

**Putting Students and Parents First:
Reframing the Choice Agenda for Education Reform**

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An education system responsive to—and guided by—the needs and priorities of parents and children would have many merits, some of them nearly self-evident. The top-down nature of public schooling would change as “consumers” acquire at least as much leverage in this marketplace as the “producers” now possess. No longer would a child’s school experience be dictated primarily in distant offices, board rooms and legislative chambers, in government agencies and faculty lounges. As is already the case in pre-school, in higher education and in most other spheres of American life, the customer would have plentiful choices and numerous opportunities not only to select among them but also to shape the options themselves. A culture of innovation and customization would emerge as educators, schools, and school systems continuously adapt to the preferences, needs, and requirements of their diverse clients—and as they find themselves obliged to compete for those clients and their continued patronage. Schools would focus more directly on the services and results important to children and parents, rather than on bureaucratic compliance, job-protection, continuity, and other such proclivities that typically take over decision-making in organizations that lack outside pressure to perform. Taken together, these changes would produce a dramatically different education system, leading to significantly different classrooms and a more contented, more empowered, and better educated citizenry.

Broadly speaking, there are two overlapping and complementary rationales for giving consumers—parents and students—greater say in education, twin arguments that derive from basic economics and the justification for markets in general. First, better-functioning education markets will better satisfy the consumers. Their needs and preferences will be met more precisely, affordably, and flexibly than is possible under a top-down, centrally-run system guided not by the imperatives of supply and demand but by other considerations. Second, the

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competition fostered by such markets will lead to a more ample supply of diverse, high quality, and cost-effective schools and other education providers, by rewarding those that succeed and marginalizing or eliminating those that are inefficient, undesirable, or unable to keep pace with their superior counterparts.

Such competition can easily be imagined among schools, not least because a fair amount of it already exists in various forms. But it can also be visualized *within* schools—among courses, among teachers, even among instructional materials. In these pages, we describe what such a dynamic could entail and how it might change education so that schools become more student- and parent-friendly, customizing their work to meet the needs of students and the priorities of parents while also improving the quality, productivity, and effectiveness of their own operations.

Recognize from the outset that, if such changes were as easy—and incontrovertibly desirable—to accomplish as to imagine, they would be upon us today. So we'll also note some of the barriers and trade-offs inherent in such a demand-driven education system. These begin with the fundamental truth that education is both a public and a private good. It must address larger societal needs even as it provides for individuals and families. On the public side, we expect our schools to lay the groundwork for civic participation, for higher education, for a competitive workforce, a robust economy and a sturdy culture. Education isn't ice cream or skateboarding; it's an essential good, not a discretionary purchase, and it performs a vital public function. Moreover, we expect our education system to accomplish this equitably, serving all its pupils fairly and competently, regardless of race, income, physical condition, mental prowess, or prior education. We also impose upon our schools public burdens that are not strictly academic, such as tending to the health of children and imparting basic values and sound work habits to them.

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And while all this is contributing to—we hope—the public good, we ask our schools also to meet the diverse individual needs of millions of young people, providing them the education that they and their families crave, maximizing their potential, readying them to support themselves and their own families, and accommodating their myriad idiosyncrasies, aspirations, and differing circumstances.

Yes, it's a balancing act, and yes, we want our schools to strike that balance without slighting either side of it. The challenge is to meet all those individual needs and private preferences while also honoring the public obligations of our education system.

Yesterday and Today: How Parents and Students Influence Schools

Consumers have long possessed many mechanisms by which to signal and sometimes act upon their schooling preferences. Families with the financial means can move to neighborhoods with superior public schools or enroll their children in private schools. For some, teaching their kids at home is an avenue for avoiding schools altogether. In recent years, magnet, charter, and virtual schools have provided additional options. Some districts operate selective schools for high-achievers, such as New York's Stuyvesant and Bronx Science. Some states allow children to attend schools in adjoining districts, sometimes (as in Minnesota) anywhere in the state. Adding it up, one can reasonably estimate that at least half of U.S. students—most from the upper half of the income distribution—are enrolled in schools that entailed some form of choice on the part of their families. And those families have greater access than ever before to information that can facilitate their school selections, not just school-level “report” cards posted on state websites but also private information providers and interpreters such as Greatschools.net and SchoolMatters.com.

Nor is selecting among schools the whole story. Particularly at the secondary level, students and parents have long enjoyed options among courses and programs: among vocational, academic and honors tracks, for example; between French and Mandarin; between physical education classes or time spent on the track team. Gifted and talented programs, Advanced Placement, and International Baccalaureate courses create additional within-school opportunities, as do joint ventures between high schools and community colleges and “dual enrollment” arrangements that allow one to take some courses at the university level while still in high school. And then, of course, are the innumerable extracurricular options (school newspaper, drama club, ROTC, Future Farmers, etc.) as well as supplemental offerings outside the school together (ballet lessons, internships, summer science camps, software programs for one’s home computer, etc.).

Such choices and opportunities have burgeoned in recent years as America itself has become more diverse, as political pressure for school choice and equal opportunity has intensified, and as technology and prosperity have facilitated access to certain options. The advent of online or virtual courses, for example, has added to one’s capacity to elect courses, modes of study, daily schedules, even some choice among teachers, as well as the ability to supplement regular schooling with outside offerings.

At the same time, there has been pressure in the opposite direction—from uniform academic standards and NCLB-type testing regimes, for example, and certainly from resistance by teacher unions and other influential elements of the public-school “establishment.” In some ways, then, public education has become *less* responsive to parents, as districts have focused more single-mindedly on complying with state and federal accountability requirements and have found themselves bound more tightly by government regulations, collective bargaining contracts,

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and court precedents. Still, most fair-minded observers would agree that the dominant trend has been toward amplification of consumer-driven education options among, within, and outside of schools.

Parents also exert influence over their children's schooling in less direct fashion: by voting in school board (and other) elections; by participating "civically" in school affairs via PTA's and PTO's, classroom volunteering, field-trip chaperoning and such; by circulating petitions and testifying at school board meetings; and by using their influence with board members, principals, teachers, and others to get their daughters and sons into certain classes, clubs, programs, etc. With the help of special-education and civil-rights statutes and (sometimes) litigation, the parents of disabled children wield substantial control over their kids' educational experience (though here, as elsewhere, the well-connected and well-to-do generally exert greater clout than the poor and powerless, even if their children have similar needs).

