



The Phyllis Schlafly Report

VOL. 24, NO. 10, SECTION 1

BOX 618, ALTON, ILLINOIS 62002

MAY 1991

What Does School Choice Mean?

The most welcome yet controversial feature of President Bush's long-awaited education initiative is summed up in the word **choice**. In this century in America, children have been pawns in a monopoly system in which they must attend the school designated by the bureaucrats — and submit to the curriculum thrust upon them — if they want to use their education tax dollars.

Since American parents have always had the opportunity to choose non-government schooling for their children by paying double (first in taxes for tax-funded schools, and secondly for tuition to private schools), when we talk about school choice today, we mean letting parents designate where their children spend their education dollars — and also what they buy with those dollars.

Secretary of Education Lamar Alexander argues for real choice — “dollars will follow the child” — and says that “telling parents where they must send their children to school is an alien idea in America.” Indeed it is; we don't require foodstamp recipients to spend their coupons in a designated government food store, or require medicare recipients to be treated by a designated government physician.

The Bush initiative would be a small start toward restoring freedom of choice to education. It calls for \$230 million to fund locally devised programs to allow parents to choose public, private or religious schools; that's less than one percent of the \$27.1 billion federal education budget.

We don't know how a real choice system would operate since each of the 50 states would have to pass its own version. But let's list some of the different varieties of choice that parents are seeking today.

(1) Choice to attend any public school in the same district.

(2) Choice to attend any public school in the state.

Currently, at least eleven states and many individual school districts allow some form of choice among public schools, but there is little or no choice of curriculum.

(3) Choice to attend a public school dedicated to teaching the basics, including phonics and other traditional skills, and to enforcing traditional discipline. Only a handful of districts with such a school exist, and those traditional schools are so popular that parents camp out overnight for days to be in line to enroll their children for the limited slots available.

(4) Choice of curriculum content in the public school; e.g., choice of learning how to read by the proven phonics method

instead of discredited word-guessing methods; choice of traditional and inspiring books and stories instead of violent and depressing ones; choice of a healthy abstinence-based sex curriculum instead of an explicit contraceptive-based sex curriculum; and choice of alternate reading when parents find school materials offensive. Only a handful of public schools allow this kind of choice.

(5) Choice to allow parents to opt out their children from curricula, books, classes, surveys, or methodology which parents consider privacy-invading or offensive to their religion, morals or values. Choice to allow parents to remove their children from any group therapy, psychological curricula, or counseling in the classroom. Such choice, of course, would require parents to be notified before such things take place, and no penalty should be attached to this choice.

(6) Choice to attend a private school. Milwaukee and Vermont are the only areas that currently allow this. Only low-income families are allowed to exercise this choice in the Milwaukee plan. The Vermont plan, which has been in effect since 1869, “tuitions” many thousands of students to non-sectarian private or public schools when local school districts do not have their own high school.

(7) Choice to attend any public, private or religious school. No state in the country now allows students to use taxpayer funds to enroll in a religious school.

(8) Choice for high school juniors and seniors to complete high school at a community college. Only Minnesota permits such transfers.

(9) Choice to attend a single-sex elementary or secondary public school (which has proved so successful in pilot projects for black boys in the inner city).

(10) Choice to homeschool. Only one district (in California) is known to have a plan that allows some public money to go to homeschoolers.

(11) Choice to homeschool combined with attending selected courses or activities in a public or private school, such as math, science, football, or band. Only Washington State allows such partial enrollment in public schools.

Real educational choice means most if not all of the above. Now that “choice” has become a good word and even national policy set by the President, most people will probably say they support “choice.”

But it won't be real choice unless it means choice of curriculum, books, and methodology. Just to allow choice among government schools which have the same curriculum would be a cheat on the children and their parents.

What Does Accountability Mean?

The booklet called *America 2000: An Education Strategy*, which was distributed at the White House in connection with the President's speech, states: "Such choices should include all schools that serve the public and are accountable to public authority, regardless of who runs them."

What does "accountable to public authority" mean? To require successful private and religious schools to be "accountable" to the same public authorities that are running the failed public schools would be to destroy the whole reason for private schools. That would be a fraudulent definition of choice and a wholly unacceptable use of government power.

The Bush-Alexander plan places much emphasis on making schools "more accountable." The only kind of accountability that can have any meaning is accountability to parents and taxpayers, and the way that accountability should be enforced should be by allowing parents to choose the school where their school dollars are spent, and also to choose the curriculum and teaching methodology they want for their children. Accountability is a fraud if it means one group of tax-salaried education bureaucrats reporting to another bunch of tax-salaried education bureaucrats. Choice is a fraud if it means choosing a different building but being denied a choice of curriculum.

