

School Choice

BY WALTER E. WILLIAMS



The overall quality of primary and secondary education received by white students is nothing to write home about. The very fact that 30 percent of college freshmen require remedial education, at a cost of over \$2 billion, is pretty good evidence that there is widespread fraud in the conferring of high-school diplomas. That level of fraud, though, does not compare to the fraudulent education received by blacks—that darn near approaches criminality. According to National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) findings, only in writing do less than 40 percent of black high school students test “below basic.” NAEP defines “below basic” as being unable to demonstrate even “partial mastery of prerequisite knowledge and skills that are fundamental for proficient work” at their grade. In math 70 percent and in science 75 percent of black students score below basic. Black high-school graduates perform a little worse than white eighth-graders in both reading and U.S. history and a lot worse in math and geography. The nation has tried almost everything to improve black education: busing, setting up magnet schools, pouring billions of federal, state, and local tax dollars, and all for naught. It seems that the only approach that has not been tried on a large scale is some form of school choice.

Most school-choice proposals are in the form of either educational vouchers, which pay all or part of the cost of nonpublic education, or tuition tax credits, which let parents deduct tuition from taxes owed. Some of the support for school choice comes from the expectation that it would introduce more competition into education and produce higher-quality education for all students, particularly minority students. Though

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school choice has that potential, I support it for another reason: Namely, I think any government-created and -protected monopoly is harmful to the best interests of consumers. Competition always produces a superior and lower-cost product than government monopolies. It is no accident that our supermarkets (stocking over 60,000 different items) are the best in the world. Similarly, it’s no accident that we lead the world in communication, computer hardware, software technology, the Internet, and other areas where competition is ruthless.

There is no reason to suspect that it would be any different if there were competition in primary and secondary education. U.S. universities, particularly at the graduate level, are the envy of the world. People from every country salivate at the chance to earn a graduate degree here. However, I would wager that there would be no such excellence if our graduate education were organized like our primary and secondary education.

Most of the criticism of school choice, regardless of method, is wrong and self-serving. My own preference is for tax credits as opposed to vouchers. Tax credits would reduce the risk of government intervention in the form of Departments of Vouchers.

There is considerable hypocrisy among some of the staunchest opponents of school choice. They want, demand, and can afford school choice for themselves, but for the less affluent it is a different matter. President and Mrs. Barack Obama enrolled their two daughters in Washington’s prestigious Sidwell Friends School,

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forking over \$28,000 a year for each girl. Whilst Obama was senator, the girls attended the University of Chicago's Laboratory School, a private school charging almost \$20,000 each. A Heritage Foundation survey found that 37 percent of the members of the House of Representatives and 45 percent of senators in the 110th Congress sent their children to private schools (www.tinyurl.com/d97000). Public-school teachers enroll their own children in nonpublic schools to a much greater extent than the general public. In Cincinnati about 41 percent of them send their children to nonpublic schools. In Chicago it is 38 percent, Los Angeles 24 percent, New York 32 percent, and Philadelphia 44 percent (www.tinyurl.com/99d8s). Both congressmen and public-school teachers enroll their children in private schools at rates three, four, and five times the rate of the general public.

Defenders of the education monopoly have advanced arguments against greater competition in primary and secondary education. These arguments seem plausible; however, a little reflection shows they are simply baseless.

Public schools would be destroyed. This charge amounts to a tragic confession that public schools are so inferior that given choice all parents

would opt out. In fact, some public schools are doing a satisfactory job; those schools would survive. Schools doing a poor job would have to either improve or face an exodus of students and perish.

Private schools would skim off the best students. Assume for a moment this might happen. To object to parental choice for that reason is callous arrogance and cruelty. It differs little from saying that parents who want better education prospects and a brighter future for their children should be held hostage until some undetermined time when public schools have improved.

School choice would lead to school racial segregation. Most voucher and tuition-tax proposals prohibit racial discrimination. The major thrust for school choice has come from black parents. Moreover, most large city public schools are already racially homogeneous, but

while a smaller percentage of blacks attend private schools, those schools are more racially heterogeneous.

There are not enough private schools. This is an absurd criticism and reflects ignorance of markets. In the 1970s there were no computer software stores and few videotape rental shops. Would anyone have argued back then that the manufacturing and marketing of computers and VCRs should be held up until software and video shops were in place? By purchasing computers and VCRs, consumers created the demand for those shops. We would expect the same with private schools. If parents had vouchers or tax credits worth \$3,000 or \$4,000, profit-seeking entrepreneurs would meet the demand for private schools.

Parents, particularly those who are low-income, can't make wise choices. This is a demeaning attitude toward the poor, and it also reflects ignorance of how markets operate. People have little direct information about the quality of most goods and services they use. They depend on indirect information, such as word of mouth, consumer reports, and advertisements. The market would generate information about K-12 schools just as markets already provide information about colleges and universities. It is inconceivable that parents, particularly black parents, could choose schools worse than the ones their kids already attend.

Education vouchers and tuition tax credits face another source of opposition: from those fearful of government control of nonpublic schools. I share that concern and urge strong measures to minimize that likelihood. The question I pose to these critics is: Which is the more serious and costly risk, the increased government intervention in nonpublic schools that might accompany school choice or the continued educational destruction of the nation's youngsters, particularly its black and Hispanic youngsters?

Finally, I am thoroughly convinced that all children, including black children, can achieve academic excellence. What's necessary is 1) parental involvement, 2) well-behaved and motivated children, and 3) a competitive educational environment. **FEE**

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