Students, too, exert influence over the own schooling, increasingly so as they progress through the grades to high school, where they (and their parents) face a plethora of choices among electives, clubs, sports, and more. High school students are perhaps more capable of steering their own educational paths than many acknowledge. Education visionary Ted Kolderie notes that, "Minnesota now has schools in which young people make more decisions, individually about the pace and nature of their learning and collectively about the rules by which their school runs," and he urges readers to "get beyond the technology of teacher instruction; let students explore the world of organized information now available digitally, with teachers as their guides."¹

And yet today's education market also displays plenty of gaps, dead-ends and shortcomings. Good information remains limited, for example. Though private data providers

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strive to augment objective statistics (test scores, student demographics, course offerings) with subjective parent reviews and comments, such information is often sketchy. For example, the profiles of Maryland's Montgomery Blair High School, a school of nearly 3,000 students in a middle class suburb, contain not a single parent review on Schoolmatters.com and just nine on Greatschools.net (three of which are more than five years old).²

Even if parents had better information, many families would still find too few viable options. The public-school establishment's pushback against most forms of school choice is well documented.³ The political battles over charter schools in many states – whether to allow them at all, what constraints to place on their growth and proliferation – have been intense, such that today, nearly two decades after the first such school opened in Minnesota, fewer than 3 percent of all public school students are enrolled in charters. Eleven states still have no charter schools at all.⁴

Choices among districts are also constrained. Only 18 states insist that students be allowed to cross district lines to find other public school options—and many of those policies incorporate severe limitations. In Arkansas, for instance, the transfer is conditional on its desegregation impact; Missouri's required program is limited to those who live unreasonably far from their assigned school or whose district has no accredited school; and several states restrict their transfer programs to students in low-performing schools.⁵

Within individual districts, we find similar problems: many parents enjoy few choices. Only half the states require their school systems to offer choices and many such offerings are skimpy. In Massachusetts, for example, they're restricted to students assigned to racially imbalanced schools. Thirteen jurisdictions limit their required alternatives to students attending low-performing schools.⁶

The federal No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) sought to expand public-school choice, at least for students in faltering schools. But a 2009 evaluation found that just 1% of the 6.9 million eligible youngsters participated in that option in 2006-07 and “a majority of parents (in a subsample of eight districts) of students eligible... say they were not notified of those options, even though the districts documented that they had sent out written notifications.”⁷

While plenty of large high schools offer diverse menus of classes and programs, many other students attend small, rural, or poor schools where they find far less variety and choice—scanty AP offerings, few foreign language choices, little choice among small seminars or lab-style classes, no say over whether they’re placed in front of a didactic or student-centered teacher, and more.

In short, despite the proliferation of education options in recent years, many families enjoy far too few choices among and within schools.

What Could Be Different Tomorrow

The present situation need not describe the future. One can picture many paths by which the needs and wants of students and parents could gain greater voice and power over their own education and over the offerings and practices of schools and districts. Though consumer supremacy in public education may seem like a pipedream in 2009—and would surely come with tradeoffs and drawbacks, discussed below—there are a variety of ways that schools and school systems could adapt and customize their offerings to satisfy their consumers more fully than they do today. In the process, the education delivery system would also benefit by becoming more open to the potential benefits of innovation (rather than, as today, focusing mostly on costs). With some political will, evolving technologies, and the vision to see past the status quo

toward a more innovative, competitive, and customizable system, parents could wind up with many more choices among schools, courses, teachers, and instructional materials.

We deal with each of these in turn before discussing some of the changes that will be needed to realize these visions.

More School Choices

Most obviously, to align public education more precisely with the needs and preferences of students and families, we can continue to create more new schools, more choices among schools, and more of the financial and political mechanisms whereby such choices can be exercised by a widening sector of the population. Programs allowing parents to choose among public schools, both within their district and across school-system borders, should certainly be expanded. And voucher and charter programs should be allowed to flourish and expand. But such changes, though desirable and probably inevitable, are apt to continue to be gradual—too gradual for the millions of students now relegated to inadequate schools.

A faster form of change—and one far harder to block through traditional political mechanisms—is introduced by virtual schooling. Technology holds great promise for conferring education options on families. It helps remove the physical, logistical and geographic constraints created by school locations, classroom capacity, teacher availability, schedules, calendars and more. As Terry M. Moe and John E. Chubb write in *Liberating Learning*, technology heralds a future in which “[s]chools will do a better job serving needy constituencies.” For example,

[c]yberschools provide a vehicle for incorporating the nation’s million-plus homeschoolers into the education system, providing them with high-quality curricula and an organized schooling experience. Dropouts can readily take the classes they need for graduation, aided by the choice and flexibility that cybers provide them—and the graduation rate should climb. Rural kids can escape the limitations (usually due to small size and budget) of their local districts, use

cybers to enroll in a full range of specialized and advanced courses, and take advantage of what the larger education system has to offer. Gifted kids, so often held back by the “least common denominator” norm in regular schools, can zoom ahead at their own speed.⁸

Technology creates opportunities both to grow choices *among* schools and to create more options *within* schools. Among virtual schools, the largest and perhaps best-known example is the state-run Florida Virtual School, now with 84,000 students.⁹ Other states have similar state-wide offerings and an additional 100,000 students attend virtual *charter* schools in 22 states.¹⁰ Virtual *courses* have been growing for a number of years, creating options within and alongside schools. Starting with Utah’s Electronic High School in 1994,¹¹ online course offerings have grown to the point that 1.03 million students participated in virtual classes of one form or another in 2007-08,¹² and forty-four states now “offer significant full-time or supplemental online learning options for students.”¹³

All of these give students and parents considerable flexibility to customize their educational experiences. When changing schools can be accomplished by, in effect, altering the web-address on one’s computer rather than moving homes or riding the bus across town to a different building, parents gain abundantly more market power than they had before, as do students—particularly at the secondary level—with minds, interests and priorities of their own. How might such options be further expanded? Certainly the six states without significant online course offerings (Oklahoma, Maine, New Jersey, New York, Rhode Island, and Vermont)¹⁴ and the 28 states with no virtual charter schools represent wide-open opportunities for growth. Virtual coursework is also destined to accelerate, as has happened in other industries following the introduction of new technologies. In *Disrupting Class: How Disruptive Innovation Will Change the Way the World Learns*, Clayton Christensen, Michael B. Horn, and Curtis W. Johnson predict that, within a decade, half of all high-school courses will be on-line in some

form or another, driven there by a superior cost structure, ever-better technology, and looming teacher shortages in brick-and-mortar schools.¹⁵

Such growth of on-line learning is apt to occur both within traditional brick and mortar schools and in the less corporeal environments of charter and virtual schools. Though the overwhelming majority of students attend traditional schools, it's the virtual and charter sectors where the swiftest diversification is apt to occur. As Moe and Chubb explain,, “The proliferation of autonomous schools, combined with their differentiation as they seek out niches and constituencies to attract enrollment, will give students and parents a much broader array of alternatives to choose from: some cyber, some hybrid, some neither, with many variations on each theme. There will be much greater variety in the universe of schools and much greater choice.”¹⁶

There are, to be sure, many dogged opponents of school choice and plenty of good and bad arguments against proliferating school options. The most squalid of those arise from self interest—from schools and school systems that stand to lose students and funding, unions that fear diminished power and shrinking membership, or bureaucracies bent on maintaining control. Nearly as bad are arguments that stem from ideology or misinformation, such as the fear of letting private ventures gain a larger foothold in public education, the concern that competition will harm rather than strengthen public schools, and the (false) belief that choice will inevitably siphon the best students from traditional public schools. These arguments have been debated for years, and each concern has been refuted with skill, so we will not rehash them here.

Nor will we linger over the opposition to cyber-education in particular, which is no less intense. Much of this, too, is self-interested—unions, for example, understand that virtual education may portend fewer high-paid senior teachers, perhaps fewer teachers altogether. But

there are also legitimate concerns about educational efficacy—will children learn as well from a computer as from a teacher? For what ages and subjects is virtual learning really suitable? Is it practical for lower-income students? Does it diminish students' interactions with other children, and with other types of children? As such learning options expand, the opportunities for analysts—and parents—to evaluate them will increase and clearer answers to such questions will emerge.

