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Mark Golden
ABC News
147 Columbus Avenue
New York, New York 10023

Dear Mark:

I hope you find the enclosed articles helpful. As you will see, they come from different viewpoints, some more sympathetic to school choice than others, but what is most striking is that there is no evidence that vouchers, or other choice plans, have had a significant impact on the overall effectiveness of education systems. This finding is not surprising for two reasons. First, vouchers do not address the underlying factors contributing to low educational achievement—primarily the problems associated with poverty, the major correlate of low educational achievement in countries throughout the world. Second, vouchers are a funding mechanism, not an educational method: The quality of voucher schools differs enormously, as does the quality of traditional public schools.

There are three main conclusions from the studies of choice:

- There are no real differences in achievement results between “choice” schools and traditional public schools when the studies control for the socioeconomic status of the student body.
- There is typically an increase in the extent to which schools are stratified by students’ socioeconomic status, or even by other characteristics, such as political ideology or religion. Like any research, the studies of stratification sometimes reach different conclusions. The existence and extent of stratification, for example, depends on the context: Studies are unlikely to show increased segregation in a city like Washington, D.C., which has little racial diversity in its student body. Increased segregation can occur, however, in communities with schools that were racially diverse to begin with. The main point is that choice plans generally result in an overall increase in stratification—despite the fact that these plans give some students the opportunity to attend schools that would not otherwise have been available to them.
- Parents, not surprisingly, like the opportunity to choose their children’s schools, and in some communities they are actively involved in that process. There are many communities, however, where few families make use of the choice options that are available. (For example, *Education Week*, using U.S. Department of

Education information, reported that in the 2004-2005 school year only 0.1 percent of eligible students actually used the school choice option under No Child Left Behind.) Often, families are satisfied with their neighborhood schools. For many, there are also very important practical constraints, such as transportation; lack of good information; unaffordable tuitions that vouchers do not cover; insufficient openings in “choice” schools, and the fact that the schools themselves are also making choices and, therefore, the opportunities are not as open as they may appear in theory. These factors, in turn, contribute to the increased stratification described earlier.

The important point, however, is that school choice programs will not make a significant difference in the overall effectiveness of schools. I believe that ABC News can perform an important public service by presenting vouchers not as a “quick fix” to the problems of education, but in terms of their realities. It would be interesting, therefore, to focus the program on one or more “case studies” of choice programs to show the complexities involved in implementing these programs, and the difficult policy choices that have to be made. Chile would be a good example, as would England, Sweden, Israel, New Zealand, or Australia—perhaps shown along with a U.S. school district.

Among the materials I am sending is a conference discussion (taken off the Internet) by participants from several countries, including Belgium and the Netherlands. Flemish Belgium might not be the best example for a U.S. audience because its history and structure are so different from the situation in this country: The Catholic school system, for example, runs the majority of schools. It is also clear from the discussion of Belgium and the Netherlands that each of these countries is facing a set of complex issues as it implements its choice plans. The participant from the Netherlands, for example, describes the following concern about the increasing religious segregation among schools:

“...in very recent years [the choice system] has provided a very good framework for Islamic groups or Hindu groups to start their own schools. ... it produces a big diversity of schools, but this diversity is among schools and not necessarily within schools, and these are two very different things. The real challenge is then to have diversity of learning and cultures within schools, not to have an Islamic school, which should be allowed, of course, but to have a school where Muslims, Catholics, and Protestants are involved: freedom of education is not total freedom. There are conditions and there is a challenge between the two: how free is free?”

Balancing Change and Tradition in Global Education Reform, the book I sent you previously, also addresses the issue of choice; I thought you might be interested in a few quotes from the book:

Chile:

“The first thing that must be said about Chile’s twenty-year experiment with vouchers, competition between private and public providers of education, and the provision of test-based information to facilitate competition is that it has not had the impact on

performance that Milton Friedman and his followers would have predicted. Comparing average scores between the private and municipal subsectors of education shows that the private subsidized schools have somewhat higher average scores than the municipal schools. ... With appropriate controls for students' socioeconomic background and selection factors, there are essentially no differences between the two categories of subsidized schools. ... [There is a] high dispersion of scores within both categories of schools, indicating that being private does not guarantee high quality and that some public schools are capable of high levels of performance.”

Sweden:

“In 2003 the National Agency for Education reported on the consequences of the freedom of choice strategy. In general, the information available to parents has improved, but the system understandably continues to demand knowledge and time to be used effectively. Most parents and students, especially better-educated parents, are in favor of the right to choose schools, even though most parents continue to select the closest school. In addition, both parents and students think that freedom of choice has facilitated their participation in school policies. School choice also has given some schools the opportunity to expand, though others have lost competent teachers and students. Choice does not appear to promote more efficient use of resources. In general, the National Agency for Education views freedom of choice primarily as a “social project” for better-educated parents living in big cities, where choice is an option. With respect to equity, the report describes a trend to segregate students by ethnicity and achievement. Overall, the school system has become more segregated, and, in a way, a parallel school system is being established that increases the status differences among schools.”

