

SCHOOL CHOICE: OPTIONS IN AMERICAN EDUCATION

IAN FRITH

Abstract

Education policy has been the subject of intense scrutiny over the past several decades. This study looks at how varying ideas for education policy came about, particularly policies related to school choice. The study then examines school choice policies in light of the “process model” of policy formation and compares it with Kingdon’s model to examine which model more accurately explains the development of education policy. This study also considers the merits of school choice legislation, finding that school choice is ultimately advantageous because it would effect much needed change in the public school system.

Introduction

Since the beginning of the public school system in the 19th century, political actors and policymakers have debated the best method to educate the majority of Americans in a comprehensive, standardized way. It is no less contentious today, as evidenced by the recent appointment of Betsy DeVos as Secretary of Education, which became one of the most controversial presidential appointments in recent memory. Additionally, many people, both inside and outside the education system, have been calling for significant reforms for decades.

Education policy is also an interesting field for political scientists because, while certain functions of education policy are handled from the top down, many functions of school administration are handled at the local level by various school boards. As a result, applying policy models to education policy is very difficult. For example, elite theory (a model of policy analysis that views policy as the wishes of a few influential actors) and rational theory (a model that views policymaking as a rational calculus to maximize net social benefit) are particularly difficult to apply to education policy because of its fragmented nature. A better method, albeit a more generic one, is the group model, which understands public policy as a struggle and a cooperation between competing groups to establish a compromise.

One of the more controversial education reforms is the movement for school choice. There are many families who live in districts with underperforming schools and are forced to send their children there, even if there may be a better school just a few miles away. This leaves families that cannot homeschool or afford private education feeling trapped in a broken system that continues to produce people unequipped for college and their future careers.

Fair and effective allocation of federal funds to schools is another disaster of public education policy. By creating the merit-based test score system, policymakers have ensured that teachers only teach students to perform on a standardized test, thus neglecting the more philosophical underpinnings of education. This hinders schools from promoting a holistic approach to education. The variation in funding for schools based on test performance has resulted in increased inequalities in school districts, which has led to unrest among citizens who feel forced into a failing school system. Alternatives such as charter and magnet schools seem appealing, but threaten to seriously upset the current system of public education.

This paper seeks to answer the question of whether or not school choice is a good idea and examines the costs and benefits of specific policies that would increase opportunities for school choice, such as educational vouchers and decentralized school districts.

Literature Review

In order to fully understand school choice and education policy as a whole, it is necessary to examine the underlying philosophy behind education. Historically, there have been two philosophies of education, a traditional philosophy and a progressive philosophy. John Dewey (1938/1997) attempted to analyze both of these philosophies in his book *Experience and Education*. He argued that both philosophies ultimately come up short, because the traditional philosophy relied too heavily upon cultural heritage for its content and the progressive philosophy is based on naturally transient, current problems, which do not give it a stable foundation (Dewey, 1938/1997). This ties into school choice because, under the traditional philosophy and standards of learning, there would not be much change in organizational structure from one school to the next, but in a progressive model where everything is modeled to address a specific problem, structures are constantly changing, and some schools may not be able to adapt as quickly, thus creating a lower quality.

Another component of educational policy is funding. Grants for education at all levels have gone through numerous iterations, and, as states and localities have shifted to being increasingly dependent on the federal government, they have adapted their school models in order to appear more attractive to grant offers. The Nixon administration played a critical role in laying the foundation of modern education funding with Basic Educational Opportunity Grants and Emergency School Assistance Acts in the 1970s (Cross, 2014). Some schools have adapted well to these grants and are performing quite well while others languish behind.

Differences in school district performance have created a myriad of other disagreements and problems, as well as proposed solutions. The *Opposing Viewpoints* series has published a book on education that highlights many of these debates and features prominent scholars on both sides. One such article is on decentralized school districts, which is a critical component of school choice. Lisa Snell (2006) argued that decentralizing school districts actually causes public education to become more like free markets by incentivizing schools to differentiate themselves from each other to attract more students, thereby increasing their budget. School choice is also far more than simply decentralized school districts. True school choice looks at other options such as homeschooling, charter schools, and private schools, all of which are also discussed in other articles within the book. True school choice, however, does not simply provide all of these options to parents, but also makes them accessible through other programs such as school vouchers or laws that protect homeschooling. All of these arguments and viewpoints are things which policymakers must consider as policy floats around in what John Kingdon

(2011) called the “primeval soup,” or the collection of interests and policy ideas that exist before a particular course of action is chosen. This study will flesh out these elements and fit them into a group theory model.

