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the education magazine for parents

Tories
pledge
School Parent
choice schools

Choice is not
moral
of schools-call
the spice

Education Bill will
cut choice schools

All-in schools
need more

Alternatives

Britain's school system includes only a handful of education experiments, and an endangered handful at that. Can they survive?

PARENTS' CHOICE

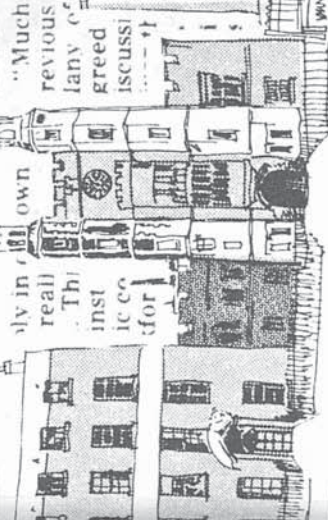
OF SCHOOL TO BE FURTHER CURBED

By DAVID FLETCHER, Education Staff

NEW legislation to limit still further parents' right to have a free choice of schools will curbed the Minimum Earnings level for...

...does not introduce a new sector covering the private fee-paying schools, which in the future we feel will warrant further debate.

"Much that has been left over from previous years we have had to seek again. Many of the issues that last year we agreed terms of reference for joint discussion have been put aside and not considered."



INTEGRATION AFTER WARNOCK
Survey—page 115

The case for family choice — page 102

FREEDOM AND CHOICE FOR THE FAMILY: HOW TO REFORM THE SYSTEM FAIRLY?

Give back choice and control over education to the family, says the author of this article, STEPHEN SUGARMAN, a professor of law at the University of California (Berkeley) and co-author with John E. Coons of Education by Choice — the case for family control, recently published in Britain and America. Coons and Sugarman are active campaigners in the US for family choice and a fair distribution of resources. Here, Sugarman outlines how his plan, with suitable conditions, could encourage diversity and experiment in the British system, without fostering division or unfairness.

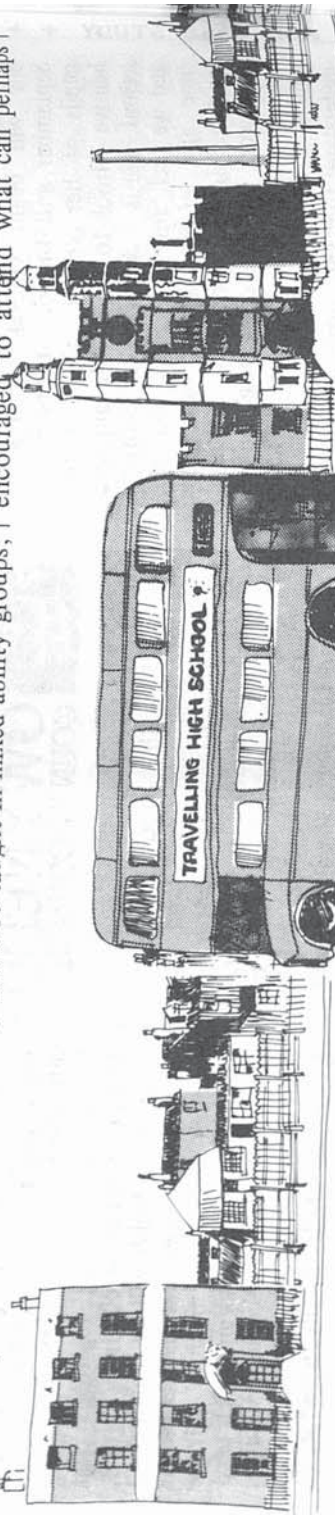
Should individual families have far greater control over the education of their children? Should Britain's primary and secondary school system be based on the principle of family choice? From Labour, the response traditionally has been decidedly in the negative. Indeed, the rhetoric from the Left has emphasized a highly contrasting principle: all children should share common educational experiences with a true cross section of British society.

That principle, however, would require a number of important changes in the current system of British education: independent schools would be abolished, presumably by making attendance compulsory at state maintained schools; religious schools (large numbers of which are now funded by the state) would also be abolished; not only would all of the maintained schools provide comprehensive education, but also all forms would be taught in mixed ability groups;

finally to the extent feasible, and in order to increase heterogeneous student bodies, pupils would be bussed in and out of communities that are similar in terms of the social class or ethnic background of the families living there.

