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# Educational Governance and Democratic Practice

MICHAEL MINTROM

*A preoccupation with academic quality has guided contemporary education reforms in the United States. This is hardly surprising, because political and business elites recognize that well-trained, high-skilled workers are crucial for regional competitiveness. Many parents have also come to see academic credentials as vital to their children's future well-being; they have thus sought more control over their children's schooling. As these changes have been occurring, others have voiced concerns about the state of civic engagement and democratic practice. With questions emerging over how public policies might promote democracy, the democratic function of public schooling has received renewed scrutiny. However, as yet, no effort has been made to explore the commensurability between reform efforts motivated by quality and accountability concerns and the growing discussion of education for democracy. This article begins that task, indicating where trade-offs must be made between goals and where goals could be advanced in mutually supporting ways.*

SCHOLARS AND commentators have documented a serious decline in political participation, civic engagement, and social capital in the United States in recent years (Putnam, 1995, 2000; Skocpol & Fiorina, 1999). Meanwhile, efforts to reform government through a turn to the market have often

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been predicated on the belief that democratic forms of governance and public bureaucracy reduce operational effectiveness and cause intolerable inefficiencies. Thus, removing aspects of service delivery from the public sector has frequently been championed as the key to improved outcomes (Barzelay, 1992; Gormley, 1991; Osborne & Gaebler, 1992; Savas, 1987). Might such action further erode opportunities for citizens to deliberate about the effects of (public and private) policies on their individual and collective well-being? Do we face a trade-off between public policy in the service of economic efficiency and public policy in the service of democracy? Here, I seek to address these questions through an analysis of the interplay between opportunities for democratic practice and efforts to change educational governance.

Public schooling has always loomed large in discussions of democracy and how it can be advanced in society. Given this, thinking more about the democratic purposes of schools would seem an essential task for those who are most concerned by reports of declining civic engagement. Recent discussions concerning public schooling in the United States and related efforts to engage in significant school reforms add urgency to that task. Increasingly, calls for school reform in the United States have been driven by a fixation on economic concerns (Hirsch, 1997; Murnane & Levy, 1996; National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983; Stevenson, 1992). Further, many proponents of reform have argued that substituting market forms of service delivery for centrally coordinated governmental forms would greatly improve school quality as well as the accountability of school leaders to parents and students (Chubb & Moe, 1990; Finn, Vanourek, & Manno, 2000; Peterson & Hassel, 1998). In this view, schooling is best pursued through market-like delivery systems, and present forms of democratic control are treated as problematic.

When thinking about educational governance and democratic practice, we must acknowledge the broader political economy within which education occurs. The contemporary United States, perhaps even more than most developed countries, exhibits a corporate capitalist structure that informs and infuses every aspect of our lives. Given this reality, it is hardly surprising that political and business elites tend to emphasize the importance of knowledge and skills for the workplace when they talk about the purposes of public schooling. Questions of just how schooling might contribute to democratic practice get short shrift in this context (Plank & Boyd, 1994). For their part, parents who care greatly about the future well-being of their children also tend to emphasize credentials for the workforce over other educational goals (Laberee, 1997). Meanwhile, as socializing agents, schools must compete with families, peer groups, powerful media, and "the paraphernalia of markets" (March & Olsen, 2000). Often, these other forms of influence do not

exude dispositions or behaviors that would seem compatible with the maintenance and growth of a democratic political culture. What space remains for schools to support democratic practice? Although schools are not bastions of democracy, they still represent vital—and, in many ways, unique—sites in which “prefigurative forms” of such practice are able to be developed. As Shapiro and Hacker-Cordón (1999, p. 1) have observed: “At best we can perhaps say that the democratic ideal lives in adaptive tension with the political realities in most so-called democracies.” Such observations need not invite despair. By acknowledging how far our political realities fall short of democratic ideals, we open the way for asking how current institutional settings could be transformed to positive effect.

Here, I proceed on the premise that a key task for democratic theorists and policy practitioners alike is to look for democratic potentials in the everyday world. Toward this end, my analytical strategy involves scrutinizing recent school reforms, asking if and how they might serve to enhance democratic practice. Democratic ideals are normative benchmarks, and, thus, they are unattainable, but moves toward them are not. Of course, such an analytical strategy could be viewed as the refuge of a reform apologist, someone always seeking the positive spin while we move further from our ideals. Those who reject my perspective on democracy and the positive effects that I believe democracy at its best can produce might have this reaction. However, I consider myself neither a reform apologist nor an ideologue. In a society where market forms of organization are pervasive and democratic forms appear increasingly constrained or under threat, looking for democratic potentials in reform efforts is important, both as an exercise in meaningful theory construction and as an approach to real-world policy analysis. In the spirit of deliberative democracy, I hope what I have to say here will stimulate discussion and will motivate theory-driven, research-intensive analysis of how educational governance shapes democratic practice.

In what follows, I first state why there is merit in thinking beyond the increasingly prevalent exchange theories of democratic behavior. I then review recent discussions of democratic practice in the United States and suggestions for increasing civic engagement. Afterward, I consider arguments that link education with democratic practice. Following this primarily theoretical discussion, I explore the practical implications for democracy of five school-reform movements currently ascendant in the United States. These are the charter school movement, the voucher movement, home schooling, state and national standard setting, and top-down takeovers of poorly performing schools. By integrating my theoretical discussion with observations of actual school reforms, I am able to identify both instances where trade-offs must be made between promoting democracy and

promoting other social goals and instances where those goals could be advanced in mutually supporting ways.

### BEYOND EXCHANGE PERSPECTIVES

There is no doubt that moneyed interests—including businesses, single-issue public interest groups, professional associations, and unions—enjoy enormous political clout in contemporary politics in the United States. The influence of moneyed interests can be routinely observed at the national, state, and local levels. Often, these interests come to shape the terms of public debates about policy change. Campaign finance laws make it all the easier for moneyed interests to dominate contemporary politics, using contributions, or the promise of them, to entice elected politicians to do their bidding for them. Invoking Olson's (1965) theory of collective action and Mayhew's (1974) theory of the connection between policy making and electoral politics, a straightforward explanation for the influence of moneyed interests can readily be made. Theories of this sort, and other contributions to the rational choice literature, constitute what March and Olsen (1995) term *exchange perspectives* on democratic governance. These rational choice theories assume that interests and resources are fixed and, hence, exogenous to the political process. Actors in politics, like actors in markets, are assumed to be motivated by self-interest and, thus, democracy is reduced to a form of governance characterized by contending interests continuously striking bargains. In this conception, the role of political discourse is downplayed. Moe (2000), a proponent of rational choice theory and its application to political analysis, has observed that "group preferences are usually rooted in basic interests, and they cannot be expected to change much as a result of argument, deliberation, or participation. The groups want what they want, and more 'democracy' will not change that" (p. 134).

