

Redefining “Public” Education: Charter Schools, Common Schools, and the Rhetoric of Reform

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Virtually every definition of charter schools asserts that they are a form of public schooling. This article poses the question: In what way? Charter school advocates, observers, and opponents all note that the schools are publicly funded, are open to all, and are chartered by public entities. This analysis pursues the question by comparing the rhetoric regarding the definition of public education employed by charter school reformers in one state, Michigan, with that of the common school reformers of the 19th century, particularly Horace Mann. The analysis finds conflicting definitions of what constitutes public schooling. Although both reforms support tax-funded schools and open access, the common school reformers emphasized political-democratic forms of control. Charter school advocates actively challenge such control, and elevate market mechanisms of consumer choice and competition between providers as the primary means of authority. To advance such a program, proponents of charter schools explicitly seek to “redefine” popular conceptions of what constitutes public and private education. In doing so, they frame education principally as a consumer good, and, this article theorizes, effect a privatization of the purpose of public education that contrasts with the common school reformers’ stated concern for democracy and the public good.

Charter schools are redefining public education in the United States. As a widely popular reform movement, charter schools focus on student achievement and curricular innovation as driven by the choices of parents, rather than the directives of bureaucratic governance. Frustrated with the “one-size-fits-all” model of traditional public schools, charter school proponents and parents place their hope in the ability of autonomous schools to provide an array of options for children and to offer some competition for moribund district schools. In doing so, they insist that—as opposed to vouchers, for example—charter schools operate within the public education system, since they are, in the end, public schools. Therefore, according to their supporters, they are not a form of privatization.

Indeed, virtually every description of these schools either asserts or assumes that charter schools are “public” schools. For example, researchers at the

Hudson Institute see charter schools as "a new breed of public school" (Manno, Finn, Bierlein, & Vanourek, 1998a). Ted Kolderie, one of their earliest proponents, contends that the "idea offers a way to broaden quality choice within public education" (quoted in North Central Regional Educational Laboratory, 1993; see also Kolderie, 1990; Peterson, 1997; Rofes, 1998).

Many observers view charter schools as an integral part of an effort to redefine or reinvent public education (e.g., Hill, Pierce, & Guthrie, 1997). The prolific Hudson team concludes that they are "creating a new kind of American public school" (Manno, Finn, Bierlein, & Vanourek, 1998b; see also Finn, Manno, Bierlein, & Vanourek, 1997; Manno, 1997). They write,

They are effectively rewriting our hoary definition of a "public" school: Instead of "a school run by the government, today's public school can be run by a committee of parents, a team of teachers, a local Girls and Boys Club or community college, even a for-profit company. What makes it "public" is who can attend it, how it's financed, and how it's held accountable for results, not whom it employs or how many assistant superintendents order it around. (Finn & Gau, 1998, p. 86; see also, Kolderie, 1990; Nathan, 1997; Peterson, 1998)

And in addition to reinvigorating public education, these advocates also note that the reform sustains the public system by preempting efforts to privatize public schooling (e.g., Hill, 1994). Kolderie, for instance, argues that charter schools provide "a middle way between traditional public education and the 'choice' proposals that use vouchers for private education" (quoted in NCREL, 1993). Yet, as is noted below, other education reformers have come to different conclusions regarding the "public" aspect of public education. Indeed, the persistence of charter school advocates in asserting the "public" nature of the endeavor highlights the changing understanding of "public" education, and points to the often neglected question of what it means to be a "public" school.

Then what is the definition of public education? This article examines two prominent answers to that question and finds in them serious implications for the organization and governance of schooling in a democratic society. It considers the redefinition of the "public" aspect of public education by contrasting the conceptions of public schooling embedded in the rhetoric of current charter school reform advocates with that of the common school reformers who systematized mass education in the United States. This exercise is not concerned primarily with the specifics of proposals or policies but instead examines the construction of the public aspect of education in these two cases. The contrast identifies competing understandings of democracy, and the role of education in sustaining it. The concluding discussion explores the incongruence between the two

constructions in the context of education in a democratic society. I contend that this redefinition encourages a pattern of privatization of the purpose of public education away from one of a public good to that of a private good.

PUBLIC GOODS, PRIVATE GOODS, AND CHARTER SCHOOLS

The charter school movement is a national phenomenon. National political leaders endorse the idea as a grassroots reform effort, and nurture it through federal funds. Likewise, major think tanks express significant support for the endeavor. The majority of states now embrace charter schools as a reform effort. Although this state-level prerogative in establishing charter schools means that they will vary from state to state, there are still several common aspects that characterize these schools across political boundaries. In general, charter schools are publicly funded, but are freed from many of the bureaucratic regulations with which traditional public schools have to contend. Usually, they operate independently of a locally elected school board and are designed instead to be more directly accountable to the families that they serve.

Still, despite these commonalities, charter schools tend to differ across states depending on the legislation that establishes them. Some states maintain more of the regulatory apparatus for these schools—limiting the agencies that have the authority to grant a charter; restricting the types of organizations that can receive a charter; capping the number of charter schools; and constraining school autonomy in decision making, such as requiring charter schools to hire certified (and unionized) teachers, for instance (see, e.g., Center for Education Reform, 2000).

THE CONTEXT IN ONE STATE

In order to understand the role of charter schools in public education, this analysis looks at the rhetoric from charter school advocates regarding their conceptions of public schooling. This analysis focuses on just one state—a state that both typifies and epitomizes the charter school movement for many of its supporters. For much of the 1990s, Michigan's state board of education actively pushed market-oriented proposals as the necessary remedy for "government monopoly schools." The centerpiece of those efforts is a statewide school choice system driven by interdistrict choice and "Public School Academies"—charter schools (Arsen, Plank, & Sykes, 1999). In the eyes of prominent choice advocates and observers both in and outside Michigan, such efforts make the state one of the leading sites in the United States in terms of "significant development of autonomous charter schools"

(Center for Education Reform, 1999, 2000; see also Bulkley, 1999; Nathan, 1997; Toch, 1998).

