

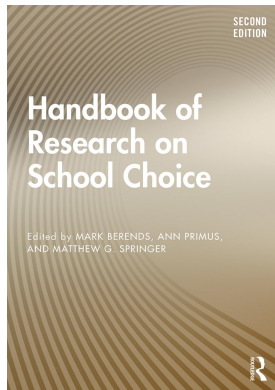
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SCHOOL CHOICE IN AMERICAN HISTORY

John L. Rury

For many Americans, the idea of choice in schooling has been rather unfamiliar, at least through much of the country's history. Schools operated as community institutions, and the matter of choice was simply whether to have one or not. In most such instances, there was little inducement or support from state authorities, much less federal ones, so schools arose more or less organically from local interest in improving literacy, teaching certain other subjects, and imposing order on unruly children and youth. With a predominantly rural population, there was little prospect of school choice and perhaps little interest.

But educational alternatives to these schools certainly did exist in the past. Independent teachers offered instruction in "venture schools" (i.e., self-regulating, individual) to those willing and able to pay, tutors taught the children of the wealthy, and private schools and academies operated in the cities and larger towns. For many children and youth, learning was an informal affair, occurring primarily at home, on the job, or innumerable other circumstances. Urbanization brought new complications to education; the appearance of more specialized institutions made choice a more compelling question. It was in the cities that choosing between schools first became a matter of disagreement and debate. And the emergence of educational options clearly benefitted some groups more than others.

While these developments did not necessarily set the stage for today's arguments about markets for schooling, they demonstrate that school choice is hardly a new issue. It has been a source of inequity and controversy in the past. Like most facets of the nation's educational system, it has a history. And examining it a bit more closely can be helpful in assessing its implications today.

Educational Choices in Colonial America

Despite folklore about the first colonial schools, formal educational institutions were relatively few and far between prior to the American Revolution. This meant that education often occurred in families, churches, other institutions, or even informally among friends and acquaintances. This may have represented a measure of choice in how families taught their children, but it also was a matter of necessity. Even in New England, site of the continent's first college, local schools numbered less than one for every 300 households in the latter 17th century. Elsewhere the numbers were lower; Virginia counted only about one for every 900 households. New York was a leader with one for every 200 families (Cremin, 1970). For most children, schooling was not a major aspect of life, although it probably was more important in northern colonies than the South. This, of course, made

school choice largely a moot point. Children who happened to live in proximity to a school could attend to gain literacy skills, often for largely religious purposes. In New England, local theocratic authorities tried to mandate the provision of schooling, and families there clearly valued formal education. Governments rarely advocated schooling elsewhere, especially in the South. In fact, the governor of Virginia opposed it, declaring in 1671 that “learning has brought disobedience, and heresy, and sects into the world” (Fischer, 1989, p. 347).

Statistics on literacy reflected these regional differences, although it was not always linked to schooling. The region with the highest levels was New England, where about 90 percent of the male population was literate by the Revolution. Literacy rates apparently were somewhat lower in the middle colonies, New York and Pennsylvania, but lowest in the South. Historians estimate the male literacy rate in Virginia at about 70 percent by the latter 18th century, comparable to England at the time. The fact that literacy was so high, however, suggests that much learning occurred outside of schools.

Historians attribute some of this to the changing functional demands of society. Reading and writing skills became increasingly important for the performance of essential commercial tasks, such as transferring property and keeping accounts. Demand for marketable skills led to the formation of venture schools in cities and towns, as independent teachers offered instruction in reading, writing, computation, keeping accounts, and other skills to young men. These entrepreneurial masters provided lessons pertinent to mercantile careers in the colonies, and offered their students a choice of schooling options. With these developments, it was possible to say that school choice existed in colonial British America (Cremin, 1970; Teaford, 1970).

For younger children, so-called dame schools often were conducted by matronly women to provide instruction in basic literacy skills and perhaps a smattering of other subjects. Young women could attend certain other schools, sometimes called female seminaries, to learn “polite” skills, such as playing music, dancing, and recitation of poetry, abilities that often proved helpful in the marriage market. These and other alternatives were also offered by individuals who made a living as autonomous teachers, often advertising their expertise in local newspapers. For them there could be little doubt that education functioned in a marketplace (Cremin, 1970).