Methods and Models

Education policy is usually best described by the group theory model, a theory of policy analysis that says that “public policy at any given time is the equilibrium reached” in the struggle between interest groups (Dye, 2013, p. 17). This is because of the fragmented nature of education policy. Not only are there several different levels of government involved in the management of education, but there are also multiple interest groups and voting blocs that have a vested stake in education policy (Dye, 2013). These groups include parents, professional educators, teachers’ unions, taxpayers that fund the school system, racial and religious groups, and school boards. These groups all have substantially different viewpoints, both on whether or not school choice is a good idea and on how to best implement school choice. This study will examine three specific policy proposals or ideas that have been offered as a means of facilitating more school choice: educational vouchers, charter schools, and decentralized school districts. Other issues involved in education policy, such as school funding and educational models will be touched on briefly insofar as they pertain to school choice. This study will also address primary and secondary education, as this is the area in which school choice is most frequently discussed.

Research

Educational vouchers are a relatively recent addition to the American public school system. However, the idea of school vouchers has been around for quite some time. Economist Milton Friedman discussed a notion similar to vouchers in 1962 when he published his book *Capitalism and Freedom*. Friedman (1962) suggested that families should be given a base amount of money in the form of a federal grant that they can use to pay for their child’s education in whatever way they see fit. Friedman (1962) believed that this would develop an educational market that would continually improve due to competition. This idea would eventually turn into a policy proposal for a federally funded voucher experiment in the 1970s that was presented by Friedman and his colleagues. Modern day voucher programs, as seen in many states, are still based off of the framework from Friedman’s experimental design. The federal voucher program proposed in the 70s was never implemented, due in part to several other battles over educational policy, namely a dispute regarding Title IX (Cross, 2014). But once the idea of school choice had

been formulated, it was an added ingredient to the policy primeval soup, and would eventually resurface in the policy stream (Kingdon, 2011). Today school vouchers are found in 16 states and can be funded through a variety of both private and public means (Metcalf & Legan, 2002). The most controversial vouchers are ones seen in the cities of Milwaukee and Cleveland, as well as the state of Florida, where public resources are used to fund vouchers that can be put to use at any school, including private or religious schools (Metcalf & Legan, 2002).

In theory, the voucher program is a relatively simple policy—families are given a portion of school tuition which can be used at any qualifying school. Politicians only have to decide three issues: which families qualify, which schools qualify, and how the funds are disseminated (Metcalf & Legan, 2002). In Milwaukee and Cleveland, families who exhibit the greatest need for financial assistance have priority in receiving school vouchers. Similarly, in Florida, families who currently reside in failing school districts receive priority so that they have a greater ability to escape bad education (Metcalf & Legan, 2002). Schools are made eligible for voucher programs by agreeing to a set of requirements and restrictions. The dissemination of funds varies widely, going anywhere from \$2,000 to \$5,000 in the three examples cited by Metcalf and Legan (2002).

Secretary DeVos has come out in support of a federal voucher program which would be similar to state vouchers already in existence. However, vouchers have historically been met with fierce opposition, and, in the current political climate, rhetoric regarding vouchers is even more heated. While supporters of vouchers argue that vouchers would improve equality between low-income and middle-income Americans, opponents argue that vouchers only benefit parents who are already involved in their child's education. Challengers argue that school choice will result in a stratification of schools that are popular and attract better students and inferior schools that are left with students whose parents are uninterested in their child's education (Dye, 2013).

Opponents also have argued that vouchers would prevent a common set of core civic values from being established among children because parents may enroll their students in private education, which could be more consistent with the parents own viewpoints (Metcalf & Legan, 2002). This particular controversy over vouchers is rooted in a larger discussion of educational philosophy. A progressive model of education seeks to establish a core set of socially agreed upon values such as tolerance, acceptance, and diversity. However, as social values change, the education system also changes to adapt to new values (Dewey, 1938/1997). A traditional model of education also seeks to develop virtue, but it does so by giving students the tools to discern which values are good and which values are harmful. This conflict between subscribers of progressive education and traditional education has extended into

almost every policy arena. By looking at this conflict through the group model, it appears that the progressive educators have had more success implementing their vision through specific policy proposals. However, there is also increasing dissatisfaction with the results of the progressive model of education. Even some of its strongest supporters and engineers admit that the system has failed in certain areas (Dewey, 1938/1997). This could lead to traditional educators regaining traction.

