

RACIAL DESEGREGATION

Magnet Schools, Vouchers, Privatization, and Home Schooling

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The control and welfare of urban schools continues to occupy the attention of mayors, governors, state legislatures, and local citizens. Public funding, media scrutiny, and the school's reflection of society are primary contributors to this ongoing interest. The changing demographics of the urban setting and its effect on public policy have launched education into broader political, economic, and legal arenas. The major change in the education of urban students began with the 1954 ruling by the United States Supreme Court in *Brown v. Board of Education*. At that time, the Supreme Court recognized, through a unanimous 9-0 decision, the significance of the fiscal, sociological, and psychological role of the public school and its significance to our democratic existence.

The empirical findings from Myrdal (1944) were the foundations of the psychological argument convincing the Court that segregation did in fact have a negative effect on African American students' potential for success (Orlich, 1991) and that there can be no equitable system of separate but equal schooling. Although the detrimental effects of segregation appeared clear to the Court a decade preceding the civil rights movement, neither *Brown* (1954) nor *Brown* (1955) provided prescriptive strategies to incorporate desegregation or to eliminate segregation. Some see this as synonymous with legalizing freedom but not abolishing slavery. However great, this omission has left a generation to continue to grapple with achieving a goal that has far-reaching underpinnings exacerbated by unforeseen circumstances, such as a changing national demographic, pervasiveness of racial separatism,



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unequal patterns of poverty, the political divisiveness of this educational issue, and the shift in the country's economic base from national to global.

Today, the United States is experiencing a shift in the demographic configurations of its cities and schools. Minority populations are growing at a faster pace than the majority. Some urban school districts have greater numbers of minority students than majority students, and the numbers of affected districts is predicted to increase (Stringfield, 1997). Neighborhood segregation and the imbalance of wealth, which influence the racial divide in this country, are factors that have not changed significantly since the inception of *Brown*. Reports indicate that the per capita cost of public schools is increasing, whereas scores on achievement measures are decreasing. In addition, the United States is evidencing a shift in its global positioning. It is no longer the monolithic power from previous decades but, rather, one of several major economic entities in a global market. The authors of *Brown* could not have anticipated these issues.

Although *Brown* continues to uphold the moral principles of desegregation, the legal significance is being debated and is eroding with current policies supported or ignored by the Court. The current Court has intentionally or unintentionally made no rulings on desegregation cases in nearly 10 years (Russo, Harris, & Sandidge, 1994). This failure to provide the legal framework for school reform may have given decision makers too much latitude, which many interpret to nullify the effects of *Brown*.

Since *Brown*, race has been a constant factor for parents in the selection of schools for their children. Brown and Hunter (1995) reported that, although 95% of White parents surveyed had no objection to their children attending a school in which a few of the children are Black, the proportion of objecting Whites grew steadily as a school population became increasingly Black. This resentment led to "White flight," leaving the urban schools primarily minority.

Although public perception of integration is clearly more positive now than nearly 50 years ago, the realization of legalized desegregation as a means toward this end has not been as readily endorsed. Court-ordered desegregation was accepted as a remedy for the "deliberate speed" implementation mandate for almost three decades, but now the federal courts are relieving most urban schools from court-ordered supervision of all efforts to desegregate schools.

The contradictory messages regarding the effects of desegregation from both races—perception of White parents that desegregated schools benefit Black students more so than Whites and the growing discontent of Blacks that desegregation has not had the intended positive effect on academic success for Black students—have led to the incorporation of politically inspired

initiatives into the public educational arena. Consequently, the basis for assessment of these initiatives has primarily been political rather than educational because parent and student satisfaction are replacing traditional measures of educational achievement and program effectiveness. Even less empirical attention has been given to the effects on multicultural and exceptional populations (McKinney, 1996; Ramirez, 1998).