By the 18th century, there were many avenues to literacy and other skills in colonial North America. The wealthy often hired private tutors to teach children to read, especially in the South, and others were taught at home or in other settings, such as apprenticeships. There was considerable “on-the-job” learning of essential skills, and enterprising lads (like young Benjamin Franklin) gained knowledge from employers and fellow workers. As literacy became more important, new routes to its acquisition became available. In the most commercially expansive settings, particularly the cities, literacy rates among both men and women rose sharply (Lockridge, 1974).

Not surprisingly, in all colonies, literacy generally was highest for those with property and wealth, and it was usually better for men than women. But rates among the poor were highest in Puritan New England, which pointed to the role of religion in schooling. There are indications that many women in certain parts of that region could read as well. Moreover, individuals with more schooling probably possessed greater mastery of it. There is scant historical evidence about proficiency in reading, however, apart from the general circulation of books, newspapers, and other reading material. And on this score, there was little variation among the colonies, apart from population size. By and large, British North America was a literate society, even if schooling differed from one region to another (Moran & Vinovskis, 2007).

There were other sources of informal education as well. One was a custom among many households, especially in New England and other northern colonies: sending older children to board with other families, often neighbors or relatives. This provided a sort of apprenticeship in a variety of household tasks, especially for girls (Rury, 1988). Of course, there also were traditional forms of apprenticeship for young men—a practice with European roots—observed widely in the colonies.

In most cases, formal contracts were drawn up, periods of service were outlined, and lessons to be learned were agreed on. But complaints also often were registered about the quality of education that apprentices received (Cremin, 1970).

Thus, even if relatively few of North America's European settlers attended school, most received an education of one sort or another. In certain settings, a degree of educational choice existed, especially in larger towns and cities. But for most youth, education was often an informal affair, embedded in a host of other social relationships and guided by the necessities of life and work. Such was the market for educational services and outcomes during a time when institutions and expectations about learning were still emerging.

Building a Comprehensive Educational System

Schooling became a much larger aspect of everyday life in the 19th century, especially during and after industrialization. National investment in education grew dramatically, as larger segments of the population attended school for greater lengths of time. An average American received just 210 days of formal education in a lifetime in 1800. By 1850, that figure had more than doubled, and by 1900, it was more than a thousand, about half of what the number would be in 2000 (Fishlow, 1966). Apprenticeship and other less institutionalized forms of education faded in importance. In the course of such changes, formal education began to assume the familiar institutional dimensions known today.

Apart from its sheer quantity, the character of schooling began to shift as well. For many children, especially in cities and towns, it became more aligned with preparation for work. Schooling focused on cultivating proper "habits" of industriousness and responsibility, along with basic literacy, numbers, and other subjects. It focused on citizenship but also on the emerging industrial order, a society marked by shifting status distinctions and an abiding concern with efficiency (Kaestle, 1983).

In comparison to today, formal schooling did not occupy much of people's lives, and most made a living without reference to education or formal training. Experience and reputation counted for more than schooling. While resources devoted to education were high compared to other nations, they were far below today as a portion of the economy (Goldin, 2001). And it took time to develop a comprehensive public school system, which certainly did not exist in 1800.

As historian Carl Kaestle (1972) noted, a lively market for schooling existed in New York City during the latter 18th century. Independent masters offered instruction for relatively modest fees, serving a large portion of the city's middling classes. This surely represented a marketplace for education, but in Kaestle's words, it hardly resulted in a stable set of educational outcomes: "[S]chooling arrangements were haphazard and temporary; people in all ranks of society gained their education in a patchwork, rather than a pattern, of teachers and experiences" (p. 465). Given the many alternatives that existed, such shortcomings with respect to formal education may not have proven problematic in old New York.

Most Americans lived in rural settings, where schools typically were quite small but numerous. By the 1830s, they dotted the countryside, mainly in the Northeast, serving millions of children in small, intimate settings bound by rural communities. In the cities, somewhat bigger institutions appeared, especially after Lancastrian (or monitorial) methods for teaching large numbers of students inexpensively were introduced in charity schools for the poor. Kaestle suggested that a 1796 decision by New York authorities to use public funds to support these institutions rather than individual school masters was a decisive turning point. Eventually these sorts of schools became models for urban education systems across the country, representing a shift away from the fragmented marketplace of small providers that existed earlier (Kaestle, 1972; Vinovskis, 1972).

