

Sen. Reichgott:

This may be the best article on choice ever written.

It's full of insights, and skillfully ~~tailored to the~~ ^{keyed to the} New York liberal audience.

It's also, of course, a ^{true} real story. ~~About~~ ^{About} charter schools,

Note, though: Those schools in East Harlem became possible only because of the appearance of a new 'sponsor': the (much-maligned) community school district/board, created in the New York reorganization of the late 1960s.

The existing city school district did not do it. And would not have done it. It took a new institution, to be the willing sponsor.

The New York City District, in fact, has been trying to kill the community district system. As Meier suggests toward the end, her schools have only barely survived the last few years.

Great article
on DISTRICT
4 Schools

The Nation

March 4, 1991 \$1.75 U.S./\$2.25 Canada

COCKBURN-
THE BAGHDAD BOMB
See Page 258

EDITORIAL

THE NUCLEAR OPTION

The war is going "right on schedule," military briefers tell us. But lurking behind their bland assurances we sense uneasiness, a feeling that the Iraqi military is not about to crack, an unspoken fear that American ground forces could walk into some terrible calamity—a bloody tank battle, a chemical attack—that would cause great pain and anger at home. These lurking anxieties lend credibility to reports that the Administration is looking seriously at the possibility of nuclear retaliation, which it has never categorically ruled out.

It's unlikely at this point that President Bush would authorize a nuclear offensive to soften up Iraqi defenses—the political fallout would be too great. But it's not so clear that he would not take up the nuclear option in the event of some military disaster. Defense Secretary Dick Cheney hinted as much when he told U.S. troops in Saudi Arabia that if "Saddam Hussein is foolish enough to use weapons of mass destruction, the U.S. response would be absolutely overwhelming and it would be devastating." Given that conventional bombing has already pulverized Iraq, what sort of "devastating" options remain?

Chemical weapons might not have the massive retributive effect sought by Washington. Fuel-air explosives (FAEs) approximate the destructive power of smaller nuclear munitions, but they would not appreciably shorten the war. In the end, Bush may conclude that only nuclear weapons could provide an "absolutely overwhelming" response and hasten Iraq's defeat.

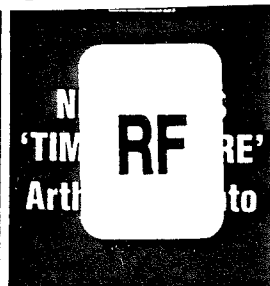
America may well "prevail" in the gulf war without recourse to nukes, but the fact that U.S. leaders are even considering the use of nuclear, chemical or FAEs shows the pathological impact of this war on the national psyche—one that will persist for many years to come.

HOW TO END THE WAR
Charles William Maynes
Peter Weiss
Robert C. Johansen
Richard Falk

BALKAN THRILLER
Slavenka Drakulić

CONFESSIONS OF 'BAGHDAD BETTY'
Margot Kidder

THE SELLING OF SUELVY STEEL



SCHOOLS AND DEMOCRACY

CHOICE CAN SAVE PUBLIC EDUCATION

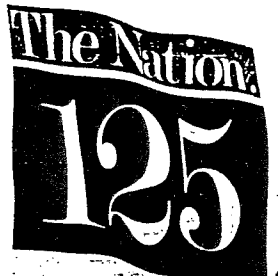
DEBORAH W. MEIER

Before deciding to go down in history as a war President, George Bush called himself our "education President," announcing ambitious goals to make American schoolchildren first in the world by the year 2000. These goals were applauded by politicians, educators and corporate leaders across the political spectrum. America's future itself, they all declared, is at stake, but, unlike the gulf war, they believe this future can be bought cheaply.