In sum, in order to implement the rhetoric of the Left, educational authorities would have to be charged with the duty of making all schools truly similar.

In practice, the Labour Government has taken a far more pragmatic approach and none of these changes is being seriously advocated. To be sure, the Labour Government stands squarely for 'comprehensive education', but what does this really mean? As I see it this means that state financed schools (although not classrooms within schools) are to contain pupils who reflect the social class and ability patterns (although not religious backgrounds) of the area in which the school is located (although not the country as a whole). Along with this goes a general downplaying of highly consequential examinations — at least of the traditional exams — a de-emphasis of ability grouping (setting — ability-grouping by subject rather than broad streaming — is the current favourite) and much handwringing about, but a toleration of, the independent sector. Repeating, as it does, a series of realistic compromises, it is not obvious just what principle Labour policy is supposed to reflect other than children should be encouraged to attend what can perhaps



HIGH SCHOOLS++++PERFORMING ARTS SCHOOLS++++HUMANIST SCHOOLS++++RUDDOLF

best be called an American-style neighbourhood school.

Given the divergence of rhetoric and reality, it is perhaps significant that the Government now has gone out of its way to argue that the 1978-79 Education Bill will, among other things, increase family choice. Whether it actually will or not is another question, and the Opposition was quick to claim that in fact choice will be restricted. Nonetheless, choice is one of

The case for family choice rests on the belief that there is no social consensus over what are the proper goals and means of education.

its proclaimed virtues. The cynical explanation for the Government line is that it hopes to get some political mileage from its formal support of family choice. For there is plainly some political pressure building up behind the idea, however hazy the notion may be. Moreover, choice that is to be allowed will be within very narrow confines. Families are essentially to be given a choice among the local authority's comprehensives (something they enjoy in many communities already), and even this degree of choice is to be circumscribed, since other local authority preferences — such as school size targets, social and ability mixing and the like — may override family wishes.

Nonetheless, it is possible to think of the new Bill as a sign — not that Labour is

changing its mind, but that it is at least willing to listen to arguments. If so, is there a case for choice that the Left should support? I think there is. It has a number of steps, but in a nutshell it goes like this.

The case for family choice rests on the belief that there is no social consensus over what are the proper goals and means of education. In short, there is simply no public agreement on basic matters such as what is the good life for which education might prepare one, whether childhood primarily is to be a time of joy or of apprenticeship and so on. Of course, everyone wants children to learn the basic skills, but education is surely about far more than that. Besides, even as to the basic skills, there is no agreement on how to impart them. But if both the goals and the means of education are uncertain (or, as I prefer to say, indeterminate) what is one to do?

The answer, I submit, is to turn away from the issue of 'what is best' and to ask instead who should be given the power to decide what education is best for children. The answer to that, I suggest, is that in general parents, with professional advice, are the best deciders we have.

Why do I favour the family? Put simply, I think that typical families listen to the child, care about the child, and know intimate aspects of the child's personality better than do the other possible choosers. Moreover, because the child's success or failure is to reflect on

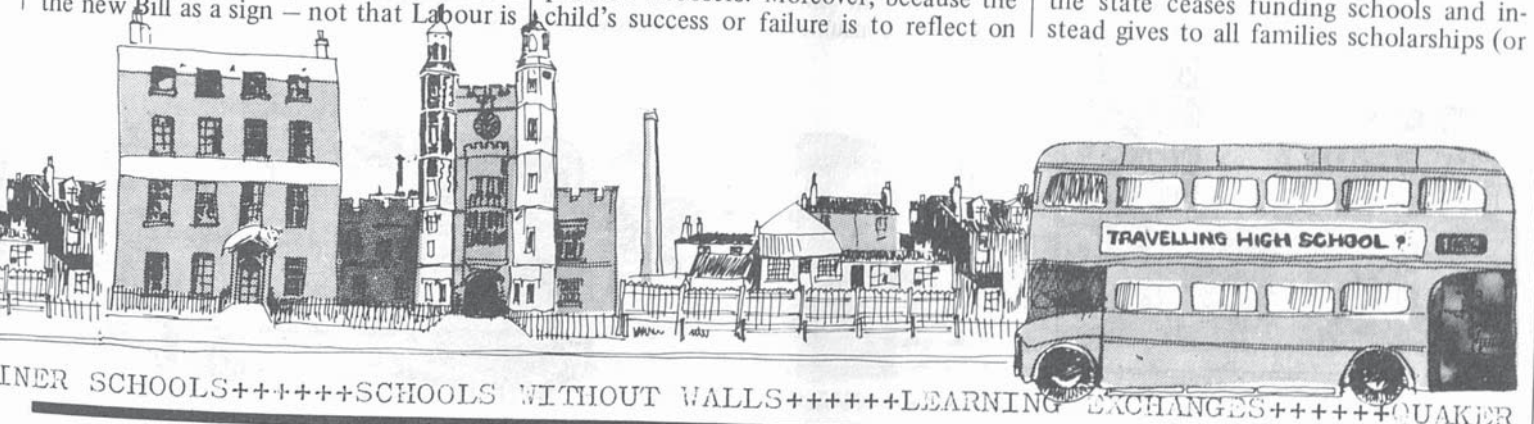
the family in any case, I believe it best able to respond to the responsibility of choice. After all, families decide first whether to have children at all, then how to feed and shelter them — indeed, how to rear them generally.