Support for the public school system is another area of conflict related to school vouchers. School vouchers have been opposed heavily by professional school administrators and state educational agencies (Dye, 2013). Teachers' unions and associations have lobbied fiercely against school vouchers, particularly the models seen in Cleveland and Florida, because they believe that having increased public and private school options undermines the public school system as a whole (Metcalf & Legan, 2002). Effective language from opponents made vouchers sound like primarily a benefit for wealthy families and warned that vouchers would create a "two tiered school system" (Dye, 2013).

Until recently, it seems like interest groups had been able to effectively block serious measures to implement a voucher program on the federal level. This lines up with Kingdon's (2011) theory that interest groups are not able to set the policy making agenda so much as stall or block policy initiatives already set on the agenda. However, school vouchers may have a better chance today, as some of the arguments made against them are being disproven by research. Metcalf and Legan (2002) found that the preliminary research on voucher programs in states and localities demonstrated that vouchers have primarily benefited the low income families they target. Metcalf and Legan (2002) also found that school voucher programs have led to increased parent satisfaction with their children's education, and there is some evidence that voucher programs prompt positive change in the operation and administration of public schools; although, this evidence needs further research. Additionally, education reform is always seen as a problem that needs continual adjustment, so it would not be hard to find a problem to attach a school voucher solution to (Kingdon, 2011). Ultimately, the policy of school vouchers would create a maximum amount of school choice for families, but they are also some of the most controversial policy measures. Additionally, vouchers would be difficult to implement on the federal level due to so many competing groups.

Charter schools are seen as a more moderate approach to implementing school choice policies. A charter school is formed when a community education group signs an agreement or "charter" with their school district to establish their own school within the public school district. They are given more leeway and flexibility when it comes to the school district's regulations, and they promise to show student achievement in specialized areas in exchange (Dye, 2013). They are still classified as a form of public education, albeit a non-traditional one. The idea of charter

school programs has only come about in the last 25 years. Thus, research on their performance is also somewhat limited (Bohte, 2004). However, charter schools are viewed in a generally more favorable and less controversial light among voters, as nearly 40 states have at least one charter school in them (Bohte, 2004).

It is important to remember that the goal of charter schools and increasing school choice is ultimately to improve all forms of education and schools. Thus, it is important to look at the impact of charter schools not just on the students enrolled in the charter schools, but also the impact on traditional schools that are in the same area as the charter school. Former Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings had a remarkably positive view of charter schools in her address at a 2007 conference. She pointed out that charter schools were developed in urban and inner city areas and were able to address the needs of low-income and minority students (Spellings, 2007). She pointed to success in academic growth in Hispanic communities and the increased enrollment by students who ordinarily would have continued their education in charter schools (Spellings, 2007). There is also a good measure of bipartisan support for charter schools. Several very liberal, democrat leaders in cities such as Indianapolis and St. Paul have advocated for creating more charter schools, and Republicans have worked with Democrats to give charter school principals more autonomy to manage their schools (Spellings, 2007). Although the political climate has changed over the past decade, charter schools were receiving an overwhelming amount of support from many of the different groups involved in education policy, including parents, teachers, education interest groups, and leaders on the local, state, and federal level. Since the groups have a large degree of consensus among them, charter schools have been established in more states and been given more freedom even since Spellings' remarks in 2007 (Bohte, 2014). The policy is effectively solving a known problem in the education of low-income and minority families and has also enjoyed substantial bipartisan political support.

Bohte's (2014) study primarily looks at the second half of the question regarding charter schools—namely, how they impact the quality of education in the traditional public schools that surround them. Public schools respond to charter schools primarily because of the money loss that occurs if students leave traditional schools for charter schools. Traditional schools are given funding based on the number students that attend, and so charter schools provide the needed incentive for traditional schools to try and increase their attractiveness or be effectively punished by cuts in funding (Bohte, 2014). In some ways this is merely a market technique in practice and can be viewed as healthy. Some case studies have shown, however, that charter schools have caused too much of a flight from traditional schools in some areas, which has led to overall decline of education in those areas (Bohte, 2014).

