

Briefing Papers

Education modernisation and school choice

by Andrew J. Rotherham

What is needed is a dialogue about modernising public education to meet the political and policy challenges. Obviously entrenched interests will continue to fight almost any change to the existing power structure in education. At the other end of the spectrum, some critics of public education will not be satisfied with any reform that does not eviscerate the public sector role in education.

Introduction

Many western democracies are wrestling with the challenge of how to modernise public service delivery systems. Whether social services, skills and training, or primary and secondary education, public demand for greater flexibility coupled with political demand for greater accountability are driving a fundamental rethinking of frontline delivery systems. Nowhere is this more evident than in education, where the imperative to improve schooling and the demand for greater parental choice is unleashing new innovations and raising difficult questions.

Public, private or beyond?

In education the debate is traditionally framed as a conflict between publicly provided education and privately provided schooling. This, however, is a false dichotomy because a range of schooling options exists within the education sector that are neither public schools in the traditional sense nor private schooling options. In the United States, these include public charter schools, magnet schools and privately managed public schools. In New Zealand, there is a spectrum of school 'types' – independent schools, state integrated schools, Kura Kaupapa Maori and designated character schools – all with different regulatory structures

and varying degrees of 'publicness'. These schools represent attempts to reconcile the public's interest in public education with parental prerogatives and the demand for greater parental choice. In the United States, these reform models have produced mixed results and have also met with considerable opposition from established interests.

What is needed is a dialogue about modernising public education to meet the political and policy challenges. Obviously entrenched interests will continue to fight almost any change to the existing power structure in education. At the other end of the spectrum, some critics of public education will not be satisfied with any reform that does not eviscerate the public sector role in education. Between these extremes, however, there is room for compromise built around a system of accountable choice in education. That is, greater choice among schools for parents and fewer barriers to entry for new schools seeking to serve students but coupled with public accountability and oversight.

This paper lays out both theoretical and practical issues about reconciling demands for greater choice with the public interest in education. The paper explicitly rejects both outright privatisation of public education and also the notion that greater choice for parents is at odds with either the democratic goals of public

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education or current school reform goals. Instead, the paper argues that:

- the drive toward higher standards goes hand-in-hand with expanded choice and increasing options for parents; and
- policymakers must simultaneously expand parental choice while emphasising academic standards.

Under such an 'accountable choice' model, public accountability, as well as funding, follows students into new or existing schools of choice – whether operated by government, private, or parochial authorities. But these schools remain public in the most critical sense – public results and accountability in exchange for public funding.

In this paradigm, a public school would not be defined by who *runs* it, but rather by two features: universal access and accountability to the public for results. It doesn't matter whether a local school board, a group of parents, a teachers' union, a Fortune 500 company, or a church runs a public school. What matters are results in student learning and ensuring that schools receiving public monies abide by performance contracts and non-discrimination laws in exchange for this public money.¹ In the

case of education, most schools will continue to be public sector owned and operated. This paper merely argues that the choice facing policymakers is not between a public or private sector educational system but rather how to modernise the service delivery of education to better exploit the advantages of both.

The assumption that underlies much of the support for greater choice, particularly private school vouchers, is that increasing freedom of choice by parents will introduce competitive forces and drive improvements in all schools. In the United States, and elsewhere, the evidence is preliminary and mixed with regard to system-wide change in the three public voucher experiments in Wisconsin, Florida, and Ohio, and also with regard to public charter schools. Nonetheless, there is reason to believe that choice and competition can help to improve schooling.²

However, because any choice mechanism is only a funding device rather than an instructional change, it is important to consider two important principles when thinking about school choice:

- choice itself has no *direct* connection with teaching, curriculum, or other in-school factors that influence student learning; and
- parents, and the general public, have a compelling interest in ensuring at least basic student learning.

This does not mean that greater choice and competition cannot drive improvements in teaching or curriculum. On the contrary there is reason to believe that greater responsiveness to parents can help improve school quality. In

1 See *Counterpunching on School Vouchers*, (The New Democrat, May/June 1999).

2 For views on how competition has played out in practice see, Frederick M. Hess, *Revolution at the Margins* (Brookings Institution 2002); Frederick M. Hess and Patrick J. McGuinn, *Muffled by the din: The competitive non-effects of the Cleveland voucher program*, (Teachers College Record, 104(4): 727-764, 2002); Caroline M. Hoxby, 'How School Choice Affects the Achievement of All Students', in *Choice with Equity*, Paul T. Hill, ed. (Hoover Institution Press, 2002); Caroline M. Hoxby, *School Choice and Productivity (Could School Choice be the Tide that Lifts All Boats?)*, (unpublished, available at: <http://post.economics.harvard.edu/faculty/hoxby/papers.html>).