Israel:

“...the number of schools representing political positions and ideological perspectives has increased—a result of ‘privatization’ [in the form of school choice], school autonomy, a decline in the power of the central ministry, and the increased politicization of education.”

New Zealand:

“[In the 1990s] the government relaxed some requirements on schools to accept students from their immediate vicinity and allowed them to accept a higher proportion of students from farther away. Particularly among secondary schools, which previously were required to take most of their students from a clearly defined zone, this led to substantial increases in targeted recruiting (for instance, for students with high academic or sporting achievements), to heavy advertising and other promotional activity, and, in some cases, to an unwillingness to enroll local students with weaker backgrounds or disabilities. ... As Fiske and Ladd (2000) have documented, these factors apparently led to a notable increase in the stratification of the school system between 1989 and 1998. Many schools in poorer areas, particularly those with high proportions of Maori and Pacific Island children experienced a significant degree of ‘white flight’ or loss of children from more

affluent or educated families, which made the task of education in these schools harder. They had to cope with reduced funding and with redundancies of teachers because of falling rolls, reduced bases of parental experience to draw from for the board of trustees, reduced abilities to raise local funds for extra resources, and greater challenges in recruiting highly qualified and capable teachers. These challenges increased the risk of spiral to failure and even school closure.”

England:

“The degree to which social segregation [under school choice plans] has actually increased is hotly debated, but on balance the evidence suggests that there has been some increase—but less than many predicted and not in all areas. ...because funding is related to enrollment, schools with low enrollment find it ever harder to provide an adequate program or retain good staff. A very few ‘failing’ schools have closed, but most limp on. ... Whether choice has done anything for overall standards is anyone’s guess”

Australia:

“...the school system itself is becoming more stratified because of a significant movement of students from state to nonstate schools, a trend that has been encouraged by increased federal government subsidies to the nonstate sector. If the current trend continues, the risk is that by 2010 we will have a state school system in which as few as 50 percent of Queensland children are enrolled, and those children will come primarily from working-class or poor families who cannot afford independent or private schooling.”

United States:

“...The voucher idea, first promoted by economist Milton Friedman in the 1960s, was originally an economic idea—to promote competition and thus quality and accountability through market forces. For obvious reasons, it was quickly taken up by parents who send their children—and pay tuition—to religious schools because they offer a moral and religious climate that they believe they cannot get in a scrupulously secular public system that, under America’s tradition of sharp separation of church and state (and by virtue of a series of Supreme Court decisions), prohibits school-sponsored Bible reading and prayer, teaches Darwinian evolution, and generally (though not always) excludes religious creation stories from its science classes. The issue of vouchers thus brought together two major wings of political conservatism—economic conservatives and religious conservatives. But in the past decade the voucher movement has transformed its rationale into an equity and quasi-civil rights argument: If the wealthy have choice, through either their financial ability to move into communities with good schools or their ability to pay private school tuition, why shouldn’t the poor? How can anyone, the Left particularly, justify keeping the poorest children in the worst schools? ... The proposed voucher amounts would not begin to cover the tuition of many private schools, nor is there any indication that the private schools would accept significant numbers of children from the most troubled public schools. ... the demand for more choice has produced a

classically American compromise, charter schools. ... Because the movement is barely a decade old, outcomes are hard to measure. What outcomes there are—in test scores and other assessments—are mixed, with some charter schools producing high-achieving students and some doing no better or even worse than traditional public schools. And because many of the state laws authorizing charters are themselves of recent vintage and are reflective of the deeper American ambivalence between regulation and unfettered experimentation, there have been widely publicized scandals—reports of outright theft and corruption”

Finally, a quote from the chapter on **France**, which describes the opposition to any plan perceived as a first-step toward privatizing education and also demonstrates the strength of the French unions:

“...the government announced its strategic plan for the decentralization of education, which includes more autonomy to schools and the transfer of all nonteaching school staff from central government to the regions. This plan resulted in major school strikes to oppose the move. Teachers themselves reacted very strongly, as they saw this change (unrealistically) as the first step toward privatizing education. The government was finally compelled to water down these plans for the time being, following the very real possibility that teachers would disrupt the *baccalaureat* examination, often with the support of parents who are also in favor of retaining the national character of education. The cancellation or postponement of the examination was unthinkable and might have led to the fall of the government.”

I have enjoyed our discussions, Mark, and will be interested in hearing your reactions to this material. In the meanwhile, when do you plan to televise the program on oysters?

Best regards,

Iris C. Rotberg, Ph.D.
Research Professor of Education Policy
The George Washington University

irotberg@gwu.edu

(202) 994-2735