The booklet *America 2000* further cautions, "Choice will apply to all schools except where the courts find a constitutional bar." That language sounds like an invitation to the courts to prevent allowing parents to choose religious schools, thereby enabling the Administration and Congress to avoid the blame for such discrimination.

It's too bad that the Bush-Alexander initiative fails to address the fundamental education problem — that 25 million citizens who have been through the public schools are illiterate and that another 25 million read too poorly to realize the American dream. The "Education Goals" which President Bush and Secretary Alexander say they want to reach by the year 2000 do not include reforming the single most important failure of the public school system: the failure to teach children to read in elementary school.

Instead, curiously, the Goals include the following: "(1) All children in America will start school ready to learn. . . . [and] (5) Every adult American will be literate." Preschool children and adults are not the mission of the public school system. We wonder what kind of programs the U.S. Department of Education might be planning for "all" preschool children to assure that they are "ready to learn" when they enter school.

The most important goal for the schools should be to assure that all children in America learn to read in the first grade. The absence of this goal from the Bush-Alexander plan means all the more that parents must have the right to choose curriculum, as well as location, for the education of their children.

Choice in Reading Materials

One of the most important kinds of choice parents are demanding today is choice in the reading materials assigned to their children. Many parents are up in arms about the dreary

succession of depressing materials that children of all ages are forced to read as part of their reading, English or literature classes.

The most controversial textbooks in the public schools are the readers for Kindergarten through 6th grade called *Impressions*, published by Harcourt Brace Jovanovich through its subsidiary Holt, Rinehart and Winston. Parents object to the themes of violence, despair, witchcraft, and mutilation, as well as the bizarre illustrations. Many parents assert that these readers are so frightening that they give their children nightmares and desensitize them to violence. Parents also find the readers offensive to their First Amendment religion rights because they include themes connected with the New Age, witchcraft, and the occult.

With all the splendid readers and stories available in the English language, schools should respect parents' wishes and give them the choice of alternate reading assignments for their children. Unfortunately, in most schools where *Impressions* has become a controversy, the schools have so far denied this choice to parents.

Another illustration of the need for choice in reading materials is a list of books assigned to one 7th grade Literature class. All the 7th graders were assigned one paperback book of contemporary fiction a week, which had to be read and then discussed in class. With all the good books that are available, it is remarkable that any curriculum director could come up with so many books that aren't worth reading.

The required books were all improbable fiction about unattractive if not actually villainous characters who babble constantly with a pitifully limited vocabulary, redundantly using obscenities, bad grammar, and slang. The stories are written in short choppy sentences with a high proportion of incomplete sentences. The language and the situations are vulgar if not downright immoral or violent. Most characters are not people you would ever like to know. Their behavior is unrealistic and often grotesque.

Hero Ain't Nothin' But A Sandwich by Alice Childress leads readers to believe that taking drugs is a matter of choice, and that drug pushers and users who make that choice are not bad people. The descriptions of 13-year-olds getting high on various illegal drugs could easily encourage students to experiment. The book contains a steady stream of bad language and bad grammar, thus reinforcing poor English skills and vulgarities.

The main themes of *The Outsiders* by S. E. Hinton are thugs, teenage drinking and smoking, gang fights, breaking the law, and death, all described with gory details. While the actions have consequences in the book, they are never addressed as behaviors that are wrong or to be avoided.

The main characters in *The Undertaker's Gone Bananas* by Paul Zindel are a loud-mouthed disagreeable boy and a girl suffering from emotional trauma, neither one of whom is understood by other people. The book contains gruesome details of a murder, an attempted murder, and the death of a family by fire.

Lisa, Bright and Dark by John Neufeld is a story about a girl who is mentally ill and attempts suicide. She is depressed all the time, and three other teenagers who try to help her are depressed much of the time. The book emphasizes the notion that most parents and adults are not any real source of help in

times of trouble.

Ghosts I Have Been by Richard Peck is about the occult and makes no distinction between Christianity and spiritualism. The book would be highly offensive to those who do not want their children taught that it is normal to participate in seances, contacting the dead, and having out-of-body experiences. The book could easily encourage impressionable teenagers to believe that they can develop a "special gift" to experience these things (which is supposedly possessed by the characters in the book).

The Ghost Belonged To Me, also by Richard Peck, is about a boy who finds a ghost in his barn. People who don't believe in ghosts are portrayed as backward, short-sighted, and too dependent on science, while those who believe in ghosts are portrayed as reasonable, gifted, likeable and clever. The books could lead children to believe that, in order to be an interesting person, one should try to contact the dead and seek acquaintances who do likewise.

