

At Williams's urging, and despite widespread opposition, Wisconsin passed the country's first voucher legislation. In 1990, the year it was implemented, a group of nearly four hundred low-income students in Milwaukee attended private, nonreligious schools at taxpayer expense. The private schools got \$2,500 from the state for each student, money that would have otherwise gone to public school funding. Critics feared that an expansion of the voucher program might ultimately cripple the city's public schools. Voucher proponent Annette Polly Williams defended the program. "I am not in this battle on education to save any institution," she said. "I am in here to save the lives of children by any means necessary."

Nationwide, voucher advocates got a boost in 1992 from President George Bush. "For too long, we've shielded schools from competition, allowed our schools a damaging monopoly power over our children," Bush said. "It is time we began thinking of a system of public education in which many providers offer a marketplace of opportunities. . . . A revolution is under way in Milwaukee and across this country, a revolution to make American schools the best in the world." Chester Finn, an education advisor to Reagan, adds, "Well, the best argument for choice is to enable poor people to have the same rights and opportunities that rich people already have by virtue of being rich. I mean, rich people exercise school choice. They move to where they want to buy a house, because of the schools, or they send their kid to a private school. It is poor people who typically get trapped in bad schools and can't afford to

A Nation at Risk?

do anything about it." Jonathan Kozol counters, "They are proposing a voucher of a couple thousand dollars which at best would allow a handful of poor children or children of color to go to a pedagogically marginal private school. The day that the conservative voucher advocates in America tell me that they would like to give every inner-city black, Hispanic, or poor white kid a \$25,000 voucher to go to Exeter, I will become a Republican."

By 1997, the Milwaukee voucher program served 1,500 students. Success stories included Urban Day, an elementary school offering small classes and a rigorous curriculum, whose students went on to graduate from high school at double the norm for the area. But many private schools did not accept vouchers, and the quality of those that did varied widely. "Anybody can start a choice school in Milwaukee," says Greg Doyle of the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction. "You don't have to have any money. You don't have to have any expertise in education. We had quite a number of people who wanted to start school without a building, without teachers, without textbooks. We believe that those are conditions that are not conducive to the education of children in the state." Critics also noted that the private schools, unlike public schools, could cater to special interests. The Bruce Guadeloupe School, for example, stressed Hispanic heritage and achievement. The Harambee School, visited by Vice President Dan Quayle in 1994, was Afrocentric.

Of greater concern to voucher opponents, however, was the push to include private religious schools. In 1994, this expansion



was debated in the Wisconsin legislature. Annette Polly Williams, a voucher proponent, told members, "I am not convinced that God or religion is going to hurt these little children in these schools." Opponents went to court, arguing that the use of publicly funded vouchers in religious schools violated the constitutional separation of church and state. "The question is, if it is okay for one church, why is it not okay for another church?" says Greg Doyle. "Would the taxpayer generally be willing to support a voucher that went to a school run by witches? Would they be willing to support a school that was run by skinheads? The gravest

Students praying at the start of the school day in San Antonio, Texas, in 1992.

concern has to be that this society made a decision in its very beginning that church and state would be separate. And so we believe that the democracy needs that separation." Chester Finn argues, "I don't get this distinction between why it is okay to assist people in church-affiliated hospitals and church-affiliated colleges and church-affiliated day care centers—but for some reason it is verboten to assist them in a church-affiliated elementary or secondary school." Jonathan Kozol says, "Think of cities that are just struggling to hold together . . . and then imagine what it would be like if you added a system whereby every little intellectual, ethnic, theological splinter group could indoctrinate children separately, and use public money to do it. It would rip apart the social fabric of this nation."

In 1996, low-income students in Cleveland, Ohio, became the first in the nation to use vouchers to attend religious schools. Two years later, in 1998, the Wisconsin Supreme Court allowed Milwaukee students to do the same. That fall, the number of voucher students jumped to nearly six thousand. Significantly, three out of four of these students had already been enrolled in private schools but now paid for them with public school money. This left the majority of Milwaukee's public schools with fewer resources than before. "One of our biggest concerns about the choice program is that we are not making the effort to improve the public schools," says Greg Doyle. "Rather than supporting the public schools we are supplanting them with something else. An expanded voucher system is going to require the taxpayer to support more than just

School: 1980-2000



Milwaukee voucher students attending religious schools.

the public schools in America. It is going to require them to support an entire private school system. In Wisconsin, that will mean about six hundred and sixty million additional dollars for education in this state and we don't have the money for that."