In the meantime, we must acknowledge several important barriers to a high-performing, parent-driven marketplace of schools. One of the most important is simply the paucity of good information by which families can make satisfactory choices. This is true in some other markets as well, and within education it can also hold true for parents facing choices among courses, teachers, or instructional materials, so we address this issue in greater detail below. Note here, however, that much more information could be made available for parents, thereby improving the marketplace. At the same time, in no market is every participant perfectly informed; in education and elsewhere, a satisfactorily-functioning market can exist even when information about the choices is spotty or not equally available to all.¹⁷

Of greater concern is the contention that giving schools the freedom and incentive to appeal to parents' demands may yield perverse outcomes, since we know that academic success is only one among families' priorities. Some surveys have shown parents favoring safety, convenience, or sports above academics, for example. Others may judge books by their covers—and schools by their appearance. Will schools respond by devoting excessive time and resources to cosmetic matters? And will they fret too much about keeping parents happy, hesitating to send stern messages to those students who need them? Do such concerns undermine the potential for parental choice to force schools to compete principally on grounds of academic quality?

To mitigate these concerns, a safety net is needed. The “default school” option must be adequate. In restaurants, we assume that the health inspector and the FDA ensure that what we eat is safe, even if not necessarily tasty. But in schools we must count on more than safety. They are more like new drugs and medical devices that—at least in the United States—are obliged to demonstrate both their safety *and their efficacy*. Society’s interest in education demands that all schools not just meet minimum legal standards but also that they produce acceptable academic results.

A set of strong academic standards, suitable assessments, “promotional gates,” and graduation requirements can provide a solid safety net. When these basic requirements are combined with an effective blend of sanctions, interventions, and help for schools that fall short, parents and society can both be reasonably confident that choosing among schools is not fraught with educational peril.

Another objection to school choice is that it will foster a fragmented society, one in which people “sort” themselves into likeminded clusters, isolating themselves and their children in communities with people who look like themselves and share their values.¹⁸ Will such sorting diminish the shared “public” nature of schooling and undercut the common experiences we hope all students receive at school? Will it fragment America’s shared culture, even her civic life? It’s possible that some of this will indeed occur and, within limits, it’s not all bad. For example, enrolling students whose families share similar educational priorities or who themselves have similar needs helps a principal who seeks to focus his school’s mission, strengthen its culture, and customize its programs.

The negative effects of such sorting could also be mitigated by a strong, common core of academic standards and course requirements, ensuring that all schools cover the essentials of

history, science, and other topics in fundamentally similar ways. Scholar and curriculum expert E.D. Hirsch is perhaps the foremost proponent of such a common curriculum, which he deems especially important in the primary and middle grades when students must acquire essential knowledge in core subjects.¹⁹ With this safeguard, we need not unnecessarily restrict parents' freedom to select among schools for fear that their pursuit of their own preferences would undercut an aspect of the public good that comes from public schools. Hirsch himself suggests that the common core might comprise half of the schools' total curriculum in grades K-8 with schools free—and perhaps encouraged—to differentiate themselves by what they offer (or require) in the other half. (He also expects high schools to differ considerably from one to the next.)

A final, important concern about school choice is that too many parents will turn out to be passive consumers, accepting the school to which they are assigned—or the one nearest home—rather than seeking out alternatives that might work better for their children. For example, the aforementioned federal evaluation of NCLB's choice provision noted that “parents have shown a low propensity” to “avail themselves of the options offered to their children.”²⁰ That further argues for a robust system of standards and accountability, to ensure that the “default” choices are sound for families that do not make the most of the education marketplace. As for that marketplace, some evidence from other sectors is instructive. Economists have found that markets can function well so long as a certain fraction of consumers is truly “active.” Economists have estimated that perhaps 15 percent of customers in the United States are “information seekers,”²¹ who make product comparisons and seek to make an informed decision—for example, taking the time to understand which brand of soap or toothpaste is most effective, most economical, etc. (while the rest of us simply grab what's on sale that week or has

the snazziest label or is on the nearest shelf). Economists have argued that these active consumers help make the market more efficient for all buyers, as manufacturers and sellers strive to satisfy that small minority of customers. As a result, the other 85 percent of shoppers, though more “passive” about their shopping options, are reasonably assured of quality products no matter what they reach for in the store.

Schools, to be sure, work differently than supermarkets and soap companies, and the number of active, fussy consumers may need to be higher for them to respond to pressure to improve and compete. But with a sufficiently free market, a growing number of better-informed consumers, and enough choices, all parents can benefit even if some are better than others at navigating the complicated process of selecting a superior school.²² Furthermore, because research suggests that parents can be *induced* to become more active by giving them choices,²³ some of the challenges we currently perceive in getting parents more involved in their children’s education may in fact be an artifact of the simple dearth of choice and control they have today.

Regardless of whether all parents ever become fully-engaged in choosing schools, the fact that some ride on the coat-tails of others is not a fatal flaw in creating a better market for schools, nor should it deter our quest to widen options for students and families.

Choice Among Courses

Not only do parents need more choices among schools; they also need more choices *within* their children’s schools. The most straightforward approach to this is to increase the variety of courses and programs of study available to students. Certainly, many schools do supply considerable variety today, not just among individual courses but also curricular pathways. For example, *The Washington Post* describes how “Virginia offers a growing menu,”

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including an “advanced diploma,” which “requires more math, science, social studies and foreign language credits.” “About half the Virginia students who completed high school last spring [2008] earned one,” reported the newspaper, and in 2010 “students who prefer to learn by doing will be able to earn one of two technical education diplomas.”²⁴ Many high schools today offer scads of course choices across many subjects; a large high school—Maryland’s upscale Walt Whitman for example—may even furnish a plethora of art choices, from the basic to advanced levels and covering drawing, photography, “digital art,” and more.²⁵

A school must ordinarily be large enough—and/or wealthy enough—to offer much course variety beyond the traditional elective choices of French versus Spanish, AP biology versus basic life-sciences, a few art electives, etc. But there are other ways that classes could be differentiated, even in smaller, poorer settings. For example, tenth-grade English could incorporate a choice between a 35-student lecture class and a nine-student seminar. Likewise, physics could be primarily lab-based or textbook-based, depending on the teacher’s experiences and preferences. If teachers were judged on their results, they could be freer to deviate from their colleagues in their instructional styles while still assuring parents that education quality will not suffer—indeed, such pedagogical freedom might lead to its improvement.

Students would also benefit from continued expansion of within-school options among academic programs and approaches. These could be structural options (for example, multi-grade classes, team-taught classrooms, homogeneous versus heterogeneous grouping of students on the basis of ability or prior achievement) or programmatic options (such as International Baccalaureate, art-centric, or language immersion programs). Though we are accustomed to thinking that course options are things that high schools provide but elementary schools do not, this need not be the case. Even if all schools were to adopt a “Core Knowledge”-style curriculum

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for a sizable chunk of the school day, there is still room for “Pre-IB” programs, gifted-and-talented programs, dual-language immersion classes, accelerated math, and other choices in elementary and middle schools. Though schools charged with teaching basic skills and knowledge to younger pupils may never become curricular multiplexes, they need not be art houses either, serving up only a single take-it-or-leave-it offering. Parents need a middle ground, with at least a few key choices that are not unduly burdensome logistically and financially for schools.

Technology makes much of this easier, more economical, and better suited to small as well as large schools. Offering classes online is a relatively direct way to provide students with more curricular choices and sidestep some of the constraints imposed by school buildings, faculties, and budgets.

Such courses can span an impressive array of subjects, as entrepreneurs and innovators push the virtual boundaries. For example, Christensen and his colleagues capture the story of Virtual ChemLab, which “serves some 150,000 students seated at computer terminals across the country.” Its creator “took 2,500 photographs and 220 videos, and, along with some video-game designers, created a simulated laboratory,” where students can conduct experiments and record their results, to be reviewed and graded by a teacher.