In fact, in the early years the family is likely to have the child all to itself. If it is so entrusted in those respects, why not with the child's schooling as well? Surely making decisions about the child's nutrition is no easier than making choices about the child's education. And, since the rich are trusted today to send their children to the schools of their choice, why not extend this power to the caring non-rich as well? The rich, after all, have no monopoly on wise parenting.

This, it seems to me, is an argument that the Left can and should support. But this analysis only yields a principle and not a programme. The risk of offending Leftist sentiment is greater when it comes to applying the principle. Indeed, while 'choice' is a banner I have long flown, I

'Choice' would be consumer choice, and providers, like public utilities would in general have to serve all comers.

am keenly aware that it can be used to cloak arrangements that I would very much oppose. Hence it will not suffice to say that choice is put into practice when the state ceases funding schools and instead gives to all families scholarships (or



FAMILY CHOICE

vouchers) to be used by the family to pay for the school it prefers. Rather, it is necessary to resolve at the level of principle some crucial issues.

Under a choice plan, among what **Since the rich are trusted today to send their children to the schools of their choice, why not extend this power to the caring non-rich as well? The rich after all, have no monopoly on wise parenting.**

schools should families be able to choose? A family should not be restricted to selecting among state run schools; it should be allowed to use its scholarship at one that is privately run. This is necessary in order to provide both models for and refuge from government owned schools and to make clear which government schools are failing.

Nearly as important, there should be substantial choice within the state run sector. And this choice should not be limited to the schools now under one's local education authority; rather, one's child should be able to cross authority lines if the family thinks this desirable. Indeed, over time state schools should become autonomous bodies, freed from control by local education authorities in a block and instead constituted like independent public non-profit entities with their own boards of governors, much like charities of various sorts now have.

Should schools be permitted to charge

fees in excess of the value of the scholarship? No. Participating schools should be required to accept the scholarship in full payment of their charges. The reason for this is *not* to prevent the rich from spending more on the education of their children than do the poor, for that cannot be stopped. So long as child-rearing goes on in the family, private after-school lessons, summer travel, books in the home, and the like are but some examples of the extra-cost educational things that the rich simply can and thus will, on average, better provide for their children than will the poor.

Rather, the point of the no fee add-on rule is to prevent the wealthier who participate in the plan from using their personal resources to purchase isolation from the poor in the formal school setting. Put differently, I see little to be gained by giving state grants to the wealthy in order to help them to buy schooling that the poor cannot afford. This rule may keep some families, and indeed many existing independent schools, outside the scheme altogether. But there would be pressures on both to participate, as users of existing independent schools would find for the first time that their no cost alternative would not simply be the local state school.

Should participating schools be able to control their admissions? No. I would allow a school only the right to determine its maximum size. In short, 'choice' would be consumer choice and providers,

like public utilities would, in general, have to serve all comers. Plainly, to favour the principle of inclusion over the right of exclusion means that while some will get in who otherwise would not, others will not have their choices satisfied in full; their child's classmates will be other than those who would get in were the school able to be selective. But it is to avoid having a child labelled undesirable, and to prevent schools (and groups of families) from deliberately excluding children from poor and minority homes that I would insist upon the consumer choice model. And if there were too many applicants for the available places, admission should be by lot (with the exception of those who attended the prior year and perhaps siblings).

