

The seduction of school choice

BY RAFAEL HELLER

According to the legal scholar Martha Minow (2011), there have been at least four distinct school choice movements in the United States over the last hundred years. In the 1920s (at a time when many public schools were hostile environments for non-Protestants and immigrant students), Catholics, Jews, and other religious minorities secured the legal right to opt out of public education and choose a private parochial school for their children. In the 1950s and '60s, following *Brown v. Board of Education*, school choice became an explicit rallying cry among white southerners who demanded the right to transfer their children to all-white public schools or to close public schools altogether and use public funds to set up private "segregation academies." In the 1970s, liberal reformers adopted the language of school choice as they created magnet schools and other public options meant to attract students from all backgrounds, enticing their parents to choose integrated schools voluntarily. And in recent decades, debates about school choice have focused mainly on charter schools, voucher programs, and big ideas about personal liberty, consumer freedom, and the salutary effects of free market competition.

As Minow points out, each of these forms of school choice has created as many problems as it has solved. When we allow some families to choose private schools, we exclude the many others who cannot afford the tuition. When some families insist on racial segregation, others are denied equal access to resources. When some families choose magnet and charter schools, other schools lose their most engaged students, parents, and staff. When families must compete for admission to such schools or navigate a complicated application process to enter a random selection lottery, the most affluent or savvy parents tend to seize the most desirable opportunities. There is, in short, no such thing as a perfect form of school choice, only a complex interplay among disparate interests.

The problem, says Minow, is that "choice" is a dangerously seductive word — seductive because Americans so deeply value the freedom to choose (what to think, how to vote, whom to marry, what to buy, where to live), and dangerous because we're so easily won over by policy makers who promise us more and better options for our children. Once we've been seduced by a "general idea" about school choice, we become distracted from the specifics of who gets to choose what. Never mind the messy details of how voucher programs and charter schools actually function or who actually gets to make meaningful choices and who doesn't. The abstract concept of *choice* has such a "powerful attraction and appeal," Minow argues, that it blinds us to such complexities, "papering over . . . deep conflicts over religion, race, immigration, national identity," and more.

For the contributors to this month's *Kappan*, the question isn't whether school choice is good or bad in *general*, but what do we actually know about the specifics of school choice in the U.S.? Rather than letting ourselves be seduced by one or another idealized version of school choice, how should we weigh the many conflicting needs and interests that no form of school choice can resolve? ■

Reference

Minow, M. (2011). Confronting the seduction of choice: Law, education, and American pluralism. *Yale Law Journal*, 120, 814-848.

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