Exchange perspectives on politics offer important insights on processes and outcomes. However, by assuming fixed interests and discounting the value of political discourse, such perspectives ultimately offer an impoverished view of humanity and our developmental potentials. Policy prescriptions informed by exchange perspectives treat individuals as self-interested and such prescriptions themselves have the effect of cultivating narrow notions of self-interest. Public education is valued within the exchange perspective primarily as a means by which individuals are prepared for engagement in market and market-like activity. In this context, democratic citizenship is accorded little meaning. The communitarian benefits that derive from civic engagement are treated as intangibles and are thus accorded no value. Of course, these exchange perspectives have been met with criticism from a

variety of quarters, yet the views of their proponents have often dominated discussions of public policy. There is no good intellectual reason why democratic theorists should cede the terms of policy debates to proponents of exchange perspectives. There is enormous scope here for conversation among scholars working out of different paradigms and perspectives. More important, conversation of this sort, bringing issues of democratic practice to the fore, could provide renewed intellectual leadership for policy makers and their advisors.

Even if we admit that individuals are often motivated by self-interest, we need not assume that interests and identities are necessarily fixed. By relaxing this assumption, we can integrate the possibility of socially contingent human development into our understandings of politics. For example, Coleman's (1988) highly influential notion of social capital is predicated on the assumption that ongoing social interactions generate tangible benefits that do not receive a full accounting within a narrow exchange perspective. Recent proposals by political scientists and policy practitioners for how to arrest and reverse the decline of political participation and civic engagement reflect views of the social world that extend well beyond exchange perspectives. Likewise, here, I assume broader human motivations and human potentials. I believe that carefully designed public policies can shape us as citizens in uplifting ways, that power in politics is socially contingent and, hence, far from immutable, and that democracy need not always disappoint. Thus, I find myself in agreement with Skocpol (1999) when she states that "ideals of shared citizenship and possibilities for democratic leverage have been compromised. . . . We may need to find creative ways to repair those links if America is to avoid becoming a country of detached spectators rather than fellow democratic citizens" (p. 506).

#### EMBEDDING DEMOCRATIC PRACTICE

Often, scholars and political pundits assume that a nation is democratic in so far as it holds free and fair elections and citizens have more than one political party to choose among. But this view of democracy is a minimalist one. As such, it fails to recognize the ways that the routine practices of citizens can affect a nation's political culture. For citizens living in households where decision making occurs in a nondemocratic fashion, or for those who experience the workplace as authoritarian, democratic ideals will appear remote and, perhaps, not especially important.

In the United States, the dominating influences of money, media, and professional political operatives pose a serious challenge to democratic practice even within the formal spheres of politics. These influences make it all the

harder for individual citizens and local community groups to develop a sense of political efficacy. Recognizing the growing disconnect between people and politics, a number of scholars have recently begun to think about how this situation might be rectified. Two insights stemming from this scholarship seem especially important. First, democratic practice grows, and it grows as a function of the day-to-day actions of citizens. Landy (1993) has argued that “for most people, good citizenship, like physical fitness, does not come naturally. It is a regimen and thus requires adherence to self-imposed, but publicly sanctioned, discipline” (p. 24). Bringing people into politics—having people engage with each other in the practice of collective problem solving and decision making—can have transformative effects both with respect to how decisions are made and, even more important, with respect to the participants. A political culture that is supportive of democratic ideas, values, and practices cannot be maintained in a top-down fashion. There is a constant need for democracy to be reinvigorated, and this reinvigoration must be grounded in the actions of large numbers of citizens. This is why Dahl (1998) has stated that “one of the imperative needs of democratic countries is to improve citizens’ capacities to engage intelligently in political life” (p. 187).

A second insight concerning the disconnect between people and politics is that, because public policy alters and shapes the behavior of citizens, it can and should be used to support democracy. This insight reminds us that both what services get provided by government and how they get provided affect how citizens relate to each other and to government. There is no presupposition here that trade-offs necessarily must be made between advancing democracy and advancing other social values. Nonetheless, by highlighting the relationship between policy design and democracy, Schneider and Ingram (1997) make it clear that proposals for policy change can and should be informed by analyses of their effects upon democratic practice. If trade-offs are to be made, then their nature and magnitude should be made explicit during policy deliberations.

The argument that democracy grows out of the day-to-day practices of citizens and that public policy can shape democratic practice has an important implication. That is, to be successful, efforts to embed democratic practice must reflect coordinated action between the government and its citizens. In the face of remote, unsupportive government, citizen action alone will do little to advance democratic practice. Meanwhile, government efforts to engage citizens will have little effect if citizens are disinterested, alienated, and cynical. Thinking along these lines has led Weir and Ganz (1997) to suggest that people may have been pulling back from politics not because they lack any intrinsic interest in civic engagement but because they face so few

opportunities for effective participation. To avert a self-reinforcing cycle of unresponsive government and citizen alienation, policy makers need to find ways to energize the interest and resourcefulness of citizens. When done well, this can have positive outcomes for all concerned. As Weir and Ganz have observed: "It is the combination of interest and moral purpose that can draw us into deliberative engagement with others through which we begin to discover new common interests even while constructing the capacity to act on them" (p. 166).

Scholars have delineated a range of strategies that governments can use to foster closer connections between citizens and government. For example, the contributors to Ingram and Rathgeb-Smith's (1993) volume *Public Policy for Democracy* suggest a variety of ways that public policies can serve to empower, enlighten, and engage citizens so that they might more fully contribute to the practice of government for the people, of the people, by the people. Typically, these strategies focus on the local, grassroots level, where efforts to build citizen capacity are likely to be most effective. There is no reason why efforts to embed democratic practice could not be spurred by government entities at the state and federal level, although it is likely that such efforts would have to be undertaken in close consultation with local officials. Here, I list four key strategies.