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addition, some choice proponents argue that greater school choice would benefit teachers as well as students.³

Contrary to the claims of many choice opponents there are benefits to consumers from greater choice and competition in education and other sectors. However, as with many other 'products', in education there is a public sector role to protect the public interest by ensuring basic standards of quality and service provision. It is through this process that the link between choice and desired outcomes – learning and school improvement – is reinforced, often to the dismay of liberals and conservatives alike.

To help reconcile choice and public accountability in education, an 'accountable choice' system would guarantee:

- full per-pupil funding augmented for poverty and disability that would follow students so parents are empowered with real choices and the conditions for new schools to open and operate are created;
- equal access protections so schools accepting publicly-funded students must accept *all* students, space permitting, and conduct a blind admissions process if over-subscribed; and
- accountability for common student learning and performance goals applying to all schools serving students with public funding, regardless of governance.

However, just as choice opponents wrongly deride the benefits of greater choice, many of its proponents decry access and accountability provisions as 'strings' or unwarranted intrusion into the operations of private schools.

But the above principles are important because

they move the debate past a frequently meaningless delineation of public- and private-based ownership to a new definition of 'publicness' predicated on operating principles and performance rather than ownership or governance.⁴ This shifts the focus of the school choice debate toward improving education for currently underserved students. In the United States and New Zealand, there are significant disparities in school quality within the public and private sectors, particularly in low-income communities. Thus, the challenge for policymakers is to increase good educational options in distressed communities, not simply to move students into 'private' schools. Addressing this 'supply side' problem takes two forms: improving low-performing public schools and allowing new schools to enter the public marketplace and serve students.

As this paper argues, accountability measures are an essential part this effort. Nonetheless, they should be modest and targeted at key market needs including information, transparency and protecting the public interest. As they resist demands from voucher proponents to eliminate public regulation of education, policymakers must also resist pressure from choice opponents to make accountability requirements so cumbersome that they thwart the creation of new schools or expansion of existing choice options. But, even with minimal requirements about open admissions and student performance, some schools will understandably elect not to accept publicly-funded students under such a system. In fact, it is the very marketplace forces that choice proponents seek that will determine whether schools elect to compete for publicly-funded students. 'Private'

3 See, for example, Hoxby, Caroline, M., *Would School Choice Change the Teaching Profession* (revised January 2002). Available online <http://post.economics.harvard.edu/faculty/hoxby/papers.html>); Hoxby, Caroline, M.

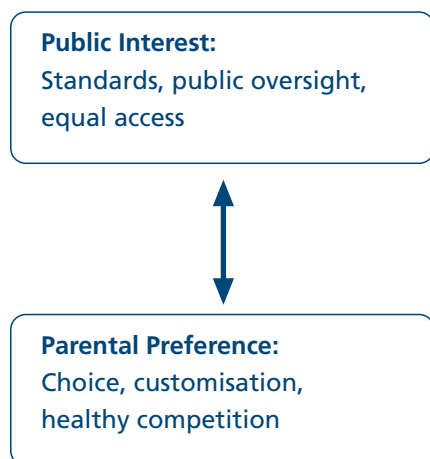
4 For a discussion of 'Publicness,' see for example, Paul T. Hill, 'What is Public About Public Education', in *A Primer on America's Schools*, Terry M. Moe, ed. (Hoover Institution Press, 2001); Hess, Frederick, M. *Making Sense of the Public in Public Education* (Progressive Policy Institute, 2002).

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schooling options should remain open to parents who seek them. Rather than forcibly compel schools to change their admissions and operating procedures, the policy goal should be to lay out a set of minimal ground rules to link the demand for greater choice with society's interest in equitable and high-quality education.

Figure 1 below graphically illustrates the relationship between parental choice and the private interest in education and the public sector's interest.

