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EDUCATING ALL OF THE CHILDREN OF ALL OF THE PEOPLE: Will School Choice Help or Hinder?

by Van D. Mueller

This essay is drawn from several presentations made during the past 12 months. The approach is probably less formal than a typical academic presentation. However, the ideas incorporated here represent careful thought and genuine commitment to principle and are best delivered in this more conversational style.

Children cannot pull themselves up by their bootie or boot straps. We cannot expect children to organize, fund and deliver their own education; to make it on their own. Someone must educate all the children just because they are children. I believe children are the "walking wounded" of the school finance equity wars and could become the casualties of the choice movement. Now too many children attend schools which are impoverished due to wealth-based disparities and inadequate state finance systems. Children are not born to poor schools but bred there. They are the victims of failure of adult policymakers. I believe there are ready solutions to the injustices in our public school systems. I also believe that the needed resources exist. What we lack is the commitment to all children not just our children; and the will to act on this commitment. I believe Americans have the capacity to have both choice and community reflected in our policies. Educating All of The Children of All of The People is what equity and justice in school financing is all about.

It is also what I believe can be accomplished if both organizational change (choice) and resource distribution fairness (school financing) are considered together, as mutually supportive and necessary reform strategies.

My thoughts about this topic have been heavily influenced by several factors:

- (1) By my 40 years experience as a professional educator;
- (2) By my visits (1988-93) to rich schools and poor schools in Minnesota, North Dakota, South Dakota, Missouri, Kansas and Wyoming; and
- (3) By my almost 20 years as an active parent advocate (state and national PTA) working with hundreds and hundreds of caring and committed parents in 15 or so states and hundreds of school districts.

More than ever I believe that for schools to be good and strong they must be just. How we treat the "bottom layer"—the children—will determine our success as a nation. The remainder of this article will be organized around several themes/questions: (1) What is equity as it relates to children? (2) Does money really make a difference in providing education to all children? (3) Does choice really make a difference in the educational lives of children? and (4) What can each of us, lay and professional, policymakers and implementer, do to assure that all children can receive high quality educational services? Also included is a summary update of choice activity in Minnesota.

First, what is equity as it relates to children? The more diverse our population and schools have become the more we talk about equity and the less we equalize. The school equity discussion has focused on race and gender equity and has neglected class and age equity. The school financing discussion has too frequently centered on equity for school districts or equity for teachers or for school buildings. This focus has placed the attention on adults and adult-built organizations rather than children. The debate on choice has taken on some of these same characteristics. Another dark cloud over the discussion of equity has to do with it being a "zero-sum" game. That is if some people "win" some other people must "lose." If adults win on issues like "local control" must children lose? Is equity different when thinking of individuals rather than of people in groups? Does the debate on choice reflect some of the same "win-lose" thinking? Another area of interest with respect to equity is the tendency to constantly change the rules. Just when plaintiff parents and children in some school finance equity lawsuits (Note: there are active cases in at least 13 states at the present time¹) have assembled compelling evidence of disparities on input measures the defendant states attempt to change the rules and want to focus on outcomes—or at least those "outputs" which can be easily measured such as achievement tests. Is this fair? Webster defines equity as *fairness, impartiality and justice*. Can these principles provide a useful working guide? Can we educate all of the children of all of the people by accepting these notions for policy development in choice and school financing? They seem to me to provide a useful start. It seems clear to me that neither equity nor choice has commanded significant attention or has been a major goal of U. S. education regardless of which definition is employed.

According to the Children's Defense Fund, 25 percent of our children live in poverty.² It is a massive national disaster of epidemic proportions. If a disease affected 25 percent of our population we would be up in arms! Do we truly care about our children? Are the motives back of movements to provide school choice and to equalize school funding designed to benefit children or adults? What is our evidence here? Adults are clearly in control of the educational and policymaking institutions of our society, children are most often without voice or representation. Schiller's comment that "the voice of the majority is not proof of justice" probably applies. Our school finance systems and school organization systems are not fair or just to children.

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Second, does money make a difference in educating all children? Over 25 years ago Arthur Wise raised two important questions—important questions in 1967 and maybe more important in the 1990s. Wise asked: Why does the widespread condition of inequality of education exist? The immediate answer is that public schools are locally financed, states do not equalize, and localities differ in their ability and willingness to support schools. This is only half the question, it does not only ask why such inequality is allowed to exist? Wise also asked why has there been no public outcry against the inequalities which exist? Is it because the poor do not complain or because no one listens when they do complain? We continue to ponder why children from more advantaged families do better in school than children that grow up in poverty. Certainly part of the discrepancy results from what the advantaged family is able to offer its children in terms of adequate nutrition, a stable home, books and trips.