With the apparent end of court-ordered desegregation, the avenues of escape for White parents from enrolling their children in largely minority and poor schools have been identified as choice options. The most prevalent of these include magnet schools; vouchers; privatization of public schools or private, for-profit schools; and home schooling. These choice options initiated in the 1970s present an alternative to forced busing. They are particularly significant for middle-class families who cannot afford to reside in affluent neighborhoods with well-financed, predominately White schools nor afford the tuition of private schools (Glenn, 1998). Proponents of both political parties see some form of choice option as being the most efficient route to needed educational reform.

If the central focus of *Brown* (1954) was to create a school environment conducive to learning for all students, the central question in analyzing the choice option movement is whether this premise is still at the forefront of policy making and school options. Have the alternatives to traditional education promoted in the past decade lived up to their promise? The discussion that follows scrutinizes the alternatives based on this question.

ALTERNATIVE CHOICES

MAGNET SCHOOLS

Magnet schools are defined as a selective, academically demanding public elementary or secondary school with superior facilities and programs that are more readily received by White citizens than is forced busing (Dejnoska & Kapel, 1991). They were established under the administrations of Presidents Richard Nixon and Ronald Reagan as a mechanism of a choice option for parents in lieu of forced busing to desegregate public schools. The assumption was that middle-class White parents could be lured back to inner-city schools with the assurance of an innovative and focused curriculum with locally tailored extras and that the financial base influenced by this infusion of students would revitalize the school. Magnet schools typically offer a nontraditional curriculum, incorporating thematic learning and

technology that are governed by the school district and local school board (Metz, 1986).

The number of students enrolled in magnet schools has tripled in the past decade (Steel & Levine, 1994). Between 1985 and 1993, the federal Magnet School Assistance Program spent \$739 million in schools districts promoting magnet schools (Steele & Eaton, 1996). Typically, program offerings include an emphasis on basic skills, language immersion, humanities, and instructional approaches such as open classrooms, individualized instruction, and enriched curricula as well as career or vocational education, the arts, and gifted-talented programs. In other words, magnet schools specialize in programs that cater to the population that will support and control them. One important aspect of magnet schools is internal control that involves parents and teachers. The expectation is that the school will be responsive to its constituency because this group is in control. These schools are governed by administrative policies dictated through internal leadership.

According to Goldhaber (1997), the assumptions underlying the selection of a magnet school include the following: (a) All parents will be well informed regarding the benefits for enrollment in the school; (b) representation will be broad in policy development and management of the school; (c) the location will be centralized, supposedly assuring access for all populations; and (d) the selection or enrollment process will be equitable, thus promoting an inclusive population. Specifically, magnet schools should appeal to a broad base of parents and be accessible to a similar base of students. If these assumptions are not met, magnet schools can mimic the segregated neighborhood schools predating the *Brown* era.

Although the practical, economic impetus for magnet schools is clear, from an inclusion perspective, the intent of magnet schools seems suspect. Archbald (1996) notes, "Variables related to parent socioeconomic status and proximity to magnet schools were found to be significant predictors of magnet school enrollment" (p. 152). This is further evidenced by Orfield and Eaton's (1996) study of magnet schools in Kansas City, Missouri that showed the following:

- Magnet schools did little for integration.
- Magnet programs tend to help desegregate schools in middle-class communities with school districts and sizable minority and White populations.
- Magnet schools have less effect in large cities where Whites have fled to the suburbs.

In districts dominated by minorities, White students typically comprise 32% of the magnet school population. When analyzing the demographics of

magnet school populations, Archbald's (1996) finding that neighborhoods with higher levels of educational attainment find magnet schools to be more attractive is also significant. White parents in Buffalo, Boston, and Charlotte have successfully challenged the concept of the magnet schools selection process by race to use this scheme to fashion desegregated schools (Hunter & Brown, 1991).

