

ISSUES

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Myths and realities of school choice

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 Special to *The Times*

TWO initiatives now before the state Legislature promise to give parents more choice in the education of their children.

I-173, the "Choice in Education Act," enables parents to receive vouchers redeemable at private schools. In effect, they can elect to spend their tax dollars outside the public schools.

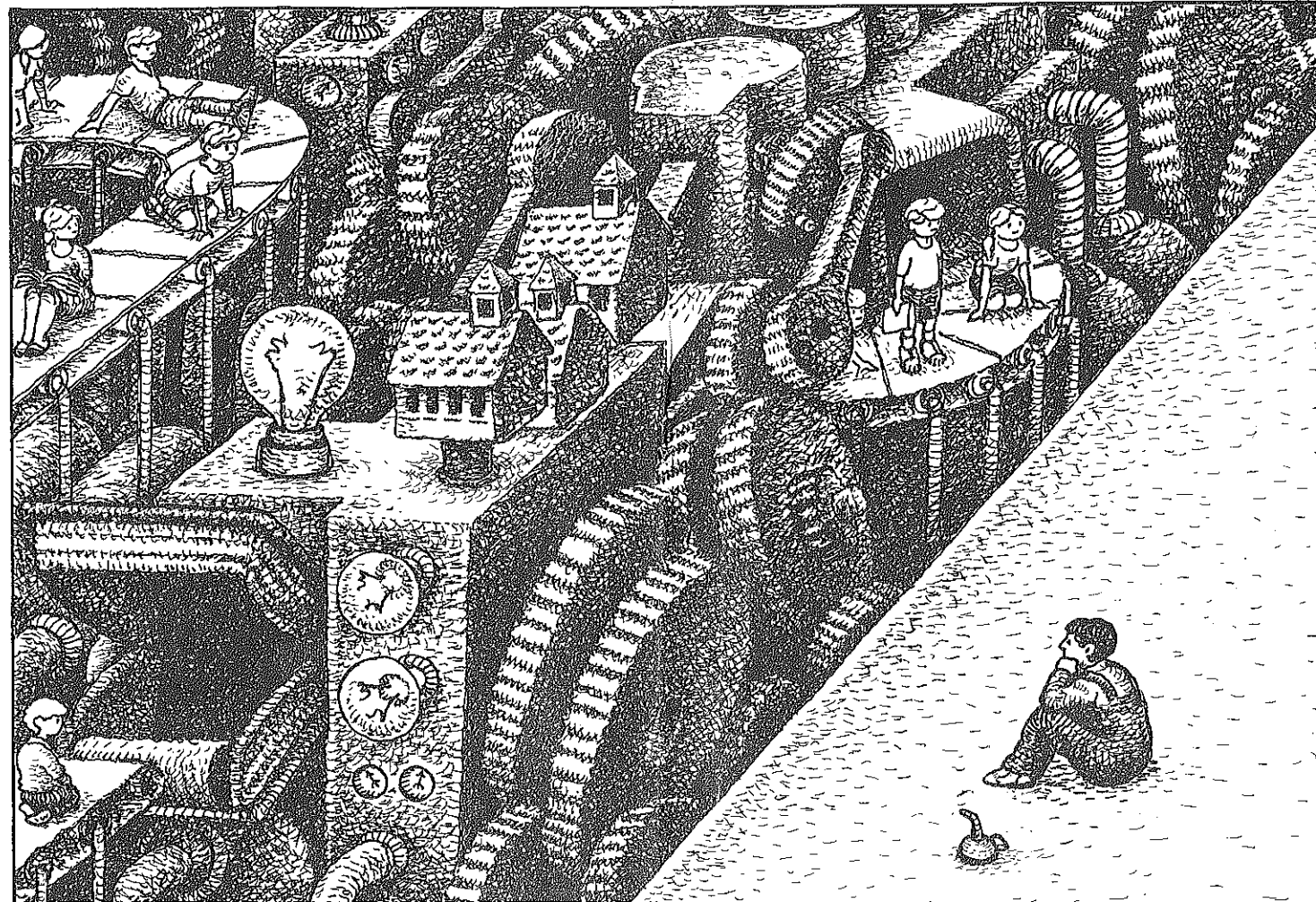
I-177, the "Education Excellence Initiative," enables citizens within a school district to create "charter" schools, tax-supported independent schools outside the control of present districts. Private non-religious schools could meet state requirements and become charter schools.

