Will school reform undermine society’s ability to pass a shared heritage to the next generation?

CHOICE, TESTING, and the JIGSAW SOCIETY

SCHOOL CHOICE WILL ENABLE MANY MORE PARENTS TO exercise their religious or cultural values in choosing a school for their children. They will suddenly find themselves able to afford an education that emphasizes their Christian, Islamic, or Jewish religious beliefs; their Latino, Irish, or African heritages; even their conservative or liberal political ideologies. To many this is a reason to oppose choice. The fear is that education, often considered society’s great leveler, will become an increasingly divisive force, further separating white from black, rich from poor, the fundamentalist from the secular. Choice will thus undermine the traditional mission of the public schools—to assimilate a nation of immigrants into a shared heritage and a common set of ideals. But the high immigration levels and cultural shifts of the past four decades have also transformed the milieu of the public schools, often dramatically. Multiculturalism and its celebration of diversity is now the reigning ideology among public educators. And state standards and high-stakes tests are introducing a whole new curriculum into the schools, one focused on skills and often devoid of any cultural reference points. Which social force presents the greatest threat to the common culture?

Diane Ravitch remembers the historical and literary canon of her own schooling page 26

David Steiner worries less about the effects of school choice than about the current crop of state tests page 30

Nathan Glazer predicts that choice will be less harmful to the culture than the effects wrought by ongoing segregation and judicial meddling page 34