Bohte's (2014) study examines school districts in Texas where there are a

substantial amount of charter schools along with traditional public schools. He compared the state test scores in these districts over a period of several years, during which several new charter schools were founded. He discovered that while test scores in traditional schools initially went down in a few districts, the overall trend was that traditional public schools improved on their state test scores over the course of several years after the charter school had been introduced into the district (Bohte, 2014). Specifically, Bohte found that a 1% increase in countywide enrollment in charter schools led to a .1% increase in district pass rates for the statewide tests, known as the TASS exams (Bohte, 2014). This research is remarkably encouraging and suggests that charter schools are beneficial not only by providing parents and students with more options, but also by providing competition, which generally increases the academic performance of traditional public schools around them (Bohte, 2014). Coupling these results with the already positive views of charter schools among voters and politicians indicates that charter schools are a viable and effective policy for improving education policy in the United States.

The final specific policy that will be examined is decentralizing school districts. School districts go back to colonial times and have endured as a staple of American law which intend to allow for community run education and leadership. School districts are also a uniquely American idea not found in the same format in any other countries (Shoked, 2017). However, many believe that the modern school district system is no longer able to accomplish its original goals and now might be doing more harm than good (Shoked, 2017). This has led for some to call for the decentralization of school districts. Decentralization would eliminate restrictions on where students can enroll in school based on their geographic address, and it would allow them to enroll in schools based on the unique qualities and programs that interest them (Snell, 2006). Snell (2006) offered a specific case study and example of decentralized school districts in the city of San Francisco, and explains how decentralization was able to help struggling families find the best option for their young students.

Shoked (2017) argued that school districts were originally created in the interest of promoting local governance and that a school district would provide the opportunity for local citizens to oversee their children's education. A school district also would be best suited to provide the services that the individuals in the district needed and provide the community with a common building, the schoolhouse itself, that could be used for various functions (Shoked, 2017). However, Shoked (2017) argued that several factors have rendered the modern school district incapable of delivering on its normative promises. These factors include twentieth century court decisions, political patterns, economic trends, and demographic shifts. Shoked (2017) gave two examples of school districts which are performing significantly below average in reading and math scores. One district is in Newark, New Jersey,

while the other is in Rockland County, New York. The Newark school system was given millions of dollars by Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg and others, while the Rockland County school district is severely cash starved due to the local Jewish community's decision to divert resources to private schools instead (Shoked, 2017). Despite their differences, both school districts continue to perform at a subpar rate. Shoked (2017) argued that the subpar performance is because the school districts and school boards are controlled by groups that do not actually have a vested interest in the schools. This is because the schools are not controlled by the city of Newark or the villages in Rockland County, but rather by the school district, which is a separate governmental entity (Shoked, 2017). In the case of Rockland County, the school board consists mostly of Jewish community members, most of whom opt to send their children to private schools. As a result, they have adopted policies that divert funds away to private schools whenever possible and have created a deliberately cash-starved public school system (Shoked, 2017). In the case of Newark, the school district also spent the generous funding it was given in ways that benefited their own interests more than the constituents of the schools themselves. This is what Shoked (2017) described as the undermining of the school district by the modern interest group dynamic. This further gives credence to Dye's description of education policy by the group theory model.

Shoked (2017) argued that the modern school district has strayed so far afield from its intended purposes that it is actually subverting the goals it originally was supposed to promote. As a result, Shoked (2017) argued for the complete abandonment and abolishment of the school district. He understood that this was a radical proposal, although one he claimed was not unrealistic or unwarranted. However, such an entrenched part of American governance is extremely unlikely to be removed in any realistic amount of time. Such a proposal would have to be accompanied by a nationwide failing of school districts to serve as a focusing event, and, even then, it would still be subject to an overwhelming degree of political pressure and opposition. A more moderate position may be the decentralization of school districts as outlined by the Reason Foundation's Lisa Snell. Snell (2006) argued that decentralizing school districts would still solve the problem that Shoked identified. Currently, students are assigned schools based on their local address, but their local government may not have any control of how their schools are actually run, thanks to the school district system. Snell's (2006) proposal would give families more leverage against the school district system by allowing families to choose the school and school district in which they enroll their children. This creates an educational, market-like environment, which allows competition and causes the money to follow the children. Snell (2006) looked at the San Francisco public school system as a case study where decentralization has been implemented and found

that the number of schools that parents have deemed “acceptable” for their children actually increased.