This section examines charter school reformers' conceptions of public education by analyzing the public rhetoric of a few of the primary groups who have played key roles in promoting this reform in Michigan. Certainly, one could criticize this focus on public rhetoric because of the possibility that the public statements of prominent figures do not necessarily match their personal values or agendas, much less the reality of the programs eventually implemented. However, this is an appropriate focus in this case for two reasons. First, public rhetoric suggests visions of reality and possibility, both for the speakers and their intended audiences. Although we can only guess at intentions behind public rhetoric, that rhetoric, in fact, in itself serves to advance agendas regarding how things ought to be. Secondly, the focus on public figures—as opposed to broader indicators of popular calls for such reform—is pertinent here because there has not been overwhelming and widespread grassroots support leading to the implementation of choice programs in Michigan. As with many choice programs in other states, policy makers, and not voters, legislated Michigan's charter and choice plans. In fact, Michigan mirrors much of the rest of the nation in that the general population has been largely apathetic or ambivalent, at best, and rather unfamiliar with this issue (Farkas, Johnson, Foleno, Duffett, & Foley, 1999). Residents consistently express satisfaction with their local schools, with the notable exception of communities trapped in underfunded urban districts with high concentrations of poverty (and it is not clear that their dissatisfaction is with governance, as opposed to funding levels, for instance; Daubenmier, 1995; Public Sector Consultants, 1997, 1999; see also Berliner & Biddle, 1995; Rose & Gallup, 1999). The successful calls for reform have come instead from policy elites and from segments of the business community (DeWeese, 1994).

Furthermore, the Michigan Constitution has one of the strictest clauses of all state constitutions on the prohibition of using public money for private religious schooling (Overton, 1997; Reed, 1996). Michigan's current (1963) constitution notes that the "legislature shall maintain and support a system of free public elementary and secondary schools. . . . Every school district shall provide for the education of its pupils" (State of Michigan, 1963, Art. 8, Sec. 2). Yet it goes on to distinguish that

No public monies or property shall be appropriated or paid or any public credit utilized, by the legislature or any other political subdivision or agency of the state directly or indirectly to aid or maintain any private, denominational or other nonpublic, pre-elementary, elementary, or secondary school.

Choice advocates have failed several times to get voter approval for proposals to use public funding for private schools. Indeed, since some charter proponents in Michigan view these schools as a stepping stone to a market-oriented voucher system, they hope to establish charter schools as “public” schools “in the public’s mind,” as a precursor to pure market reform: “The significance of the charter school reform cannot be overemphasized in terms of helping to prepare the public for broader educational reform” (DeWeese, 1994, p. 32). Therefore, this analysis studies the ideas of the primary groups that championed charter schools in Michigan in order to understand the evolving conception of the “public” aspect of education.

Several powerful policy groups introduced charter schools as a part of Michigan’s system of public education. Along with the Mackinaw Center for Public Policy—an influential think tank that promotes privatization across a number of issues, particularly education—some prominent individuals such as the Governor and several key legislators embraced these schools as a necessary measure in bringing choice and competition to the public monopoly on education. Two organizations were particularly instrumental in advancing charter schools in Michigan:

- TEACH Michigan, an advocacy group founded by voucher activist and current state representative Paul DeWeese, M.D., played a primary role in authoring and financing the legislation that established charter schools (Morken & Formicola, 1999). It also established the Michigan Center for Charter Schools to provide the support and resources to nurture new schools and to help pre-existing private schools become chartered. TEACH Michigan cooperates with the Mackinaw Center, the Edison Schools Corporation, and the growing charter school management industry (e.g., DeWeese, 1991, 1996c; Reed & Hutchison, 1991). The group publishes op-ed columns in local and regional state newspapers and business publications in support of choice and charters (e.g., DeWeese, 1993, 1995, 1996a, 1996b, 1996c; Lange, 1996).
- Michigan’s State Board of Education was also pivotal in advocating drastic and immediate school reform, primarily through the mechanisms of choice, competition, and charters. Specifically, W. Clark Durant, III, the president of the board at the time the charter school legislation was passed and implemented, took a publicly combative stance in attacking the education “establishment” and espousing “revolution.” Appointed by the governor after several failed runs for elected office, Durant is noted for his incendiary rhetoric: “We’re not at 1776 yet. It’s more like we’re at 1774” (quoted in Andrejevic, 1995, p. 1A). Durant—who is on the Board of Directors of the market-oriented Education Leaders Council—has sought intellectual support for his ideas from

members of the academic community, especially scholars affiliated with the Mackinaw Center (e.g., Allen, 1996).

Initially, members of these organizations sought to build public support for their measures around choice. In criticizing district schools, they characterized them as part of a rigid government-run system that was in a state of crisis because its monopoly status shields it from competition (DeWeese, 1991, 1994; Durant, 1996, 1997; Education Leaders Council, 1995; Hetzler, 1997; Hornbeck, 1995; McGriff, 1996b; Taylor, 1996, 1997; TEACH Michigan, 1996a, 1996b). Although the patterns in the rhetoric around these issues are interesting, this analysis focuses on another element in the discourse—these organizations' efforts to reconfigure conceptions of public education. Members of these groups launched an explicit effort to redefine the terms of the debate around school choice. A closer look at their endeavor illuminates the conceptions of democratic institutions in the public discourse on charter schools in Michigan.

