

Charles Glenn
« School Segregation and Virtuous Markets »

Summary: The extensive American experience with racial segregation and attempted desegregation of schools is echoed by the growing problem, in Western Europe, of the concentration of families from outside the EU in 'sensitive' areas and their children in schools with low morale and high rates of failure, and the abandonment of those schools by middle-class families. The author, a long-time state government official responsible for addressing this issue, reviews the remedies attempted in the US over the past half-century, and suggests that, while market forces help segregate schools, they can also – in the right policy framework – be part of the solution to racial/ethnic segregation.

Definitions

Before discussing this complex and sensitive issue, it is important to give concrete meaning to certain terms which will be used.

'Minority group' will refer to those in a given society who differ significantly in appearance (and, typically, in some or many aspects of culture) from the majority, *and* are generally marginalized economically and socially. Under this definition, for example, in the North American context immigrants from the Indian sub-continent or from Korea, while physically and culturally distinctive, do not constitute a 'minority group' since they are notably successful economically and do not experience social discrimination. The primary 'minority groups' in the US, by this definition, are African Americans or blacks, Latinos (Hispanics from the Western Hemisphere), and what are awkwardly called 'Native Americans' or, in Canada, First Peoples.

'Racial imbalance' will be used to refer to the situation in which a school has a significantly-higher proportion of pupils of a minority group than is found in the surrounding area from which pupils could reasonably attend the school, with transportation support as needed, and 'racial

isolation' to the opposite situation, of a significantly-lower proportion of minority pupils, making no judgment about the cause of this situation. 'Racial balance' means that the enrolment of a school approximates the racial/ethnic makeup of school-age youth in area; thus in different areas a racially-balanced school could have very different racial/ethnic proportions.

'Segregation' will refer to racial imbalance or isolation in schools which has not 'just happened' but has been caused in some way other than the decision of members of the minority group itself to cluster together. American law makes a distinction between two sorts of school segregation based on broad categories of causes:

De jure segregation is that arising from government action, most notably the state laws in the South of the United States that were struck down by the famous decision of the Supreme Court in *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954. Courts have also found evidence of *de jure* segregation in some cases in northern states where the government action leading to racial segregation was more subtle and did not declare the intention of keeping the races separate, but had that effect in ways that should have been anticipated. Decisions, for example, about the location of new schools, or the definition of attendance districts for schools (what, in France, is the *carte scolaire*), when those officials making the decisions must have been aware that the effect would be to increase racial imbalance have been found to constitute illegal racial segregation requiring a remedy.

In a case with which I was closely associated, in Boston, the court found (among other evidences of *de jure* segregation through official action and inaction) that school officials had allowed thousands of white pupils to leave the schools to which they had been assigned by their attendance districts as those schools enrolled increasing proportions of black pupils and to go instead to out-of-district schools with a higher proportion of white pupils. This *dérogation à la carte scolaire*, as it would be called in France, had the predictable effect of increasing racial segregation, and at least one French study concludes that the education authorities, by permitting such transfers, "*participe[nt] activement aux processus ségrégatifs*" (Laforgue 2005, 25).

'*De facto* segregation' is the racial imbalance and racial isolation which result from demographic trends unaffected (at least ostensibly) by official action. Only my own state of Massachusetts enacted, in 1965, a law requiring school districts to take action to end *de facto* segregation of schools, and this law was repealed in 1974 as a result of my actually starting to enforce it!

Finally, 'integration' of schools refers to the process of bringing together minority and non-minority pupils in such a way that they are in a positive relationship, both socially and academically. A school is not integrated, by this definition, if it houses a small selective program with a relative handful of white middle-class pupils who have little or no contact with the black and Latino pupils who form the bulk of the school's enrolment.

This process has been observed in some ethnically-mixed communities in France where educators concentrated their efforts more on special arrangements to retain their 'good' pupils rather than on addressing the difficulties of the others, thus tending "*à éloigner les établissements périphériques de leur mission primordiale de transmission de connaissances en faveur de pratiques visant à améliorer l'image disciplinaire des établissements, à renforcer la polarisation scolaire, sociale ou ethnique ou à retraduire la hiérarchie entre établissements en hiérarchie entre classes d'un même établissement*" (van Zanten 2001, 92, 144). Such 'magnet programs' were a device used by the Chicago Public Schools in the 1980s to meet court-ordered desegregation requirements; as the appointed monitor for pupil assignments in Chicago, I criticized this practice in my reports to the court as unrelated to real desegregation.

Why should public policy seek to desegregate schools?

In *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), the United States Supreme Court famously asked, "Does segregation of children in public schools, solely on the basis of race, even though the physical facilities and other 'tangible' factors may be equal, deprive the children of the minority group of equal educational opportunity? We believe that it does. . . . in the field of public education, the doctrine of 'separate but equal' has no place. Separate educational facilities are inherently unequal."

How did the Court arrive at such a decision, after tolerating officially-mandated segregation for many years? It did so on the basis of the language of an amendment to the national Constitution, adopted in 1868 after the Civil War had led to the emancipation of slaves, that guaranteed to all Americans "the equal protection of the laws." Since public schools are, by definition, established by government through its laws, the Court found that "segregation of white and Negro children in the public schools of a State solely on the basis of race, pursuant to state laws permitting or requiring such segregation, denies to Negro children the equal protection of the laws guaranteed by the Fourteenth Amendment - even though the physical facilities and other 'tangible' factors of white and Negro schools may be equal."

