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# Introduction

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An observer from another planet might think our national debate about school choice is a ritual. One group offers a litany of evidence and arguments about the benefits of choice, and another group responds ritualistically with claims about the harm choice can do. Neither side seriously confronts the arguments of the other, and the debate does not change. But of course the visitor would miss the point. The debate is serious, and members of at least one side, those in favor of greater choice for families and educators, intend for it to go somewhere. The opponents of choice, knowing that stalemate favors their side, might be content to protract the debate indefinitely. But they, too, take the debate seriously and think important matters are at stake.

The proponents of K–12 school choice focus on its possible benefits: Children could be placed in schools that match their interests and approaches to learning, and might therefore learn more deeply and efficiently; families and school staffs that could choose each other might develop relationships of trust and confidence; schools needing to

compete for students and teachers might develop focused and consistent approaches to instruction.<sup>1</sup>

Opponents are skeptical about choice's possible benefits, but their arguments focus elsewhere, on the harm choice might do. The most alert and aggressive families might take all the spaces in the best schools, and schools might make themselves look effective by only admitting the children of intact middle-class homes. Schools left behind after the advantaged depart might be weakened as educational institutions; and the children in those schools, disproportionate numbers of whom would be from low-income and minority families, would receive worse instruction after choice than before.<sup>2</sup>

"Choice" can mean many things—from allowing parents to choose among a limited group of existing public schools to giving parents public vouchers that they can redeem for tuition in any private school. Choice programs differ on two dimensions: (1) who provides schools, and (2) who decides what school a particular child will attend. The base non-choice case is the traditional school district, which is a monopoly provider of all publicly funded schools in a locality, and assigns children to schools, usually on the basis of residence. The extreme choice case is the pure voucher system in which government pays for schooling but does nothing to provide it. A less extreme case is regulated vouchers, in which government licenses schools, provides information about all schools, and manages fair admissions lotteries. "Public school choice" is another variant: it preserves the school district monopoly but allows families to choose which

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<sup>1</sup>These are not all the benefits claimed by choice proponents, but most others are derived from these. For example, choice supporters claim that competition would force regular public schools to improve. This claim is based on the more fundamental assumed benefit that entrepreneurial schools will compete with regular public schools on the basis of instructional quality.

<sup>2</sup>These are not all the harms of choice cited by opponents, but most others are derived from these. For example, choice opponents claim that choice will deprive low-income children of the benefits of association with students from middle-class families. This claim is based on the more fundamental assumption that choice will lead to increased segregation.

schools their children will attend. Finally, chartering and school contracting allow parents to choose among publicly funded schools, which are provided by independent groups under contract with government agencies.

Different forms of choice inspire hope and fear in different degrees. Public school choice inspires neither fear nor hope: it is unlikely either to change the kinds of schools made available or to give parents many real options. Any other form of choice, even charter schools, inspires fears, for example, that school providers and better-off families will monopolize information and use it to their own advantage; or the fear that there will always be only a few good schools, so that schools, not families, will be the real choosers and the best schools will choose the easiest to educate. Opponents also fear that independently run schools (whether charters or wholly independent schools under a voucher scheme) will compete on the basis of whom they exclude.

Each side works to develop evidence buttressing its case. Thus, proponents of choice show that choice leads to gains in student learning, especially for minority and disadvantaged children, and opponents show that families of particular income levels or ethnicities cluster in schools of choice. Neither side's evidence resolves the debate. First, the results, good and bad, are never overwhelming. Even under the best-controlled quasi-experimental programs studied by Peterson and his colleagues, students who attend schools of choice do not always learn at a dramatically higher rate than similar students who remain in regular public schools. Moreover, when compared with regular public schools, choice programs often do not segregate students or create larger gaps in achievement between ethnic and income groups. A second reason for the lack of a clear answer to the debate is that neither side can marshal compelling evidence to "convert" people—even intellectually honest people amenable to evidence—on the other side. People on both sides can dismiss the other's evidence as weak, debatable, or highly dependent on special characteristics of the circumstances under which it was obtained.

But of course serious debaters care less about converting opponents than persuading the audience. Both sides hope to persuade educators, parents, voters, and public officials that choice can (alternatively) lead to overall improvements in student learning or to worse schools and less learning for the disadvantaged. Though neither side has been completely successful, here the proponents of choice have an advantage. Many laypersons know children who benefited when their parents put them in a parochial school or campaigned successfully for a change in public school placement. Many laypersons are also unimpressed by the regular public schools' track records on racial and class integration and effective education of the disadvantaged. These groups—especially, according to many polls, African American parents in big cities—are open to evidence about the benefits of choice and are not particularly concerned about its harms.