The conservatives have the answer: choice. It's a solution, they note, that doesn't require throwing money at schools. And furthermore it's politically correct. The marketplace, they remind us gloatingly, will cure what a socialistic system of schooling has produced: the miseducation of our young. The most articulate and contentious proponents of marketplace choices in education are John Chubb and Terry Moe, whose articles, speeches and book, *Politics, Markets, and America's Schools*, have sparked widespread debate. But this is not merely a battle of words. A number of localities and several states have initiated systems of choice, often using Chubb and Moe's data to support their programs. While Chubb and Moe contend that they favor public education, what they mean is public funding for education. Public institutions are their

enemy. They make no bones about it: Private is good, public is bad. Private equals enterprising, public equals stifling bureaucracy and destructive political influence.

(Cont. on p. 266)



March 4, 1991 NATION



My friend, you would not tell with such high zest
To children ardent for some desperate glory,
The old Lie: Dulce et decorum est
Pro patria mori.

Was it as sad as this in World War II, Mummy? Write soon.
I love you,
Margie

Choice

(Continued From Front Cover)

The original right-wing challenge to public education, vouchers for private schools, went down to a resounding defeat. The newest star on the right, choice, is both a more powerful challenger and a more interesting one. Because progressives are on the defensive, their concern with equity leads them to attack choice reflexively as inherently elitist (naturally, it has few friends among educational bureaucrats either). This is, I believe, a grave mistake. The argument over choice, unlike the one about vouchers, offers progressives an opportunity. After all, it wasn't so long ago that progressive educators were enthusiastically supporting schools of choice, usually called "alternative schools." However, those alternatives were always on the fringe, as though the vast majority were doing just fine, thanks. We now have a chance to make such alternatives the mainstream, not just for avant-garde "misfits" and "nerds" or those most "at risk."

Americans have long supported a dual school system. Whether schools are public or private, the social class of the students was and continues to be the single most significant factor in determining a school's intellectual values and how it works. The higher the student body's socioeconomic status, the meatier the curriculum, the more open-ended the discussion, the less rote and rigid the pedagogy, the more respectful the tone, the more rigorous the expectations, the greater the staff autonomy. Numerous studies have confirmed a simple fact: The primary factor in determining the quality of schools (as well as programs within schools) is not whether they are public or private but who attends them. Changing this is what education reform is all about. What we need is strategies for giving to everyone what the rich have always valued. After all, the rich have had good public schools as well as good private schools. If we use choice to undermine public education, we will increase the duality of our educational system. If we want to use it to undermine the historic duality of our schools, the kind of plan we adopt is more important than choice advocates like Moe and Chubb acknowledge.

When I first entered teaching, and when my own children began their long trek through urban public schools, I too was an unreconstructed advocate of the strictly zoned neighbor-

hood school. I knew all about choice, a favorite tactic of racists escaping desegregation. There were even moments when I wished we could legally outlaw any selective public or private institutions, although I could readily see the risks—not to mention the political impossibility—of doing so. That's no longer the case. My change of heart has personal overtones: I've spent the past sixteen years in a public school district in East Harlem that has pioneered choice, and I have founded a network of small schools of choice in that community: the Central Park East schools. All of District 4's schools are small, largely self-governing and pedagogically innovative. They are schools with a focus, with staffs brought together around common ideas, free to shape a whole set of school parameters in accord with those ideas.

It would have been impossible to carry out this ambitious agenda without choice. Choice was the prerequisite. It was an enabling strategy for a District Superintendent, Anthony Alvarado, who wanted to get rid of the tradition of zoned, factory-style, bureaucratically controlled schools that has long been synonymous with urban public schooling and replace it with a different image of what "public" could mean. The District 4 way was deceptively simple; it required no vast blueprint, just a new mindset. Within ten years, starting in 1974, District 4 totally changed the way 15,000 mostly poor Latino and African-American youngsters got educated without ever pulling the rug out from under either parents or professionals. The words "restructuring" and "reform" were never used—this was, after all, the late 1970s and early 1980s. The Superintendent sidestepped resistance by building a parallel system of choice, until even its opponents found themselves benefiting from it.