The other assigned books were just as bad. Anyone would be depressed, alienated or stressed after being forced to read such trash every week in the school year.

The students were not given great books that inspire and encourage. They were not introduced to the noble characters of history and literature who are role models for honorable and courageous behavior. They were not assigned the great writers whose eloquence of language teaches good habits of written and oral expression. They were not introduced to the beauties of the truly great literature written in the English language.

When students are trapped in a class with a teacher whose judgment is so poor, parents should have the right to demand alternate reading assignments for their children. Parents should be able to select good books from the thousands available in any library.

Who Is Imposing Values On Whom?

One of the most important areas of education where parents are demanding choice is sex education. For years the liberals have been busy falsely asserting that "extremists" and "fundamentalists" are trying to "impose their values" on public schoolchildren. The fact is that the liberals, specifically Planned Parenthood and the National Education Association, are the ones doing the imposing, and they have vigorously fought allowing parents any choice in what their children are taught about sex, marriage and parenthood.

These two organizations make an effective team working to dictate what other people's children must learn. Planned Parenthood has a specific curriculum agenda and the NEA has the political muscle to force that curriculum into place.

Their literature calls for mandating comprehensive K-12 sex education. "K-12" means that sex education must be "sequentially" taught for 13 years, from kindergarten to 12th grade, many more years than any other subject is taught in the public schools. Since it doesn't take very long to tell anyone about sex, you can imagine how much redundancy is imposed on the pupils.

"Comprehensive" means that: (1) the "education" must be integrated throughout several subjects, thereby making it difficult-to-impossible for parents to identify what is being taught, or to inspect the materials, or to withdraw their

children from the course, and (2) it must include teaching about sexual intercourse, contraceptives, masturbation, and homosexuality.

Planned Parenthood offers targeted states "technical assistance; a sexuality education consultant who will help develop strategies; and an information network on national development." When this type of well-financed back-up is combined with NEA's team of tax-salaried lobbyists, many legislators and school boards are bamboozled. The NEA and Planned Parenthood treat parents as if they know nothing about sex and as if schools have a right to do anything they want with schoolchildren. Their actions make it clear **who** is imposing values on **whom**.

Let's take just one example of how one school fought to deny choice in these sensitive areas to parents who believe that school teachings are an offense against their First Amendment rights. An outrageous "Health" textbook called *Adolescents Today* by John C. Dacey was prescribed beginning in 1984 as "must reading" for 10th graders in the Norwin School District, a middle-class Pittsburgh suburb. After parents raised objections, the School Board stubbornly announced its decision in August 1986 to continue with the course and the text as "mandatory for graduation," to "deny the right to opt-out, and to deny the right to alternative health education curriculum."

It took a two-year battle and a lawsuit before the school finally receded from that arrogant attitude and gave the parents the right to choose a sex curriculum for their children. Attorney Roxanne Sakoian Eichler of North Versailles, Pennsylvania filed a Complaint which exposed the evil of the book with such specificity that the school's position became untenable.

Under the settlement agreed to in June 1988, parents were allowed to choose an alternate health course that did **not** use the offensive text. The parent-plaintiffs and their lawyer were given the opportunity to review and make extensive revisions in the alternative course. The alternative curriculum chosen by the parents did not include values clarification, situation ethics, moral dilemmas, the encouragement of premarital sexual activity or abortion, or nosy invasions of personal and family privacy.

The text of Mrs. Eichler's Complaint shows why parents should have had this choice as a matter of right. The Complaint charged that, in the textbook, self-discipline and sexual abstinence until marriage were presented to the students as "an improper value choice." The text presented homosexuality as "a natural stage in sexual development." The text encouraged "autosexual activity" and recommended "gang masturbation and masturbation as early as four years of age." The text condoned androgenous sex roles and transsexuality and stated that "the transsexual is happier as a result of the sex change."

Mrs. Eichler's Complaint showed how the textbook manipulated the personal choices of students regarding birth control, sterilization, abortion and infanticide, as well as other actions that require moral decisions. She charged that the text included "no recommendation or mention of abstinence in the discussion of pregnancy and birth control" and did not even include marriage in its discussion of family structures. The text promoted communes, advocated joining cults, espoused

“open” marriage, and thereby distorted the traditional family structure.

According to the Complaint, the text undermined parental authority and contradicted biblical values and the religious ideology of the children. It taught that a “true value” must be “chosen freely” by the child, and that it is an authoritarian imposition if it is expected or enforced by parents. The Complaint charged that the text portrayed parents as “individuals who are confused as to their own values and self-identity,” and whose strictness is “the cause of much adolescent neurosis.”