First, democratic practice might be advanced through the use of public programs and public organizations that enjoy a high degree of local autonomy and that have a relatively low ratio of users to providers. Designed in this way, programs and organizations can provide more opportunities for citizen voice and for broader group deliberation over local policy choices. Government entities of this sort can serve as schools for democracy. Valelly (1993) has noted the following:

To the extent that people govern on a small scale, the possibilities grow for the transfer of skills engendered in one area to another, small-scale context, or to involvement in electoral politics and the associational life of groups or movements with national goals. (p. 258)

Second, democratic practice might be advanced by giving citizens greater choice among service providers. In contrast to a monopoly situation, when service providers must compete for clients, they face strong incentives to encourage client feedback on what they are doing. Whereas greater client choice serves to transform government organizations into market-like organizations, the leaders of those organizations actually stand to benefit from finding ways to transform their relations with clients so that the organizations

themselves become community forming. As in any market situation, service providers in a competitive environment benefit from developing ongoing relationships with clients. The upshot is that such organizations might achieve a competitive edge and enjoy a loyal client base through welcoming voice and creating opportunities for deliberative democracy concerning policy directions (Mintrom, 1998).

Third, democratic practice might be advanced through government efforts to facilitate network ties among local organizations. Efforts to promote reconnected citizenship ultimately must involve building ties across individuals and organizations that are multiple and variegated. Clearly, this is a difficult challenge and one that might only be met once citizens have developed a sense of personal and political efficacy through close involvement in particular organizations in specific local settings. Skocpol (1999) argues that civic revitalization is best facilitated when ways are found "to weave connections among institutions and places, classes and cultural groups" (p. 504). These efforts have to begin somewhere. Several successful national citizen advocacy associations have built their fund-raising and lobbying capacity through cultivating strong grassroots organizations. Observing these associations, such as chambers of commerce and some church groups, Weir and Ganz (1997) have noted how the local organizations offer opportunities for their members to participate in programs, join in deliberation, and select leaders for themselves. These authors have also noted the ways that some national associations carefully build network ties across local organizations. These ties serve as conduits for disseminating ideas, generating training opportunities, and passing on practical know-how and lessons learned from one local site to another. Government efforts could mirror these to positive effect.

Finally, democratic practice might be advanced through the use of public information campaigns (Weiss, 1993), the dissemination of database information (Valelly, 1993), and the development of organizational report cards (Gormley & Weimer, 1999). So long as the information made available in these ways is truthful and of sufficiently high quality, it can serve to empower citizens, giving them access to information that would otherwise remain in the hands of providers. (These means of information collection and dissemination also can be potentially of enormous assistance to providers, giving them a sense of the relative quality of their services.) The availability of good-quality information to clients can increase their ability to hold providers accountable for results. With respect to advancing democratic practice, new information presented in these ways can provide the starting point for discussion and for collective efforts to find appropriate—and possibly unique—solutions to local problems.

The four strategies listed here do not constitute an exhaustive set of approaches that governments might use to advance democratic practice. Further, depending on the policy area under consideration, some strategies might be more fruitfully pursued in some contexts than in others. There may be times when, pursued in combination, these strategies serve to be mutually reinforcing. In the remainder of this article, my interest lies in scrutinizing how contemporary school reforms might serve either to promote or to inhibit democratic practice. My analysis is informed by an understanding of these general strategies for citizen empowerment and the embedding of democratic practice. However, of course, it is shaped in ways that acknowledge the unique features of education as a social activity. As a necessary precursor to my focus on these contemporary school reforms, I next review the distinct connections that exist between democratic practice and the social practice of educating the young.

#### EDUCATION AND DEMOCRACY

Stretching back to the work of the classical political theorists, a long tradition of scholarship has recognized the critical role education plays in the construction and maintenance of political community. Education of the young presents both extraordinary challenges and extraordinary opportunities for governmental regimes. Undertaken with sufficient perspicacity, formal schooling can serve to advance the values of a regime and maintain its continued viability. Recently, Dahl (1998) has argued that

the prospects for stable democracy in a country are improved if its citizens and leaders strongly support democratic ideas, values, and practices. The most reliable support comes when these beliefs and predispositions are embedded in the country's culture and are transmitted, in large part, from one generation to the next. (p. 157)

In a democracy, the primary function of public schooling is to impart a democratic education to the young. The content and the form of democratic education cannot be meaningfully separated. For example, providing excellent education for democracy to some groups while systematically denying it to others makes a mockery of democratic ideals. Likewise, seeking to provide a democratic education through organizations deliberately placed at arm's length from democratic control must be an ultimately self-defeating exercise. In each case, day-to-day practices serve to contradict the democratic values being imparted in the schools. Dewey (1916) encapsulated the basic requirements of democratic education when he stated the following:

A society which makes provision for participation in its good of all its members on equal terms and which secures flexible readjustment of its institutions through interaction of the different forms of associated life is in so far democratic. Such a society must have a type of education which gives individuals a personal interest in social relationships and control, and the habits of mind which secure social change without introducing disorder. (p. 99)

Gutmann (1987) has provided a comprehensive analysis of the necessary components of democratic education in contemporary society, doing so with reference to education in the United States. Based on Gutmann's analysis, five requirements for democratic education can be stated.

First, democratic education must teach mutual respect and the value of working through differences in deliberation. Gutmann (1987) argues that "a state makes choices possible by teaching its future citizens respect for opposing points of view and ways of life" (p. 30). Gutmann also argues that well-run schools serve to model in students some of the basic skills and virtues that are needed for them to become democratic citizens. Of course, for citizens to be able to contribute equally to processes of deliberation, all must have acquired at least some threshold of knowledge and skills. This threshold Gutmann describes as possession of "the intellectual skills and the information that enable [citizens] to think about democratic politics and to develop their deliberative skills and their knowledge through practical experience" (p. 147). The threshold for effective political participation is likely to rise as the average level and quality of education in society increases. Gutmann argues that schooling in the United States often fails to educate students to a level adequate for effective engagement in politics. This failure has consequences for democratic practice and, thus, for the life chances of citizens as they are mediated by government policies (p. 148).