But part of the discrepancy results from the schools and education that our states and school districts provide. For decades the gulf has been widening between the "haves" and "have nots." By relying on local property taxes we have created a caste system of public education that is increasingly separate and unequal. The states which have the ultimate responsibility for equity and fairness have often shirked their responsibility. Will choice solve or exacerbate this unequal condition? What is needed to provide a level-playing field where market forces can work to improve for all rather than continue to discriminate? How widespread is the public attitude represented by the 1993 Texas bumper sticker which reads "Robin Hood was a Thief" or the newsheadline which read, "Texas Voters Jail Robin."

To be sure educational quality is not solely determined by the level of funding a school receives. Money can be squandered and facilities and personnel put to unproductive uses. On the whole, however, schools with more money can buy more and better resources—teachers, buildings, equipment and books. When the advantaged have the better financed schools and the disadvantaged the poorly financed schools, we continue to provide unequal education to those who most need what the public schools have to offer. Must we first fix this broken system of school financing before choice can serve all children?

In many places across our country, these discrepancies are especially stark. Consider Kozol's exposé of the extremes of wealth and poverty in America's school system and its effect on poor children, especially those in the cities.⁴ From San Antonio to New York City's South Bronx, Kozol describes inner-city schools as bleak fortresses with rotting classrooms and few amenities to inspire or motivate the young. In painful detail Kozol describes inner-city schools in images which stand in stark contrast with the descriptions of the luxurious facilities in suburbs such as Winnetka, Illinois, Edina, Minnesota or Clayton, Missouri.

There is no denying the key role that access to resources plays in creating the vast education gap between such rich and poor. In the affluent Texas district of Glen Rose, the children benefit from expenditure of \$9326 per student, three times as much as in Rio Grande Valley's Roma district. In my own experience I have visited schools such as suburban St. Louis's Clayton schools where they have over \$5000 more per pupil per year to spend than the neighboring Jennings district, even though Jennings' taxpayers levy a higher rate. In rural North Dakota the Billings County Schools provide their children with all of the human and material advantage that money can buy—excellent facilities, small class size; varied materials, well-stocked libraries and extensive technology to support instruction. In another North Dakota district (Bell) the students attend classes in substandard buildings where committed teachers valiantly struggle to overcome large class sizes, outmoded

equipment and ancient textbooks. It is indeed a tragedy that the components needed to provide excellence in education for all children are not more widely shared. All of our children ought to be allowed a stake in the enormous richness of America. Will choice help achieve this goal? Do resources (money) make a difference in the quality of education for our children? You bet money makes a difference!

One can go on and on with stories of the discrepancies in educational opportunity between the have and have-not school districts. It makes little difference which state one visits, the disparities in access to educational services are shocking. Since 1988 I have had opportunities to visit schools in Minnesota, Missouri, North Dakota, South Dakota, Wyoming and Kansas while working with the plaintiffs on their respective school financing lawsuits. I have seen the same pattern of advantage and disadvantage in each of these states—the same pattern documented by Kozol, Wise and others over the past several decades. I believe the same pattern of unequal opportunity for children is present in all 50 states and is well known to most educators and policymakers. Are these differences driven by the presence or absence of resources? Of course they are!! Necessity may be the mother of invention but it has some severe limits. I have not come across many educators or parents who can work miracles.

Now, finally I want to address school choice directly—will it strengthen or weaken public education in America? Among educational reformers and policymakers, choice is a commonly heard buzzword. Supporters say the entire education system would benefit if parents could choose their children's schools. In this view, competition for students would force schools to improve. Better schools, in turn, would prod students to do better. And parents, having set the whole process in motion, would take a greater interest in the schools and in their children's academic progress. But many people, including teachers and school administrators are deeply skeptical. They fear that choice plans will siphon money and interest from the public schools, will create elite schools for the few and second-rate schools for the many, will lead to increased segregation of students by race and class and will cost taxpayers more money. The choice concept (the symbolism if not the reality) has caught on in many quarters throughout the country. Minnesota has what is probably the most comprehensive statewide program and I will provide a brief status report a bit later. You should know that I have been an advocate of the controlled-choice program in Minnesota. As a volunteer lobbyist for the Minnesota PTA I testified in support of the original legislation and subsequent amendments. Also I have spoken in support of the concept at National Governors' Association hearings, the NEA Board of Directors and other forums. It is appropriate also to acknowledge that I was the named plaintiff in the challenge to Minnesota's tax deduction law which diverts public monies to non-public schools but was upheld by the U.S. Supreme Court on a five to four decision in 1983.⁵ This is one reason why I continue to believe that totally uncontrolled choice is wrong.