In reaching this conclusion, the Court quoted approvingly the finding of a lower court in the same case, that "Segregation of white and colored children in public schools has a detrimental effect upon the colored children. The impact is greater when it has the sanction of the law; for the policy of separating the races is usually interpreted as denoting the inferiority of the negro group."

The emphasis here, it is evident, is on the stigmatizing effect of racial isolation that is caused by government action. Under such circumstances, the Court was saying, an official sanction is given to a broader societal assumption of racial inferiority, both encouraging that assumption on the part of the non-stigmatized majority and making it all the more bitter as experienced by the stigmatized minority. In a fundamental way, the child so stigmatized is denied the equal protection of the laws which is his or her birthright.

The Court, it should be noted, was not addressing *de facto* segregation, the segregation resulting from individual decisions or demographic trends. This has never been declared illegal, but for several decades social scientists argued that their research demonstrated that black pupils made more academic progress when in classes with a significant proportion (usually a majority) of white pupils. More recently, in the general disillusionment over efforts at Northern school desegregation, this finding was increasingly challenged or explained away as a social class rather than race effect, or dismissed by black leaders who disliked the implication that black pupils dragged each other down. Examples are frequently cited of individual schools

which achieve satisfactory results while enrolling only black and Latino pupils from poor families, such as the network of KIPP (Knowledge Is Power Program) schools or a group of Boston charter schools studied recently by one of my doctoral students.

Nevertheless, economist Eric Hanushek, in a careful analysis of nationwide data, has concluded that

We find small and insignificant impacts of school racial composition on whites and Hispanics, but there are strong impacts of the black composition of schools on the performance of blacks. The magnitude of the proportion black coefficient for blacks of -0.25 suggests that a 10 percentage-point reduction in percentage black would raise annual achievement growth by 0.025 standard deviations. These estimated effects apply to the growth of annual achievement and thus accumulate across grades, implying a substantial role for school racial composition in the determination of the racial achievement gap (Hanushek 2007, 174).

Why? We don't know, but it suggests that efforts to desegregate public school systems during the 1960s and 1970s were not misguided, even though the results have been undermined by demographic change.

Another reason to continue to seek to achieve racial integration of schools is the traditional reason, in the United States and other countries, for the creation of common public schools: the desire to overcome the prejudices and simple ignorance about others that attending separate schools was thought to reinforce. During the 19th century, this belief was most commonly directed against the existence of separate Catholic schools. In France, for example, anti-clerical spokesmen assumed that the education received in Catholic schools would make their pupils unfit to be citizens. In a celebrated formulation in 1822, General Foy lamented that "they will have received in these establishments, which are not national, an instruction which is not national, and thus these establishments will have the effect of dividing France into two youths (*deux jeunesses*) (in Rémond 1985, 114). In the Netherlands, in the same period, the common primary school was lauded as the instrument by which the nation would be knit together. As the

United States, in the 1850s, sought to deal with the massive immigration of Catholics from Ireland and Germany, Protestant leader Horace Bushnell drew a sharp distinction: "Common schools are nurseries thus of a free republic, private schools of factions, cabals, agrarian laws, and contests of force. . . The arrangement is not only unchristian, but it is thoroughly un-American, hostile at every point to our institutions themselves." Catholic schools, according to Bushnell, were a menace to society, and their religious justification was in fact no justification at all. In such schools, the children of immigrants "will be instructed mainly into the foreign prejudices and superstitions of their fathers, and the state, which proposes to be clear of all sectarian affinities in religion, will pay the bills!" (Bushnell, 1880, 299-303).

This last cluster of concerns, then, is less about social justice and more about social harmony; it rests on the assumption that, for its own protection, government should seek to *educate* (not just to *instruct*) all of the children of ordinary citizens or subjects in a common school where they will be shaped to a common pattern of convictions and loyalties. By the same logic, the existence of separate schools – generally on the basis of religious identity – has been perceived as a menace to national unity and social harmony.

[Note that this concern has not generally been to the existence of schools serving the social elite. The opposition to private schooling in the United States has seldom been to its *class* character; the teacher unions do not deplore the existence of elite independent schools or the use made of them by elected officials of unimpeachable liberal credentials: Clintons, Gores, Obamas. There seems to be a tacit acknowledgment that those who can afford high tuitions and who do not choose to live in affluent suburbs will pay for private schooling for their children. Surely that is because the commitment of American elites to the national project is not in question; in fact, it is *their* project.

[The danger comes, it is believed, from the existence of an alternative, for the children of 'ordinary' Americans and of immigrants, to the socializing function of the common public school. These families, it is assumed, cannot be trusted to convey to their children the necessary civic virtue of tolerance, based upon the cultivation of indifference to beliefs that "go all the way down."

[Similarly in France, it does not seem to have occurred to Ferry, Buisson, and others who sought to turn 'peasants into Frenchmen' (in Eugen Weber's phrase) through *l'école de la République* that they should abolish the *classes préparatoires* of the *lycées* or send the children of the *beaux quartiers* to school with working-class children. Measures taken in recent decades, such as the *collège unique* and increased participation in the *baccalauréat*, in France, or, in England, with the comprehensive secondary school, have indeed done something to reduce the educational advantages that the lower middle class has been able to give its children over those of the working class – creating new problems in the process – but it has left elite schooling intact.]