Figure 1: Choice and accountability



Source: 21st Century Schools Project
– Progressive Policy Institute

Choice and accountability

The idea of choice in education and its relationship to standards and accountability is not new. While many choice advocates are quick to cite the work of Milton Friedman as the origin of the notion of school choice, discussions about how to combine parental and societal prerogatives in education predate Friedman's work. The accountable choice model shares characteristics of many proposals, including the recent work of Paul Hill and earlier work by liberal voucher and equalisation proponents Christopher Jencks and John Coons. But it is perhaps best articulated in John Stuart Mill's *On Liberty* published in 1859.⁵

Mill wrote that, "Is it not almost a self-evident axiom, that the State should require and compel the education, up to a certain standard, of every human being who is born its citizen?" He worried, however, that there were dangers if the state dominated this process and thought that parents should have broad sway over schooling so long as those "certain standards" are being met. Mill argued that, "The objections which are urged with reason against State education, do not apply to the enforcement of education by the state, but to the state taking upon itself to direct that education; which is a totally different thing". He envisioned a system where schools operated by the state existed, "as one among many competing experiments carried on for the purpose of example

5 For several views on vouchers and choice see Milton Friedman, *Capitalism and Freedom* (University of Chicago Press, 1962); John E. Chubb and Terry M. Moe, *Politics, Markets, and America's Schools* (Brookings Institution, 1990); Paul T. Hill, *Choice with Equity* (Hoover Institution Press, 2002); Christopher Jencks, *Education Vouchers: A Report on Financing Education by Payments to Parents* (Center for the Study of Public Policy, 1978); John E. Coons and Stephen D. Sugarman, *Education by Choice: The Case for Family Control* (University of California Press, 1978). For a discussion of contracting and charter districts see, Paul T. Hill, Lawrence C. Pierce, and James W. Guthrie, *Reinventing Public Education: How Contracting Can Transform America's Schools* (University of Chicago Press, 1997); Paul T. Hill, *Charter School Districts* (Progressive Policy Institute, 2001); Paul T. Hill, 'Give Kids A Choice', in *Blueprint: Ideas for a New Century* (Democratic Leadership Council, 1999). For a pro- and-con- debate see Jerome J. Hanus, Peter W. Cookson Jr., *Choosing Schools: Vouchers and American Education* (American University Press, 1996). Jencks' ideas were partially put into practice in the federal voucher demonstration program in Alum Rock, California during the early 1970s.

A substantial shortcoming of existing school choice schemes is their lack of funding. Students are generally funded at less than 100 percent of overall per-pupil expenditure and this limits both their choice of schools and also the ability of new providers to enter the marketplace.

and stimulus to keep the others up to a certain standard of excellence.”.

As for accountability, Mill saw no alternative to subject-matter examinations that were confined to “facts and positive science exclusively”. Mill recognised that some measurement of basic educational attainment was important for society, just as policymakers do today. The entire standards movement of the past decade is premised on this idea.

Today, as a policy matter, the key question policymakers must answer is whether such accountability (which does involve student testing in every US state and most industrialised countries) should be coercive or only informational. In an informational model, students are tested so that transparent and comparable information is available to parents and the community about school quality and learning. Parents then make enrolment decisions based on this information and presumably poorly-performing schools would improve or go out of business as a result of these choices.⁶ The primary shortcoming of the information model is its reliance on the market to sanction low-performing schools. Even in the face of chronic underperformance, with the

informational model there is no governmental sanction for low-performing schools and parents are free to continue to choose bad schools as well as good ones.

In a more coercive model, a public or governmental entity uses the information on student performance to oversee schools and intervene, sanction, and ultimately close those with low-performance. In the United States, this is the basic standards and accountability model many states are adopting and that is codified in the *No Child Left Behind Act* of 2001. The primary drawbacks of this system are two-fold. First, although it is not incompatible with choice, it makes no explicit provisions for parental preference.⁷ Second, because of highly politicised educational policymaking, actually putting teeth in this model has proven difficult in practice.⁸ As United States Senator Evan Bayh (D-Ind.) told the *Los Angeles Times* in 2001 during a debate about accountability in the United States, “Everyone is for accountability until it actually gets put into place and applies to them”.⁹

6 For a brief exploration of this idea see, Chester E. Finn Jr., *Can state standards & market-based reforms be reconciled?* (The Gadfly, April 25, 2002, available at www.edexcellence.net). For a longer treatment see *The Marriage of Standards Based Reform and the Education Marketplace* by Chester E. Finn Jr., (Achieve, 1999). For a caution on hybrid market-accountability models see Frederick M. Hess, *Revolution at the Margins*, (Brookings Institution, 2002).

