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What America Can Learn From School Choice in Other Countries

Edited By David Salisbury & James Tooley
Cato Institute, 2005
\$24.95, 236 Pages

Reviewed by Sister Mary Sheila Maksim, O.P.

If the United States government divided tax dollars evenly among students and let them take that money to their school of choice, what would happen? Would private schools “skim” the student and teacher population, leaving public schools to struggle with only average students and mediocre teachers? Would new private schools be created to accept the new surge of students? Would public schools suffer, or improve in a competitive market? Would school choice cause national test scores to rise? Would there be discrimination against disabled students? Would society be divided by voluntary segregation? Would religious freedom be compromised by government regulations?

A valuable resource for educators and parents who advocate school choice, this book looks abroad for answers to pertinent questions like these, since “the modern U.S. experience with marketlike education systems is limited to just a few programs, most of which are recent and all of which are relatively small” (p. 149). It makes sense that leaders and researchers in our country should investigate the effects of school choice by looking at countries such as Denmark where school choice has been in place for 150 years. Yet “Americans are usually quite reluctant to concede that they have anything to learn from experience elsewhere” (p. 79). Such prevalent reluctance means that this work on other countries’ policies and statistics is full of enlightening surprises.

What America Can Learn from School Choice in Other Countries is a collection of research essays by various authors. Some chapters are specific to a single country, and others compare practices between nations. Countries of special focus include Canada, Sweden, Chile, and New Zealand. Each chapter has a different tone; some are more technical, some more conversational. Although certain chapters seemed to disrupt the flow of the whole by leaning too far one way or the other, all of them contain information that is valuable

and thought provoking. It is helpful that most authors, in their investigation of other countries, regularly refer to the United States, and the implications of their findings on debates and practices here. The clarity and voice of the chapter written by Charles L. Glenn, though placed in the middle of the book, stood out for its fine quality.

Advocates of private schools and school choice will be pleased to read that international findings more than answer the objections of those who oppose school choice in our country, and that countries which offer school choice have seen their school markets flourish.

Yet this news is not given without warning. The authors seem to agree that school choice has many advantages, but can cause failure and frustration if it is not correctly implemented. One author quotes an economist from the Hoover Institute: "The term choice conveys about the same information as saying that I just ate in New York City. There is a wide variety of places to eat in New York City. Some of them are good. Some of them are okay. Some of them are dreadful. And that is my view of what we will see in a number of these choice plans" (p. 80). Key differences among plans in other countries are whether public funds are offered to schools or to individual students, whether all students receive funds or only the poor, and the degree of regulation for schools where public funds are used. In general, the most successful plans seem to be those that allow funds to follow students, so that teachers and schools must maintain quality in order to retain them; those that fund all, but allow the rich to make additional contributions; and those that require minimal government regulation. After all, "if all schools have the same schedule, program, and staffing, what does choice mean?" (p. 176).

In the midst of lauding government funding, the authors also point out the benefit of accountability obtained by parents who continue to pay some fee. Even in developing countries, where they might pay a tuition fee of ten cents each day, parents eagerly seek the better education offered by private schools. As one parent in Kenya put it: "If you go to a market and are offered free fruit and vegetables, they will be rotten. If you want fresh fruit and vegetables, you have to pay for them" (p. 102).

It is heartening to find that private schools have not discriminated against the poor, academically struggling, or disabled, but welcomed them, and benefited them more than public systems. Public schools may have greater numbers of minority students, but these tend to be self-segregated into social cliques, whereas private schools more successfully integrate different ethnicities by unifying students in a common mission. Public schools have not been cheated by open-market systems, but have improved to compete with

private schools. And yes, test scores seem to be positively affected by school choice in other countries.

Although it gives kudos to religious and especially to Catholic schools, the book raises one disturbing question about religion. The conclusion that less regulation allows for more diverse and therefore better schools, including religious schools, is good news to Catholic readers. Yet what about funding religions with radically different world views? If governments allow religious schools to flourish without much regulation, what is to prevent citizens' tax dollars being spent in support of, say, Muslim extremist schools, a reality currently debated in Sweden. Although a satisfactory solution to this problem is not supplied, it is cleverly compared to a similar problem faced in our own country now, where Catholics and others object to their taxes supporting a public system that teaches secular humanism. These matters of religion become a question of freedom: in an educational system without school choice, there will always be disagreement on how issues touching religion should be taught, and those who lose the argument will be held captive in a system that teaches children views that their parents oppose.

The issue of freedom might be the hardest for any American to argue against. This makes it surprising that education enjoys less freedom here than in most countries: "Governments in most Western democracies provide partial or full funding for nongovernment schools chosen by parents; the United States (apart from a few scattered and small-scale programs) is the great exception, along with Greece" (p. 80). Some might argue that parents in the United States are free to choose private schools, but this is not entirely true. "The bottom line is whether we will operate a system of mandatory schooling that denies some parents, because of their relative poverty, the right to make important decisions about what is in the best interest of their children" (p. 82).

Though not all the news in it is indisputable or positive, this book is a valuable resource for anyone who wishes to be an informed advocate for educational freedom.

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