Although magnet schools purport to offer a superior curricular program, issues of accountability and quality controls for magnet schools continue to plague the U.S. Department of Education as researchers find that 453 of the 1,068 schools that received federal grants between 1989 and 1991 did not have objectives compatible with those defined by the government for a magnet school (Waldrip, Marks, & Estes, 1993). Consequently, the data resulting from empirical studies documenting achievement gains for magnet schools compared with the traditional public schools are conflicting.

The effect of these schools on minorities and special needs populations in urban settings also needs further study (Ramirez, 1998). Sociological and psychosocial factors impede this type of research, yet these issues must be addressed.

VOUCHERS

Vouchers are individual scholarships to parents that can be used to defray the cost of a child's tuition at any school—public or private, religious or secular—so long as that voucher is awarded on the basis of neutral secular criteria (Lewin, 1999). This plan provides public monies to parents to pay or supplement the cost of schooling. Parents rather than the government determine the schooling options for children financed by public funds. From the very beginning, constitutional challenges of vouchers have been at the forefront of discussions regarding their place in the educational arena. The challenge centers on the interpretation of the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment that prohibits public funds from being spent on religious activities or teaching.

The economist Milton Friedman introduced the concept of vouchers in the mid-1950s when he urged that competition would strengthen public education. His ideas were revived in the 1980s and 1990s when education became a central political theme and vouchers were promoted as parental choice. Public schools were portrayed as ineffective and in serious need of advancement. Vouchers provided the government a means to address public education externally rather than internally, pursuing alternatives rather than solutions. This strategy would "fix" public schools by providing competition for them,

and competition would spark improvement because school survival would be linked to public popularity.

The assumption underlying vouchers is that parents, not the government, should have control over the selection of schools for their children. Gallup poll results indicate that the percentage of parents in favor of having this option is steadily increasing, especially among Black parents (Rose & Gallup, 1998). In the educational arena, the belief is common that parents are their child's best teacher, so the proposition that parents are the group best equipped to select an educational experience for their children also seems reasonable. According to proponents, this would be the natural result of providing parents with an opportunity to actively advocate for schools that are effective versus those that are ineffective. Theoretically, effective schools would be deemed as those schools that provide the greatest opportunity for achievement and have a history of proven achievement gains. Achievement results, not school demographics, would be the ultimate determiner of school selection. Therefore, the premise for vouchers is that all parents can choose schools based on academic success. Neither race nor socioeconomic make-up of the school would be a primary factor in selection increasing the opportunities for equitable access.

An essential question is the following: How do parents interpret school effectiveness? Rose and Gallup's (1998) results indicated that when parents were asked to rate factors that contribute to effective schools, more parents ranked good citizenship as a result of schooling higher than scores on standardized tests, the typical measure of academic achievement. This finding contradicts the media's portrayal of poor performance on tests as the community's reason for dissatisfaction with public schools. Also, it contradicts voucher proponents' claim that a demand for higher test scores is the major reason that they embrace a voucher system. The Gallup findings also contradict the primary goals of public school education if one defines good citizenship as promoting moral values.

When Black parents support the voucher system as a means for effective schools, is good citizenship their litmus test for success or are they seeking an alternative from the deprivation inherent in urban schools? Are the expectations for the two groups the same or is the voucher movement merely assuming similarity in goals? Is the movement an avenue to circumvent the policies of *Brown* by exploiting the dissatisfaction of poor, predominantly minority parents who have been discriminated by our economy to achieve the goal of creating a publicly funded, private school system free of public control and oversight (Molnar, Farrell, Johnson, & Sapp, 1996)?

The presumption that choice options are a remedy for public schools may also be flawed. Based on final evaluation findings from the Milwaukee Parental

Choice Program, the first publicly funded voucher program, no conclusive evidence supports the academic superiority of one system versus the other (Witte, Stern, & Thorn, 1995). Although other researchers have questioned the research model (Greene, Peterson, & Du, 1999), the lack of evidence to support the voucher system cannot be dismissed.