There are, however, constituencies that are hard to persuade about the benefits of choice, and easy to persuade about its risks. In addition to unionized public school teachers and other school district employees, all of whom would experience new demands and changes in their jobs, other groups are more inclined to worry about the harm that choice might do. These include liberals whose aspirations for public education focus on racial integration more than any other outcome, individuals convinced that regular public schools were their own route into society's mainstream, and parents of children whom the existing public schools are serving well.

Our national debate about choice will not be resolved by one side's finally finding that one bit of evidence that vanquishes the other. Resolution will come only when large numbers of laypersons, parents, educators, and elected officials come to believe one of four things:

- That the potential benefits of choice are so great that they outweigh any possible risks; or
- The risks of choice can be so well controlled that it is worthwhile even if benefits are moderate; or

- The risks of choice, though moderate, still outweigh its potential benefits; or
- The risks of choice are so great that no benefit can possibly offset them.

From where we are today it could take some time for the debate over choice to arrive at any of these endpoints. But there is a real cost to protracted debate. If choice can lead to better schools and smaller achievement gaps between rich and poor or white and minority children, these benefits should not be postponed. Humans are schoolchildren only once in their lives, and learning opportunities delayed are learning opportunities denied. On the other hand, if the risks of choice are truly so great as to outweigh its benefits, no one should be encouraged to rely on efforts to use it as a way of providing better schools.

## MOVING THE DEBATE

This book is an attempt to move the debate on choice ahead by focusing on the risks of choice and how they can be controlled. It is a product of the Koret Task Force, an interdisciplinary group of scholars convened by the Hoover Institution to apply the highest standards of social science research to education policy. The authors of this book, all easily identified as members of the pro-choice side, have written a fair amount of the literature on the benefits of choice. We have, however, long understood that benefits are only one side of the ledger. All of us have tried to acknowledge and take account of the risks, though that has never been our main focus. All of us understand that programs of school choice could, if poorly designed or perversely implemented, have negative consequences.

We undertook this book because we know that America cannot afford to slip back toward a dual school system in which children are separated by race or in which some children get the best of everything and others do not learn enough

to enter college or get good jobs. We know that there are not enough good schools for all the children in this country, and that the shortage is especially severe in the central neighborhoods of big cities. We also know that all Americans, not just a few, need to be taught to value mutual respect, freedom of speech, and open democratic decision-making. As citizens and as parents we would not support choice or any other policy that would deny poor and minority children a good education, reduce the numbers of good schools, or weaken our country's capacity for civil discourse.

In acknowledging the importance of these issues, we do not endorse the ways they have been approached by opponents of choice. Though respectable scholars have claimed to document the harms of choice, most have artfully cited situations in which the harms are poorly defined, choice is poorly implemented, or its effects are confounded with those of other factors. Thus, for example, arguing that choice will create segregation, Bruce Fuller, Richard Elmore, and Gary Orfield claim that the "cultural logic of families" will lead parents to choose schools that serve only people who have similar beliefs.<sup>3</sup> However, similarity is loosely defined to include even the very specific belief that a given school is the right one for a particular child. Thus, a term originally coined by these authors to cover religious and political beliefs is stretched to cover simple preferences for a school. By that stretch the authors are able to claim to show that choice will allow families to choose segregated schools.<sup>4</sup>

Based on experience in New Zealand, Ted Fiske and Helen Ladd speculate that choice leads to worse education

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<sup>3</sup>Bruce Fuller, Richard F. Elmore, and Gary Orfield, "Policy-Making in the Dark: Illuminating the School Choice Debate," in Bruce Fuller, Richard F. Elmore, and Gary Orfield, eds., *Who Chooses? Who Loses? Culture, Institutions, and the Unequal Effects of School Choice* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1996), pp. 1–24.

<sup>4</sup>For a similar argument see Amy Stuart Wells, Alejandra Scott, Janelle Holme, and Jennifer Jellison, "Charter Schools as Postmodern Paradox: Rethinking Social Stratification in an Age of Deregulated School Choice," *Harvard Education Review* 69, no. 2 (Summer 1999): 172–204.

for low-income children.<sup>5</sup> Though they have no data on student performance, they draw this conclusion from the fact that some schools got dramatically worse on measures of instructional resource quality. Yet they ignore the fact that total enrollments in highly regarded schools grew, and enrollments in lesser schools shrank, dramatically. They also ignore some program design elements that led to creation of have- and have-not schools: New Zealand's program continued civil service employment of teachers and charged schools the same amount for every teacher they employed, regardless of what a teacher was actually paid. This allowed the most popular schools to hire all the highest-paid and best-regarded teachers, and left the least popular schools with only the least experienced or most lowly regarded teachers. New Zealand also did not close failing schools, nor did it allow the formation of new schools, and it let popular schools grow to any size they pleased. Taken together, these factors—not choice itself—caused the harmful outcomes reported.

