book review

Choice Words
Religious schools, parental choices

The Ambiguous Embrace: Government and Faith-Based Schools and Social Agencies
by Charles L. Glenn
Princeton University Press, 2000, $37.50; 304 pages.

Schools, Vouchers, and the American Public
by Terry M. Moe

Choosing Schools: Consumer Choice and the Quality of American Schools
by Mark Schneider, Paul Teske, and Melissa Marschall

As reviewed by Sally Kilgore

The economist Milton Friedman was the first to propose vouchers as a different way of distributing public funds for the education of all children, rich and poor — with the assumption that parents, as consumers, would act in ways that improved education for all students, not just their own children. Because they were more interested in promoting equality of opportunity than simply consumer choice, sociologist Christopher Jencks and law professors John Coons and Stephen Sugarman proposed placing some constraints on how vouchers could be used: Disadvantaged students would receive larger vouchers, and regulations would prevent any school that accepted vouchers from imposing tuition and fees beyond the value of the voucher.

As the choice movement has moved from theory to practice in recent years, the translation has been much more limited than the theorists could have imagined. Vouchers have come to include the use of private funding as partial tuition support for low-income students to attend private schools (as in Washington, D.C., San Antonio, and New York); the use of public funds to allow a small number of low-income students to attend private schools (as in Milwaukee and Cleveland); or, as in the case of Florida, the provision of public funds for students to attend a private school or another public school if their current public school has a poor academic record. In each case, eligibility has been so limited and the level of funding set so low that vouchers have yet to be fully tested, much less to have demonstrated the potential that their original conceptualizers saw in them.

In The Ambiguous Embrace, Charles Glenn wrestles with the question of whether school choice will be good not only for students but also for private religious schools. The paradox for religious schools and other faith-based service providers is that public funding may enable them to expand their services at the cost of compromising the very qualities that made their services effective in the first place. Public funds necessarily and appropriately bring public oversight. Some regulation is needed to ensure, for instance, the safety and well-being of children and the responsible use of public funds. But what if the regulations begin to impinge on a faith-based organization's core principles or essential service-delivery strategies?

Consider treatments for drug addiction. Whereas faith-based organizations view addiction as a matter of morality and values, more medically oriented programs tend to treat it as a disease. According to Glenn, research comparing these divergent treatment models finds the faith-based approach more successful: Addicts are more apt to be drug-free and gainfully employed if they have participated in a faith-based treatment program. But these programs can pose challenges to government regulators. For example, once an organization accepts public funding and thereby becomes subject to local health and safety codes, it may find itself facing a...
limit on the number of people that can be housed in a building. This could cause trouble for a faith-based organization that has a policy of never turning away anyone seeking help. Likewise, government rules often require staff members to hold certain certifications. If faith-based organizations are required to hire certified staff without regard to their religious beliefs, the organization’s consensus on treatment strategies is lost. In this scenario, public funding can undermine whatever made the faith-based organization unique.

Glenn shows how some faith-based organizations, such as the Salvation Army, have been able to maintain the core principles of their faith while still accepting public funds. They clearly limit the types of services for which they will accept public funds, depending on their judgment of how strongly public funding will affect their ability to maintain their essential philosophy and mission. Even in these instances, however, tensions emerge between the professionals hired to deliver the publicly supported services and the volunteers (or church members) who staff other services.

Glenn believes that government funds should be made available to faith-based organizations as a demonstration of respect for the freedom required in a pluralistic society and as a way of providing effective service. The challenge is to frame the relationship in ways that protect the essential character of those services. Reviewing the practices of other industrialized countries as well as U.S. case law, Glenn concludes that third-party payments (or vouchers) to individuals seeking treatment or services is the best way of using public funds to provide services while preserving the essential character of religiously affiliated service providers. Indirectly funding these organizations through consumer choice protects them from some of the regulatory intrusions that apply when governments directly fund religious organizations. Even so, such a strategy should guarantee that there is public accountability for outcomes, for staff certification, and for eligibility for services. Faith-based service strategies—such as instructional methods—could be largely protected by allowing such organizations to discriminate in hiring on the basis of religious affiliation. Yet, as Glenn shows, the definition of whether an organization is “pervasively religious”—the condition an organization must meet under U.S. case law in order to be able to discriminate in hiring practices—is hardly consistent.