REALIGNING THE PUBLIC ASPECT OF PUBLIC SCHOOLING

When framing the problem of a "crisis" in education due to the government monopoly, school choice advocates propose market mechanisms of parent choice and competition between a broad array of schools as the solution. Yet they run into the obstacle of popular conceptions of a barrier between public and private forms of education.¹ According to choice advocates, people erroneously understand public education almost exclusively in terms of funding, access, and provision (e.g., DeWeese, 1993, 1994; Durant, 1997). Essentially, if an educational institution is controlled or operated by the government, then it can receive public funding as a public entity. But TEACH Michigan and prominent members of Michigan's State Board of Education explicitly attempt to realign popular thinking about the common conceptions of "public" schooling, since they see the common definition as too narrow. For example, former Detroit Superintendent and current Edison vice-president Deborah McGriff (1996b) contends that a "redefined paradigm" is the key to a sea change in educational provision. Similarly, Durant's Education Leaders Council (1995) is "committed to changing the terms of the education debate in this nation." DeWeese (1994), in particular, is very clear on this agenda: "It is difficult to convince the public to fundamentally change the only educational system they have come to know. . . . [O]ur citizens have come to a distorted view of the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution" (p. 31). Thus, DeWeese continually refers to schools with traditional district arrangements as "government schools," whereas all others—regardless of funding sources, access, or governance—are "independent schools," not private schools.

Since choice advocates see the popular concern about a “wall of separation” between public and private schools as the primary obstacle to radical reform, they hope to “blur” that boundary. DeWeese (1994) is explicit on this strategy: “Charter schools can be privately initiated and sponsored, even though they must become public schools. This is critical in that it helps to substantiate the claim that independently sponsored schools can serve the public well” (p. 33). Thus, charter schools can play a key role in redefining what “public” education is because they

blur the distinction between “religious” and “secular” public education . . . in the public’s mind. . . . The importance of eliminating the distinction cannot be overemphasized because the opponents of reform have successfully argued that private schools should not receive public funds. . . . [P]roponents of reform [seek] to create a new public education code that will allow for no prior distinction between government schools and independent schools. The importance of eliminating the distinction cannot be overemphasized. (p. 34)

To that end, DeWeese seeks to “establish an entirely new conception of public education. This would lead to a foundational paradigm shift in the broader public understanding of public education” (p. 35).

New Conceptions of “Public” Education

So, if we accept that the old definition of the “public” aspect of education is obsolete, then what will the new definition look like? Before answering that, it is helpful to recall Schattschneider’s axiom: “The definition of the alternatives is the supreme instrument of power” (quoted in Kingdon, 1984, p. 2). In the Michigan case, influential policy elites are in a position to frame the problem in education as one of a government monopoly, and to locate the solution in the redefinition of “public” education—thereby limiting other possible alternatives. Bureaucracy is the problem, in this line of neoliberal reasoning, and bureaucracy is the result of political processes; therefore, the only alternative is to depoliticize the system, according to public choice theorists (e.g., Chubb & Moe, 1990). Thus, charter advocates cast their reforms as apolitical. They often understand their efforts as a reaction to what they perceive to be an overly politicized education system—one too susceptible to political control in its monopoly status. Despite the “radical” nature they assign to the changes they propose, these policy makers do not present the reforms as *political* or institutional changes. Instead, they frame their agenda as an organic evolution away from an artificial, centrally planned system to one based on the inherent preferences of parents (as consumers). Consequently, this system will be one where the schools that most efficiently and effectively meet that consumer demand

will survive naturally, without artificial political support (DeWeese, 1996a). The older school governance system is, according to Durant (1997), a "politicized education system" that needs to be "de-politicized"—i.e., marketized (p. 362). Therefore, by initiating the reform effort, charter school advocates set the terms of the debate on issues of efficacy, funding, accountability, inclusion, and parental choice. Indeed, in defining what is meant by "public education," the few politically viable policy alternatives around this issue have implications for the very purposes of education in the United States.

As reformers portray the problem and establish the solution, we can see the outlines of their vision of the new public education. Not surprisingly, they expand the definition beyond the existing tenets of funding, access, and provision—substantially in opposition to "the government education monopoly" that they identify as the problem. McGriff (1996b) quotes Chester Finn at length in outlining her vision of the new public school:

What would this new definition of public education look like? Redefining public education recognizes . . . "A public school . . . need not be managed by a government agency, staffed by government employees, and regulated by a government bureaucracy. Rather, it is only necessary for the school to be open to the public, paid for by the public, and accountable to a duly constituted public authority for its results."

Thus, McGriff sees a school as being "public" in terms of access, funding, and some unspecified form of accountability. Durant (1997) suggests that a "public school should be a school *the public chooses to have*. Universal access should mean *universal opportunities and choices*" (p. 362, emphases in original). The State Board of Education (1995b) claims that "schools should be defined by mission." This necessitates expanding the common definition of a public school or district to encompass entities that exhibit the "primary mission of providing teaching for learning academic skills and knowledge"—including any "public organization, corporation, or agency." In "redefining" public education, the Board recommended to the Legislature and Governor business-style "reform concepts" that "treat parents and students as customers" (Michigan State Board of Education, 1995a). Writing for the Board, Allen (1996) suggests a much clearer, yet utilitarian, conception: "Public education may be defined instrumentally as the provision for well nigh universal literacy and numeracy." So the new definition asserts that the "public" aspect is in funding, access, and accountability for academic outcomes, rather than processes or institutions (e.g., Reed, 1996).