Is there evidence that these policy changes stand a reasonable chance of improving the education our children receive?

The belief that choice policies cause improvement is now widespread. It shares deep roots with the notion that competition delivers efficiency and incentives for improvement. This faith in competition is perhaps the defining idea of our time, certainly more popular than it has been for 60 years.

Parents have specific reasons for desiring a choice among schools:

- **Safety.** Many parents believe their public schools are not safe. Stories of youth crime and violence are more frequent than



gram. Its city schools, like Seattle's, are not heavily supported by white households (in Milwaukee only 30 percent of public school students are white). The voucher program is aimed at poor inner city children, and only a few thousand students take part.

Baltimore and Hartford, Conn., have used private contractors to manage some schools in an effort to let competitive forces work. Minnesota is the leader in statewide choice programs, which include charter schools. Many other states have tried smaller experiments. What do these experiments tell us about competition in education?

The overriding message is that parents should not expect dramatic change. In these examples, standardized test scores did not improve.

Why the disappointing results?

The wider availability of private schools dilutes the creaming effect. If we are correct, more private schools means dilution of the process that makes private schools appear better. This is related to the lack of national standards. If we don't agree on where we are going, how will more ways to get there bring improvement?

Exactly how is competition supposed to work? The prescription is based on a diagnosis of public schools that goes like this: Public education is fairly uniform, and it has failed. Parents want different things than are offered, but their voices are stifled in a political and bureaucratic struggle that does not give their wishes the highest priority. Market-like forces will bypass these prob-

when most of today's parents were in school.

● **Values.** Do parents feel their values guide their children's schooling? For most parents such guidance is difficult to maintain at home, and schools are almost wholly beyond their direct influence. Both here and with the safety issue, parents do not need to see much to be connected with values. News stories, student dress and demeanor, and stories shared among parents are some of the cues parents read to form a picture of the values that influence their children.

● **Achievement.** "Low test scores" is a common charge leveled at the public schools. Many parents believe the schools do not do an adequate job of educating children, although the evidence is mixed.

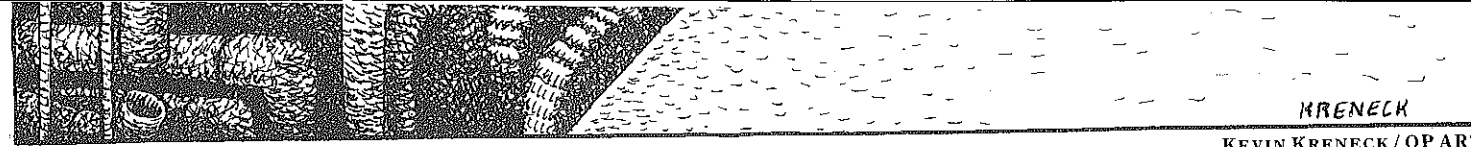
● **Technology.** Many parents believe schools outside their neighborhoods are superior in facilities and equipment, teachers, sports teams, bands and so on. When offered the opportunity, parents will choose other schools for a wide variety of reasons.

We should remember that alongside these ideas about the public schools are polls that show a majority of parents who are quite satisfied with the quality of the schools their children attend.

How much choice?

Even without the Washington initiatives, we now have some school choice. The Washington Federation of Independent Schools reports that about 8 percent of all students in the state attend private schools. An additional 2.5 percent of students are home schooled in a given year. Together that totals about 100,000 students.

