

CERI Working Paper

What Works in Innovation in Education

School: A Choice of Directions

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In 1994, the OECD published *School: A Matter of Choice*, the first study in its series of reports on "What Works in Innovation in Education". Eight years on, this Working Paper is a succinct examination of school choice policies and practice in the intervening period and of the questions these developments raise. As an overview relating to a small number of countries, rather than a detailed empirical survey, it is intended primarily as a discussion of emerging issues. The main countries referred to in this report are: Australia, France, Netherlands, Sweden, United Kingdom and the United States. Where relevant, reference has been made to the other schooling studies in the OECD "What Works" series.

This report has been written in four sections: an overview of the choice issue and concepts; a discussion of policy developments relating to school choice over the past decade, identifying significant dimensions and outcomes; a discussion of these in the wider context of education systems; and a summary of the main messages in a concluding chapter.

This Working Paper has been prepared by Donald Hirsch, acting as consultant to the Secretariat. He was also the OECD staff member responsible for the original 1994 study. In preparing this report, he has drawn on the inputs of a small network of experts who provided him with written inputs and participated in an electronic conference. Once a first draft was completed, it was circulated to the countries referred to and their comments have been incorporated. It was subsequently presented to and discussed by the CERI Governing Board at its meeting in March 2002.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION - SCHOOL CHOICE COMES OF AGE

“Greater choice of school by parents and pupils is changing the balance of power in education, away from ‘producers’ and towards ‘consumers’.”

– School, A Matter of Choice, OECD, 1994

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, schools in many countries seemed to be confronted with one of the most revolutionary changes since the advent of public education systems. Reforms designed to give families¹ more choice as the clients of schools threatened to undermine the longstanding control of public education by “providers”. More specifically, a “neo-liberal” revolt against existing public services was seeking to restructure them around a market model in which “consumers” chose which service to use just like when buying commercial products.

A decade on from the advent of these upheavals, what impact has school choice had on education systems? Has it destroyed them, improved them, failed to take root, or faded into the background? This report reviews what has happened in the school choice story in the eight years since the OECD last analysed such policies across a range of countries. It argues that while the terms of school choice remain in many cases unresolved at the political level, choice has in practice become an established and integral part of the educational landscape. In this context, the effects of choice can only be understood alongside analysis of other education policies. In such analysis, narrower definitions of choice in terms of the selection of a school by parents tend to be less useful than wider ones that also incorporate the ways in which parents and students are able to participate in decisions that influence educational directions.

¹ When this report refers to “families” choosing schools, it means parents and/or children making decisions about which school to attend. “Parental choice” misleadingly implies that students have no say in the matter. But the term “family” used in this context is not meant to imply that the choice is always a collective one.

What kinds of choices?

School choice can mean many things. The earlier OECD report on the subject looked at “policies to give parents and children a greater choice over which school a child attends”. Choice of school became a focus of attention from the 1980s onwards for two main reasons. First, because it is an aspiration for a growing number of people. Families everywhere are becoming more choosy about their children’s education, and less willing to accept unquestioningly whatever institution they are assigned to in a public system. Second, because in some countries it has been seen as a tool for educational reform. In some cases where education systems as a whole are not thought to be delivering what the public want of them, measures to allow clients to choose between competing institutions have, alongside other reforms, sought to force professional educators to heed the views of non-professional stakeholders.

This report reviews what has happened to policies concerning the choice of school, and the visible outcomes of such policies (see especially Chapter 2). But it also considers broader aspects of educational choices, which interact with choice of school. A wider choice than “which school should my child attend?” is “what kind of education should my child receive”? Parents may potentially get most involved in such choices not by selecting schools but by acting as partners with schools in the educational process, collectively through governance or individually through liaison with the school over the education of their individual child. Students may be more or less involved, in terms of choosing what to study, and various educational styles may allow them to direct their own learning to different degrees. Schools and teachers themselves may be given more or fewer choices over the curriculum and pedagogy, relative to central agencies. None of these aspects of choice and decision-making are easy to measure or monitor. But in considering, in Chapter 3 below, the evolving role of choice within educational systems, such wider definitions are taken into account.

The dynamic that brought choice to the fore

Recent decades have seen widespread reassessment of how public services should be run, and how they should relate to the needs and demands of their users. Such reassessment has been most pronounced in countries, such as the United States and the United Kingdom, where there has been the strongest sense that public services have failed to meet expectations, and where market-oriented “neo-liberal” political movements have made greatest progress. But in some relatively stable countries that one might not earlier have expected to fall into this category, including Sweden, neo-liberal ideas have had a significant impact in certain policy areas. By the end of the 1980s, the core idea that “quasi-market” mechanisms should allow users to choose schools within publicly-funded education had become a potent force for change.

However, the change of paradigm brought about by the school choice movement was at most partial. Some countries such as the United Kingdom and Sweden allowed money to follow pupils to the school of their choice (in Sweden’s case to independent ones outside the main public school system), yet for most parents and children the actual scope for choosing a school other than the local one remained constrained. In particular, unlike successful companies, popular schools did not necessarily expand to meet demand. In other countries such as the United States, the rhetoric of school choice far outstripped the reality. Conversely, many European countries that talked less about choice have always allowed families to choose between different denominational schools, although this has (at least until recently) been impelled by religious rather than by educational freedom, and had nothing to do with putting pressure on schools to force improvement.

Yet, even where choice was less talked about in the policy debate, pressure for greater choice of school reflected an underlying change in the way that families regarded and used educational services. It was not in an “anglo-saxon” political culture, but in France where a leading sociologist, Robert Ballion,

encapsulated most tellingly a transformation that was taking place across educational systems and regardless of official policies:

“From the lower secondary school level upwards, the institution of the school has transformed in the minds of its users into a service-providing organisation...Rather than working for the transformation of schools, the great majority of users accept them as they are, on condition that they are allowed to choose the best on offer.”²

What happened next?

In the course of the 1990s, debates about school choice neither disappeared nor cooled down. In at least four of the six countries whose experiences were looked at for this report, it was a significant issue in a general election in or around 2001.³ Two related issues lie at the heart of the political debate: the extent to which “private”⁴ or independent schools should be subsidised to create an alternative choice, and the extent to which public schools should be given greater freedom to define their own mission, manage their own budgets and compete for pupils.

Yet while the terms of choice continue to be hotly debated, the nature of this debate has been affected by the experience of choice in practice over recent years. In the early 1990s there was in many cases insufficient evidence to be able to forecast policy impact. There followed a period rich not just in the experience of choice-related policies and practices, but also their evaluation. This experience is explored in chapters 2 and 3 below. Overall, the experience may be summarised as follows.

Policies associated with school choice have nowhere proven to be a “magic bullet” to improve education systems, but nor have they created a general catastrophe for education. Rather their effects have been specific and localised. In the United States, for example, some publicly-funded but independently-run charter schools offer a dynamic and successful alternative to those run by school districts, but experience has varied greatly according to location and provider. In Sweden, competition from independent schools supported by public vouchers has arguably created a dynamic that has helped stimulate the public sector (for example encouraging schools to listen more to parents) without yet threatening it (fewer than 4% of enrolments are in independent schools); in Australia, on the other hand, where nearly one student in three is now enrolled privately, the viability of the public system could be compromised. In cases like the UK, where competition within the public sector has been encouraged, there is little doubt that students in less socially privileged schools have in some cases suffered (for example by being stranded in under-subscribed and declining schools), but researchers have found it hard to prove that this is a generalised result.

² R. Ballion (1991) *La bonne école*, Hatier, Paris, p.18.

³ In both Australia and Sweden, the spread of subsidised private schooling was expected to be an emotive issue in forthcoming elections. In the United States election of 2000, proposals for vouchers were an important part of the Bush campaign. In the UK in 2001, the Labour Party’s proposal to increase specialised secondary schools was a hot issue, and Conservative proposals to give individual schools more independence might also have come to the fore had the party had a prospect of winning.

⁴ There is no stable international definition of private schools. Private sources of funding and non-government control over schools are combined to different degrees in different countries. In some countries the term “independent” is used, and in Sweden for example this term has come to replace private as more non-profit organisations have been running schools without charging fees. In this report, terminology is as close as possible to that used in the country being referred to, without trying to imply that there is an equivalence between what is described as private/independent in one country and in another

So, the results of policy have been mixed. A more consistent picture emerges, however, when one looks at research on how people are choosing schools in practice. In all of the countries under observation, the social trends observed in the early 1990s have been confirmed and intensified. Most importantly, parents everywhere are trying to choose a “better” school for their children, whether defined through academic results or social composition (with the former sometimes a proxy for the latter). This is true even in countries like France and the Netherlands where choice is supposedly mainly about religious preference: this is decreasingly the case in practice. The effects are tangible. In France, for example, some secondary schools in deprived areas are now suffering severe declines in enrolments because parents find ways of enrolling their children elsewhere despite official zoning. Of course, in countries with policies that permit or encourage choice within public education the effect can be more dramatic, but such social behaviour can be hard for public authorities to resist.

However, the playing out of these desires has also served to illustrate the impossibility that the strategy described by Robert Ballion – choosing the *best* school – can work for everyone. Ultimately, popular good schools must turn away pupils, whether by forbidding them to apply there (because they live outside an administrative catchment zone) or by limiting numbers because the school is full (whether by letting in those who live closest, those who are cleverest, or by other criteria). If there is one thing that parents have learnt in recent years it is that the sweetness of the promise of being able to choose a school does not compare with the bitterness of disappointment when a school does not choose your child. As one woman reportedly said about her son’s failure to get into the school of their choice: *“I have been rejected for jobs, rejected by men and failed my driving test three times, and none of it compares to feeling my child has been rejected from the education I want for him”*.

While it has had uneven effects on individuals, school choice has been a powerful catalyst for wider change in education systems in recent years. It has often been implemented in parallel with administrative devolution to schools and their managers. But as well as interacting with such reforms, choice in itself has often been a stimulus for change in schools and school systems. Decline in enrolments, for example, may prompt anything from superficial changes in the way a school presents itself to a re-launch with a new character and ethos (see for example Illustration 1, below). At the system level too, a fall in market share can shock a system into a change in strategy – as shown in Illustration 2 on Queensland. This does not mean that choice has always had a positive effect on schools’ behaviour: a measure aimed at making a school more popular does not, *a priori*, improve education. Rather, choice has become in recent years an important part of the context of educational change.