Before attempting to relate the choice and school financing issues in a common policy mode there are a number of questions raised by choice which are worthy of review:

1. Will school choice lead to improved student achievement in the classroom? This is a key contention of choice advocates that competition for students will create more stimulating classroom environments and surely yield high overall scores on standardized tests. In addition advocates argue that parental involvement in their children's education and the act of choosing a school can serve as a catalyst for increased parental commitment. But critics contend that many school choices will not have anything to do with academics and that if choice schools draw brighter and higher mo-

tivated students higher test scores would just reflect the different students rather than better school curriculum or program.

2. Will choice programs lead to the creation of segregated or elitist schools with the best students being lured to the best schools and the less gifted left behind? Choice critics warn that the "skimming" or "creaming" of the best students is inevitable. They argue that choice will create an even larger gap between rich and poor, between motivated and the unmotivated; and push our country even further toward a two-tier society. Proponents argue that this does not have to happen, that transfers which undermine desegregation plans can be prohibited. Both proponents and opponents are in agreement that unless there is diversity available in educational programs there is no possibility of any real choice being available.
3. Should secular and church-related private schools be included in a choice program designed primarily for public school students? This is among the most sensitive issues surrounding the school choice policy debate. Many experts, including choice advocates argue that including private and parochial schools in a choice system could destroy public education in America. Others suggest that if parents abandon the public schools it reflects how bad they are and how desperately parents want to see improvements. This debate also touches on the question of whether inclusion of parochial schools in choice plans would violate the U.S. Constitution's doctrine of separation of church and state. In Minnesota Governor Perpich's assurance that choice would be public school choice only was a pivotal factor in its adoption in 1985. The support of the Minnesota PTA and other organizations and individuals would have evaporated had choice been broadened to include private schools.
4. Will choice undermine the current education establishment and transfer responsibility for choosing curricula, setting graduation standards and running the schools? Empowering parents to choose their children's schools without doubt changes the entire power dynamic in schools. Accompanied by the empowerment of teachers, principals and parents under school-based management plans the existing school structures will be weakened and/or be substantially revised. Power and influence issues and questions of who will or should control the schools add additional questions about employee unions, the role of school boards, competition between lay persons and professional educators as well as policy issues with respect to state-mandates v. local initiative and control.
5. Will choice programs increase or decrease educational expenditures?⁶ Supporters and critics of school choice differ sharply on its budgetary impact. Critics say choice programs would end up adding to educational expenditures in several areas. One of the most expensive areas is student transportation. Even supporters of choice agree that choice will not work unless school districts provide student transportation or reimburse parents for these costs. Other areas of increased expenditures include the need to provide improved and diversified educational programs, to provide for improved communication and public information about available choices and to train all parents to make informed choices for their children. In addition to transportation costs each of those areas would create new resource demands to increase the current capacity of most school districts to provide diverse programs of quality and to inform con-

stituents. A final cost-related issue is associated with the loss of funds in those districts where substantial numbers of students leave for other districts and take along their eligibility for state aids. Choice certainly does not appear to be a money-saver.

Before bringing this paper to a close with some summary remarks I want to give you a brief progress report on the status of choice programs in Minnesota since its choice program history is somewhat longer than elsewhere. Minnesota's K-12 enrollment options programs (open enrollment across district lines and other programs) are not a Minneapolis/St. Paul metropolitan area or super-star phenomenon.⁷ A significant number of students from around the state (36,000 or about 4 percent) are using one or more enrollment option programs. Some programs are more heavily used by non-metro students while some seem to better meet the needs of metro students. And well over half of the students using choice programs are students at risk of failing in traditional school settings.

The programs students participated in during 1992-1993 included:

1. Attending school outside their home district;
2. Attending multi-district area learning centers for students at risk;
3. Attending public or private alternative programs for at-risk students;
4. Taking classes at public or private post-secondary institutions; or
5. Taking college level courses in their own schools.

About 42 percent, or over 15,000 students who used enrollment options programs in 1992-93 had either dropped out of school previously or were at risk of dropping out. The next largest group of students, about 8,000 or 22 percent used the post-secondary enrollment options program to attend post-secondary institutions. The state picks up the bill for their tuition. Over 13,000 students or 36 percent chose to attend school outside of their resident district under the open enrollment program. State funding follows the student. Non-metro students accounted for almost two-thirds of the open enrollment transfers.

In 1992-93 about 8 percent of the state's 11th and 12th graders took post-secondary courses under the Post-secondary Enrollment options program. The students came from 75 percent of Minnesota's school districts.