Even gym and music classes can deploy imaginative technologies. Consider, for example, Nintendo’s Wii, which allows users to participate physically in any number of games and sports in their living rooms, from simulated tennis and boxing to golf and baseball. Some teachers are already incorporating Wii Music in their classrooms. Given the high cost of supplying real instruments to students, it creates learning opportunities that would otherwise be out of reach for some schools. As MSNBC recounts, “[u]sing the Wii Remote and Nunchuk controller, players

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can experiment with more than 60 different virtual instruments ranging from bagpipes to ukulele. They can play mini-games such as ‘Handbell Harmony’ and ‘Pitch Perfect.’ And they can jam or improvise as part of an ensemble.”²⁶

One concern with providing more curricular choices—actual or virtual—within a school is this may undermine the school’s central tenets, culture, or distinctive educational mission. Successful schools often feature a coherence and focus that may be threatened if they turn into a smorgasbord of individual preferences. This is, of course, one argument for choice among *schools* – so that when options are limited within a given school, students can seek alternatives in other schools. Thus school choice and choices within schools are complementary: a rich diversity of schools means that no one school must cater to all preferences and needs.

Yet a modicum of variety *within* schools is important, too, if education is to be more responsive to students and parents. We know that parents want more choices within their schools, and equally importantly, that parents in the worst schools are most likely to face a dearth of them. A 2007 survey by Civic Enterprises found that only 30 percent of parents in low-performing schools reported that their schools “do a good job...giving parents an opportunity to be involved in selecting the courses their children take,” compared to 68 percent of parents in high-performing schools.²⁷

To foster more options within schools, a creative mechanism is needed to balance parent and student preferences with resource and logistical constraints. Most parents might prefer their children to be in small classes all the time, but that’s not budgetarily realistic for all students. Today, such rationing is typically managed by the school or district, which determines that physics classes will be of a certain form, that a pre-set selection of English classes will be offered, and that students will be allotted to courses in prescribed ways. But like any “top down”

allocation of resources, such a system relies on guesswork, past experience, or merely the preferences of suppliers—the school, principal, teachers, etc.—to determine the mix of offerings that the consumers, in this case parents and students, can choose among. Thus it's nearly impossible to find the sweet spot where demand and supply meet and an optimum balance of large and small classes is offered, one that accommodates both the preferences of families and the realities of schools.

A more efficient way of allocating or rationing such choices is to create a market by attaching a “price” to each and giving every student a “budget” with which to construct a semester's or year's worth of courses. This could grow overly complex but we can readily imagine some steps that would move us in that direction. Whereas in the past, calculating the “cost” of a small class versus a large one would have been fairly difficult, today's amplitude of data makes this more feasible. The work of analysts like Marguerite Roza enable us to see, for example, that in one district “core classes” like English and math cost \$950 per student, while electives average \$1206.²⁸

Parents could then decide whether they prefer that Jose get intensive attention in physics rather than in English, because he is a voracious reader on his own time anyway. Or Shawanna could get maximum exposure to extras like track and field, tennis, and music, while settling for larger classes in math and history. Even in the lower grades, a small class in reading, for example, might be offset by a larger one in science or art, or vice versa. And as the students get older, one could choose “inquiry science” versus the didactic kind, and more.

The “prices” set by the school could be adjusted annually depending on the popularity of courses and any excess or shortfall in the demand for each offering. This would be novel, even revolutionary, and likely unwelcome to the prevailing culture of public education, in which the

introduction of economic considerations sullies the romantic ideal of a school that simultaneously meets all the needs of all its students. But such price-point rationing would acknowledge the reality that parents and students have distinctive preferences and the premise that schools should respond to those needs tomorrow more than they did yesterday. Without the invisible hand of the market, school leaders are likely to guess wrong about what their students and parents value most.

As with choice among schools, a system of uniform academic standards and results-based accountability, plus perhaps a universal core curriculum, would help ensure that students do not neglect the essentials of an appropriate, basic education. Though testing and accountability are more difficult in the outer reaches of the curricular universe, so long as all are becoming proficient in math, reading, history, and science, we may not need as much external accountability in the arts, music, and other such courses, or in the advanced and elective versions of history, science, etc.

With greater choice among classes, the sticky questions may involve (as is often the case) the teaching of controversial topics like abstinence and contraception; evolution and its critics; which authors to include in a literature course (for example, a European or multicultural focus); or which events to focus on in history and social studies. Here, the role of public policy should be to ensure that all students receive a solid core education, leaving to parents the no-consensus decisions about which supplementary courses to add to the menu and leaving to teachers the decisions about how to teach such courses.

Choice among courses may provide parents an outlet for avoiding or seeking out some touchy topics but does not erase the obligation of schools to determine which topics and courses to *require* of students. We can only suggest that schools err toward giving parents as much

flexibility and as many options as feasible, so that more value-laden judgments can be made in homes rather than in district headquarters or principals' offices.

Choice Among Teachers

Few parents now have much say over which teachers instruct their children—nor over whether those teachers are regarded as successful and rewarded as such. The fussiest and most persistent (or influential) of parents may be able to lobby a principal or other administrator to get his child into a certain instructor's class (or perhaps to have that teacher praised or reprimanded for something that caught the parent's attention). And parents and students often have indirect choice among teachers when selecting high-school electives. Certainly, when they sign up for an online course as supplement or complement or alternative to classroom-based courses, they are making a choice about who will "teach" their child.

Yet none of these versions of "teacher choice" gives parents a sure way to match teachers' varying pedagogical and personal styles with the needs, personality, or learning style of their children. None ensures that parents' preferences influence teachers. None incorporates "market signals" when teachers are reviewed, promoted, retained, reassigned, or let go. Hence schools' human resource decisions are made without direct regard to the impact these teachers have on their students. Not surprisingly, a study by The New Teacher Project found that few teacher reviews amount to much; most teachers get similar ratings; and principals seldom invest much time or effort in this activity.²⁹ These could be much improved if they incorporated market signals from parents and students regarding teacher performance.

Can parents exercise more choices among teachers within their schools? As with selecting class sizes, there are ways to create more choices while accommodating the principal's

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obligation to structure the school's class offerings and assignments within the confines of his teaching staff, classroom sizes and numbers, etc. For example, parents could indicate their first, second, and third teacher choices. Computer software could then assist administrators to mesh those preferences with their various resource constraints. As with course selection, basic markets could be created, with prices for teachers (admittedly a controversial proposition)—indeed, it would be natural for any market in courses to deal jointly with teachers, as these go hand-in-hand.

Such “prices” need not literally reflect the exact cost of any one teacher or class in order to be useful. For example, students needing to select 15 classes over the span of tenth grade could be given 100 “points” with which to assemble their set. Most teachers or courses could be worth five points, but those with the smallest class size or most experienced teacher (and thus the highest cost) or the longest waiting list (highest demand) might require 20 or 30 points to secure a seat. One could thus imagine students selecting a dozen basic “default” courses and thereby husbanding their points to reserve seats in the costliest or most popular classes or those that matter most to individual pupils—say a class in chemistry for the aspiring physician or in English for the future teacher.

It needs to be acknowledged that most parents (and certainly most students) are not experts in pedagogy. Their opinions about whether Ms. Jones is a good eighth-grade math teacher may focus too heavily on the experience of their child, or a neighbor's child, and miss the mark about whether she is effectively helping her class as a whole. (And nobody benefits if teachers compete to become “most popular” in the eyes of students and parents. That would create all sorts of perverse incentives.).