School choice today

Today, therefore, choice has a real and varied impact on education systems; it is associated with continued debate and reform at the system level, and with aspiration, promise and in some cases disappointment at the individual level. Of two things we can be reasonably sure. First, that a situation in which many families exercise an active choice over which school a child should attend, rather than taking it for granted that it will be the local one, is a permanent feature of education systems – for better or for worse. Second, that this ability to choose schools will not, on its own, determine the quality and character of education. As discussed in Chapter 3, it is the ways in which school choice interacts with other aspects of education policy and practice that determines its influence.

In this context, the movement towards school choice needs to be seen as something much wider than the increased ability to select a school. At the most general level, it is about the ways in which the stakeholders in education help choose what kind of education children receive. This may be felt for example through parental or community representation in school governance, through pupil choices over study tracks or through sensitivity of schools to the preferences of their clients. In parallel with policies to

allow more choice of school, education systems have moved to a considerable extent away from a model in which such decisions are taken solely by those who deliver the system – the professionals and administrators. As noted above, simply choosing the best school available is an aspiration that can ultimately cause as much frustration as satisfaction among parents. But if parents, children and others become more engaged in decisions and choices that influence the type of education they receive, it is possible in principle for everyone to be a winner.

At one level, such change may be seen in terms of making the education system more “demand driven”. Certainly public services are trying to think more about demand, both to boost the confidence of their users and, where appropriate, to respond to variegated forms of demand rather than delivering only a single “model”. Yet analogies with demand from private markets have limits. Parents in free education systems do not express demand by their willingness to pay a particular price for the service, and there are limits on how much they want to switch between “products” in response to quality judgements given the disruption it would cause for their children. This makes other forms of influence over schools important. There is no doubt that schools and education systems feel under pressure to take the views of users into account, although such influence is often intangible, based as much on what educators *think* will satisfy their customers as on revealed preferences or user involvement in governance.

It is therefore not easy to ensure that users participate fully in the choice of direction for education systems. Yet as school choice comes of age – reaching the stage at which it is a relatively stable and integrated feature of schooling rather than a new, cross-grained policy threatening to destabilise existing systems – it is bound to play its part in influencing the future development of schools. The challenge is to understand, in each local context, how various choices interact with the development of educational provision, and to manage these choices in a way that helps meet stakeholders’ hopes for school systems, rather than frustrating them.

CHAPTER TWO

HOW SCHOOL CHOICE HAS DEVELOPED

This chapter reviews the directions that school choice has taken in recent years. It looks first at the evolution of policies that permit or support choice, second at the strategies that choice has stimulated among families, schools and school systems, and finally at some of the direct outcomes that appear to have resulted from school choice. At this stage, the descriptions are focused on choice as more narrowly defined – the choice of school by parents and pupils. The following chapter goes on to consider choice in a wider context.

Policies for school choice

The OECD's 1994 report on school choice identified five main types of policy supporting choice of school:

- public support/toleration for non-public schooling (eg vouchers for private schools);
- liberalised enrolment rules in the public sector (eg abolition of strict zones or catchment areas);
- policies encouraging schools to compete under liberal enrolment rules (in particular by allowing “money to follow pupils” to the school of their choice);
- policies enabling schools to be different under liberal enrolment rules (eg permitting, encouraging or organising schools to take on “specialist” characteristics such as “technology school”)
- policies to make choosing schools more feasible (eg better information or school transport options).

In the late 1980s and early 1990s a number of countries in the study had made radical changes in such policies. Sweden, for example, had introduced a voucher scheme in 1992 obliging municipalities to pay for students to attend independent schools; the United Kingdom had opened up public sector enrolment with money following pupils in the late 1980s; in many parts of the United States cross-district choice was spreading, and widespread “magnet” school programmes had helped to increase choices within districts.

In the years that followed, there was not on the whole a comparable radical revision in the terms of school choice, certainly not at the level of national governments. Rather, some of the trends set in train earlier have worked themselves through, while incremental changes and local innovation have gradually transformed the landscape. In some cases, what might have seemed like a natural forward march of pro-choice policies has not progressed much. In the United States, for example, public vouchers paying for private education, long advocated by some groups, have not, so far, been introduced nationally but rather on a limited scale in a small minority of districts. The big development in the 1990s was the spread of Charter Schools. This has been driven by initiatives in individual states (37 of which now permit such schools), and Charter Schools vary in scale and character according to local circumstance and practice, although the federal government has helped accelerate such initiatives by giving them encouragement and financial support. In France, moves in the 1980s to relax enrolment rules in some areas got no further, and indeed appear to have been reversed by local administrations in certain cases. The French government continues to reject officially the notion that parents should have a right to choose within the public sector, or that such choice is desirable, and the *de facto* choice in France referred to in this report relies on exemptions that are not always easy to obtain. In some countries, notably the United Kingdom and the Netherlands, admissions and funding arrangements have not changed fundamentally in the past decade, but school choice in practice has become ever more active partly as a result of the publication of comparative performance tables and inspection reports on all schools.

Thus, the development of policies for school choice over the past eight years needs to be analysed in terms of trends in practice and take-up as much as in terms of policy decisions about rules. Five main aspects that have been important are looked at in turn below.

Private alternatives: funding and growth

One of the most distinctive educational choices made by many families is between public and private educational alternatives; in many countries the latter are supported by public money, often making private education affordable to all or most families. In some countries, such as the Netherlands and Denmark, this choice is well established, and a relatively stable proportion of the population choose each sector. In France, the state systematically controls the overall share of the subsidised private sector. But in other countries, such as Australia and Sweden, there is a more active debate about how generously private/independent schools should be funded, and what the effect of a growing private sector might be on public institutions. In still others, there is severe caution at the policy level about directing any public money to private schools. The result in the United States has been that voucher schemes were far more talked about than implemented during the 1990s, while the United Kingdom's incoming Labour government in 1997 scrapped the only systematic public support for private education in the form of the Assisted Places Scheme providing scholarships for students from poorer families.

A critical issue about the private sector, where it receives financial support from the public purse, is the terms of this support and the related question of the role of private fees. One model, epitomised by the Netherlands, is that "private" education is only supported by the public sector if it is made, in principle, entirely free to students. Although the role of a form of fee, rather thinly disguised as a "voluntary contribution" appears to have grown in Dutch private schools, it would be hard to argue that these schools are only accessible to privileged economic groups. At the other extreme is the "top-up voucher" model. In this form, the state gives families the average cost of educating their children in the public system, to spend if they wish on private education in combination with whatever extra fees the school wants to charge. Critics of vouchers warn that, far from giving a fair choice to all, such a system implicates the state in helping those who can afford it to buy a superior education for their children.

No OECD country has introduced a voucher worth the full cost of a public education that may be topped up with private fees. But two countries that now have considerable experience of the top-up voucher principle are Sweden and Australia. Their experience is instructive.

Australia has given systematic public support to private education since 1973, in the form of federal and state subsidies to private schools. These payments have helped Catholic schools to maintain about a 20 per cent share of the student population, mainly providing low-fee education to families who are not particularly well-off. The formula for support favoured those schools, but also gave significant sums to non-Catholic private schools (though less to richer than to poorer ones), which have steadily increased their share from about 5% to just over 10% of students over the past two decades. Policies pursued by the conservative government first elected in 1996 have made funding more favourable to private schools. The total federal and state subsidy for private schools is, per child, worth 70% of the cost of educating a child publicly in the case of Catholic schools, and 50% on average for other private schools⁵. Although resource levels vary greatly across the non-Catholic private sector, it is worth noting that on average these schools spend about one-third more per student than public ones: so public subsidies help buy more expensive education.

In Sweden, where fewer than 1% of children attended “private” schools until the 1980s, municipalities were from 1992 obliged to pay independent schools 85% of the public cost of educating each child. This was reduced in 1995 to 75%, by a Social Democrat government. By 2001, about 3½% of students were enrolling in these independent schools, although in big cities there was more of an impact – for example about 10% were in private schools in Stockholm. The voucher has attracted a wide range of organisations to start up schools, ranging from fundamentalist Christians to groups of parents disillusioned with their local public school. About 40% of enrolments are at schools defined by alternative pedagogies; a third have no defined profile. Only a minority charge fees, which are generally modest.

On the one hand the situations of Sweden and Australia illustrate the vast differences in the private education context across countries: a private/independent sector covering one in 30 students cannot have the same impact on education overall as one covering one in three students. But it is interesting to look, in Figure 1, at the *rate of change* in enrolments outside the main public school system in a range of countries. Several things can be observed:

- First, changes in enrolments in different sectors tend to be very slow. It takes time for private or independent schools to start up and attract clients, and a one to two percentage points shift every five years or so is about as fast as one might expect. Yet as Australia has found over a 30-year period, an inexorable change in one direction eventually can threaten seriously the sector that is losing market share.
- Second, the availability of public funding clearly makes a huge difference. In the past 20 years, public education has at times had a bad press in many countries, with reports such as “A Nation at Risk” in the United States provoking grave public doubts about the quality of the system. At the same time rising economic prosperity has potentially increased the amount of income available to families to spend privately on education. Yet over that period there has been a striking difference between the trend in private enrolments, on the one hand in countries like the United Kingdom and the United States where there is no systematic public

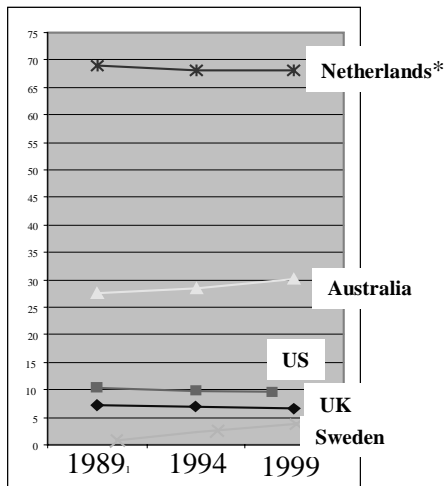
⁵ Under new funding arrangements for non-government schools, which were introduced in 2001, schools will move to a system of funding based on the socio-economic status (SES) of the school community. The SES approach to school funding involves linking student address data to Australian Bureau of Statistics National Census data to obtain a measure of the capacity of the school community to support its school

funding for private education, and on the other hand in Australia, where there is. In the first two countries, there has been no significant increase in private enrolments in recent years, and since in both countries there was a rise in total rolls in the 1990s, the private share went down slightly. The fact is that most ordinary families simply cannot afford to pay the full cost of educating their children privately. It is significant therefore that in the United States it is home schooling rather than private schooling that has grown fastest as an alternative to public education: some estimates put the number of children educated at home as high as two million, or around 4% of the student population – nearly half as high as the rolls of private schools.