A study frequently cited in support of vouchers was conducted in 1988 (National Center for Education Statistics, 1988). The study's sample included more than 20,000 eighth graders nationwide. Follow-up studies of these students were conducted in the 10th and 12th grades. Higher graduation rates and academic performance were found in favor of students attending private schools. Another significant finding was that private school students in the study started at a higher academic base, and their parents had substantially higher incomes than those in the public school sample. Goldhaber's (1997) analysis of this data found no significant effect in academic achievement when these factors were controlled.

The results do not lend support to the premise that race is not a primary factor in school selection, and Goldhaber (1997) suggests that race and socioeconomic status are primary factors in parents' selection of schools. Results such as these validate opponents' fears regarding vouchers' potential for greater economic and racial stratification of the schools.

Public support is currently against vouchers (Rose, Gallup, & Elam, 1997). Voters in Washington State defeated a voucher initiative by a 2-1 margin. Similar defeats were evidenced in Oregon, Colorado, and California. More recently, the state courts have struck down a total of six private or religious school voucher plans in Maine, Vermont, Pennsylvania, and Ohio. The country's two teacher unions, the National Education Association (NEA) and the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), vehemently oppose vouchers. The Court's position is presently unclear. Although lower courts have ruled that an expanded Milwaukee Parental Choice plan that would include religious schools violated the state constitution, the Wisconsin Supreme Court upheld the constitutionality of the plan in June 1998. The Court declined to hear the case in November, thus allowing the lower court's ruling to stand.

Cleveland's attempt to incorporate a choice plan that would allow poor students in Grades K-3 to attend religious and secular private schools with public money was supported by a trial judge and then appealed and first ruled unconstitutional by the Ohio Court of Appeals and then reversed, allowing students already selected to participate but barring any future selections. The decision to disallow further enrollment was appealed to the court that ruled to allow the continuation of the voucher program for the time being. The court did not deliver a ruling on the constitutionality of vouchers in this decision.

Florida's Choice Plan was thrown out and ruled unconstitutional. The judge concluded that the mandate violated the law that provides a free education through a system of public schools. Under Florida's voucher law, students at public schools that earn a failing grade 2 years out of 4 could ask for tax dollars to pay for private school tuition. Vouchers would be worth between \$3,000 and \$4,000, depending on the deficiency of the schools' scores.

Typically, the amounts of money awarded in vouchers do not cover the entire cost of the choice option school. Parents would have to pay as much as one half of the remaining costs. On the surface, this may appear as an option for all socioeconomic levels, but realistically it is not. Middle- to high-income parents' benefits would be far greater than representative urban parents.

PRIVATIZATION AND CHARTER SCHOOLS

A third and most recent alternative to public schools that evolved during the latter part of the 20th century is the move toward privatization, engaging private enterprise in the management and operation of schools. The contracting strategy of privatization is the most popular, in which the public sector remains the financier of the school but delegates production or provision of services to the private sector (Murphy, 1996). The resulting schools from this approach are called charter schools. Although similar in intent, charter schools are different from magnet schools in that they are privately owned and managed by that entity rather than the local school board. They are chartered to produce achievement gains with state and federal funding based on the delivery of results and operate as tuition-free public schools. They were fueled by the nation's perception of the high cost and inefficiency of government and a renewed interest in private-market values (Murphy, 1996). Assumptions that emulating organizational models of the private sector and educational models of other industrialized countries that boast of high academic achievements can enhance education belie the move toward privatization.

During the beginning of the movement toward charter schools, many perceived them as a perfect complement to vouchers. Currently, with the popularity of the concept and the extremely controversial nature of vouchers, proponents of charter schools make a clear distinction between the two. Charter schools can be sponsored by one of three entities: the State Board for Charter Schools, the State Board of Education, or the local school boards. Supporters are broad in political and financial base, educational expertise, and philosophy.

Although the AFT and NEA oppose vouchers, they support charter schools with reservations—that they are limited in number and governed by comparable standards as public schools.