It seems quite clear, in fact, that concerns about confessional schooling – notably, Catholic schools – were misplaced; millions of children attend Catholic schools in the United States and other Western democracies, and have done so for many decades, without producing religious conflict or mutual intolerance. Major studies of the effects of Catholic schooling (and the few studies that have been done of 'fundamentalist' Protestant schooling) have found that their graduates are if anything *more* tolerant and civically-engaged than are the graduates of public schools (see Bryk, Lee, and Holland 1993; Pushkin 1986).

But if separate schooling on the basis of religion has not produced the socially-harmful effects that were often predicted, what about Islamic schools in the context of Western societies? Here the best source of evidence is from the Netherlands, where about fifty Islamic schools are government-funded and follow the general guidelines of other Dutch schools. AnneBert Dijkstra, Ben Vermeulen, and other Dutch scholars who have followed the situation closely report that repeated studies, by government agencies and others, have not found the negative effects that might be anticipated. Muslim pupils in these schools do not seem more alienated from Dutch society than their counterparts attending non-Islamic 'black' schools (with a very high proportion of immigrant minority pupils), and if anything their achievement is somewhat higher. It seems not to be the religious content (alongside the regular Dutch curriculum) as such that causes social marginalization, but this is not to minimize the effects on their

achievement and integration of the largely segregated schooling of many immigrant pupils in the Netherlands.

This brings us back to the issue of race or ethnicity, and specifically of minority status. The concern of the Supreme Court in *Brown* was about the way in which children from a socially-marginalized racial group widely considered to be inferior culturally and intellectually (as was the case with African Americans in the 1950s) would have that crippling identity reinforced by the fact of attending separate schools. Unspoken but surely also on the minds of the justices was that members of the majority white group would be reinforced in their negative assumptions about their black peers by the perception that 'black schools' were inferior, if not in resources (though most of them were) then in the quality of their pupils and the expectations of academic success.

To quote again from the 1954 *Brown* ruling, "a sense of inferiority affects the motivation of a child to learn. Segregation with the sanction of law, therefore, has a tendency to [retard] the educational and mental development of negro children and to deprive them of some of the benefits they would receive in a racial[ly] integrated school system."

This conclusion does not preclude – as we have seen – good education in schools which are all-black or all-Latino; indeed, there has been considerable interest in creating public schools that are especially targeted to provide an effective education to minority pupils, sometimes further distinguished by serving only boys or girls (see Glenn 1995a). Since such schools are presented with high expectations for academic achievement, and are chosen voluntarily by the parents or the pupils themselves, the problem of negative assumptions does not arise, and the advocates for such schools hope that they can overcome the self-limitation which John Ogbu (2003), Ronald Ferguson (2007), Signithia Fordham (1996), Claude Steele, and other social scientists have found to be characteristic of many black youth.

Such schools are exceptional, however, and do not remove the rationale for seeking to achieve racial (and social-class) integration of schools. The fundamental rationale for such integration is that, in general, schools serving white and Asian middle-class pupils are characterized by higher

expectations of academic effort and achievement than are schools predominantly serving pupils of minority groups which are not generally expected (even by themselves) to be successful academically. A secondary but also important rationale is that low-performing schools reinforce residential patterns of racial and social-class segregation as parents who are ambitious for their children employ any means available to escape; this residential segregation creates a downward spiral of increasing hopelessness and diminished effort among what William Julius Wilson refers to as 'the truly disadvantaged.'

Public policy has every reason to seek to promote the academic success of minority pupils, and to counter the formation and intensification of residential ghettos. For these reasons, public policy should promote the racial integration of schools.

Markets as a cause of school segregation

With Belgian legal scholar Jan De Groof, I have published chapters on nearly fifty different national systems of education, seeking to specify to what extent parents are able to exercise choice among schools, educators are able to create distinctive schools, and government enforces common standards (Glenn 1995b; Glenn and De Groof, 2004). In every one of these countries, market forces are at work in education, whether or not they are officially acknowledged. Even in countries officially under communist rule – the former Soviet Union, China and Vietnam today – members of the elite are able to send their children to favored schools with those of other members of the elite, just as do the Clintons, Gores, and Obamas in the United States.

It is evident that racial imbalance – the disproportionate concentration of disadvantaged minority pupils in schools with dismal reputations – is to a considerable extent the result of the operation of markets, usually in an unintended alliance with decisions made by government. Thus, in the terms used in American law, such racial imbalance is the result of both *de jure* and *de facto* segregation. There is a *de jure* element because government makes decisions about the

location and scale of subsidized housing intended for low-income families, about the location and size of schools, and about the attendance zones prescribed for those schools. It is evident that a moderate-size school located near a large housing development is likely to serve predominantly pupils living in that development, while a larger school located near a smaller housing development might draw pupils from an area that also included middle-class residential areas.

Apart from such government decisions, however, the exercise of choice by families – especially families in an economic position to make residential decisions – within a market for housing is the primary cause of *de facto* segregation of schools. There is a great deal of evidence that the perceived quality of schools is a major factor in these decisions. Some of this evidence is anecdotal (real estate agents in the United States, at least, usually have achievement data for local schools at their fingertips), but there have also been convincing studies demonstrating this to be the case. For example, Linda Darling-Hammond and Sheila Nataraj Kirby found that 53 percent of public school parents in suburban Minnesota "had considered public school quality as an important factor in determining residential location" (Darling-Hammond and Kirby 1988, 248). The same phenomenon has been noted in France (van Zanten and Obin 2008, 79). But 'school quality,' in such circumstances, refers in large part to the type of pupils attending the school and of course the impact of that upon academic expectations and outcomes.

