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## F o r e w o r d

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Progressives who deal with American education on the grassroots level have long awaited an intelligent, persuasive, and visionary defense of school choice. *The Emancipatory Promise of Charter Schools: Toward a Progressive Politics of School Choice* perfectly fits the bill. It has been more than a quarter century since Samuel Bowles and I published *Schooling in Capitalist America*. We there claimed that capitalism generates a high degree of within- and across-generational inequality, that IQ and other test scores account only for a small portion of that inequality, that schooling reproduces rather than ameliorates that inequality, and that schools contribute to worker productivity in considerable part via the personality traits and behaviors they foster, rather than cognitive skills alone. Contemporary research has strengthened the empirical evidence underlying our analysis (Bowles, Gintis, & Groves, 2003; Bowles, Gintis, & Osborne, 2001). We are also no less committed today than we were when we conceived of and wrote *Schooling* to the vision of making a better, more democratic society in which all have the material and social prerequisites for developing their personal capacities to the fullest. But neither there nor elsewhere have we offered concrete steps toward a more progressive educational system. This volume provides a long stride in this direction.

When I wrote "The Political Economy of School Choice" for *Teachers College Record* some ten years ago, my progressive friends thought I had lost my sense of reason. Everyone knew that school choice was a conservative plot to finance the private education of the well-to-do, to bleed the public schools of needed revenue, and to add one more roadblock against the

struggle for social equality. Indeed, when I started writing about education in the 1970s, I shared this view. Not that I had ever really thought about the matter. I just knew that if Milton Friedman (the conservative University of Chicago economist) was for it, and if the teachers unions were against it, I must be against it, too.

Well, we were all very wrong. If school choice is *fully funded*, so that choice schools financed with government funds are not permitted to impose tuition charges on families of students, as is the case with charter schools, then school choice can be an extremely progressive institution. Perhaps the most important attraction of school choice—and I use the admittedly broad term in this piece to mean those choice plans that allow for significant autonomy in curriculum and governance—is that a creative and dedicated group of teachers can set up their own school without being beholden to rich donors or to unresponsive school boards. This sort of creative experimentation is likely to improve both the average quality of schooling and the diversity of types of educational experience.

A second major attraction of school choice is that parents will have much more influence over their children's education than under the current system. In general, public institutions work best when their constituents can control institutional behavior (*voice*) and when they can vote with their feet by moving to a competitive supplier (*exit*). The public schools give parents very little voice and no exit. In traditional public schools, principals and teachers are beholden first and foremost to school boards, who hire and fire them, rather than parents, who have no more power than the average voter in making and changing school policy and determining school personnel. By contrast, school choice options, like charter schools, directly empower parents; yet citizens retain general control over the choice system by regulating and accrediting the educational institutions that they fund.

A third attraction of school choice is that poorly performing teachers, and indeed poorly performing schools, need not be tolerated by parents intent on improving their children's education. The competition among schools for students will make it easier to eliminate deadwood and ineffective management is replaced.

Many progressive educators are wary of "competition," which they equate with the cutthroat capitalist marketplace. It is certainly true that cooperation is often more effective than competition, but in general, cooperation itself is enhanced in a competitive system. School choice allows teachers and administrators to cooperate voluntarily, subject only to the competitive restraint that parents and students must be satisfied with the

results of their cooperative efforts. Indeed, competition itself is problematic only when it leads to inequality. If choice schools are fully funded, an unequal distribution of financial resources cannot occur. Financial equality will not, of course, guarantee that better teachers will not prefer to work with more affluent students, but it will allow the many teachers who are dedicated to improving the lot of the less affluent to do so much more effectively. Nor will financial equality redress the fact that advantaged families are more likely to have the time and energy to shop wisely for their children's schools than are disadvantaged families. But social service agencies and faith-based groups can be drawn upon to advise poor families how best to use their right to choose their children's schools.

