

Choice for choice's sake

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Education choice programs are widely viewed as a means for students to leave traditional public schools and seek better opportunities to learn elsewhere. Researchers therefore have attempted to compare how students perform academically at schools of choice versus their traditional counterparts – the idea being that the value of choice depends on its ability to produce superior educational outcomes.

But that approach ignores the virtue of choice.

The power to choose isn't just another instrument of policy. Exercising choice is a fundamental human desire that increasingly is accommodated in multiple spheres of life. Why should education be excluded?

To be sure, there is utility in choice. A nation of 325 million people diverse in its political, economic and cultural makeup and with competing, and often conflicting, interests does not lend itself to uniform, top-down policies. Allowing folks more freedom to navigate their own paths can reduce social friction and increase opportunities to thrive.

Furthermore, technology has enabled the customization of lifestyles to extraordinary degrees. Americans have become used to being able to choose exactly what they want, and when and where they get it, without having to settle. They have copious options and multiple delivery systems. This applies to consumer products as well as to information and entertainment.

The marketplace seeks to keep up with this demand, not only by supplying existing goods and services in different ways, but also by innovating new products that tap into that desire to customize. Legacy institutions either adapt to meet this changing environment, or they succumb to the newer, more nimble entrants who do.

Two areas that have lagged in providing more choices are government (including public dissatisfaction with the two-party system) and public education. Unsurprisingly, they are connected.

The current education system as designed and operated is incapable of meeting the demands of a heterogeneous society subject to rapid change. It is centralized and bureaucratic. It imposes top-down standardization on its clients at a time when bottom-up customization is the norm virtually

everywhere else. It is resistant — if not downright hostile — to new ideas. It includes incentives, such as funding and political power, to maintain the status quo.

Giving families more control over their children's education flips that paradigm on its head. Amy Anderson, executive director of ReSchool Colorado, argues that the pace of change is too rapid to concentrate all the responsibility for educating children into third parties. Parents, particularly those who have been historically blocked from privilege and access, therefore should receive the resources needed to navigate what a robust system of choice has to offer, shifting the perspective from systems and schools to families and learners.

That kind of agency has intrinsic merit, regardless of its outcome. First, there's more to education than test scores; quality of life can't be boiled down to a number. The Declaration of Independence considered the mere pursuit of happiness — not its achievement — as an unalienable right.

As Corey DeAngelis of the libertarian Cato Institute remarks, while noting that the preponderance of evidence indicates that private school choice improves student outcomes (including tolerance of others), “science shouldn't determine whether families are allowed to pick the schools they want for their kids.”

Choice is empowering and fulfilling, and can instill a sense of ownership. Survey after survey shows that parents who send their children to schools of choice tend to be significantly more satisfied than those whose children attend traditional zoned schools.

Jack Coons, a professor of law emeritus at the University of California at Berkeley and a pioneer in the field of education choice, has described the freedom to choose as being psychologically transformational:

“Choice is the source of human responsibility, the pre-condition of maturity and goodness. We grow morally, and spiritually, only by specific consequential acts of the will. For parents of every class and every aspiration for their child, the liberty and duty of selecting the educator are the occasion of growth as a person. In turn, the child's observation of that parental decision as an act of duty, freedom and authority sends a message of the moral dignity that is possible to all of us as adults. By contrast, America's historical disempowerment of the ordinary parent in favor of a professional school elite is a psychological disaster for both parent and child — hence for society.”

Furthermore, Coons sees parental choice as a vital component of citizenship:

“The parents must decide; but first they must probe and learn — they must act like responsible citizens. They will make mistakes and grow by them, because these decisions will affect their own future lives. They care about this child, not simply because she is theirs — though that is crucial — but because they must live with the outcome.

“The child observes such behavior, and that experience suggests the meaning of responsibility.”

Considerable research in cognitive science bolsters that belief. For example, the presence or absence of choice “can have a significant impact on the regulation of cognition, emotion, and even physical health,” and “the opportunity to choose is inherently rewarding, independent of the outcomes.” (Leotti and Delgado, 2011)

It's a gross oversimplification to treat a market for choice in education the same as shopping for breakfast cereal or a cell phone carrier. Students are not products that can be fabricated on factory assembly lines.

But it's also wrongheaded to consider education too important to leave to choice. On the contrary, it's too important not to give families more say in the matter. Yes, results matter. Parents should be able to choose from a menu of quality programs and be given the tools to make informed choices. The freedom to make those decisions, though, remains fundamental.