

Schools Making

Political rhetoric in the United States generally assumes that other countries—or at least those with high rankings on international test-score comparisons—have found the “right way” to strengthen student achievement without ever having had to face difficult trade-offs. Yet, every country’s policies require choices among conflicting goals, and these choices, regardless of how thoughtful they are, inevitably involve negative consequences or “costs.” The most difficult trade-offs arise in deliberations about policies that affect educational equity.

An International Perspective

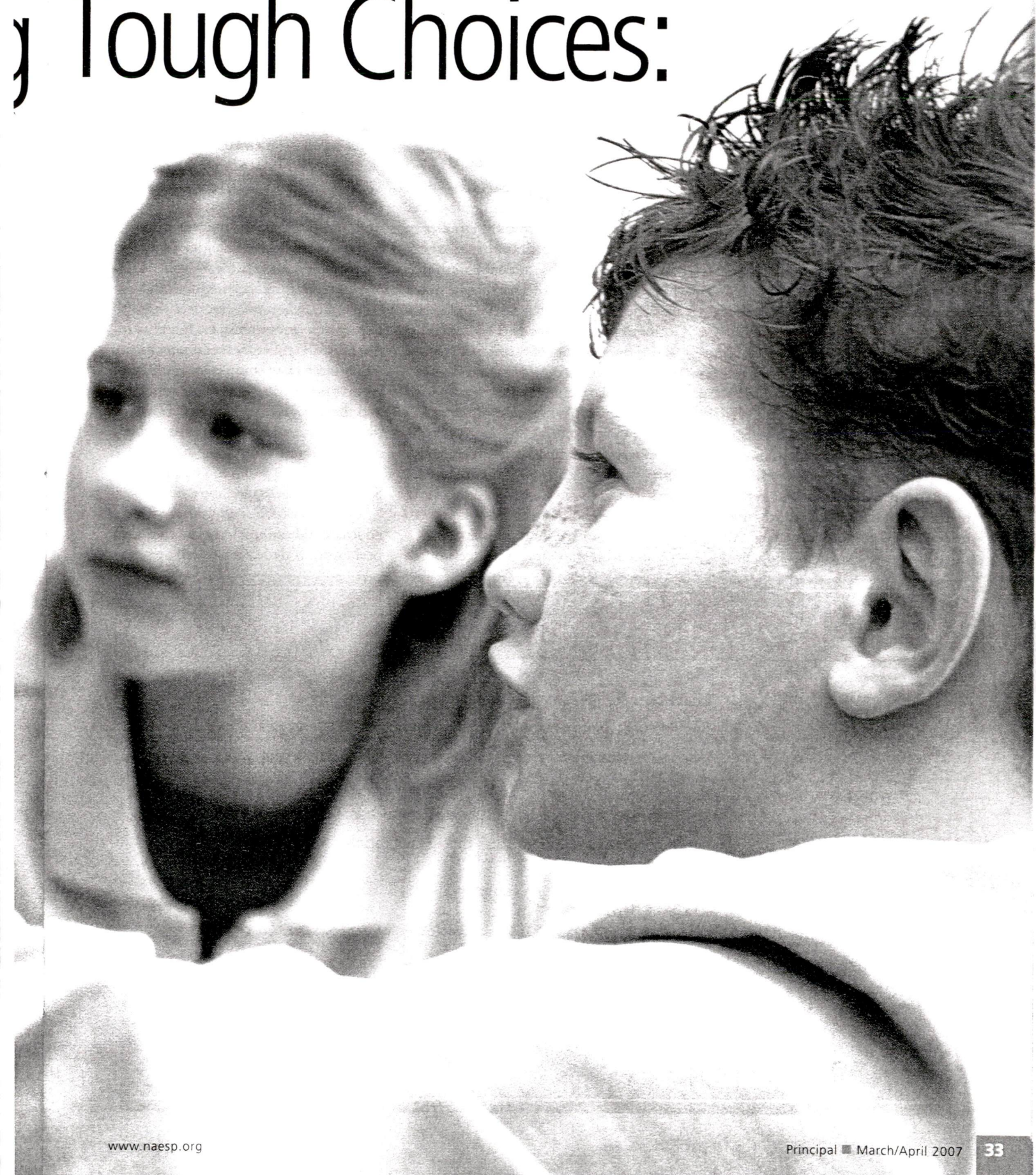
In the United States, as in other countries, public education involves painful trade-offs that reflect each nation’s traditions and values.