It must be recognized that under a

If one wants a more equal distribution of wealth which I do, let us do it with progressive taxes and better social security benefits.

consumer power rule schools will, so long as they set their own work standards, get pupils who they would prefer to exchange for others on their waiting list. Therefore I believe that some protections within the school would be needed so as generally to afford the child fair treatment. I would, however, permit a school to require a child who was 'failing' to repeat a year, and in extreme cases, where the child was simply unable to benefit



from the programme, to exclude him altogether (after a hearing, which hearings would also be required before permanent disciplinary exclusions).

I see little to be gained by giving state grants to the wealthy in order to help them buy schooling that the poor cannot afford.

While many important regulatory issues would have to be resolved, perhaps it is enough here to say that I would impose very little curricular control on schools, that I would permit schools to have widely differing environments, teaching styles, hours, term/holiday arrangements and the like, and perhaps most important that I would allow teachers to be anyone the school chose to hire – in short, no specific qualifications would be required. On the other hand, I would impose substantial disclosure obligations on participating schools, such as the school's programme and objectives, how well the children did (especially as compared with what might be expected of them given their abilities), on what the school spent its money, what are the qualifications of its teachers and so on.

Who might start new schools under a choice plan of the sort I have described? Traditional business enterprise might, as might groups of parents seeking a distinctive ambience or governance style for the school their children attend – eg, a 'free' school.

Groups of teachers are a very likely source; surely the growing number of trained but unemployed teachers forms a pool from which promoters of new schools are likely to emerge. Thus, in the end, family choice might benefit professionals greatly – if only the members of teachers' organizations could see that.

Another possibility is the 'minority' ideological group. Plainly there are cultural and political organizations in Britain whose members feel that their values are not part of the social mainstream. These could be groups of feminists, socialists, libertarians, blacks, fascists and so on. For many, their children today go to schools in which the values taught clash with the values of the home. Some people laud this: education, in short, is designed for socialization into mainstream values. Those with other values, of course, can be quite embittered by this unwanted indoctrination.

There is, quite obviously, a danger here – but a danger worth running. I believe that the best hope for a pluralist society is to use the power of government to encourage its members peacefully to pursue their differentness. The theory, of course, is that when minorities are given support by the society to pursue their own values, they will reward the society with their ultimate loyalty. Britain seems not to fear this diversity at present when it comes to Roman Catholic schools; why then not schools run by those of other minority views?

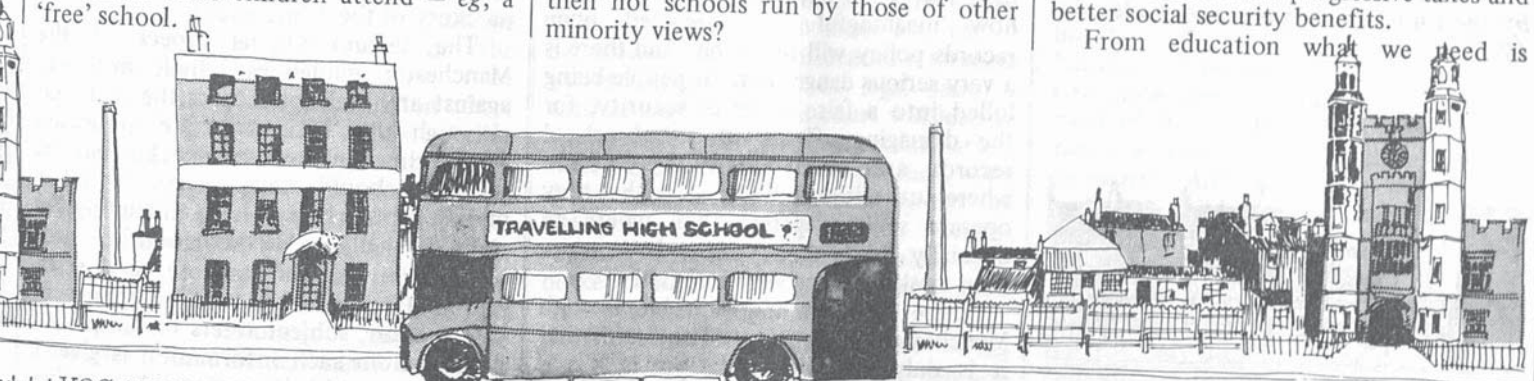
One Labour fear is that choice will lead to 'excessive' separation by ability and that this is educationally bad for the less bright. The problem with this argument is first that there is no good evidence that this is so, and second that the current comprehensive school policy also allows a great deal of ability grouping.