To critics nationwide, voucher programs threaten public schools not only by siphoning off resources, but also by selectively sorting through students and excluding those who are difficult or harder to serve. Says James Anderson, "We could end up with vouchers that would allow systems to cater to people on the basis of class. People who are well-to-do [could] select students who are very similar in terms of class background and educate them in a



very different system. And we might end up, particularly in large metropolitan areas, with another class of schools that are public schools for the poor, the disenfranchised.”

Still another movement for school choice gained momentum during this period: home schooling. By the late 1990s, the Christian right had led a successful campaign to make home schooling legal in all fifty states. While the percentage of students being home schooled remained small—less than 2.5 percent in 2000—exit strategies like vouchers and home schooling would continue to spark political battles in the years ahead.

Baltimore, Maryland, was the site of another experiment with

A child demonstrates in favor of home schooling at the State Capitol in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, 1985.

John T. Golle, head of Education Alternatives, Inc., the first for-profit company to manage an American public school, talks with first- and second-graders at Tesseract School in Eagan, Minnesota, in 1995.

big implications: private management of public schools. Schools in Baltimore were in tough shape in 1992, when the experiment began. "We were overcrowded, underfunded," says Irene Dandridge, president of the Baltimore Teachers Union from 1980 to 1996. "Lots of teachers did not have supplies, such things as paper and duplicating fluid." Teachers had to buy their own books and buy workbooks for children, she says. "Having to duplicate materials over and over and then not having the paper to do it with. It was bad, it really was." Dr. Walter Amprey, Baltimore superintendent of schools from 1991 to 1997, adds, "We had tried many things in the past. I had a real clear list of what wasn't working. Not a real strong list of what would work. So I was looking for answers where they hadn't been found before."



School: 1980-2000

In 1992, the city of Baltimore hired a private company, Education Alternatives Inc., or EAI, to manage nine of its public schools. “[Public schools] are funded by the government. Their rules and regulations are dictated by the government,” says John Golle, founder and chairman of EAI. “Where else can we look in our society and say that a government monopoly functions best for our society? I would suggest to you, no place.”

For the same \$5,400 per pupil that the city would have spent, EAI said that it could run the schools, boost test scores, and still make a profit. A Minnesota-based company, EAI was already running two private schools, as well as a public school near Miami, Florida—the first in the nation to be managed by a private business. Yet private-sector involvement in education is not new, says Jeanne Allen, president of the Center for Education Reform. “We buy our desks, they are for profit, we buy our pencils, we buy our computers. We get our software, teachers are paid. I mean, there is money all around our schools. So to have a private company come in is not really a strange idea.” In Baltimore, John Golle focused on the school buildings, which were in a state of disrepair. As a private company, EAI could bypass the bureaucracy, invest its own money, and hire outside contractors to rehab the buildings. He remembers, “When people came in and they saw one high-speed computer for every four kids, they said, how did you do this and earn a profit? We said it is easy. We had everyone compete. Compete for the delivery of the food services. Compete for the maintenance and the cleaning of the building, interior and exterior. And

A Nation at Risk?

by competing what we found was we were able to drive up the quality and drive down the costs.”

Critics held a different view. EMI had replaced unionized teacher’s aides with interns paid an hourly wage. They had cut special education services in half, and reduced art and music programs. The company was accused of taking profits back to Minnesota at the expense of Baltimore’s schoolchildren. “These children need many, many, more services than children that you might find in the suburbs, for example, than most children,” Irene Dandridge argues. “They need psychological services, the city has to provide health services. All kinds of services that children just cannot learn without. There is just not enough money in public school education, particularly in urban centers, to have a profit and good education, too.”

Elsewhere, corporate involvement in schools was growing. By the mid-1990s, education in the United States was a \$90-billion-a-year industry. Increasingly, for-profit tutoring firms were brought into classrooms to raise student test scores. School districts earned extra cash by allowing corporate logos to appear in public school buildings. Whittle Communications offered free media equipment to schools. In exchange, all students had to watch twelve minutes per day of Channel One, a broadcast of news features and commercials geared to a young audience. By the year 2000, one-quarter of the nation’s secondary students were watching Channel One.