- Third, where a public subsidy exists, its effect on market share depends on a range of developments over time, not just on the terms of the subsidy. Certainly putting private education into the financial reach of a wider range of people is important. But in both Australia and Sweden the culture of using private/independent schools has built up progressively, rather the subsidy creating a sudden switch. In the Netherlands, on the other hand, choices have been around for a long time and the numbers enrolling in each sector are stable.

Figure 1. FIG 1 THE “PRIVATE” SHARE OF PRIMARY AND SECONDARY SCHOOL ENROLMENTS IN THE 1990s

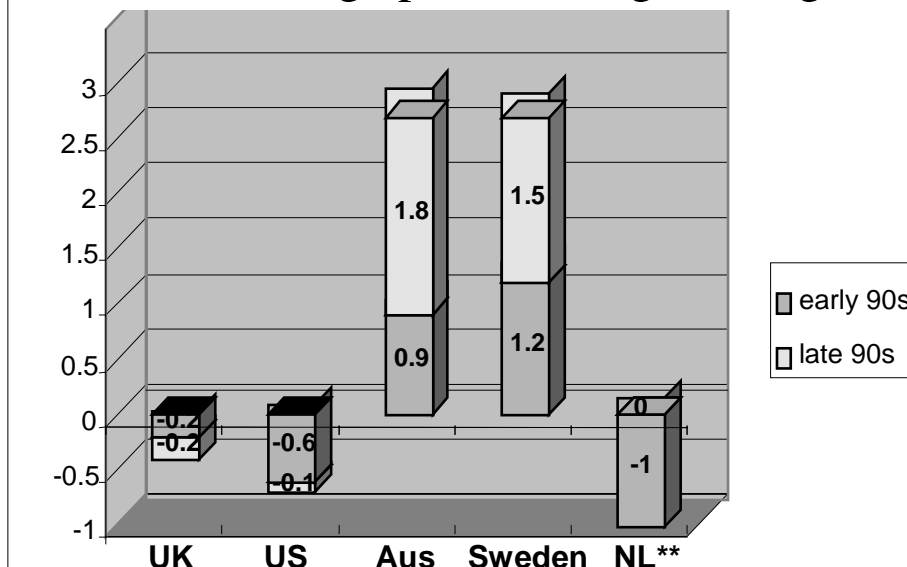
1. Percentage shares



These graphs contrast the size and growth of certain sectors labelled “private” in different countries. Note however that these sectors have very different characteristics from one country to another. For example that in the United Kingdom they receive no government support but in the Netherlands the sector shown is 100% publicly financed, though privately governed. Fully private schools are less than 1% of Dutch enrolments

*Dates as shown on axis, except: Sweden 1990/91, 1995-96 and 1999-2000; end date for US is 1997-98
* Primary only. Secondary trends are complicated by recent school mergers combining more than one sector.*

2. Percentage points change during 90s



*** Note that the decline shown in Dutch private enrolments is negligible relative to the sector’s size: from 69% to 68% (rounded).*

Sources: Author enquiries to Dutch Ministry of Education and Skolverket (Sweden); published data from National Centre for Educational Statistics (US); Independent Schools Information Service (UK); Angus paper prepared for this exercise (Australia)

So, choosing alternatives to public education is a habit that builds up at most gradually. In understanding the character of demand for private provision, it is useful to distinguish the choice of private education as *different* schooling, from its choice as *better* schooling.

Providing subsidies for non-public schooling can be one way of giving freedom to choose the religious orientation of one's children's education. In some cases it also give families a chance to seek out very different educational styles. Even in cohesive and relatively uniform Scandinavian societies there is some such demand. In Sweden for example some 12,000 students enrol in 127 schools with philosophies inspired by Montessori or Steiner. In Denmark, where "free" (ie. private) schools have been subsidised for longer, a number of new ones have nevertheless been founded recently to cater, for example, for Muslims. As the Netherlands has shown for nearly a century, such cultural diversity can in principle coexist with a stable and educationally sound schooling system.

But a private education can also be seen as an alternative, and potentially better-quality, route to obtaining the kind of education provided in public schools. Although "private" does not necessarily mean "better", there are signs even in France and the Netherlands that increasingly parents are choosing between sectors on the basis of perceived quality⁶. One factor is that private schools can be seen as a refuge from certain social problems more visible in public systems, and it seems that increasing importance is being attached to the right of private schools to turn away "difficult" students that the public sector is obliged to accept. Another is that private schools may be better resourced – the more so to the extent that the state helps them out. One Australian official interviewed in the course of this study speculated that if proposals to improve funding for private education were followed through to their logical conclusion, eventually about the same amount of public money would be invested in a child's education whether they attended a public or private school, and regardless of the quantity of private resources spent on the school. This would mean that every middle class family with some spare income could invest it in buying a better-resourced schooling for their children: each dollar of fees would go into giving the school an advantage over the public sector.

Some advocates of school choice argue that the most important effect on the public sector of subsidies to private education is to put pressure on public schools to compete on quality. In practice there has undoubtedly been such pressure, but the difficulty is that the competition has not always been on a level field, particularly in funding terms. How much this matters in the future may depend less on how steeply the field is tilted as on the attitudes of the players. Insofar as schooling is seen by families and society as a means of "getting ahead", a flow of enrolments towards more advantaged sectors seems inevitable. Insofar as schools are seen institutions for building cohesion within communities, the story may be different.

Public alternatives: emerging models of autonomy and competition.

In the United Kingdom in particular, school choice was developed in the late 1980s in tandem with greater autonomy for schools. The idea was to encourage competition within the public sector rather than to run it as a single administrative system. School principals and governing bodies were allowed to run their own affairs more, and their fortunes were linked to the number of pupils that they managed to attract, through funding rules based on capitation. Other countries, and some local government bodies within them, followed this path to varying degrees.

There has not been a major further move in this direction since the mid-1990s, and in some cases there has been a modest withdrawal. In the Australian State of Victoria, for example, an incoming Labour administrations in the late 1990s reduced the autonomy of self-governing schools. Some detected the same

⁶ See for example Sylvain Broccolichi and Agnès van Zanten, "School competition and pupil flight in the urban periphery", *Education Policy*, 2000 vol 15 no 1 pp 51-60

tendency in England when “grant-maintained” status was ended, but in fact GM schools preserved autonomy in many areas, including – crucially – deciding their own admissions policies and which pupils to admit. In general there has not been a return to centralised control, but some recognition that there are probably limits to how far schools will move towards full autonomy. Certainly people working in education systems recognise that whatever the advantages of autonomy some central co-ordination of school management is necessary. The UK government for example is legislating for all local education authorities to operate “co-ordinated admissions systems” to ensure that all children area receive an acceptable school place offer on a single day.

But the terms of devolution and competition have not everywhere been set out as clearly as in some countries, by clear-sighted central governments. The United Kingdom government, for example, has strict rules backed by legislation determining the proportion of spending that local authorities must give to schools to manage and how much of this must be allocated purely according to the number of students. In some other countries developments have been more *ad hoc*. In Sweden, for example, responsibility for schools has been devolved from the central state to local government, but the degree to which it is in turn devolved to school managers themselves remains largely a matter for local discretion. In France too, the central state has stepped back from running schools directly, but it is in many respects ambiguous where power now really lies. In such situations, competition among schools can be intense, but the rules of the game are not always clear. So for example when outcomes are judged to be unsatisfactory, a central planner may still step in and change the rules of choice (see the example of Rueil Malmaison in Illustration 1, below).

In the United States, too, the terms of choice, competition and autonomy are being worked out organically rather than according to some prior plan. The most distinctive mechanism is through the spread of “charter” schools, publicly funded schools that operate with some degree of independence from local school districts, and with some degree of exemption from state regulation. Their growth has been rapid over the past decade, although their impact on the educational debate in the United States is perhaps out of proportion to their numbers: they have yet to enrol 1% of all primary and secondary school students. Some charter schools compete directly with public school systems in providing a standard form of education. Others offer specialised programmes and contribute to diversity. Some are able to select their students; others are not. Thus, the charter school movement has produced some elements of the grand plan, proposed by John Chubb and Terry Moe in 1990⁷, to replace public bureaucracy and democratic accountability with school autonomy and parental choice as the driving force of American education - but the practice has been supremely *ad hoc* in character, and partial in coverage.

Across countries, then, schools enjoy more autonomy and are more likely to compete for pupils than two decades ago, but a model of fully autonomous schools funded purely according to how many students they can attract has not become the norm. The choices available to pupils continue to depend not just on market competition but on decisions taken by local authorities, and by the conditions applying locally. To the user, hybrid systems of this type are not always easy to understand, but perhaps they represent a compromise between pressures for school autonomy and the advantages of centrally managed school systems.

Qualitative choices: new types of supply?

Requiring schools to compete for students may, or may not, encourage educational diversity. As discussed below under “strategies”, a free market can potentially cause all schools to compete to produce similar types of education, rather than creating a differentiated style of supply. Yet, governments may find it

⁷ J.E. Chubb and T.M. Moe (1990), *Politics, Markets and America's Schools*, Brookings Institution, Washington, D.C.

helpful to try to stimulate diversity alongside choice. One reason might be to use schools with different strengths to take the lead in educational innovation. Another might be to avoid a situation where choice creates a single hierarchy of preferences that cannot all be filled: if everybody chooses the same school, some will be disappointed.

As noted in the OECD's 1994 choice study, government initiatives to create diversity may range from the permissive (allowing greater curriculum variation) to the directive (designating schools with a particular character), but in either case may come up against limits to which genuine difference from a mainstream curriculum model will be tolerated. This tension appears to have persisted, and efforts to move towards diversity appear nowhere to have created the kind of innovative educational hothouse embodied in the East Harlem model of the 1970s and 1980s (where teachers in each school were allowed to pursue their own distinctive educational ideas). However, governments have not given up trying to reconcile choice and diversity on the one hand with strong central curricula on the other. As discussed in Chapter 3 below, they are keen to create dynamic schooling systems that can cater for a range of changing demands and expectations. The 1990s saw attempts to refine strategies for diversity.

In Australia, various attempts have been made by states to create specialised schools, which help make the public education systems more attractive and less monochrome. In New South Wales, for example, the designation of various high schools to specialise in languages, technology or the teaching of gifted children in the late 1980s had varying results, depending on the extent to which genuine innovation took place within schools. In 1998, a review of the 28 technology schools reduced them to about half that number – those that genuinely showed a commitment to developing a technology curriculum. Officials in the state government believe that they have learnt that getting such initiatives to work depends most on establishing collaborative relationships between themselves and local innovators. Similar lessons have been learnt in the United Kingdom, where there is a vast difference between initial attempts to establish independent “city technology colleges” and the current development of City Academies, “beacon schools” and specialist schools aiming to take a lead in system innovation.