The rise of publicly supported education was accompanied by growth in enrollments, as suggested by the numbers above. Important regional disparities existed, however, with attendance lowest in the South, where industrialization did not occur until much later. The Nat Turner rebellion in 1831 demonstrated the possibility of violent revolt by educated slaves and led to extensive prohibitions of any Black education. Because of these tensions and great differences in wealth and social status, it was difficult to reach consensus there about schooling or to spur widespread interest in reform.

Despite the efforts of some intrepid reformers, southern investments in public education lagged northern standards. As a consequence, levels of literacy were relatively low, with the exception of planters' children, who occasionally received a better education than their northern peers (Kaestle, 1983; Rury, 2006). There was a lively if somewhat irregular market for venture schools in many of the region's towns and cities, but individual teachers could experience considerable difficulty in making a living, particularly women (Tolley, 2015).

Schools were considerably more popular elsewhere, where they persisted on meager budgets, sometimes augmented by "rate bills" and other forms of tuition. Local support notwithstanding, it was not always clear just what most students learned in these district schools. The circumstances of formal education differed significantly from one place to another. The length of school terms varied, as did the condition of schoolhouses, and attendance often was inconsistent. Consequently, rural common schools may have simply enhanced lessons that children learned at home and church (Soltow & Stevens, 1981; Fuller, 1982).

Venture schools offered alternatives in some towns and villages in the North too. Typically run by a lone teacher, frequently a woman, they often would come and go with shifts in enrollment or changes in the lives of their proprietors. Little is known about them as a result. Even if they cost more than local public institutions, however, these schools could attract students if they maintained a positive reputation (Kaestle, 1983; Tolley, 2015).

Taken together, these varied institutions provided many options for schooling, and their existence indicated that Americans valued education. Levels of participation, attendance for any part of the year, were already quite high by 1830, over 70 percent for children aged 9 to 13, and approaching 90 percent in northern states two decades later. Growing numbers of girls attended school along with the boys, especially in the Northeast and upper Midwest, yet another unique feature of American education (Goldin, 2001). Only Germany had higher rates of participation in 1830, and by 1880, the United States led the world.

Given this record, most Americans may have been satisfied with their schools, but the idea of a coherent system of education held great appeal for reformers. Taking the apparently orderly Prussian schools as a model, they were troubled by the variability that existed in local American institutions. They called for a system with consistently high standards of teacher preparation, long and uniform terms, and generous supplies of books, paper, and other materials.

Reformers also were concerned about the growing diversity of American society, and social conflict in the absence of common values and shared identity. Schools were supposed to help forge ties among students of varied backgrounds and teach principles of republican citizenship in addition to basic literacy skills and other academic subjects. For this to occur, however, children of all backgrounds and abilities had to attend the schools together. This meant that the irregular, untidy, and unregulated marketplace for schooling had to give way to a cohesive and carefully planned education system (Kaestle, 1983; Neem, 2017).

This became the focal point of the "common school" reform movement, spearheaded by Horace Mann, Henry Barnard, and a host of others, most of them Whigs in favor of government intervention to address social problems. As secretary of the Massachusetts Board of Education, Mann tirelessly campaigned to promote improvements in the public schools and used his annual reports to highlight deficiencies across the state. These reports were widely read outside of Massachusetts, too,

and they inspired reformers elsewhere (Kaestle, 1983). In this way, the Common School Movement grew through the first half of the century, steering the nation's primary schools in the direction of a more unitary system serving most American children.

Debates over Secondary Schooling

An important corollary of reform was creating public institutions of secondary education, so children who finished the common school could gain additional instruction. Public high schools were established in urban education systems with growing numbers of students and firm tax support. From the beginning, however, only certain youth were expected to attend these institutions, the best graduates of primary and grammar schools. Called "the people's college," these institutions represented something of a contradiction. While part of the popular education system, they were designated to serve social and academic leaders. This accounted both for their great appeal and the controversies they engendered (Reese, 1995).

As public interest in them grew, many large public high schools admitted students by examination, and many were turned away. This became an early form of assessment that extended across lower schools, spanning communities. In this way high schools helped to establish academic standards in urban education, while contributing to an ethos of competition. This was a clear manifestation of isomorphic forces at work within growing public school systems (Labaree, 1988; Beadie, 1999).