The controversial partnership between corporations and

schools brought national attention to the EAI experiment in Baltimore. Stockholders had seen the price of their shares rise from \$4 to \$49 in the first two years. But for students, the gains were less clear. An independent report said that EAI students performed no better on tests than their peers in other Baltimore schools. "There are other parts of our school system that did better for our school system than EAI," Kurt Schmoke, the mayor of Baltimore at that time, said. City leaders, caught in a fiscal crisis, pressured the board of education to end the experiment early. In 1995, with one swift vote, the school privatization experiment in Baltimore ended, just three years after it began. In news coverage of the cancellation, Bob Kur of NBC News said, "Had it gone better in Baltimore, this movement to privatize schools could have spread all over the country. This was a crucial test for one of the most controversial experiments in American public education."

Those involved disagreed over what had been learned. Union leader Irene Dandridge: "Their primary job was supposed to be education. And the education part just didn't work. Cleaning the buildings worked. Bringing in supplies worked. Teachers were happy to get them, certainly. But they did not deliver the quality of education that they promised." Superintendent Walter Amprey: "It started the concept of schools making their own decisions about their dollars — and beginning to contract on their own. And we did put in place, through the EAI relationship, a way in which schools could begin to spend their own dollars as opposed to having those dollars spent for them by the central office." EAI

A Nation at Risk?

chairman John Golle: "This is going to be the example that people refer back to and say, 'Private enterprise can't work internally to make the system better; they are not welcome. Private enterprise will have to work externally to make competition prevail and make the whole system better.' In the last two years, there have been a dozen or more companies coming to the forefront, running charter schools all over the nation and proving that very point."

One way that EAI has found to work externally is through a special category of public schools known as charter schools. "Charter schools are a new form of public school," explains Jeanne Allen. "[They are] the same as traditional public schools in that they are open to everyone. They are not private, they don't have admissions criteria. They don't cost money. And oftentimes they are run by teachers, and parents are heavily involved." Charter schools can also be run by private companies; in 1997, EAI signed a contract with the state of Arizona to run a dozen small charter schools. Proponents argue that charter schools offer more flexibility than other public schools, in part because most are accountable directly to the state, rather than to city or school bureaucracies. Seymour Fliegel, who helped to pioneer school choice in East Harlem and is now a leading advocate of school choice, explains, "There is no central board, there is no district office, there is no superintendent, you make a contract that is usually five years, three to five years, you say this is where youngsters will be achievement-wise. If you reach those goals, you get renewed. If you don't, they can close you down."

School: 1980-2000

As schools that must be chosen, rather than assigned, charters compete for students with targeted programs in subjects such as environmental science, learning and manners, and performing arts. Supporters hope that regular schools will be motivated by these schools—and by the potential loss of students—to reform. “Every state should give parents the power to choose the right public school for their children,” said President Bill Clinton in his 1997 State of the Union address. “Their right to choose will foster competition and innovation that can make public schools better.” That year, Congress approved \$80 million to aid in the construction of new charter schools. Four years later, in 2001, there were 2,100 charter schools in the United States, including 173 charter schools run by for-profit companies. There were nearly 91,000 regular public schools.

Like other forms of school choice, charters have sparked significant debate. Chester Finn, a founding partner of Edison Schools, Inc., a private company, says, “Competition is having a salutary effect on schools and school systems as well. We are seeing examples, that are mostly anecdotal so far, of so-called regular schools responding to competition by changing their own offerings, by replenishing their faculty, by getting new textbooks, by getting a new principal or assistant principal. I think it is very important and I think it is probably going to work.” Others, including historian Carl Kaestle, disagree. “I don’t see any special reason, any convincing reason yet to think that competition is going to lead to better schools,” Kaestle says. “Free market is not a perfect mech-

A Nation at Risk?



Principal leading students in the Pledge of Allegiance at the Ryder Elementary Charter School in Miami, Florida, 1999.

anism in the educational business. And I don't think the evidence so far suggests that it is." Historian James Anderson also has doubts. "Efforts at privatization and other kinds of efforts will incorporate a very small fraction of students," he says. "The vast majority of school-age students depend on a system of public education and at this point I don't see an alternative to that. And I don't even see an alternative that is of the same quality."