To begin with, Alvarado initiated a few model schools open to parental choice, locating them within existing buildings where space was available. He sought schools that would look excitingly different, that would have a loyal, if small, following among families and would have strong professional leadership. Alvarado and his Alternate Schools director, Sy Fliegel, gave such schools extraordinary support in the form of greater flexibility with regard to staffing, use of resources, organization of time, forms of assessment and on-site advice and counseling. Wherever possible, they also ran interference with Central Board of Education bureaucracy. When people in the "regular" schools complained of favoritism, Alvarado and Fliegel assured them that they'd be favorites too if they had some new ideas they wanted to try. Some even accepted the challenge. Each year, more schools were added. They generally started with a few classes and the largest grew to no more than 300 students. Some stayed as small as fifty. Within half a dozen years most of the students in the middle and junior-high grades were attending alternative schools, and each district building housed several autonomous schools.

Schools were no longer equated with buildings. Where there had been twenty-two schools in twenty-two buildings, in less than ten years fifty-one schools occupied twenty buildings (along with two housed in a nearby high school). Only then did the Superintendent announce Stage Two: Henceforth no junior high would serve a specific geographic area. All fami-

choice needed
X
Fliegel

Deborah W. Meier has been working in New York City public schools for the past twenty-three years and is currently principal of Central Park East Secondary School. This article is adapted from her essay in *Independent Schools* in the 1990's, edited by Pearl R. Kane (forthcoming from Jossey-Bass).

ies of incoming seventh graders would have to choose. The district provided sixth-grade parents and teachers with lots of information to assist them in their choice, although probably word-of-mouth was the decisive factor (as it is in private schools). Sixteen neighborhood elementary schools remain intact, with space reserved first for those living within the designated zone, but Alvarado promised that parents were free to shop around if space existed. In addition, the district supported the creation of twenty alternative elementary schools, eight of them bilingual. As a result, the neighborhood elementary schools became both smaller and, in effect, also schools of choice. Alvarado even enticed a former independent elementary school to enter the public sector, leaving intact its parental governing board.

A majority of the new schools were fairly traditional, although more focused in terms of their themes (such as music, science or journalism) and more intimate and family-oriented due to their small size. Size also meant that regardless of the formal structure, all the participants were generally informally involved in decisions about school life. Most of the schools were designed by small groups of teachers tired of compromising what they thought were their most promising ideas. As a result there was a level of energy and esprit, a sense of co-ownership that made these schools stand out. They developed, over time, differences in pedagogy, style of leadership, forms of governance, tone and climate. A few schools (such as the three Central Park East schools) used this opening to try radically different forms of teaching and learning, testing and assessment, school/family collaboration and staff

self-government. In this one small district, noted only a decade earlier as one of the worst in the city, there were by 1984 dozens of schools with considerable citywide reputations and stature, alongside dozens of others that were decidedly more humane, where kids found it hard to fall through the cracks and teachers were enthusiastic about teaching. A few were mediocre or worse; one or two had serious problems. The consensus from the streams of observers who came to see, and those who studied the data, was that the change was real and lasting. What was even more important, however, was that the stage was set for trying out more innovative educational ideas as professionals had the opportunity to be more directly involved in decision making. It was not a cost-free idea, but the added expense was small compared with many other heralded reform efforts; it was less than the cost of one additional teacher for every newly created school.

If this were the best of all possible worlds, the next ten years would have been used to launch Stage Three. The district would have studied what was and was not happening within these fifty-three small schools, examined more closely issues of equity, tracked their graduates over time, studied the families' reasons for making choices and looked for strategies to prod schools into taking on tougher challenges. The Central Board would have worked out ways to legitimize these "wildcat" schools while also encouraging other districts to follow a similar path. Under the leadership of Alvarado's successor, Carlos Medina, District 4 launched Stage Three. But it was not the best of all worlds, and the district found itself on the defensive for reasons that had nothing to do with education in the fifty-three schools. As a result, Medina's efforts to move ahead were thwarted, and new leadership hostile to choice was installed. Today, in 1991, District 4 stands once again at a crossroads, with new sympathetic leadership both within the district and at the Central Board, although badly hobbled by the threat of draconian budget cuts. That the fifty-three schools have survived the past few years in a system that not only never officially acknowledged their existence but often worked to thwart them is a tribute to the loyalty and ingenuity that choice and co-ownership together engender.

