

REMARKS OF ALBERT SHANKER
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TO
NGA EDUCATION TASK FORCE ON PARENT INVOLVEMENT AND CHOICE
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EXPANDING CHOICES FOR PARENTS, STUDENTS AND TEACHERS

A Statement of Principle

I believe that we in the teacher union movement ought to support the greatest possible choice among public schools by parents, students and teachers.

The current system of placing kids in school on the basis of geography is one that was designed a long time ago, when most people who sent their children to school were not educated and wouldn't have been able to make an informed decision about a school; parents looked up to teachers and accepted the authority of government. But times have changed, and most of the public is just as well educated as teachers, some more educated. The day of automatic agreement that one's child will attend such and such school is over; parents shop for public schools when they move to a different community, and many will seek nonpublic alternatives if what they regard as a decent public school is not available to them. Students who drop out or attend high school only sporadically may be telling us not necessarily that they don't want school at all but that they don't want the particular school they're going to. Attendance is much higher and dropout rates are much lower in those public schools--vocational and option academic high schools--that students themselves have chosen to go to.

Public School Choice for Students and Parents

We now permit some choice among junior high and high schools within a single school district. Why not expand that and permit much greater choice within the district and even across some district lines? I am talking about offering parents and students more options, not about conferring legal rights or instituting some sort of voucher system. In most school districts today, when a parent seeks a waiver of bureaucratic rules for a child to attend a school different from the one assigned--a school that is not an available option--the answer is generally no. Such a request creates more paperwork, and bureaucracies tend to be insensitive to requests for individual treatment. But the bureaucracy must be moved to be more flexible. The more public school choices we offer parents and students, the better are our arguments against destructive schemes like tuition tax credits and vouchers. Wider public school choice will very substantially negate the argument for giving money to parents to send their children to private schools. Incidentally, this is not as revolutionary as one might think: a number of school systems in Massachusetts which started out attracting kids to "magnet" schools for purposes of integration are now using choice as the primary means of placing students in schools, and there is a sort of friendly competition among the schools in a district for youngsters. Surely a competition among public schools, where everyone competes under the same ground rules, is a lot healthier than a private versus public competition, which is inherently unequal and unfair because the rules don't apply to all.

I have often discussed the idea that a professional must be seen to be acting in the interests of the client. But most clients choose the professionals they see--a doctor, a lawyer, an accountant. Children are the only clients who are perceived as the captives of the professionals who deal with them, captives of a given school and teacher. If, as occasionally happens, there is poor chemistry between a teacher and a student, even a within-school choice ought to be available. It is not in that student-client's interest to be stuck with the same teacher all year -- and, by the way, it is not in the teacher's interest either. Suppose, for example, that a tired and pressured teacher snaps at a young child. The young child goes home, refuses to eat, resumes an old pattern of bed-wetting and won't come to school over the succeeding days. Of course, there is value in having a child learn that in the real world one has to get along with many different people, but there are times when that won't work, when that particular child is just not ready for that particular lesson. And while it's not the job of the school to replicate the comforting bosom of the family, nevertheless there has to be concern and a humane orientation. Here, too, flexibility is critical. Why not make a change?

Choice for Teachers

Nor should choice be restricted to parents and students. Teachers need and deserve many more options than they now have. For example, while there is much talk in education today about career ladders, those who recommended them for teachers haven't really taken a hard look at what passes for career ladders in the business world. Very few people, even in giant corporations, move straight up the ladder within one firm. Typically,

a person starts working for one company, gets some experience and a good reputation and maybe even a promotion or two. But pretty soon he or she is lured away by some other company, often with a salary increase and other "perks" as well as new and bigger responsibilities. That pattern repeats itself; and by mid-life, the executive may well have worked for half a dozen businesses, improving her salary and status all along the way.

But teachers are stuck. If a 10-year teacher attempts to move to another school district, he or she will almost invariably find that the new district will not credit more than a fraction of that prior experience toward salary. Even if the new district has a better salary schedule, the incoming teacher is likely to lose or, at best, to stand still. He may also lose pension credit. Teaching may be the only occupation in this country where if you move voluntarily from one place to another, you have to suffer for it -- the only occupation you have to leave in order to improve your lot. And that situation is probably another vestige of a time when schools could get smart women teachers on the cheap because women had few other career options. One of the elements of widening choice in public schools ought to be freedom for teachers to move around without penalty. Just as we ought not to lose students to private schools because of lack of sufficient choice in public education, we ought not to lose teachers to other jobs because they have no real mobility in teaching. And, of course, in failing to grant full credit for prior public school experience, school districts also prevent themselves from competing for talented teachers from other districts. I don't know of any business that could stay in business very long if it denied itself the opportunity to compete for talent. We

ought to be pointing out to the business community this very unbusiness-like bind that school districts and teachers are in, captives just as much as children denied more choice in schools.