A fourth attraction of school choice is that in choice schools, the influence of less-well-off parents will be heightened. In traditional school, only parents who have the time, energy, and resources to devote to affecting school policy and the school's treatment of the children have an attentive audience with school staff. With school choice, the simple threat of withdrawing one's children and sending them elsewhere is enough to make school personnel stand up and listen.

It is not surprising, then, that parents, students, and teachers find charter schools a highly positive experience, and that urban minorities are the strongest supporters of this choice alternative.

What about the downside of school choice? Why have so many progressive educators rejected this alternative? I think the answer is very simple: they have taken the workers' point of view instead of the consumers', or, in this case, that of the teachers unions rather than the students. Organized teachers have a vested interest in the traditional school system because its monopoly position in controlling educational funds allows teachers' organizations to bargain effectively, in a centralized framework, for higher wages.

There are two weaknesses in these arguments for rejecting school choice. First, in many states and communities teachers are extremely well paid, and where they are not, it is unlikely that school choice will leave teachers less well off than they are now. Indeed, since dedicated and creative teachers are a basic prerequisite for charter school success, a widespread choice system might well raise average salaries, both because high salaries will be needed to draw teachers from competing professions, and because the less capable teachers will be weeded out of the system, thus raising average teacher productivity. Second, while the United States might be better served by a strong labor movement, this end must be achieved by labor legislation on the federal level that is applicable to all industries. The

school choice movement should not be asked to shoulder the brunt of the burden of achieving worker representation for the country as a whole.

The bottom line is that defenders of the monopoly public school system are simply throwing up smokescreens to hide the simple fact that teachers are loathe to submit themselves to the United States labor market—a market that most Americans are obliged to live with and that has turned out to strongly benefit consumers.

In defending school choice, you will hear the objection that parents are really incapable of choosing for their children, and education will be turned into a popularity contest. Nonsense! Parents choose their health care providers quite effectively. Why should they be any less capable of choosing their educational providers?

You will hear that charter schools bleed the traditional schools of needed funds. Well, that's what they are supposed to do! If the traditional schools want to compete effectively, they will simply have to improve their service delivery. Indeed, one of the most important effects of choice schools is the improvement of the performance of the nonchoice schools with which they are in competition.

You will hear that choice schools will teach whatever parents happen to want, thus lowering educational standards. However, if credentialing standards are up to snuff, this cannot happen. Once again, the American health care system, where people choose their providers, shows how such a system can work.

You will hear that choice schools represent one more step toward the privatization of American society through the atrophy of public spirit. However, accepting school choice does not imply a lesser role for the public sector, but only a different role. By regulating and accrediting choice schools (for example, by requiring participation in a national standardized testing system, or by prohibiting discrimination based on race, ethnicity, or religion), government will play the same role in a choice educational system that it now plays in most spheres of economic life: the government makes the rules of the game, but is not itself a player.

You will hear that choice schools will promote racial and ethnic segregation by accepting only certain kinds of students. Again, this can be prevented by the appropriate regulatory standards, prohibiting discrimination on the basis of race and ethnicity.

You will hear that choice schools do not perform better than standard schools in raising student reading and math scores. In fact, however, they do raise cognitive performance, although not generally by a huge amount. This is because most choice schools are quite young and are often

harassed by the traditional educational establishment when they attempt to acquire the educational resources to which they are entitled. Moreover, test scores are not everything. Indeed, my work with Samuel Bowles has shown that test scores are not the major way schools affect the future wages and life chances of their students. It is likely that such factors as good citizenship, ability to take orders and complete tasks, and having a long time horizon are what schools really pass on to their charges in addition to cognitive skills. The more positive, community-oriented attitude of many choice schools is likely to do as much to help children control their lives as will their higher test scores.

School choice is a creative experiment. We don't know that it will work. The fact that the well-off parents (including teachers) prefer to send their children to private schools, involving a very high material sacrifice, is some indication of the value of being able to choose. Let's extend this privilege to the rest of our citizens.

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