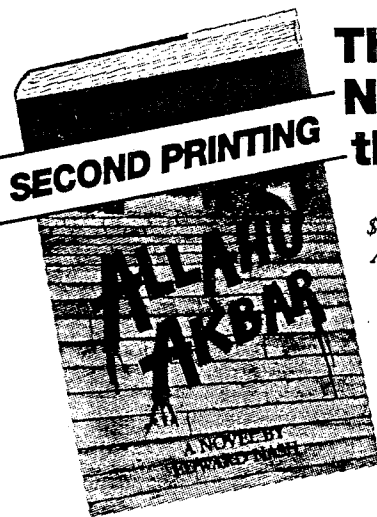
While the District 4 story suggests that choice is fully compatible with public education and an efficient vehicle for setting in motion school reform, it is foolhardy not to acknowledge that in the political climate of the 1990s choice runs the risk of leading to privatization.

However, it's not enough these days to cry out in alarm at the possible demise of public education. If public schools are seen as incapable of responding to the demand for wholesale reform, why should we expect the public to resist privatization? Maybe private schools aren't much better, but if public education has proved so inept at meeting the challenge, if it has had such a poor history of serving equity or excellence, it's easy to see the lure of privatization. Given this history, why not just let the chips fall where they may?

The question is a good one. If we want to preserve public education as the norm for most citizens then we'd better have important and positive reasons for doing so, reasons that are compelling to parents, teachers and the broader voting pub-

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To do so we must make the case that the rationale for improving education goes far beyond the problem employers face in recruiting sufficient numbers of competent and reliable workers or our chagrin at finding the United States at the bottom in test scores for math and science. At least as important is the role education plays as a tool in reviving and maintaining the fabric of our democratic institutions. While public education may be useful as an industrial policy, it is *essential* to healthy public life in a democracy. The two go together, and never has this been clearer than it is today. If we cannot make a convincing case for this, we will see our public schools dismantled in one way or another, either by a misused choice or by erosion and neglect as funds dry up for public education and private schooling becomes the norm for those who can afford to opt out. The status quo plus cosmetic changes won't save public education, at least not in our major urban areas.

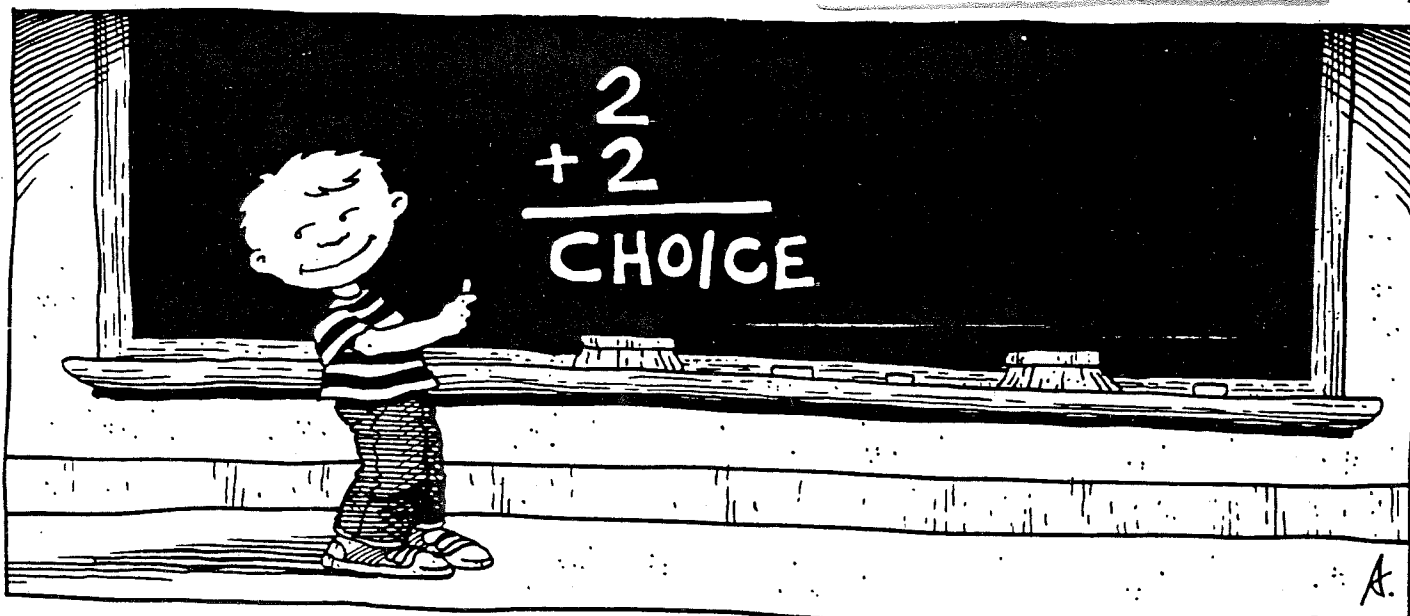
The alternative to privatization is good public education, and choice is an essential tool in the effort to create such education. It is the necessary catalyst for the kind of dramatic restructuring that most agree is needed to produce a far better educated citizenry. Virtually all the major educational task forces, for example, agree that dramatic changes will require removing the stifling regulations that presently keep schools tied to outmoded practices, to doing things in lockstep. They agree that if we want change, we'll have to put up with non-conformity and some messiness. We'll have to allow those most involved (teachers, administrators, parents) to exercise greater on-site power to put their collective wisdom into practice. Once we do all this, however, school X and school Y are going to start doing things differently. How then can we ignore personal "tastes"? Besides, it's a lot easier to undertake difficult innovations successfully if teachers, parents and students are in agreement.