Second, democratic education should be nonrepressive and nondiscriminatory. Gutmann (1987) argues that nonrepressive schooling occurs when the state and any group within it is prevented from using education to restrict rational deliberation of competing conceptions of the good life and the good society (p. 44). Nondiscrimination (or nonexclusion) can be thought of as the distributional counterpart to nonrepression. Gutmann's principle of nondiscrimination states that nobody should be excluded from receiving a democratic education. "A society is undemocratic—it cannot engage in conscious social reproduction—if it restricts rational deliberation or excludes some educable citizens from an adequate education" (p. 95).

Third, funding for democratic education should be distributed by government. Distribution through complete reliance on the market should be avoided because that would mean children with poor or uninterested families

would not receive it (Gutmann, 1987, p. 127). However, in turning to the government for funding, it is critical that the rules of allocation be carefully determined. Gutmann warns that distribution should not occur through “unconstrained democratic decision.” Distribution through a political process that relies entirely upon majority rule can lead to the children of disfavored minorities being relegated to the worst schools. According to Gutmann, although funding for democratic education should be allocated so that every citizen receives a threshold level of quality schooling, full equalization of funding is neither necessary nor desirable. Inevitably, different families and different communities will reasonably display differences in the expenditure priority that they accord to education relative to other goods. Gutmann contends that “inequalities in the distribution of educational goods can be justified if, but only if, they do not deprive any child of the ability to participate effectively in the democratic process” (p. 136).

Fourth, decision making over schooling and the content of that schooling should be jointly undertaken by states, families, and educators. Gutmann (1987) notes that children are neither the property of their parents nor the property of the state (p. 33). Given this, families and the state should each have input into determining the development of moral character in children. However, it is also important that professional educators be allowed to make judgments on this matter that are independent from the judgments of parents and the state. Such independence increases the chances that democratic education integrates the value of critical deliberation among good lives. According to Gutmann:

A democratic state of education recognizes that educational authority must be shared among parents, citizens, and professional educators even though such sharing does not guarantee that power will be wedded to knowledge, that parents can successfully pass their prejudices on to their children, or that education will be neutral among competing conceptions of the good life. (p. 42)

There is another reason why states and families should cede some educational authority to professional educators. When efforts to control the content of classroom teaching effectively repress reasonable challenges to dominant political perspectives, this serves to undercut the democratic ideal of mutual respect for alternative viewpoints (p. 77).

Finally, local autonomy for schools must be balanced against the pursuit of national educational goals. This is especially important in a mass society. In the face of unlimited local control, efforts to teach essential democratic values and to cultivate a common culture can be seriously undermined, especially when localities have the tendency to display bigotry of various kinds.

Nonetheless, the imposition of federal and state standards holds the danger of seriously constraining opportunities for citizens to deliberate over the kinds of educational policies they wish their local schools to follow. According to Gutmann (1987):

Local school boards must retain substantial control and freedom to exercise their discretion over education within their school districts, subject to the strictures of democratic accountability. So construed, local implementation of both centrally and locally determined educational standards makes diversity of public schooling possible without destroying the moral unity of a democratic society. (p. 75)

As we might hope, Gutmann's (1987) requirements for democratic education do not contradict—and, indeed, can be seen as complementing—the strategies for embedding democratic practice introduced in the previous section of this article. Aside from this, it seems reasonable to conclude that many aspects of contemporary public schooling in the United States should be viewed in a positive light by those who voice concern about democracy's future. There are, however, also reasons for concern. Woefully inadequate funding of some public schools means that too often the state is not ensuring that every child receives a level of education consistent with the democratic threshold. In addition, high levels of bureaucracy, especially in big-city school districts, serve to minimize opportunities for parents and other concerned citizens to influence decisions over the education being provided in local schools. Then again, arguments for placing more control of educational choices in the hands of parents raise the issue of how the common goals of democratic education might be pursued if the state cedes too much power to families. Given our interest in democratic practice and democratic potentials, how should we judge the recent flurry of efforts to reform educational governance? In the remainder of this article, I seek to answer that question through a *democracy audit* of five contemporary reform movements.

#### REFORMING EDUCATIONAL GOVERNANCE

Recent efforts to change educational governance in the United States have taken two distinct forms that, in some ways, seem to contradict one another. The reforms in the first set have been centrifugal in nature, serving to further decentralize decision making and giving more discretion to schools themselves as well as to parents. Reforms in the second set have been more centripetal. Here, states and other central decision-making entities have sought to bring their power to bear directly on schools in ways that are somewhat

unusual for a system that has traditionally vested much decision-making power at the local level. Here, I discuss three centrifugal reform movements (charter schools, voucher plans, and home schooling) and two centripetal movements (standard setting and top-down takeovers of schools). In each case, after providing a brief description of each type of reform, I assess its democratic potentials. I then consider the ways in which each reform poses challenges to democratic ideals. To the extent that a given reform threatens to undermine democratic practice, we must then consider what benefits—with respect to the attainment of other desirable social values—have been sought at the cost of pursuing democratic values.

### *Charter Schools*

Charter schools represent an important addition to the set of public policies that have been developed over the past decade or so to infuse an element of school choice into the delivery of public education. Charter schools have neither a guaranteed budget nor a guaranteed student population. Rather, they must find ways to attract and maintain a viable student body, and funding is based upon the number of students in attendance. Charter schools typically operate as legally and fiscally autonomous organizations. They operate within the public school system under contracts, or *charters*. The charters are negotiated between organizers and sponsors. The organizers may be teachers, parents, or others from the public or private sectors. The sponsors may be local school boards, state school boards, or other public authorities, such as state universities. The organizers manage the schools, and the sponsors—or authorizing agencies—monitor compliance with the charter. The charters contain provisions regarding issues such as the curriculum, performance measures, the school governance structure, and management and financial plans. The first charter school law was adopted by Minnesota in 1991. By June 2001, a total of 36 states, along with Washington, D.C., had charter school laws, and more than 1,700 charter schools were operating across the United States. Nathan (1996) and Finn et al. (2000) provide useful overviews of the charter school movement. Charter school laws differ from state to state, so that making generalizations across all charter schools is unwise. Nonetheless, some general tendencies are apparent, and it is those that I focus on here.