Some believe that charter schools are the precursors of the government's abandonment of public school funding. Olson's (2000) report of charter schools charged that

there are free marketers who believe that government should stop financing education entirely, and who view vouchers as one step in that direction; rural communities that are trying to stave off the consolidation of local schools by converting them to charter schools; teachers and parents who are teaming up with philanthropists to put innovative ideas into practice; and religious schools that are looking to vouchers as a way to shore up their enrollments and financial future. (p. 3)

According to Olson (2000), at least a dozen for-profit companies (led by the New York City-based Edison Schools, Inc.) are trying to make money by running charter schools because charter schools are sweeping the nation. Today, there are nearly 1,700 across 36 states. A key concern is that accountability approaches across these states vary significantly.

President Clinton, a strong supporter of charter schools, recognizes that differences in standards of accountability are a major problem for schools. He notes,

not every state has had the right kind of accountability for charter schools. . . . Some states have laws that are so loose that no matter whether the charter schools are doing their jobs or not, they just get to stay open, and I think even worse, some states have laws that are so restrictive, it's almost impossible to open a charter school in the first place. (Clinton, 2000)

Educational and political supporters are claiming charter schools to be the panacea of choice options for the prevailing ills of public schools. This support is evident by federal funds as well as rhetoric demanding that every state should give parents the power to choose the right public school for their children. They claim that charter schools, vouchers, and other new means of providing education will produce higher achievement; encourage innovation; promote equity by giving poor families, in particular, more options; and foster accountability by enabling dissatisfied consumers to vote with their feet (Olson, 2000). Further evidence of their increased popularity is the establishment of a \$4.4 million federal grant program to support their growth.

Charter schools are varied in design and accountability. Although some use traditional methods, many replicate curricular innovations similar to those seen in magnet schools and other public schools. Barring the dissimilarity of curricular approaches, one aspect is the same: All charter schools promise academic results through the charter, contract, or desolation of the schools. However, nationwide, closures have been relatively rare (Archer, 2000). Archer (2000) reports that only 59 charter schools had shut down by last fall, representing a failure rate of just fewer than 4%, and most closures have resulted from severe mismanagement or financial crises not because of concerns over academic achievement.

Currently, there are 19 charter schools in Illinois. The surrounding states of Michigan and Missouri have 93 and 18 charter schools, respectively. The Multiple States Charter School study conducted by the Center for School Change at the University of Minnesota reviewed data from 31 charter schools in the following eight states: Arizona, California, Colorado, Georgia, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, and Texas. Published results of the study indicate that 68% of the schools appear to be making gains. No comparative analysis was made between charter school students and regular public school students. To address the issue of whether private industry has the answers to the current educational dilemma, comparative studies with public schools are needed.

Although parent satisfaction with charter schools is high, the question remains of whether the original intent of charter schools to produce greater academic gains than public schools remains unanswered. There is no conclusive answer; therefore, further research is warranted.

HOME SCHOOLING

The last alternative to be discussed is home schooling. Home-schooled or home educated, the teaching of one's own children at home is steadily becoming an accepted and respected alternative to public school education. Duffy (1998) reports recent estimates of home-schooled students to be about slightly more than a million.

Home schooling is not new, but the recognition of the phenomenon as a legitimate option to public school is receiving renewed attention. Also new is its position in the desegregation controversy. The right to home school is not questioned but, rather, the effect on public schools is the focus of discussions.

Researchers cite parents' concerns for safety, security, morality, and educational quality as primary reasons for home schooling (Dahm, 1996). Parents

want decision-making authority to determine their child's teacher, classmates, and curriculum with access to extracurricular activities of the public schools.

Opponents of home schooling (e.g., Gorder, 1996; Mayberry, Knowles, Ray, & Marlow, 1995; Ramirez, 1998) cite issues regarding accreditation, parents' lack of formal training for teaching, comparable facilities and resources for schooling, lack of opportunity for socialization, and the deflection of students from public school as detractors. A primary area of concern is the lack of standardization of home schooling laws across states.

