

# Good Choices for Teachers

*School choice has the potential to enhance professionalism and collegiality among teachers.*

**By David J. Ferrero**

As a teacher, I had much in common with my progressive colleagues. We all wanted students to read well, think critically, and live happy, prosperous lives. Each of us had credible conceptions of democracy, freedom, and achievement. We all agreed that schools should be challenging, personalized, and staffed by committed teachers who inspire and motivate students.

But our understanding of what those things actually require of schools differed profoundly. Our definitions of democratic freedom and how to achieve it derived from different intellectual and moral traditions, as did our beliefs about what's worth learning, what counts as achievement and, most important, what kind of school is best for children and society.

The differences go deep. Pedagogical and curricular beliefs are extensions of more comprehensive philosophical or religious doctrines that are in turn coloured by ideological ones. This is why educators have never agreed on what knowledge should be taught or how to teach it.

Given these profound disagreements, I have come to believe that educators would derive more satisfaction from an education system that gave them greater freedom to create schools according to their principles, in recognition of the powerful influence that philosophical, ideological, and sometimes spiritual worldviews have over those principles.

Such a system would entail allowing parents to choose the schools their children will attend, because the many different kinds of schools established under such an arrangement would correspond to the values and needs of educators, students, and parents.

In short, a system of school choice would prove more satisfying for educators because it could foster the creation of cohesive learning communities based on common beliefs about teaching and learning.

Despite moving toward a greater appreciation for pluralism in other spheres of life, educators and policy-makers persist in their attempts to impose a uniform doctrine of education on the entire institution of schooling.

One reason for the difficulty of comprehensive school reform is that any attempt to impose coherence inevitably generates resistance among a plurality of the teachers. To be sure, some resist out of sheer lassitude or intransigence. But others resist because they hold contrary beliefs about their vocation as educators.

To keep the peace, schools often resort to giving teachers a lot of latitude in their classroom practices — hence the oft-cited isolation of teachers and the difficulty of forming genuinely collegial school cultures.

School choice actually has the potential to enhance professionalism and collegiality among teachers by allowing them to form communities of practice around some core conception of the pedagogical good. At the school level, enabling educators to establish their own schools of choice would make it possible for them to agree on principles, practices, and strategies for improvement.

Choice likewise provides a substantive basis for parental and student buy-in. All would belong to a school with a shared sense of mission, organized according to a common set of values. Right away, two key features of strong schools — quality teachers and engaged students and parents — can more easily gain a foothold.

At the community level, support for schools might also be enhanced under a régime of public school choice, because fewer people would feel compromised, silenced, or alienated in an environment where well-intentioned school officials are forced to accommodate conflicting constituent demands and wind up doing so in ways that favour the most vocal, affluent, or well-organized.

My argument for school choice does not rely on the virtues of markets or the rights of parents. At its core, it recognizes that the philosophical, ideological, or spiritual outlooks that drive a person to establish or attend a certain kind of school are not chosen in the same way that one chooses a dentist or soft drink, but rather reflect his or her identity and conception of what kind of life is most worth living.

In this model, schooling is conceived of as an institution more like a church, a profession, or a branch of the military, where one can choose to join or leave, but the choices reflect deeper convictions rather than mere consumer preferences.

This way of looking at schooling and choice also makes it possible for schools to exercise normative authority — to impose standards and expectations — in guiding children's development. As with churches, the professions, and the military, students are socialized into a culture and are expected to master its standards of excellence and ethics.

Talk of schools as moral communities taken to its logical extreme can sound scary, conjuring up images of publicly-supported madrasas, KKK schools, and fundamentalist schools. But I think this fear under-estimates the strength of the political and professional consensus we enjoy.

Designed correctly, a system of choice that honoured the convictions of educators and other stakeholders would take many of the most intractable issues off the table — disagreement over curriculum, pedagogy, and standards of personal comportment. It's time for a truce in the holy wars of public education!

*(Adapted with permission from "Why Choice is Good for Teachers" in Education Next, Winter 2004, www.educationnext.org. Mr. Ferrero is a former teacher and director of evaluation and policy research at the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.)*