Choices within the public sector: application and admission rules

Whatever forms of educational “supply” are on offer, a key issue for families is whether they get access the school of their choice. Two constraining questions are: “am I eligible to apply to this school?” and “how will scarce places be allocated?”

The late 1980s and early 1990s saw an opening up of enrolment rules in a number of countries. Pure open enrolment, applied in Sweden and the United Kingdom, gave students the right to apply to any school they wished, whether or not they lived in its catchment area. Open enrolment in this sense already existed in principle in the Netherlands. In the United States and Australia, enrolment opened up in many cases, for example by allowing students in some American states to apply to schools across district boundaries for the first time. In France, a form of qualified open enrolment was introduced in some areas – it was permitted only to the extent that it did not cause the number of pupils going to the school in the pupil's home zone to fall below a set level.

A more open enrolment regime has on the whole been a one way street: once an entitlement has been established permitting one to apply freely to any public school, it is politically difficult to withdraw it. The French relaxation of zoning, which was not followed through and in some cases has lapsed, is an exception – but in this case the permission was always contingent rather than general: one had to apply for a derogation to enrol outside one's zone, rather than being given a general right to enrol anywhere.

In practice, though, the most important factor for parents has not been application rules but admission rules: that is, who gets the places when there are too many applicants. The promise of choice was never an absolute one given that there are limits to how many students a school can admit. In most countries there is no systematic provision for popular schools to expand, although the Netherlands comes closest to this by guaranteeing that provision will be made to provide sufficient places to meet demand for any one *type* of education (eg public, Catholic, Montessori) in each municipality, subject to a minimum level of demand for that type. In countries where markets have been most active, notably the United Kingdom, the most emotive issue relating to school choice has been “will my child get into our preferred school?”. This raises the question of how scarce places are allocated – and who decides these criteria.

The predominant criterion for admission in most countries remains the family’s residence: those who live closest to the school or within a designated area have priority (although sometimes after an initial allocation to some other groups such as siblings of existing pupils). To some extent this replicates the old zoning systems, for schools where demand is high. However, two important issues have arisen from admissions practices under open enrolment systems: who determines catchment boundaries, and to what extent can students be selected on other criteria? In the England, although local authorities have continued to supervise admissions at most schools, but the process is undertaken by the school where it has opted out of local authority control or is a church-run school with public funding.. The present Labour government has introduced a Code of Practice and adjudication system applying to all admissions authorities. Thus even where the trend was initially towards a “free for all” in admissions, the need for some co-ordination has been accepted.

Yet at the same time, policies that encourage families to choose the “right” school have, ironically, put pressure on schools to choose the “right” families where possible – potentially by indirect means. Where parents judge schools by the social composition of their intake or by their performance as measured by student exam results, schools wanting to compete effectively have an interest in attracting the most advantaged students. Public schools tend to have limited powers to turn away students, although some private organisations contracted to run schools on behalf of the public sector, like American charter schools, may negotiate a right to do so. Another way of selecting students is in the name of specialisation: a school that wants to specialise in music, for example, may select some students according to their aptitude in this subject. In the United Kingdom, a big debate about specialist schools is the degree to which they are able to introduce such “selection”. In France, there is no such open debate, yet in practice the scope for selecting brighter students for specialised classes. Indeed, the numbers who gain entry to some *collèges* (lower secondary schools) and *lycées* (upper secondary schools) on this basis would make the UK specialist schools’ limit of 10% selected by aptitude look modest (see Illustration 1).

Information and image: opening Pandora’s box?

Information has played an important role in the development of school choice in many countries. This is partly because a family choosing a school for their child needs to have reliable information on which to base the decision. But in addition, a proliferation of published information in some countries has itself encouraged active choices to be made, where otherwise one’s local school may be chosen by default. Where certain differences among schools are made more visible, it can be harder than in the past for a parent to accept what now appears to be an “inferior” option.

The United Kingdom led the way in officially publishing, from 1992, performance tables of the raw examination results at the end of secondary school, and has since extended these comparisons to include results of national tests of 11 year old students. In most countries, there is now at least some proxy measure of school outcomes, whether published and promoted at official level or not. In France, for example, students may complete upper secondary education with one of three types of baccalureat (general,

technical, vocational) which in theory enjoy equal esteem – but the outcomes of *collèges* are commonly expressed in terms of the percentage going on to the first two of these streams – even though the French government remains cautious about publishing this or any other results in a form that could lead to performance tables”. In the Netherlands, the ministry of education is in favour of openness, but considers simple school performance tables (which are published by newspapers) to be crude – instead it publishes a new “quality card”, which schools often advertise, and has introduced a new inspection system. In a number of countries, attempts are being made to replace crude measures of school results with those that look at how much value a school adds to each pupil’s performance, although it is not easy to design valid measures of this type.

There is widespread agreement that more information about schools’ performance can have perverse effects. It can encourage schools to aim to focus efforts for improvement only on those aspects of education that can be easily measured. Moreover, even where lots of scientific effort is put into showing measures of school quality rather than crude results that reflect the intake of the school, it appears that many parents will continue to pay more attention to the latter, since they want their children to go to school with better-achieving pupils. Publication of results can make parents more aware of the variations in the social and academic profiles of students to increase, by leading more privileged families to shun schools with a “worse” intake.

Yet once information has been made available, there is little prospect that it can subsequently be suppressed. (However there is some scope for de-emphasising them at official level, as recent decisions in Wales and Northern Ireland to stop collating schools’ exam results into “league tables” demonstrates.) In most countries the myth that every school is equal has been shattered or is in the process of being seriously eroded. Performance measures are a fact of life for schools, and the only way to create more equal esteem for various schools will be by reducing the greatest disparities in their outcomes, not by hiding them.

Strategies

The above analysis indicates how the impact of policies affecting school choice in the 1990s has been affected by the responses of educational users and suppliers, as much as by further changes in rules. But what strategies exactly have families, schools and school systems taken when confronted by school choice? It is, of course, impossible to generalise. However, one can characterise some broad responses that have influenced developments.

Families do not judge schools only on their academic results, yet often use these results as a criterion for choice. As documented in the OECD’s 1994 report, parents do not only choose schools on narrow academic criteria. Most want a school where their own child will feel happy and thrive, rather than necessarily one that wins prizes for high exam results. Yet evidence from the United States, for example, shows consistently that “school quality” is what parents look for when they select schools. By this they could mean a number of things, from good exam results to high quality teachers to a healthy social atmosphere. Well-informed parents have always been able to get information about some of the less tangible aspects of school quality through the “grapevine” – especially for local schools. But wider choice requires them to know about a greater range of schools, and also potentially makes active choosers of a wider range of parents not all of whom have good information networks; while at the same time there has been a proliferation of quantitative indicators of academic performance. In this circumstance, they rely increasingly on academic results – potentially as a proxy for other things

Where choice has a social component, parental choice strategies are interdependent. Whether openly or not, many parents are concerned about who else their children go to school with. Choice of residence and carefully drawn catchment zones can create a relatively straightforward means for privileged families to

cluster into semi-segregated school communities. However, in residentially more mixed areas, choices become more complex. If more than a certain proportion of middle class parents in certain cities do not choose local schools, that reduces the incentive for others to do so as well. This is a familiar phenomenon in, say, American inner cities, but also now exists in many different cultures. One recent French case study found, for example, that "urban pioneers" – middle class families settling in a hitherto "difficult" city neighbourhood (in the centre of Nanterre, near Paris) tried actively to encourage others in their social circle to support two middle schools where the social balance was delicately poised. In one case it appears that they succeeded in retaining a "critical mass" of such parents at the school; in the other, most left to attend private schools or found ways of getting into public ones outside the neighbourhood.⁸

Schools may choose, to varying degrees, to assist the clustering of more advantaged families. Many modern educators are social idealists who wish to provide opportunities to children from all backgrounds and of all abilities, not assist in the preserving of élites. Yet schools that enjoy greater autonomy, that find their performance under the spotlight, and that have their fortunes linked to the number of clients that they can attract, face considerable pressure to aim for a more advantaged clientele. One of the key concerns, particular in areas of social deprivation, may be to limit the number of "troublemakers" who might create a difficult social atmosphere in the school. Private schools may be in a position to prevent such pupils from being admitted, for example through a screening interview; public schools may use expulsion as a significant tool. In England, the 1990s saw a dramatic rise in the number of permanent exclusions – from 3,000 in 1990/91 to 13,000 in 1996-97, before falling to 9,000 in 1999-2000 after pressure from the government on schools to exclude fewer pupils⁹. More widely, schools that are unable to select students by ability or by interview may try to ensure that their catchment areas cover "nice" neighbourhoods. While there is no evidence that this has become the norm, there is little doubt that it occurs in a number of cases, particularly where schools have discretion over whom to admit. In the United States, a criticism of charter schools is that they have in many cases been selective about their clientele.

It should also be noted that schools may adopt strategies that make it clear to parents that their children will be educated alongside similar children within the school, even though the intake of the whole school is more mixed. The "comprehensive" education ideal has often been associated with a lack of internal differentiation, particularly in schools below upper secondary level. (Some countries on the other hand have continued to separate children by ability throughout secondary education, including for example the Netherlands, which gives a high degree of school choice within these constraints). However, it has latterly become more common, for example in England, to separate students into different classes by ability within secondary schools, in some or all subjects. This does not contradict government policy. However in France, separation by ability is not officially permitted, yet in some cases the division of students into classes following specific curriculum alternatives is perceived to have a similar effect. For example it is thought that German is a harder second language to learn than English, and some parents may want their children to take this subject in order that they are grouped generally with higher-achieving peers. An increasingly common strategy of *collèges* in relatively underprivileged catchment areas, who are trying to avert an exodus of middle class families from the school, is to offer and emphasise such special classes.

In choosing schools with "specialised" labels, families are not always trying to buy into a different form of education. In the 1970s, the East Harlem district of New York City, which had been achieving poor academic results, launched a much cited experiment in which all schools could adopt a special profile, ranging from liberal open classroom style to highly formal "academies". One lesson that the world drew from that experiment was that where parents and children feel that they have chosen a distinctive style of education, motivation and results might improve.

⁸ Research by Agnes van Zanten, publication forthcoming, 2002.

