word school derives, literally means “leisure.” In other words, learning was available only for the rich, people with the wealth to afford free time. A small group of students met at the house of a teacher. As in a one-room schoolhouse, they were not divided into grades, and they were kept in line by the use of physical force. Most of the teachers (but not all) in the elementary stages were men. It was a trade that might be passed on from generation to generation in one family.

Only a relatively small number of students who learned to read advanced to the next stages of education, where they were taught by grammarians, teachers who were proficient in letters (grammata)—that is, literature. These teachers (and their students) were almost always male. They studied and memorized long passages from the works of the great Greek poets who had lived centuries before their own time. The most popular text, even in Egypt, was the Iliad, particularly Book 2, which contains the Catalogue of Ships, the list of all the heroes who came to Troy. The grammarians preferred Euripides to the other tragedians, because his language was simpler and his style more rhetorical. Their favorite among his dramas was a play that few people today have even heard of, the Phoenician Women. It contains some fine set speeches, along with a fast-moving account of the fate of Oedipus and his children.

By committing at least large portions of these texts to memory, students acquired a ready store of poetic phrases and vocabulary. They also learned how to structure a speech and present their arguments. They learned how to give a “true” account of a word (etymologia) by using puns to make it mean whatever would best suit their purposes. By memorizing the words of others, they learned how to structure the elements of their own compositions. It was this kind of education that the precocious young Maximus drew on when he composed his remarkable mythological “impersonation.” It is not a curriculum that would appear to have encouraged exploration or originality, and it would not have won the approval of John Dewey. Nonetheless, as Cribiore points out, it instilled a lasting respect for hard work. The same learning, drill, and impersonation lie behind the work of the greatest poets of the time, Virgil, Horace, and Ovid, to name just a very few.

—Mary Lefkowitz is a professor of classical studies at Wellesley College and the author of Not Out of Africa: How Afrocentrism Became an Excuse to Teach Myth as History.

Out of Balance

Mollifying factions is no way to improve schools

School Choice Tradeoffs: Liberty, Equity, and Diversity

By R. Kenneth Godwin and Frank R. Kemerer

University of Texas Press, 2002, $29.95; 315 pages.

Reviewed by John E. Brandl

America lacks a theory that would explain how its current system of public schooling could function at an acceptable level. Such a theory would describe how the several components of schooling—finances, administration, curriculum, teaching, and student characteristics—could come together in a way that yields educated children. This fundamental deficiency garners scant attention in much of the country because, in most suburbs and rural areas, parental guidance or social support enables students to reach adulthood passably educated. In the central cities it is a different story. There, at age 18—the age at which students are expected to exit the K–12 system—too many young people, particularly those of color, remain ill equipped for social life, parenting, employment, citizenship, and further education. There, the schools and the society have failed.

Plans for fixing the schools are regularly put forward. The one most often invoked, particularly by adults in the pay of the schools, is that adding funds would do the trick. This is not so much a theory—a theory would explain why more money would matter—as an assumption that the schools operate as machines: if they were fed sufficient numbers of dollars, they would yield good results. In this view, the level of spending matters because educators are deeply altruistic; devoting more money to hiring more such folks should help. However, this ignores the embarrassing reality that real per-pupil expenditures have more than tripled in the past four decades, without a corresponding rise in student achievement. Moreover, American government was founded on the expectation that, as James Madison put it, people are not “angels” and therefore need “precautions” to orient them toward socially productive behavior. The public school system lacks effective precautions.

Most academic research on education policy suffers from a similar implicit assumption: that the schools automatically use their resources well. The prevailing mode of research seeks to iden-
The education policy debate by resorting Locke's and John Stuart Mill's arguments of more statist continental thinking. altered significantly by the introduction that liberal political philosophy has been man. A central argument of the book is phers from John Locke to Amy Gut- question.

In this vein, one turns hopefully to School Choice Tradeoffs. The book emerged from the authors' study of choice programs in the schools of San Antonio, but it became an attempt at a sweeping synthesis of scholarly work on education policy, drawing on literature in philosoph- ogy, economics, political science, edu- cation, and law. There is much to admire here, but ultimately the book's organizing idea—that education policy-making consists of confronting tradeoffs—diverts attention from the efficacy question.

The authors admirably illuminate the education policy debate by resorting to the ideas of liberal political philosophers from John Locke to Amy Gutmann. A central argument of the book is that liberal political philosophy has been altered significantly by the introduction of more statist continental thinking. Locke's and John Stuart Mill's arguments for individual autonomy retain power today, but in the 20th century Dewey and others, influenced by Hegel and other German thinkers, put forward an arresting claim: that the proper education of children requires a role for government so large that it would have shocked their liberal predecessors. Locke, deeply sus- picious of the state, placed the responsibility for educating children with their parents. Mill thought similarly; indeed, he argued that poor parents should receive financial assistance from the gov- ernment in order to afford the type of education they favor for their children.

Dewey, by contrast, saw the public schools as a benevolent force with a responsibility to erode the prejudices and parochialisms children acquire from their parents. Gutmann, a contempo- rary political philosopher, shares Dewey's concern that parents, particularly religious ones, will indoctrinate children with irrationality and intolerance, mak- ing them ill suited for life in a democra- tici. Thus arises the tradeoff that most concerns Godwin and Kemerer: individual autonomy and cultural pluralism versus social cohesion and a societ- al duty to rescue children from obscu- rantism. They subtly present and discuss this apparent conundrum.

Godwin and Kemerer next move to recount how courts have negotiated that tradeoff. They describe a period in the past century when individual and parental autonomy was usually upheld, followed (beginning with Brown v. Board of Education) by a period in which the courts, in the name of equal opportunity, considerably limited the ability of par- ents to control where and with whom their children would be educated. Very recently the Supreme Court has given parents more say in the education of their children. The authors' analysis anticipates the Supreme Court's decision in Zelman, released after this book's publication, which found the Cleveland voucher program constitutional.

A strength—a formidable policy proposal—as well as the weakness of the book are found in the final chapter, in which the authors first discuss the contending political positions and con- comitant tradeoffs regarding vouchers, then propose a voucher program they have planned in exceptional detail. The tradeoffs are variations on the funda- mental fissure Godwin and Kemerer identify in liberal political philosophy: individual autonomy versus public accountability; religious freedom versus separation of church and state; cul- tural diversity versus coherent national values. They seek an "Archimedean point" at which these several consider- ations are in balance.

But the authors don't seem to have decided whether they are analyzing conflicting interests or offering a compelling idea—a theory—which, if applied to schooling, would yield better-educated youngsters. Juggling tradeoffs is a description of normal politics, but it doesn't consider the power of ideas. Appeasing opposing groups can leave unanswered the question of how to organize schooling so that children actually get educated.

In construing policymaking as the balancing of interests, Godwin and Kemerer eschew the power of an alternative understanding of policymaking, namely the design of institutions so that people are oriented to accomplish public purposes. In that understanding, a policy reflects a theory of how individ- uals and organizations act. Accomplishing education policy by mollifying factions is unlikely to raise student achievement. However, underlying the idea of vouchers are theories that com- petition properly structured can foster innovation and efficiency, and that choice can facilitate the formation and flour- ishing of nurturing communities. Per- haps those theories will ultimately be shown to be wrong. If so, voucher advoc- ates will never prevail. They have other arguments on their side—vouchers would be fair because they would end double taxation, and vouchers would be American because they would respect individual autonomy. But those argu- ments will not persuade opponents, who will continue to see them as special pleading. A powerful theory has a chance of changing minds.

—John E. Brandl is a professor of public affairs at the University of Minnesota.