

Liberal Education

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Charters, Vouchers, and Public Education edited by Paul E. Peterson and David E. Campbell Brookings, 320 pp., \$42.95 Revolution at the Margins The Impact of Competition on Urban School Systems by Frederick M. Hess Brookings, 268 pp., \$18.95 Rhetoric versus Reality What We Know and What We Need to Know About Vouchers and Charter Schools by Brian P. Gill, P. Michael Timpane, Karen E. Ross, and Dominic J. Brewer RAND, 120 pp., \$15 Schools, Vouchers, and the American Public by Terry M. Moe Brookings, 350 pp., \$29.95

THE DEBATE over school choice presents a puzzling spectacle. On one side are those who favor choice. In response to the longstanding crisis of our inner-city public schools, they favor charter schools (which receive state funds as a result of commitments made in the school's charter) and, far more controversially, cash vouchers from the state to use at participating schools. These supporters stand for innovation, experimentation, and a diversity of approaches. And they are generally thought of as the conservatives. On the other side are the opponents of school choice. Their response to our failing public schools is to seek to strengthen them, usually by spending more money. These opponents of choice defend the status quo, stand with entrenched interests, especially teachers' unions and big-city school boards, and warn ominously that even small changes to a system that has its roots in the nineteenth century will undermine our shared civic culture. They think of themselves as liberals or progressives. Of course, in one respect, the positions do line up as one would expect. The school-choicers press for market-based reforms, in the spirit of much conservative public policy, while the anti-choicers put their faith in the state, following in the footsteps of much progressive public policy. Some of the debate reflects disagreement about the facts: What is the most effective means to better education in America? But the debate also reflects disagreement about the ends of education in a free society. And sorting out these issues requires both an examination of current research and a reconsideration of

fundamental tendencies within the classical liberal tradition. A central role in the school-choice debate is being played by Washington's venerable Brookings Institution, the moderate--or slightly left-leaning--think tank that is a pillar of Washington's idea industry. For the better part of a decade, a loose-knit group of scholars have been studying school choice. (Their unofficial leader seems to be Paul Peterson, a professor at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government and a fellow at Stanford's Hoover Institution.) According to several studies Brookings has recently published, the evidence is mounting that expansion of choice through charters and vouchers improves, and certainly does not diminish, academic achievement. These findings, which are either bolstered or uncontradicted by other serious studies, such as the RAND education report "Rhetoric versus Reality," seem to strike hard at the anti-choice position. NONETHELESS, progressive critics see school choice as a threat to democracy. They charge, for instance, that such programs appeal to white elites who wish to separate their children from blacks and to religious parents who wish to separate their children from the secular world. They insist that vouchers and charters deprive students who take advantage of them of diversity in the classroom. They assert that such innovations weaken public schools by draining away state money and creaming off the best students. And they declare that schools out of the government's hands generally subvert the nation's shared civic culture by teaching a narrow, intolerant, sectarian creed. The Brookings books, however, tell a different story. Using the latest social science methods, Terry Moe shows in "Schools, Vouchers, and the American Public" that the critics' fears about the wealthy and the religious taking advantage of school choice are baseless. In fact, Moe concludes, the appeal of such programs is strongest among low-income parents in districts with poorly performing schools--and the primary reason such parents desire choice is not diversity or religion but the opportunity to place their children in schools that will provide a better basic education. So far as diversity in the classroom is concerned, Chester E. Finn Jr., Bruno V. Manno, and Gregg Vanourek report in "Charters, Vouchers, and Public Education" that charter schools actually do a better job of providing students with a diverse classroom than do regular public schools: "In the aggregate, charter schools are populated by a more diverse population of American schoolchildren than regular public schools (though these demographics vary by state and district). Over half (51.8 percent) of charter pupils belong to minority groups (compared with 41 percent in conventional schools). Nearly two fifths (38.7 percent) come from low-income families, slightly above the poverty rate among regular public school pupils (37.3 percent). About one-tenth (9.9 percent) have limited English proficiency (compared with 9.8 percent in regular public schools), and 8.4 percent are special education students (compared with 11.3 percent in regular public schools)." Perhaps one reason for these encouraging numbers is that attendance at charter schools is based on choice and is open to students from diverse neighborhoods and school districts, while attendance at public schools is generally based upon residence in particular school districts, which tend to be ethnically homogeneous. Moreover, the facts should ease fears that school choice will drain funds from public schools. Consider, for example, the case of the Cleveland voucher program (whose constitutionality will be decided in the coming weeks by the U.S. Supreme Court). In Cleveland, the inner-city public schools receive from the state and local authorities approximately \$7,000 per student