This functional definition represents the essential conception of the reconfigured "public" education for these charter school advocates. Market-oriented reformers define public education not primarily by common values, nor by public governance, nor by equality of access and opportunity,

nor by adherence to democratic due process, nor as a guarantor of the public or “common” good. Although these may be laudable goals, they are not effectively pursued by direct democratic/governmental control, according to this line of reasoning (e.g., Chubb & Moe, 1990). Instead, these proponents see public education in terms of the instrumentality of its academic mission. So how would this definition look in practice? Durant (1997) is both descriptive and prescriptive on this question:

Let’s have public corporations for a new kind of public education. Let’s allow educational entrepreneurs to raise capital in the public markets. . . . Banks and financial service companies might start a school of business and finance. Automobile makers and their suppliers might start a school for engineers and other related professions. Our houses of faith can create and/or expand existing schools. (pp. 363–64)

In this scenario, “public” schools could include charter schools, as well as other independent schools supported by vouchers, for example. Since the focus has shifted from control to clientele, “public” no longer refers to the broader community of taxpayers, much less citizens. Instead, Durant defines the “public” as those immediately owning or consuming a good or service. Schools are “public” just as a restaurant is a public accommodation for its customers or a corporation can “go public” by selling stock on the market. For Durant, private ownership for the “consumer” and “producer” is the key to implementing this vision of a redefined public education:

Some may try to sidestep this and say that the taxpayers are the owners of the local public education system. They are not the *owners*. They are the *payers*. Keep in mind, however that collective ownership really means no ownership at all. . . . It is crucial that people purchase public education directly, when and for only as long as they or their children need it. . . . What is crucial for the success of any of these public education enterprises? Freedom, true ownership, and personal responsibility. (pp. 363–64, emphases in original)

Although choice advocates often employ the term “government schools” in reference to the public monopoly on education, it must be noted that this use of the term also expands the definition of “public” schooling. Many charter school advocates criticize the exclusive government franchise, and many also claim to be supporters of “public” education but in a different sense (e.g., Michigan State Board of Education, 1995c). For example, when McGriff (1996b) writes of “government-run schools,” she is not simply implying that public schooling is an inferior form of education but exploding the definition of public schools, where government-run schools are only one type among many. Her for-profit “business-run” charter schools also find room within the enlarged definition of “public” education (McGriff, 1996a).

Indeed, in legal terms, "charter schools" in Michigan are "Public School Academies"—a politically brilliant label with historical connotations (as discussed below).

Finally, this new definition of public education relies on a reconfiguration of the values of equality and equal opportunity. Certainly, charter school advocates in this case demonstrate a definite concern for extending school choices to all children (e.g., DeWeese, 1994; Michigan State Board of Education, 1995b)—indeed, many portray school choice as a civil rights issue. But, while trying to realign the age-old philosophical tension between freedom and equality, policy makers operate in a context fraught with racial and socioeconomic considerations. In fact, the legislation that advanced choice in Michigan also substantially reformed the funding structures for school finance. On the issue of moving the burden for school funding from locally collected property taxes to a state sales tax, policy makers debated the implications for racial and economic equity. Conflicting factions all noted the inability of economically polarized communities to equitably fund local schools. However, the rhetoric around charter schools has endowed "equity" with a new meaning. Thus, when DeWeese (1994) writes of an "equitable system of educational freedom," he is not referring to a concern for equality of outcomes, nor an equal opportunity to learn. Instead, his vision "is to bring about a system of public education in Michigan, whereby public resources are equitably *invested*. . . . so that every child in Michigan may have *access* to publicly accountable schools that are freely chosen by the parents" (p. 29, my emphases). Essentially, the focus on equal inputs and access means equal educational opportunity for parents all the way up to the schoolhouse door, deemphasizing concern for equal outcomes. Likewise, when McGriff (1996b) observes that "low-income parents deserve choice too," it is within the context of low-income families relegated to living in communities that others have chosen to leave—and leave underfunded. The new definition of public education advanced by charter school proponents changes the demand for equity from one of resources intended to provide equal educational opportunities or outcomes to one that permits families the equal opportunity to seek access to the more desirable schools.

In summary, then, Michigan charter school proponents see and consistently portray traditional public education as a business—one that has fallen into crisis by being immersed in politics through its existence as a monopoly. Without ownership and competition, they assert that there can be no improvement. These reformers transfer public schooling squarely into the logic of market theory. The definition of "public" is no longer tied only to funding, access, and direct governance. Instead, these reformers explicitly reconfigure the "public" aspect of education in terms of access, funding, public choice, and mission or academic function—to include institutions traditionally held to be private enterprises.

So, with animosity toward the provision of state schooling as it had been administered and an agenda of radical reform, charter school proponents in Michigan represent an important part of the wider charter school and school choice movement. The values of democracy embedded in their rhetoric suggest that the Michigan proponents of charter schools have a definite perspective on the political economy of school choice. They place a high priority on private (as opposed to community) ownership of both the means of provision and of the benefits of schooling. The primary control of mass schooling should be entrusted to the individualized demands of consumers. The fact that public education is to be treated as a private good highlights the view that education is not effectively provided in a system that does not rely on the market mechanisms of consumer choice and competition between providers. The apolitical claims of charter school advocates and their recognition of the need for a redefinition of terms and concepts point to their aversion to monopolistic forms of provision seen in political bureaucracies and highlight their position that markets are a superior form of organization for distributing mass education to the “public”—which is identified as the immediate consumers.

PUBLIC GOODS, PRIVATE GOODS, AND THE COMMON SCHOOL REFORMS

Article X, Section 3 of the original constitution of the State of Michigan (1835) declares that “The legislature shall provide for a system of Common Schools, by which a school shall be kept up and supported in each school district. . . .” Subsequent versions re-worded this requirement so that districts had to “maintain” and “support” primary schools (State of Michigan, 1850, 1908). But what does it mean to “maintain” a school? Did the framers intend that a district administer schools? Or could a district use tax money to pay a denominational or private academy to educate the local youth? Would such a school meet their understanding of a “common school”? Could a charter school?