7 The *No Child Left Behind Act* builds on public school choice provisions for students in failing schools that were agreed to in 1999. For students in failing schools, these provisions are weak and often ineffectual in practice. See, for example, Richard D. Kahlenberg, *A County's Failing Policy*, (*The Washington Post*, June 24, 2002). In addition, the new law also does little to address the supply side problem and the provisions that were included to help increase the supply of charter schools was not funded for Fiscal Year 2002, the first year of the *No Child Left Behind Act*.

8 For example, evaluations of Title I schools consistently show that very little state or district action is taken with regard to these schools if they are deemed in need of improvement. See, for example, *High Standards for All Students: A Report from the National Assessment of Title I on Progress and Challenges Since the 1994 Reauthorization*, (United States Department of Education, 2001). For one explanation of problems with top-down accountability see Terry M. Moe, *Politics, Control, and the Future of School Accountability*, (unpublished paper prepared for Program on Education Policy and Governance, Harvard University, 2002, available at <http://www.ksg.harvard.edu/pepg>).

9 Ronald Brownstein, *Belatedly, a Front Is Forming to Fight Education Legislation Schools*, (*The Los Angeles Times*, July 24, 2001).

To provide real choice, students must receive equal levels of funding, irrespective of whether they choose a private or public school, rather than some pro-rata share, as exists at present in New Zealand and in voucher schemes in the United States. In addition, funding must be weighted to reflect factors such as poverty and disability.

How it could work in practice

Accountable choice requires marrying the coercive model to the informational approach in a way that bolsters both and alleviates their primary shortcomings. The governmental oversight of the coercive model, although intrusive, is necessary to ensure that the interests of society are represented in education. However, by coupling this approach with parental choice, the direct interest of parents in their children's education can be reconciled with society's indirect interest. Essentially, parents have a free range of schools to choose from so long as those schools are achieving educational results and meeting public purposes. Obviously, this approach also introduces a bottom-up or 'market' accountability structure as well providing the added benefit of mitigating some of the problems with top-down only accountability.

To design an accountable choice model, policymakers must address the complicated and contentious issues of how to allocate funding, ensure equal access and measure accountability. In the past, choice partisans have often been dismissive of these issues and opponents have

raised them as intractable obstacles to choice. Addressing each is possible and necessary to create the basic components of an education marketplace that is accountable to parents and serves the public interest.

Funding

A substantial shortcoming of existing school choice schemes is their lack of funding. Students are generally funded at less than 100 percent of overall per-pupil expenditure and this limits both their choice of schools and also the ability of new providers to enter the marketplace. In other words, their voucher is worth less than what the system makes available to students in traditional public schools. There are two primary reasons for this fiscal shortfall. First, as a political matter, voucher proponents have found it easier to sell smaller pilot programmes than initiatives that take the full PPE because these are easier to fund and seemingly more innocuous.¹⁰ In addition, the public and legislators are understandably sceptical of providing substantial amounts for vouchers without guarantees of basic accountability. Second, one argument animating much of the choice movement is that public schools are tremendously inefficient and so many proponents believe that private schools can do more with less. In the United States, the experience of many charter schools struggling with facilities and funding problems is evidence that this is not always the case and illustrates the large disparities in per-pupil expenditure.

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¹⁰ Generally both public and privately funded voucher programmes share this characteristic despite evidence that low-income students are often more expensive to serve than more affluent students. In the United States voucher opponents have fought these programmes under the assumption that they are a 'camel's nose under the tent' for larger voucher initiatives. However, they have frequently done so arguing that these vouchers are too small which is, of course, an argument against small vouchers rather than vouchers *per se*.

A key role of governments in any choice system is to provide support to all schools to ensure a healthy educational 'ecosystem'.

privately owned. In addition, funding must be weighted to reflect factors such as poverty and disability. In the United States, federal, state and local funding schemes take poverty and disability into account when allocating educational resources and an equitable choice system must do the same. New Zealand does the same through its Targeted Funding for Educational Achievement and special education programmes. The cost of delivering a quality education is not the same for all students and these differences can be quantified and incorporated into a choice-driven funding plan.