⁹ Mohibur Rahman, Guy Palmer, Peter Kenway and Catherine Howarth (2000) *Monitoring poverty and social exclusion*, York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation

The many “technology schools”, “language academies” and other “specialised” schools that have been set up in different countries since that time have had mixed fortunes, but any attempt to generalise the East Harlem model comes up against an important flaw on the demand side. The circumstances of East Harlem were in many ways a unique combination: a densely populated area with many schools in easy access of children’s homes, plagued by economic decay and blessed by a dynamic set of innovators, unconstrained by centralised curriculum controls, who gave the community hope of something different. More typically, most parents seem to want *good* education for their children, not *different* education. They often like schools with impressive labels not because they want them to be *specialised* but because they hope they will be *special*. Equip a school with lots of brand new computers and call it a technology college, a parent might hope, and it will become a positive and optimistic environment. It would be wrong to suggest that parents are all looking for exactly the same kind of education, and in the Netherlands, Sweden and Denmark, for example, there is sufficient demand for a minority of schools with alternative pedagogies. Such schools have tended, however, to be very small by the standards of, say, American schools enjoying public support. The evidence does not so far suggest that there is enough demand for such schools to make radical educational innovation an attractive proposition for a school hoping to attract a high proportion of students from a particular neighbourhood.

Correspondingly, schools use specialisation to a large extent for tactical purposes rather than to promote a particular educational conviction. One UK study¹⁰ asked head teachers who had chosen specialised status why they had done so; by far the most common response was the additional money it would bring from sponsors and the government. Research has also noted that head teachers of such schools present themselves to parents as providing a broad curriculum, rather than emphasising mainly the area of specialisation.¹¹ This is not to say that there is no room for diversity in school character, but the evidence to date appears to show that long-standing differentiation in cultural terms may not be replicated in educational differentiation. Some countries have a tradition of providing education appealing to members of, say, different religious communities, without the implication that the educational approach will be greatly different – thus for example a private religious school in the Netherlands has the freedom in some disciplines to teach to their religious “colour”, but in the main is guided by a national curriculum. Culturally distinct groups in many countries are seeing advantages in having their own schools but educationally driven diversity appears so far more limited.

Competition can, however, spur schools to adopt new strategies for improvement – whether of quality or image. There is no doubt that school choice and competition makes it hard for schools to be complacent. School leaders who cannot take for granted their clientele or their funding must think carefully about the service that they deliver, and about their reputations. Most dramatically, schools that experience a sudden loss of pupils, or damage to their reputation, need to think about new ways of doing things. This can be done in a positive or in a negative context. A school that had gained a notoriety for ill-discipline in a high-immigrant district of Stockholm, Botvidgymnasiet, is being transformed by a principal appointed in 1999 who aims to build stronger relationships between staff and students, emphasising teaching quality and reversing negative images of immigrants. On the other hand, the threat of exit can prompt conservative or defensive behaviour by schools. There is no doubt that for individual schools, strategies for change today occur not just as a result of educators having new ideas, but in the context of multiple pressures from their clients. These pressures can be particularly strong on schools that are losing students: see Illustration 1 at the end of this chapter.

¹⁰ West, A., Noden, P., Kleinman, M. and Whitehead, C. (2000), *Examining the Impact of the Specialist Schools Programme*, London, Department for Education and Employment, Research Report RR196.

¹¹ See especially Woods, P.A., Bagley, C. and Glatter, R. (1998), *School Choice and Competition: markets in the public interest?* London, Routledge.

Choice and competition can also act as a spur to whole school systems. One of the biggest variations across countries is the degree to which the most important forms of choice are made between schools of different sectors or the same one. In the United Kingdom, public money follows students to whichever public school they enrol at, but never to private schools. Here the key competition is among individual public institutions. In countries where funds follow students across sectoral boundaries, on the other hand, it is often the competition between different sectors that is the most important. The development of subsidised competition from independent schools in Sweden and in Australia can cause the public sector to consider its educational strategy. In particular, the steady decline in market share of school systems run by Australian states has stimulated the authorities to think about what parents and communities want from education. Illustration 2 at the end of this chapter shows the effects in the case of Queensland, a previously conservative state that has recently been spurred into reform in large part by competition from the private sector. One must be careful not to attribute every educational reform purely to such stimuli, even in places where they are strong. But the importance of system change that is prompted partly by the wish to regain customers is that it is bound to focus consciously on the aspirations and involvement of users, rather than being led purely by ideas generated within the education system.

Outcomes

Many attempts have been made to research the outcomes of school choice. They have produced no single answer to the question “does choice improve performance?”, for several reasons. First, because there are many forms of school choice, and they take place in many different educational contexts. Second, because measurable outcomes such as test results are not the only outcomes (definitions of performance are discussed further in chapter 3 below). Third, because even if choice were marginally to improve average performance, an adverse impact on a minority of individuals could make its effects undesirable. Fourth and most obviously because of what researchers call “noise” – the many other forces at work simultaneously with the introduction of policies to increase choices. There is some evidence established by research in different countries on the direct impact of choice in various circumstances. Some observations that can be made on these results are that:

- *School choice has proved neither a cure-all nor a catastrophe for the quality of education.* Evidence from the United States provides some patchy examples of where choice initiatives have been associated with rises in test scores, although in no case has the rise been dramatic. A difficulty is that in the United States, which provides the best laboratory of different policies, the initiatives have often been on too small a scale for their results to carry much weight. Yet paradoxically countries that have introduced choice on a grand and uniform scale lack the characteristics of a “laboratory” with control groups: exam results in the United Kingdom have improved greatly overall since 1988, but there is no way of distinguishing the effect of the enactment in that year of open enrolment from that of a national curriculum or of national testing. However, if choice produced an automatic route to high educational standards or to their collapse, it is likely that more than a decade of choice-friendly policies around the world would have revealed this. They have not.
- *School choice can have marked effects on the social polarisation of students.* Research on whether choice has increased polarisation has produced understandable controversy. It is not easy to demonstrate that polarisation arises from privileged schools finding ways to admit a greater concentration of privileged students (which many people suspect), but more straightforward to show that schools serving deprived communities suffer from student flight. Such a pattern is consistent with earlier findings in France, where lower middle class families “escaping” working class areas were the most active “choosers” under its limited

“desectorisation” rules¹². In Australia, not surprisingly, private schools draw more students from higher-income families; even though the evidence is unclear on whether this phenomenon has increased, the expansion of private education supported by state funds therefore creates a public sector with a lower average socio-economic profile. England, despite anecdotal reports of growing social polarisation, the true overall picture is less clear. The authors of a systematic analysis have asserted that there is no evidence that the introduction of a limited market has led to an increasingly stratified school system.¹³ This has provoked disagreement among researchers, revealing that generalisations in this area are risky. Rather, it seems well established internationally that polarisation is a *real risk* rather than an inevitable consequence of school choice.

- *Choice creates new possibilities of social exclusion influenced by geography.* Some American advocates of public support for school choice see it as a way of combating geographical exclusivity in access to schooling. Without it, richer families will be able to buy into good education either by paying fees for private schools or moving to socially privileged areas, where under the relatively localised financing system for American education, the amount of resources available per student in public schools can be much higher than in worse-off areas. Greater choice regardless of residence can be a way of helping people escape educational ghettos. In some cases, carefully designed choice initiatives have succeeded in giving more people access to more schools regardless of where they live (see for example the case study of Boston in the OECD’s 1994 study). But since in practice residence has been the most common factor limiting access to popular schools that are full, there has not been a general opening up. At the same time, the extra pressures on successful schools to seek “privileged” markets has helped in some cases to emphasise geographically-based social exclusion of others. So has the tendency for less privileged schools to face falling rolls and hence reduced funding. None of these phenomena are completely new, but with greater public emphasis put on the performance of schools and their ability to fill their available places, there is more scope for a downward spiral of demoralisation and decline.
- *Finally, school popularity, school performance and school quality need to be clearly distinguished.* It has been noted in this chapter that parents often associate “good” schools with those achieving good results in terms, for example, of crude test scores. For this reason the growth of publicly available test results has created a growing association between popularity and performance as measured by these results. Yet as inspection reports in the United Kingdom and elsewhere have shown, school quality is not systematically linked either with popularity or crude test results. Some popular schools getting a large proportion of children through exams have relatively mediocre standards of teaching and learning. This demonstrates a limit to which choosing between schools can be relied on to create pressure for desirable outcomes. At the point of choosing a school, one of the most important factor for a parent might be the quality of “intake” – whether other students applying are above-average achievers – a criterion that by definition cannot be fulfilled for everybody. Yet once enrolled, parents individually and collectively have a further interest in ensuring that teachers make the most of their children’s talents. Thus it is important to consider the choices that take

¹² R. Ballion, *La Bonne Ecole* (1991) Hatier, Paris, pp 178-199.

¹³ Gorard, S. and Fitz., J. (2000), ‘Investigating the determinants of segregation between schools’; Gibson, A. and Asthana, S. ‘What’s in a number?’; and Gorard and Fitz, ‘Here we go again’: all in *Research Papers in Education*, Vol. 15, No. 2, June, 115-162.

place around schooling beyond the context of the enrolment decision. Chapter 3 does so, in looking at the role of choice in the overall evolution of education systems.

ILLUSTRATION 1:

Strategies to combat school decline – two examples

For some schools, it seems that whatever educational strategies are adopted, the social context stands in the way of success. Where this is so, something more might be needed to “turn the school around”. There is no sure-fire way of doing so. Attaching “magnet” programmes to American schools in poor areas sometimes but not always enabled them to become popular with out-of-catchment children (and sometimes improved the school but only by limiting access to deprived local families). For every highly publicised example of a talented leader rescuing a failing school, there are many untold stories of steady decline. Strategies to arrest this decline play out differently according to local circumstances, but there are some striking similarities across cultures.

Kings Manor secondary school in Guildford, UK, served a severely deprived district of a highly affluent town near London. Its situation by the late 1990s illustrates the extreme situation that some English schools find themselves in largely as a result of school choice. Attempts to stem a loss of pupils by renaming it and by appointing a well respected new head had failed to improve the take-up of places despite raising educational quality. Providing well for children with special educational needs probably made the school even less attractive to parents of other children, as it potentially attracted disruptive pupils and lowered the crude performance of the school in terms of exam results : only a fifth of children were getting five good “GCSE” grades at age 16, compared to up to three quarters in two other schools in Guildford. Enrolments plummeted, to a low of about 60 a year compared to the 180 for which there was capacity. Closure seemed inevitable. Yet this would have caused a shortage of secondary school places in Guildford.

The local education authority came up with a radical alternative, never tried before in the UK: a private company was brought in to create a new school. **Kings College** was created by “3E’s”, a commercial offshoot of one of Britain’s few independently run but publicly funded “city technology colleges”. It invested a large amount in creating a modern high-tech environment and a fresh “feel”; it obliged students to reapply for the school and sought a wider catchment area. Most importantly for parents, it restructured the school day in a way that engaged the children constantly in organised activity, avoiding the biggest worry about what would happen to them in an unsupervised “playground culture”.