CHOICE TESTIMONY - DRAFT

Some Cautions

Having endorsed the principle of public school choice for parents, students and teachers, let me raise some cautions and issues for you to consider. I raise them not to squash the public school choice movement nor to shift the burden of the resolution of these issues to others. In fact, the AFT is now actively engaged in considering and devising public school choice schemes. Instead, I raise them because while I am encouraged by the results of some choice experiments, I don't trust much of the talk I have heard about choice these days, nor do I particularly believe that choice is the central issue in education reform. Unlike the most vocal proponents of choice, who see it as a value and end in and of itself, I see choice as of value only as a means to the end of improved teaching and learning. Despite the claims of the advocates, choice by itself will not magically produce that result. Let me elaborate.

First, there is already an astonishing amount of choice within and between schools, particularly high schools. You have only to pick up the recently published The Shopping Mall High School to find out that in all but the most rural areas there is something to meet the needs and tastes of just about every student. Rather than being the unresponsive, standardized bureaucracies pictured by choice proponents, these schools have picked up just about every fad, fancy, option and requirement that one can imagine over the past 15 or 20 years, and students are free to pick and arrange this menu in any way they choose.

You will not be thrilled by reading this book or visiting these schools. I was profoundly depressed. For it was precisely this

staggering array of choices that contributed to the failure of these schools and the problems of our education system. Everything counted, so nothing counted; what mattered was the exercise of choice. Every student and parent had the maximum responsibility, even authority, and therefore there was no authority or responsibility and little judgment. Good programs could die for want of clients; silly programs mushroom because they were fun or easy. And if the choice you exercised didn't work out, well, it was your choice and there are others to be made. You might emerge uneducated, in which case everyone's responsibility became no one's responsibility, but the choices were there.

If choice means an educational system organized as a shopping mall, where all offerings are equally valid and neutrally displayed, where survival necessitates pandering as much to the worst as to the best in clients, and where the only determinant of quality is the market, where you vote with your feet and then wait for the recalls, then I do not want such a system; we seem to be close to that already. Such schools as described in The Shopping Mall High School do not "mean" to be that way; they are that way by the very nature of the choice model used. The burden of any responsible choice system, then, is to balance freedom with order, diversity with commonality, style with substance, and parental and student preference with knowledge-based professional judgment of what constitutes an education and pedagogy of value.

My second argument in part contradicts the first; that is, while there is a great deal of choice and diversity within schools, especially high schools, there is little diversity between schools within a district. There is a great deal of diversity, or shall I

say difference, between districts, but that is largely accounted for by grossly unequal funding and by student-body composition, which in turn affect the quality of teachers and teaching.

Choice proponents have advocated open enrollment as a way of addressing both problems. In the first instance, intra-district open enrollment, the argument goes that by allowing parents to enroll their children in any school in the district, bad schools will be emptied and good ones will thrive and be replicated. We support that view and have supported a number of such open enrollment schemes.

But again, let's look more closely. What has been the result of open enrollment within a district? In all but a few programs, we find that parents largely keep their children in neighborhood schools. Holding in abeyance the very real problem of the tendency of the central administration not to publicize open enrollment, what is the reason for this failure to exercise choice?

The main reason is that the choice is phoney: where the administration promulgates stifling rules and regulations, discourages innovation, and prescribes virtually every detail of school and classroom life, most schools in the district are pretty much the same. As most parents realize, a geographical change is not an educational cure.

Where there are some real choices, that is, some innovative schools in the district, there is some movement. The scarcity of those schools, however, usually means that there is some admission criteria, which creams students on some academic or interest dimension out of other schools and further depresses the quality of the neighborhood school. Do bad schools empty out or are they shut

down? No. Does the administration warm to the successes in the system and make it possible for all other schools to develop the processes and substance that made for the good schools? No, they maintain the successful schools -- be they magnets or other types -- as exceptions to the system, and then frequently use the policy of open enrollment as an excuse for not redesigning the whole system.

And what of the successful schools? Are they that way merely because students or teachers have exercised choice? Only partially so. They are good because they have responsibly departed from standardized procedures, because the staff is centrally involved in the design of the school and its programs, because teachers are permitted to be professionals. So long as these schools, and the conditions that permit them to arise and flourish, are the exceptions to the system rather than the system, no choice scheme that I know of, let alone the best-publicized open enrollment policy, will do anything more than redistribute a few students and teachers -- and leave the rest to languish in the status quo.