While Michigan was emerging from its status as a frontier territory, common school advocates in the northeastern states were asserting their answers to these very questions. In the previous generation, Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Rush, and other early leaders argued that the government needed to organize and maintain a state school system for the general diffusion of knowledge so that the republican experiment would survive (Butterfield, 1951; Jefferson, 1946, 1950, 1995); however, their plans never advanced beyond the proposal stage. Instead, it was the founders of the system of what we have come to know as public schooling who institutionalized this connection. And, just as current charter school proponents in Michigan now see themselves as the prototype for reformers elsewhere

(DeWeese, 1994), the common school reforms of the Northeast became the model on which many other states would—for better or worse—base their own systems of public education. So, whereas charter school reformers seek to redefine public education, the common school reformers of the 1830s and 1840s essentially established the definition of public education that many current reformers criticize. But, as is demonstrated below, the common school reformers themselves had to redefine public education away from earlier conceptions that predated their own reforms—not unlike the task for current charter school advocates.

Of course, it must be noted that most of what has been handed down as the legacy of the common school reformers is an idealization, one whose implementation and actual practices are significantly divorced from the lofty rhetoric that launched and advanced the common school movement. However, the public positions that policymakers advocate—whether for common schools or charter schools—speak to their vision of reality or, at least, their hope for influencing the public's vision of what that reality should look like. Furthermore, despite the differences in circumstances, we observe both reform movements within the wider context of a market democracy. Indeed, on closer examination, it is important to note how many of the most substantial issues and concerns of the day are common to both contexts—socioeconomic polarization, immigration, socioethnic fragmentation, rapid economic transformation, and elevation of the market to a more prominent position in society. In fact, both reforms in education demonstrate a direct relationship with what Hogan (1992, p. 182) terms the “market revolution” in the society of their respective times.

PLACING THE COMMON SCHOOL REFORMS IN CONTEXT

The common school reforms emerged in the 19th century to become the predominant model for organizing public education in America, but they were not without controversy or criticism. Indeed, they provoked conflicts between different segments of American society in the 19th century and between historians in the 20th. Many have noted, for example, the political battles between Jacksonian Democrats and the Whigs over the role of government in expanding education; the controversies in Boston over religion and corporal discipline in the schools; or the instances of local resistance to centralized state mandates in schooling. Likewise, the historiography of the common schools presents us with contradictions and complexities that make generalizations difficult. Some historians portray the rise of a system of mass education characterized by an absence of class conflict and a general allegiance to “public” schooling that cut across social and economic barriers (see, e.g., Kaestle, 1983; Katznelson & Weir, 1985). Others describe the evolution of a system of common schooling that functioned to socialize an

emerging working class into the industrial economy—imparting values of hard work, deference to authority, respect for private property, and acceptance of one's place in the hierarchical social order (see, e.g., Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Church & Sedlak, 1976; Katz, 1968). Finally, in addition to the motives and impact of the reformers, historians disagree over the distance between the rhetoric and reality of the common schools, the priority given to competing purposes for education, and the definition of “education” itself (Kaestle & Vinovskis, 1980; Labaree, 1988; Osgood, 1997).

Certainly, aspects of the common school reforms—including centralization and standardization, bureaucratic oversight, compulsory attendance, assimilation, republicanism, and a common curriculum, for instance—were and are open to criticism on many fronts. Most notably, the reformers imposed a view of education that reflected their Whiggish, Protestant, and nascent capitalist perspective (Kaestle, 1983). They argued that centrifugal forces could be tamed by bringing diverse elements of society together in a common educational experience, but such policies had the effect of delegitimizing minorities and dissenters—provoking reaction from Roman Catholics and others at the time (Glenn, 1988; Jorgenson, 1987; Labaree, 1988). Minority groups can still make the very valid claim that the legacy of this aspect of common schooling, when translated into curricular decisions and classroom practice, robs people of distinctive cultural heritage and is a tool for social hegemony by dominant groups—superimposing one version of being “American” over another (e.g., Chavis, 1994; Hones, 1997).

Although these criticisms of the common schools are important, they are largely beside the point for this analysis. What is important here is the common school reformers' relevant views on the “public” aspect of public education and particularly their success, for better or for worse, in co-opting the “public” label for their agenda. This was largely a rhetorical feat—one which the reformers accomplished in public speeches and political maneuvering. So that is where this article turns its attention. In view of the leading role of Massachusetts in these reforms, I focus primarily on the rhetoric of Horace Mann. He was prolific in his work, and his influential annual reports and speeches are still widely available. Massachusetts epitomizes the common school reforms in standardizing mass education and intensifying public control, which typified the wider common school movement (Kaestle & Vinovskis, 1980). But to understand the record of these reformers in appropriating the “public school” label, we must first understand something of the circumstances that preceded and precipitated their reforms, since—like the charter school reformers today—they saw themselves reacting largely to a untenable status quo in education.

Common school reformers came to prominence during a time of rapid and drastic socioeconomic transformation. Old patterns of social interaction, authority, and control were quickly becoming obsolete and replaced

in the face of emerging industrialization, urbanization, westward expansion, accelerated immigration, ethnic diversification, and socioeconomic polarization (see, for example, Johnson, 1978). In that context, reformers such as Mann both expressed and capitalized on the concern that the democratic experiment would degenerate into chaos—that liberty was coming to mean license. With deadly riots and other social disturbances appearing to be on the increase in the mid-1830s, Mann noted that democracy freed “the powers of doing evil as much as the powers of doing good” and cautioned against mobocracy: “if the ignorant and vicious get possession of the apparatus, the intelligent and the virtuous must take such shocks as the stupid or profligate experimenters may choose to administer” (quoted in Sellers, 1991, pp. 367–68). Yet, although education could preserve order by causing students to internalize certain values, it could also rein in the emerging individualism that was replacing the rejected feudal aristocracy with a new economic caste system. In that, reformers held to the belief first espoused by some of the nation’s founders, that the survival of the Republic depended upon the mass diffusion of education—indeed, it represented for some the very means for the completion of the Revolution itself (e.g., Benjamin Rush, see Butterfield, 1951).

