

Pro-Choice, Except for Education

Charles A. Byrne

Charles A. Byrne represents District 11 on the Ohio School Board. This May Mr. Byrne will be joining representatives from twenty-eight countries to arrange an educational conference in Glasgow, Scotland. His address will be entitled "Choice and Civil Rights in the U.S."

America is the land of choice. If one doesn't care for Starbucks coffee, there are a dozen other places only too eager to satisfy your yen for caffeine. If a particular brand of soap suds doesn't suit your needs, you've only to wander down the supermarket aisle to select from among a host of others. It's only in one area, in fact, and a crucial one at that, that consumer choice gets a bad rap: education.

Why? Why does a country which holds the ability to choose in such high esteem not apply that same principle to that most precious area, the preparation of its young minds? Why does a nation drenched in consumer choice as a jealously guarded right suddenly settle for a Stalinist-style planned economy when it comes to education?

Much of the answer lies in the regrettable fact that we've become hostages to our hired hands. Without really intending to, parents and entire communities have lazily delegated to a vast public-school bureaucracy the responsibility for improving schools. The result has been a system that places a higher value on ritual than reading, one that works better for teachers' unions and paper shufflers at district headquarters than it does for the average student. A system where wiring schools for the Internet takes precedence over bedrock items such as securing safety and order in the hallways. And one where, as the nonprofit New Ohio Institute recently found in a survey, as much as forty percent of school budgets in this state were earmarked for items not directly related to classroom instruction.

Even the educational establishment has to concede that there are severe problems. But as public schools frantically search for new models on which to pattern themselves, they seem to be ignoring the simplest models staring them in the face. For decades, America's Catholic schools have gone about the task of cost-effectively educating students with quiet, unflashy competence. And they've done so not by cherry-picking the best and brightest students from the most wealthy homes, but by taking all comers.

A generation ago the Second Vatican Council laid out what would become the moral underpinnings of the church's inner-city schools by emphasizing that poverty must not prevent children from attending the school of their parent's choice. And that has become the fundamental charge of those schools.

If the public school clique seems mostly blinded to the brilliant job those schools are doing at educating kids, it hasn't been lost on others. Even as unlikely

a source as the national business paper *Investors Business Daily* recently took note. In a front-page report headlined “The Magic of Catholic Schools,” the paper pointed out that despite spending far less than their public counterparts, Catholic inner city schools have greater success and send a far higher proportion of graduates to college. And it demolished the canard long advanced by the public-school establishment bent on undermining quality comparisons, that Catholic schools appear more successful only because they can screen out problem students and expel the rest. The paper cites a University of Chicago study that found inner-city Catholic schools cater to families with a greater diversity in race and income level than public school counterparts.

With Ohio’s public educational system now under court scrutiny in the DeRolph case, the state has an historic opportunity to satisfy the courts while also establishing a school-funding mechanism unique in America. Should the state elect to simply hand over to parents the monies it spends on education—anywhere from \$4,000-\$5,000 per child—so that they can make their best judgment on where it would be best invested, most families would still keep their children in publicly funded schools. But additional alternative schools would spring up to meet the new demand.

In the original DeRolph decision, Judge Linton Lewis said schools in Ohio must operate in a manner that’s “thorough and efficient.” What could possibly be more thorough and efficient than giving maximum choice to parents? All of us who care about our children’s education must stop delegating to this arrogant, entrenched elite the most basic task of society, educating our young. It’s time to give choice a chance. Ω