The new school opened in 2000, and by its second year of operation had at least reversed the decline in enrolments, with the number of places taken up rising from one-third to over two-thirds. Much of this gain was at the expense of a neighbouring school in an area of medium affluence, which was in its turn facing some severe difficulties, rather than creating immediate problems for the two most desired secondary schools.

Collège Henri Dunant in Reuil Malmaison, France, serves a highly deprived district of a generally affluent town near Paris. This lower-secondary school draws its students mainly from a large high-rise public housing estate (“HLM”); two-thirds are North African in origin and half of these have difficulties with French. A new principal appointed in 1996 has tried to reverse its image as a violent and undesirable school, which has caused some middle-class parents living in its catchment to seek alternatives for their children in private schools or in more privileged public ones. Although they require a special exemption to choose a different public school, a nearby highly-desired *collège*, Jules Verne, offers that opportunity

through two routes. A child who can demonstrate that they are gifted in music can enter the music class, which accounts for one in six of the classes at Jules Verne. Another possibility is to express an interest in learning Russian, which is offered at Jules Verne but not other schools in the area – about 15 students a year enter the school by this route. By the standards of some struggling UK schools, the enrolment situation in Henri Dunant was not desperate: 285 were enrolled, in a school with a maximum capacity of 350.

The new principal focused initially on reducing violence, getting teachers to work together and engaging the students on project work. Such measures appear to have arrested the decline to some extent, but not to have reversed the school's disadvantaged image. Enrolments have fallen slightly – by a further ten pupils. Two other measures are now being tried. The education authorities are proposing to revise catchment areas to put some middle class streets in Henri Dunant's zone, rather than Jules Verne's. Nobody knows whether this will result in a more balanced social intake, or more people enrolling privately or seeking exemptions to go out of zone. A second measure with a social dimension is the setting up of a class that allows children to study two foreign languages, provided they have sufficiently good grammar. This modest form of intra-school selection could help reassure middle class parents that their children will not be learning primarily alongside students facing severe difficulties.

These two examples from two very different systems of school choice both illustrate the uphill struggle faced by schools with a reputation of difficulty and disadvantage. Educational improvement is certainly part of the story, but it is rarely enough. Both schools have had to look for ways of attracting a wider mix of students in terms of social background and ability. Both have also had to think directly about parents' concerns about what will happen to their children at school – not just in the classroom but in the playground. Thus choice creates new challenges for schools to think holistically about what they are offering children and parents, not just about delivering the educational curriculum.

ILLUSTRATION 2 –

Competing through distinctiveness - Queensland's educational rethink

At the end of the 1990s the Australian State of Queensland started to rethink its strategy for providing school education. It was prompted in large part by a trend that has affected all Australian states: the loss of market share by state schools to a private sector that receives generous public subsidies. Between 1979 and 1999, the private share rose from 21% to 28% of all schoolchildren. This steady, seemingly inexorable rise had initially been largely ignored by the education authorities in most Australian states, but they have recently started to react by asking how they can make their schools more attractive in order to compete more effectively with the private sector.

In 1999-2000 a dynamic new team at Queensland's education department carried out a review and consultation resulting in a widely disseminated document, *Education Queensland 2010*. The review found in particular that :

- Both parents and teachers say they would like to see diverse forms of education to meet diverse needs.
- An important influence on what parents think about schools is the quality of relationship between teachers and students and between teachers and parents. Parents are more likely to rate private schools than public schools highly on this criterion.
- The state does relatively well for less advantaged children, but is letting down advantaged ones.
- There is widespread concern that if nothing is done to change, the public system is in danger eventually of serving only a residual population.

The state's strategic response to this analysis challenges schools to rethink what they offer, in consultation with local communities. It has a number of levers, some in the form of demonstration projects covering selected schools, others as conditions covering the whole system. For example:

- **“New basics”** On four key determinants of successful pedagogy, Queensland schools were found by the review to be: strong in giving social support, medium in recognising different student needs, but poor in their intellectual quality and relevance. The New Basics project seeks to improve basic standards of pedagogy. Initially trialled in 38 schools, this programme is based on a set of “rich tasks” describing things that students should be able to do, with a real-world value. This outcomes-defined approach enables schools to devise their own pedagogies, rather than laying down a single formula from the centre.
- **“Distinctive schools”**. There had been considerable differentiation among Queensland schools even before these reforms, but it had been rather unsystematic, with low public awareness of any choice of options. Although some initiatives, such as the creation of a dance school and the establishment of language immersion programmes, had a degree of funding support from the state government, initiatives typically came independently from individual

principles. A danger is that initiatives driven by one or more individuals will wane when those leaders depart.

Recently a more concerted attempt has been made centrally to encourage schools to define their distinctive character in ways that meet particular local needs. One spur has been a Secondary Schools Renewal Project, initially covering 63 schools. This initiative gives money for facilities renewal, but only on condition that schools engage in an intensive consultation with local communities over how to develop their programmes. In effect, the state insists that schools requiring physical renewal do not take resources for granted, but rather makes them conditional on a thorough review of how needs are being served.

- **School marketing demonstration.** Schools tend at worst to have poor relationships with parents, and at best to interpret marketing in a narrow sense of producing glossy brochures and being good at selling themselves. A demonstration project covering six schools worked on a wider interpretation of marketing, in the commercial sense of researching and responding to what clients want, as well as cultivating client relations. As understanding of such strategies develops, the aim is to spread it to other schools.

Distinctiveness and choice in Queensland schools

The model being developed in Queensland does not seek to encourage a competitive internal market within the state system – as has been done in such countries as New Zealand and the United Kingdom. For an Australian public school, the “competition” is, first and foremost, nearby private schools. Diversity within such a context is interpreted as developing a range of options across the public system.

Yet while that is the ideal, it will not be easy to achieve. An earlier attempt, in the mid-1990s, to identify “leading schools” with distinctive profiles was sunk by the powerful teacher unions who feared that it would create inequality and elitism. Whatever the intention, some Queenslanders feel there will always be a tendency for school differences to be associated with higher status and resources rather than simply a range of alternatives of equal educational quality. This may be less so if there are systematic attempts to co-ordinate a range of offerings among schools in a particular area. But Educational Queensland is not inclined to do this from the top down – it would require considerable voluntary collaboration among schools, for which there is at present no particular mechanism.

While the application seems at present rather *ad hoc*, Queensland is introducing an important principle into policies around school choice. This is that state school systems, as well as the schools within them, should consider closely what they are missing from the perspective of parents and communities who are losing confidence in them and turning to private schools; but that in doing so they should not think simply in terms of a “one size fits all” model of public education. In many other cases it has been assumed that raising standards in a relatively uniform system is the key to the restoral of faith in a public system. Queensland believes that standards are important – especially in terms of specifying final outcomes – but wants to develop a more “permissive” model, allowing and helping each school to chart its own course, sensitive to local views and demands.

CHAPTER 3

SCHOOL CHOICE IN EDUCATION SYSTEMS

American thinkers from Milton Friedman in 1962¹⁴ to Chubb and Moe in 1990¹⁵ argued that the market should be made the driving discipline of education. In fact, while the introduction of quasi-markets has undoubtedly had an effect on the direction of school systems, the above analysis has shown some of the difficulties with separating out its effect as a driver of change. Experience has shown that it is unrealistic to regard choice as a mechanistic lever to change what happens in schools. Yet this does not mean that the effects of school choice can be discounted or ignored.

An alternative approach is to regard school choice as a feature of education systems that is constantly interacting with other features to influence educational processes and outcomes. This influence will result both from the mechanisms for making choices within the school system and from the diverse ways in which choice is exercised in practice. This chapter looks more closely with how school choice, in its wider sense, interacts with various aspects of education systems, in particular those identified by the Centre for Educational Innovation's *What Works* series as key areas of current policy change (see introduction above).

Choice and the involvement of educational users

A weakness of applying a market model to a public "service" like education is that it is misleading to draw a clear-cut distinction between educational producers and consumers. Parents undoubtedly have a huge influence on educational outcomes, which helps explain why such outcomes are so strongly correlated with socio-economic and educational characteristics of parents. Yet, the role of parents as co-producers of education has not traditionally been well recognised by school systems, which on the whole have seen teaching as something to be done by professionals, with parents playing at most a narrow supporting role of handing over children at the school gates and making sure they did their homework.

In recent years, parents have in many cases become increasingly involved in schooling, at three levels. First, this takes place in closer discussion with schools over the education of their individual children. Second, in formal arrangements to involve parents in decision-making in schools, for example as members of governing bodies or representative councils. Third, and less tangibly, as a collectively more articulate voice that is listened to in developing education policy generally. As discussed in an OECD report on what

¹⁴ Milton Friedman (1962) *Capitalism and Freedom*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago

¹⁵ Chubb and Moe, *op cit*

works in this area published in 1997¹⁶ such influence is unevenly felt both within and across countries, but overall the voice of parents is being heard as never before.

As shown in the examples in the OECD's review of parental partnerships with schools, the most fruitful form of parental involvement tends to be collaborative rather than confrontational. To some extent such models limit the degree to which parents are genuinely involved in making choices about the fundamentals of their children's education. It is difficult, for example, for parents on a governing body to challenge professional judgements made by a head teacher, so often they will get involved with matters on the margins rather than at the core of schooling (e.g. raising extra funds or organising school trips). Similarly, parents working collaboratively with a teacher in helping an individual child would generally find it hard to contradict the professional's view.

Yet just because key decisions about how schools are run and what they deliver can rarely be attributed directly to them, this does not mean that parental influence is absent. Far more than in the past, school principals are directly aware of the need to keep their stakeholders happy. If parents' support is to be retained, whether for fundraising, for liaison with teachers on homework or for recommending the school to others, their views cannot be taken for granted.

Box 1 summarises evidence from surveys of Swedish parents showing that they would not always support the choices about schooling that might be made by professional educators, especially reforming ones. They are generally quite conservative, and have felt uneasy with rapid change. In taking such opinions into account, school decision-makers do not have to mirror them exactly, but rather heed them carefully. Where changes seem to be needed of which parents are nervous, it may be a matter partly of explaining them properly, partly of modifying them and partly of implementing them at a manageable pace. Certainly those who implemented new teaching methods introduced in the 1960s and 1970s might have paid undue attention to the need to keep parents involved. (If learning changes beyond recognition from one generation to the next, will parents have the skills to help children with their homework?)