However, the colonies and the early United States already had a relatively educated—if not always “schooled”—population, judging by literacy rates and other indicators (Kaestle, 1973, 1983; West, 1996). Particularly for White male citizens, early American education was rather widespread, often through traditions and practices outside of the formal institutions of schooling, including families, churches, apprenticeships, and so forth (Church & Sedlak, 1976; Cremin, 1970). Still, a substantial portion of school-age children did receive some formal schooling. So, by no means did the common school reformers “invent” popular education. Furthermore, there were already “public” schools before the common school reforms.

The Common School Reforms and “Public” Education

Within the milieu of academies, charity schools, tax-supported free schools, independent pay schools, tutoring, dame schools, church schools, elite boarding schools, town, district, and ward schools available at the time, there were schools that considered themselves—and were widely seen as—“public” schools (Kaestle, 1973). Indeed, this diversity of provision within what was essentially an open market may approximate the multiple options that current choice advocates seek (Kaestle, 1983). In the period leading up to the common school reforms, citizens perceived a much less definite distinction between “public” and “private” spheres, and the concept of a “public school” held a less distinct and somewhat different meaning than it has in recent times (Bailyn, 1960). In the late 18th and early 19th centuries,

education could be “public” if it was held in a relatively public setting—such as a school, as opposed to a private home (Kaestle, 1973; Katz, 1987). Likewise, education might also be “public” if it was directed towards preparing students for public service. Kaestle (1973, pp. 16–17) suggests that these connotations—which still survive in elite English public schooling—can be traced back at least to 16th century England, as one observer championed “common schooles” in contrasting “private & publicke education.” In late colonial New York City, citizens understood “public” education in terms of setting, but also in the sense that such education was tied to the public good—at least through the public-minded education of the sons of the elite, according to Kaestle. Thus, although the “public” aspect of education was defined by setting and mission or orientation at the time of the Revolution, it gradually came to be understood more in terms of broader access, as advocates of charity schooling and free schooling sought to serve—or instill “appropriate” morals in—the poorer segments of society. Although government authorities often granted such schools funds in view of the benefits they provided to the broader society, it was not because of the funding that they were sometimes labeled “public schools” but because of the service they provided (Katz, 1987).

In the early decades of the 19th century, the common school reformers began to promote a conception of “public education” based on public financing and direct public or political control (e.g., Carter, 1826). They advanced that definition largely by ordaining the traditional district schools—the locally supported (if not always maintained) schools in New England. Moreover, charitable and social reformist organizations gradually expanded their operations, consolidated urban schooling under their purview, and increasingly monopolized the public money available for education. The Free School Society in New York City, for instance, reanointed itself as the “Public School Society” in 1825. But, although it soon gained a monopoly on public funding for education, it still relied on additional private financial support and was organized under a nonelected, self-perpetuating board until the 1850s. Thus, the common school reformers slowly but surely asserted their version of “public” education not only in to the rhetoric around school reform but also through legislation that directed public funding to schools accountable to emerging bureaucracies (Katz, 1971; Tyack, James, & Benavot, 1987). Between the mid-1820s and the mid-1830s, these reformers increasingly referred to their model of schooling as “public.” By about 1840, in urban areas at least, the term “public schooling” was widely understood to mean schools that were publicly financed and managed (Cremin, 1951; Kaestle, 1983).

Of course, the common school reformers defined their model largely in opposition to other forms of schooling. Right or wrong, they successfully attacked schools that relied on fees for effectively segregating citizens by

social class. As the common school movement expanded beyond primary education, its leaders criticized the academies in particular for representing an elite and antirepublican threat to the "people's" schools. Mann's predecessor in Massachusetts, James Carter (1826, p. 24), broadly claimed that "every private establishment . . . detaches a portion of the community from the great mass, and weakens or destroys their interest in those means of education which are common to the whole people." Although proprietary schools were not a substantial presence, the common school reformers charged that elite academies diverted resources and potentially influential political support from the common schools (Cremin, 1957):

Some few persons in a village or town, finding the advantages of the common school inadequate to their wants, unite to establish a private one. They transfer their children from the former to the latter. The heart goes with the treasure. . . . They have now no personal motive to vote for or advocate any increase of the town's annual appropriation for schools; to say nothing of the temptation to discourage such increase in indirect ways, or even vote directly against it. If, by this means, some of the best scholars happen to be taken from the common school, the standard of that school is lowered. . . . All this inevitably depresses and degrades the common school. . . . until the common school is left to the management of those, who have not the desire or the power either to improve it or command a better. (Mann, 1838, pp. 49–50)

Such charges are interesting in the case of the academies, not because of their accuracy, which is questionable, but because of their effectiveness. In fact, many academies were chartered by public authorities and received public monies in block grants or per-pupil allotments, in addition to revenues from tuition. Whereas some had elite reputations, others served people of modest means. Usually, independent boards served as the governing mechanism, although membership on those boards often overlapped to a great degree with the locally elected school board. Indeed, many of their defenders claimed that these schools were part of the "public" system of education. They would probably fall somewhere in between strict, modern understandings of public and private schooling today (although Katz, 1987, sympathetically sees them as "private" in current terminology). However, despite the fact that they were often "public" in terms of access, funding, incorporation, and mission or function, their critics in the common school movement successfully argued against the academies, and gradually either brought them under direct political governance in the public system, or ended their public funding (Beadie, 1999; Kaestle, 1983; Nybakken, 1997; Sizer, 1964).