The text contained the diary of a 14-year-old girl which said, “Religion has little place in my life. . . . I think Jesus is a phoney, set up by men only to scare men into being slaves of the church. Eventually, I think he will be denounced.”

Like many “Health,” “Family Living,” “Growth and Development,” and “Home Economics” texts used in the public schools today, this one contained an unacceptable invasion of personal and family privacy on matters that are none of the school’s business. Questions and surveys inquired about the students’ personal religious attitudes.

Common sense and a decent respect for the First Amendment rights of parents should compel public schools to grant parents a choice of curriculum. They should have the right to choose a healthy abstinence-based sex education curriculum.

Let’s Finance Students, Not Schools

During 1988, David T. Kearns, board chairman of the Xerox Corporation, sent an open letter to all Presidential candidates in which he complained that teaching new workers the basic skills amounts to businesses “doing the schools’ product recall work for them — and frankly I resent it.” He should resent the way business has had to assume the costs of teaching new employees what they should have learned in public elementary schools, and for which the taxpayers have already paid.

For the foreseeable future, American businesses will have to hire a million new workers a year who can’t read, write or count. Teaching them how, and absorbing the lost productivity while they are learning these basic skills, costs industry \$25 billion a year. America’s public schools graduate 700,000 functional illiterates every year — and 700,000 more drop out before graduation.

Kearns said he opposes corporations donating money to public education. He says such donations hurt more than they help because they let the school system frame the problem and set the agenda. Kearns ridiculed what he calls these “feel-good” partnerships; they give corporations a “feel-good,” altruistic feeling, but they only pour good money after bad. It’s as futile, he said, as “doing your daughter’s homework.”

Kearns offered several constructive suggestions, and he has been repeating them in articles and speeches ever since. His most constructive idea is that our tax dollars should finance *students* instead of schools. We need a complete changeover to a system whereby we let students attend any school they want to attend and bring their education dollars with them.

Such a system would use the magic ingredient of competition to invigorate public school education and let us escape from the present failed monopoly. The public school system

today is an immense and authoritarian bureaucracy, exercising its tight and total “control of dissatisfied markets.” Funding students instead of schools would be the most democratic and equitable of all systems. Poor families would have the options enjoyed only by the affluent today.

In a competitive school system, schools would have to compete for students and dollars. Operating income would be directly related to customer service. The schools that produced a better product would have parents beating a path to their doors. The others would have to shape up and do better, or go the way of other mismanaged businesses and companies that produce products nobody wants.

Competition is a fact of life in American industry. We have to compete in a world economy, and by 1990 three out of four jobs will require some education or technical training after high school. Where will the new workers come from when half of those in public schools can’t read or write?

Yet, public expenditures on public education have doubled or tripled in every postwar decade, even when enrollments declined. Kearns asks, “what other sector of American society has absorbed more money by serving fewer people with steadily declining service?”

Kearns thinks that “anyone who thinks it’s possible to have a value-neutral education is dead wrong.” He correctly points out that excluding values from schools teaches the “value” that values aren’t important. Kearns agrees that children need to learn moral values at home. But the school needs to reinforce moral precepts and the responsibilities of citizenship because “a democratic society won’t stay democratic very long if it doesn’t teach a love of democracy and insure that that love is passed on to its kids.”

David T. Kearns is now a member of President Bush’s Education Policy Advisory Committee. We hope he will now work not only for choice in schools but **also** for choice in curriculum — with accountability to parents, **not** accountability to the same government education establishment that — with an average annual expenditure of \$5,000 per public school student — has failed in its job.

Phyllis Schlafly writes and speaks frequently on education subjects, particularly on parental rights in education and on how psychological curricula of all kinds have replaced academic teaching in the public schools. The book she edited on this subject, entitled *Child Abuse in the Classroom*, was recently called “required reading for every parent” by Hoover Institution scholar Thomas Sowell. She is the president of Eagle Forum Education & Legal Defense Fund which publishes the *Education Reporter*, a monthly newspaper with current news on these same subjects (\$25/year). Her weekly Saturday call-in radio program is devoted to education topics.

The Phyllis Schlafly Report

Box 618, Alton, Illinois 62002

ISSN0556-0152

Published monthly by The Eagle Trust Fund, Box 618, Alton, Illinois 62002. Second Class Postage Paid at Alton, Illinois. Postmaster: Address Corrections should be sent to the Phyllis Schlafly Report, Box 618, Alton, Illinois 62002.

Subscription Price: \$20 per year. Extra copies available: 50 cents each; 4 copies \$1; 30 copies \$5; 100 copies \$10.