Thus, the greatest challenge in pursuing closer involvement of parents as partners in education is not simply to enhance formal mechanisms for parental involvement, but to achieve a mutual respect in a relationship that accurately identifies the parental agenda. As pointed out in the OECD's earlier review, this relationship cannot be built on instant assumptions about what parents want, but must be based on widespread consultation and a willingness to question established truths.

¹⁶ OECD (1997) *Parents as Partners in Schooling* OECD, Paris

BOX 1

Swedish parents get engaged

During the 1990s, Sweden's education system has undergone radical and rapid change – abandoning central control to give far more local autonomy and an orientation on goals rather than processes. One thing that influenced these changes was the perception that parents had too little to do with the system, and needed to get more involved, both through choice and voice. Yet in 1990, many observers of Sweden would have doubted whether the political thinking that was driving reforms could really be applied to Sweden: was it realistic to think that parents who had long accepted a stable, professionally dominated and monochrome model of public schooling actually wanted to get involved in choosing and influencing schools.

Surveys through the 1990s¹⁷ revealed a steadily growing desire among parents both to choose a school more actively and to influence the school that their children attend. By 1997, the majority (between 86% and 54% depending on the question) wanted to participate “very much” or “quite a lot” in decisions regarding possibilities for extra support, class size, norms and rules, and school environment. Considerably fewer felt the desire to influence decisions on actual educational matters - content, work procedures, or choice of textbooks and teaching aids. What is more striking, however, is that two out of three parents (70%) expressed a strong interest in choice of school, and almost half (47%) expressed a similar interest to influence the choice of teachers for their child. The surveys have also found that more educated parents have the best opportunities to make their influence felt, and less educated ones are often frustrated.

Two other findings from the surveys also stand out. First, the pace of educational change, despite opening up these new possibilities for choice and influence, leaves many parents uneasy. Four in ten thought things were changing too quickly by 1997; this unease had grown rapidly during the 1990s. Second, the kinds of changes that parents do like to see are more “traditional” than teachers. More teachers than parents supported greater openness, more co-ordination of teaching across subject borders, and more independent work for pupils. More parents than teachers supported more tests, more homework and the awarding of grades at an earlier age.

Choice and the school curriculum

Who decides what children should learn in schools? In public education systems, this question has been answered through a combination of professional judgements and policy decisions by school authorities. The influence of regional or national decision making compared to the choices of individual schools, and the significance of political or administrative choices compared to the judgements of professionals, have varied according to the existence and character of any national or provincial curriculum, and to the degree of centralisation in the national culture. In some countries such as the United Kingdom and the United States, which have a relatively decentralised tradition, government has in the past 15 years acquired new powers to influence and regulate aspects of schooling such as curriculum and assessment. In others, like France, a long-established national curriculum in a highly professionalised culture has to some extent been relaxed in an era of decentralisation.

¹⁷ Reviewed in Sten Söderberg, “Attitudes and Expectations in relation to Schools: Swedish Findings and some International Comparisons”, (Chapter 9 in “What Schools for the Future? OECD, 2001).

But is it inevitable that parents and children accept the curriculum that is decided for them by politicians and professionals? To some extent, they have gained influence over collective decisions about curriculum in countries where politicians have taken greater control, since politicians are more explicitly accountable to the public than the teaching profession. Certainly a re-emphasising of “the basics” in some countries, where it is perceived that parents worry about certain failures in new teaching styles, aims to bring parental views into the picture. But as noted above, assumptions about “what parents want” are not always firmly rooted in researched preferences. Moreover, a strong national curriculum may leave little scope for parents to influence their individual school, and does not necessarily give choices to parents and children about individual learning directions. In societies that are multicultural and diverse, is a “one size fits all” curriculum really appropriate?

This question can be addressed both at the level of cross-school diversity and at the level of curriculum choices and student pathways.

School diversity. To what extent does the decision over which school to go to give parents and students real choices about the school curriculum? That depends largely on the degree of prescription to which schools in general are subjected. National education authorities are often reluctant to allow major variations from a specified curriculum in public schools. As a result, schools that “specialise” in say languages or technology often have a curriculum that varies only at the margin from other schools, rather than being fundamentally different.

The degree of freedom for private schools is far more variable. As a condition for financing the operation of privately governed schools, the Dutch government insists that they follow a public curriculum with specified opportunities for variation related to the religious or philosophical ethos. This contrasts starkly with Danish policy, which is to pay for most of the cost of educating children at “free” schools with no requirement to follow a set curriculum, leaving it to parents (who pay the remainder of the cost) to decide, through their collective control of the school. The United Kingdom government pays nothing to private schools and does not require them to follow the national curriculum. Yet such schools are covered by an inspection system with national requirements that impose some limits. These were exercised recently when Summerhill, a small private school with fewer than 20 students originating from the UK, was almost closed down because inspectors judged that its “alternative” style did not give a basic educational grounding.

In understanding the degree to which school systems are willing to accept diversity in education where it is chosen by parents, one needs to distinguish several types of pluralism. One is ethnic, religious or cultural pluralism. Another is pluralism in educational content and outcomes. A third is pluralism in teaching style. As some systems become more outcomes-oriented, they may in principle become tolerant towards different types of teaching in different cultural settings, as long as it can be shown that they produce acceptable results. This might be the case even in countries, like the United Kingdom, which in recent years through its national curriculum and inspection systems has made it difficult to educational approaches differing radically from the mainstream, although it is sometimes possible in theory to use alternative means to common ends. For example the present UK government has introduced a daily “literacy hour” which primary schools must follow unless they can show that they are achieving the same results by other means – but understandably, few have the courage to divert from the suggested norm. In its 2001 Green Paper on diversity, and subsequent White Paper, the administration sought to explore ways of reconciling more freedom for schools with guaranteed educational standards.

Whether specifying outcomes permits schools to offer parents a range of educational approaches and cultural settings depends to a large extent on how these outcomes are described. The otherwise permissive attitude towards educational pluralism in Denmark was tested recently when questions were raised about whether children at Muslim schools were receiving adequate education in the Danish language. Other

countries have a much more detailed view about what all children should learn, and growing diversity can in itself lead to a definition of standards of “cultural literacy” that bind a nation together. In practice, the method of student assessment can help determine the scope for diversity in teaching methods: some forms of assessment are better than others in measuring genuine educational outcomes rather than ensuring that students have learned the curriculum in particular ways.

Nor is it always clear exactly what families are choosing when they opt for educational “diversity”. As noted earlier in this report, those who today opt for “religious” private schools supported by the state in some European countries appear often to be choosing a school that they think is educationally sound rather than selecting a religious ethos. Choosing a particular kind of school can also have an element of social clustering.

Individual curriculum choice. A second aspect of choice in relation to the school curriculum is how much freedom individual students have to choose what they want to study. In general, this increases as pupils get older, and in particular from the upper secondary level onwards. In the United States, critics of the “shopping mall high school” argue that students have been given too much choice and need more direction. Elsewhere – in Sweden, for example – advocates of greater self-determination are trying to find ways of giving students a greater say in their own learning pathways rather than being processed along pre-set tracks.

Allowing students to make choices at school is not just a matter of getting the right balance between compulsory and optional subjects. More fundamentally, the challenge is to engage them in decisions about their own learning. This can help motivate students, but it is equally important that they receive guidance that allows them to use these freedoms constructively.

A number of initiatives across OECD countries are trying to reach disaffected and poorly motivated students in new ways that will engage them not just at school but in learning throughout their lives. An important finding of an OECD study on such initiatives¹⁸ was that they work best where students feel involved in decisions about their own futures, rather than being passive recipients of knowledge. An important way of achieving this engagement is by allowing students to make positive decisions about what they are studying and, increasingly as they get older, structuring their own learning pathways.

Yet this does not simply mean presenting students with a smorgasbord of options and allowing them to steer their own course unguided. The most significant criticism of the “shopping mall high school” is not that it gives students choices but that it allows these choices to be made in an unstructured and unguided context. Strong guidance is becoming ever more important to secondary school students, both in relation to their learning needs and to their future career choices. Yet career guidance has too often been introduced only in the closing stages of education. Another OECD study, of young people and career guidance, recommended that guidance be offered to everyone from their early teens “as an integral part of their education or training curriculum”, and that students where possible should learn to take responsibility for their own choices from a relatively early age.¹⁹ Responding to a follow-up questionnaire on the guidance study, one respondent noted the rapid growth in the importance of internet resources in enabling students to access information flexibly and hence to feel better equipped autonomously to develop choices about their own futures²⁰

¹⁸ OECD (2000) *Motivating Students for Lifelong Learning* OECD, Paris.

¹⁹ OECD (1996) *Mapping the Future* OECD, Paris, page 51.

²⁰ Unpublished reply to CERI questionnaire (Canada, on *Mapping the Future*)

Choice, school development and school management

Reforms promoting school choice have been introduced as part of a wider reform of education that encourages schools to look for new routes to improvement and development. In particular, they interact with a new emphasis on the school as a unit. This is partly because schools themselves have been made more accountable, not just by allowing parents and students to choose between them, but also through inspection and performance reporting systems that stress the school level more than they did in the past.²¹ In some countries more than others, each school had previously been seen as little more than an administrative unit of a centrally managed school system. New approaches to the management of schools are now needed.²² At the same time the reforms put a spotlight on school development, a process whereby the school as a whole makes choices about its strategies for the future, and individuals within the school learn how to put the required changes into practice. The relationship between school accountability and school development continues to evolve, as systems search for a working partnership between the management of schools and their governance at a political level.²³ This in turn necessitates a new emphasis on in-service training and development for teachers, which is being addressed more systematically in many countries²⁴.

It is far beyond the scope of this report to analyse the profound impact of these changes on school education. However, it is worth noting some broad issues relating to choice that schools have to confront in the context of this transformation. One is who makes choices about the direction of schooling. Another relates to what kinds of directions are being chosen.

Devolution of responsibility to schools puts a large amount of power and influence in the hands of school managers and in particular principals. Yet the OECD's study of new approaches to school management found that successful managers are those that can involve the many other stakeholders in decision-making, as well as showing clear leadership. The parents' role has already been discussed, above. Many school managers have also taken care to involve the wider community, getting them involved in projects that support the school, and giving them a voice in school decision making. Another significant stakeholder is the student. Serious power for students remains the exception, but in Sweden, for example, the issue has become an important one, with efforts to give students influence, for example through representative student councils. The benefits of involving multiple stakeholders arise both from the direct support that they can put back into the school as a result of feeling involved, and also from the enhanced reputation of the school in the wider community which can make it a more popular choice.