Amy Stuart Wells, in a contribution to the Fuller, Elmore, Orfield volume based on a survey of urban African American students who took an opportunity to enroll in suburban schools, observes that minority choosers are interested in having contacts with whites and are critical of all-black schools.<sup>6</sup> She concludes that choosers were eager to escape other blacks and not interested in school quality. Observing that students who did not choose were those who feared the competition they might encounter in white or higher-status schools, she argues that non-choosers would be left behind “in an educational free market predicated on the existence of both winners and losers.” Thus, according to Wells, though choosers do not select better schooling, non-choosers are condemned to staying in the worst schools.

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<sup>5</sup>Ted Fiske and Helen F. Ladd, *When Schools Compete: A Cautionary Tale* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2000).

<sup>6</sup>Amy Stuart Wells, “African American Students' View of School Choice,” in Fuller, Elmore, and Orfield, eds., *Who Chooses? Who Loses?* pp. 25–49.

The fact that these analyses are weak and one-sided does not mean that choice can do no harm. To the contrary, like any powerful tool it can do harm as well as good. As Terry Moe's recent book on Americans' views of choice shows, there are parents who would use choice to escape from others and to cluster in privileged enclaves.<sup>7</sup> As some have argued based on other countries' experience, schools with no constraints on whom they admit can also succumb to the temptation to admit only the easiest to educate and the most congenial.<sup>8</sup> The authors of this book are not neutral about such potential consequences of choice: we are against them.

Moreover, as people who think choice can lead to better education for the children whom our schools now serve least well, we are not complacent about issues of design and implementation. We are against leaving equity and quality in education to chance, no matter how schools are run or who decides what schools children will attend. For that reason each of us has been critical of the predominant model of public education, which relies on bureaucratic process to run schools and allocate opportunities. We have condemned school districts for their rank carelessness in allowing the most advantaged children to get the best teachers and condemning the neediest children to the weakest teachers and most turbulent schools. No matter how optimistic we are about choice we cannot take an indulgent approach to it and a critical approach to the current public education system.

To date, however, the opponents of choice have succeeded in assigning the entire burden of proof to choice supporters. Show us, they say, that choice will not favor the alert and ag-

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<sup>7</sup>Terry M. Moe, *Schools, Vouchers, and the American Public* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2001), esp. chap. 5, "The Attraction of Private Schools."

<sup>8</sup>See, e.g., Martin Carnoy, "National Voucher Plans in Chile and Sweden: Did Privatization Reforms Make for Better Education?" *Comparative Education Review* 42, no. 3 (August 1998): p. 307. See also Gregory Walford, ed., "School Choice and the Quasi-market," *Oxford Studies in Comparative Education* 6, no. 1 (1996).

gressive and disfavor those who do not know how to recognize good schools or cannot organize themselves to campaign for admission. The authors of this book accept some, but not all, of this burden of proof. The part we accept is the responsibility to provide hard data whose provenance is clear, and to compare situations that are identical except for the presence or absence of choice. But we reject as biased any requirement that choice be shown never to create advantages for anyone, and never to allow people of like mind to join with one another.

Of course choice creates opportunities that some people take advantage of. But, as Paul Hill and Kacey Guin demonstrate in Chapter 2, so does every other way of organizing schooling, including the bureaucratic methods now used to provide public education. They show that existing public school districts allow a great deal of racial segregation. Moreover, in the absence of transparent choice mechanisms, more sophisticated parents manipulate bureaucratic processes to their advantage. The result is that middle-class, often white, children monopolize the best programs and teachers the public school system has to offer. Hill and Guin conclude that the results of choice programs need to be compared against a baseline of the public school system's real performance, not to its lofty aspirations or to ideal standards that no practical arrangement can meet.

Using that standard of comparison this book looks hard at two ways that choice might do harm, not good, from the perspectives of educational equity and quality. The first is that choice might exacerbate segregation of students by race or income. This would violate the constitutional principles established by *Brown v. Board of Education*; worse, it would probably imply that children of different races and income groups would be educated in different ways and to different standards. The second potential harm we examine is a decline in the quality of regular neighborhood public schools, which could harm children left behind in those schools even as children whose families were quick to choose benefited.

We focus on these two potential harms of choice because most other objections stem from them. For example, some fear that choice might lead to a balkanization of society resulting from differences in children's educational experiences. That claim goes beyond the segregation argument, to assert (counter to American experiences with graduates of parochial schools) that people from different educational backgrounds cannot engage in democratic discourse. But the claim starts with the assertion that choice will lead to the sorting of children by race, sex, religion, and other characteristics. If this does not happen, the "balkanization" argument loses its main premise.