Responding to parent preferences among teachers, while setting up a coherent classroom and course schedule, would certainly be a challenge for principals. One of their core responsibilities is to oversee their teachers and make expert judgments about the optimal matching of instructors with courses and pupils. Small schools pose additional problems.³⁰ Yet here, once again, technology can assist. If Billy could use the internet to access the award-winning English teacher across town, this virtual teacher might prove to be better than the uninspiring flesh-and-blood instructor in his own school. Technology will also help teachers sort themselves. In Moe and Chubb's vision, "Teachers will have a great variety of schools to choose from, and a greater variety of roles they might play. The typical teacher will no longer be standing in front of a classroom of twenty-five children. Indeed, there will no longer be a typical teacher: specialization and differentiation will become the norm, and the bland uniformity of the past will die a well-deserved death."

Demand-Driven Instructional Materials

Parents and students today have scant influence over the choices their schools and districts make about which textbooks and other instructional materials to use. Much of this is logistical—the economies of bulk purchasing, the constraints of state "textbook adoption," the value of having a single textbook "series" span multiple classrooms and grades. And the curricular materials that accompany those books—handouts, lesson plans, additional readings, etc.—are typically selected by teachers, principals, or subject specialists who have greater experience and knowledge about curricula than most parents. It's not crazy to suggest that parents should stick to parenting and let educators worry about curriculum. Moreover, a teacher's style and classroom techniques bear on the types of materials that will work best for

her. Perhaps parents should settle for picking the school, picking the course, picking the delivery systems, and perhaps the teacher, and leave the choice of materials to the educators.

Yet if they could exercise somewhat greater influence over the selection of instructional materials, everyone might benefit. Unlike many other aspects of schooling, this is an area where significant scale exists for reviews, ratings, and other such data to inform parents about what their children are learning, and for parents to provide ratings or feedback that in turn informs (if not controls) the purchasing decisions of schools and districts. TripAdvisor and Zagat provide reviews and customer feedback about hotels, vacation destinations, and restaurants, empowering consumers to make better, more informed decisions, while at the same time pressuring inns and eateries to improve and earn better ratings. There is no reason why education would not benefit from an equivalent arrangement for textbooks.

When combined with working markets among schools, courses and teachers, such reviews and ratings would give parents several ways to “vote with their feet” if their child’s teacher or school purchases shoddy or offensive textbooks, and textbook providers would have incentive to improve their reviews and ratings.

Once again, technology is apt to speed the move toward a better market for instructional materials, one less dominated by a limited number of textbooks (and where the concentration of publishers and the oft-political “adoption” process in many states thwart real competition). As Christenson, Horn, and Johnson argue in *Disrupting Class*, “when disruptive innovators begin forming user networks through which professionals and amateurs—students, parents, and teachers—circumvent the existing value chain and instead market their products directly to each other...the balance of power in education will shift. Administrators, unions, and school boards

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will capitulate to the fait accompli of larger and larger numbers of students acquiring and using superior, customized learning tools of their own.”³¹

Technology also curbs the influence of and dependence on textbooks by making it far simpler for schools, department heads, individual teachers, and even individual pupils to assemble their own instructional materials from multiple sources, mixing and matching to serve more individualized needs than textbooks possibly can. In this way, parents and students (and teachers and schools) gain additional control and customization.

The Policy and Market Environment

For the types of choices envisioned here—among schools, classes, teachers, and materials—to proliferate and thereby help to make public education more demand-driven and client-responsive, changes are needed both in school governance and in the operation of the education marketplace. Most obviously, parents need better information, school funding needs to be re-engineered, and the politics of schools need to become more mindful of consumers and less in thrall to producers.

Better Information

Markets with poor consumer information work poorly. Consumers with an approximation of “complete information” about their choices are empowered consumers. Producers in every sector understand that, which is part of the reason that the public-education establishment has made it difficult for parents (and taxpayers) to obtain clear, up to date, objective, trustworthy information about school and teacher performance, about costs, comparisons, etc.

Attentive grocery shoppers can access troves of information about the ingredients, nutritional values, calorie count and unit costs of bread loaves, cans of peas, ice cream bars, hot dogs, you name it. The information available to parents shopping for schools pales in comparison, and the problem worsens in schools delivering weak academic results. The Civic Ventures study mentioned above found that “73 percent of parents with a child in a high-performing school say they have good sources of information beyond school-provided materials to help them decide which courses their child should take to prepare for success after high school, compared with only 51 percent of parents with a child in a low-performing school.”³²

It’s a fact that gaining deep understanding of what makes a school tick demands a sizable commitment of time and effort. One must wander its corridors, talk with principal, teachers, other parents and students, and spend time comparing these many factors to all the alternatives. Some parents have the time, discipline, wherewithal and motivation to do all this, but many do not—and as a result, their decisions are less than fully informed. As noted above, they may be “passive” consumers who focus on a handful of features that matter to them and find a school or course that satisfies these criteria, rather than exhaust all their options and learn everything there is to know about them.

Is this an indictment of school choice? Not really. Consumers take shortcuts all the time in other well-functioning markets. When shopping for a new pair of jeans, some would-be purchasers may visit dozens of stores to inspect and try on hundreds of varieties, while combing the advertising circulars for coupons to find the perfect combination of price, style, and fit. But most of us don’t shop that way. We visit one or two stores, depending on how rushed or desperate we are, and we buy the first pair of jeans that meet some basic criteria—the price is reasonable, we like the style, and they fit well enough.

Yet there is still robust competition among jeans manufacturers, in part because a subset of active consumers are energized and persnickety shoppers. And with more complicated, expensive, and consequential purchases—like a new car or house—many people do put in more time, since so much more is at stake.

Choosing a school is more like buying a car than buying jeans, so it's important that parents have every opportunity to make the best possible decision. But until very recently, one could get far more information about one's choices of cars, movies, TV shows, and hotels than about one's school options. Parents seeking reliable information about a school, teacher, course, or school system really had their work cut out for them. Of late, federal and state "report card" requirements and private websites have improved this situation, although significant challenges still confront parents wishing to determine which school in their community is the best—or more importantly, is best for their child. A concerned parent might reasonably want to be able to compare many different school elements, from its teachers and their pedagogical styles to its textbooks and curricula; from its financial health to its demographics; from safety to culture to parental involvement; and much more. Some of these are easily quantifiable, and thus more readily available, but others (like a school's culture) must be experienced to be well understood.

Part of the problem in sharing such information about schools is scale. *Consumer Reports* and *Car and Driver* can provide detailed reviews on cars because there are a limited number of new models every year, each with thousands of buyers, whereas there are about 100,000 public schools across the country, most of which are attended by a few hundred or, at most, a few thousand students.³³ Virtual schools and courses help to address this issue. With more students per class, there is greater scale to induce ratings. And when classes (and whole schools) can be

more easily “viewed” by outsiders, reviews become easier to produce, and students and parents find it easier to sample and look in on classes before making a choice.

Technology can also do much to keep parents in touch with their child’s school and his or her progress, as end-of-week reports and other feedback loops become simpler for the teacher to produce—they can even be automated in some cases—and easier for parents to access and engage. In that way parents become better-informed consumers (and empowered with greater control over their child’s educational experience as well, if, say, they know what homework is being sent that week or that day).

