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School Choice in the U.S.

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I. Let me first speak about the extent of school choice in the U.S. today.

A. I will start with public school choice.

1) American parents understand that most children are assigned to the primary or secondary school located in their neighborhood, and hence many parents choose their children's school by choosing where to live. This sort of choice is probably more important in the U.S. than in Japan because school curriculum and school quality probably vary more from place to place in the U.S. Making this sort of choice is, of course, easier for wealthier families. Polls suggest that perhaps 25% to 33% of children (12-17 million) have their schools deliberately selected for them in this way.

2) About 10% of U.S. children (about 5 million) attend a "choice" school located within their local school district. Most of these choices are made through special programs that offer what are typically called "magnet" or "alternative" or "specialized" schools that do not accept pupils based on neighborhood assignment. Some children, however, simply attend regular schools located outside their neighborhood. In relatively few districts all families must choose (that is, there are no neighborhood schools); this is usually called "controlled choice" because racial balance criteria shape which choice the family gets.

3) Some families send their children to public schools located in other school districts (in the southern states school districts are county based; in the rest of the country they tend to be city or town based and are far more numerous).

Choice of this sort is now allowed in about 20 states. Usually, out-of-district pupils may enter only if there is room for them. About 2% of children seem to take up this option in states which have allowed it for 4 years or more, often leaving smaller high schools for larger ones with more course offerings. Projecting that 2% nationwide (that is, assuming all states were to adopt such plans and had similar experience) would mean 1 million children getting school choice this way.

4) Charter schools are an important new school choice development. I will say more about them shortly. For now let me note that they are growing very rapidly in some states, especially Arizona, California, and Michigan. About 1000 charter schools were in operation this fall, although nationally they still serve less than 1% of pupils.

B. Now let me turn to private school choice.

1) Private schools in the U.S. are essentially privately funded, although in some states provide modest financial aid. About 10% of the children attend private schools (5 million). Most attend religious schools which are now about 50% Catholic. Although there are relatively few non-religious private schools, many wealthy and professional families who live in large U.S. cities use them for their children. The other schools are formed by many different religious groups.

2) There are now two important public-funded private school experiments being carried out in the cities of Milwaukee and Cleveland. These are called "school voucher" plans. Although these are very small programs, they are quite important and controversial. I will say more about them later.

3) What we call "home schooling" occurs when parents educate their children themselves. We know that in America home schooling has grown enormously in the past 30 years. At first it seemed most common among radical left parents, but more lately it seems more common among conservative religious parents and others. There are now possibly as many as 2% of children being home schooled (which would be 1 million children).

II. Although it may seem that a great deal of school choice already exists, there are now strong pressures for expanding school choice even further.

A. It should be understood that expanded school choice has at least two dimensions: giving genuine choice to more families; expanding the number and variety of choices that families actually have.

B. For advocates of school choice, as a practical matter this primarily means expanding the schools that government will pay for by expanded "charter school" and "school voucher" plans.

C. The pressure for more school choice comes from many sources.

1) As I already noted, many American parents send their children to private religious schools, and for years they have complained that it is not fair that government only supports public schools, arguing that they must "pay twice." By contrast, in most other countries with large numbers of Christian schools, families using those schools are publicly subsidized. In the U.S. in the past the legal doctrine of the "separation of church and state" has been thought to prohibit such assistance, but today it appears that a neutral school voucher system that included the funding of religious schools would probably be legal.

2) Some "libertarians" including the Nobel Laureate Milton Friedman have argued that education, along with other government functions, should be privatized. This has led them to push for replacing the public school system with a school voucher scheme.

3) Since the mid-1980s national reports have showed that U.S. schoolchildren are performing poorly both in terms of national educational goals and in comparison with the children in other countries. This has caused many business leaders to argue that the benefits of competition should be realized in the education sector by having the government subsidize alternatives to the traditional public schools -- both public charter schools and private school

funded with vouchers.

4) Some advocates on behalf of poor children have also pushed for more school choice. (More than 20% of America's children are living below the poverty level, one of the highest rates in the industrialized world). These advocates point to the especially bad job that public schools in our big cities are doing in trying to educate these children from low income families. They argue that these families should have the same choices for their children that wealthy families have who can either buy private school or buy a house in a rich neighborhood with good schools.

