

References

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MAKING UP OUR MIND: WHAT SCHOOL CHOICE IS REALLY ABOUT

by Sigal Ben-Porath and Michael Johanek

Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019. 208 pp. \$25.00 (paper).

School choice remains one of the more heated debates in the US education policy landscape. Although not always neatly hewing to standard ideological lines, partisans on both sides remain thoroughly dug into their positions, too often lobbing into the fray the same old arguments, whether or not they seem likely to catch the attention, let alone change the minds, of their ostensible targets.

Given the state of the debate on school choice, *Making Up Our Mind: What School Choice Is Really About* has its work cut out for it. An attempt to reframe the debate over school choice, the book offers nuanced historical and philosophical perspectives to encourage us to ask better, clearer questions about why school choice matters and what we should do about it. Written by philosopher Sigal Ben-Porath and historian Michael Johanek, this slim book makes a convincing case that the question we should be asking isn't whether or not to provide families a choice in schools but, rather, "*how* we will regulate *who* has *which* choices in our mixed market for schooling—and what we want to accomplish as a nation with that mix of choices" (p. 1).

One of this book's key contributions is showing us why our standard way of asking about school choice—Should parents have a choice in where their children are educated?—is neither historically sensible nor normatively appropriate. When we take a historical view of schooling in America, from the colonial period to today, we see that families have always had choices around where to send their children to school. Of course, there are still important regulatory questions about how we should shape the market for schooling, questions that have been approached in different ways in different eras. These questions about how to regulate the mix of school choices available to families, however, are more challenging than simply asking whether or not families ought to have some choice over the schools their children attend.

The standard question is problematic, as it implicitly neglects the fact that education is simultaneously a public, private, and positional good. As Ben-Porath and Johanek explain, education is a private good because it benefits the individual who receives it, but it is also "a public good, helping maintain a productive, well-organized, and democratic society" (p. 11). Education is, moreover, a positional good, as the amount of benefit any individual derives from their education rests in important respects on how much education others have received. Given these complexities, the authors argue that we must

recognize that “personal and public decisions intertwine deeply” when it comes to education (p. 13). Acknowledging this complexity demands making decisions based on education’s public, private, and positional aspects.

In important respects, much of this book is devoted to showing us how to ask these better, tougher questions. The book consists of two primary essays, one on the history of school choice in the United States and one on the challenging normative questions that school choice raises today, sandwiched in between two shorter framing chapters. The longer of the two essays takes a historical view of school choice, surveying how Americans have approached school choice questions across three different eras: the colonial period, the Common School era, and the recent past, from *Brown* to today. The shorter philosophical chapter is organized around three major debates between proponents and detractors of school choice initiatives: the benefits and drawbacks of markets, the tension between innovation and accountability, and the tension between increasing quality education options and increasing segregation in schooling. While the book’s primary audience is likely education policy makers, anyone with an interest in the school choice debate stands to gain from engaging with the perspective these authors offer.

Ultimately, Ben-Porath and Johanek name three key questions they believe educators and citizens have grappled with historically and that we ought to attend to in thinking about school choice today as well (p. 15): Whose education is it? How much innovation do we want, and how much accountability? What role do we seek for our schools in building a more inclusive, equitable, and integrated plural society? In both the historical and philosophical sections, the authors work to show us how these are questions that have and will continue to demand our sustained attention. In the historical section, for instance, Johanek shows how academies—“a broad range of incorporated educational entities”—came to be one of the dominant forms of higher learning during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in large part because they offered a better balance of public accountability and innovation than competing institutional types (p. 30). Typically funded through a mix of tuition and locally raised money, academies were able to maintain sufficient flexibility to adapt to the demands of their predominantly middle-class clientele in a rapidly evolving nation while still “creat[ing] a more stable market for schooling and the communities they served” (p. 33). In the philosophical section, Ben-Porath shows how many current debates about school choice still turn on balancing innovation against citizen accountability. Many arguments for and against charter schools, for instance, hinge on whether or not we believe these schools support innovation through their ability to be flexible and free from bureaucratic interference or undermine democratic accountability through their exemption from many of the regulations governing traditional public schools.