Regular updates from the classroom and other forms of interaction of course occur today, and yet parents, teachers, and principals all say that more of this would be helpful. This can be done on a personal, one-on-one basis, and can also be facilitated on a larger scale. In New York City, for example, 850,000 parents responded to a 2009 survey about the quality of their schools and teachers (the results of which count for 10 percent of each school’s “progress-report” grade, on an A-F scale).³⁴

Aggregate achievement data from teachers’ classes, past and present, could also be made available to parents (though some states presently ban the linking of student and teacher data). Though one must be cautious in interpreting such data, given the small sizes and differing demographics of many classes and the year-to-year achievement fluctuations that can result, the increasing availability of longitudinal data, particularly the “value-added” kind, enables parents and others to observe the size of student gains over time and thus to appraise the role of teachers in such gains (or the absence thereof).

Feedback from other parents could also be aggregated and shared back, creating multiple impressions of individual teachers and perhaps a group consensus. Student input might also be harnessed; as education analyst Bryan Hassel has noted, “RateMyTeachers.com enables students and their parents to rate K-12 teachers on ‘easiness,’ ‘helpfulness’ and ‘clarity.’ As of June, 2008, this site contained 10 million reviews of 1.5 million teachers nationwide.”³⁵

Finally, to increase the quality of information that parents use in comparing schools, teachers, courses, programs, etc., common standards and metrics would be helpful, together with achievement reports—preferably from a trusted independent review or auditor—keyed to those standards. Such data would equip parents with a sound base on which to rest the choices that they must make, including monitoring the progress of their own children’s education. (Such data would also go a long way toward enhancing the public’s ability to gauge how well its education system is serving society’s ends.)

Fussy comparison shopping is not at all new to education. Many parents and students are accustomed to time-consuming information-gathering, comparison and selection processes among colleges, among preschools, and among private schools. So it’s easy to imagine that, given options and information, many more parents could become more accustomed to and adept at making such choices within K-12 education.

Educators and schools also benefit in sundry ways from informed, empowered, engaged consumers, with a healthy, two-way flow of information. In any market, this continuous two-way information flow—not limited to times of decision-making or major other “transactions”—is healthy; it improves the quality of goods and responsiveness of services in that market. Education could do more to emulate sectors that have robust feedback loops, enabled by, for example, web or phone surveys, hotel and restaurant complaint cards, chefs asking their patrons

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how they've enjoyed the meal, etc. Education could surely do more of this, enhancing its capacity to deliver solid academic results while fostering better-informed and more engaged parents.

Weighted Student Funding

No market functions well unless resources flow to and away from providers in synch with the choices that consumers make. This is obvious in the private sector where, for example, only the airline or restaurant or soap manufacturer that John Doe patronizes on a given day receives the money that he spends for the purchase. In portions of the public sector that function like vouchers—Food Stamps, for example, or Pell Grants, Medicare, housing vouchers, day care, tax credits—similar mechanisms are at work: the consumer makes a decision that causes a certain amount of public funding to flow to a particular vendor. But public education, by and large, causes its monies to flow on a completely different basis, according to complex budgets, allocation formulas, staffing ratios and programmatic rules. And, for the most part, the resources don't end up in the particular school that parents may choose for their child (much less in the paycheck of a particular teacher).

Such a system may work satisfactorily if the goal is simply for schools to replicate last year's funding, perhaps with a small boost, or if the objective is centrally to control the distribution of teachers, extracurricular offerings, and special programs. But if the goal is for resources to be allocated where they are most needed and for the education services provided to children to be attuned to their needs, then a more dynamic system is needed, one that responds to changes year by year (or more often), to whether schools are succeeding or failing, to whether

parents are satisfied or disgruntled, and to whether resources are being used efficiently or carelessly.

For such a funding arrangement to work, it must hinge above all on the family's decision as to what school(s) its children will attend in a given year. In other words, the flow of resources must be student-based and must "follow the child," rather than be tied to the teacher, staff position, or program. When a dissatisfied family switches schools, one school's budget shrinks and the other grows. In that way, every school's future is tied to its success in attracting, satisfying, and retaining students, rather than its success in appealing to the district office for dollars, teachers, or programs. And if the amounts that follow children are adjusted according to their needs—attaching more dollars, for example, to youngsters who cost more to educate for any number of reasons—the system further empowers those parents who today are least powerful.

Under such a weighted student-based funding system, principals also gain greater authority to lead their schools, deciding who works there (and how they are deployed and compensated), how to structure their academic programs, and what core values and culture the school will espouse. Some principals won't do this well, at least not in the short run, not if they're unaccustomed to budgetary control. But they'll learn, too, and people desirous and capable of wielding such authority will gravitate to the principal's office. Even in the near term, their errors are apt to be fewer and smaller than those regularly made by downtown system offices trying to divine the optimal mix of teachers, classes, or programs at dozens or hundreds of schools. Decisions made by bureaucracies, especially those burdened by politics, complex rules, and elaborate contractual stipulations, are bound to respond clumsily to the needs of students and parents and the leadership challenges of principals.

Under a weighted student funding system, parents sort their children into the schools that are the best fits for them. That sorting in turn reinforces the unique nature of each school, drawing to it more students and parents who share the principal's vision and goals for the school. Then its principal has the budgetary autonomy and authority to implement the programs that work best for these students, customizing services, responding to individual, family, and neighborhood circumstances, and negating central-office barriers against innovation and adaptation. Over time, this will foster better, more entrepreneurial principals.

A system in which principals have full budgetary control may have the added benefit of encouraging parental (and other private) donations to schools. Parents, local businesses, community foundations and individual philanthropists will know that principals have the power to put their money to good use. Today, parent donations—when they exist at all—are apt to support small add-ons, such as band uniforms or musical instruments. When principals control their budgets, their teachers, and their schools, these funds could be used for a wider range of needs, such as hiring (or rewarding) a great math teacher. Yes, there's a potential equity downside, since some schools will have easier access to such private resources. But bear in mind that parents with means already supplement their children's education in innumerable ways: buying books, software, tutoring, piano lessons, summer programs, and more. Unfortunately, such private outlays currently exert little pull on the school system itself. Moreover, inequities will always exist so long as local taxes are a component of school funding; when funds are given by donation rather than levied via taxes, they are a much clearer expression of parents' preferences.

We recognize that a more dynamic funding system is also a less predictable one. It could become harder for a school to plan ahead when next year's enrollment and funding cannot be

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known with precision. But organizations of all types deal with such challenges, making projections and contingency plans to account for various futures, then working as hard and intelligently as possible to realize the future they desire. Within the education realm, examples of this sort can be found among preschools, colleges, tutoring programs, summer camps, and more, most of which cannot be sure of their enrollments—or revenues—until the year or session or season actually commences. Public schools, too, can learn to cope with this kind of uncertainty. It seems like a fair exchange for a better-functioning market.³⁶

Politics and School Governance

Schools will never be very responsive to parental preferences and student needs so long as the politics and governance of schooling are little influenced by such priorities. That doesn't mean parents must run school systems, serve on school boards, or dominate the voting for school referenda. Plenty of other mechanisms exist for increasing parental engagement and influence at the policy level. Schools often have parental advisory bodies; Chicago's schools have long had "local school councils," selecting principals and developing school budgets and improvement plans;³⁷ and in New York City and Los Angeles, charter-school leaders have started "parents' unions"—Harlem Parents United³⁸ and the Los Angeles Parents Union³⁹—in part to create a political counterweight to the teachers unions.

