

Parental Choice in America is Widespread Unless You Are Poor

Why should we establish policies and programs that give poor and working class parents the capacity to choose the best educational environment for their children? Why should their children be allowed to escape from schools that more affluent parents who oppose choice would never tolerate for their own children? After all of the philosophizing about the need to protect the traditional public school system's funds and institutional prerogatives; Looking past the expressed concerns about the separation of church and state, the real issue in America is not choice - It is who has it! Those of us with money already have it and have no intention of relinquishing it. If schools do not work for our children, we have at least two choices; we can move to communities where they do work or we can put our children in private schools.

It is important that at the outset to establish the operational definition of parental choice being used in this paper, because this is a concept that is often misunderstood by some well meaning people or distorted purposefully by some people who oppose it.

The term is often understood as only tax supported vouchers.

Vouchers of this type are only one form of parental choice – a very important form, but parental choice encompasses more than just vouchers. It defines policies that give families the capacity to choose from a wide range of learning environments that they feel are best for their children. These options can be public or private. - charter schools, public/private partnerships, contract schools, home schooling, cyber schools, tax credits, private scholarships as well as innovative governance arrangements in the traditional public or private educational institutions.

Parental choice programs when properly created and implemented: give poor and working class parents the power to choose schools where their children have the opportunity to succeed and in turn

give all schools the incentives to value children and work to meet their needs. Consider the power of this right in the hands of families who have little or no power because they control no resources, no levers of influence over the decisions and decision-making process that impacts their children's education. Consider how this power may change the shape of the future for their children. And consider how the absence of this power may mean their children will be trapped in schools that more affluent parents who oppose choice would never tolerate for their own children. Parental choice is at the heart of three important concepts in our society: Freedom, Power and Democracy.

Freedom

Martin L. King, Jr. defined freedom in the following way: It is first the capacity to deliberate or weigh alternatives. "Shall I be a teacher or a lawyer...Second, freedom expresses itself in decision...When I make a decision I cut off alternatives and I make a choice...A third expression of freedom is responsibility. This is the obligation of the person to respond if he is questioned about his (or her) decision.

Power

Sarah Lawrence Lightfoot in asserting the relationship between power and education made this point: A critically important ingredient of educational success for Black and white children lies in the power relationships between communities and schools, rather than in the nature of the school population.... the nature and distribution of power among schools, families and communities is a crucial piece of the complex puzzle leading toward educational success for all children.

Democracy

Dr. Kenneth Clark said, [The] substance rather than the verbalization of democracy depends upon our ability to deepen the insights of the people. Only an educated people can be expected to make the types of choices, which assert their freedoms, and reinforces and reinforces their sense of social responsibility

The fact is, in many areas of the country poor children a disproportionate number of whom are children of color are being precluded from being effective participants in the democracy because we are failing to educate them. Their ability to exercise

freedom is being stifled because they and their parents lack the power they need to influence the decisions that are being made about their education.

The current approaches and power arrangements in our systems of K-12 education do in fact work well for many of our children:

- They do well on various forms of assessments.
- Their schooling gives them pathways to participation in mainstream America.
- Their parents are involved, happy and empowered.
- Their school environments physically and mentally are developed in ways that respect them and the communities from whence they come.
- There is an understanding that the school had better educate the students, or there will be drastic changes including people losing their jobs.

But, there are significant number of our children living in urban areas like San Francisco, LA, Chicago, Detroit, New York, Milwaukee, Oakland, Philadelphia, Miami where most of our

poorest children of color live for whom the current system does not work well at all:

- They do not do well on various forms of assessments.
- Their schooling gives them pathways to the lowest rung of America's ladder of success.
- Their parents are unhappy, uninvolved and underpowered.
- Their school environments physically and mentally are developed in ways that devalue them as people and are contemptuous of the communities from whence they come.
(When they don't learn – they and their families are blamed!)
- There is a clear understanding that whether the school produces or not will make little or no difference in the existence of the school or the lives of the adults responsible for their learning.
The old “my check is going to come whether you learn or not,” is the prevalent attitude.

The right kind of parental choice program will give a measure of equity to parents such as these who have long been denied a real voice in the educational affairs of their children. It provides access

to educational environments that were inaccessible or did not exist prior to the programs. It provides a way out for children who need an escape hatch, while at the same time putting pressure on the traditional systems to change.

Parental choice programs by providing a measure of equity and enhanced accessibility, increases the likelihood that many more children will be able to gain the skills needed to be effective participants in a democratic society.

These programs are at their core an empowerment strategy. The ability of poor and working class people to impact the flow and distribution of educational dollars is a critical ingredient in the struggle for fairness and equality for themselves and their children.

Parental choice is a necessary but not sufficient ingredient to any serious effort to change schools and school systems in this country.

We must also clearly focus on the impact on our children's lives of the existence of differential power and access to resources in our society based on race and class.

Children who are hungry cannot learn. Children who are abused and neglected are not going to be able to concentrate in school.

Children need to see people in their immediate families working in order to understand the value of work and the connection between education and work. Children must see a society where their race will not be an impediment to advancement and respect. Children must interact with adults who have not already reached conclusions about their capabilities because of the color of their skin, or the clothes they wear.

We must walk a delicate line here because although race and class clearly have an impact on our children's perceptions and their life chances, we can not allow these conditions to be an excuse not to educate them.

Given the issues facing our poorest children the implementation of parental choice programs will not by themselves change their current educational reality. But the level of change that is needed will not occur without empowering their families to be able to choose the best educational environment for them.