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# Choice

## IN P-16 INITIATIVES

School choice already exists for preschool and postsecondary education. Ms. Meyer argues that such choice also should characterize education from kindergarten through high school.

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**BY RHONDA MEYER**

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**I**F WE were asked to start from scratch in 2008 and create a seamless education system, from prekindergarten (PK) through college, what would it look like? Which elements of each level — early childhood, K-12, and postsecondary — would we retain? Which would we change?

I propose that we would benefit greatly by expanding to K-12 the elements of parental choice that now mark our early childhood and postsecondary systems. Often, support for public education and support for the traditional forms of school choice (vouchers or tax-credit scholarships) are viewed as being in direct opposition rather than as being complementary strategies for improving educational outcomes. Given that many of us remember our public school experiences with pride and affection, this should not be surprising.

Unfortunately, the neighborhood schools of today are often very different from those we attended. Most of us would agree that the overriding goal for America's public education system is the provision of high-quality educational opportunities for every child. The public schools have been the primary mechanism for achieving that goal. But today, too many public schools fall short of providing the opportunities every child deserves. While we should insist on reforms that make public schools better, we need to do everything we can to ensure that children have access to a good education today. One of those reforms is parental choice of schools.

Real choice means that all parents, regardless of income, have more than one high-quality educational option for each school-age child. In this broadest under-



standing of “choice,” I would include open enrollment, charter or community schools, virtual or online schools, magnet schools, traditional public schools, home schooling, and educational vouchers and tax-credit scholarships that provide new options for those otherwise unable to attend private schools.

### **WHAT A CHOICE-DRIVEN PK-16 SYSTEM WOULD LOOK LIKE**

A system of PK-16 parental choice would look much more like the current situation in early education and in postsecondary education than like our system of K-12

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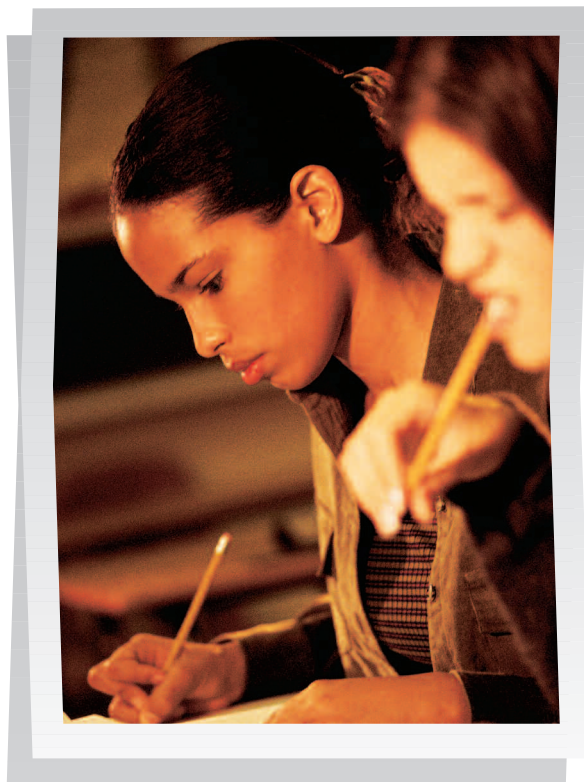
neighborhood schools. The changes required would provide more options for a tailored or customized educational experience for each child than those now offered by our K-12 public school infrastructure. The problem with that infrastructure is not that it doesn't serve some children well — it does — but that it tends to treat the children as interchangeable units, rather than as individuals with unique learning needs. The system tends to work toward sustaining and expanding itself, rather than toward the success of each child. The bureaucracies associated with education are not the same as the delivery of education. For the moment, though, let's walk through the systems currently in place and consider the role parental choice plays in them.

**Early childhood system.** Prekindergarten education has made use of a diverse delivery system that is somewhat similar to the delivery system at the college level, with a range of private and public providers serving parents. A variety of options exists, ranging from neighborhood programs run out of homes, to faith-based programs, to Head Start sites, to Reggio Emilio programs, to Montessori programs. Darcy Olsen, president of the Goldwater Institute, points to this flexibility as a strength: "America's flexible approach to early education gives children a strong foundation. Skills assessment at kindergarten entry and reports by kindergarten teachers show a large and increasing majority of preschoolers are prepared for kindergarten."<sup>1</sup>

This flexibility shows up in state-funded programs as well. Florida has the largest parental-choice prekindergarten program in the nation, allowing more than 85,000 children to attend private preschools in the first year of the program. Parents participate in the program voluntarily and have complete control over the provider they choose. Private providers must have state-approved accreditation, a Gold Seal Quality Care designation, or the approval of a local early-learning coalition in order to receive state funds.