The advent of charter schools brings with it several important possibilities for embedding democratic practice. Most charter schools are relatively small in size. This means that the educators and parents associated with each school are able to feel a greater level of efficacy with respect to having input into decisions and making a difference on how things happen. Charter schools also benefit from being schools of choice because everybody associated with

the school must first have made a positive choice to be there, and no individuals in the school can be said to be there because they face no other options. The major benefit of choice in this instance is that it increases the likelihood that members of the school community, because they have selected into it, can readily develop a shared sense of identity.

The democratic potential of charter schools is advanced in other ways because of the fact of parental choice. School choice implies that, at base, charter schools are market organizations. As such, leaders of the schools must be concerned to avoid parents and students leaving their schools, because if too many leave, the schools will eventually have to close. Charter school leaders face incentives to reduce the threat of exit by encouraging parents and students to express their concerns about the school in ways that ensure that the parents and students feel they have been given a fair hearing and treated with respect. The upshot of this situation is that charter schools hold the potential to be important sites for the development of forms of deliberative democracy, where all concerned provide reasoned explanations for their ideas and actions. (In another article associated with this project on educational governance and democratic practice, I have made this argument in more depth and reported empirical support for it. See Mintrom, *in press*.)

The advent of charter schools does pose some potential threats to democratic practice, although all of these could be mitigated through appropriate policy changes. First, in some states—Michigan is a prominent example—charter schools are increasingly being managed by for-profit companies, referred to as education management organizations. Some of these management companies, such as Edison Schools Incorporated, require that all the schools they manage are run according to a fairly rigid blueprint. This limits the amount of autonomy that decision makers at the local sites can exercise with respect to key issues like the curriculum, instructional procedures, and the general ethos of the school. Because the viability of large management companies is not dependent on the viability of any given school, company decision makers can make choices about school policies and be immune to the consequences. This would be impossible in a charter school that is not part of a franchise. To the extent that management companies with rigid blueprints become more prominent in the management of charter schools, the democratic potentials of this movement could be lost.

A second threat to democracy posed by charter schools arises through the possibility that school leaders might find subtle ways to screen the students who attend their schools. This threat to democracy arises because of the greater degree of autonomy that charter schools enjoy compared with traditional public schools. A third threat is posed by the greater weight that the charter school model places on accountability to parents as opposed to

accountability to the broader public. Given the greater influence that parents enjoy over charter schools, it is possible that some schools will become so preoccupied by local interests and the specific concerns of parents that they will neglect to teach essential democratic values and to support the cultivation of a common national culture.

### *Voucher Plans*

Politically, voucher plans are extraordinarily controversial, and, for this reason, policy entrepreneurs have often promoted charter schools as a stepping stone to this more radical form of policy change (Mintrom, 2000). Voucher plans currently in place in the United States fall into two groups: public programs and private programs. Of these, private plans are far more numerous.

Public voucher programs have been designed to provide opportunities for children in public schools to attend private schools, with their tuition being covered by the state. Advocates for children from poor, inner-city, minority families have proposed voucher programs as a desperate means to escape ineffective local schools. At the same time, Republican legislators, business leaders, conservative foundations, and church groups have advocated voucher programs for a variety of reasons. These range from the charitable desire to help poor children receive high-quality education to the strategic goal of introducing greater competition in the delivery of publicly funded education, thus setting the scene for private companies to run public schools. Three public voucher programs currently exist in the United States. The introduction of a public voucher program in Milwaukee in 1990 and another in Cleveland in 1996 occurred in both cases only after pitched battles in the state legislatures in which the respective state governors became actively involved. Witte (2000) provides a comprehensive analysis of the Milwaukee program; Greene, Howell, and Peterson (1998) provide a preliminary analysis of the Cleveland program. In Florida, a plan introduced in 1998 has been designed to provide opportunities for students in schools deemed to be failing to use state-funded vouchers to attend other schools, which might include private, religious schools. So far, no students have been granted vouchers, because schools deemed to be failing are given a year to improve their performance, and, until now, all "failing" schools have been able to make required improvements.

Private voucher plans represent a distinctive effort to promote school choice. The first of these plans was established in 1991 by an insurance company executive, J. Patrick Rooney. Frustrated by the lack of action occurring in the Indiana state legislature to promote school choice, Rooney decided to establish his own charitable voucher plan. Under this plan, children from

poor families are provided with subsidies to attend private schools of their choice, including religious schools. Rooney saw this as a strategy that would provide immediate relief to poor families seeking to place their children in better schools. However, he also saw it as a way to alter the nature of the school choice debate in his state and to develop evidence of the workability of broader, publicly funded voucher plans. Rooney's plan has now been successfully emulated by private charities in many cities across the United States. Moe (1995) and Peterson and Hassel (1998) bring together a number of analyses of private voucher plans.

Conceivably, if all public schools and some number of private schools converted to charter schools, then the public school system would operate essentially as a voucher system. Under such a voucher-type scenario, the democratic potentials and the threats posed to democracy would be identical to those associated with the advent of charter schools. It is possible, therefore, to consider voucher plans as holding the potential to advance democratic practice. Typically, however, voucher plans are viewed as posing major threats to the democratic practice currently associated with public schools. Although opponents of voucher plans express concern over this prospect, voucher advocates see things differently. According to Moe (2000), the democratic control of public schools is the source of many of their current difficulties, and he advocates removing schools as much as possible from democratic influence. For Moe, voucher plans offer the hope of a politics-free schooling nirvana, where governments provide the funding, parents do the choosing, and schools compete to deliver the kind of education that families most desire.