In the San Francisco system, funding for schools is determined by enrollment, with varying amounts of money given for different student characteristics (Snell, 2006). The enrollment based system, then, incentivizes schools to develop unique programs in order to differentiate themselves and attract more students as well as the different kinds of students that offer more funding to the school (Snell, 2006). This competition also causes schools to increase their marketing to students, creating stronger public relations between schools and families (Snell, 2006). Snell admitted the decentralized program could still be refined, and provides alternative plans of decentralization such as open enrollment or differing pay structures for school teachers and administrators (Snell, 2006). The San Francisco system has generated improved results, however, including a considerable 37% increase in reading proficiency among 2nd graders in just two years at a particular elementary school (Snell, 2006). Some parents are even opting to take their kids out of private schools, generally considered to be a higher quality education, and enroll them in San Francisco public schools because they are attracted to their programs. (Snell, 2006)

Other studies have found similar results. William Ouchi (2003) did an extensive study at UCLA, comparing heavily centralized school districts and very decentralized school districts. He found that decentralized districts performed substantially better both at an academic performance level and an administrative level. Therefore, the option of decentralizing school districts may soon gain enough momentum in the political stream to be a legitimate policy alternative. As the policy is developed and experimented within local areas, the policy stream will also probably pick up the idea, making the chances of implementation even greater.

Conclusion

This paper has demonstrated that there are several viable options to education reform. Additionally, it has explained the nature of education policy in light of a group model theory that seems to best describe the nature of decision-making in education policy. The varying interest groups in education are all significant and hold substantial power, which means that it is necessary for policymakers in the education field to gain the support of multiple groups in order to have any realistic chance of pushing their policy proposals through. As far as options for school choice are concerned, charter schools and decentralized districts seem to have more political will and more proven results than school voucher programs. However, school voucher programs have been demonstrated to offer the most school choice out of the three options. Political will may continue to develop for school voucher

programs, particularly if Secretary DeVos is successful in her campaign for them. However, the policies of decentralization and charter schools should continue to be pursued as well, as they may open the door for more aggressive school choice options such as vouchers.

Regardless of what policies ultimately come to the forefront, increasing school choice has been proven to improve and solve numerous problems in the current education system, both at the academic performance and administrative levels. While the education problems America faces may not yet constitute a focusing event by Kingdon's standards, they are substantial enough to get the problem stream flowing. Additionally, there is evidence that the political stream is also getting involved, and consensus is beginning to build among the various groups that have a stake in education policy. According to Dye's group theory, this is a sign that education reform is on the horizon. As policy alternatives continue to be developed in state and local governments, Kingdon's policy stream will also become active due to state and local governments serving as "policy laboratories" for the federal government. In short, both Kingdon and Dye's theories point to a policy window being opened for education reform in the next few years, and education policymakers should be ready to take advantage of such an opportunity by further refining options that will increase school choice.

Reference List

- Bohte, J. (2004). Examining the impact of charter schools on performance in traditional public schools. *Policy Studies Journal*, 32(4), 501-520. Retrieved from <https://search.proquest.com/docview/210573045?accountid=13113>
- Cross, C. T. (2014). *Political education: Setting the course for state and federal policy*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- Dewey, J. (1997). *Education and experience*. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster. (Original work published 1938).
- Dye, T. R. (2017). *Understanding public policy* (15th ed.). Boston, MA: Pearson Education, Inc.
- Friedman, M. (1962). *Capitalism and freedom*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Kingdon, J. W. (2011). *Agendas, alternatives, and public policies* (2nd ed.). Glenview, IL: Pearson Education, Inc.
- Metcalf, K. K., & Legan, N. A. (2002). Educational vouchers: A primer. *The Clearing House*, 76(1), 25-29. Retrieved from <https://search.proquest.com/docview/196853163?accountid=13113>
- Ouchi, W. G. (2003). *Making schools work: A revolutionary plan to get your children the education they need*. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster.
- Shoked, N. (2017). An American oddity: The law, history, and toll of the school district. *Northwestern University Law Review*, 111(4), 945-1024. Retrieved from <https://search.proquest.com/docview/1929026266?accountid=13113>
- Snell, L. (2006). The agony of American education. *Reason Foundation*. Retrieved from <http://reason.com/archives/2006/04/01/the-agony-of-american-educatio/>