In a recent newsletter, Steven Barnett, director of the National Institute on Early Education Research (NIEER), notes:

[Milton] Friedman's [government-funded] voucher idea has been embraced in early care and education to a far greater extent than elsewhere. Vouchers are a primary mechanism for child care policy, and a number of state pre-K programs essentially work as voucher programs. Florida essentially gives parents \$2,500 per child with the barest minimum of constraints on where they spend it. At the other end of the spectrum, New Jersey's Abbott pre-K program provides over \$10,000 per child to a system of free education with stringent standards in which parent choice is more extensive than in K-12, but is far from absolute.<sup>2</sup>



Thus far, parental choice options have been much more abundant and well received in PK than in K-12 education. And the acceptance of the use of vouchers for early care and education has been instrumental in the success of diverse delivery systems.

**K-12 education system.** The state of American K-12 public education is a mixed one. In a 2005 study of national graduation rates, researchers Jay Greene and Marcus Winters found that, nationally, the percentage of public high school graduates with the skills and qualifications necessary to successfully attend college increased from 25% percent in 1991 to 34% in 2002.<sup>3</sup>

But the system works better for some than for others. The students for whom the system is least effective are predominantly poor and minority students. Though educational prospects have improved somewhat for black students over the past 20 years, they still lag behind prospects for white students, according to data from the National Center for Education Statistics. The Schott Foundation for Public Education reports that, nationwide, schools are graduating a dismal 42% of the black males who enter the ninth grade.<sup>4</sup> For Hispanics, the fastest-growing minority group in the United States, the figures are similarly distressing. The disparities in the graduation and dropout rates reported by states have prompted the National Governors Association (NGA) to call for improved reporting and a common definition for

high school graduation rates.<sup>5</sup>

Currently, the K-12 system seems more concerned with preserving the status quo than with ensuring successful outcomes. For example, there is a strong need for colleges to provide remediation. That would not be the case if the current system of K-12 education were adequate. A 2006 report from the Kentucky Council on Postsecondary Education indicated that, in 2004, most students entered college behind in at least one subject area, most often math.<sup>6</sup> The students' preparation, or lack thereof, was highly correlated with demographic characteristics and educational backgrounds, with large differences associated with racial/ethnic category, adult students, and holders of GED (general education development) certificates. Those universities and technical and community colleges that serve regions with the greatest educational needs enrolled the least-prepared entering students.

In a speech to the National Education Summit on High Schools, Bill Gates offered his conclusion that "America's high schools are obsolete." He continued:

When I compare our high schools to what I see when I'm traveling abroad, I am terrified for our work force of tomorrow. . . . We have one of the highest high school drop-out rates in the industrialized world. Many who graduate do not go on to college. And many who do go on to college are not well-prepared — and end up dropping out. . . .

The poor performance of our high schools in preparing students for college is a major reason why the United States has now dropped from first to fifth in the percentage of young adults with a college degree.<sup>7</sup>

The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and many other private philanthropic groups have poured billions of dollars into improvements to our existing system of public education over the years. Other private initiatives, such as Memphis' Jubilee Schools and the Children's Scholarship Fund, offer opportunities for low-income children to attend a private or religious school that meets their educational needs. These are instances in which local community leaders have stepped up with funding to provide options to poor students and their families. These local leaders have identified needs that are not currently being met by the system of government schools.

What we see with all these measures is that choice remains an equity issue: if you are wealthy enough to buy choice or live in an area where private donors have offered options for which you qualify, you get educational choices.<sup>8</sup> If you don't fit those descriptions, that's too bad. These equity issues are one reason that some proponents of school choice prefer the logistics of state-funded programs. Such programs can be targeted toward the citizens in greatest need, most frequently those in inner cities, and evaluation criteria can be built into the programs to measure their success.

The Milwaukee Parental Choice Program is an example of a state-funded program that has been in existence and growing since 1990. It is widely viewed by school choice proponents as a model program in that it provides options to families who otherwise would have none. Enrollment in the program, test scores, graduation rates, and voucher amounts have increased over the years.<sup>9</sup> State-funded school choice programs exist in various forms in cities and states nationwide, yet school choice in K-12 education remains an option surrounded by misperceptions and fear.

**A postsecondary system to emulate.** The quality of America's system of postsecondary education is the envy of the world. Students here are free to use public funds in either public or private institutions of higher education. A college student can determine whether to take a publicly funded Pell Grant to such schools as the University of Massachusetts, Boston College, Brandeis, or Harvard. The Pell Grant surely won't cover a student's full costs, but it will help that student get a good education. A diverse array of public, secular private, and religious colleges is available to meet the needs of U.S. students. Moreover, the system adapts and improves in response to the choices students make.