Parents who can't make such choices, for financial reasons or because their employment or their ideological convictions create pressure to live in areas with schools enrolling a large proportion of pupils whom they consider undesirable as peers for their own children, commonly employ other strategies to find 'niches' within those schools which will ensure a more selective group of classmates. *"L'effet agrégé de ces pratiques est le maintien de ségrégations existantes ou l'émergence de nouvelles, tant à l'intérieur des établissements scolaire qu'entre ceux-ci. Ce processus affecte en premier lieu, et de façon beaucoup plus décisive, les familles les plus démunies qui disposent de peu de moyens pour réagir aux contraintes de leur environnement local"* (van Zanten 2001, 104-5, 365).

This is especially the case in urban settings. A study of the failure of school reform in four American cities where, in the 1970s, leadership for public schools had been entrusted to black educators in the hope that they would bring about fundamental positive change documents how most of their 'progressive' white allies withdrew from active engagement with the schools. "Many white parents pointed to the declining quality of education in the public schools as a major contributor to their limited activism in school affairs." Anxious to retain middle-class residents and taxpayers, cities created or maintained "an elite subset of predominantly white, upper socioeconomic status schools [which], combined with the deterioration and unresponsiveness that characterized the broader system, provided parents with an incentive to pursue their children's needs at a microlevel" (Henig, Hula, Orr, and Pedescleaux 2001, 53). One is reminded of Agnès van Zanten's 'hypothesis' that it is the existence in France of the alternative of private schools and of public schools with elite programs which maintains "*dans certains communes périphériques une certain mixité urbaine, sans doute très superficielle*" (van Zanten 2001, 5, 136-7). This describes the situation in American cities as well.

In Washington, D.C., in particular, white pupils from middle-class families have become concentrated in a few schools in one section of the city and – faced with declining enrolments – the principals of these schools were able to attract upwardly-mobile black families living in other parts of the city. "Parents in these enclave schools are extremely active and involved, but most of their energies are targeted at improving the relative position of their school versus others, rather than aiming for changes that might benefit the system at large." The middle-class parents expressed some guilt but, as one put it, "in the end, the decision came down to one thing: we didn't want our kids to suffer" (Henig, Hula, Orr, and Pedescleaux 2001, 198f). Similarly in France, parents of irreproachably progressive views are tempted, when their children are ready to enter intermediate school, to look for alternatives to unacceptable schools, through "*des demandes officielles de dérogation, au contournement de la carte scolaire par le biais de fausses adresses et des contacts avec les chefs d'établissement ou au choix du secteur privé*" (van Zanten 2001, 108).

A more recent study of American cities found that this was even more the case in those few cities where the mayor has gained control of the school system; the authors suggest that this

"may be a result of mayors' interests in maintaining high-performing schools to anchor middle-class communities in the city" by introducing "more rigorous curricular programs, such as advanced placement and international baccalaureate classes, as a strategy to attract well-prepared students" (Wong, Shen, Anagnostopoulos, and Rutledge 2007, 108, 110).

Whatever the negative social consequences, it is evident that it is a perfectly rational choice for parents to seek to enroll their children in schools with high academic expectations and also (and it would be a mistake to dismiss this as social snobbery) in a peer culture that values academic effort and ambitious goals. Arguably, indeed, the most important benefit that parents can give their children, once these have passed the stage of learning language and habits of optimistic industry, is so to arrange matters that they will associate with peers who will raise rather than lower their ambitions. Thus Steinberg points out that "although parents can't choose their children's friends, they can influence their child's choices by defining the available pool of possible peers" in various ways, of which school choices are undoubtedly the most powerful. Based on a large-scale study of peer culture in American secondary schools, Steinberg reports that "peers were far more influential than parents in influencing teenagers' achievement, especially when it comes to day-to-day matters such as doing homework, concentrating in class, or taking their studies seriously. . . . we also found plenty of evidence for the power of 'good' friends to compensate for deficiencies in the home environment" (Steinberg 1997, 152, 25).

That being the case, it is not surprising that a number of studies in different countries have found that the parents most eager to exercise school choice for their children are not those of the solid middle class, who characteristically live in areas with satisfactory schools, but marginally middle-class and upwardly-mobile working-class parents who cannot afford to move out of what they consider undesirable neighborhoods but want their children to be in school with the sort of peers who are not available locally (van Zanten and Obin 2008, 98).

Researchers in Scotland, for example, found that manual workers were strongly over-represented (37 percent) among those requesting school transfers under the government's choice policy compared with their 20 percent presence in the population. "The primary reason

(60 percent) given by parents requesting an elementary level assignment was avoidance of their local school, often because of the perceived roughness of its students, and preference of another for safety and school climate reasons." Transfer requests at the secondary level were often motivated by a feeling on the part of parents that "the school was not seen as providing an adequate counter-attack to peer-group culture. Nor was this parental belief uninformed; the researchers found that "in some instances parents had access to information (e.g. about bullying and attitudes of local peer groups) which may have led some parents to have been better informed than some parents" (Macbeth, Strachan, and Macauley 1986, 299, 279, 124). Similarly, in a working-class *banlieue* of Paris it is concerns about the moral and social as much as the academic development of their children in the local schools "*qu'incite une fraction grandissante de parents, y compris des parents d'origine immigrée, à quitter les établissements publics du quartier pour des établissements présentant plus de garanties d'encadrement pédagogique et moral*" (van Zanten 2001, 376).