COMMON SCHOOL REFORM RHETORIC IN DEFINING PUBLIC EDUCATION

Within this context, the common school advocates launched a campaign for reform couched in religious and republican terminology—a verbal barrage that was most likely sincere, but tailored to the context and audience (Osgood, 1997). Their rhetoric suggests three elements that build upon a remarkably optimistic faith in the power of their version of public education to solve almost all social ills (see, for example, Mann, 1841, 1849, especially pp. 59–60). First, common school reformers justified their efforts largely on the grounds that education (indeed, society in general) was in a state of crisis—a tactic used by educational reformers throughout the history of the United States. In the context of the social upheavals described above, reformers identified common schools as the answer:

The common school is the greatest discovery ever made by man. . . . Other social organizations are curative and remedial; this is a preventive and an antidote; they come to heal diseases and wounds; this to make the physical and moral frame invulnerable to them. Let the Common School be expanded to its capabilities, let it be worked with the efficiency of which it is susceptible, and nine tenths of the crimes in the penal code would become obsolete; the long catalogue of human ills would be abridged; men would walk more safely by day; every pillow would be more inviolable by night; property, life, and character held by a stronger tenure; all rational hopes respecting the future brightened. (Mann, 1841, p. 15, emphasis in original)

Yet, according to Mann (1849), this purported panacea could not work its wonders because local schools had fallen in to a state of disrepair and neglect (especially pp. 17–18). He placed a good portion of the blame for this crisis at the feet of the influential and wealthy people who took the “anti-republican” measures of patronizing the private academies, thereby leaving the common schools as a charity service to the poor.

Second, the arguments of the common school reformers suggest a pronounced concern for the future of the democratic experiment and sought to make a close connection between their education reforms and the future of the Republic. In this, Mann echoed several of the nation’s founders—such as Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin, Benjamin Rush—who saw a dim future for democracy without a system of mass education for the wide diffusion of knowledge. Thus, common school advocates opposed channeling resources into the training of the talented few; wisdom needed to be cultivated across the population (Mann, 1844, p. 77; see, also, pp. 36–47; 1846, pp. 138–9; and, 1847). In his *Twelfth Annual Report*, Mann (1849) juxtaposed the social stratification of aristocratic Europe with the promise of equal opportunity for individual advancement inherent in the Republic.

He portrayed the social dislocation that came with industrialization in Britain—distress which was probably near its worst point in this period—as the antithesis for his idealization of a just and “Christian” civilization. Mann presented this contrast to show that a rapidly industrializing (and polarizing) Massachusetts was quickly sinking to Britain’s level, with the possibility of losing the democratic promise of the Revolution—a betrayal that would “create a feudalism of a new kind, but one more oppressive and unrelenting than that of the Middle Ages” (p. 57). This new feudalism would be an economic, not aristocratic, system. In view of the emerging socioeconomic polarization in Massachusetts, he blamed the socially segregated nature of the independent schools for contributing to the demise of democracy. For Mann (1839c, p. 200), the existence of a two-tiered system of schools forewarned that “the distinctions of the dark ages, and of aristocratic governments, will be revived on these happy shores.”

Public and Private Goods in Common School Rhetoric

Third, and most importantly for this present concern, the common school reformers defined their version of public education in light of republican conceptions of the public good. Of course, there were competing conceptions of the civic-minded “republicanism” that they believed the body politic required from the common schools—conceptions closely related to the political conflicts between Jacksonian Democrats and Whigs (Kaestle & Vinovskis, 1980; Reese, 1995). The Whiggish view that common school advocates tended toward held that the Republic was in jeopardy due to both unruly mobs and the emerging capitalist class that was turning its back on its fraternal responsibilities. The survival of the Republic depended upon a civic virtue that would pacify and unite the increasingly polarized citizenry. And that civic virtue meant that people must be willing to subordinate individual interests to the common good. Therefore, in order to check the rise of rampant individualism, the wealthy should forgo the opportunity to place their children in elite “private” schools and send them to the common schools instead. In his appeal to “the professional men of Massachusetts,” Mann (1839a, p. 143) chastised them for using the advantages of their wealth to effectively deny the common good: “Has not the course which some of you have pursued in relation to the education of your own children tended to reduce the reputation of our excellent free school system?” He continued,

The consciousness that they are attending a school unworthy of the patronage of those whom they have been led to regard as the better part of the community, will degrade the children of the less-favored classes in their own estimation, and destroy that self-respect which is

essential to improvement either in science or in morals. This feeling of degradation will hang like a millstone about the necks of the children of the poor. (Mann, 1839b, p. 154; see also, 1838, p. 48)

Therefore, the project of the common schools then was primarily a social endeavor of instilling republican morality, not an academic one (Kaestle, 1983).

The common school reformers pursued this through a “public” system of schooling. And to accomplish this goal, a public school would be defined by public funding, universal access, and democratic-political control. Without public funding and quasi-universal attendance, public schools would sink back to the former charity role, with the associated stigma of pauperism. Without public control, public schools would be undemocratic, and would be susceptible to private interests, uneven access, market whims, and local vagaries. If there was to be an appropriate and effective public benefit, there had to be direct public control, according to these reformers. Where current proponents of school choice see value in a diversity of options, common school reformers saw inefficiency, disorder, and inequality. Indeed, as current reformers denounce the public monopoly on education, the common school reformers would celebrate that as an accomplishment. Entities thought to be serving a public good were often granted monopoly status in the 19th century as a way to shield them from the distracting and harmful effects of competition (Horwitz, 1977).