Thus the 13-16 grade range of a P-16 system is already dominated by choice. This flexibility has led to a wonderful combination of variety and excellence for postsecondary education in the U.S. We have an extensive community college system that is inexpensive, quite good at remediation, and specialized in constructive ways. We have state university systems that often skillfully blend ready access for most students with selective pockets of excellence — something like public mag-

during prekindergarten “can promote children’s school readiness and is associated with higher academic achievement and fewer behavior problems through adolescence, at least in low-income families. It can also lead to greater parental involvement in elementary school, which is associated with higher achievement for children of all socioeconomic backgrounds.”<sup>11</sup>

3. *Families need discretion in deciding what is best for them.* Families face very different circumstances. Allow-

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net schools. We also have a very strong private sector. When we consider the availability of Pell Grants and the G.I. Bill, we have the functional equivalent of charter schools, magnet schools, and even vouchers at the 13-16 level.

## **WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?**

Thus far, the early childhood and postsecondary systems have worked through a diverse delivery system, both private and public. With the growth of educational options in the form of charter schools and targeted choice programs, in my view it would be a mistake to realign prekindergarten and college as extensions of the state-run K-12 system. For the benefits of choice to occur across the PK-16 spectrum, policy makers, parents, and educators will need to consider the following four factors:

1. *Unused capacity currently exists.* Catholic school closures have made the news in cities across the country for more than a decade. The infrastructure of the inner-city Catholic school system could accommodate many of the K-12 children most in need of better educational options. Though some research shows positive effects of Catholic schools,<sup>10</sup> further research is needed on the effects of vouchers on religious schools and the academic and nonacademic effects of religious schools on students. Alternatively, since charter schools in many places struggle to find physical locations for their schools, the use of buildings previously occupied by Catholic schools presents an opportunity worth exploring.

2. *Students benefit from the parent involvement that accompanies choice.* Enhancing parent involvement enhances educational outcomes. For example, a Georgia State University report noted that parent involvement

ing a choice of schools facilitates the best solution for each parent. Parents of all income levels are capable of making the right educational choices for their children, if accurate information is provided to them in a timely manner. Low-income parents use the same techniques and tools and are just as satisfied with their decisions as wealthier parents.<sup>12</sup>

4. *Competition produces quality.* Some contemporary research indicates that competition has a positive impact on educational quality. Research at the preschool and K-12 levels has found that the positive effects extend to both private and public schools and that both “appeared to respond to the incentives of competition.”<sup>13</sup> Not all parents need to be informed consumers to create sufficient competitive pressure to force continuous school improvement. Informed, marginal shoppers can influence quality across a delivery system. Like marginal consumers, parents visit schools, ask questions, and evaluate performance criteria in order to choose a school for their children. Their informed behavior affects the marketplace disproportionately, as schools strive to respond to these parents.

## **LEARNING FROM EXISTING SYSTEMS**

Creating competitive educational options in K-12 education faces practical, institutional, bureaucratic, and political challenges. However, simply by adding the element of parental choice, the systems we have designed to educate citizens could do a better job of building on one another’s efforts. It makes a great deal of sense to take a look at the strengths of the current systems where choice is central and build on those strengths to improve the system as a whole.

How do we do that? Let’s start with activities in six

general categories in which we can build on strengths and improve on weaknesses.

1. *Educational standard setting.* States that assume that inputs lead to high-quality outcomes tend to overregulate the components of the education system. Extremely low teacher/student ratios, for example, drive up costs substantially — without producing commensurately better educational results. California exacerbated its teacher shortage by just this kind of overregulation. Our focus needs to be on outcomes.

2. *Visibility and transparency.* Better access to information produces better decisions, thereby reducing risk. If parents are to exercise choice in any form, they need accessible, comprehensible, and comprehensive information relating to education providers. The state needs to produce disaggregated online information to help parents choose providers.

3. *Health and safety.* In states today, an extensive regulatory and inspection regime exists regarding health and safety requirements for child-care centers, schools, and workplaces. These requirements should suffice. Rational regulations, fairly enforced, will ensure quality.

4. *Assessments.* State-funded education systems should require simple assessments. In this way, high-quality outcome data would be available to help parents choose schools and help regulators identify and terminate inadequate programs. Rather than specify a particular test and add an additional assessment, it would make more sense to provide states or districts choices of currently available norm-referenced assessments. In addition, there has been a great effort to develop a consistent metric for high school graduation and dropout rates to help ever-more-mobile families have a sound basis for comparison when choosing schools or districts.

5. *Citizen-centric systematization.* Public officials need to be sensitive to the great variety of parental circumstances. Generally, government organizes processes for the convenience of the bureaucracy, not of the citizens. A system that allows parents to make informed choices while providing maximum flexibility and variety would go a long way toward fulfilling this goal.

