

School Choice Myths (*)

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By Alfie Kohn

Most critics of school choice proposals, in which students shop for an education and school districts must compete for their business, have emphasized the inequity of such plans, contending that they are recipes for making the rich districts richer and the poor poorer.

This argument needs to be taken seriously, but it is by no means the only problem with such proposals.

The whole idea of school choice, in fact, rests on a series of myths and misunderstandings.

1. The contention that a marketplace model will improve the quality of schools contains two hidden premises: first, that every district already has what it needs to give children a better education, and only inertia or sheer laziness prevents this from happening; second, that all educators require is a swift kick – specifically, the threat of losing public funds – and they will get to work.

Neither assumption survives close inspection. Many districts are struggling to make do with inadequate resources – run-down buildings, a scarcity of qualified teachers, and too few supplies. But even if this were not so, the idea that holding a gun to people's heads will motivate them to improve is psychologically naive, to say the least.

Fear typically creates anger and resentment. It leads people to switch into damage-control mode and act more cautiously. Human beings simply do not think creatively and reach for excellence when they perceive themselves to be under threat. The philosophy that underlies the use of punishment has been deftly satirized by a sign posted in some offices: "The Beatings Will Continue Until Morale Improves."

2. Choice plans reflect not only a misplaced acceptance of the value of external inducements in general but a blind faith in one inducement in particular: competition.

Our workplaces and classrooms are constructed on the myth that it makes sense to set people against one another so the success of each must come at someone else's expense. Yet hundreds of studies have shown that competition actually undermines the quality of task performance – to say nothing of its emotional costs. The more we must struggle to beat others, the more we handicap ourselves.

There are several reasons for this surprisingly consistent research finding. Competition causes anxiety, which undermines performance. It also makes people less interested in what they are doing for its own sake – more likely to see it as a means to an end (the end being victory) and therefore less likely to do their best over time.

Finally, competition is wasteful because people cannot cooperate with their rivals. If two school districts are fighting over the same students, for example, they are unlikely to exchange ideas and resources. The result is that both (and, in the long run, the people they serve) are the losers.

3. School choice plans misdiagnose the problem and offer a solution that is bound to backfire. But they also represent and underscore a philosophy that is troubling in its own right: the community be damned.

Let's face it: selfishness is one of the reasons that schools are now underfunded. Some people who have no children of their own defiantly resist contributing to something from which they will not personally benefit. Some political philosophies have actually tried to make a virtue of this attitude.

Applying a marketplace mentality to education will just exacerbate this emphasis on self-interest, with parents encouraged to focus only on the improvement of their own children's situation. This is the very opposite of an invitation to work together to make schools more effective and inviting places for all our children.

4. Finally, people who are sincerely committed to the concept of choice might do better to ask how much choice students have *within* their classrooms – that is, the extent to which children can participate in determining what they are learning and the principles by which their classes are guided.

The way a child learns to take responsibility for his or her actions is by being *given* responsibilities, not by having to follow someone else's rules all day. Learning comes to be experienced as more engaging, and children come to acquire moral and democratic skills, when they are brought into the process of making choices and solving problems.

A sense of genuine self-determination results from playing a role in deciding *how* schooling happens, not from having one's parents decide where it happens. Turning education into one more commodity for sale does nothing to foster real choice. It simply invokes a comfortable faith in the magic of competition to make educational problems disappear.

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