Iris C. Rotberg

IN BRIEF

Many nations, including the United States, have had to make difficult decisions that often affect educational equity. This article addresses three controversial issues—parental contributions to public schools, student tracking, and testing practices—by comparing policies in South Africa, England, and China with those in the United States.

y Tough Choices:



This article will focus on three highly controversial issues—parental contributions to public schools, student tracking, and testing practices—with examples drawn from experiences in the United States, South Africa, England, and China. Each of these countries, in one way or another, has reached an accommodation on which policies to choose, but with compromises that are often painful because they require trade-offs between deeply held value systems.

Parental Contributions to Public Schools

Middle- and upper-class families sometimes make substantial financial contributions to their children's public schools—but at the cost of creating disparities between schools serving affluent and low-income students.

That trade-off was perhaps most difficult in South Africa, which has focused its post-apartheid reforms on rebuilding what was one of the world's most inequitable educational systems. After the collapse of apartheid, the school

funding formula was designed to equalize expenditures among schools and to provide additional funding to low-income areas. This redistribution, in turn, required the withdrawal of funds from the more affluent schools—an action that many feared would cause middle-class families (now increasingly both black and white) to leave the public school system.

To prevent that from happening, a decision was made to permit families to make private contributions to their public schools, thereby enabling those higher-income schools to have facilities and services not available in less affluent neighborhoods. The concern about the inequity of this arrangement was balanced by the even more troublesome concern that, if private contributions were not permitted, middle-class families would leave the public school system, which would then lose both the participation of these families and their advocacy for high public expenditures on education—along with the resources and influence to do something about it. The decision,

therefore, was based on the expectation that the loss of the middle-class constituency from the public school system would, almost inevitably, have adverse consequences for the education of all children.

The type of decision that South Africa faced is repeated in different guises in countries throughout the world. The choice is never easy. In the United States, affluent parents in many communities make substantial private contributions to their children's public schools in order to provide services or equipment that otherwise would not be available. As in South Africa, school superintendents are faced with the difficult choice between permitting middle-class families to fund their schools or denying that opportunity and thereby increasing the chances that these families will leave the public school system.

Student Tracking

A particularly difficult decision for educators is how best to balance comprehensive (one school for all) versus

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“selective” schooling. Thus, school systems that offer an elite academic track provide an incentive for affluent families to remain in the public school system—but often at a cost to children assigned to lower tracks.

There are a number of variations on this theme. Over the past generation, England has moved to a comprehensive (nonselective) school system in place of its earlier reliance on “grammar schools.” These were selective, serving high-achieving children from both middle- and working-class families, and were successful in sending students to prestigious universities.

Grammar schools were abolished in an attempt to overcome tracking, which identified the highest-performing students at an early age. The result has been that while the public schools became less stratified, many middle-class families chose private schools and dropped out of the public school system. As a result, the proportion of children from public schools attending prestigious universities has declined since the 1970s.

It is impossible to estimate the relative influence of changes in the education system as compared to societal changes (including high rates of immigration) that occurred in the same time period. However, the point is that well-intentioned “solutions” to perceived problems sometimes provide incentives (in this case, the incentive for increased private school attendance) that undermine the reform’s initial purpose.

Even in the United States, where comprehensive schools have been the norm, there are many exceptions, including schools that select by achievement levels or special interests and charter schools. Moreover, students attending comprehensive schools are often tracked into different courses or programs within the school, depending on their achievement level.

Many of these approaches have been developed in order to prevent an exodus to private schools, and while they have uncertain effectiveness in achieving that goal, they create consid-

erable concern about the potential for relegating the children “left behind” to mediocre schools and tracks, and for increasing social stratification.

Testing Practices

In recent years, efforts to encourage flexible learning environments have been constrained by testing practices. Many countries throughout the world are attempting to move from a strict reliance on didactic teaching and rote learning to creating learning environments that encourage student participation, problem-solving, and critical analysis. However, they often find that parents, students, and teachers do not accept changes that are perceived to be inconsistent with high test scores, particularly when the scores determine students’ admission to elite secondary schools and universities.

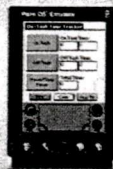
Recently China has been successful in implementing innovative education programs in some schools—primarily those in the more advanced economic

regions. The country also has revised its university entrance examinations to support and explicitly encourage changes in classroom practice that will teach students to integrate knowledge from diverse fields, rather than simply memorizing facts. For example, a recent university entrance examination included a question on the increasing number of private cars in China. The response required students to draw on knowledge of statistics, comparative analysis, supply and production, urban traffic, pollution, and social studies.