Duffy (1998) reports that the typical home schooling family is White and Protestant with two parents, three children, and above-average income and education. The mother is the primary instructor and religion is likely to be the most important—although seldom the only—reason for home schooling. Home schooling is typically not an option for urban parents primarily because of the same problems that plague urban schools (e.g., poverty, lower levels of parental education, parental involvement in the educational process). A single parent—primarily the mother—who is also the principal wage earner heads most urban families. Rather than a choice issue, however, home-schooled students do present another opportunity to divert funds from urban schools. Currently, with the percentages of home-schooled students being proportionally low, the threat appears minimal. But as the trend grows in popularity, the competition will be more evident.

The Supreme Court's position on home schooling is as uncertain as its stance on the other alternatives. No case has been tried in the past 25 years. The last case tried in the early 1970s (*Wisconsin v. Yoder*, 1972) provided only a limited ruling in support of Amish students not attending a public high school.

Although prominent educators such as Holt (1983) advocate home schooling, little empirical research is available regarding academic achievement and comparative data with non-home-schooled students. Supporters attribute this is to the general distrust of educators of home schooling with traditional research; however, if it is to be legitimized as an educational alternative, this scrutinization must be forthcoming. Without adequate evidence of academic superiority over public schools, the choice of home schooling as an alternative to public school instruction must be questioned.

CONCLUSION

The most prominent issues in the 20th century regarding American education were school quality and desegregation. It appears that, almost 50 years

after the *Brown* decision, these issues continue to be dominant concerns in education. Whereas during the 20th century much of the discussion was focused inside the educational community, this community has now expanded to include all stakeholders, including parents, businesses, and the general public. With the inclusion of these participants, the reform of education has become a public forum and a political agenda.

Choice is a valued principle of democracy. The foundations of our political, economic, and legal systems are driven by this principle. In each of these areas, however, the presumption is that choice will be influenced by a thorough investigation of facts followed by objective reasoning. If not, what is perceived as choice may become biased assessments or personal preferences.

The origin of the argument for choice options for public schools was a response to desegregation and based on the assumption that schools were ineffective and unresponsive to the varying needs of the population. The problems identified with the system were internal, requiring systemic changes at many levels. There is no evidence that choice option programs recognize or make any attempt to address this key factor. Rather, these options are focused on creating a separate system that will avoid the ills of its predecessor rather than address them. Consequently, an analysis of the problems that they attempt to avoid is critical to urban education.

Educational issues that confront urban public schools are low test scores, poor graduation rates, poor attendance, inequality, discipline, overcrowding, lack of parent involvement, violence, and poor teaching. Few studies have shown that, when the same populations of the public schools are provided the current choice options, these issues are significantly influenced. These alternatives are providing an avenue for those that are dissatisfied with the current system to abandon it in lieu of a better choice. The literature has shown that there are inequities in income and education for those that are electing to take this route to school reform; therefore, one can conclude that these options are not flawless.

In 1983, the government's report "A Nation at Risk" analyzed the status of education in this country, and many accepted its findings as representative of the nation's educational system. More than 25 years later, many of its primary findings still have not been addressed. The choice option debate has not added to the resolution of any of these findings, but it may have diverted our attention away from the real issues in education.

If educational choices are not motivated by reasoning due to validated progress of choice options, it is reasonable to speculate that bias or personal preference is motivating these decisions. If this is the case, the effect of choice options on desegregation is clear. The proposed solutions are attempts to separate from the traditional public schools and to maintain an equal funding

base, curriculum, and accreditation in favor not of school reform but more so the creation of a separate system. Parents who separate from the traditional system supposedly leave these same problems for another generation. Funding alternatives naturally deplete resources from the primary system. You cannot make one system equitable without making another more inequitable. This concept was struck down and found ineffective, unfair, and unconstitutional more than 50 years ago.

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