

Controlled Choice Isn't School Choice

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I recently heard the term “libertarian paternalism.” It was presented in an [article](#) about health care, specifically doctor-patient relationships, as a strategy for helping patients choose among the various best options the doctor recommends. There were many good points in this article about personalizing medicine, but that term made me cringe. Taken literally, “libertarian paternalism” means the free will to select among the choices that some authority figure determines is in your best interest. I don't like this term, mainly because it's an oxymoron. The dictionary definition of “libertarian” is a person who believes in the doctrine of free will. To add a caveat that limits free will to options chosen by some allegedly omniscient actor rubs me the wrong way. And yet, we see this contradictory and demeaning idea enacted in many areas of life, especially education.

The comparable term in education is “controlled choice,” or the idea that someone will pre-select among the best options and then allow an end-user (e.g., a student or a family) to choose from among those established options. At the student level, controlled choice might look like a teacher announcing a unit on US presidents and then letting the learner pick which one to research.

Or it could look like a lesson on mammals in which a teacher allows the child to pick the elephant group, the bat group, or the whale group. In this environment, the teacher (or curriculum developer) decides what the child will learn but allows the child some discretion. It's a lot like reading a choose-your-own-ending book: It can make the story more enjoyable, but only if you are interested in the overall theme. We can contrast controlled choice at the learner level with [self-directed education](#) in which the child is fully in control of what, how, when, and with whom she learns.

At the macro level, controlled choice manifests in policies that allow families some degree of choice over their assigned district school, as long as it meets a district's overall enrollment distribution goals. My city, Cambridge, Massachusetts, was one of the first to enact this type of controlled choice program in 1981 as a way to let families choose among the city's various public elementary schools through a ranking system, as long as each school met its preferred socioeconomic distribution quota. The goal was economic integration and improved academic performance, particularly for disadvantaged students, while retaining some choice beyond a zipcode school assignment.

Controlled Choice Programs Results

But new research reveals that controlled choice programs in many urban districts have not achieved their intended goals of socioeconomic integration or the narrowing of achievement gaps between high- and low-income students. An in-depth [analysis](#) by David Armor of the Cato Institute finds that not only were intended goals not reached but also that unintended

consequences, including “white flight,” were widespread in controlled choice districts. Armor concludes:

Most larger school districts that have implemented controlled-choice plans have experienced (or are experiencing) demographic changes like those experienced during race-based busing, meaning the loss (or “flight”) of white and middle-class families. Moreover, there is ample evidence that economic diversity is not producing academic benefits for poor children in these districts. In other words, controlled choice can bring much pain and controversy for little or no educational gains, at least as measured by test scores.

Central planning, even when seemingly well-thought-out and with good intentions, ultimately restricts free will. Concerned that when given real freedom individuals will make the wrong choice, those with power often seek to limit—or control—choice. It is true that freedom means the freedom to make bad choices, but that isn’t a compelling reason to curb one’s freedom to choose. It’s also important to note that what constitutes a “bad choice” is subjective. Individual freedom means toleration of individual choices. As the Nobel prize-winning economist F.A. Hayek wrote in *The Constitution of Liberty*:

What is important is not what freedom I personally would like to exercise but what freedom some person may need in order to do things beneficial to society. This freedom we can assure to the unknown person only by giving it to all.

Hayek goes on to say that the essence of real freedom is humility. He wrote:

All political theories assume, of course, that most individuals are very ignorant. Those who plead for liberty differ from the rest in that they include among the ignorant themselves as well as the wisest.

Controlled choice, libertarian paternalism, or any number of similarly discrepant terms suggest that appointed wise ones should have the power and influence to coerce others through policy or decree. Those of us who truly believe in the doctrine of free will should recoil at attempts to add qualifiers to its promise.

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