However, many Chinese families and teachers are concerned about changing the type of test questions. Because success in university entrance examinations traditionally has been the main route out of poverty in China, high scores seem more attainable if they depend primarily on hard work and memorization. It is more difficult to prepare for test questions that require analysis—particularly when the new teaching and problem-solving

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approaches have not yet reached the majority of Chinese schools.

It is ironic that even as other countries throughout the world struggle to make a transition from rote learning to school environments that emphasize a broader set of skills, the United States—which has a reputation for flexible teaching practices—appears to be moving in the opposite direction. Here, there is an increasing emphasis on testing, more pressure on schools to raise scores, and strong incentives to “teach to the test” by narrowing the curriculum and encouraging rote learning.

Many of the controversies about testing in the United States reflect value judgments about the extent to which grade promotion, high school graduation, and university admission should be based on students’ performance on standardized tests so that high school and college diplomas “mean something.” The decisions that are made ultimately will have a signifi-

That there must be legislation concerning education, then, and that this must be made common, is evident. But what education is, and how one ought to educate, should not be neglected. For at present there is a dispute concerning its tasks. Not everyone conceives that the young should learn the same things either with a view to virtue or with a view to the best way of life... Investigation on the basis of the education that is current yields confusion, and it is not clear whether one should have training in things useful for life, things contributing to virtue, or extraordinary things; for all of these have obtained some judges [willing to decide in their favor].

—Aristotle, “Politics,” 330 B.C.

cant impact on which and how many students advance through the education system.

Because test scores are highly correlated with socioeconomic status, many fear that relying on them will magnify the adverse effects of poverty and unequal educational resources, further increasing polarization between rich and poor. Others argue that without the clarity of test-score criteria, diplomas become meaningless. The decision about the optimum balance between these two concerns is, of course, a value judgment. The choice is never easy.

Trade-Offs

The tough choices faced in formulating policies on parental contributions, student tracking, and testing practices are repeated in other areas. For example, countries that attempt to weaken centralized bureaucracies by delegating authority for education to regions often create resource

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disparities, with the poorest regions having the least to spend on education. In the voucher controversy, the debate is about the benefits of parental choice compared to the risk of increased social stratification. In higher education, there is a strong incentive for colleges and universities to use financial aid to attract the highest-achieving students—regardless of their financial need—because the schools wish to increase their ranking in publications like *US News & World Report*. The downside of this practice, however, is that it contributes to the already growing concentration of students from poor families in the lowest-cost, and least prestigious, institutions.

The fact is that although we can gather research evidence about the consequences of alternative choices, the decision about which choice is “best” remains a judgment that ultimately depends on each country’s traditions and values. □

WEB RESOURCES

The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development’s 70 countries share publications and statistics on a broad range of social and economic issues.

www.oecd.org

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization provides statistical information on early childhood and primary education.

www.unesco.org

The United Nations Children’s Fund Innocenti Center undertakes original research to monitor the changing situation of children around the world and to highlight gaps in child-related data.

www.unicef.org/research

Reference

Rotberg, I. C., ed. *Balancing Change and Tradition in Global Education Reform*. Lanham, Md: Scarecrow Education, 2004. For a more comprehensive discussion of the countries mentioned in this article, see the chapters by Luis Crouch (South Africa), Peter Schrag (United States), Alison Wolf (England), and Kai-ming Cheng (China).

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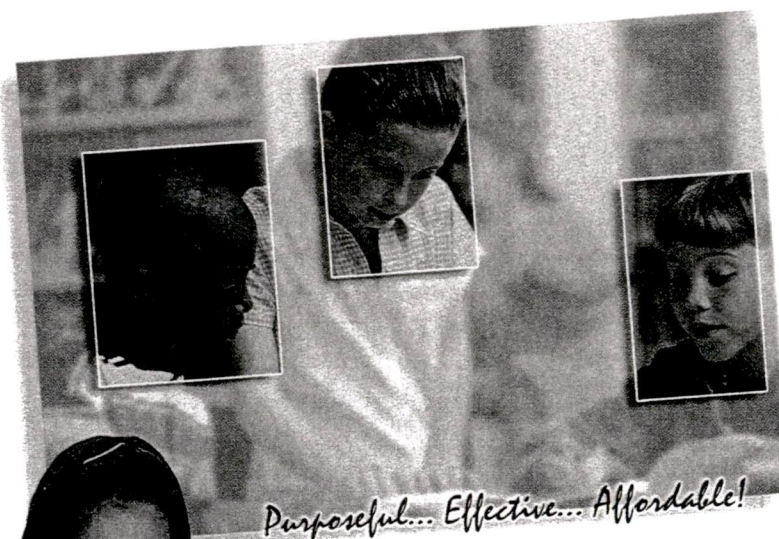
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