

# Learning from Others

***Good school choice policies can make public education more effective and equitable.***

**By Charles L. Glenn**

---

Virtually every country in the world with a well-developed educational system allows parents, at their own expense, to choose alternatives to state-operated schools (the exceptions are Cuba and Vietnam). In China, indeed, there are reportedly tens of thousands of private schools that respond to the new prosperity of many families.

In addition, governments in most Western democracies provide partial or full funding for non-governmental schools chosen by parents; Saskatchewan, Ontario and the Atlantic provinces are the exception, along with Greece and the United States (which has a few small-scale programs).

Economist Eric Hanushek has pointed out that “the term choice conveys about the same information as saying that I just ate in New York City. There are many places to eat in New York City. Some of them are good, some okay, and some of them are dreadful. And that is my view of what we will see in a number of these choice plans.”

What can we learn from the experience of other countries about how to make public education more effective, more equitable, and more consistent with a free society? Here are four possible lessons.

## **Families must have the right to choose schools for their children.**

Of course there are parents who abuse or neglect their children, and in such cases society has an obligation to intervene. But public policy should not be based on a mistrust of families

The primacy of parents in making decisions about the education and other aspects of the welfare of their children is firmly established in international law. For example, the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (1948) states that “parents have a prior right to choose the kind of education that shall be given to their children”. Canada is a signatory.

Unfortunately, the discussion of school choice in Canada has often been dominated by arguments about the virtues or potential dangers of markets. Although those arguments deserve thoughtful consideration, we should not allow these questions to define the debate.

The bottom line is whether we will operate a system of mandatory schooling that denies to some parents, because of their relative poverty, the right to make important decisions about what is in the best interests of their children.

## **Schools must be allowed to differ in significant ways.**

Schools that differ in ways that are meaningful to families are not only more satisfactory to those families but also more likely to be effective educationally. Commonly, those are schools founded on the basis of and seeking to express an alternative, religious understanding of life that is not reflected in the public schools.

The reason is not mysterious. Schools whose staffs are clear and in agreement about what they are seeking to accomplish are more likely to be successful than schools whose staffs are responding only to procedural requirements, as is too often the case in public schools.

Research in France, England, Belgium, and the Netherlands bears this out.

## **Distinctive schools do not harm children or create social divisions.**

Experience in other countries demonstrates that the concerns expressed by opponents of family choice of schools (that it will lead to various harmful side effects) are unfounded.

The Dutch example is particularly telling, since there is a constitutional guarantee of freedom of the religious or philosophical character of schools, and two-thirds of pupils in the country attend non-public schools.

Surely in the Netherlands, if anywhere, we might expect to find weird or divisive education. But in fact, the rich variety of publicly-funded schools including Catholic, five varieties of Protestant, Anthroposophic, Orthodox and Reform Jewish, Rosicrucian, Hermetic, Platonic, several varieties of Muslim, several varieties of Hindu, Montessori, Dalton, and Freinet, has neither divided Dutch society, nor resulted in groups of children being poorly educated.

## **Regulations should allow school distinctiveness.**

The most crucial issue – beyond the fundamental right of parents to choose a school for their children – is the right of the school to select staff on the basis of criteria specific to the distinctive mission of the school rather than to some universal standard established for all schools.

Also very important is the right to select the academic and other outcomes for which the individual school would be held accountable. Other significant issues include the right to establish open and mission-related criteria for the selection of pupils and to provide character education based on a school-specific understanding of the nature of a good life.

Forty-five years ago, when France adopted legislation allowing the government to contract with Catholic and other schools to provide instruction at public expense, some observers warned that it could lead to the nationalization of private schools.

In 1984, more than a million parents and other supporters rallied in Paris to protest an attempt by a Socialist government to bring private schools into the public system. The rally led to the fall of that government.

*(Adapted with permission from What America Can Learn from Schools Choice in Other Countries – See our review on page 3.)*