The high school was controversial for other reasons. It competed with private or semi-public secondary academies, some dating from the 1700s. Most were for young men, although a number of female academies were founded after the Revolution. Both women and men, however, flocked to public high schools. The ensuing competition between these wholly public and private or semi-public institutions represented an early question of school choice (Terzian & Beadie, 2002). Since the high schools received public funding, often at rather generous levels, they held a formidable advantage. They also were part of the public school system in cities and larger towns, and thus a presumptive choice for many students.

Given these conditions, it is hardly surprising that high schools eventually displaced the academies, but the process was fraught with conflict. Academies were rather numerous, especially in the Northeast, where networks of influential supporters existed. Furthermore, some early high schools were quite costly, occupying palatial buildings and launched with great fanfare. Critics decried the expense, complaining that few students graduated, and tuition-based academies provided the same services. The fact that high schools turned away many applicants did not help matters (Terzian & Beadie, 2002).

Things came to head in Kalamazoo, Michigan, where opponents of the local high school in 1874 unsuccessfully sued to have it abolished, claiming it did not serve the wider community. The case was widely cited in later disputes, and courts generally rejected the proposition that only common or elementary schools qualified for local tax support. Beyond that, however, education leaders argued that the quality of public high schools was higher than private academies, and they helped raise academic standards for public systems. They also provided teachers for the lower schools. Supporters maintained that high schools rewarded the most talented and diligent students, providing reliable credentials and preparing leaders. Many high schools began as small addendums to the common schools, but boosters dreamed of institutions like those in big cities (Reese, 1995).

Reform thus brought many changes to the nation's schools, which many educators counted as progress. Common schools became more uniform and high schools multiplied. Following the Civil War, more schools ran annual sessions of 160 days or longer, with urban areas leading the way. Compulsory attendance laws raised attainment levels among the less affluent (Rauscher, 2014). Professional expectations increased for teachers, as more were trained in high schools and normal

schools. A more unitary school system emerged, representing a sweeping process of institutional change but offering limited choice for most Americans interested in alternatives.

Choice for Social and Cultural Outsiders

Not everyone was happy with the public schools, especially in the cities. Controversy emerged in the wake of large-scale immigration, especially among Catholics. In New York, Bishop John Hughes demanded public support for parochial schools. He argued that Irish children and other Catholics were demeaned in the public institutions, which often favored a Protestant perspective. They needed schooling consistent with their religious beliefs, he declared, even if city authorities refused to support them. The debate drew attention to the issue, and a parochial school system quickly emerged. Similar issues roiled other cities, and schools for Catholic children became the nation's largest alternative systems of schooling. This type of success was unique, however, as few minority groups could manage to sustain institutions on this scale (Neem, 2017).

Catholic arguments also fostered change in the public schools. In New York they contributed to creation of its first elected board of education in 1842. Offensive passages in textbooks gradually were expunged, and new books were more even-handed regarding religion and immigrants. Even so, Catholic schools became fixtures in cities with significant immigrant populations. For their constituents, these institutions offered a choice in religious traditions, and a possible safeguard for native languages and customs (Kaestle, 1983).

The rise of Catholic schools was an example of school choice in the 19th-century U.S., but not all children had the option of attending such institutions. The parochial schools offered greater educational opportunities to Catholics but not to others at the time. Additionally, the education of indigent immigrant children unable to pay the modest tuition at parochial schools remained in doubt. These students posed a challenge, but responsibility for them fell to the newly formed board of education. This, of course, was emblematic of the criticism that public school leaders and other reformers leveled against all private institutions: They did not serve every student equally (Ravitch, 1974).

Other minority groups, including religious denominations, also established schools, but the Catholics maintained the largest network of such institutions. Led principally by Irish Americans, they integrated generations of students into mainstream American life. Another example of immigrant success in challenging traditional public schools was German-language institutions that appeared in public systems in parts of the Midwest, until most closed during the First World War. Racial minority groups fared much worse, and lacked the economic and political resources to establish and maintain alternative schools when they suffered discrimination in the public education system.

