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A Choice Question: School Choice and Educational Equity

By James E. Ryan on March 29, 2016 7:23 AM |

I will pick up here where I left off with my [last blog](#), talking about school choice. School choice, especially if it involves charter schools and vouchers, is a hotly debated topic, with serious and sophisticated arguments on either side, but also a great deal of emotion. The question I keep returning to, as firm believer in education equity, is a simple one: Are you comfortable allowing more affluent families to choose their schools while denying poorer families similar opportunities?

I am genuinely puzzled why those who care about equal educational opportunity but oppose school choice fail to see the tension in those stances. At the moment, families with financial means have options. They can, and often do, select a place to live based on the quality of the public schools, or they can choose a private school. Poorer families have far fewer options. To be sure, the growth of public school choice plans, including charter schools, has offered more choices to lower-income families. But what middle-income and affluent families often take for granted--the ability to select a school for their children--poorer families experience as the exception rather than the rule.

The famous education philosopher and progressive educator John Dewey wrote over a century ago: "What the best and wisest parent wants for his child, that must we want for all the children of the community." The best and wisest parents undoubtedly want their children to attend excellent schools. But even if all schools were excellent, presumably those parents would still want some say over which of those schools their children attend. At a minimum, the best and wisest parents presumably would not want their children to be forced to attend a school that is failing them, with no real option to exit and only a promise of school improvement in the future. Yet that is the situation that too many poor families face.

Choice is hardly a panacea, and choice proponents, if honest, would have to concede that simply allowing for choice does not mean that all of the available options will be good ones. But this is not a very convincing argument for prohibiting school choice. A child with only marginally better choices is still better off than one with no choices at all. And a child with nothing but poor choices is still no worse off than a child with no choices at all--unless the very existence of choice weakens rather than strengthens existing schools.

Which leads to what seems to me a more powerful objection to choice--that it is a distraction that can hamper efforts to improve all public schools. This is a serious objection. To be sure, there is disagreement about this point, with **some** pointing to **the positive effects of competition** and others lamenting the **loss of funding** from traditional public schools when students choose another school, as well as the **potential loss of families who are most actively involved** in their children's education. At the moment, the empirical evidence on whether choice will actually lift all boats or weaken traditional district schools seems--as is often the case--quite mixed.

But notice that most debates about choice are really only about limiting or expanding the choices of poorer families. No one is suggesting that we outlaw private schools or tell people where they can and cannot live. (Can you imagine the latter? Or even the former?) Which means that, regardless of the outcome of myriad debates about expanding or contracting formal school choice plans, families who can choose where to live or who can afford private schools will **always** have school choice. When these families choose to leave a school or a district, or to never enter into one in the first place, they too are depriving the school and district of resources. But no one is forcing, or even really asking, them to stay in particular schools or districts that they dislike in order to make those schools or districts better for everyone else.

The only group currently asked to shoulder this burden are poorer families who, absent a school choice plan, have no options. Why we would single out this group, and this group alone, is hard for me to understand. Which is why, again, to me, the key question in school choice debates is simple: Are you comfortable denying school choice solely to poorer families?