residing in their district. Cleveland parents were offered a choice: continue to send your child to the city's public schools or receive a cash voucher worth \$2,500 for use at the private school of your choice. The children whose parents chose the voucher program actually boosted spending per student in Cleveland public schools--because public schools were still receiving \$7,000 for each child residing in the district, even though the voucher students had opted out. To what extent charter schools and voucher programs cream off the best students is more difficult to measure. It may be true that the best public school students with the most engaged parents disproportionately take advantage of choice programs. But it is hard to understand how this constitutes a serious objection. The truth is that creaming already occurs when high-income parents take their talented children out of public schools and pay five-figure tuition fees to send them to elite private schools. It also occurs when concerned parents who have the resources and education and inclination decide to home-school their children. To block states from giving low-income parents the opportunity to take their children out of broken-down public schools and send them to effective private schools, whether religious or secular, is to compel low-income families alone to make a sacrifice for a questionable conception of the public good. SOME PROPONENTS of choice have argued that far from weakening public schools, school-choice programs may actually improve public schools by creating competition for students. Based on his studies in Milwaukee, Cleveland, and San Antonio, Frederick M. Hess concludes in "Revolution at the Margins" that competition has produced only "modest and subtle" changes in teaching and learning in the public schools. Yet even this small result, Hess suggests, points in a school-choice direction. Given the small number of students involved in voucher programs to date, one would not expect competition to produce big changes in the public schools. And yet Hess finds that creating choice for parents and their children has attracted the notice of teachers and administrators at public schools and opened up opportunities for reformers within the public-school system to introduce or gain a hearing for new programs. Similarly, Jay P. Greene reports in a paper published in "Charters, Vouchers, and Public Education" that in states where parents have more choices, the statewide average attained on test scores for all students combined is higher. Perhaps the most intriguing findings obtained by any study concern the cultivation of political tolerance. The figures come from Greene's research, carried out along with colleagues Patrick J. Wolf, Brett Kleitz, and Kristina Thalhammer and also published in "Charters, Vouchers, and Public Education." Critics--especially academic political theorists--worry that private schools, especially private religious schools, fail to teach the values and principles crucial to sustaining a pluralistic democracy. Such critics point to a long tradition, stretching back to Thomas Jefferson, that has seen public schools in the United States as the key place for preparing the nation's youth for the challenges and opportunities of democratic citizenship. But the critics' premises are open to question. What if the public schools--particularly the ones that serve low-income, inner-city families--no longer effectively educate students in the basics, let alone for the challenges and opportunities of democratic citizenship? And why, for that matter, can't private education teach the civic virtues that make democracy work? This is what Greene, Wolf, Kleitz, and Thalhammer set out to test. And they found that private schools appear to teach political

tolerance more effectively than do public schools. In surveys administered to 1,212 students enrolled in required introductory courses in American government at four Texas universities, the students were asked questions revolving around their willingness to tolerate "extremist political groups." The researchers found that the greater the students' exposure to private education, the more likely they were to be politically tolerant, and this was true whether students had attended private secular schools or religious schools. While acutely aware of the limitations of survey research and the preliminary character of their findings, Greene and colleagues offer several explanations that make sense of their initially surprising results. Because many wealthier families have moved to the suburbs, low-income students end up in socially and racially uniform public classrooms where they lack contact with individuals from backgrounds different from their own. By contrast, private schools, which attract students from a variety of neighborhoods, can achieve greater diversity. In addition, private schools, which often emphasize moral values and character formation, have a freer hand in teaching democratic values than do public schools, the content of whose curriculum is restricted by bureaucratic red tape and legal limitations. Finally, by promoting the free exchange of ideas among students and between students and teachers, and by involving students in decisions about school governance, private education can give students greater practice in the art of civic life. ALL OF THIS seems to show that market-based remedies to the crisis of our public schools are on the side of progress, while insistence that the state is the primary solution to the ills that afflict our schools seems to reflect a misguided attachment to order and the old ways of doing things. So why is it so hard for so many who see themselves as progressives to admit this? Why is the left wing of the Democratic party so hostile to school choice? The political root no doubt can be traced to the Democratic party's unseemly dependence upon the teachers' unions (in particular their lobbyists at the state and local level), which have never seen an educational reform they liked (except increased state spending and greater benefits for teachers). But the intellectual root of the progressive hostility to school choice goes deeper, and it can be traced to a homogenizing tendency that arises within the liberal tradition. This is the tradition whose fundamental moral premise is the natural freedom and equality of all, and it runs all the way back to Locke, encompassing Montesquieu, Madison, Mill, and many others. It underlies our constitutional order, and it links right and left in our politics today. Homogenizing liberalism wants all individuals to be autonomous free agents who have transcended narrow communal and religious attachments and who are bound together by their shared capacity for reason and choice. The achievement of this kind of autonomy, contends the homogenizing liberal, is not merely a good but perhaps the highest good: both a benefit and duty of citizenship in a liberal state. In order to ensure that each individual lives up to the demands of citizenship so understood, it is necessary, homogenizing liberals conclude, to rely upon the state, which alone has the resources and reach to rescue children from negligent or sectarian parents and instill, through public education, autonomy. In pursuing this ambitious educational program, however, homogenizing liberalism betrays an illiberal impulse and threatens the freedom and dignity of the individual. Even as thoughtful a political theorist and as committed a liberal as Princeton's Stephen Macedo wants--in the name of autonomy--our public schools to form

