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Educating Our Children: Whose Responsibility?

To make its research readily available to a broad audience, the Center for Philosophy and Public Policy publishes a quarterly newsletter: *QQ—Report from the Center for Philosophy and Public Policy*. Named after the abbreviation for “questions,” *QQ* summarizes and supplements Center books and working papers and features other selected work on public policy questions. Articles in *QQ* are intended to advance philosophically informed debate on current policy choices; the views presented are not necessarily those of the Center or its sponsors.

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Everyone seems to agree that America’s schools are not doing their job, but disagreement is rampant over what should be done about it. Should responsibility for education devolve to families, as under proposed voucher plans? Or is increased state- and even federal-level centralization the answer? . . . p. 1

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When the National Commission on Excellence in Education sounded the alarm two years ago that “the educational foundations of our society are presently being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity,” most Americans felt vindicated rather than surprised. The commission’s report, “A Nation at Risk,” merely gave official voice to doubts long expressed by many, that America’s schools are not doing their job. As demand for highly skilled workers in technically challenging fields is accelerating, test scores are just now bottoming out of a two-decade decline. The average achievement of high school students on most standardized tests is lower today than it was when Sputnik was launched, nearly three decades ago. On many international comparisons of student achievement American students trail the rest of the industrial world. If the current state of affairs in education had been plotted by a hostile foreign power, the report concluded, we would call it an act of war.

The question is what to do about it, and critics of the Reagan administration charge that it is lavish with rhetoric decrying the problem, but sparing of any federal initiatives toward a solution. The administration counters that education is constitutionally the responsibility of the states. Far from heightening the federal government’s role in education, it proposes to retrench it still further, by reducing federal aid to public schools, loosening federally enforced anti-discrimination regulations, and questioning the need for a cabinet-level Department of Education.

Traditionally responsibility for education has belonged to each local community. With the demise of the little red

schoolhouse, however, has come a steady trend toward state-level centralization. Local contributions to school revenues have dwindled from more than 80 percent in the 1920s to about 42 percent in 1983, with the state's share rising from less than 20 to a full 50 percent. Recent years have also seen a trend toward imposition of statewide standards of educational achievement that all students — and increasingly teachers as well — are required to meet. While many welcome these developments, others resist what they see as sterile homogenization. They would like to see responsibility for a child's education devolve to the level of the individual school, or the family.

But responsibility for education has many dimensions. Before we decide who should be responsible, we need to ask: responsible for what? Who should set the curriculum? Certify teachers? Decide how much to spend on public education relative to other goods? Pay the bills? In each case, we have a choice of authorities — parents, school, local community, state, federal government, or even the child. Our answers to these questions will be guided in part by what interests we take education to serve, by what we take the purposes of education in a democracy to be.

The Voucher System

If the education of adults were at issue, one might well decide that the final responsibility for any person's education should rest with the person himself. Insofar as one central purpose of education is to contribute to individual human flourishing, decisions about the nature and scope of education should be left to the individuals in question, as the best judge of their own best interests. But children are not adults. Children, at least young ones, cannot make their own decisions on how they should be educated, since a chief goal of education is precisely to enable them to make such decisions wisely.

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A natural, though today quite radical, answer to where responsibility for a child's education should, then, be lodged is: with the parents. The claim is that parents are, of all possible surrogates, best placed to determine what is in the best interests of their children. Thus John E. Coons and Stephen D. Sugarman, writing in *Education by Choice: The Case for Family Control*, argue that: (1) "Beyond the broad generalization that it is good for children to be educated," there is no clear consensus on what constitutes the best interests of children generally. (2) The process of deciding what constitutes the best interests of any particular child "should always incorporate the child's own voice expressed within a decision-making community that is knowledgeable and caring about him." (3) The family

most nearly meets these conditions: "In its unique opportunity to listen and to know and in its special personal concern for the child, the family is his most promising champion."