Although such motivations for choice are commonly cited by choice opponents as evidence that choice has nothing to do with academic quality, in fact we know that peer influence and school climate are intimately related to learning.

In the United States, a nationwide study of public attitudes toward 'vouchers' to allow pupils to attend nonpublic schools at public expense found that, among parents with children in public schools, vouchers were supported by 73 percent of those with family incomes below \$20,000 a year, compared with 57 percent of those with family incomes above \$60,000. Breaking out the results by race, 75 percent of black parents and 71 percent of Hispanic parents, compared with 63 percent of white parents, supported vouchers. Significantly, 72 percent of all parents in the lowest-achieving school districts favored vouchers, compared with 59 percent of those in the highest-performing districts (Moe 2000, 212). The results should be unsurprising, since it is low-income parents, minority parents, and parents forced to live in less effective school districts who have the most need for public support to exercise the choices on behalf of their children that other parents are already making.

Much as they would like to have such choices, however, poor and working-class parents must generally be contented with the schools to which their children are assigned by government, usually on the basis of residential districts that are usually economically segregated through the functioning of the housing market. Not only do these parents lack the financial resources to move to residential areas near the more desirable schools, but they also commonly lack the social capital that enables middle-class parents to manipulate the system as 'school consumers' (Ballion 1982).

It is evident, then, that the choices made by middle-class parents, above all by where they choose to live, and by those among the working class with relatively more social capital and thus the attitudes and skills needed to take advantage of opportunities to escape from their residentially-assigned schools, are a major factor in exacerbating the concentration of pupils from less-affluent or less-enterprising families in schools which in the great majority of cases exhibit both low expectations and low outcomes academically and socially. The effect is, we could say, individually advantageous but socially harmful.

If those who leave tend to care the most about their children's education and have the socioeconomic status that makes exit more feasible, suburbanization may selectively deplete the supply of those who are most likely to constitute an effective leadership core around which a political movement for reform might be built (Henig, Hula, Orr, and Pedescleaux 2001, 196).

As in France (Ballion 1991; van Zanten and Obin, 75-6), it appears that American teachers are especially inclined to exercise school choice for their children; an often-cited (and never, to my knowledge, refuted) study by the American Enterprise Institute, released in 1988, found that between 25 and 35 percent of public school teachers (compared with 14 percent of the general population) in nine large cities sent their children to non-public schools.

This process is often deplored by 'Progressives' (who, typically, do not send their own children to the schools that other parents seek to avoid), as in a collection of studies edited by three members of the education faculty at Harvard. Like most professors, they are critical of vouchers

and other devices to allow poor parents to exercise the choices that middle-class parents take for granted. An example of the 'spin' that characterizes this collection is the comment, in the introductory chapter, that "school choice [through vouchers and other policies] implies . . . that if young white professionals want to have schools serving their particular educational interests, they should have a right to a share of public resources to pursue their private interests" (Fuller, Elmore, and Orfield 1996, 17). Of course; we call those suburban schools!

What the studies they use actually show is that, among poor black parents, those who are aware of and take part in school choice programs tend, not to be better-educated or less impoverished, but to be more concerned than their neighbors about the quality of schooling their children receive and more optimistic that education can make a difference in their lives. In St. Louis, "parents who were more involved in their children's choices tended to accept the dominant achievement ideology, an acceptance they generally passed to their children" (Fuller, Elmore, and Orfield 1996, 32). Other parents left the decision up to their children, who "opted for the nearby and the familiar: the all-black neighborhood school," even though they tended to make derogatory comments about those schools and to expect little from their education. In Milwaukee, they found, poor parents using vouchers for non-public schools had been more involved than others in advocating for their children; they had been Ballion's 'school consumers'.

Several of the researchers pointed out, with good reason, that public policy should be concerned with those poor children whose parents are less motivated and involved. That is certainly true. It would be perverse, however, to snatch away the rewards of involvement for some families simply because other families do not take advantage of opportunities. Isn't it possible that some of the latter, seeing how their similarly-situated neighbors benefit from better schools, will come to change their attitude about what is possible? African American anthropologist Reginald Clark's *Family Life and School Achievement: Why Poor Black Children Succeed or Fail* shows how profoundly important expectations are, especially for those considered by many policy gurus as victims incapable of changing the fate dealt them by an unjust society. Life is unjust, but the parents who take part in these choice programs are seeking to do something about it for their children.

Frustration of school desegregation efforts

After the 1954 *Brown* decision, a number of American school systems that were required to desegregate their schools because of previous *de jure* segregation adopted 'freedom of choice' plans under which black pupils were allowed to transfer to formerly 'white' schools, and vice versa. For a variety of reasons – including physical intimidation and administrative hassles – these policies had little effect and most schools remained nearly as identifiable racially as before, with only about 15 percent of black pupils attending 'white' schools and no white pupils attending 'black' schools. In 1968, the Supreme Court ruled that 'freedom of choice' was not by itself a sufficient remedy for previous *de jure* segregation. This led to a variety of plans that relied on changing attendance zones and even creating non-continuous attendance patterns, assigning pupils to schools located outside of their residential neighborhoods.

In 1971, I was placed in charge of desegregation and other equity issues for public schools in Massachusetts; I had been serving as urban education coordinator for the state education agency and was completing a doctoral dissertation at Harvard assessing prospects for region-wide desegregation in the Boston area, and concluding that the likely resistance from affluent suburban communities made it unlikely. My own seven children would attend the Boston Public Schools over a period of thirty years, and often my child would be the only white child in his or her class. My wife was for a number of years the paid parent coordinator for the Rafael Hernandez School, a bilingual elementary school. Most of our friends also had their children in public magnet schools in Boston. None of these schools practiced the sort of internal segregation that I had noted in Chicago; as the state official overseeing them, I made sure of that.