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Glenn’s concern with the regulation of faith-based organizations is in some ways justified by the survey results on which Terry Moe relies in Schools, Vouchers, and the American Public. Moe finds that, by a huge majority, Americans think private schools should be regulated in certain key areas, including curriculum, teacher quality, financial audits, student performance, and the fairness of their admissions policies. These findings differ from Glenn’s recommendations most sharply in terms of curriculum and instruction. Glenn endorses public accountability for the content of instruction (academic standards, in other words), but would want, whenever possible, to allow individual schools or organizations to determine their own instructional strategies.

How religious schools are to be regulated, however, is not Terry Moe’s main line of inquiry. He is more interested in Americans’ attitudes toward school choice and how policymakers can respond to those attitudes. Using a 1995 survey of 4,700 adults (with an oversample of urban adults), Moe finds that Americans like the public school system but think that private schools are better. They are not satisfied with certain features of the public school system, especially inequities, the absence of voluntary prayer, the level of parental involvement (they’d like more), and school size (they’d like smaller). The surveyed adults are pretty clear that they think market incentives would make schools more productive.

Moe uses these data to address the concern that allowing more children to attend private schools would lead to further social separation—by race, religion, and income. First he selects those parents whose responses signal that they would be likely to enroll their children in private schools should tuition no longer be a barrier (with a predicted probability of entry of 70 percent). Then he compares the current racial and economic composition of the public and private sectors with their hypothetical composition after these parents make their move to private schools. He finds that the social and ethnic disparities between public and private schools...
Choosing Schools

Consumer Choice and the Quality of American Schools

Mark Schneider
Paul Teske
Melissa Marschall

Academic performance is clearly most important to parents, regardless of their education level or ethnicity.

Order for a choice system to function effectively.

Choosing Schools’ most unique contribution is to evaluate systems of school choice in terms of how they could serve various public interests—namely, the degree to which a system of choice can promote equity, student achievement, and social capital (or social connectedness). Comparing districts with and without systems of choice, Schneider, Teske, and Marschall find little evidence of increasing inequities where choice is available; the academic performance of all schools appears to increase with even limited choice in a district; and parents become more engaged when allowed to choose their schools—thus enhancing the community’s social capital.

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As reviewed by Michael Mintrom

As an advocate of state funding for religious schools, Charles Glenn supports the use of school vouchers. The complicating detail—or the ambiguity of the embrace, as Glenn terms it—is the danger state funding poses to the schools’ uniquely religious perspective. The danger comes from two sources. First, when government contracts with religious groups for services, those groups become subject to new forms of regulation and accountability. Second, when religious groups build up the service delivery aspects of what they do, the logic of effective management techniques (bureaucratization and professionalization) often serves to diminish the focus on faith that is said to lie at the heart of the organization’s mission. Few observers in the voucher debate recognize the hazards presented to religious schools of mixing church and state. Glenn’s perspective here is thus refreshing. In particular, Glenn’s case study of the Salvation Army—its near collapse, as Glenn terms it—makes for compelling reading.

Nevertheless, Glenn too often assumes that the relevant religious organizations are mainstream ones. Since Judeo-Christian principles infuse Western society, Glenn’s assumption may seem innocuous. And it is this assumption that allows him to argue that parents should trump the state in determining how children are to be educated. Thus does Glenn create an escape hatch for himself, one that helps him avoid...
Parents might not know a lot about the schools their children attend, but maybe the mechanism of school choice produces good results anyway.

