High-Stakes Culture

State testing will inevitably sculpt the ways in which school choice affects the culture

by DAVID STEINER

Any attempt to divine the cultural consequences of choice must recognize that the movement for educational choice has not been limited to vouchers. Steady reform on a number of fronts has given parents in the United States an extensive array of options. These include home schooling, charter schools, magnet schools, private religious or secular schools (with or without the help of public or private vouchers or state tax credits), public “exam” schools like New York City’s Stuyvesant High, a variety of “regular” public schools in nearby school districts, a variety of schools in students’ own districts, or, most frequently, the specific public school into which children are zoned by their place of residence. The extent of these choices is determined not simply by wealth, but by the academic ability of the child, by family history, race, religion, and the educational regulations of each state and school district—and by sheer luck.

All these choices have cultural consequences, especially when parents use any of them as a way of ensuring that their children are educated in particular religious traditions or social environments. Addressing the cultural consequences of choice by reference only to the choices themselves is shortsighted, however. In the end, at least culturally speaking, all these choices may not matter much. Depending on how policymakers choose to regulate these choices, the standards-and-testing movement may have far more impact on the cultural consequences of choice than choice itself. Content-based state testing (increasingly linked to graduation requirements) may create greater curriculum uniformity in American education than the system has known in half a century. These new state tests, and the curricular frameworks that are being designed to prepare students for them, represent the most sustained effort in American history to introduce a mandated common core of learning.

Testing intersects with educational choice because children attending a particular school as a result of certain choice mechanisms will inevitably be required to take the tests. Today almost all children in private school are exempt from them; Ohio is a partial exception. Will all children who are using vouchers to attend these schools remain exempt from mandated state testing, or will public testing follow the public dollar? Will a school accepting vouchers have to accept public testing of all its children? On the one hand, regulating the teaching at voucher schools without stifling the autonomy that is their raison d’être is not going to be easy. On the other hand, requiring voucher schools to administer well-designed, commonly accepted standardized tests may be the best way of ensuring that choice does not undermine our teaching of a common culture.

Since charter schools are public schools, students there, whose numbers are steadily increasing, are already required to take state-mandated tests. Will American courts allow religious schools to become charter schools, as is the case in Australia, whose constitutional provisions are almost identical to ours? If so, then the new testing regime will expand to cover all children whose parents choose such schools. Finally, while it currently seems unlikely that states will ever require home-schooled children to take state tests, the rapid growth in the number of such children may force a rethinking of this policy.

Why, however, would one use the word culture to describe the consequences of a content-based testing system? In America today, we frequently speak of the “culture” of a certain school to refer to its milieu or particular ethos. In this sense, charter, magnet, and private schools can seem instantly vested with “cultural capital,” at least in contrast to the public schools, constrained as they are by bureaucratic procedures and legal ease. Nevertheless, perceiving culture this way is a mistake; it confuses issues of style and institutional ethos with matters of intellectual substance. Not for a moment do I underestimate the importance of ethos in creating the incentives for effective learning. Context and content, however, are two different things.

To illustrate the point, consider the schooling system in England, where many religious schools are public schools in the American sense that they are government funded. Thus there is no shortage of variety among “public” or state-supported schools. What nevertheless brands the education of an English child as particularly English are the GCSE (General Certificate of Secondary Education) and “A” (advanced level) essay-based public examinations. These high-stakes exams, together with the curriculum that prepares students to take them, ensure that choice does not undermine our teaching of a common cultural vocabulary.

This vocabulary is a necessary part of what I take to be a culturally rich education, an education that lends a deep exposure to the most enduring, exacting, exciting, and inexhaustible concepts and works in the human experience. This does not mean an American child must read Shakespeare, Racine,
Goethe, and Dante to be cultured. My “A”-level texts (works we knew we would be asked to write about) included the poetry of e.e. cummings—perhaps not inexhaustible, but certainly exciting. A cultural education blends the classic with the provocatively novel and asks the student to engage in sustained reflections about both.

**Serious Multiculturalism**

If America’s public schools were teaching a thorough knowledge of the nation’s history and literatures, then enabling more parents to choose private schooling for their children would presumably dilute our common culture. Some private schools of choice might teach much the same curriculum as public schools, but others would opt instead for a curriculum that emphasizes particularist religious, ethnic, or cultural stories.

Some observers of the educational scene argue that something like the opposite has happened—namely, that the public schools have embraced particularism. Therefore, they suggest, opening avenues of escape to private schools could hardly be damaging to a common culture that the public schools have already abandoned. What the majority of public schools profess to teach, however, is not a particularist or idiosyncratic vision of culture but multiculturalism—an education designed to introduce a heterogeneous American school population to the rich diversity of its cultural heritages. Some scholars see little cultural value in an education that incorporates a bewildering array of racial, ethnic, and national perspectives.

But is multiculturalism, for all its faults, so dire a model of cultural instruction that we should turn our backs on public schools? It would be useful to more firmly understand what the argument is. Is the criticism that multiculturalist teaching is done poorly? Or that it diminishes the American story? Or that it is done at all?

My litmus test of any high-school “multicultural” program is that it should meet at least two conditions. First, that the school requires the sustained study of at least one language in the culture(s) being investigated. Second, such investigations must augment rather than replace the teaching of American literatures and history. Almost all of the evidence, however, indicates that these two educational standards are rarely met. Too much that passes under the banner of multiculturalism is devoid of intellectual depth or scholarly integrity. Such programs, often deliberately, confuse political with educational commitments. A serious consideration of multiculturalism should be part of any high-school curriculum. Children would then discover that we have much to learn from and much to question in other cultures. If a public school instead offers an anodyne affirmation of diversity, and do so instead of rigorously teaching literature and history, so much the worse for our children.