In Boston, our preliminary investigation found that some 7,000 pupils (out of around 80,000) were attending schools outside of their residential attendance zones under an 'open enrolment' policy that the local authorities had adopted, allegedly to reduce the racial imbalance in predominantly-black schools. In fact, we found, the great majority of those making use of this

policy were white parents seeking to escape the 'neighborhood schools' in residential areas that were undergoing racial change. An educational market existed in Boston, but it was exacerbating racial segregation.

In the school desegregation plan that we developed over the next several years, and that was implemented in September 1974, we sought to end this abuse of 'open enrolment' and to provide mandatory assignments to schools based upon newly-defined attendance zones that incorporated both predominantly-black and predominantly-white residential areas. The following year, an even more extensive mandatory assignment plan, including non-contiguous zones, was implemented. White pupils were assigned to schools in black neighborhoods, and vice versa, and extensive conflict and disruption of the functioning of schools resulted.

It is fair to say that these plans, for a variety of reasons, were largely unsuccessful in achieving their purpose. That is, they *did* manage to ensure that there were no schools in Boston that were 'white havens'; every school (except for two secondary schools with selective admission) came to reflect to a considerable extent the racial proportions of all the schools in its section of the city. The problem was that within a few years there were not enough white pupils left in the system to provide meaningful racial integration.

This was not entirely a matter of 'white flight': in 1972 (before desegregation began) we had already noted that there were twice as many white pupils graduating from secondary school each year as there were entering first grade. Boston was changing demographically. But there can be no question that the turmoil associated with desegregation, and loss of confidence in the public schools on the part of white parents, contributed to the process.

'Virtuous Markets' as a potential remedy for school segregation

Despite the general discouragement about the results of our efforts, we noticed one bright spot. There were a number of 'magnet schools' – ten at the elementary and three at the intermediate level – which were allowed to continue to enrol their pupils on the basis of parental choice, and these were successful in retaining white pupils and, in fact, had far more applications than they could accommodate. Even as these schools became half and then two-thirds and then three-quarters minority in their enrolment, reflecting the overall demographic changes in the system, white middle-class parents continued to send their children and to be highly involved with these schools.

As we reflected on the evident success of the magnet schools, based on a sort of 'virtuous market' in public schooling, and the contemporaneous failure of mandatory measures, based on a sort of 'command economy' of top-down decision-making, it became evident that, to achieve real racial integration, we needed to work *with* rather than *against* the wishes of parents for their children. We needed to persuade rather than seek to compel, not least because the white, middle-class families whose children could contribute so much to the education of black and Latino pupils could not be compelled to send their children to schools in which they did not have confidence. Their financial and social resources allowed them to escape our grasp, just as middle-class parents in France escape the efforts of government to impose schools which they perceive as "*trop mixés*" (Laforgue 2005, 179).

This realization also made us aware of what we had been doing all along without reflecting on it: compelling poor parents, who had no such resources, to send *their* children to schools that we would not have entrusted with our own children. We realized belatedly that this was wrong, and that we should stop treating *any* parents as passive recipients of our decisions.

In 1974, the state legislature created a new funding program in support of racial balance and I was placed in charge; over the next sixteen years this provided supplemental funding amounting cumulatively to around \$200 million to school systems in Massachusetts for the purpose of promoting desegregation. As we worked with seventeen other cities to develop effective plans, we sought to avoid the mistakes we had made in Boston and instead build systems based upon respecting parental concerns and choices.

Initially this involved the replication of the 'magnet school' model, but we came to see that this produced the negative unintended consequence of tending to concentrate the most imaginative and committed educators in the magnet schools, where they attracted the white and black and Latino families with the most social capital, leading to school systems that in a sense operated at two speeds. Magnet schools were generally quite successful, but the other schools became all the more demoralized and ineffective. In addition, while expanding the opportunity of parents to choose, magnet schools also – precisely to the extent that they were successful in doing so – increased the number of disappointed applicants and thus of children assigned *involuntarily*. Typically they had several times as many applicants as they could accept, so that hopes were raised only to be disappointed. In Springfield, one year, only 37 percent of the applicants to magnet schools could be accommodated, while Worcester could accept only 600 of 1,700 applicants to a new citywide magnet school.

To address this problem, during the 1980s we began to encourage (and fund) urban school systems to adopt what we called 'controlled choice,' under which all school attendance districts were abolished and pupils were assigned to schools on the basis of a carefully-designed process in which parental choice played the major role. Since these other cities, unlike Boston, were not under court orders to remediate *de jure* segregation, we had to persuade them to reorganize their school systems on this basis. This turned out not to be terribly difficult. Assigning pupils to schools on the basis of where they live has some practical advantages, but geographically-based assignments also create problems for school systems: as demographic changes increase or decrease the number of school-aged children in a particular area, attendance areas must be redrawn, portable classrooms added, schools closed (usually over fierce local opposition), or the grade-levels assigned to each building reshuffled.