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The more serious concern from the Left, I think, rests on the belief stated at the outset that it is *socially* better for children of all classes (and abilities) to be mixed together and that choice will not do this.

The idea is that families ought not to be allowed to sort themselves out among schools of different types according to the way the family feels the child gains most. Rather society must take affirmative steps to throw children with all their differences in together in order that they see what others are like, learn from each other, become more like each other, share similar values and the like. It is in short a drive for an even more homogeneous society. I find it frightening. If one wants a more equal distribution of wealth, as I do, let us do it with progressive taxes and better social security benefits.

From education what we need is

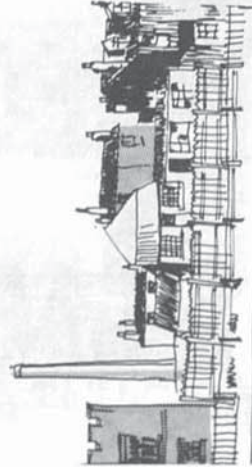


+++VOCATIONAL SCHOOLS+++++FREE SCHOOLS+++++TRAVELLING SCHOOLS+++++BOYSON

FAMILY CHOICE

diversity. With the growth of both television and the pop style in music, dress and behaviour, youths throughout Britain are now well exposed to the common culture. What is missing I believe, is the opportunity to be exposed to organized experiences that reinforce special aspects of one's family background. Schools of choice might just provide this possibility. By contrast, if society uses schools to provide common experiences it is difficult to avoid trampling on minority culture and views, suggesting to those whose homes are atypical that their families are inferior. Moreover, in the end, without further drastic change, the hope of using state schools to turn rough-edged young stones into uniform and smooth gems is doomed to be disappointed. What would be required next is mandatory attendance at state nursery schools and then compulsory state child-minding. In a society with a clear consensus as to the role of its citizens, this is not an outlandish scenario. But in Britain today this is, I hope, unthinkable. Here the variety that comes from individually chosen lifestyles is something that is still valued and it is to an enrichment of that variety that an experiment with education by choice would be committed.

Education by choice — the case for family control, by *John E. Coons and Stephen Sugarman*, is published in *Britain and US* by the *University of California Press* price £7.75.



SCHOOLS+++MINI-SCHOOLS

MANCHESTER'S NEW FILES: NOT SO OPEN AFTER ALL

Manchester education committee has recently issued guidelines on the keeping of confidential information by their education department.

The basic principle of these guidelines is that 'subject to the law a person about whom information is given and/or recorded should be entitled to know the content of the information on request so as to permit him the opportunity to challenge or confirm the information; and the donor of information should control the dissemination of information'.

These guidelines were welcomed by the press and those who have been campaigning for parental access to school records. But here, **MARIE MACEY**, Lecturer in Education at Bradford University, shows just how far Manchester's policy falls short of ensuring parents the right to check, challenge and control the information contained in their child's school record.

I was delighted to hear that Manchester education committee has adopted an 'open' school records policy, and even more pleased that they had circulated guidelines on operating the system, thereby apparently demonstrating genuine commitment towards implementing the policy.

Unfortunately, whilst not suggesting that Manchester education committee has any intention of deliberately misleading the general public, my study of the guidelines leaves me extremely sceptical as to how meaningful the so-called open records policy will really be. And there is a very serious danger here of people being lulled into a false sense of security, for the damaging effects of secret school records are more readily appreciated where authorities publicly state that they operate such a system than where an officially 'open' policy does little more than mask the same secret activities.

There are two major problems with Manchester's new policy. The first is that it is only a recommendation; it is not mandatory, so that individual schools are at liberty to accept or reject it outright,

or alternatively, to implement it in any way they choose. It seems realistic to assume that prior to the issue of official guidelines, some Manchester schools allowed parents access to school records, whilst others refused; and nothing about the new policy seems likely to effect any significant change in this pattern. Manchester's choice of a 'soft-line' approach to the implementation of an open school records system is in stark contrast to Bradford's forcefully reiterated secret one, and this makes a mockery of the entire exercise.

The second crucial aspect of the Manchester guidelines which mitigates against any real openness is the fact that although the 'basic principle' (repeated several times in the document) is that the 'subject' should have access to information kept on him or her — including the right of challenge — the 'donor' of such information is to control its dissemination. (Donor refers to the supplier of information; subject refers to the person about whom such information is given). In other words, if person 'A' supplies information about person 'B', 'A' (being