

5/29/92

MEMO

To: Becky Kelso
Ember Reichgott

From: Pete Vanderpoel

I thought you might be interested in the attached rough notes I made of Benno Schmidt on public TV the other night, on theory you might not have seen the interview.

It was terribly clear that MacNeil hasn't thought at all about how "public" doesn't have to mean the conventional definition of public, and that he assumed that if it ain't conventional public, it must be private, elite, and a seeker after vouchers.

Schmidt's answer in the last paragraph of attached was particularly good, I thought -- it was made thoughtfully and from the heart, not as a wisecrack.

cc: Ted Kolderie ✓

Benno C. Schmidt Jr. on MacNeil/Lehrer News Hour, 5/26/92
(Interview is with Robert MacNeil)

(General background is that public education is in trouble in this country, not working as well as should...)

Our public schools are not working despite good people (teachers) in them...the system's structure inhibits innovation. The concentration of power in parts of the public system...in the bureaucracy, means it tends not to be creative, innovative. Will use competition, choice, diversity to introduce fresh thinking, innovation.

The effort will revitalize public education if it works. It is not intended to replace public education. But the current system's bureaucratic and political atmosphere makes risk-taking, innovation impossible. Who is to say that we must start at 5 years of age, schools should be open only 8 to 9 months, 5 days a week? Hopes to introduce innovative technology, teaching methods, ways of involving parents. Will try to provide the system with (a demonstration of) the innovation and fresh thinking that is lacking now.

Schools will **NOT** be private, he insists. Open to all, including those w/learning disabilities. If more applicants than spaces, will choose by lot. Reserve about 20% for scholarship (free ride). They will cost the same as regular public schools (average about \$5,000/year, he says), but do better. Expect to locate them in central cities, suburbs and rural areas. This is definitely not (with emphasis) a program to create another layer of elite schools.

No, this effort will not hurt public education. "Competition serves all our interests." Does anyone seriously argue that presence of Yale somehow hurts U of Michigan, or the California public university system?

The problem is not the people in public education. They're good folks. The problem is a single system. He expects "radical improvement" due to "structural reform" that is just about impossible to accomplish within the present system. Competition and choice provide a stimulus for diversity and experimentation. Focus should be on political as well as educational competition.

Asked if this venture doesn't count on vouchers, Schmidt says absolutely not, parents now are willing to spend lots of \$ on day care, will also be willing to pay the \$5,000-plus needed for education per year/per student.

Asked, with your background and ideals, why don't you focus on improving public education, the public system, he replies: "Well, why didn't the person who created Federal Express go into the Post Office?"