Unconstrained voucher plans pose a threat to democratic practice for a number of reasons. First, they give up large amounts of decision-making authority to parents and to other private interests. Voucher plans are designed on the presumption that parents should have considerably more say over the ways that their children are educated than should the state. This presumption, however, ignores the point made by Gutmann (1987) and others that children are neither the property of their parents nor the property of the state. Democratic education requires that parents, the state, and professional educators all have appropriate input into establishing the nature of the education that children will receive. Ceding too much control to parents limits opportunities for citizens to deliberate over the nature of the education that the young should receive. This makes it that much harder for the state to ensure that democratic practice will be advanced in society. Under voucher plans, it is also possible that parents will make concerted efforts to (further) segregate their children from others through their choices of schools. This clearly reduces the potential for schools to offer democratic education. As Gutmann has observed:

[A democratic] state makes choices possible by teaching its future citizens respect for opposing points of view and ways of life. It makes choice meaningful by equipping children with the intellectual skills necessary to evaluate ways of life different from that of their parents. (p. 30)

In practice, public voucher plans are constrained in a variety of ways by state regulations. For example, serious efforts are made to avoid racial segregation through vouchers. Private voucher plans are not constrained in these ways. However, because the voucher advocates administering them have so far sought to use the academic results of voucher recipients to demonstrate the merits of voucher plans, many private plans use lottery systems to randomly allocate their scholarships. Some private voucher plans have even offered scholarships to all children in particular geographical areas who seek them. (For example, these plans have operated in parts of Albany, New York, and parts of San Antonio, Texas.) However, this broad-based approach does not eliminate the prospect of vouchers being used in the service of segregation, and it raises an even more serious concern: Private voucher plans for all eligible students in a given locale represent instances of private policies—the actions of wealthy individuals or foundations—that have very public consequences. These efforts that have public consequences are based on policy making removed from democratic influence. Private policies that have significant public consequences serve to directly challenge democratically controlled efforts to educate the young. Large-scale private voucher plans should therefore be viewed as deliberate efforts to circumvent and erode democratic practice. Greater critical scrutiny of such plans is urgently needed for this reason.

### *Home Schooling*

Home schooling occurs when families decide to opt out of sending their children to public or private schools and to conduct lessons themselves instead. Home schooling was a relatively common phenomenon in the early days of the American republic, when organized schooling was less prevalent, a large proportion of the population was rurally located, and transportation was difficult. From the end of the nineteenth century onwards, the practice of home schooling declined. However, beginning in the 1970s, increasing numbers of parents have chosen to engage in home schooling (Kirschner, 1991). Often, these efforts have been motivated by religious convictions or by extreme political commitments. Since the early 1980s, members of home schooling movements across the United States have managed to secure changes to state laws that have made it relatively easier for parents to lawfully keep their children at home and conduct their own schooling (Cibulka, 1991).

During the 1990s, advocates of home schooling turned their attention to securing governmental support for their efforts. Thus, several states now provide tax credits to families engaging in home schooling of their children. In California, the state's charter school law supports the establishment of on-line schools that are designed to give educational support to home schooling families. As might be expected, it is difficult to estimate the number of children who are being home schooled across the United States, but estimates hover around one million and are growing (Archer, 1999; Lines, 1998).

Home schooling might be thought of as the most extreme form of school choice. In many cases, home schooling parents believe that through their efforts they can provide their children with an education that is more morally appropriate than what they would receive in the local public schools. Others believe that they can exert more academic press on their children than would be the case in the local public schools. Still other parents engage in home schooling because they fear that the local public schools offer too many risks from the perspective of personal safety. As Hill (2000) has observed, "Home schooling is part of a broad movement in which private groups and individuals are learning how to provide services that once were left to public bureaucracies" (p. 21). There is nothing wrong with parents wanting to influence the moral focus, academic standards, and safety of the environments in which their children are schooled. In fact, the argument could be made that educational outcomes would be improved if more parents were to display such concern and interest in the schooling of their children (Apple, 2000). However, when energies toward such ends are channeled into home schooling, they serve to maximize private benefits and reduce the opportunities for citizens to deliberate over collective goals and to work together to secure them.

From the perspective of embedding democratic practice, efforts to home school children would appear to have nothing to commend it. In fact, home schooling can be seen as posing threats to democratic education and the democratic practice that such education is intended to advance. Home schooling is based on the supposition that children are the property of their parents and, hence, that parents are free to encourage their children to embrace their conception of the good life and reject others. Even if home schooling parents adhered to democratic principles and were intent on inculcating them in their children, this practice would still pose a threat to democratic practice. Home schoolers deliberately turn their backs to significant aspects of the broader community. In so doing, they exhibit intolerance for the views and practices of others. Thus, they do not offer their children an environment in which they might develop mutual respect for the views of others with whom they might disagree. In addition, home schooling serves to promote segregation because

it does not allow children to socialize with others from different backgrounds. This does not equip them for engaging in democratic practice in a pluralist society.

Aside from depriving children of the opportunity to receive a democratic education, home schooling serves to erode the prospects for democratic practice. The isolationist mentality accompanying home schooling efforts can only be viewed as harmful for democracy. This mentality presumes that nothing good can come from engagement with the broader world or from confronting and seeking to understand ideas and practices that are unfamiliar and disconcerting. Tolerance of such behavior is problematic in a democracy, and, if unchecked, such behavior can do damage to the broader fabric of society. In addition, home schooling is typically facilitated through a patriarchal family structure where the mother manages the private sphere, part of which involves teaching the children. However, because mothers in patriarchal families of this sort are essentially removed from participation in public life, they tend to construct their interests with respect to the private needs of the family. This provides them with little basis on which to train their children in the habits of democratic citizenship.

Based on what I have said so far, there would appear to be little prospect for democratic potential to be found in the home schooling movement. Perhaps, however, things need not be viewed so negatively. If we give due recognition to the energy and commitment that home schooling parents bring to organizing the education of their children, then it is possible to begin thinking about how that energy and commitment might be rechanneled into supporting more publicly oriented educational endeavors. Many home schooling parents have created networks among themselves, and many also engage in the "bartering" of services based on pedagogical expertise. Thus, determined efforts to achieve independence from organized, public education do not necessarily lead to isolationism (Hill, 2000). Further, it is noteworthy that increasing numbers of instances can be found where home schooling parents are turning to organized educational entities, like traditional public schools and charter schools, to help them in their efforts to educate their children. Given this, perhaps there are ways that aspects of educational organization and funding could be managed so that home schooling parents are given encouragement to take a more publicly oriented turn in their practices. The charter schools model, because it is so flexible, represents one potential means by which the more negative isolationist tendencies of home schoolers could be mitigated. Aspects of traditional public education in the United States do not serve democracy well, yet we do not argue that the enterprise should be abandoned. We consider ways that it might be improved so that

democratic practice could be further embedded in society. By the same logic, the fact of one million children being home schooled in this country need not be seen as immutable or even especially discouraging. The challenge is to discover means by which to change the situation in ways that are mutually beneficial for all concerned.