Making Up Our Mind is a fantastic example of why historically informed and philosophically sophisticated work is vital to resolving some of our stickiest

education debates. In paying careful attention to the history of school choice in the US, the book, first, helps us zoom in on those central dilemmas necessarily embedded in designing a school system. As the authors argue, attending to the history of schooling in the US allows us to “decipher the constant versus distinctive elements of our current debate” (p. 10). Second, by paying careful attention to the thorny ethical issues these dilemmas raise, the book helps ensure we make education decisions in ways that realize those values we most care about as citizens.

Especially in light of its interdisciplinary approach, *Making Up Our Mind* presents a compelling argument for how we should think about school choice today. In the historical section, Johanek shows how contemporary school choices “reflect decades of struggles rooted in segregated residential patterns, when local control held fast within suburban boundaries and the collective political will rarely coalesced to level the disparate contexts of individual choices” (p. 80). After largely abandoning efforts to mandate desegregation through the courts, charter schools, voucher programs, and other market-based reforms, including earlier innovations like the magnet school, “promise a consumer nation a neutral arbiter, with schools the place for gritty strivers to flourish” (p. 76). On this longer historical view, as Johanek suggests, many of these innovations come to look like compromises with educational justice at best. In the philosophical section, Ben-Porath weaves together astute normative insight with significant empirical data to undermine many of the central arguments advanced by market advocates. For example, she convincingly argues that claims that choice promotes innovation are deeply flawed. Despite promises of pedagogical innovation, many charter management organizations have grown into “ghost districts”: district-like organizational structures that replicate traditional districts even as they are funded and coordinated by a mix of public and private moneys and rules” (p. 100).

Unfortunately, the authors’ perspective about school choice today tend to get buried, likely due in part to how much ground they attempt to cover in this short book. Especially in the philosophical chapter, it can be somewhat hard to follow each of the successive arguments for and against various school choice initiatives while also keeping track of the key takeaways. To be clear, however, *Making Up Our Mind* isn’t a mere survey of debates around school choice. Rather, Ben-Porath and Johanek press the case that boosters of charter schools and other market-based school reform initiatives overstate their case for the value of their proposed changes. Backed by unprecedented levels of philanthropic and corporate support, education reformers today have pushed market-driven reforms with particular zeal. As the authors note in the concluding section, “Our present era features a particularly strong ideological commitment to idealized market mechanisms, across policy areas” (p. 126). While Ben-Porath and Johanek do not reject out of hand popular reforms like charter schools, they do a lot of work to significantly deflate the positive case made by choice advocates, insisting reformers pay renewed attention to the

public, private, *and* positional aspects of education in debating how we should regulate our market for schooling.

Yet there are moments where additional context would have supported the authors' key claims. For instance, they argue that one of the distinctive features of our present moment is the significant involvement of philanthropic, corporate, and other private interests in shaping education policy, helping ensure that "public policy is shaped outside the public's reach" (p. 126). While they convincingly argue that this development ought to be considered when we think about the meaning and value of school choice, it would have been useful to note the work of the many education historians who have catalogued the significant money, effort, and time philanthropists put into developing an education system for African Americans during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Motivated by a complex mix of duty, racist paternalism, and concern with securing continued access to Southern labor, Northern industrialists like John D. Rockefeller, Andrew Carnegie, and Anson Phelps Stokes played outsized roles in shaping the education options open to African Americans through the first half of the twentieth century (Anderson, 1988; Watkins, 2001). Especially as so many contemporary education reforms primarily affect students of color in urban areas, this comparison would have offered valuable insight.

Making Up Our Mind makes a convincing case that there is significant value in beginning our education policy debates "from an understanding of the *shifting profile of choices* available to different families at a given time" (p. 122). I hope this book is read widely, as I believe it promises to enlighten our debate over school choice. And if we could get our legislators—or even their aides!—to read this book, it could help inform better education policy decisions in the future.

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SUDDENLY DIVERSE: HOW SCHOOL DISTRICTS MANAGE RACE AND INEQUALITY

by Erica O. Turner

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Public schools in the United States are serving students from increasingly diverse racial, socioeconomic, and linguistic backgrounds. According to a 2018 report (de Brey et al., 2019), almost 50 percent of school-aged children