One key argument has been raised against the movement for school choice: that schools of choice, whether created through charter alternatives or through voucher programs, will undermine the common culture. One central aim of the public schools, once called the common schools, is indeed to create a common culture, a common loyalty, a coherent nation. It is understandable that many feel this aim would be undermined by the flourishing of schools of many types, based on different educational visions, on different values, perhaps on different communities. This raises a serious problem, but on the whole it is an argument that is being made abstractly or on the basis of history—without considering the existing public school systems and how well they are presently carrying out this aim. Three developments have already severely undermined the ability of existing schools to instill and transmit a common culture.

Segregation
First is the dense concentration of students of one race or of Hispanic background in our urban schools. To a large degree schools containing only African-American children or children from Spanish-speaking homes have become the norm in cities such as Los Angeles and New York. At one time, this would not have sharply affected a school’s commitment to transmitting a common culture— the teaching of English, the use of a common group of readings drawn from English and American literature, the passing on of a common account of the American past and how it was to be viewed. It is intriguing that this commonness managed to establish itself at a time when states were much less involved in setting a required curriculum and imposing state tests than they are today. Perhaps it was a reflection of the fact that the culture was well established and seldom challenged in the past.

Today, however, the concentration of African-American students and students from Spanish-speaking backgrounds has radically changed the common curriculum. Consider bilingual education. In effect, bilingual education has meant a multicultural or really monocultural education in the language and culture that is presumed to be that of children from Spanish-speaking homes. Originally intended to be transitional, a step on the way to full fluency in English and lasting at most three years, bilingual education has been transformed into the only education many children receive over a much longer period.

A consequence has been a reduced effort to instill the common culture in such schools. For instance, schools I visited in New York City some years ago displayed a map of Puerto Rico alongside a map of the United States. According to these fanciful maps, the two territories are the same size. The only heroes exhibited on the walls were those considered suitable for children of Puerto Rican heritage.

Something similar happens in schools that are almost entirely African-American. Teachers feel compelled—regardless of any multicultural ideology or lack thereof—to bend the curriculum in the direction of their students’ interests and background. Indeed, this is generally considered a sign of good and responsive teaching. It does, however, reduce the attention given to the common curriculum. Some black teachers do insist that Shakespeare is the heritage of black students as well as of the English-speaking world in general, but, encouraged by changes in curriculum at state and city levels, rather more teachers believe that the writings of black authors are more suitable for black students and will better seize their interests. They may be right.

New Perspectives
These changes in curriculum have been driven not only by the high concentrations of racial and ethnic minorities in some schools, but also by a change in what is considered the common and celebratory story of America. Multiculturalism—a
greater appreciation for the subcultures of American minorities and new American immigrants—has been only one of the large changes, quite independent of developments within the world of education, that schools have had to account for. When the Republican president of the United States celebrates Cinco de Mayo day (with a speech in Spanish to boot), how far behind can the schools be? Clearly the 1960s and 1970s transformed American culture and perspectives on America. The past is always a foreign country, but the past of 40 years ago has been made much more foreign to us than previous generations found their world 40 years ago.

Not far from where I live is John F. Kennedy Park, with inscriptions from his major speeches and his inaugural address.

ORIGINALLY INTENDED TO BE
transitional, bilingual education has been transformed into the only education many children receive over a much longer period.

No president today could give such speeches, calling unabashedly for citizens to sacrifice themselves in the cause of protecting and expanding democracy and freedom. Forty years ago, boys and girls (as they were then called) could not visit in each other’s dorm rooms. Harvard students wore ties and jackets. There were no organizations for African-American, Mexican, Puerto Rican, Native American, Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, gay, lesbian, transsexual, and other students, which now create an astonishing lineup of students organized by religion, ethnic background, and sexual orientation. Jewish students did not wear yarmulkes on campus. There were no African-American studies, no women’s studies, and no gay studies. Professors graded severely, and they had no doubts that their standards were the correct ones and that what they taught and how they taught could not be challenged. The list could go on and on. We have lived through a revolution, and now many perspectives on the American past and American culture compete. It has to affect how we transmit the common culture and, more seriously, whether and to what extent there is a common culture.

Cultural Capital

A third shift—one that importantly has not touched private schools—comprises the legal decisions that have undermined the authority of principals and teachers to create and pass on a common culture. Here I use the chameleon-like term “culture” to refer to the culture of the school in an anthropological sense—its rules, its norms, its expectations of behavior, its sanctions: the “hidden curriculum,” as it was once called. It would go too far to say it no longer exists, but it has been much diminished. Today formal rules have become the only legitimate rules. Outside those, anything goes.

Indeed, the relative freedom from rules and regulations that private schools enjoy has enhanced their relative ability, vis-à-vis the public schools, to transmit the common culture that we all took for granted a few decades ago. Consider the experience of our largest system of private schools, the Catholic schools. Insofar as the law makes it possible for children to choose formally religious schools, Catholic schools would be the main beneficiaries of expanded choice. It is clear that Catholic parochial schools do not produce students whose adherence to a common culture and a common loyalty is any weaker than that of public school students. Their discipline is stronger, their curriculum concentrates more on essential disciplines and knowledge, and they are more effective educationally with poor children and with those from disturbed homes.

