

## Preface

School vouchers, tax credits, charter schools, the right to leave failing schools—all are concepts hardly known as recently as fifteen years ago. Though propounded as early as 1955 by Hoover scholar Milton Friedman, these ideas did not gain currency until 1990 when another Hoover scholar, Terry Moe, together with John Chubb, published a book, *Politics, Markets, and Public Schools*, that showed how politics undermined effective public education. Also that year, the State of Wisconsin established a small voucher program in Milwaukee, shortly after a charter initiative had been enacted by the State of Minnesota. Both ideas have since cascaded across the nation.

With the spread of the choice idea has come intense opposition, especially from vested interests with a stake in existing institutional arrangements. Virtually every effort to increase choice and competition in education has met stern resistance from teachers unions, established school boards, and most state departments of education.

Much of the antagonism to choice has expressed itself in the courtroom. School vouchers were said to be unconstitu-

tional, because they violated the First Amendment ban on the establishment of religion. But it remained unclear whether school vouchers actually “established” a religion, or simply permitted the “free exercise thereof,” a right also protected by the First Amendment. In 2002, the Supreme Court, in *Zelman v. Simmons-Harris*, answered this question by saying that no constitutional violation occurs as long as voucher programs take a neutral stance, allowing students a choice of a religious or secular school.

Does this decision open the door to large-scale school choice? Or will choice programs in the future be as small and scattered as those that have thus far been tried? Will school choice simply become the latest fad to be given a trial run, only then to be abandoned? Or are the small steps taken thus far harbingers of an educational future quite unlike the present?

Much hangs on the answer to this question. American education, for at least a half century, has been stagnant, excessively bureaucratized, overrun by special groups and vested interests, unable to respond to the changing dynamic of society as a whole. The problem is not to be solved by adding more dollars to the equation, by teaching fewer students in each class, or by creating a few school-choice boutiques.

In this volume, the authors consider whether something more substantial might be occurring. They examine the meaning of the recent Supreme Court decision and consider the new political and policy context it has created. Our authors do not provide any single answer as to the future of school choice, though all acknowledge the manifold obstacles the movement must overcome. Yet there is a certain implied optimism, a sense that this movement, unlike past school reform fads, is likely to press forward, simply because choice, once granted, is seldom withdrawn. Once parents exercise it, they love choice dearly, all but ensuring its perpetuation.

*Preface*

xi

All but one of the papers in this volume were initially presented at an October 2002 conference hosted by Harvard University's Program on Education Policy and Governance. These papers have been strengthened by the comments and discussion of the participants in that conference, including Alan Altshuler, Cory Booker, John Brandl, Chester Finn Jr., Jay Greene, Michael Owens, Bruce Manno, David Steiner, Joseph Viteritti, and Patrick Wolf. In addition to the conference papers, the volume includes an essay by Ronald Brownstein on the implementation of the choice provisions contained in the 2002 education law, *No Child Left Behind*. The essay originally appeared as "Locked Down: Will Failing Public Schools Let Students Leave?" *Education Next* 3 (summer 2003): 40–47. The introduction to this volume includes material that appeared originally in Paul E. Peterson, "Victory for Vouchers?" *Commentary* 114 (September 2002): 46–50.

The conference was supported by a grant from the John M. Olin Foundation. Antonio Wendland, the Associate Director of PEPG, provided invaluable assistance with the organization of the conference and the preparation of this volume. Mark Linnen assisted in this effort. Christopher Berry helped prepare some of the essays for publication. I am especially grateful to John Raisian, director of the Hoover Institution, for his help in seeing that these papers are made available to a broader audience. I also wish to thank the staff of the Hoover Institution Press, who assisted with the production of this volume, including Pat Baker, Marshall Blanchard, Jeff Bliss, Lyn Larson, and Richard Sousa.