We can't expect the marketplace, public or private, to stimulate this kind of reform magically. Private schools as an example of the market at work aren't very inspiring when it comes to innovation. They may encourage livelier educational practice, but in general they are as convention-bound as public schools. They mostly differ in an invidious way, much

like their public school sisters. There's a hierarchy among them, based mostly on how choosy the school can be about whom it accepts. The fact that the choosiest schools attract higher-status families and select only the most promising students insures their success; replication, by definition, is impossible. Their value lies in their scarcity. This kind of marketplace has led not to innovation but to imitation on a steadily watered-down basis, appealing not so much to different "tastes" but to different means and expectations. The dual system has remained alive and well in the private sector. But if the marketplace is not a magical answer, neither, experience suggests, can we expect that forced change from the top down will work. What results from such bureaucratically mandated change is anger and sabotage on the part of unwilling, unready parents and professionals as well as the manipulation of data by ambitious bureaucrats and timid administrators. The end result: a gradual return to the status quo.

To improve education for all children will require more than one simple cure-all. It requires a set of strategies. For starters, federal, state and local initiatives can stimulate districts to adopt one or another variation of the District 4 story, providing incentives to districts to break up their oversized buildings and redesign them into many small schools, easily accessible for families to choose from. Once we think small, we can even imagine locating new schools in other available public and private spaces, near workplaces as well as residences, in places where young people can interact with adults going about their daily business. While no system of rules and regulations can insure equity, public policy can assure that resources are fairly allocated. It can go further by establishing guidelines that promote appropriate social, ethnic, racial and academic diversity.

We'll also need a better quality of information if we want to promote long-range school change. We'll need a public that is not confused by misleading data or quickly discouraged by the absence of dramatically improved statistics. Who knows today what the definition of a high school dropout is or what "reading on grade level" means? We'll need to place less reliance on standardized high-stakes testing systems. Good lay



EDITORIALS.

(Continued From Page 257)

information will encourage the kind of lively, even contentious, dialogue about the nature and purpose of education that is so badly needed. Choice offers no guaranteed solution to these concerns, but the existence of clear and coherent alternatives encourages such debate.

