

Markets, Choices and Educational Change

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Market forces have been widely proposed as a solution to the alleged inflexibilities and inefficiencies of school bureaucracies in a rapid changing postmodern world. Subjecting public education to the rules of the market arouses great passion among educational reformers, whether they are in favour or opposed. In this chapter, Boyd and Lugg review the arguments and, most importantly the evidence about the effects that market forces of school choice have had upon public education.

Seeking the “pragmatic, but precarious middle ground”, Boyd & Lugg move beyond absolute opposition to market influences of any kind, and beyond the nostalgic distortions through which past public bureaucracies are lavished with fake praise, to evaluate the evidence on marketization, as it has been played out in different contexts. They examine the contexts and causes of market-oriented influences in education, and succinctly summarize the key arguments of proponents and opponents.

What is especially interesting about the chapter is the way its authors tread beyond conventional “left” and “right” positions on this issue, by sketching out what the moral and regulatory boundaries of market systems in education might reasonably be. The chapter contributes strongly to the debate on school choice and charter schools that are taking place in many jurisdictions.

Market forces, especially in the form of “school choice,” have been proposed as a panacea capable of curing mediocre government school monopolies (Chubb & Moe, 1990). Proponents claim that with one “silver bullet” school choice not only can improve schools but resolve governance conflicts by allowing divergent groups to cluster in their own schools. Critics of choice and market forces reply with apocalyptic visions of the injustice and fragmentation such measures will visit upon schools and society. As a result, views on school choice are so polarized, and writing and research on the topic are often so partisan, that it is not easy to assess the merits of the competing claims. Neutral observers – if any exist – are likely to be confused, because advocates and opponent of school choice are inclined to draw conflicting conclusions from the *same* evidence.¹ This happens, time and again, because advocates value liberty or choice above all, whereas the overriding value for opponents is social equality. Each side heavily discounts the opponent’s primary value, so rapprochement is unlikely.

As we shall elaborate, the evidence from school choice programs internationally provides less support for the claims of advocates than for the fears of critics, but much of the research and debate on both sides is characterized by inadequate evidence, exaggerated claims, and signs of partisanship.² Little doubt exists, however, that choice policies do transform the environment and governance of

schools. Depending on how they are designed and regulated, choice policies can either promote desirable reforms or cause serious problems (OECD, 1994). As Glenn (1989, p. 220) concludes from his research:

The experience of other nations yields no conclusive evidence that parent choice has a decisive effect, either positive or negative, on the *quality* of schooling. Evidence is extensive, however, that choice may have either a positive or negative effect upon *equity*, depending upon how the process is structured and what incentives are included for ethnic and class integration.

What parent choice of schools *does* affect powerfully is the satisfaction of parents, their sense of being empowered to make decisions about their own children, the accommodation of their deeply-held convictions about education.

For better or worse – depending on one’s viewpoint – school choice increasingly seems to be an idea whose time has come. Parents tend to be attracted to it, and policy makers see it as a way to reform stagnant public school bureaucracies. Since a problem for all organizational change is finding the incentives to overcome the status quo, the dynamics unleashed by market forces appeal to many policy makers. At the same time, choice and market forces challenge core beliefs about the non-competitive structure and democratic purposes of public schools. Consequently, choice and market forces antagonize those deeply invested into the tradition and ideology of public education.

Elsewhere in this Handbook, Tom Sergiovanni argues persuasively that deep or fundamental improvement in the quality of teaching and learning in schools is more likely to be achieved through efforts to build a caring and professional community within schools than it is through bureaucratic or market-driven devices. The latter, he contends, can produce quicker and more efficient change in schools, but of a more superficial nature. We agree with much of his analysis, and with the growing consensus (see, e.g., Newman & Wehlage, 1995; Elmore, 1995) that simply changing the structure of schools (e.g., by introducing school-based management or intensive scheduling) does not, by itself, guarantee real improvement in their core functions, teaching and learning.

In addressing school choice, however, two things need to be recognized. First, the market-driven changes that Chubb and Moe (1990), Milton Friedman (1955, 1962), and others advocate alter the *institutional structure* of schools (their incentives, accountability mechanisms, and ultimately, their culture), not merely their organizational arrangements. That choice advocates are right about this is seen in the fears of critics that market-driven policies will distort the culture of schools and lead to the “commodification” of education. Second, and equally important, school choice is being advocated not only in the belief that it will lead to school improvement and efficiency, but often even more because it can enhance freedom, parental empowerment, and the ability to create schools as “communities” of shared values (Glenn, 1989, 1995). In our highly secularized western societies, the religious and cultural values of parents – especially those outside the mainstream values of the society – are too often discounted or dismissed as irrelevant or undesirable when it comes to the provision of schooling or the choice of schools