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The School Choice Issue

Remarks Made at the U.S. Department of Education's Regional Strategy Meeting on Choice in Education

by

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October 17, 1989

The term choice as it is used by the current administration with regard to education is a cosmetic, simplistic response to the failure of American schools. Choice has become a catch-all term for a whole variety of programs, plans, and theories. We should not let this meeting or the Department of Education delude us into believing that parental choice holds the promise for poor and minority children. The term is being used to describe not only what is happening in District 4 [public school district in New York City], but a plethora of ideas based on the free market. I say: Buyer beware.

Choice places the burden of making schools work on parents and teachers and lets school boards, legislators, governors, and the federal government off the hook. The federal role in education is to guarantee equal educational opportunity. It is irresponsible for the Secretary of Education [Lauro Cavazos] to promote the notion that simply giving parents choice will lead to better schools. The Secretary does not say that he supports only those choice plans or theories that equalize educational opportunity. He showcases anything called choice.

Mr. Secretary, you have not answered your critics. Last night you alluded to the detractors who fear that choice will lead to increased racial segregation. Then you went on to talk about inner-city students going to the suburbs, and if the city school is not managed right it should be closed down. How many states are currently permitting city children — mostly poor and minority — to attend schools in the white

suburbs? The few cases where this is happening have come about under court desegregation orders.

We just heard Governor Keane's remarks; he is a great advocate of choice. But let me tell you two things that the Governor did not tell you about New Jersey. New Jersey's choice plan is limited within a district. Students cannot go across district lines. The second thing the Governor did not tell you is that New Jersey is one of the most segregated states in the nation for blacks and Hispanics, and his administration has been fighting *Abbott v. Burke*¹ tooth and nail. *Abbott v. Burke* is the long-running law suit challenging spending disparities in education in New Jersey.

If you, Mr. Secretary, really believe that choice will promote racial and economic integration, you should publicly support only those plans that are designed to accomplish that goal.

There is an employee of Secretary Cavazos's department, Jack Klenk, who is quoted in *Education Daily*² as saying, "The public school choice movement actually emerged from the civil rights movement of the 1960s. Busing was not successful." I have to set the historical record straight.

Freedom of choice in the 1960s was a device used to deny black children their constitutional rights and to deny them the promise of *Brown v. the Board of Education*.³ Instead of putting the third grade from the black schools together with the third grade from the white school, pairing or clustering school in de jure segregated districts, black children had to choose to go to the white school. A few brave ones did. The NAACP Legal Defense Fund fought freedom of choice in the courts until the Supreme Court finally declared it unconstitutional unless it actually accomplished desegregation.⁴

Choice places the burden of making schools work on parents and teachers and lets school boards, legislators, governors, and the federal government off the hook.

The President and the Secretary are engaged in a public relations exercise to distract our attention from the real issues:

- This administration does not want to spend money to bail out failing schools.
- This administration does not want to talk about the large disparities in state and local spending for education. In one of the pamphlets handed out at this conference, Secretary Cavazos is quoted as saying that more money is not the answer, that we already spend more on education than any other industrialized nation. In your home state of Texas, Mr. Secretary, the

Supreme Court has just declared the funding disparities unconstitutional. The range in spending per pupil went from the low of \$2,112 to the high of \$19,333. Secretary Cavazos, I would like you to go to that district that spends \$2,112 per child and tell them that they do not need more money.

- This administration's promotion of choice does not address the huge number of dropouts from our education system.
- The promotion of choice does not address the lack of an adequate supply of well-trained, well-paid teachers.
- The promotion of choice does not address the declining minority participation in higher education.

Freedom of choice in the 1960s was a device used to deny black children their constitutional rights and to deny them the promise of Brown v. the Board of Education.

- The promotion of choice does not address the watered-down curriculum and low expectations for poor and minority students.
- The promotion of choice does not address the problem of schools that are not preparing youngsters for college or for the high-skilled jobs that this country needs to sustain economic growth.

Parental choice cannot be separated from school improvement and equitable allocation of resources. Here in East Harlem, districtwide educational improvement was well underway before choice was introduced. It was not choice that created specialized, smaller schools; it was teachers. It was not choice that improved test scores; it was the new reading and math programs that were introduced.

Advocates of choice would have us believe that giving parents options will create good schools and drive bad schools out of existence. That, to put it bluntly, is nonsense. Truly free choice will lead to even greater inequities in funding, in the distribution of opportunities, and in the assignment of teachers, as well as greater race and class segregation. Middle- and upper-class parents who can negotiate the choice process and who can afford the transportation will take state aid with them, further draining resources from property-poor communities. The teachers no other school will take will be left with the students no other school wants. The existing hierarchy among American schools will be further exacerbated.

Choice does nothing for bad schools. It simply ignores them. The theory is that these schools will disappear because either the school will be closed or all the parents will transfer out. But transfer to where? Good schools are scarce. Seats in them are limited. Superior schools will establish admission requirements for fear that their reputation and test scores will decline if they accept all comers. Where are the students remaining in the bad schools supposed to go?

The only real answer is to create excellent schools for all children. And that includes excellent schools for children whose parents do not make a choice, children who move into a district after the choice period, and children whose choices are rejected.

My final comment about choice is: Buyer beware.

References

- ¹*Abbott v. Burke*, 119 N.J. 287 (1990).
- ²Staff. (1989, October 13). Choice Isn't License to Resegregate, ED Says. *Education Daily*. P. 3.
- ³*Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas*. 347 U.S. 483 (1954); 349 U.S. 294 (1955).
- ⁴*Green v. County School Board of New Kent County*, 391 U.S. 430 (1968).