Similarly, greater school-based autonomy goes well with choice. School-based management itself does not trigger innovation, but it offers a much better audience for such innovation. Empowered faculties and families are better able to hear new ideas and less likely to sabotage them. Innovation no longer appears threatening. School-based management combined with the idea of small schools of choice allows both parents and teachers to embrace new ideas even if they cannot convince all their colleagues or all the school's parents. Furthermore, once we set loose those who are already eager to "restructure," it will be easier to encourage successive waves of innovators and risk takers. While R&D in education can't take place in labs separate from real life, as it can in most industries, no one wants to be a guinea pig. Creating a school different from what any of those who work in the system are familiar with, one that runs counter to the experiences of most families, is possible only if teachers, parents and students have time to agree on changes and a choice on whether or not they want to go along with them.

By using choice judiciously, we can have the virtues of the marketplace without some of its vices.

Since school officials, like parents, are naturally conservative and reluctant to change their habits, we don't need to sign them all up at once. What's needed first is a range of models, examples for teachers and the public to scrutinize and learn from. Credibility will require a critical mass of such schools; at this stage it is hard to know how many. But we can go only as fast and as far as those who bear the burden of change can tolerate. Putting more money into schools does not guarantee success but it can accelerate the pace of change. Of course, taking money out slows down the possibilities for change too.

In short, choice is necessary but not sufficient. There's something galling about the idea that you're stuck in a particular school that's not working for you unless you are rich enough to buy yourself out of it. Still, if it worked for most students, we'd put up with it, but it doesn't. What's not necessary is to buy into the rhetoric that too often surrounds choice: about the rigors of the marketplace, the virtues of private schooling and the inherent mediocrity of public places and public spaces. By using choice judiciously, we can have the virtues of the marketplace without some of its vices, and we can have the virtues of the best private schools without undermining public education.

gained the result of devastating Iraq's military infrastructure, making it highly unlikely that Iraq could mount a serious threat to its neighbors in the near future. The sense of achievement would be reinforced by the remarkably low level of American casualties relative to the scale of the war. By stopping now Bush would also avoid the risks of a ground campaign, including heavy casualties, growing dissent at home and in Europe, likely defections from the coalition and an almost certain hardening of Islamic hearts against all things Western for a long time to come. To go ahead with the war might truly imperil access to gulf oil and generate a tidal wave of fundamentalist militancy, sweeping away existing political arrangements throughout the region. Ironically, the American war machine might in the end achieve what the Ayatollah Khomeini and Saddam Hussein could only dream about.

On Saddam's side this cold logic of peace is equally compelling. Iraq has, in a sense, withstood the incredible air onslaught of the coalition without collapse or surrender. No Arab country has managed this much resistance throughout the entire century. Saddam's voice has been heard by the Arab masses, indeed by the whole Islamic world. But to go on with the war by remaining in Kuwait is suicidal at this stage.

Of course, cold logic is never enough. It must be reinforced and masked by some sort of political process. One can assume that the flurry of recent diplomatic activity by France, Iran, Algeria, the Soviet Union and others is intended to establish this process. Perhaps both leaders are too stiff-necked to heed even their most primitive self-interest, but citizens must act on the assumption that some possibility exists to avoid carrying this already dreadful war to its bitter end.

The easiest way to move forward is for either leader to act unilaterally. Saddam could stop the war simply by withdrawing, Bush by reverting to the sanctions-plus approach. But the mindset of the two leaders creates an almost zero prospect of that happening.

Hence we must assume that if a political process is to materialize, it must have at least the semblance of mutuality. Without doubt Iraq must quit Kuwait, while the United States must remove its forces from the gulf. Further, both leaders will have to endorse a Middle East conference on peace, security and cooperation with an open agenda and a flexible format.

I wish fervently that our best hope did not rest on cold logic. I wish that the horror of war—so manifest these past weeks—could have produced a backlash of revulsion. Or that the suffering of the peoples of Kuwait and Iraq could move the opposing leaders to back off. Or that the U.N. would summon the courage to revoke its mandate to wage unrestricted war. But such compassionate responses will not be forthcoming without a "new world order," not in the form of Bush's geopolitical fantasy but built on the foundation of human rights and shaped by democratic social forces dedicated to the vision of a warless world.