Black Americans, for instance, were historically denied access to all but the most basic forms of education, but after the Civil War, the federal government created the Freedman's Bureau, which established schools to give freedmen literacy skills and citizenship education. Missionary organizations also contributed to the effort. Local Black communities donated hard-earned cash and labor to establish still more schools and expand upon northern assistance. Given the opportunity, the nation's newly designated Black citizens enthusiastically chose to attend all such institutions in large numbers (Butchart, 2010).

Eventually, however, educational options for Black Americans narrowed dramatically in the wake of Jim Crow segregation and new forms of peonage, or debt servitude, across the South. After the end of Reconstruction in 1877, Blacks could not easily establish their own institutions and were strictly barred from attending school with Whites. As White school terms lengthened and high schools were built for them, Black institutions languished with shorter terms, dramatically fewer resources, and few options for advanced instruction. Most educational alternatives were funded by philanthropists, often with provisos limiting the type of education offered. Decades would pass before these circumstances changed substantially (Anderson, 1988).

To the extent that various forms of school choice existed in the 19th century, consequently, it was largely limited to groups deemed to be White and with the resources necessary to maintain alternative institutions. Families of Mexican descent, living principally in the Southwest, often were required to attend separate and inferior institutions. Even though they were Catholic, they lacked the resources and political power to develop an alternative school system like the Irish (San Miguel & Valencia, 1998). In this respect, their experience was closer to that of Blacks in the South than other groups. Native American children were taught by missionaries or were taken to government-run boarding schools, where they were compelled to abandon their native traditions (Adams, 1995). School choice at that time was not available to everyone, particularly not to destitute children judged to be racial or ethnic outsiders.

Progressive Alternatives

Yet another form of alternative education first appeared in the latter 19th century, principally serving affluent families. John Dewey and like-minded reformers believed that lessons should be taught by utilizing direct experience to help understand history, biology, geography, and other fields. Accordingly, students at his Lab School at the University of Chicago learned about the past by visiting museums and historical sites; they toured factories to understand the economy, and they conducted biological experiments in parks and nature preserves. In these and many other ways, Dewey and the Lab School faculty experimented to better understand teaching and learning. It was a relatively small institution, with dedicated teachers who gave students individual attention. It was not immediately clear, consequently, what lessons it offered to burgeoning public schools (Cremin, 1961; Kliebard, 1986).

Inspired by Dewey and the work of other progressive reformers, dozens of visionary educators established schools embracing similar pedagogical principles. In 1915, Dewey and his daughter Evelyn published *Schools of To-Morrow*, which described exemplary progressive institutions around the country. It offered evidence that schools embracing these ideals could be established in a variety of settings. Thousands of educators took heart from such examples, as progressive ideas found a receptive audience across the country and around the world (Cremin, 1961).

Women were especially prominent in these reforms, leading new institutions and occasionally school systems (Semel & Sadovnick, 1999). It was not long, however, before criticisms began to surface. Some suggested that experiential methods did not teach children basic academic skills. Others noted that progressive methods seemed to work best with affluent children, who typically were better prepared for them. Classes with other students often demanded more teacher control, especially if they were large. Unlike public schools, many progressive institutions were small and served a wealthy clientele. Critics pointed to this, suggesting that progressive reform was a fad for the social and intellectual elite (Zilversmit, 1993). This hardly made it an attractive option for most other American families.

Choice Defined in Geo-Spatial Terms

By the mid-20th century, the nation's public school systems were the principal source of education for its diverse population. Catholic schools served a substantial minority, but in most of the country there were few alternatives to public institutions. Big city school systems were widely seen as the best, apart from a handful of elite private institutions. In smaller towns and villages, along with rural areas, tiny school districts were consolidated to conform to standards set by urban systems. Public schools were organized on a local basis, with funding derived mainly from property taxes. It was an arrangement reflecting principles promulgated in the 19th century by Horace Mann's generation and its successors. But it was about to undergo many changes.

The Second World War had barely ended when a grand migration to suburbia began in major metropolitan areas. Pressured by housing shortages and encouraged by new freeways and cheap gas, Americans began flocking to the fringes of urban areas. Between 1940 and 1960, the suburban population grew by some 27 million, more than twice the number in major cities. As a result, the nation's metro urban core population dropped from nearly two-thirds in 1940 to about half in 1960. By 1980, only 40 percent of metropolitan residents lived in central cities, with the rest in the suburbs (Jackson, 1985).

