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INNOVATIVE PUBLIC SCHOOL SYSTEM

Education and citizenship

PART ONE

More than ever before, America's prosperity hinges on how well the nation educates and trains its people. Revitalizing US education is an urgent priority. Public support is needed for radical reforms to improve dramatically the quality of the public schools while preserving their civic mission; create a more rigorous system for training young people in the skills needed to compete in the global economy; guarantee financial assistance for college for anyone willing to earn it through national service; and thereby underscore the responsibilities as well as the rights of citizenship.

Three initiatives taken together would provide the basis for a new education compact for work and citizenship:

- Promote charter schools and other experiments to invent a different kind of public school: innovative, flexible, and responsive to the special needs of students and their families.
- Institute a nationwide system of school-based youth apprenticeship to give the half of US youth who do not attend college the skills necessary to prosper in a changing economy based on flexible, knowledge-intensive industries and services.
- Create a civilian GI bill, modeled on the generous education benefits provided to millions of veterans after World War II, to expand federal aid for college in return for community service.

At the heart of the debate about school reform is a central question: do schools fail because communities spend too little on them or because of the way they are organized? In general, liberals have been inclined to the view that US schools suffer from a lack of resources, while conservatives tend to see their problems as rooted in the structure of public education.

During the last decade the US increased per-student funding in public schools by 36 percent (adjusted for inflation). However, there is little to show for this surge in spending. More resources are part of the answer, particularly in troubled inner-city school districts. But the disappointing record strongly suggests the need to shift the focus of the debate about improving schools from spending to structure—to the way the enterprise of public education is organized.

Many public school districts display in classic form the overcentralization and bureaucratic rigidity that afflict government in general. The central problem with public schools was put perfectly by Albert Shanker, the president of the American Federation of Teachers union, in 1988: "This is a system that can take its customers for granted." Children attend where they live. Within each district only one organization is allowed to offer public education, together, these "givens" guarantee the district its success—its customers, its revenues, its jobs, its security, its existence—whether or not the district changes and improves and whether or not the students learn. So, with what observers of public education describe as weak incentives for the introduction of new methods and ideas, the cards are stacked against innovation. For a country that claims to be serious about improving its public schools this is an absurd arrangement.

Yet if conservatives have been right to focus on public bureaucracies that exercise monopoly control over education, they have picked the wrong solution: privatizing public education by offering vouchers to parents who want to enroll their children in private schools. While vouchers may be advocated as a necessary prod to public school improvement, they in fact encourage parents to abandon the public schools, a solution the nation cannot afford. America's public schools have been the principal catalyst for equal opportunity as well as a crucible for the common civic culture. They have been a great leveler of economic, social, and, lately, racial distinctions, as well as a path to economic opportunity and American citizenship for immigrants from the mid-19th century to today.

The United States can save its public schools. By harnessing the power of parental choice, competition, and innovation the nation can radically restructure its schools while retaining their essentially public character.

The promise of choice lies in its ability to make public education a self-improving system. Government and blue-ribbon commissions may be able to identify systemic problems within schools, but such outside groups cannot make a school principal more entrepreneurial, a teacher more focused on achievement, or parents more involved in their children's education. What is needed is a change of structure and incentives that will push public schools to improve on the basis of their own initiative, in their own interest, and from their own resources.

The leading edge of public school choice experiments today is the charter school movement. As pioneered in the state of Minnesota, charter schools are intended to speed the rate of change by making it possible for somebody other than the local school board to try out different and better forms of public education which students could choose.

Charter schools seek to foster healthy competition within the public school system by enabling administrators, teachers, and even other groups or individuals to create new schools, chartered by the state, which compete for students and the public funds that support their education. These schools follow the principles of public education: they may not have a religious character or charge tuition; nor can they pick and choose their students or discriminate. They are accountable both to the public—for meeting defined student achievement goals—and to parents, who are free to move their children to other public schools if they are not satisfied with the results. In return for agreeing to be judged on their performance, charter schools are allowed to design their programmes free of the regulations and rules that pass for accountability in education today. The state pays directly to the charter school an average per-pupil amount.

Charter schools are not intended to replace existing schools. Their likely effect is to stimulate the system in ways that will cause districts to improve. They offer some reward for taking risks. The new schools will be small, so that mistakes, which will occur, will be small. They let parents and teachers volunteer for change.

The purpose of choice is to create a new form of public education, not to finance private schools or transform public education into private education through publicly financed tuition vouchers. It is possible to improve the public education system while still retaining its essential principles and the values of opportunity, diversity, and community that are so important to democracy. Private education should remain and will remain—but as private education, privately financed.

Charter schools do not drain funds from public education. They reallocate dollars within the community, between existing schools and new public schools. The charter idea, therefore, can deliver the benefits of choice with out bankrupting the public schools, as a voucher system could. Perhaps that is why polls show support at two-to-one in favor of public school choice. Significantly, support is highest in the big cities, among minority groups, younger people, people who have only secondary school educations, and families of average income.

In a real sense, of course, every state has a "choice" plan today. Parents don't have to send their kids to the schools where they live. They can pay tuition to private (or to another district's public) school. Or they can move to a better school district. Lots of people do this: all it takes is money. This deeply inequitable arrangement has turned public education in big metropolitan areas into a system stratified by income and race. Those with little income have no choice. States should and can design a better plan, using public resources to offset private inequalities and enhance diversity. The charter idea resolves this problem: new schools, free to try new forms of learning, operated on the principles of public education, located where children live.

Because schools are governed at the state and local level, they cannot be changed by federal legislation. Congress can add only money and regulations. Correcting the system is the obligation of each state. However, the President can lead in activating the process of reform by making proposals to the states. In addition, the President can use the leverage of federal education aid to promote public school choice through proposals that would permit the states to use federal education grants to set up charter schools.

In the global economy, the collective skills and capacities of a nation's workers are its chief source of comparative advantage. Yet the United States has no system for ensuring that the half of the young population that does not go to college receives the skills and training necessary to secure a decent living. America thus faces a fundamental domestic challenge in the 1990s: reversing the stark and growing disparity between the fates of college educated and noncollege educated youths.