Of course, Catholic schools are only one of a variety of schools from which parents will choose. Some schools of choice will have little interest in the civic aims of classic public education and may indeed promote attitudes that undermine common commitment and common culture. One can expect A-focentric schools, fundamentalist Christian schools, progressive schools critical of major American institutions, perhaps Muslim schools, and so on. There will certainly be public scandals over some of the teaching in these schools.

Nevertheless, I think such schools will be in the small minority. What parents on the whole want is good education and socialization into the ordinary values and decencies of life. In this country we do tolerate communities—whether Amish or Mennonite or Hasidic—that clearly have no interest in accommodating or becoming part of the larger common culture and its values, but I don’t think the movement for schools of choice will lead to the growth of many schools reflecting small aberrant and dissident groups.

Some Will Choose Poorly

While a greater number of schools of choice will do no more to fragment America than has already happened, such schools do raise another problem. Our expectation that they will uniformly raise the level of educational achievement is, I am afraid, naive. These schools will undoubtedly reflect to some degree distinctive communities, distinctive interests, distinctive philosophies. That, after all, is one reason we support schools of choice: we expect them to bring to the educational process the social capital that reflects the common values of a group of teachers, a community of parents, and their children—and to make education more effective by so doing. Our hope is that all of
schools will bring children to a decent level of achievement in
education. But differences have consequences. We are acquainted
with the substantial differences in educational achievement by
socioeconomic class, which all research demonstrates. Nothing
we’ve tried has been able to eliminate them. There is always
the exceptional school, the exceptional principal or teacher, but
we cannot build a great public enterprise based on the routine
expectation of the exceptional.

We are also acquainted with substantial differences in edu-
cational achievement among ethnic and religious groups. Noth-
ing has eliminated them, either. We can have all kinds of rules
to reduce such differences, such as rules that limit a school’s free-
dom to choose students. But even if they select their students
by lottery, there will be differences, and one can guess substantial
ones, among those who decide to choose one school or another.
That after all is inevitable if choice is to have any meaning.

School cultures will be created, based on educational
philosophies or on the concentration of students of distinctive
socioeconomic and racial and ethnic groups in one school or
another, and these varying cultures will have educational con-
sequences. The more we try to control these differences, the
more we undermine one of the key reasons for the achievement
advantages of such schools— their creation of social capital, the
advantageous consequences of the act of choice in creating
the community in the first place. More rules bring the schools
closer to the bureaucratic norm we are trying to escape.

We can establish— we certainly should— an attainment
minimum by which to test these schools, and the standards
movement is doing just that. We are all aware, however, of the
difficulties facing these efforts to create a standard for all
schools and all students. We know that the level of the stan-
standard will be set either very low, to accommodate more failing
students, or too high, where there will be enormous pressure,
which will be hard to resist, to reduce the stan-
standard. This pressure will also come from some of the creators of the new schools of choice, who will
feel the effort to reach the standard will under-
mine what is original and distinctive in the
school’s approach, the reason for its creation in
the first place.

After all, the movement for schools of choice
is based on a greater commitment to freedom
than to equality. Of course there are many dif-
ferent ways of defining freedom and equality, and in a sense the
schools of choice movement can be said to promote equality:
those with few choices because of their poor economic posi-
tion will be less constrained by economic circumstances and thus
become more “equal” to others. I think it is clear, however, that
the value of freedom— to choose, and thus to choose something
different— dominates in the complex of values that drives the
choice movement. And freedom to choose undoubtedly means
differences in outcome. Schools of choice will give many the
opportunity to get a better education, an education that reflects
the values and desires of parents better than public schools do
or can. These values and desires will mean in many cases com-
mitments that undermine what we think of as a good educa-
tion. Parents may want their children to remain committed to
unsound views or to traditional values that many contemporary
Americans believe harmful. The diversity of achievement,
belief, and commitment will grow.

One may argue that public schools in the inner city are now
doing such a poor job that the increase in the opportunity to
choose only means that some will escape and raise their edu-
cational achievement. In other words, among the new schools
of choice we will see a variation only in degrees of success; and
there is no reason to expect, it is said, that some will fall below
the level of public schools today. I think that is on the whole
true, despite the occasional scandals over finance and curricu-

larum that will undoubtedly erupt. Nonetheless, it underestimates
the diversity in culture and values of the American population
to take it as a given that we will not see among schools of
choice a number that will outrage even the most fervent advo-
cates of the freedom to choose one’s school and one’s education.
Here will undoubtedly be a difficult trade-off between, on the
one hand, the government controls, requirements, and limita-
tions that will extend to all schools, and, on the other hand, their
opportunity to pursue their legitimate objectives.

We are already, in historian Gertrude Himmelfarb’s descrip-
tion, two cultures— at least. They were not created by the pub-

clic school, but the public school and the winds blowing around
it have contributed to the establishment within the schools
of various elements of the “counterculture”— that which coun-
ters the American culture in which older Americans were raised.
There is no easy way of excavating these elements of the coun-
terculture from curricula, from the training of teachers and

Private schools’ relative freedom from
rules and regulations has enhanced their
ability, vis-à-vis the public schools,

to transmit a common culture.

---

forum
COMMON CULTURE GLAZER

Nathan Glazer is the author of We Are All Multiculturalists Now (Harvard University Press, 1998).