### *Standard Setting*

Following the 1983 publication of *A Nation at Risk*, the report of the National Commission on Excellence in Education, considerable effort went into the development of state and national educational standards. Although efforts to devise national standards drew much political attention, they did not result in the creation of broad curricular guidelines or national tests (Massell & Kirst, 1994; Porter, 1994). By contrast, at the state level, major changes were made. Today, many states have detailed curriculum guidelines in place, and they use annual testing programs to assess how well students and schools are measuring up against specified content standards (Firestone, Bader, Massell, & Rosenblum, 1992; Fuhrman & Elmore, 1995). Typically, state curriculum guidelines leave a considerable degree of room for local educational authorities to decide how best to teach required material. Of course, this assumes that there are sufficient resources at the local level for actors to decide how to most appropriately mesh state requirements with classroom practice. Sometimes, this is not the case (Spillane, 1999). Meanwhile, the use of standardized tests to assess student and school performance can serve to undercut efforts by magnet schools and charter schools to devise and offer unique curricular content. As state test results are given increasing weight for accountability purposes, schools face strong incentives to raise their average test performance by teaching to the test, screening out students who they believe will do badly on the tests, or just encouraging poorly performing students to be elsewhere on test days.

The trend toward states requiring all public schools to teach a common curriculum and to administer standardized tests can be viewed as a positive development with respect to democratic practice. These efforts serve to remind local educational decision makers that the children in their schools are citizens of a broader political economy and, as such, they should be acquiring the knowledge and skills necessary to participate effectively within it. As the general level of education required to be a full participant in the economy and in the broader society increases, it is essential that some mechanism be available for higher level governments to ensure that local schools are bringing children up to at least a minimum academic threshold. Standard setting and performance testing are well suited to this task.

Centralized analysis and dissemination of the test results can also contribute to local democratic practice. Information concerning how well schools are performing relative to others offers parents and other interested citizens vital knowledge. Armed with this knowledge, it is much easier for citizens to ask pointed questions about school performance. For example, several states now report district test scores in ways that break them down by race. Aware that African American students appear to be systematically underperforming on test scores, even in schools with good reputations, parents in places like Nyack, New York, have called for the matter to be addressed (Zernike, 2000). Knowledge of relative test results can also help educators to identify the strengths and weaknesses of their schools and, thus, to determine how best to allocate resources to make improvements. Used most effectively, knowledge of school test results can provide a starting point for local stakeholders to deliberate over problems and to work together to develop appropriate solutions. As evidence of such promising practice, Wohlstetter and Smith (2000, p. 508) report the efforts of “school families” in Los Angeles to conduct training workshops on how to use test data to diagnose student needs. In this particular case, the school families and other efforts to establish social networks across schools have been supported by the Annenberg Challenge, a national reform initiative aimed at improving student performance in inner-city public schools and funded by former U.S. Ambassador Walter Annenberg. Efforts of this sort have the potential to support the emergence of deliberative democracy, and many school leaders could benefit from finding ways to encourage fact-based discourse among stakeholders concerning student performance and how it might be improved. Such collective efforts could also provide a foundation from which advocacy efforts could be launched on behalf of the schools involved. For example, if students in schools with limited funding are found to consistently underperform on standardized tests, then this would support arguments for greater equalization of funding through state efforts.

State standards and performance tests have been introduced primarily because political and business elites recognize that well-trained, high-skilled workers are crucial for regional competitiveness. However, this policy move can also be seen as holding positive implications for democratic practice. There need not be—and probably is not—a trade-off here between economic goals and democratic goals. Such a trade-off would arise if curriculum guidelines became so prescriptive as to rule out local input. This does not seem to have occurred so far. A trade-off would also arise if test results became so central to holding schools accountable that teaching to the tests became pervasive. This problem could most readily arise in schools that have been placed on notice as failing. In a culture where parents care greatly (and for

good reason) about the academic credentials of their children, it is possible that some charter schools—being more subject to parental control and influence than traditional public schools—could emphasize test performance over other equally important educational goals.

### *Top-Down Takeovers*

Since 1989, when New Jersey assumed control of the Jersey City schools, 23 states have passed laws that permit state officials or city mayors to exert special authority over school districts that are deemed to be “academically bankrupt.” Such action has been taken in less than half of the states with such laws in place. Typically, when action is taken, it occurs only after a period in which school districts have been placed on notice of potential takeover. Actual takeovers of school districts usually involve replacing all or at least some of the leading board members and administrators in a district. Often, the takeover threat allows state officials to influence district decisions behind the scenes rather than through taking control directly (Sandham, 1999). When takeovers do occur, states make various structural changes in the school district. For example, in a recent takeover effort in Pennsylvania, the state opened opportunities for the districts concerned to improve their academic performance through the creation of charter schools and through bringing private management companies in to run other schools (Johnston, 2000). As mentioned earlier, in Florida, state takeover provisions have been designed so that students would be eligible for vouchers to attend private schools if the troubled district schools do not rapidly improve their academic performance.

State legislation allowing state and mayoral takeovers of districts and schools has been motivated by concerns over the quality of the education being provided in public schools. Like state standards and performance tests, this policy move represents another aspect of efforts to increase public school accountability. Both initiatives emerge out of the growing realization of just how crucial a well-educated population can be for supporting positive economic outcomes. From the perspective of democratic practice, top-down takeovers could be viewed as antidemocratic. After all, they involve a higher authority stepping in to take power away from local actors who have been legitimately put in place through democratic processes. In addition, the racial dynamics of takeovers deserve serious attention. According to Hunter and Swann (1999), almost all takeover efforts have been supported by White majority state legislatures, yet the districts involved have had predominantly minority student populations. Eisinger (2000) notes that the mayoral takeover of the Detroit School District occurred in a racially charged atmosphere. Moreover, Eisinger states that

Black opponents of the Detroit takeover were quick to point out that the predominantly white legislature in Lansing never contemplated removing the school boards in several rural white school districts in Michigan, even though the test scores in those places were typically lower than in Detroit. Indeed, the only other communities besides Detroit that were considered for takeovers in Michigan have been other largely black cities in the state. (p. 14)

Although the racial dynamics of top-down takeovers could readily undercut the potential benefits of such efforts, they do not negate the point that the top-down actions of state legislatures and city mayors may well have much to commend them. It has long been acknowledged that local democratic processes can sometimes produce outcomes that are morally reprehensible. Recognizing that point, top-down takeovers of failing schools can be viewed as instances when state officials, who are constitutionally responsible for ensuring adequate education of all citizens, decide that too much power has been ceded to individuals at the local level who are not fulfilling their responsibilities.

