles in the economy, and social institutions and conventions, but also the social and emotional capacities required to support civic and economic participation (Levin, 2012b). Even the knowledge requirements of democratic participation are formidable, such as serving on a jury of peers in which intricacies of law and evidence must be understood and interpreted in a legal context. A civic response might be required for major public controversies, such as the challenge of global warming. Many economic issues require complex insights, such as the controversy over the establishment and magnitude of a minimum wage, subsidized health care, and the employment implications of automation. In addition, citizens need some understanding of the complications of threats to national security and the defense of the nation to make intelligent choices in these domains.

Various divisive forces—such as populism, identity politics, religious conflict, and even strident differences in conventional political and philosophic views on education and other issues—can interfere with rational and productive democratic interactions. The public goal of education must focus on sustaining an accepted political process that transcends issues so that members of society can work together productively, despite their private differences. How does one reconcile the different privately held views that motivate family educational choice with the public requirements for sustaining a democracy? How can schools serve to address ideological and public policy differences in a manner that is productive and sustains a harmonious contribution to social stability while honoring educational preferences? Clearly, we must find a way of reconciling educational choice and education for the effective functioning of a democratic society.

In an age of social media, civic participation has grown more challenging (Sunstein, 2017). One might argue that with so many political and public policy news sources available online, our young are exposed to a richer and more variegated flow of information than in the past. Within easy reach are explanations and evidence on different sides of the issues. However, the reality is the opposite: Users

are informed by sources that customize the messages reaching them to mirror the patterns of search and utilization reflected in previous usage. This exposure provides a confirmatory bias to their beliefs and understandings (Lee, Choi, Kim, & Kim, 2014). Such channels of information do not seek balance among competing views, but serve to reinforce the worldview of their audiences, creating “alternative facts” as needed to suit the claim. Students are vulnerable to these trends (Domonoske, 2016). If the choice of schools is just a reinforcement of partisan views of the world already held by families, the role of schools will circumvent the informed decisionmaking required for democratic governance.

A further challenge to U.S. democracy is the very steep rise in economic inequality combined with the impact of unlimited funding of political candidates by wealthy families and corporate entities. Recent historical study suggests that massive wealth accumulation combined with poverty and deterioration of the middle class have not been arbitrated effectively by democratic processes. Such extremes have led to war, authoritarian rule, and street-level conflict and violence, precisely the opposite of the purposes of the democratic process (Sitaraman, 2017).

CONCLUSIONS

The public and the private goals of education as accounted for by charter schools are not fully compatible. An increase in the number of charter schools is likely to increase choice but diminish the unifying influence of schools for creating the common values and knowledge required for effective participation in a democracy. In some cases, there has already been a movement toward charter school districts, where every school is a charter school competing for the district’s students (Levin, 2012a).

The tension between choice and uniformity is at the heart of charter school policy in the United States. Charter schools must meet specific family preferences while molding the young for a common society for which all members are held accountable. Charter schools may lead to greater parental satisfaction with schools in addressing their private goals and values, but they may also lead to greater segregation of students and a tattering of the social fabric of preparation for democratic and civic participation.

Charter schools have a strong incentive to “differentiate their product” to create a competitive edge to attract students. This appeal is in conflict with the goal of creating a common public purpose to education among schools that will promote the public interest in preparing the young for civic participation. If charter schools attract more students by emphasizing narrow political and philosophic values and ideologies, they will have a disassembling effect on preparing students for democracy.

Recommendations. No simple solution can resolve this conflict. To the degree that charter schools are authorized by state and local legal provisions, the degree

of commonality in teaching and learning can be addressed, at least theoretically, to increase the public benefits. For example, the Netherlands has embraced full school choice for a century, but has employed a strong regulatory function on curriculum, testing, admissions, and other important features that have buttressed choice with common goals and accountability (Levin, Cornelisz, & Hanisch-Cerda, 2013). Yet, states have taken very different stances on how much regulation is desirable, and substantial differences of opinion exist in the charter community on whether charter schools should be regulated at all, despite their public funding. For example, the Center for Education Reform (2017) ranks state charter school legislation as strongest when little or no regulation or oversight by authorities interferes with charter school autonomy. Although some individual charter schools may place very high value on what they consider to be the public goals of education, others see their competitive advantages as appealing to and serving narrower family preferences and values only.

A further complication is that laws on teaching for democracy are difficult to enforce or to translate into meaningful action. Purposeful education requires not only procedural compliance with laws, but their extension to the educational process and content. Often schools view such requirements as a checklist requiring only mechanical obedience without fully accepting or honoring their educational purpose. It is not course names or their putative content that is important, but how the topics are taught and applied (Kahne & Bowyer, 2017; Westheimer, 2015).

One potential direction is to establish a curriculum among the grades that culminates in service learning, the experience of applying knowledge to political, social, and economic challenges faced by the communities in which they live (Morgan & Streb, 2001). As a beginning, it would be encouraging for charter school organizations and schools to collaborate to develop such a plan.

The goal is not complete uniformity and rigidity in educational approaches. Some differentiation among schools can be valuable and lead to new approaches for addressing particular learning objectives of civic education. However, educational authorities will need to ensure that schools will address the requirements for civic education that fully encompass the learning needs of all students in a world in which democratic knowledge, participation, and behavior have become more complex and rising inequality is a major challenge. We cannot ignore this priority by leaving it to charter schools to decide idiosyncratically what to do. Democratic preparation of the young is a precursor to the kind of society that makes choice possible by creating an institutional environment that can sustain differences within a common political framework.

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