Yet all of these are means, not the desired end, which is a dynamic school system in which new school options can open and prosper; in which control of schools rests at the school level rather than in central bureaucracies; and in which technology is welcomed and mobilized toward its full potential to create a customized, family-driven education experience for each student.

Fully describing all the political and governance-related steps toward that goal is beyond our present scope. It seems clear that bureaucratic control must be replaced, at least in substantial part, by market dynamics, and that the political sway of provider groups must be diminished. The education establishment must become more comfortable with markets and competition. These are not simple challenges. Yet there is hope, some of it stemming from today's fast-developing technologies. As Moe and Chubb explain in *Liberating Learning*, technology helps to thwart the establishment's "politics of blocking." Indeed, they assert that it "spells the end of monopoly in American education."⁴⁰ Moreover, charter school and voucher programs have created new constituencies that are now deeply invested in the success of education markets (even if few would use that terminology). As the new parents unions demonstrate, along with such grassroots organizations as the Black Alliance for Education Options (BAEO), parents and community members can be stirred to fight for their right to a quality school option. In those ways, via technology and creating constituencies for choice, footholds are created from which greater competition, more options and for vigorous customization can spring, eventually accelerating us toward a more parent-centered, consumer-oriented education system.

Whose Job Is This?

Moving these ideas and kindred reforms from drawing board to classroom and school system is a heavy lift. We do not underestimate its difficulty—or the pace at which it may occur. Public education is terribly slow to evolve, even in the face of changed circumstances and altered needs. Witness the immortal summer vacation, the durability of rigid teacher pay scales, and the persistence of classroom-based, grade-by-grade brick-and-mortar schools. Such attributes of America's K-12 enterprise have endured for generations even as everything around them has

changed. There are multiple reasons for this resilience and analyzing them is way beyond our present mandate. Let's simply observe that the public-education "establishment" has powerful incentives to resist disruptive change. The control, compensation, and job security of those who run schools and school systems are threatened by it—and never more so than when the goal of change is to shift power from them to parents and students, from producers to consumers, from suppliers to demanders.

Thus reformers wishing to customize the experience of public schooling and make it respond more fully and swiftly to the needs and preferences of its clients, face a major-league challenge, the more so because it's not obvious who will lead this campaign. Today's education reformers can mostly be clumped into four categories, every one of them with plausible reasons for not devoting much time and energy to the quest for more choices among teachers, classes, or instructional materials.

First, there are "general" education reform organizations, many of them such state-based advocacy groups as ConnCAN in Connecticut and EdVoice in California, and their national counterparts such as Education Sector or The Education Trust. Each has its own priorities and policy portfolio, such as raising academic standards, strengthening teacher quality or reforming school funding. While those priorities may coexist comfortably with a more parent-friendly system, and while many of these organizations favor more choice among schools, more innovative schools, and other features of the world we describe, for none of them is this the top priority. With limited budgets, staff, and time, that's not irrational.

Second, we find reform organizations that focus on various aspects of school choice, groups like the Friedman Foundation, the Alliance for School Choice, and the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools. They certainly do their part to increase the supply and diversity of

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school options for parents, they support reforms like weighted student funding (to varying degrees), and they would surely agree on the need for better information. But it is simply beyond the scope of their current missions to argue for more choices *within* schools, among teachers, or in the realm of instructional materials.

Third, we find well-intended groups that stand for reforms but that are also customers of or vendors to the school system and predictably wary of unsettling their relationships by pressing for changes not integral to their own interests. Teach for America relies on districts to hire its corps members, and New Leaders for New Schools counts on them to train and hire its would-be principals. Charter management organizations though competitors to district schools in some respects, often need the cooperation of districts to approve their charters, bus their students, loan them facilities, etc.

A fourth category of reformers and reform groups may offer a bit more hope and potential leadership on this issue. Roughly described as agenda setters, it is the philanthropists, columnists, thought leaders, prominent academics, and perhaps even secretaries of education who have the independence, gravitas, and outsider-standing to agitate, advocate, fund, and guide such deep, systematic reform. These folks tend not to fear establishment retribution and they needn't be distracted by myriad other organizational priorities. Of course they each have their own agendas and interests, but if they made it a priority to put students and parents first in K-12 education, it would make a difference.

Trade-offs and Conclusions

In a hundred ways, K-12 education consumers could be empowered more than they are today, and there are a hundred arguments for why this is a worthy goal, beginning with the near-

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certainty that parents and students will be better off when their educational needs are met.

American education will also be better off—and its pupils better schooled—when it is propelled by competition, innovation, and a focus on results.

Yet making it more consumer-responsive is no simple proposition. Aside from the many logistical and practical challenges entailed in giving parents greater say in their selection of schools, teachers, courses, and more, and alongside the challenge of creating “markets” in education, this discussion raises some important questions for policymakers and reformers to consider.

First is the classic trade-off between the pluribus and the unum—between what should be uniform in American education and what should be different. While schools should give greater deference to the needs and desires of individual students and parents—that’s the burden of this paper, after all—we also recognize that schooling, especially public schooling, serves both private and public ends. The latter are important, too. They are why many (ourselves included) favor national standards and assessments and a substantial core curriculum. Yet we also remain concerned that public education has long been more concerned with the needs of its pupils as a collective than with them as individuals. It has been too slow to customize its offerings for students. We want to push it farther in this direction, even as we want it to fulfill its role on behalf of the commonweal. It’s not easy to do either of those things, much less both.

A second, more specific dilemma concerns how to balance the tension between promoting choice *among* schools and choice *within* schools. Greater proliferation of school choices would imply smaller schools, which inevitably limits the capacity of a given school to offer multiple courses or teacher choices to its students. Likewise, any school wishing to expand

its offerings will find the task easier to accomplish as it grows its enrollment. That portends a reduced supply of schools. This trade-off is not to be avoided.

Third and finally, more opportunity than dilemma, astute observers of education often note how rarely does this field learn from and adopt the best practices of other sectors. There are innumerable reasons for this, some with more merit than others. But it's undeniable that other sectors of our economy and society also provide essential services, often services with both public and private components, and that they've done better at addressing the needs of individual users or consumers while also grappling with the public interest. Transportation is an example: its primary purpose is to help individuals get from point A to point B, but public concerns abound and are among the reasons we invest in buses and subway systems, subsidize ridership, and tax cars, gasoline, and drivers licenses. Yet despite this ample government involvement and oversight, one's transportation options are nearly boundless. A traveler from Washington to New York, for example, can drive his own car, ride a motorcycle, or hitchhike; he can take a train, bus, plane, tax, limousine, or more. And once aboard a train, one can choose a quiet car, ordinary car, or cafe car; one can sit by the window or the aisle; spend time eating, reading, sleeping, or talking on the phone. And so on. The permutations for such a trip are practically limitless.

What can education learn from transportation? What about scrutinizing health care, communications, energy, and myriad other sectors for sound models? How can policymakers and education reformers distill lessons from those worlds that could be applied constructively in our schools?

Our goal is to devise reforms that enhance the private market power of parents and students without fundamentally weakening the public nature or societal contribution of primary-

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secondary schooling. Yes, tradeoffs and compromises will need to be made and lessons drawn from elsewhere. But these ought to be manageable—and are surely worth making. For the United States in 2009 needs a system of schooling that places parents and students properly in the center, exerting a strong gravitational pull—though not the only pull—on the schools, principals, teachers, and others that orbit in this cosmos. Finding that balance is no easy task, but the benefits are great enough to justify the effort.

