



School vouchers and expanded parental choice in education

James Peyser remarks at a Brandeis University-sponsored debate

October 19, 2000

In the 1999 administration of the MCAS English/Language Arts test, not one 10th grader from a Boston district high school scored in the highest performance category. Only 34 students were rated as proficient. Over 70 percent of these sophomores failed the test outright. As bad as the performance on the English test was, the results of the math test were even worse. While these numbers are shocking, it is more shocking to realize that Boston is far from the worst big city school system in the United States. Places like Washington, D.C., Detroit, and Newark make Boston look good.

What is so vexing about this abysmal performance is that the vast majority of teachers and administrators in these struggling school systems are smart, well-intentioned, dedicated, hard-working people. In addition, billions of dollars and years of effort have already been expended to reduce class sizes, develop academic standards, and improve the skills of the teaching force. These approaches to reform are yielding modest improvements, but they are falling far short of the dramatic gains that are needed to rescue urban school systems. The American public is rapidly coming to the conclusion that more radical steps are necessary, even if on an experimental scale. In particular, there is a steadily growing grass-roots movement for expanding parental choice through scholarships, vouchers, tax credits and charter schools.

National opinion polls consistently show that about half of Americans, plus or minus a few percentage points depending on who is doing the survey, support the introduction of publicly funded tuition vouchers, redeemable at private or parochial schools. A strong majority supports charter schools, and a similarly strong majority supports voucher programs targeted at low-income students or students trapped in failing schools. Support for charter schools and vouchers alike is overwhelming among urban, minority parents.

There are three basic arguments favoring expanded parental choice in education. The first is that schools of choice generally perform better than schools based on student and staff assignment policies directed by district headquarters. A veteran public school teacher from the Dever elementary school in Dorchester wrote an op-ed in the Globe last year that summed-up why this is so: "What makes a good school," he wrote, "whether it's public or private, religious or nonreligious, charter or non-charter, is a feeling. A feeling shared by [everyone] that their particular school is special. The feeling that their school really belongs to them.... When an individual school community feels it's really in control of its destiny, teachers, parents, and administrators are more inclined to do the hundreds of little things it takes to make their school work." This kind of ownership and common cause cannot exist in the absence of choice; in the absence of the community that is created when a group of people comes together freely and voluntarily to pursue a shared vision and purpose.

A second reason favoring expanded parental choice is that it introduces competition into a system that has historically been a monopoly, thereby stimulating widespread change and continuous improvement. Now, some opponents of choice argue that competition is a zero-sum game, in which the weak get weaker and the strong get stronger. They warn of dire consequences if even one child should leave the public system. The exact same argument was made concerning charter schools here in

Massachusetts. We now have 41 charter schools with about 15,000 students. I would humbly suggest that the larger public school system has not starved or crumbled.

Competition in education is proving itself to be not so much a Darwinian death struggle as a spur to sharper academic focus, greater responsiveness to parents, and better overall performance. Listen to the following excerpts from some recent news articles on the subject, based on experiences in three different states:

1. Education Week (September 15, 1999):

"Change has arrived at Spencer Bibbs Advanced Learning Academy [in Pensacola, Florida]...following [its] recent branding by the state as a failing school. Bibbs [is] one of...two Florida schools...where students were offered vouchers to attend another public or private school of their choice.... As much as they loathe the new state policy, staff members at [Bibbs] say they're determined to overcome the stigma and earn higher marks in the future. At Bibbs...new uniforms, a longer school year, and a laser-like focus on reading, writing, and mathematics are all part of that effort."

2. New York Times editorial:

"In Milwaukee, the threat of expanded competition has worked.... A system that once treated parents with contempt has begun to answer their calls and embrace local experiments through a charter school and other partnerships with community groups. A city that once rebuffed requests for public Montessori schools now has them. Said John Gardner of the Milwaukee school board: 'A system that has been arrogant and indifferent for 20 years has suddenly got religion.'" The Boston Globe editorialized just over a week ago on the impact of parental choice in Milwaukee when its editors wrote the following: "A decade ago, Milwaukee officials implemented a voucher system for low-income families whose children were not succeeding in public school classrooms. Parents liked the choice. And the teachers' union got the message. Milwaukee [is] now among the far-seeing cities that reject seniority-based hiring."