...
in a unique survey conducted in 1995 that yielded 4,700 respondents. As with all of Moe’s work, the writing is clear, the analysis is penetrating, and the arguments are cogently made.

Moe recognizes that public opinion on education represents a powerful resource that savvy advocates of policy reform can potentially tap to give political weight to their arguments. In the tradition of E. E. Schattschneider, who closely studied the dynamics of interest-group politics, Moe emphasizes the importance for reform advocates of widening the scope of conflict, or making winning appeals to the broader citizenry, in ways that help them to achieve their political goals. Of course, to make good use of public opinion, advocates must have a clear sense of what public opinion is. Moe observes that the “reality is that most Americans are uninformed about the voucher issue, more ambivalent than committed in their views, and likely to shift in the presence of new information. Elites are well aware of this and inevitably see it as an opportunity to swing public opinion over to their side.”

Moe finds that a large number of parents are satisfied with the public schools to which they send their children. But they also express a fair amount of dissatisfaction, especially when asked about specific aspects of the public schools, such as their ability to promote quality, equity, and racial diversity. This dissatisfaction, notes Moe, gives voucher advocates quite a lot to work with as they seek to move public opinion in their favor.

However, one curiosity Moe observes is that the very people who might benefit most from improvements in their schools often appear to be the most satisfied with them. Moe argues that this may be a result of people’s holding low expectations of schools to begin with: “Parents who are poorly educated and have low expectations are more likely to be satisfied with their local schools, whatever their quality, than other parents are.”

Of course, not all parents are satisfied with their public schools, and parents in school districts with the poorest performing schools often display strong desires to escape them. In asking who might switch from public to private schools if money were not an object, Moe finds that the appeal of private schools is especially strong among parents who are minority, low income, and living in low-performing districts. This, argues Moe, presents political opportunities for voucher proponents. Yet nobody should imagine that such opportunities will translate into easy victories. Voucher advocates will need to do much to educate the public, especially those members of the public who are disadvantaged and who could potentially benefit most from voucher-based education. Moe finds that close to 80 percent of the urban poor in his survey have no clue what vouchers are. This, we are told, is “rational ignorance,” the kind you choose. Calling it plain ignorance would undercut the rational-choice foundations of the voucher idea.

Among the strengths of this book is the painstaking effort to which Moe has gone to extrapolate from his public opinion data to develop a number of “what if?” scenarios concerning people’s behavior if given vouchers. Importantly, Moe finds that “the effect of choice ... is to reduce the social differences between public and private” in terms of the educational background, income, race, and religiosity of parents who would place their children in private schools. Still, a couple of issues arise. First, this is a study of attitudes, not actions. Second, reducing the social differences across the public and private sectors doesn’t necessarily mean that we would find more diversity in the classrooms of private schools under a voucher system. Careful regulation might be needed to ensure that voucher systems produce favorable social outcomes. Putting himself somewhat at odds with many voucher proponents, Moe suggests that—based on what the public says—voucher proponents would do well to “get away from free markets and accept an integral role for government regulation in the design of voucher programs.”

Schools, Vouchers, and America’s Public offers a gold mine of fascinating information and ideas. For me, it represents something of a change in Terry Moe’s thinking about school choice. In the past his writings have often placed interest-group politics at center stage. Moe now acknowledges that “the opinions of the American people will have a great deal to do with how much power each side can successfully wield in democratic politics—and whether, in the end, vouchers will prove a passing fancy, a revolution, or something in-between.”

Here is explicit recognition that the education reform battle is not so much a battle of interests as a battle of ideas about interests and who gets to define the public interest. Rather than viewing democratic politics as something to be side-stepped if we are to have better-performing schools (see Politics, Markets, and America’s Schools), in this book Moe calls for reformers to think more deeply and more democratically about the linkages between elite ideas and public opinion. Of course, Moe’s views on the merits of vouchers haven’t changed. But here he shares his thinking on how a voucher system might be achieved.

-Michael Mintrom is an associate professor of political science at Michigan State University.