The impact of Minnesota's school choice programs is difficult to measure. At its core school choice in Minnesota remains more a question of ideology than evidence. Neither proponents nor opponents have been very accurate in their predictions of impact. School choice programs have certainly influenced the destiny of certain individual school districts, mostly smaller rural districts. Choice has affected the types of programs schools are offering in a large number of instances. The number of school settings serving at-risk students has tripled in the last seven years. A number of districts have added magnet schools or "schools within schools." Teachers and parents have put together over 20 proposals for chartered schools. All of the eight charters authorized under the original law were approved by the State Board of Education. During the 1992-93 school year only two charter schools were in operation. What is probably becoming clearer over time is that the impact of choice programs in Minnesota is understated due to the overemphasis on transfer to other school districts and the lack of data on people who make choices within districts or who become informed, consider options and choose to stay put.

In sum, there are a number of important policy relevant conclusions which follow from the issues and ideas presented here. They are:

- 1) Even the most effective school choice plans will not solve all of our education problems. Clearly we need to learn more and practice more completely what we

know about children's learning. We need to implement the best curriculum, employ the best technology, retrain teachers to meet new student needs and help parents take charge of their children's learning. In and of itself choice provides only a shell—a mechanism—to encourage these activities.

- 2) All choice plans will probably help some families more than others. The challenge which we face is to make certain that those children most at risk become the first recipients of the new efforts to improve our schools and that choice be used to leverage a closing of the gap between have's and have not's.
- 3) Choice is not a money-saver. There are advocates of choice who stress competition to the neglect of cooperation or collaboration, who stress the cost-savings of the market philosophy, and whose ulterior motives have little to do with children. If educational choice is to work for all of the children of all of the people some up-front development capital is needed. This is true because improved diversity in program options, transportation of students, better communication about choices and training of all parents in making sound choices all cost money. While this new expenditure could and should be considered as an investment there will be little in the way of a dividend as value-added from an organizational change like choice without accompanying resources.
- 4) Doing nothing to improve the education for all children may be more dangerous than doing something. The public school systems in America are strong and resilient. The fear that choice within the public sector will destroy the public schools is not well-founded. In both human and organizational terms the wastefulness of continuing to under-educate or miseducate a substantial segment of the youth of our nation is by far the higher risk.

Finally, what can each of us, lay and professional alike, do to assure that all children receive high quality educational services?

It probably would be well for us to begin by publicly acknowledging the persistent condition of unequal education which plagues our nation. Unless we admit this problem we are unlikely to address solutions and remedies. The irony of this is played out in state after state as public dollars are used to defend unfairness in access to education. Can we redress the longstanding problems of distributing better education to some children and youth and worse education to others? What place do new organizational arrangements have in bringing about quality education for all children? Can choice work or gain broad public acceptance without the provision of a "level-playing field" for the market competition? Should we continue to allow stu-

dents to attend schools which we would not permit our own children or grandchildren to attend? How many teachers and school administrators work in one district and either send their children to non-public schools or to other public schools because they know of the inferior conditions and programs in their district of employment? Many years ago John Dewey suggested that the quality of education which we should provide all children is the quality of education demanded by the best and wisest parent. Why can't we do this? Kozol pointed out in *Savage Inequalities* that in most cases better off Americans simply have a narrow view of what they are doing. He wrote, "they do not want poor children to be harmed. They simply want the best for their own children." This is the point of our dilemma then. How do we get past the concern for "one's own children" and move on to a concern for all children? Is choice at all compatible with concepts of community, of concern for all children? If it truly takes a whole community to educate a child how do we balance the common good with individual initiative?

Surely we can together find the resources, organizational know-how and political will to enable all of our children to begin their lives with the support of the best education we know how to provide. We all have a stake in assuring that justice prevails for each child in each classroom and in each school district across America. For as the lyrics at the beginning of Act 2 of the musical *Miss Saigon* so eloquently illustrate: "they are the living reminder of all the good we have failed to do for we know deep in our heart that they are all our children too!"

References

1. See "Momentum for Challenges to Finance Systems Still Seen Strong," Lonnie Harp, *Education Week*, September 22, 1993.
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3. Arthur E. Wise, *Rich Schools, Poor Schools: The Promise of Equal Educational Opportunity*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967. And Arthur E. Wise and Tamar Gendler, "Rich Schools, Poor Schools: The Persistence of Unequal Education." in *The College Board Review*, No. 15, Spring 1989, pp. 12.
4. Jonathan Kozol, *Savage Inequalities—Children in America's Schools*. New York: Crown Publishing, 1991.
5. *Mueller v. Allen*, 463 U.S. 388, 103 S. Ct 3062 (1983).
6. M.F. Addonizio, P.F. First, S.L. Juday, C.P. Kearney and V.D. Mueller, *Financing School Choice*. Oak Brook, Illinois: North Central Regional Educational Laboratory, 1991.
7. For complete descriptions of all programs see *Minnesota Choice Programs*. St. Paul, Minnesota: Minnesota Department of Education, 1992.