More than all the free-market reforms of the 1980s and 1990s, the push for high academic standards, as measured by standardized testing, has arguably had the greatest impact on classrooms

School: 1980–2000

206

nationwide. A legacy of the Reagan era, these standards and tests had bipartisan support by the end of the twentieth century. "Every state should adopt high national standards," declared President Clinton in 1997. "Every state should test every fourth-grader in reading and every eighth-grader in math to make sure these standards are met." This push for higher, measurable results has led some schools to adopt new curricula aimed at raising student achievement. Among these is the Core Knowledge curriculum, created by English professor E. D. Hirsch. It offers precisely the same academic content to students in over one thousand schools across the country, from Fort Myers, Florida, to the South Bronx, New York; from San Antonio, Texas, to Macon, Georgia. "There

The chief administrative officer poses in front of Wonderland Charter School in State College, Pennsylvania. The year 2000 marked the school's second year of operation



A Nation at Risk?



is no doubt that there is a core of knowledge and shared culture that the schools have an obligation to provide," Hirsch says, "for reasons not only of commonality and community but also of equity."

At Core Knowledge schools, all first-graders learn about the ancient Egyptians. All second-graders study Asian folktales and Greek myths. By the third grade, they are immersed in ancient Rome. The approach to learning is traditional and teacher-centered. All students are expected to master the same academic content at the same time. Says Georgann Reaves, "We believe that without the knowledge, without the facts, then there is no real education. You can't teach a child how to think unless you have something for him to think about."

Progressive schools, also found nationwide, offer a very different curriculum designed to enhance student achievement as well as critical thinking skills. Based on the ideas of early-twentieth-century educator John Dewey, the progressive model was put into practice in East Harlem, New York, where school choice was pioneered. In a world in which information is constantly changing, progressive schools teach children to master skills, as opposed to a set body of knowledge. "Differences of opinion are encouraged in the school, between children and grownups, between children, between children and adults," says educator Deborah Meier. "And then they are taught how you resolve differences, how to look up answers. How you find out what works and what doesn't work. So it is to create an actual little society of people who are grappling

A Nation at Risk?

209

with difficult ideas together." Debbie Smith, a teacher at Central Park East Secondary School, agrees. "We want to teach them how to be good thinkers. And in order to do that we have to give them the freedom to explore. My job basically is to guide them. I'm a coach, teacher as coach." Students in progressive schools learn by doing, whether writing a geometry textbook for younger students or designing and building a scale model of a house. "Projects drive our curriculum," says Smith. "Whatever the skills that we're teaching them, they always culminate in one large project so they can be proud, take ownership of something that they've done." Both progressive and Core Knowledge curricula have shown positive results in terms of student achievement and test scores.

In January 2001, President George W. Bush said, "Educational excellence for all is a national issue and at this moment is a presidential priority. Children must be tested every year. Every single year. Not just in the third grade or the eighth grade, but in the third, fourth, fifth, sixth, and seventh and eighth grades." Today, in all types of schools across the country, standardized tests and the preparation for them monopolize a growing part of the school year. Test results are posted in local newspapers, and readers know that school budgets and even property values hinge on the results. Yet even as the bar for achievement is being raised, the public education system faces tremendous challenges, from underfunding and overcrowding to school violence. More than two hundred shooting deaths occurred in American schools in the 1990s.

PACING A young woman helps her friend with his mortarboard at their high school graduation.

School: 1980-2000

210

Still, in communities throughout the United States, the vast majority of parents continue to entrust their children to public schools. "I'm not excusing problems, I'm not saying please don't evaluate public education," says journalist Nicholas Lemann. "But I think the honest starting premise has to be that on the whole public education has been a big success in America. We have more people under the roofs of public schools learning than in any of the advanced industrial democracies." In 2001, nearly 90 percent of American children—47.8 million students—were enrolled in public schools. Serving them all, and serving them well, remains an important goal. "The real object that we should be striving for in this country," says Diane Ravitch, "is to have not only a balance between excellence and equity, but a sense of their being connected. That you can't have one without the other."

For more than two hundred years, public schools have helped to make us who we are as Americans. "The public school system has been a place where literally millions of children have been able to attend, to get an education, to be influenced by dedicated teachers, who otherwise would not have had that opportunity," says James Anderson. "And so I have been critical of the development of American common schools, I have been concerned about many of the faults, many of the problems, but when all is said and done I still think that it has been fundamental to American culture. It has been a positive contribution to the development of American culture." Adds David Tyack, "I do not see any way to achieve a good future for our children more effectively than debating to-

School: 1980-2000



gether and working together on how we educate that next generation. Children may be about 20 percent of the population but they are 100 percent of the future." As Thomas Jefferson said, the future of a democracy depends on the education of its people. Today, public education is in urgent need of our support. Will we give all students what they need to succeed, or stand by and see their opportunities limited? That choice will determine the future of our children—and our nation.

A Nation at Risk?

213