Chapters 3 and 4 address the segregation issue from the point of view of real-world choice programs. In Chapter 3, Paul E. Peterson, David E. Campbell, and Martin R. West compare the characteristics of applicants to a national privately funded voucher system, the national Children's Scholarship Fund, with the characteristics of a national sample of the eligible population. They also compare those who use the vouchers with those who were offered vouchers but did not use them. They find that voucher applicants are in general modestly advantaged relative to eligible nonapplicants, although African Americans are especially likely to apply. The main factor driving voucher applicants appears to be dissatisfaction with the public school that a family's children attend. Among families that are offered vouchers, the families most likely to use them are Catholic. Families in communities with large numbers of private schools are also more likely to use a voucher if it is offered. Peterson and his colleagues find no evidence that this voucher program has contributed to racial segregation in the public schools. To the contrary, by helping poor and minority students attend private schools, the Children's Scholarship Fund has increased the numbers of minority and economically disadvantaged students in public schools and has also increased their numbers in private schools.

In Chapter 4, John E. Chubb provides new evidence on the question of whether privately run schools receiving public funds are likely to promote segregation by handpicking white or economically advantaged children. He draws on the experience of Edison, a private company that manages schools under contract with local public authorities. His data on school enrollment show that Edison schools on average draw a student population that is poorer and more heavily African American than the school districts in which they are located. This reflects Edison's corporate strategy, which is to demonstrate that its schools can work for all students. It also reflects local authorities' motives in hiring Edison, often to serve neighborhoods where conventional public schools have not performed well. Chubb's data do not prove that all schools operating under choice schemes would serve such a diverse population, but they do show that critics are wrong when they say that schools of choice inevitably create privileged enclaves.

Chapters 5 and 6 address the issue of harm to schools left behind by the first families to take advantage of new options. In Chapter 5, Eric A. Hanushek asks whether choice will harm the children whose parents are slowest to take advantage of new options. Some critics fear that when choice is introduced, the "students left behind" will suffer because their peers will be poorer, less motivated, and more heavily minority than before. Reviewing research on the ways the characteristics of a student's classmates affect his or her academic performance, Hanushek concludes that the evidence is mixed. Though a student's own family income and academic ability are highly correlated with achievement, going to school with advantaged peers adds little. However, racial composition can matter: students who attend schools that are heavily African American learn less than would be predicted from their family income and academic ability. Moreover, as Hanushek concludes, school racial and income composition can have indirect effects. Three correlates of student poverty and minority status—high student mobility, capable teachers'

avoidance of schools in troubled neighborhoods, and inequitable allocation of funds within school districts—can prevent delivery of a coherent instructional program.

In Chapter 6, Caroline M. Hoxby asks whether the competition for students that choice engenders can help or harm public schools. Does choice create a zero-sum game in which the existing public schools get weaker as alternatives develop? Or might competition lead to stronger schools all around, including conventional public schools that have developed better instructional methods and more coherent instructional programs? Using results from Milwaukee, Hoxby shows that public schools facing the most severe competition raised student test scores much more than schools facing little or no competition. Similarly, Michigan and Arizona schools facing the most severe competition from charter schools raised test scores more than schools facing less competition. In both states, rapid improvement began immediately after the public schools first felt competition from charter schools. These gains were particularly dramatic for African American and Hispanic students in schools facing competition. Improving schools took sensible actions that did not involve massive new funding or changes in the student body: they focused time and attention on instruction, unified the work of teachers, and tried to replace teachers who would not cooperate with the improvement program.

In Chapter 7, Terry M. Moe reviews the potential harms of choice and shows how program design can help avoid—or exacerbate—them. Many decisions have to be made about program structure, and these determine, for example, whether poor and minority students have equitable access to good schools, or whether wealthy parents will use their own money to distort the distribution of good teachers and instructional programs. Moe argues that no one seriously suggests that choice should be a free-for-all without rules and structure. Like our free economy, an educational system based on choice would need rules to ensure that schools make honest claims, that all choosers have information, and

that no one can monopolize all the best resources. Creating fair rules of the game is a great challenge to our political system—one that it has failed to meet in the design and operation of public school districts. Moe concludes that choice schemes can be designed to be equitable and to create pressures for constant school improvement. But this cannot be done unless Americans recognize the possible risks and choose structures that address them.

Taken together, the chapters in this book show a way out of our ritualized debates about choice. People who favor choice and those who fear it can agree that choice alone does not cause any outcome, good or bad; it provides a mechanism whereby families seek what they consider the best schools for their children, and it can lead to segregation. But choice can also lead to fairer allocations of opportunities and less segregation than now exists. Everything depends on how choice is structured and managed. Choice can support the development of better schools and fairer allocation of the most desirable opportunities. Whether choice benefits children as much as it can—or whether it does little to help those most in need—depends upon how we Americans decide to govern it.