Such a funding scheme accomplishes two goals. It addresses the 'supply side' problem of school choice by providing sufficient funding to make it feasible for new providers to enter the market. In the absence of adequate funding, choice plans merely move a few students around; they do not alter the fundamental characteristics of the education marketplace. Second, full and weighted per-pupil funding creates an additional incentive for schools to serve low-income students and those with special needs.¹¹

Governments may also wish to help fledgling schools get started through fiscal assistance for facilities or "incubators" for new schools to use until they attract enough students to move into more permanent facilities. A key role of governments in any choice system is to provide

support to all schools to ensure a healthy educational 'ecosystem'.

Equal access

There are two primary reasons why basic provisions about equal access for students must be included in a system with greater choice. First, universal access to education is an essential cornerstone of equal opportunity. Second, if existing public schools are to compete with other providers of education, the rules for competition must be the same. It is disingenuous and counterproductive to create two sets of rules for schools and would likely cause the "skimming" effect that choice critics rightly worry about. Even with weighted per-pupil expenditure formulas, in an environment where schools – public and private – could seek to avoid challenging and high-need students, there would be a natural incentive for schools to avoid difficult students. This is how competition works and it is appropriate for government to mitigate these effects to advance the public good. No schools should be spared the sharp edges of competition but the playing field must be level and transparent.

Rules and regulations should be neither overly burdensome nor unnecessarily numerous.¹²

However, schools receiving public funding should:

- observe basic health, nondiscrimination, and civil rights protections;

11 This idea is not new; many early vouchers proposals included a compensatory component as an equalising or equity tool. See in particular work by Christopher Jencks and John E. Coons. Because of the evidence that concentrated poverty impacts achievement, states and localities may also wish to augment funding for schools that serve a high-concentration of such students in addition to funding provided through a choice plan. Controlled choice to combat concentrations of poverty is also an option before policymakers. See Richard D. Kahlenberg, *All Together Now*, (Brookings Institution, 2000).

12 In the United States, studies of charter schools show that these regulations (which charter schools now must observe) are not a significant barrier to their operation. Instead charter operators cite issues such as capital and fiscal concerns, lack of planning time, resistance from school boards and school districts, and internal conflicts as far greater obstacles. See for example, the *National Study of Charter Schools Fourth Year Report*, (United States Department of Education, 2000) and prior reports. See also *Charter Schools in Action: Final Report*, by Chester E. Finn Jr., Bruno V. Manno, Louann A. Bierlein, and Gregg Vanourek, (Hudson Institute, July 1997).

These basic measures ensure that parental choice means exactly that – the ability of parents to choose schools in the marketplace rather than vesting the power to choose in the hands of schools.

- meet legal obligations to students with disabilities;
- accept all students on a first-come/first-served or 'blind' basis;¹³ and
- not charge tuition or mandatory fees beyond the amount of public funding;

These basic measures ensure that parental choice means exactly that – the ability of parents to choose schools in the marketplace rather than vesting the power to choose in the hands of schools.

Some choice proponents will argue that a policy precluding selective admission harms the ability of schools to pursue a unique mission or educational philosophy. This is not the case. Any school meeting the basic access and accountability requirements can compete for students based on its mission, pedagogy or other characteristics. Some parents will naturally favour and reject various schools precisely because of mission, pedagogy or educational focus. In this environment, parents and the marketplace will determine the viability of various schools, just as market adherents seek while ensuring that the public interest in education is protected.

Accountability

Accountability to a public body for meeting the aforementioned principle of equal access as well as academic performance goals should be a key feature of any choice scheme. Because both parents and the public have an interest in measuring and ensuring student learning, the same accountability plans and standards should apply to all schools receiving public dollars for tuition. This creates common benchmarks and

standards, and facilitates a transparent competitive environment. However, responsibility for holding schools accountable for academic performance and equal access need not be limited to the entities traditionally entrusted with public education. Once clear standards for accountability are established, a variety of entities – government educational authorities, public universities and others – can effectively monitor and hold schools accountable. A major difference between the accountable choice model and a pure-market model is that under the former, academically inadequate schools are sanctioned regardless of consumer demand or governance.