It is one thing to claim that public schools are no longer teaching an America-centered culture, quite another to argue that private schools are doing a better job. Promoters of school choice offer solid research evidence that children attending inner-city Catholic schools achieve better academic results, score higher on various measures of political tolerance, and are more likely to vote than their public-school peers. However, I am not sure that these facts should be read as evidence of Catholic schools’ teaching culture. Such a demonstration would have to rest on a detailed examination of the curriculum that such students are taught.

Even if urban Catholic schools are culturally superior to many inner-city public schools, it is not safe to assume that expanding parental choice would lead most parents to choose such schools. They might be directed to more troubling alternatives. Recent survey data from Harvard University researcher David Campbell (See “Bowling Together,” page 55), while confirming the positive findings about Catholic schools, raises questions about the political attitudes of students from other religiously affiliated schools. A national voucher program allowing parents to spend public money in the school of their choice may confront us with difficult problems of how to regulate these schools of choice.

**Politics over Aesthetics**

Will our new American state tests restore, or even establish for the first time, a shared cultural education? I think not. While tests at the primary- and middle-school levels have addressed E.D. Hirsch’s concern that all children need access to a basic cultural vocabulary, the high-school tests are mostly bereft of serious cultural content. Such tests ask for a higher level of technical knowledge, but not for deep analysis or comparative understanding. Note, for example, that state exit-level tests, such as the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS), are built neither on a curriculum that requires the reading of any specific text nor on in-depth research into a particular historical period. Indeed, passages offered for analysis are chosen precisely to ensure that they are not drawn from the inflated list of recommended books on the state’s English language arts curricular framework. Students rapidly get the message that educators are more
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Likewise, the Maryland State Performance Standards tell us that “Literary works for study should reflect many classic and contemporary traditions, and should be drawn from diverse writing styles and points of view that reflect the concerns of both genders and a wide range of ethnicity and cultures.” The triumph of politics over aesthetic considerations is fully visible here—one looks in vain for the words “fine” or “excellent.” But this is not the worst offense. Under the subsection “Comprehension, Interpretation and Analysis of Text” are the rubrics:

- Explain the concept that the theme of a selection represents a view or comment on life and analyze its function and effects in literature, using textual evidence to support the claims.

- Analyze and evaluate how such literary elements as point of view, tone, voice, characterization, and irony are used for specific rhetorical and aesthetic purposes.

These are no doubt important skills—but they are divorced from any immersion in a work of literature. To write intelligently and passionately about a book, a play, or a poem, one needs to have read it before seeing it on an exam. Education is in part about learning to be discerning in one’s taste and sensibility. We are in the hands today of educators who are too frightened, confused, or educated to remember this. As a result, our state and national examinations in the humanities and social sciences continue to undermine rather than to sustain any passion for culture.

Consider foreign languages and the arts as well. Once more, Massachusetts provides a useful touchstone. Originally, there were to be assessments in both disciplines, but these plans were never implemented. Many school systems are systematically shifting resources from the teaching of foreign languages, music, and art because of the pressure to have students pass the high-stakes tests in English and math. (Even science, in which there is an examination, suffers from the fact that passing the MCAS in science is not required for graduation.) At the risk of generalizing, it seems fair to say that only in a few schools, some public, some private, is deep exposure to the adventure of human thought—American or otherwise—really taking place.

Allowing parents to choose from a wider variety of schools could, in a regime of rich content-based assessment, do much to enrich our children’s culture. If only we had state curricula and tests of real quality, we could insist that all schools receiving public tuition subject their pupils to such content and assessment. If the curricula and tests were outstanding, our worries about giving parents the freedom to choose a school based on its ethos might be balanced by an assurance that serious learning of cultural substance was at least being publicly encouraged.

However, given the current state of our textbooks, curricula, and assessments, an insistence that public testing follow public money would be premature. Unless the second generation of public testing changes substantially, it would be wrong to demand, for example, that children attending Milwaukee’s Catholic schools with the help of a voucher be treated differently from their full-fee-paying peers.

Thus raising the question: Will schools of choice, freed from the constraints of the new state-testing regimes, be more or less likely to introduce students to sustained reflection on profound works of literature and history, to the rigorous study of math and the sciences, to the learning of a foreign language, and to an immersion in the arts?

We do not really know. Public opinion polls indicate that parents tend to be in favor of a “back-to-basics” style of teaching and are broadly supportive of state assessments. Would parents likewise be supportive of a school that picks a few fine works of literature, portions of which were to be memorized? Will their children hear of the light from Achilles’s helmet “screaming across three thousand years”? Would parents choose a school where children read great historians and historical documents and study math in such a way that they experience the beauty of a theorem? Will such schools be more popular than those that reap the cheap glory that comes from cramming their pupils in preparation for their state tests? Finally, would such a school find teachers?

Since there is no national culture being taught in our public schools, some scholars suggest that there can be no harm in allowing parents to pursue their own notions of culture. Surely such lukewarm faith in the cultural consequences of choice should encourage us to get back to the thankless but critical task of reforming our recent education reforms. Only then can we make the argument that our new curricula and tests are worth imposing on all children supported by public money. Not because such materials would then be almost as fine as what is being taught in private schools, but because, as in many other countries, public schooling would become the rightfully preferred cultural choice.

A culturally rich education lends a deep exposure to the most enduring, exacting, exciting, and inexhaustible works in the human experience.

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