Let me also suggest that most of the current rhetoric I hear about open enrollment between districts or state-wide public voucher schemes is not only phoney but cruel. So long as the participation of districts is voluntary (most rich districts don't volunteer or attach such conditions as to practically obviate their acceptance of all but the best inner-city students), so long as per-pupil costs and expenditures are so unequal and parents would have to make up the difference between educating their children in a rich vs. poor district, and so long as transportation schemes are as partial as the ones I've read about, such open enrollment plans

are worth only the paper they are written on. They will make choice proponents feel good, for after all, they will have struck a blow for choice, and that is good. In practice, however, they will accomplish only three things: they will redistribute a few talented students and maybe even teachers and resources, generally from poor to wealthy districts; they will defuse or co-opt the pressure for reforming our schools by pointing to the wide choices available; or they will accomplish nothing.

My third point is that while I believe that there is an increased demand for choice by parents and teachers, I also think that the extent and depth of this demand have been oversold. I have read the polls and surveys used to substantiate the choice movement. I also know that in every poll or survey related to any product or service, when you ask, "Would you rather have a choice of X, Y or Z, or no choice?" the answer is always "choice." That is not surprising, and it is healthy, a sign of our democratic habits.

But let's look more closely. When the issue is probed, so that the respondent knows the costs and benefits and other terms of the choice, or when actual behavior is studied, the results come out very differently. Suddenly, choice is not the issue at all; instead, it is quality, costs, familiarity, convenience, the trade-offs among them, and the like. I would argue that if these educational preference pools were more carefully crafted and if you look at the existing ones alongside other surveys and against actual behavior, you will find the following: parents want, first and foremost, a good quality neighborhood education for their children and the ability to pull their child out of an uncongenial

or unsuccessful classroom -- the kinds of "little divorces" that the bureaucracy makes so difficult. As for teachers, choice for them translates into the desire to practice in schools where good practice is possible, and they want out of schools and districts where it is not. Is the issue we are speaking of choice? Only collaterally so. The basic issue is quality education and the conditions that make it possible.

All of these arguments turn on one central point: choice is not a substitute for, and in some scenarios a barrier against, substantive education reform. To believe that choice, in and of itself, will improve schools, encouraging the good and driving out the bad, is a fantasy. Insofar as it is a substitute for more fundamental, structural changes -- and in many cases it has been and is -- it is also a dangerous fantasy, for it could help assure that we never reach the second stage of the education reform movement, the real work beyond raising requirements or salaries. And insofar as choice without judgment is implicated in the education crisis we are trying to overcome, more of what ails us will not cure us.

The choices that some parents, students and teachers will have in such a system will come at the expense of most others, certainly of the weakest members of our society -- and ultimately of us all. Choice abstracted from other changes will certainly promote some good; it has already. But these changes are marginal, and have carved out precious refuges only for the lucky few. Without the work that is necessary to move these changes from the margins to the center, the issue of choice is merely a diversion -- a nice one, to be sure, one that any democratically minded citizen ought

to support, but not one that will ensure the continuity of our democratic institutions.

A final note: Those that are looking to the marketplace for more than instructive purposes about how to reform our schools are making a dangerous mistake. The talk of choice, competition, total deregulation, partnerships, contracting-for-service and the like is exhilarating, and there is much to be learned. As I said earlier, the AFT is looking at all these ideas and then some. But make no mistake: education is not like the market; it is the chief example and means of social policy in our nation. And social policy in a democratic market society is expected to do what the market cannot and chiefly will not do. The market is largely insensitive to the issue of weaker vs. stronger or to equity. Education in a democratic society is not and should not be so indifferent. The market cares about means largely to the extent that the end is a good bottom line. Education must care about means. The market is not a moral enterprise. Education is and must be. A market economy has proven to be the best system in an imperfect world, but that is also because it is sustained by an educational system that was designed to compensate for the deficiencies of the market and to care about all the things that the market cannot and will not handle. And remember too that the totally free market is an economic construct; it could perhaps be found in the villages of Thomas Jefferson's day, but it does not exist today. A huge government and regulatory apparatus, President Reagan notwithstanding, makes the "free market" operate. In turning to the market for clues to the solution of educational problems, let us then be careful, lest we imperil not only our children but the kind of democratic society our reforms intend to uphold.