5) There is no national school curriculum in the U.S., and efforts to create one have led to great controversies, and those with many different values and ideologies seek to have their viewpoints reflected (or not excluded). School choice is seen as one way to resolve this problem -- to let individual families decide, instead of having a single solution for all children.

D. In short, the case for school choice in the U.S. rests on two broad bases.

1) First, in terms of productivity, it is argued that choice and the market it creates will yield higher levels of achievement through competition and innovation; and

2) Second, the way to deal with American pluralism, it is claimed, is to tolerate differences among groups and families by allowing them to decide for themselves what sort of moral upbringing and education their children should have.

3) On both these dimensions, it is argued, school choice will benefit individual children and the society at large. Opponents of expanded school choice, are both skeptical about whether education is a good place for "the market" to operate, and fearful that toleration of too much diversity will cause increased, not decreased, social discontent in the U.S. Where one side foresees the harmony of the Netherlands, the other side foresees the bloodshed of Ireland.

III. Most discussions are about school choice in the abstract. But to make it into a real proposal, several key issues (which I will mention next) must be resolved.

A. Admission rules. May schools that participate in school choice plans be selective or must they take everyone who applies so long as they have room? Whose choice counts most -- the family's or the school's?

B. Amount of the scholarship. Will the taxpayers pay for all of what schooling reasonably costs, or should parents be asked to contribute as well, and if so, what is to be done about poor families?

C. Regulation. Will government impose requirements on the curriculum and on who may teach in choice schools; or will it rely instead on imposing common tests on all schools and requiring schools to disclose their results to the public?

D. General or targeted recipients. If vouchers or scholarships are to be provided, will they go to all children, or only to those worse served in public schools now (like children from low income families)?

E. For what sorts of schools will the public subsidy be provided? Only public schools -- i.e., only charter schools? Or also private schools, including religious schools?

IV. Because proponents and opponents of expanded school choice predict very different outcomes, what is the evidence about the effects of school choice?

A. Although there are some with different views, I believe that most scholars have concluded that Catholic schools today provide better education for less money (higher test scores, higher graduation rate, more graduates go on to college), even to poor-non Catholic children. Moreover, although these schools

preach Catholic faith, their students grow up more tolerant than average.

B. Most agree that many suburbs and private schools that serve the wealthy are spurred on to try harder by competition.

C. What about the outcomes at charter schools? There is no much data yet. It does seem clear that these schools are hard to start and that there have been some scandals and bankruptcies. On the other hand, users seem to like these schools. It is important to emphasize that the rules vary a lot from state to state.

D. What are the outcomes of voucher schools in Milwaukee and Cleveland? These plans are open to poor children only. Low achievers tend to participate in these plans, and most come from single-mother homes. Mothers like the plans. The children seem to attend more regularly. But there is a big controversy about outcomes. Are they learning more? There is some evidence that those who stay at least 3 years in choice school do lots better than they would have in public school (but many don't stay that long).

V. The future?

A. In Scandinavia now, school choice is widely allowed and lately growing fast in Sweden. Choice schools there are largely unregulated and get about 90% of what public schools get; they must accept applicants to elementary schools on first come/first served basis, and by exam entry to high schools; no extra tuition may be charged; pretty much anyone can start a choice school. Is this an indicator of what will happen elsewhere?

B. For the U.S., I believe that there will be a rapid growth in charter schools IF, first, buildings can be found (or funding is increased to account for capital

needs); second, people are trained up to start new schools; and third, there are not too many scandals connected to charter schools. I think there will also be more choice within the traditional public sector schools. Will there be much more government-funded private school choice? This may depend on Court decisions as to the legality of aiding those who attend religious schools. In any event, the political situation is difficult for school choice supporters. I think their case is most likely to succeed if they start by urging school for the neediest of children.

C. What about Japan? Let me just raise a few questions. Is there growing pluralism here? Is there growing dis-satisfaction with public schools? If capitalism is thought successful in other sectors, why not in education? Or is there now skepticism about the benefits of unrestrained free markets? One indication that school choice may gain growing support in Japan is the September 1998 final report of the Central Council for Education. It proposed both that local government and local schools be given more power to determine their own educational styles, and that families be given broader choice as to which schools their children attend.

※本原稿は、1998年10月12日に京都大学教育学部で行われたシュガーマン教授の講演の概要を再録したものである。