We find that choice presently happens within the public schools. Magnet schools, special ability-grouped or pull-out classes, and course programs (such as Advanced Placement) offer parental choice. Many parents influence the choice of teachers, and thus get more of what they want (or less of what they don't want) from the public schools. Our crude estimate is that about 20 percent of parents exercise such choice. The



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parents who benefit tend to be those involved in their children's education. These are mostly middle-class parents from two-parent households, one of whom works less than full-time or has a flexible work schedule.

If experience is a reliable guide, the parents who will send their children to private and charter schools are, for the most part, the parents who are already making use of available opportunities. The initiatives will certainly lower the price of private school services, but not as much as one might think. If a parent receives, for example, a \$3,400 voucher, and the private school must accept that voucher as tuition, there may still be fees for books, registration, sports, laboratory equipment and the like.

Most private schools expect students to take part in fund-raising activities. Those often have minimum amounts required of students that become additional fees if not fulfilled. These costs above tuition can easily run from \$500 to \$1,000. A charter high school may charge 20 percent above the voucher amount. Transportation to and from school is an additional cost.

So while private school services become cheaper through the initiatives, they will still be considerably above public school costs. How many parents would send their children to a given school if the effective cost is in the neighborhood of, say, \$1,500 to \$2,000?

Are private schools better?

If parents use vouchers to send their children to private schools, or create charter schools, will their children's education improve? A comparison between public and private schools provide some answers.

In sum, the choice schools are not likely to perform dramatically better in terms of academic achievement. They will offer parents something in the way of safety and values, at some cost.

On the average, private schools produce better test scores than do public schools. There is enormous variation among private schools. The size of the average private school lead is small in most empirical comparisons, on the order of a few percentage points in standardized tests. One caveat should be mentioned here. Published private school results generally include religious schools as well. Current Supreme Court doctrine drastically limits the amount and types of aid a state may send, even through voucher schemes, to private religious schools.

Private schools show better test scores for simple reasons. First and foremost is a process called "creaming." The parents who place their children in private schools are precisely those people who value education highly (they choose to make this sacrifice for their children) and those who can afford it (many of them can better afford to do so). Willingness to sacrifice for education is probably more important than money in family choices to use private schools.

Some researchers have attempted to

follow the private school achievements over the long haul. Do elementary test scores translate into better high school performance?

Do those in turn translate into going to college, getting into better colleges, and performing better in colleges? The evidence shows virtually no positive results.

Public education is truly for the masses. Parents with elite values and parents who object to contemporary concepts of mass education are more likely to value private education.

Elite values can include the desire to influence one's children's social and academic circles with regard to class, color, ethnicity or other social division. How many parents would not be pleased to have their eldest child become a contented, kind and public-spirited surgeon pulling down \$300,000 per year?

In an important sense, our schools are very good at sorting people according to elite values. Students are graded and sorted, some do not graduate from high school. These people at the extremes of the education system, and the folks between the poles, are for the most part sorted for life. Plenty of parents want their children to associate with other children from households that share the same values.

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Does competition work?

To date, only Milwaukee, Wis., has experimented widely with a voucher pro-

parents.

When public schools see resources draining to other schools, they will have to respond by being more attentive to the wishes of parents. They will deliver a better quality of education for the students.

So far, the choice experiments in states and cities have not delivered significantly more achievement, or even saved much money. The choice initiatives do strike at the heart of the argument: That it is up to the parents to decide what is best for their children. The argument hinges on the notion that parents know what they are doing.

What should we do?

Right now there is no broad national political movement to improve the quality of schools. Reformers come in many shapes and sizes, and do not agree on an approach. Some want stronger standards adopted everywhere, some want community controlled schools. The Washington initiatives lean toward the latter.

If the initiatives are enacted, we should not expect dramatic measurable results. This shouldn't surprise anyone, because schools don't have just one problem. Most students are bored by school. Is this the problem of schools? We don't pay much attention to serious learning. Can we set strong national standards?

Simple institutional reform is not likely to change the content in a student's (or teacher's) head. Those who want fundamental changes in student performance, safety and other values will most likely be disappointed by I-173 and I-177. If we value choice for the limited things it may bring, the Washington initiatives may be a good idea.

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Charter schools: A movement that's caught fire in many states