¹ Ted Kolderie, “Young People Are All Right,” *Education Next*, 9, no. 3 (Summer 2009): 72-73.

² www.Schoolmatters.com and www.greatschools.net (accessed October 2, 2009)

³ Terry M. Moe and John E. Chubb, *Liberating Learning: Technology, Politics, and the Future of America Education*, (Jossey-Bass, 2009).

⁴ National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, “Public Charter School Dashboard 2009”, June 2009, <http://www.publiccharters.org/files/publications/DataDashboard.pdf>, p. 7 (accessed July 21, 2009).

⁵ Education Commission of the States, “Open Enrollment: 50-State Report,” 2008, <http://mb2.ecs.org/reports/Report.aspx?id=268> (accessed July 21, 2009).

⁶ Education Commission of the States, “Open Enrollment: 50-State Report,” 2008, <http://mb2.ecs.org/reports/Report.aspx?id=268> (accessed July 21, 2009).

⁷ U.S. Department of Education, Office of Planning, Evaluation and Policy Development, Policy and Program Studies Service, *State and Local Implementation of the No Child Left Behind Act, Volume VII—Title I School Choice and Supplemental Educational Services: Final Report*, Washington, D.C., 2009.

⁸ Terry M. Moe and John E. Chubb, *Liberating Learning: Technology, Politics, and the Future of America Education*, (Jossey-Bass, 2009), 176.

⁹ Bill Tucker, “Florida’s Online Option,” *Education Next* 9, no. 3, (Summer 2009): 12-18.

¹⁰ Terry M. Moe and John E. Chubb, *Liberating Learning: Technology, Politics, and the Future of America Education*, (Jossey-Bass, 2009), 123.

¹¹ Utah Electronic High School, “Frequently Asked Questions,” <http://www.schools.utah.gov/ehs/faq.htm> (accessed October 3, 2009).

¹² Anthony G. Picciano, Ph.D. and Jeff Seaman, Ph.D., *K-12 Online Learning: A 2008 Follow-up of the Survey of U.S. School District Administrators* (Sloan Consortium, 2009), 11.

¹³ John Watson, Butch Gemin and Jennifer Ryan, *Keeping Pace with K-12 Online Learning: A Review of State-Level Policy and Practice, 2008* (Evergreen Consulting Associates, November, 2008): 12.

¹⁴ John Watson, Butch Gemin and Jennifer Ryan, *Keeping Pace with K-12 Online Learning: A Review of State-Level Policy and Practice, 2008* (Evergreen Consulting Associates, November, 2008): 13.

¹⁵ Clayton Christensen, Michael B. Horn, and Curtis W. Johnson, *Disrupting Class: How Disruptive Innovation Will Change the Way the World Learns* (McGraw Hill, 2008), 98, 100-101.

¹⁶ Terry M. Moe and John E. Chubb, *Liberating Learning: Technology, Politics, and the Future of America Education*, (Jossey-Bass, 2009), 175.

¹⁷ Jack Buckley and Mark Schneider, “Shopping for Schools: How Do Marginal Consumers Gather Information About Schools?,” *The Policy Studies Journal* 31, no. 2 (2003): 121-145.

¹⁸ Bishop, Bill, with Robert G. Cushing, *The Big Sort: Why the Clustering of Like-Minded America Is Tearing Us Apart*, (Houghton Mifflin Company, 2008).

¹⁹ E.D. Hirsch, Jr., *The Making of Americans: Democracy and Our School* (Yale University Press, 2009).

²⁰ U.S. Department of Education, Office of Planning, Evaluation and Policy

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²¹ Hans B. Thorelli, "Philosophies of Consumer Information Programs," in *Advances in Consumer Research* Volume 04, ed William D. Perreault, Jr. (Atlanta: Association for Consumer Research, 1977), 282-287.

²² Jack Buckley and Mark Schneider, "Shopping for Schools: How do Marginal Consumers Gather Information About Schools," *The Policy Studies Journal*, 31, no 2 (2003): 121-145.

²³ Jack Buckley, "Choosing Schools, Building Communities? The Effect of Schools of Choice on Parental Involvement" (National Center for the Study of Privatization in Education, Teachers College, Columbia University, February 1, 2007).

²⁴ Michael Alison Chandler, "So Many Dreams, So Many Diplomas," *The Washington Post*, June 18, 2009.

²⁵ Montgomery County Public Schools, "WaltWhitmanHS, Art Department," <http://www.montgomeryschoolsmd.org/schools/whitmanhs/academics/departments/art/art.shtml> (accessed August 20, 2009).

²⁶ Kristin Kalning "Teachers invite 'Wii Music' into the classroom," msnbc.com, February 10, 2009, <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/29127548/> (accessed August 20, 2009)

²⁷ John M. Bridgeland, John J. DiIulio, Ryan T. Streeter, James R. Mason, *One Dream, Two Realities: Perspectives of Parents on America's High Schools* (Civic Enterprises, October 2008).

²⁸ Paul T. Hill, Marguerite Roza, James Harvey, *Facing the Future: Financing Productive Schools* (Center on Reinventing Public Education, University of Washington, December 2008).

²⁹ Daniel Weisberg, Susan Sexton, Jennifer Mulhern, David Keeling, *The Widget Effect: Our National Failure to Acknowledge and Act on Differences in Teacher Effectiveness*, (The New Teacher Project, 2009), 20.

³⁰ Even in brick and mortar schools, size need not be an overwhelming barrier. If one pictures a school of 360 students, with 20 pupils per classroom, a K-5 school would have (on average) three teachers per grade, enough for some choice. (Of course any forms of team teaching and other constraints on which students can be placed in which classrooms would add to the challenge.)

³¹ Clayton Christensen, Michael B. Horn, and Curtis W. Johnson, *Disrupting Class: How Disruptive Innovation Will Change the Way the World Learns* (McGraw Hill, 2008), 142.

³² John M. Bridgeland, John J. DiIulio, Ryan T. Streeter, James R. Mason, *One Dream, Two Realities: Perspectives of Parents on America's High Schools* (Civic Enterprises, October 2008).

³³ U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. (2009). *Digest of Education Statistics, 2008* (NCES 2009-020), [Chapter 2](#).

³⁴ Yoav Gonen, "Head of the Class!," *New York Post*, June 25, 2009.

³⁵ Bryan Hassel, "Cutting Edge Strategies from Other Sectors," in *A Byte at the Apple: Rethinking Education Data for the Post-NCLB Era*, ed. Marci Kanstoroom and Eric C. Osberg (Washington, D.C.: Fordham Institute, 2008), 218-244.

³⁶ Of course, there are myriad ways to reduce budgetary uncertainty, such as setting enrollment deadlines and devising budgetary rules that cushion the short-run impact of sharp decreases (or increases) in student numbers.

³⁷ Chicago Public Schools, "Local School Councils," <http://www.cps.edu/Pages/LocalSchoolCouncils.aspx> (accessed October 1, 2009).

³⁸ Jillian Melchior, "Harlem Parents Rally for More Charter Schools," *School Reform News*, May, 2009. http://www.heartland.org/policybot/results/25162/Harlem_Parents_Rally_for_More_Charter_Schools.html

³⁹ Douglas McGray, "The Instigator," *The New Yorker*, May 10, 2009.

⁴⁰ Terry M. Moe and John E. Chubb, *Liberating Learning: Technology, Politics, and the Future of America Education*, (Jossey-Bass, 2009), 175.