Some will argue that these politically-derived rules have no place in the education marketplace because the free market doesn't require regulation. This is a fundamental misreading of how most markets work. The rules that govern marketplaces generally are derived through a deliberative or political process. Because of the importance of education it is entirely appropriate to organise the marketplace around basic principles to protect the public interest in high-quality elementary and secondary education. Coupling of bottom-up market pressures with the top-down standards in key academic subjects is the most promising strategy to drive mass-customisation in public education. In this way, a parent's direct interest in her or his child's education is married with society's interest in an educated citizenry.

Anti-choice advocates fear the lack of control inherent in a marketplace. For example, they contend that in a more robust choice regime, fringe schools will spring up. They raise concerns about 'David Koresh' schools or, more recently, 'al Qaeda' schools. While some communities will

13 Such a policy could include exceptions for sibling attendance, geographic location, or even particular aptitudes as public schools, particularly magnet schools, do now without violating the spirit of equal access for all students. In addition, as a transition issue, students should not be displaced from their current schools as a result of a new policy. Random admissions should occur as seats become open.

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have to deal with fringe groups seeking to open schools on a case-by-case basis, the dual accountability structure of parental choice and public oversight will largely marginalise this problem and there are models for barring those that teach hatred of particular groups from participating in and receiving public funds. And, as a practical matter, equal-access provisions and the sunshine of public scrutiny will deter most fringe elements from seeking public funding in the first place.¹⁴

Finally, although it is based in part on testing to measure performance, an accountable choice model could also help alleviate the vexatious debate about standardised testing of students. In a results-based accountable choice model, schools would be held accountable for academic progress (currently measured through standardised tests in all states in the United States and many other countries, though not in New Zealand) but would be free to choose their own curriculum, pedagogy and emphasis. In such a system, parents seeking an emphasis on the arts and humanities, science and technology, or a rigorous liberal arts focus could seek out schools that met their needs and approached testing in a way that they found acceptable. At the same time, academic progress could still be measured against established state and national benchmarks.

This advantage should not be minimised. As

industrialised countries around the world move to more standards-driven educational systems it is imperative that different learning needs and styles among students be accommodated. Common academic benchmarks are a key equity tool; however, different students will need different kinds of curriculum, instruction, time and support to achieve them. Greater choice helps create customised options to accomplish this.

A great irony of the choice debate is that many of the same interest groups opposing greater public sector choice in education also decry standards as harmful to students with different learning styles and needs. One can only conclude from this posture that they favour a return to the 'custodial' model of public education where the

role of schools was to provide more of a socialising than academic experience.

Figure 2 below graphically shows the relationship between choice and standards. Quadrant 1 shows what the education system in most industrialised countries looked like during

much of the 20th century. There was neither choice within the public system nor clearly defined academic standards. Quadrant 2 and Quadrant 3 illustrate the direction that many policymakers now pursue. Quadrant 2 illustrates a choice-driven system without academic standards. Adherents to this model believe that parental choice is the most effective accountability scheme and do not

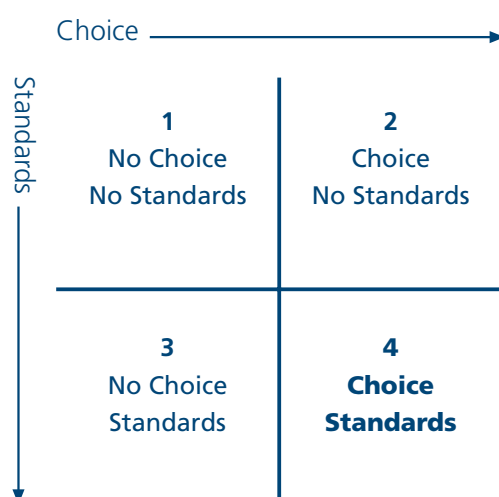


14 Some conservatives are concerned that vouchers and other choice schemes will carry regulatory requirements such as those described here and thus support tax credits as a preferred alternative to avoid this. See, for example, Andrew J. Coulson, *Toward Market Education: Are Vouchers or Tax Credits the Better Path?* (Cato Institute, 2001); Ronald L. Trowbridge, *Devil's Deal*, (National Review, 15 Sept. 1997: 56-60).