6. *Accountability.* Advancements in technology allow for accountability that was impossible a few years ago. A state can feasibly set up a single system that monitors and compiles the results in all schools, whether public or private.

Pockets of K-12 choice across the U.S. show encouraging results, and our PK and 13-16 systems certainly work. If we build on those successes, choice mechanisms in a seamless PK-16 education system would be likely to benefit all participants.

Providing all children with an opportunity for success is clearly a worthy goal. It can be realized by recognizing that we'll need many different kinds of schools to achieve it and that *all* parents must have the option of moving their children to the right school for them.

1. Darcy Olsen, "Assessing Proposals for Preschool and Kindergarten: Essential Information for Parents, Taxpayers, and Policymakers," Goldwater Institute, Policy Report No. 201, 8 February 2005.

2. W. Steven Barnett, "Milton Friedman: An Economist with Big Ideas and a Big Impact," *Preschool Matters*, December/January 2007.

3. The complete study, Jay Greene and Marcus Winters, "Public High School Graduation and College-Readiness Rates: 1991–2002," Manhattan Institute, February 2005, is available at [www.manhattan-institute.org/html/ewp\\_08.htm](http://www.manhattan-institute.org/html/ewp_08.htm). Readers of the *Kappan* Research column and of work published here and elsewhere by Lawrence Mishel and Joydeep Roy will be aware that data sources and interpretations in this area are widely disputed.

4. Rinku Sen, *A Positive Future for Black Boys: Building the Movement* (Cambridge, Mass.: Schott Foundation for Public Education, 2006).

5. *Graduation Counts: A Report of the National Governors Association Task Force on State High School Graduation Data* (Washington, D.C.: National Governors Association, July 2005), available at <http://www.nga.org/Files/pdf/0507grad.pdf>.

6. "Developmental Education Update: The Preparation of Students Entering Kentucky's Public Colleges and Universities in 2002 and 2004," Kentucky Council on Postsecondary Education, Frankfort, 5 October 2006.

7. Bill Gates, National Governors Association/Achieve Summit, 26 February 2005. The full text is available at [www.gatesfoundation.org/MediaCenter/Speeches/Co-ChairSpeeches/BillGatesSpeeches/BGSpeech-NGA-050226.htm](http://www.gatesfoundation.org/MediaCenter/Speeches/Co-ChairSpeeches/BillGatesSpeeches/BGSpeech-NGA-050226.htm).

8. The Annenberg Institute for School Reform recently announced a new website on Understanding Educational Excellence and Equity at Scale. The site aims to address a crucial issue in education reform: different strategies currently in use have created pockets of excellence but have not created equity. They have not lessened large-scale, persistent academic achievement gaps based on race and income. The site is at [www.annenberginstitute.org/Equity/strategies.html](http://www.annenberginstitute.org/Equity/strategies.html).

9. John Gardner, "How School Choice Helps the Milwaukee Public Schools," American Education Reform Council, January 2002, available at [www.schoolchoiceinfo.org/data/research/GardnerMPS.pdf](http://www.schoolchoiceinfo.org/data/research/GardnerMPS.pdf).

10. For an overview of research since the influential 1968 Coleman Report, see Adam Gamoran and Daniel A. Long, "Equality of Educational Opportunity: A 40-Year Retrospective," Working Paper No. 2006-9, Wisconsin Center for Education Research, University of Wisconsin, Madison, 2006, available at [www.wcer.wisc.edu/publications/workingPapers/papers.php](http://www.wcer.wisc.edu/publications/workingPapers/papers.php).

11. "Parental Involvement in Early Childhood Education," Child Policy Brief, Georgia State University, 1997, available at [http://aysps.gsu.edu/ghpe/child\\_policy\\_initiative/issue\\_briefs/parentinvolvement2182003.pdf](http://aysps.gsu.edu/ghpe/child_policy_initiative/issue_briefs/parentinvolvement2182003.pdf).

12. Paul Teske, Jody Fitzpatrick, and Gabriel Kaplan, "Opening Doors: How Low-Income Parents Search for the Right School," Center on Reinventing Public Education, Seattle, January 2007, available at [www.crpe.org/dscr/pubs/pdf/openingdoors\\_teske\\_web.pdf](http://www.crpe.org/dscr/pubs/pdf/openingdoors_teske_web.pdf).

13. Gary T. Henry and Craig S. Gordon, "Competition in the Sandbox: A Test of the Effects of Preschool Competition on Educational Outcomes," *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management*, November 2005, pp. 97-127. See also Caroline M. Hoxby, "How School Choice Affects the Achievement of Public School Students," paper prepared for Koret Task Force meeting, 20-21 September 2001, Hoover Institution, Stanford, Calif.



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