It is harder to generalise about the overall directions that reforms are taking schools in. One potential result of becoming more accountable for measurable results is that schools will "privilege the academic" – to emphasise strategies that raise test scores, possibly at the expense of other aspects of school life. Yet, parents' concern about the social welfare of their children is great, and many initiatives to improve less popular schools have started with other aspects of performance – such as reducing the number of violent incidents. However, an underlying difficulty is that one of the most important aspects of a school's mission today – to ensure that children leave with an enthusiasm for learning that they will carry throughout life – is difficult to quantify. As a result, there may not be strong incentives for interesting cross-curricular

²¹ OECD (1995) *Schools under Scrutiny* OECD, Paris.

²² OECD (2001) *New School Management Approaches* OECD, Paris

²³ The (unpublished) Swedish response to CERI's follow-up questionnaire on *Schools under Scrutiny* (op cit) suggests that today: "the primary aim for municipal evaluation is developmental, but that is very closely related to accountability. It can rather be said that an effort to develop is the main way to express accountability".

²⁴ OECD (1998) *Staying Ahead: In-service Training and Teacher Professional Development* OECD, Paris.

projects, that might teach students to be imaginative thinkers but not necessarily to pass exams. One approach to this difficulty is to improve measures of student motivation and general competencies, of the type pioneered by the OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA). In a world of plentiful performance information combined with school choice, it becomes ever more important to align assessment instruments with the broader goals of education systems.

Choice and innovation

The above analysis has shown in a number of ways how school choice does not automatically encourage schools to innovate in search of new "markets", and in is just as likely to discourage educational innovation for fear of losing support from parents who are wary about risking their children's futures on educational experiments whose results are uncertain. Some schools in disadvantaged situations and with falling enrolments have a greater incentive to do things differently, since they have least to lose and most to gain from a change in image. Yet not all such schools have the resources or community support needed to make bold educational experiments feasible. Often they are under pressure to offer attractive features, such as a new technology suite or the opportunity to study music intensively, without changing fundamentally their educational strategies.

In current major educational reforms aiming to transform secondary education and embolden schools to specialise and experiment after a decade of pressures to conform, the United Kingdom government hopes to encourage diversity among schools that are succeeding, rather than those that are failing. One way of doing this is to reward schools that pioneer curriculum or other initiatives and which have benefits across the system. Such a strategy seeks to counter the ethos of competitive choice, recreating some of the inter-school collaboration that has been lost. It does not return to top-down management, but aims to support innovation through "horizontal" networking. Yet a networked system remains far from a reality, and in particular schools that are in direct competition for students in the same locality can find it hard to build collaborative working relationships. In practice many of the best inter-school partnerships involve schools geographically removed from one another.

Recent work by the Centre for Educational Research and Innovation has identified the potential for schools to change radically in order to meet the new circumstances of the 21st century²⁵. In the past, bureaucratic and professional inertia has often acted as a brake on change. Today school systems are more fragmented, and subjected to multiple influences including choice and parental pressures as well as traditional bureaucratic direction. Devolution of control to school leaders has potentially enhanced the *capacity* to innovate. But it has not necessarily improved the *incentive* to do so. The dynamic for change will therefore still need to come to a considerable extent from those who make decisions at the centre of school systems, who need to think about whether and how to improve the conditions and incentives that will encourage innovation at the local level.

²⁵ OECD (2001) *What schools for the future?* Paris

CHAPTER 4

CONCLUSION

The idea of widening school choice in order to enhance the role of educational users is not longer a new one. In many ways, choice has become a more routine and integral feature of educational systems. Yet it continues to provoke fierce political controversy, in debates that frequently generate more heat than light. This report has shown that the evidence on practice shows that wider school choice produces neither automatic benefit nor automatic damage. Much depends on the context in which policies are implemented, and on other changes that are taking place simultaneously within an education system. As school choice comes of age, therefore, it may be time to introduce a new language to describe the involvement of users in education systems, focusing less on consumer-type choice and more on the engagement of stakeholders.

In the 1980s, choice was promoted as a key driver for change in education by those who believed that families' voices had been ignored, that market mechanisms could force educational "producers" to deliver services closer to what their clients really wanted and that competition would stimulate improvement. A decade and hundreds of research studies later, it is clear that school choice is no magic solution to school quality. In some circumstances studies appear to show a modest improvement in outcomes associated with wider choice, but even here it is hard to separate out the effect of choice itself. What is easier to establish is that in particular circumstances choice can have specific positive or negative effects on some schools and families. On the negative side, the unfulfilled promise of choice can cause frustrations among parent, while the greater capacity by some groups to take advantage of choice can potentially widen social divisions. For schools, themselves, introducing a "quasi market" in place of more centralised planning can create unhelpful instability. On the other hand, policies giving parents and students greater scope for choosing schools, along with financial arrangements that reward schools that attract more students, has undoubtedly prompted schools, in many cases, to listen more carefully to the views of their users. In this sense the introduction of choice may in the first instance have acted as a catalyst in attempts to change the orientation of schools to become more sensitive to clients.

Yet in many ways the language of school choice in the political debate is not today a helpful one, in terms of promoting a more productive partnership between educators and their clients. By bringing into question the monopoly of a single state provider of education, debates over choice raise highly sensitive issues about the use of public money. Should it be used to support education based around a particular ethos or religion? Should private fee-charging or profit-making organisations benefit from public funding? How can it be ensured that publicly paid for education delivered in a more diversified manner improves rather than damages social equity? These are the divisive questions that continue to dominate the political dialogue around choice. They are important questions to resolve at the political level, but have an unfortunate tendency to distract from more constructive efforts to involve families more closely in education in co-operation with schools.

These considerations may cause education policy-makers to look for alternative ways of formulating the development of closer links between “supply” and “demand” in publicly-funded school education – between the delivery of a service and the voice, interests and involvement of its users. In particular, they may consider the character and formulation of demand at three levels: that of the individual, that of the specific group or interest and that of users as a whole. The following questions are to a large extent already being asked by governments, creating a richer response to users than implied by a pure market model.

First, how can parents and students as *individuals* become more closely involved with choices and decisions about schooling, in ways that do not require them to behave like fickle consumers?

As set out in CERI’s analysis of parental partnerships with schools²⁶, the individual “client” of educational services is as much a “co-producer” as a “consumer”. This is reflected in the limits to which parents and students behave like commercial customers: many continue to see their local school as an institution, and want it to meet their needs rather than having to choose an alternative, while most students once enrolled in a school prefer not to switch to another. There are a number of ways in which individual parents can become more closely involved in the delivery of schooling, including:

- By participating in activities within the school, including in the classroom – a practice that continues to vary considerably in frequency across countries and schools.
- Through better communication between schools and parents, moving beyond infrequent mechanisms such as once-a-year reports, and towards more regular two-way communication for example through student homework notebooks.
- Through a more collaborative approach to psycho-social support for children, potentially including initiatives to educate parents themselves.

Second, how can education systems be designed to serve *particular groups*, responding to heterogeneous demand rather than producing a “one size fits all” model?

Governments want to ensure that schools deliver a satisfactory curriculum to children during their compulsory years of schooling. But to what extent does this require homogeneity in the system, and how important are different wishes coming from various groups in a pluralistic society? Countries have answered these questions in different ways in the past, and continue to debate how they should answer them in the future. One variable is the specificity of any national curriculum; another is the ways in which differences in, for example, belief, have been dealt with by public services. In terms of the national curriculum, a country such as Denmark is willing to give financial support to a private school as long as parents support and govern it, with only the most minimal of conditions about what sort of education it provides. This contrasts with very stringent curriculum guidelines and inspection regimes in many other countries.

A number of European countries have a long tradition of giving public financial support to schools providing for groups with different beliefs, as long as they deliver a specified curriculum. Such arrangements are often taken for granted as a product of history, and only come to be debated when, as for example recently in the United Kingdom in the case of faith schools, there are proposals to extend or alter them. Various recent changes in the make-up of society, caused for example by immigration, can create a discussion of whether pluralism in demand is being served on a truly equitable basis. A common case is where a historical settlement with Christian schools has not produced an equal responsiveness to demand from Muslim or other religious communities. Greater responsiveness, however, may not consist only or

²⁶ OECD, *Parents as Partners in Schooling*, Paris:1997

primarily of providing a choice of separate schools, but needs also to address the ways in which various groups' needs, beliefs and preferences are dealt with within a school, or within the requirements of a common curriculum.

Finally, are there ways of running school systems in ways that are sensitive to *collective* demand and the views of stakeholders, in a more stable framework than tends to be produced by markets?

Decision-makers have in many ways become more heavily influenced by what the users of school systems think than they were in the past. This is true both at the individual school level, in some cases supported by greater formal consultation with parents or student democracy, and at the system level, at which politicians are aware that a more educated electorate may make their own judgements about the quality and direction of the schooling service. Since "market research" on potential user response to potential educational change is a highly imperfect science, some of this responsiveness is based on hunch, but is no less real as a result. The Swedish education system, under parental pressure, has started to give grades to pupils at earlier ages. In Queensland, Australia, state education officials ask themselves (and local communities) how they can reform the system to address parental aspirations in a way that competes with private education. Thus even planned, "supply-side" changes in education are today frequently oriented to the demands – or at least to the assumed preferences - of users. To strengthen such relationships, governments will need to do more to find out what parents and students really want, and to work with them to develop a common agenda.

Yet at the same time, greater school autonomy and choice have made it harder in some respects for collective interests of any kind to be pursued. Although school choice has by no means created a pure market, it has in many cases created a condition common to other markets: unpredictability. Planning is difficult in the context of hard-to-forecast consumer demand. Any school that wants to change its policy, ethos or methods faces some uncertainty about whether such changes will retain the support of its clientele. In such circumstances, there is a premium on strong leaders who have the tenacity to follow through on an educational strategy and the ability to bring others with them. Since such strong leadership cannot always be relied on to emerge spontaneously at a local level, and since many educational goals continue to be formulated at the national level, there is also a need for those at the centre to give robust support to local educational development – at least there is in terms of advice, co-ordination and specification of required outcomes if not by adopting a hands-on centralist form of management that most countries have (to various degrees) discarded.

In a bumpy sort of way, education is being transformed, along with many other public services, from a producer-led, planned system to one guided by its multiple stakeholders. A "quasi-market" in the provision of school places has nowhere led to a system driven entirely by demand. But the effects of demand are felt in many aspects of schooling in ways that they were not two decades ago. Sometimes this leads to uncomfortable outcomes, and sometimes public authorities are having to modify the conditions of choice as a result. The net result is a compromise between the influence of the users and the suppliers of education in ways that are constantly shifting. Managing that relationship will be an important part of steering education systems in the years ahead.