3. New York Times (September 29, 1997):

"Last winter, a philanthropist from Manhattan named Virginia Gilder decided that she wanted to dramatize what she considered the collapse of inner-city public education. So she went shopping for a school in need of fixing. By spring, she had found one: Giffen Memorial, Albany's lowest performing primary school.... Mrs. Gilder offered scholarships of up to \$2,000 to any Giffen student who wanted to attend private school. As many as 105 children, or a sixth of the school, have accepted.... Though the Albany Board of Education initially ridiculed Mrs. Gilder's program as a 'political stunt,' it quickly made sweeping changes this summer to restore community confidence in Giffen.... In their overhaul of Giffen, city school officials seem to have inadvertently bolstered a central argument for vouchers: that they foster competition and thereby force public schools to improve."

Right here in Massachusetts, we have just witnessed a fine example of how competition, in this case charter school competition, can help drive district-wide reform. As many of you know, the Boston Public Schools and the Boston Teachers Union have just concluded a new contract that gives individual schools somewhat more freedom in filling teacher vacancies by weakening some of the advantages afforded permanent teachers already in the system. Let me read to you a quote from Superintendent Tom Payzant, who appeared in September on the WGBH-TV program Greater Boston to discuss charter schools: "That's why we want more flexibility in schools," Payzant said, "to make them more competitive with charters that are out there and are our competition."

The final argument favoring expanded parental choice is more straightforward and more powerful: all parents, regardless of income, deserve options to maximize the educational opportunities of their children. As someone who has money and is mobile, I have many educational options, public and private, for my two daughters. But for those families who have little or no money and do not have the luxury of picking up and moving to the suburbs, there are often no options. Looking at it from this perspective, parental choice is at heart a civil rights issue.

Howard Fuller, a former school superintendent from Milwaukee and founder of the Black Alliance for Educational Options, puts it this way: "We have teachers who teach in the public schools, but who would never put their own children in their schools. Yet we tell poor parents, 'You have to put your child in there, because to allow you out would destroy the system.' If we are serious about what is happening to poor kids, particularly in American inner cities, then we must love our children's hopes and dreams and prayers more than we love the institutional heritage of the school system."

A common criticism of choice programs is that they are not a panacea or a silver bullet. Of course, this is correct. But, it is also irrelevant. The question is whether more parental choice will help to improve the quality of education for our children, not whether it alone will solve all the problems in our schools. I ask you, what policy prescription could ever meet that test? Higher teacher salaries? Smaller class sizes? Neither of these is a panacea or a silver bullet, yet choice opponents never tire of insisting that an ever increasing share of public funds must be applied to these purposes.

While I support vouchers and charter schools, I do not oppose spending more money on the traditional public school system, as long as those funds are invested in the context of a meaningful system of accountability for results. Why does the other side refuse to allow even one dollar for vouchers?

Writer Matthew Miller interviewed NEA president Bob Chase for a 1999 article in Atlantic Monthly. During that interview Miller asked Chase whether he would agree to a voucher program for the country's five largest cities, if in exchange per-pupil spending were doubled or even tripled. Mr. Chase's answer was an emphatic "no." This interchange reveals that at least in some quarters the opposition to vouchers may have more to do with protecting jobs than protecting the interests of children.

A common mistake many education reformers make is believing that we can manage our way to significantly higher performance. That by putting in place more qualified superintendents, more highly coordinated and integrated policies and programs, and better information systems we can turn around failing schools and districts. I believe that while the existing system can be made better, it cannot achieve our aspirations without substantial structural change-especially in larger urban districts.

Great schools have several common characteristics. They have a strong sense of community, built around a shared educational vision or purpose. They have principals who are strong educational leaders, with the authority to act. They have the flexibility to establish and, as needed, change priorities. And they have clear, concrete performance standards for which they are accountable.

Central district offices can play an important role in the area of performance standards and accountability, but with respect to the everything else I've just mentioned they can only do harm. When superintendents and school boards attempt to directly manage many schools by making the key policy and programmatic decisions and by controlling the purse strings, they subvert school-based communities, disempower principals, and limit flexibility.

Let me conclude with a quote:

"...decisions affecting the educational process and the delivery of services can and should be made at the local level, with corresponding accountability for the results achieved.... The experience of educators in this and other systems demonstrates that there is no one best way to organize a school, a classroom, or any educational activity. Therefore, consistent with the philosophy of local decision-making, each school should have as much flexibility as possible to work out its own structures for governance and education."

Those words come from the preamble to the 1994 contract between the Boston School Committee and the Boston Teachers Union, and they speak eloquently to one of my central points. Large urban districts cannot be effectively managed from a central office, no matter how capable and enlightened the leadership. The kind of school improvement that is needed, will require dramatic structural reform based on independently managed schools and parental choice-in effect, an education marketplace. In such a system, the old barriers between public and private schools no longer make any sense and serve only to reduce the dynamic benefits of competition and limit options for parents and children.