Migrants escaping the big cities were disproportionately young, middle class, and well educated. The availability of Veterans Administration (VA) and Federal Housing Authority (FHA) loans made moving relatively easy, at least for Whites. A postwar "marriage boom" added more than 10 million new households within a decade. The corresponding rise in births, the national "baby boom," made comfortable, spacious suburban subdivisions difficult to resist (Teaford, 2006).

At about the same time, millions of Blacks began leaving the southern countryside and moving to the nation's larger cities. The proportion of central city residents who were White diminished each decade after 1950, falling from more than 80 percent to about a third in the 1980s. The Black population increased most rapidly in the 1950s and 1960s, leveling off at about a third of central city residents, and the number of Latinx increased significantly after 1970. With these changes, poverty levels increased sharply among all city residents, but especially for Blacks. By the mid-1970s, about one in ten urban dwellers were impoverished, and about one in five Blacks; by the 1980s, the figures had jumped to almost 20 percent and 34 percent, respectively (Wilson, 1987).

These events established a new cultural geography defined by race, ethnicity, and income. Shifting perceptions of schools accompanied it, with suburban institutions judged far superior to their urban counterparts. This was clearly manifest as early as 1961, when James Conant published his influential book *Slums and Suburbs*, and was a factor in many families deciding to leave the cities. At the same time, suburban communities invested in their growing school districts to attract the most desirable residents. It did not take long for an active marketplace for public education to emerge in metropolitan areas, focused on the burgeoning suburbs (Dougherty, 2008).

In public affairs, the question of race came to be a source of great dissension. It was a time of confrontation and debate, when tensions over questions of equity and social justice animated the cities, contributing to "white flight" to the suburbs. Civil rights groups issued legal challenges to school segregation, charging urban districts culpable for perpetuating segregation. In the 1971 landmark *Swan v. Charlotte-Mecklenburg* case, the courts approved mandatory busing as a remedy to residential segregation. The 1973 *Keyes* decision in Denver established federally mandated desegregation in northern districts, and the term *white flight* had become a part of the national lexicon. A year later, the *Milliken I* decision blocked a massive interdistrict integration plan in Detroit, foreclosing large-scale desegregation plans across metropolitan areas. As a result, the social and economic profile of schools on either side of big city district lines became increasingly dissimilar (Patterson, 2002; Ryan, 2010).

For many White families leaving central cities, school choice became an important factor in deciding where to go. The suburban marketplace for education became quite lively in larger metropolitan areas, with scores of districts touting advantages. This was choice of a geo-spatial variety, as educational institutions became associated with communities distinguishable by social and economic status. For Black families, on the other hand, barriers to settlement in suburban communities meant that such options were foreclosed to them. When they did succeed in moving to these areas, moreover, the local schools often became segregated along racial lines. School choice for them, consequently, was quite different (Teaford, 2006; Rury & Rife, 2018).

Residents who remained in the cities did find certain alternatives to struggling public institutions, such as "freedom schools" run by civil rights activists, or magnet schools created to help persuade Whites to remain in urban districts (Dougherty, 2003). Catholic schools became an option, too. But

these alternatives did little to reverse the declining fortunes of urban school systems, which became widely associated with race and poverty. The suburban schools continued to be seen as superior, and geo-spatial school choice remained a largely White and affluent phenomenon.

Emergence of a School Choice Movement

Following 1980, new criticism was leveled at public education, fueled by perceptions of declining standards and behavior problems. In 1983, a national commission chaired by Secretary of Education Terrell Bell published *A Nation at Risk*, calling for renewed attention to the academic performance of American students. At the same time, an abiding movement gained momentum to remove children from the public schools, which many parents believed were compromised by materialistic and secular values and a pervasive youth culture.

In the South, private schools serving White students multiplied following desegregation, and many of them persisted into subsequent decades. In the 1980s, researchers argued that Catholic schools seemed to outperform public institutions serving similar children, despite having fewer resources. Together, these developments contributed to increased disparagement of public schools (Coleman, Hoffer, & Kilgore, 1982; Bryk, Lee, & Holland, 1993).