The reality of changing urban residential patterns, in particular, is that many pupils cannot attend their neighborhood school. "Neighborhoods" rarely produce just the right number of children at each grade level to fill up schools precisely, even if everyone wanted their neighborhood school -- which they do not. One of the benefits of instituting controlled choice in Massachusetts cities was to minimize the impact of neighborhood population changes on local

schools. In Fall River, for example, the Wiley School had 258 pupils in its former attendance area, while the Fowler had 90; this would produce an average class size of 43 at the Wiley and 13 at the Fowler if every pupil had attended a neighborhood school. After we implemented controlled choice, each had 25-26 pupils per class. In Holyoke, the Lawrence School had a capacity of 530 but 1,042 pupils in its attendance zone, while the McMahon School had a capacity of 300 but only 118 in its attendance zone. Universal parent choice made it possible to assign the more popular schools to their optimal level, while under-enrolling schools that fewer parents chose, even if located in densely-populated areas.

As a result of these efforts, by 1990 more than 200,000 Massachusetts urban pupils were attending schools through explicit parental choice policies designed to reduce racial imbalance, 145,000 of these under 'controlled choice' and the balance under magnet school plans. Thus 25 percent of the state's public school pupils, and around 90 percent of its black and Latino pupils, were in school systems that were making a deliberate and effective use of parental choice – markets – for racial/ethnic and social class integration and to give a new dynamism to individual schools by the need to respond to parental expectations.

Unlike the usual "winner-take-all, devil-take-the-hindmost" (what the French like to call *capitalisme sauvage*) strategies of unrestrained but unacknowledged competition among schools, this 'equitable market' approach sought to provide comparable benefits to *all* pupils and also to increase the effective participation of low-income and minority children and their parents in the process of education.

Boston implemented controlled choice in September 1989. Under its previous desegregation plan, approximately 25 percent of the system's pupils attended magnet schools on the basis of choice, while the remainder – many of them unsuccessful applicants to magnet schools – were assigned without choice on the basis of the attendance zone where they lived. By contrast, the entry-level grades assigned under controlled choice were more desegregated than had been the case before, and the great majority of pupils were assigned to schools that their parents had indicated as one of their choices: 85 percent of the first graders, 87 percent of the sixth graders,

and 91 percent of the ninth graders in Boston were assigned to schools that had been selected by their parents, and in most cases to their first choices.

What about the desegregation requirement? In Fall 1990, only 1.7 percent of the pupils assigned to the entry levels of Boston schools (238 of 14,041 first, sixth and ninth graders) were either denied a place or assigned involuntarily to a place that another pupil was denied in order to meet desegregation guidelines.

Controlled choice worked like this: automatic assignment of pupils to schools on the basis of where they live was abolished, and the parents of children new to the school system or moving to the next level of schooling were required to visit state-funded parent information centers where they received information and counseling about all options before indicating preferences. Both printed information and counseling were available in the appropriate languages: Spanish, Haitian Kreyol, Khmer, Cape Verdean Criolo, etc, as well as in English. Each application was coded in three categories (black, white, and other minority), given a random number, and a sophisticated computer program then sought to satisfy as many as possible of the first, second, and third choices made by parents, consistent with available capacities and with achieving as much racial balance as possible in each school.

An important point to note here is that controlled choice was designed to be universal; it was not a way for sophisticated parents to seek a more desirable school for their children, while other parents accepted the school to which their children were assigned. Every parent (and, in the absence of a responsible parent, the guardian) was engaged in a process of choice, since there was no other way to get a child into a school. My analysis of the 1990 assignment data in Boston found that black parents were actually more likely than white parents to receive their first choices. As part of a federally-funded study, we conducted interviews with several hundred low-income parents in four cities, using native speakers of the most prevalent languages, and found a high degree of satisfaction with the information provided to them and with the entire process of school choice.

Controlled choice had four goals:

- (1) to give all pupils in a community (or in a geographical section of a larger city) equal access to every public school, not limited by where their families could afford to live;
- (2) to involve all parents in making informed decisions about where their children would go to school, and thus to increase their support for and involvement in the school;
- (3) to create pressure for the improvement, over time, of every school through eliminating guaranteed enrollment on the basis of residence; and
- (4) to improve racial balance of every school with as few mandatory assignments as possible.

The Massachusetts experience with school choice policies made clear that educational markets do not function by themselves to produce the benefits frequently claimed. The 'invisible hand' is not enough. A well-designed strategy for putting choice to work for educational reform should include three elements:

- (a) procedures to ensure equal access unlimited by race, wealth or influence, to maintain confidence in the fairness of the admission process, and (where required by law or sought as a matter of policy) to promote the racial integration of each school;
- (b) effective outreach and individual counseling to ensure that as high a proportion as possible of parents make conscious, informed decisions about the schools that will serve their children well; and
- (c) measures to ensure that there are real educational choices available, including (1) removal of bureaucratic requirements that limit new approaches desired by parents and teachers, (2) help to schools that are not able to attract applications, (3) leadership and other changes if such schools do not change over time, and (4) opportunities for groups of teachers, parents, or others to initiate additional alternatives within or outside existing structures.

Controlled choice, as implemented in ten Massachusetts cities and several cities elsewhere in the United States, provided a framework – and a powerful incentive – for bringing together these elements in a powerful combination with school-based management and pedagogical reform.

The school systems that made most effective use of parental choice made a point of conducting surveys to identify the educational themes that would appeal to a diverse population of families, and then of working with individual schools to translate such themes consistently into the character of the school. This meant, for example, preventing every school from simply declaring itself committed to academic excellence (as tended to happen under school choice policies in England, leading to hierarchies of competition) and ensuring that there was a variety of educational options, such as schools using the graphic arts or hands-on science or music or a foreign language, or some other emphasis, across the whole curriculum in imaginative ways.