How is familial responsibility for education to be translated into public policy? Almost no one suggests that the family should assume full financial responsibility for their children's education, perhaps because education is a public good that benefits all members of a society, perhaps because the resulting inequalities would be too extreme to tolerate. Nor do most proponents of parental authority call for a complete abdication of responsibility on the part of the state. Instead, what Coons and Sugarman propose, following the early lead of economist Milton Friedman, is

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a "voucher" system, which would turn over to parents some portion of the public education budget with which they could purchase what they determine to be the best schooling for their children's particular needs — be it in competing public schools, private schools, or less traditional alternatives. While some governmental standards would remain, they would be far more attenuated than at present, to encourage the maximum diversity in educational offerings. The qualifications of teachers, the content of the curriculum, and the degree and direction of moral education provided would be left to the choices of parents among competing options in a free market. Regulations could be introduced, endorsed by Coons and Sugarman (although not by Friedman's original plan), to combat racial discrimination and to equalize the amount spent on each child's education. But the driving aim of the voucher system is to facilitate parental control.

Two questions arise regarding the voucher system, and the desirability of such broad parental authority over education. First, is such a system in the best interests of the child? And, second, are the child's and the family's interests the only relevant ones, or does the community have a legitimate and independent interest of its own — one that would be better served by some other division of educational responsibility?

On many views, a central way in which education benefits children is by developing their autonomy — their ability to assess intellectual and moral options and to make genuine choices among them. A liberal, pluralist society provides its citizens with a range of options; education enables them to enjoy this range to its fullest. Political philosopher Amy Gutmann, currently in residence at the Center for Philosophy and Public Policy, argues, "The same principles that require a state to grant adults freedom to choose their own conception of the good life also commit it to assuring children an education that makes choice both possible and meaningful in the future."

Education enhances individual autonomy. But, according to Michael Walzer, Professor of Social Science at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton, it is also "a program for social survival." Walzer quotes Aristotle, that the purpose of education is to reproduce in each generation the character suited to the "constitution" of the society in question. In a democratic society this means, again, educating citizens to be autonomous choosers, since the legitimate exercise of government rests on their choices. It also means educating them to be tolerant of the choices of others. Without a deep-seated commitment to toleration, a pluralist society cannot endure.

Is parental control of education a good way to develop autonomy within an ongoing pluralist society? On Walzer's view, the voucher system restricts rather than

an escape route from the dreary sameness of today's public schools, with their emphasis on noncontroversial views and their endorsement of majoritarian social and political norms — a sameness reinforced by the bland standardization of American mass culture: "Today the danger is not that the child will learn nothing of the world and its normalities; it is that he will learn nothing else." The voucher system, according to Coons and Sugarman, is pluralism in action: a veritable smorgasboard of options laid out for the choosing.

Gutmann observes, however, that the pluralism of the voucher system is in an important respect "illusory" — the larger society is pluralist, but it might as well not be as far as the actual educational experiences of individual children are concerned. The children themselves do not sample at



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widens children's horizons: "The voucher plan would guarantee that children go to school with other children whose parents, at least, were very much like their own. . . . For most children, parental choice almost certainly means less diversity, less tension, less opportunity for personal change than they would find in schools to which they were politically assigned." Gutmann argues that autonomy and toleration are fostered when children are taught "to understand and evaluate ways of life different from those of their parents." The voucher system, instead, seems likely to trap children within one parochial point of view.

Coons and Sugarman reply that a parental choice system is in fact the best way to promote autonomy and pluralism. Autonomy is better promoted, they argue, when children are exposed to intense moral commitment than to shoulder-shrugging "neutrality." Moral sensibilities must first be engaged before they can spread and deepen. And the voucher system promotes pluralism by providing

will from the tempting feast of options the voucher system makes available; they are bound to the one dish preselected by their parents. The diversity the voucher system offers turns out to be "an ornament for onlookers": it is not a felt source of enrichment in the children's own lives.