These sentiments helped foster a movement to create alternatives to traditional public schools, coupled with the idea that greater competition between those institutions and other educational options would spur achievement. Proponents of markets in education argued that the ability to choose between various types of education would make parents and children critical consumers, compelling institutions to raise the quality of schooling. This argument helped create political pressure to provide alternative forms of education, especially in the cities, where problems in public schooling were most visibly acute (Chubb & Moe, 1990; Apple, 2006).

Some observers used the term “neo-liberalism” to describe these ideas, along with a host of similar initiatives in other policy domains. It suggested that private provision of public goods is more efficient and creative than the work of bureaucratic entities such as school districts or state agencies. Thus, neoliberal policies typically called for the privatization of most forms of government employment, including schools. Historically such measures had been utilized to combat public sector unions and to reduce government employment (Chomsky & McChesney, 2011). In the case of schooling, neoliberals suggested that public education is inefficient, overly expensive, and insensitive to its constituents (Steger & Roy, 2010).

Some critics advocated school vouchers, government payments provided to families for tuition at private schools. This idea dated from the postwar era, especially Milton Friedman’s 1962 book *Capitalism and Freedom*. Traditionally, the strongest advocates for it were groups seeking support for one form or another of private education. For example, vouchers were advocated by White Southerners seeking support for private segregation academies following desegregation in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s. They also were backed by the Catholic Church, which still represented the largest network of private schools (Carl, 2011).

Eventually, however, vouchers drew interest from other groups. In particular, some inner-city residents also advocated them as they sought alternatives to troubled urban schools. Following a concerted campaign that drew heavily from conservative foundations, a limited voucher plan was launched in Milwaukee in 1990. For optimistic proponents of private schools, not to mention long-time supporters of vouchers, it seemed that a new day had arrived. A second city-based voucher plan was started in Cleveland in 1995. The hoped-for radical transformation of urban education, however, never materialized in either of these instances (Witte, 1999; Carl, 2011).

With support from national leaders and local advocates, voucher programs also were launched at the state level, numbering 14 by 2016. Other states have offered tax credits for parents sending children to private schools. Despite legal challenges, such programs involve about a quarter million

students today. By and large, however, researchers have failed to find consensus that these children perform better than their peers in public schools, net of background factors such as income and parental education. (For more on school vouchers, see Section IV in this volume; for more on education tax credits, see Chapter 27.) Individual studies reported some advantages, while others cited problems. The existence of the voucher programs also did not consistently affect the performance of public schools, casting doubt on the proposition that competition would lead directly to improvement. Given strong political support for such reform initiatives, however, it appears likely that more will appear in the future (Dynarski & Nichols, 2017).

The voucher movement influenced the course of educational reform in other ways as well. Acknowledging criticisms of public institutions, other reformers, including teacher union leader Albert Shanker, suggested an alternative form of publicly supported education. Such new institutions became widely known as “charter schools,” as they typically were authorized (or “chartered”) by state legislatures in step with local authorities. Laws authorizing such institutions were passed in Minnesota in 1991, followed quickly by California and eventually more than 40 other states (Carnoy et. al., 2005; Lubienski & Weitzel, 2011).

Vigorous debate soon unfolded about this version of school choice as an educational reform, and as a political response to critiques of the public schools. As research became available, there was little agreement about whether charter schools performed better than traditional public schools in raising educational achievement. Studies showed some positive outcomes, especially in mathematics. But results varied a great deal and the effect of charters differed across locations, so that the net academic effect of the reform remained in question (Carnoy et al., 2005; Jeynes, 2012; Berends, 2015; Betts & Tang, 2019; see also Section III of this volume).

Public school choice, however, was hardly limited to charter schools. At the same time, neighborhood schools in many cities were opened to a wider constituency, whether for special programs or particular groups of students. In certain respects, many were similar to the magnet schools during the desegregation era, especially those featuring a particular theme or serving children with special needs. In some cities, such as New York and Chicago, secondary students were encouraged to compete for admission to public institutions across the city, often traveling widely to attend particular schools. This too was intended to provide incentives for institutions to improve, or to offer points of excellence to appeal to the best students (Lipman, 2011).

Finally, perhaps the most severe critics of the public schools, and educational institutions in general, were those wishing to withhold children from school altogether, to educate them at home. This notion dated from the 1960s and author John Holt, who wondered if schools were the most effective educational setting. In the following decade a nascent movement took form, principally comprising evangelical Christians and others who objected to secular and youth-centric public schools.