There are no easy answers to the questions facing policymakers about modernising the delivery of educational services. However, by moving the debate from an ideological one to a discussion of how to reconcile the public and parental prerogatives in public education, the issues become clearer and a framework for addressing them can be found.

see a need for publicly-defined or enforced standards. The lack of standards in this system, however, is inherently at odds with standards-based reforms. Quadrant 3 illustrates a system with an emphasis on top-down standards but without choice and options for parents. The United States right now fits most closely into Quadrant 3 although it is moving toward Quadrant 4, both through formal mechanisms such as public charter schools and public school choice and informal choice mechanisms that have long been a characteristic of American education, such as neighbourhood selection by affluent parents. Quadrant 4 demonstrates how choice and standards can be reconciled in a model that accommodates both. Greater choice needs clear standards for performance just as greater performance demands require greater choice and customisation. Only Quadrant 4 mitigates the problems of the other three models.

Figure 2: The relationship of choice and standards



Source: 21st Century Schools Project
– Progressive Policy Institute

Advantages of the accountable choice approach

There are many advantages to expanding choice while ensuring accountability. Because there are fewer barriers to entry for education providers willing to abide by state developed standards for accountability, they include:

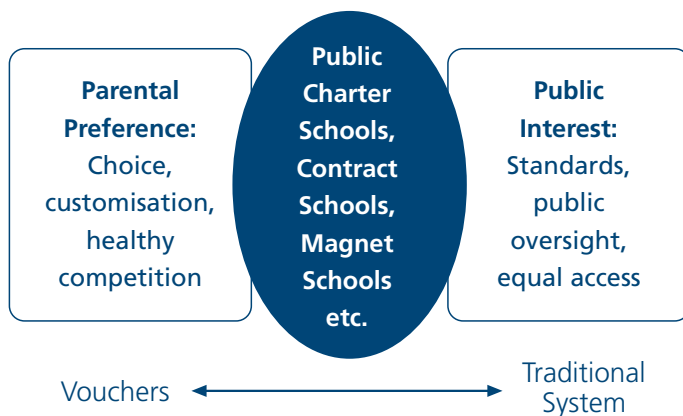
- More choice for parents and students. Multiple choices for consumers are becoming a hallmark of many industries in industrialised countries. Increased access to information is creating more sophistication and diversity in tastes and preferences.
- More accountability for performance. Coupling a top-down accountability structure with a bottom-up market based on an accountable choice system moves policymakers closer to the goal of increasing accountability in education. Under this model schools face pressure from government to perform but also from parents who are able to vote with their feet.
- More customisation. Children learn in different ways and at different rates. Too often differences in learning styles are used to camouflage mediocrity and fight against standards. Greater choice and customisation coupled with specified academic standards help to ensure achievement while also fostering the development of more customised options for different learning approaches.
- More applicability. Too often choice schemes are only focused on urban areas or areas with high population density. Although the demand and options for choice would be less in rural communities an accountable choice model with its ease of entry and transparent accountability system is applicable in all communities. Rather than a boutique reform it is a new conception of public education that can be integrated with other reforms.

Accountable choice is the best way to marry the public's interest in public education with parental prerogatives. Accountable choice is not one reform model but rather a set of standards for expanding choice in a standards-driven education system. Figure 3 illustrates how accountable choice fits between the traditional notion of unfettered parental choice and the top-down model of government control. As it shows, there are a variety of options that fall into the accountable choice category. What they share is fidelity to the public purposes of public education.

Conclusion

There are no easy answers to the questions facing policymakers about modernising the delivery of educational services. However, by moving the debate from an ideological one to a discussion of how to reconcile the public and parental prerogatives in public education, the issues become clearer and a framework for addressing them can be found. Through a relentless focus on results and greater flexibility about delivery systems, policymakers can begin to customise public education to meet the needs of a more diverse student population as well as raise overall educational attainment. The public sector will continue to provide the bulk of educational services, particularly in rural and traditionally under-served communities. That's why wholesale privatisation schemes are unrealistic. However, by lowering barriers to entry and clearly defining performance expectations a more expansive, dynamic, and responsive delivery of public education is possible.

Figure 3: Choice or control



Source: 21st Century Schools Project – Progressive Policy Institute

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