In particular, options likely to be attractive to middle-class parents were located in schools in poor neighborhoods, and options likely to be attractive to immigrant parents in neighborhoods with few immigrants, the opposite of the segregative placement of programs described by Laforge in a French city (Laforge 2005, 40). The Boston public school which my own children attended through grade five used both Spanish and English for instruction starting in kindergarten, with pupils from Spanish-speaking and English-speaking homes together continuously, learning through both languages; it was regularly over-subscribed by white and black as well as Latino parents.

Beyond 'Controlled Choice'

Controlled choice had a serious limitation as implemented in Massachusetts, however, in that it applied only to the schools of a given municipality. In periods of declining enrolment, the schools which attracted few applications could and were in some cases closed or converted to other uses with completely new staffing, but in other periods it was necessary to assign pupils to these schools against the choices of their parents. The same phenomenon, blunting the effect of 'market' forces, has been noted in France (van Zanten and Obin 2008, 107).

While this created a strong incentive to do whatever was necessary to make those schools more acceptable, it also created frustration because of the expectations raised by the choice process itself. True, it was arguably more fair that this frustration was experienced by an arbitrarily-selected cross-section of parents rather than, as before, only by those with less ability to be effective 'school consumers.' This was small consolation, however, and in a 1991 article describing controlled choice in Massachusetts, I concluded that more should be done to create additional options for parents, including new public schools not operated by the existing bureaucratic and slow-moving school systems (Glenn 1991). What then was a small experiment with public 'charter schools' in Minnesota has since spread across the country and produced thousands of new public schools which live or die by whether they are able to persuade parents to enrol their children, while at the same time being held to accountability by government in a variety of ways.

Charter schools, as they have developed, have some tendency to create the problem which we noted with magnet schools, of attracting the most innovative and committed educators and the most engaged parents while leaving other schools all the more dreary. While there is some recent research indicating a positive 'charter school effect' on non-charter schools, it may be time to consider adapting the model of universal controlled choice to the new and more dynamic situation, with every public school a charter school with its own clearly-defined mission expressed in a distinctive character. Paul Hill and his co-authors have developed a bold organizational model that could make this possible (Hill, Pierce and Guthrie 1997).

Commentators on the unequal competition between public and private schools in countries where the latter are publicly-funded commonly note that they are not subject to as many constraints as are their public counterparts, being free to accept applicants without regard to attendance districts (Maroy 2006, 185). One way to "level the playing-field," by fixing attendance zones for private schools as in Spain and in Korea, can only introduce additional rigidity into the educational system. It seems more sensible, instead, to allow public schools to behave more like private schools; this is what charter schools have made possible, thus enabling every parent, including those with few financial or social resources, to decide what is best for his or her child.

Children attend schools that are of uneven quality; that is an unfortunate given, and always has been; it has been created not by the choice of parents but by neglect and complacency on the part of educators and public officials. The power of parent choice as an impetus for school reform is that schools cannot remain seriously inadequate, so long as parents are given accurate information and honest counseling.

But do parents always make wise choices? Of course not, nor should that be the test of whether they should be allowed to choose, any more than it is with the decision of how much TV their children will be allowed to watch or what food they will eat. After all, if there are schools the choice of which would be positively harmful to children, why are we now assigning children to those schools involuntarily? It is an appropriate task of public policy *to ensure that there are no bad choices* through some form of public oversight and intervention when necessary, but not to substitute the judgment of an official for that of a parent simply because the parent does not take into account every nuance of school quality. It is not as though educators themselves were in agreement about the characteristics of a good school. That's the whole point of the 'charter school' movement which has brought so much new energy into American education.

We should not be too quick to accept that 'ordinary' parents cannot make sound choices among the school available, nor to dismiss the possibility that the process of doing so -- with appropriate support -- will in fact strengthen them as parents (Glenn 1987). Nor should we take lightly the human significance of being allowed and encouraged to take responsibility for decisions about education. As legal scholar John Coons points out,

[t]he right to form families and to determine the scope of their children's practical liberty is for most men and women the primary occasion for choice and responsibility. One does not have to be rich or well placed to experience the family. The opportunity over a span of fifteen or twenty years to attempt the transmission of one's deepest values to a beloved child provides a unique arena for the creative impulse. Here is the communication of ideas in its most elemental mode. Parental expression, for all its invisibility to the media, is an activity with profound First Amendment implications (Coons 1985, 511).

If, as some argue, there are parents who do not and probably cannot make informed choices for their children, that is all the more reason to create systems of universal choice that create pressure to improve all schools, not just offer magnet schools to satisfy middle class parents and keep their children in the school system. After all, what is the superior merit of an assignment, for the children of neglectful parents, based upon neighborhood residence alone?

No, the risk that a few parents will make ill-informed choices or fail to choose altogether should not carry much weight. While society is not always successful in protecting the children of neglectful parents, the adequacy of schooling – since it is inherently public even if in a non-governmental school – is relatively simple to oversee. We should perhaps be more concerned about the children who suffer today from neglectful public schools, in systems whose placement decisions are made by impersonal lines on a map.

NOTE: I resigned my position as the state official responsible for educational equity in September 1991 to take up a faculty appointment at Boston University, and my subsequent research has been largely international and historical; thus the account, above, of Massachusetts does not purport to describe developments there since 1991.

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