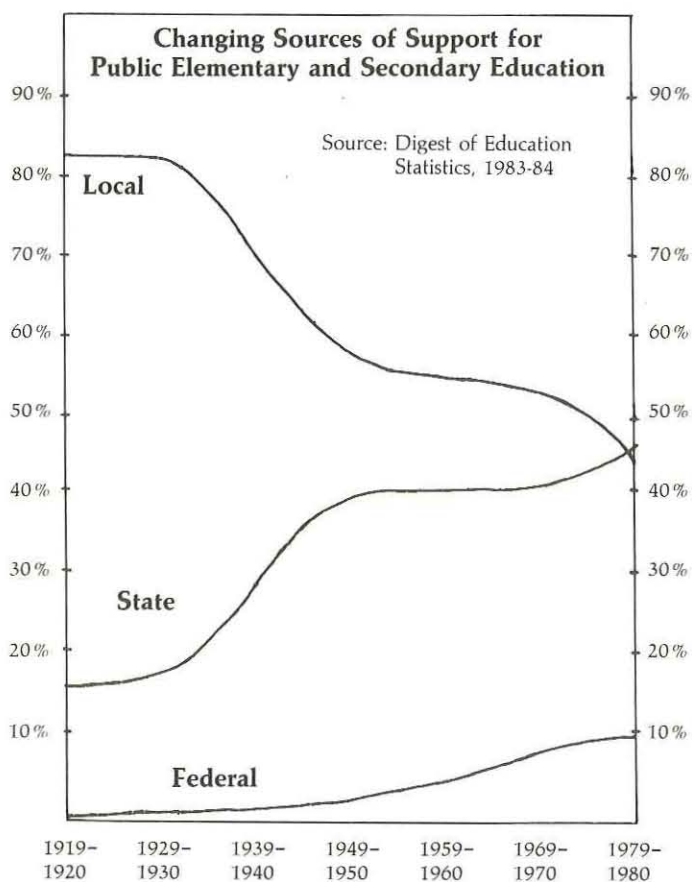
Walzer suggests, furthermore, that the voucher system can be seen as actually antithetical to democratic politics. Democracy is premised on the need for citizens to work together to achieve, out of their diversity, common goals. The voucher system issues an invitation to citizens not to work together, but to walk away. Citizens avoid the necessity for debate and compromise by bailing out of the cooperative effort altogether.

Advocates of the voucher plan point out that the affluent have always been able to walk away; they aim only to provide the same freedom for all citizens. But the social effects of defection by a small minority are very different from the sweeping change in our attitude toward public

education that the voucher plan would entail. Walzer maintains that we should tolerate the recourse to private and parochial schools "so long as its chief effect is to provide ideological diversity on the margins of a predominantly public system." We should be troubled, however, when our shared commitment to a strong public system and a democratic culture is threatened. We also might wonder whether the benefits of wise parental choice in most cases would outweigh the tragic costs in some cases of parental ignorance and neglect. Gutmann also advocates that non-public schools should be a good deal more public-spirited than many are now; *all* schools should be required to educate their students in the moral principles essential to any democratic society, such as tolerance and respect for the rights of others. That much is within the state's prerogative "in securing its own future and the future freedom of its citizens."

Local, State, or Federal Control?

What we need is a public education system that responds to parental leverage, but allows for a democratic society's interest in educating future democratic citizens. These two concerns have combined to produce our once traditional arrangement of local democratic control: school budgets are determined by local referenda and raised by local property taxes; the content of the curriculum is determined largely by a popularly elected board of education.



Local democratic control is both more effective and more flexible than state-level control.

Policy analysts Denis Doyle and Chester Finn, Jr., note that bureaucracy is less intractable at local levels, and that local control leads to greater variety among educational offerings, allowing "some responsiveness both to community priorities and to the yearning of individual families to select the kind of education that their children will receive."

Few would suggest, however, that local school boards be given a blank check to write out educational policy; the underlying purposes of education in a democracy contain within them restrictions on how much authority democratic majorities, at any level of government, should be

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free to wield. No school board should be free to flout the basic purpose of enabling all children to make meaningful choices among good lives and to participate as equals in the democratic process. Gutmann suggests that this underlying purpose entails three restrictions on democratic control: education must be funded at a minimum threshold level, in order to meet its objectives; the objectives must be met for *all* children; and the content of the curriculum must indeed expose children to the range of different, morally acceptable options open to them in our society and teach them the principles that make us a democratic nation.

