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Learning from School Choice

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Editors

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PREFACE

EDUCATION HAS assumed center stage in the national political debate. No issue is more hotly contested than the debate over school choice. Although leaders in both political parties have committed themselves to giving parents a greater say, they disagree on the form that choice should take. Some would limit choice to neighborhood or magnet schools within the district in which families live. Others would extend choice to include schools outside district boundaries. Many support charter schools that offer distinctive alternatives to public schools. Some endorse management of these charter schools by profit-making firms as well as nonprofits. And a growing number of leaders welcome vouchers, scholarships, and tax credits that provide maximum parental discretion in choosing a school, public or private, religious or secular.

The essays in this volume indicate that such educational ferment is welcome. To be sure, the evidence is not so massive and clear-cut that the time is now ripe for an immediate, full-scale redesign of American education. But both the theory underlying choice and the early evidence from school choice practice suggest that the country's educational system could benefit from increased competition and more engagement with parents and families. Certainly, this is no time to suppress current experiments or thwart new possibilities.

Fortunately, we do not need to choose between full-scale restructuring of American education and no innovation at all. Government and politics in the United States is both fragmented and decentralized. Decisions can be taken at the national, state, and local level. Now that choice is on the table, the issue is being addressed not only by Congress and state officials but by thousands of local school boards as well. It is good that such fragmentation precludes wholesale governmental transformation at any one point in time. It is also fortunate that these many points of decision provide multiple openings where experimentation can begin. We hope that what is contained in this volume may prove helpful to those who wish to move forward.

To learn more about school choice developments nationwide, a conference, "Rethinking School Governance," was hosted in June 1997 by Harvard's Program on Education Policy and Governance, located within the Kennedy School of Government's Taubman Center on State and Local Government and the Center for American Political Studies in the Department of Government. Scholars from around the country reported on an array of recent developments. This volume contains revised versions of many of the essays presented at the conference. In addition to the authors of these essays, other conference participants included Jeanne Allen, Tom Carroll, Andrew J. Coulson, Carol D'Amico, Nathan Glazer, Charles Glenn, Christopher Jencks, Helen F. Ladd, Tom Loveless, Susan Mayer, Abigail Thernstrom, Sammis B. White, Alan Wolfe, and Philip Zelikow.

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