Top-down takeovers of failing schools can be seen as positive for democratic practice if they lead to better educational outcomes in the schools concerned. Used appropriately, this strategy could serve to improve the quality of the education on offer in the relevant schools (Kirst & Bulkley, 2000). To date, little effort has been made to assess the academic consequences of takeovers. Beyond this, top-down takeovers can also create opportunities for more democratic practice to occur at the local level. This possibility is of most interest here. For example, the efforts by the Illinois legislature to restructure the governance of Chicago's schools in 1988 have been praised for the ways that they have expanded local democratic participation.

The Chicago reforms, although not involving a state takeover of the schools, were intended to break through the bureaucracy that had grown around the provision of public schooling in that city. Recognizing that bureaucracy, not democracy, was the problem to be addressed, legislators created a plan that has devolved governance to the level of every individual school, where school councils made up of the principal and parent, teacher, and community representatives are given broad powers to engage in school-based management. "Democratic localism" in Chicago has been seen as opening new opportunities for concerned stakeholders to deliberate over school problems and to develop creative ways to address them (Bryk, Kerbow, & Rollow, 1997). Takeover efforts elsewhere that make use of charter schools could also potentially have a positive effect for promoting democratic practice. In contrast, other efforts that seek to reduce community input

and to use for-profit companies to manage the public schools could erode opportunities for local democracy. As Landy (1993) has avowed,

Given the transcendent importance of the schools in the process of civic education, it would be a mistake to respond to this disheartening situation by abandoning the principle of public education itself. It is not too late for parents and neighbors to reclaim their local schools and insist on governing them according to their lights. (pp. 38-39)

Conducted appropriately—which means, among other things, being sensitive to the racial dynamics at play—top-down takeovers of failing schools can allow this to happen.

### *Emerging Issues*

This analysis of five recent school reform efforts suggests two major conclusions. First, moves toward decentralization that place more control of schools at the local level and in the hands of parents are not necessarily positive developments from the perspective of embedding democratic practice. Perhaps we should not find this surprising, because some reform efforts, especially efforts to introduce voucher plans, have been predicated on the assumption that the problems associated with public schools often stem from democratic governance and the bureaucratization associated with it. Yet it is critical to observe that democratic governance need not necessarily engender bureaucracy. Careful efforts to design local institutions can support the maximization of democratic practice and the simultaneous minimization of bureaucracy, as the reform of Chicago's public schools has indicated. Further, schools-within-schools and charter school initiatives can support democratic practice and reduce bureaucracy. School reformers should not assume that a turn to the market is the only viable response to problems caused by overly bureaucratized local schools. Indeed, it should also be observed that, as they relentlessly pursue economies of scale, over time, many private-sector organizations grow increasingly bureaucratic in character.

A second conclusion to be drawn from this analysis is that reforms that appear to be centralizing control over schools might well serve to promote local democratic practice. The introduction of state standards and testing efforts has generated information that can be of potential benefit to those who seek to organize local responses to problems in their schools. Additionally, top-down takeovers of schools hold the potential to clear new spaces for democratic practice to emerge.

## EDUCATIONAL GOVERNANCE AND DEMOCRATIC PRACTICE

Public schools represent key sites for the development of democratic practice. Aside from presenting unique opportunities for states to ensure that democratic values are passed on to the young and that members of future generations receive the knowledge and skills necessary to act as efficacious citizens, schools represent rare spaces in a highly individualized, marketized society for citizens to engage with each other to solve common problems. We all benefit from each other's higher level of education hence, all citizens—not just parents—should face incentives and opportunities to discuss and contribute to public education. In making these points, we need not ignore the obvious fact that democratic forms of governance are too often dominated by powerful interests and that this makes it all the harder for ordinary citizens to make a difference in the political process. However, greater democratic engagement must start somewhere; ideally, we would find it in families, the workplace, and other associations. At present, public schools remain our best hope for increasing democratic potentials.

Rather than being guided by concerns about democratic practice, contemporary efforts to change educational governance in the United States have been guided by a preoccupation with academic quality. This is hardly surprising, because political and business elites recognize that well-trained, high-skilled workers are crucial for regional competitiveness. Increasing numbers of parents also see academic credentials as the key to their children's future well-being, and many have sought more control over their children's schooling. As these economically motivated changes in educational governance have proliferated, voices have been raised in other arenas concerning the state of civic engagement and democratic practice. With questions coming to the fore over how public policies might promote democracy, the democratic function of public schooling has inevitably received renewed scrutiny. To add to that scrutiny, I have explored in this article the commensurability between reform efforts motivated by quality and accountability concerns and the growing discussion of education for democracy.

The message that emerges here calls both for optimism and for vigilance: optimism because public schools can be used in many ways to advance democracy, vigilance because some of the loudest and most influential voices in recent debates about the future of public schooling in the United States have claimed that democratic control of schools is the source of their performance problems. Such claims should be challenged for two reasons. First, they are based on an impoverished conception of humanity and of people's abilities to work together for common purposes. Second, they use words like *choice* and *freedom* in the service of public policies that would actually limit

democratic practice. The historical record shows that choice and freedom for all groups in society is most likely to be secured when members of these groups have opportunities to voice their concerns and to control outcomes through participation in political decision making. Democracy, although often frustrating, has shown itself to be a more consistently effective form of governance for securing choice and freedom than has any other form of governance. Rather than adopt policies that erode democratic practice, governments should be seeking ways to advance it. This certainly does not mean that the status quo in educational governance should always be defended. When reform efforts are being discussed, however, special attention should be given to how those efforts might serve to further embed democratic practice. Many scholars, especially economists, have felt quite at ease advocating school reforms predicated on the achievement of efficiency gains, and those advocates have achieved considerable success in getting the ear of policy makers. In light of this, heightened scholarly advocacy of democracy as a social practice would undoubtedly be refreshing. I suggest that such advocacy is necessary. The challenge, then, is to look for democratic potentials within designs for the reform of educational governance or within emerging practices. The prospects here for creative theorizing and creative practice are many, and, done well, work of this sort could eventually prompt major shifts in how people think about education as a social activity.

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