individuals in a single mold. "We have every reason," he writes, "to take seriously the political project of educating future citizens with an eye to their responsibilities as critical interpreters of our shared political traditions--that is, as participants in a democratic project of reason giving and reason demanding." Actually, we have many good reasons to reject such a state-organized and state-administered project. Having the government take responsibility for educating all students in Macedo's mold would be fine if it were among a liberal state's legitimate aims to raise up a nation of political theorists. (Perhaps not coincidentally, the views of professional political theorists such as Macedo would also have the effect of transforming those who have made political theory their profession into the supreme citizens.) But constitutional democracy provides more than a single way of being a good citizen and a good human being. Of course, our public life depends upon a common culture, shared moral principles, and basic civil knowledge. And literacy, toleration, and respect for the rule of law are essentials that should be encouraged by the state. But there is no reason to suppose that these can be attained only through public education. INDEED, in light of what we now know about school choice, the idea is indefensible. When we hear expressed the fear that private schools (particularly private religious schools) fail to promote autonomy as the highest good, we must ask how the liberal state's interest extends to mandating the highest goods that students and their parents must hold dear. Those who care for themselves and their friends and their family, who obey the law, and prefer stamp-collecting or fly-fishing or attending church services to spending their evenings and free weekends engaged "as critical interpreters of our shared political traditions" also deserve our respect. Indeed, our country is large and capacious and tolerant enough to recognize as good citizens and good human beings those who not only fail to place critical interpretation of our shared political traditions at the core of their lives, but who believe that there are spheres of life in which the ideal of autonomy has a subordinate role. We need to resist the homogenizing liberalism that seeks to compress all citizens in a single mold. And we have good grounds, rooted in the liberal tradition, for doing so. For coexisting in the liberal tradition alongside the ambition to homogenize is an aspiration to respect individuals by blending, in politics as well as in the individual soul, the variety of human goods. And on reflection this blending liberalism provides a better guide to liberalism's core devotion to the liberty of all. A confusing feature of the history of our ideas, however, is that John Stuart Mill is the outstanding representative of both these kinds of liberalism. His "On Liberty" famously evokes the hero of liberalism: the autonomous, freely choosing, self-sufficient individual, under no authority save his own reason. But in the name of that autonomy, homogenizing liberalism has for some time now been eager to wield the authority of the state to regulate private affairs--in order to liberate individuals from the ways of life it deems hidebound, cramped, or fettered (which is to say religion and tradition and hierarchy). This form of liberalism is partial to thought and discussion that presupposes the good of autonomy, and it seeks to impose the exalted ideal of individuality through state regulation of public education. But the same Mill also teaches that the claims of individual liberty must be heard fairly and harmonized with those of society and custom and tradition, both for the good of the individual and for the good of society. He writes, "Unless opinions favorable to democracy and to aristocracy, to property and to

equality, to cooperation and to competition, to luxury and to abstinence, to sociality and individuality, to liberty and discipline, and all the other standing antagonisms of practical life, are expressed with equal freedom, and enforced and defended with equal talent and energy, there is no chance of both elements obtaining their due." Moreover, in "Considerations on Representative Government," Mill insists that modern constitutional democracy requires both a party of order and a party of progress, a conservative party and a progressive party, because each party focuses on an essential interest of the state and each by itself neglects the essential state interest to which the other is devoted. And in essay length tributes, Mill passionately argues that any free country would benefit enormously, as did England, from both the contributions of a thinker such as Jeremy Bentham (who determinedly, if one-sidedly, showed the dependence of progressive political reform on the power of the cold, calculating intellect) and of a thinker such as Samuel Taylor Coleridge (who tenaciously and tendentiously taught the wisdom of the heart and the reason of tradition). In so arguing, of course, Mill also displayed the utility of that blending liberalism that seeks to preserve and reconcile opposing moral and political positions and competing human goods. VIEWED IN THE LIGHT of this blending liberalism, progressives and conservatives alike should welcome further experiments in school choice. Such experiments certainly do not pose a discernible threat to public school education in America. Nearly 90 percent of American children continue to be educated at conventional public schools, and the proportions are unlikely to change significantly anytime soon. Indeed, part of the experiment in school choice should involve new forms of public schools, prominent among which are the charter schools that have already opened their doors. Meanwhile, for those in greatest need--children of low-income parents who seek an alternative to chronically decrepit inner-city public school education--the preliminary results strongly indicate that choice programs do no harm and appear to do some good. This finding alone gives good reason for the party of order and the party of progress to work together to give school choice a chance. Peter Berkowitz, author of "Virtue and the Making of Modern Liberalism," teaches at George Mason University School of Law and is a research fellow at the Hoover Institution at Stanford University.