These three conditions place clear limits on the discretion allowed to any democratic decision-making body — local, state, or federal. But they usher in special questions about local democratic control, particularly local responsibility for educational funding.

One reason for centralizing financial responsibility for education is that without outside assistance many poorer communities simply cannot afford to educate their children to the threshold level. State or federal funding is thus needed, on Gutmann's view, to ensure that the democratic threshold is met for all children.

Considerations of equity also suggest a move away from local funding. Doyle and Finn observe, "There is little relationship between the value of property in a given community and the educational needs of the children who live there." They cite one particularly egregious example of the inequities that obtained in California before the courts mandated financial reform: one poor school district reported an assessed property valuation of \$100 per child; another, oil-producing district boasted for each of its handful of children an assessed valuation of one million! Such extreme differentials in the resources devoted to children's

education make us rightly uncomfortable, when they are based on the accidents of wealth alone and not on any variation in parental and community attitudes toward the value of education.

But even when it is corrected for inequities, local school funding, as Gutmann points out, does not provide an effective means for parents and citizens to express the value they place on education. Local citizens can decide how much to spend on schools, but they are not in a position to determine the relative priority to be given to education over comparably expensive goods such as transportation, health care, and national defense. The size of state and federal budgets, and priorities within those budgets, are matters over which local citizens have little control. Citizens who feel themselves overtaxed may end up voting against school budgets, not because they place a lower value on good schools than on highways or aircraft carriers, but because that is their only effective recourse. Gutmann concludes: "Local control over educational funding may therefore be less rather than more democratic than state control because it presents citizens and their representatives with a considerably more constrained choice."

We need, finally, some state, and even national, standards to ensure that the content of education is properly pluralist and that future American citizens are being prepared to participate in the American political process. "Delegating to local school boards full control over . . . education," Gutmann argues, "would reduce the United States to a collection of democratic city-states, totally neglecting our collective interest in a common moral education." The policies of local school boards, she believes, should be subject to national standards of two central kinds: "standards that are essential to any good democratic society and ones that serve to unite and distinguish us from other democratic societies." This much standardization ensures that we will pass on to our

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children a common heritage. But within these broad guidelines lies considerable scope for local districts to exercise their own authority in determining how they should be implemented.

These concerns give grounds for welcoming the current shift toward state-level control of education. Why not go all the way and endorse centralization at the national level? One reason for encouraging the federal government to assume greater financial responsibility in this area is, according to Gutmann, that "federal funding would have the considerable advantage of placing education on the same level as defense, and thereby facilitating the trade-off

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between better minds and better missiles." But opposing considerations outweigh this advantage: "complete federal funding of education would probably entail an equally significant decrease in its diversity, a consequence that we have good reason to fear for education, but not for defense. . . . States are small enough to preserve a degree of diversity and large enough to permit trade-offs between education and other goods." To the federal government, however, is properly assigned responsibility for ensuring equal access to an adequate education for all children. This responsibility justifies the federal government's intervention in school desegregation; Gutmann argues that it also provides a reason why the federal government should take up the often extremely expensive burden of financing special programs for the handicapped and other severely disadvantaged students.

Conclusion

"Education," Walzer writes, "expresses what is, perhaps, our deepest wish: to continue, to go on, to persist in the face of time." In a democratic society, education is the responsibility of democratic citizens. The sober discussion following upon the warnings issued by the president's commission is one hopeful sign that we may be willing as a nation to make a new effort to assume these responsibilities together.

The sources quoted in this article are John E. Coons and Stephen D. Sugarman, Education by Choice: The Case for Family Control (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1978); Amy Gutmann, Democratic Education (forthcoming); Michael Walzer, Spheres of Justice (New York: Basic Books, 1983), Chapter 8 — Education; and Denis P. Doyle and Chester E. Finn, Jr., "American Schools and the Future of Local Control," The Public Interest, no. 77 (Fall 1984).