As such criticisms mounted in the 1980s and 1990s, the homeschooling movement began to grow rapidly. Following battles with state and local authorities over compulsory attendance and other regulations, homeschoolers gained the political clout to enable parents to educate their own children. Meanwhile, a national network of support groups and organizations sprang up to support the movement, providing resources and advice for parents, including extensive materials on the internet (Gaither, 2008).

Estimates in 2003 put the number of children receiving this sort of education at about a million nationwide, and it grew nearly 70 percent by 2016. The majority appeared to be religiously motivated, and most came from larger families avowedly conservative in political orientation. Others saw the local schools as academically weak or unable to serve children with particular interests, among other concerns. Tensions sometimes occurred between parents and homeschoolers interested in participating in sports or other activities, and many public schools attempted to accommodate such interests. Some districts experimented with virtual schools, featuring extensive online instruction

to count homeschoolers as enrolled for funding purposes (Apple, 2006; Murphy, 2012; Redford, Battle & Bielick, 2017).

Taken together, changes in alternative forms of education since the 1980s have added a good deal of variety to the choices that many Americans have in considering schools. Ideas regarding the advantages to school choice have proliferated, and they have animated political debates about the future of educational policy. But the vast majority of American children still attend public schools, many in suburbs where there are relatively few complaints about the quality of local institutions. In fact, suburbanites have resisted vouchers and charter schools, fearing that they could suggest that local schools are failing (Ryan, 2010).

Much of the debate about school choice and related questions has focused on urban areas, where most students are less affluent—if not impoverished—and are members of historically oppressed racial or ethnic minority groups. But if school choice in these settings offers only the option of local charter schools or private institutions that are not much better—if at all—than their public counterparts, it is unlikely that this sort of reform will succeed. Families seeking alternatives in these settings are still largely excluded from affluent suburban schools that typically represent the highest standards of achievement. Thus far, the evidence suggests that the limited choice options in most urban settings has not improved education for many of the students that they reach (Austin & Berends, 2018).

Choice in the History of American Education

As the foregoing indicates, school choice of one sort or another is hardly a new feature of American history. Since the very first decades of European settlement, people have utilized a variety of means to achieve educational goals. In colonial times and during the early years of the republic, public schools existed alongside apprenticeships, tutors, venture schools, academies, and other arrangements for popular education. Common school reform during the 19th century aimed to impose more consistent standards on schools and improve a variety of outcomes, but it also reduced alternatives in education. Public high schools eliminated most other institutions of secondary education, contributing to the development of a unified system of public schooling. Rising enrollment levels pointed to the triumph of such reforms, although not all children were treated equally. As some groups searched for alternatives, there was considerable variation in their success.

Through much of American history, school choice has worked to the benefit of social groups with clear advantages, including financial resources and readiness for formal education. The latter was perhaps most relevant during the colonial era, when many youth chose more practical forms of preparation over academic pursuits. Economic status later turned out to be critically important for Blacks, for Latinx in the Southwest, and other under-resourced groups offered an inferior education. Catholic immigrants benefitted from a parallel system of schools, extending all the way through the university level. But their success was unique in many respects, and hinged to a large extent on an ability to fund institutions and assimilate into the nation's larger White majority. Many Catholic institutions serve a diverse constituency today, especially in urban settings.

School choice in the 20th century exhibited similar tendencies, especially geo-spatial forms of choice that emerged with the growth of suburban school districts. Relatively affluent Whites benefitted the most from these developments, and non-White minority groups gained the least. In recent years, the school choice movement has focused on school improvement in urban settings, where problems dating from the postwar era have persisted or even grown worse. While these reform efforts have improved conditions for some, they have not benefitted the majority of children living in such settings. Most such students cannot choose to attend affluent suburban schools that are unwilling to participate in choice plans, and are thus often denied access to the very best schools available.

This is the irony of the contemporary choice movement: By limiting the range of educational options to institutions in the same disadvantaged environments, it offers participants little choice at

all. This, of course, is sadly similar to the effect of prior school choice arrangements in American history. Reformers who advocate such reforms in the future would do well to consider this historical record. School choice has never been the panacea that some of its proponents claim; expectations to that effect should be qualified accordingly.

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