But what about other contemporary and current proposals to serve the public need for education by “contracting out,” or funding private entities to educate students on behalf of the public? Could the public good be served in that way? Not according to the logic of the common school reformers. Waks (1996) demonstrates that “public” schooling, at least in the northeastern states, meant public funding and democratic or political control, and, following Butts and Cremin (1953), notes that the common school movement was essentially an expansion of this direct public control of education. Cremin (1951) has shown that the common school reformers extended public control of education by forcing institutions relying on public money to come under the control of public authority through political or bureaucratic means or by abolishing funding for institutions that refused to accept such authority. Mann consistently supported this position as he spoke of the “duty of the State to provide for and control the education of youth” (Downs, 1974, p. 118). Some current choice advocates suggest that the state does not have to manage the schools directly. Mann’s contemporary, Theodore Edson, held that public schools are “responsible more or less directly to the community. The private schools have no supervision, or only that of the parents” (Cremin, 1951, p. 137). When Mann

claimed that "all the children of a republic should be educated in the people's schools," he was speaking of the "people" as the citizens of a community, not simply the parents or "customers" (Mann, 1847, p. 27; see, Cremin, 1980, p. 140).

Of course, the common school reformers did not deny that private benefits could be realized from the common schools. Indeed, Mann's (1842) *Fifth Annual Report* was a classic rhetorical appeal to the private interests of the influential business community for support of the common school program (Vinovskis, 1995). Although elsewhere he reminded the affluent that his common schools could alleviate the dangers of class envy, here Mann pointed employers—potentially valuable allies—to the benefits of having a trained worker educated in the values of obedience, hard work, and respect for private property, traits that would prove "capable of earning more money for his employer" (Mann, 1842, p. 86). Likewise, he tried to mobilize public interest in the common schools by appealing to the chance for self-improvement for otherwise skeptical or apathetic working-class parents who would rather send their children to gainful employment. He did this in the language of meritocracy and personal responsibility—a language his business audience would understand and endorse as the justification for their position.

Yet, it needs to be noted that this appeal to the private advantages of public education was not the primary concern for Mann and the common school reformers in general. They were more interested, judging by the weight of their rhetoric, in promoting popular education for the public or common good in a democracy. Mann's appeal to the business elites was remarkable for his backhanded and notably unenthusiastic use of economic instrumentalism as an argument for public education—an approach unique to this appeal and for which he was explicitly apologetic. Furthermore, its isolated position in the body of his writings suggests Mann's view of this argument as a politically opportunistic and secondary issue. More importantly, Mann was at least as likely to admonish those elites for treating education as a private good as he was to court them with appeals to their potential profit. Although there were private aspects to education, these reformers conceived of it primarily as a public good:

Above all others, must the children of the Republic be fitted for society, as well as for themselves. . . . In a government like ours, each individual must think of the welfare of the state as well as of the welfare of his own family; and therefore, of the children of others as well as his own. It becomes then, a momentous question, whether the children in our schools are educated in reference to themselves and their private interests only, or with a regard to the great social duties and prerogatives that await them. (Mann, 1846, p. 64)²

To summarize, then, the common school advocates, as typified by Mann, advanced a distinct definition of the public aspect of mass education that, for better or worse, became wedded to its role in promoting the public good. Like the current Michigan reformers, Mann was operating in a context of rapid socioeconomic change, and identified education as both an institution in crisis and the solution to that crisis. However, the common school reformers framed the problem as one of too much variation at the hands of local and market forces. Their answer was to shield education from the economic forces of unregulated supply and demand, private cost, and benefit—to implement more political-democratic control. They explicitly portrayed education as an institution that could serve the broader public interest in mediating the effects of the rising forces of competition and private control in the emerging market system. For these reformers, a key element of “public” schooling was public governance. Since they linked the nature of a good to its form of control, the definition of “public” was intentionally and explicitly cast in terms of community control and societal benefit within a democratic system. The political claims of common school reformers that public education was to be treated as a public good speaks to their aversion to variegated and nondemocratic forms of provision.

Therefore, with antipathy toward the narrowness of private provision of education as it was conceived at the time, the common school reformers had a definite perspective on the political economy of school choice. They placed a high priority on collective (as opposed to private) ownership of both the means of provision and the benefits of schooling. The public aspect of education was located in the availability of access, in the source of funding, in its social mission, and in community—not consumer—control. The primary authority over mass schooling was to be entrusted to the citizenry, not just immediate users. The principal effect of the reforms was to centralize administration with some degree of standardization, since reformers associated diversity with inequality and disorder. The overall force of their rhetoric suggested an overly optimistic view of the potential of education to cure social ills. The reformers were reacting to both the milieu of the precommon school era system that they saw as being in a state of crisis, as well as the social dislocation and misery they saw in Europe after the enclosures, urbanization, and industrialization. The common school reformers consistently used the theme of a republic-nourishing system required for the strengthening of democratic and communal institutions that were being challenged by the rising forces of the market, thereby presenting public education as a policy alternative appropriately and effectively located in a public sphere. The paternalistic and statist nature of their program indicates that they were trying to weaken parental influence, in some cases, and act in the absence of appropriate parental guidance in others. Moreover, their claims highlight their position that democratic con-

trol was a superior form of organization for the provision of mass education to the Republic.

SERVING THE PUBLIC WELL AND SERVING THE PUBLIC GOOD

Although they differ on important elements of the public aspects of "public" education, it is interesting to note the similarities in the approaches used by leaders in both reform movements for advancing their agendas. Rather than utilizing popular democratic channels like the ballot box, both groups of reformers relied instead on other political means such as legislative fiat and administrative appointments. Furthermore, they exhibit a masterful use of rhetoric in demonstrating the need for reform and advancing their agendas as the solution. In doing this, charter and common school reformers successfully removed other policy options—and particularly the status quo—from the table by peripheralizing their opponents. For example, consider how Mann (1957) equated his common schools with support for the Republic in his *Tenth Annual Report*:

In later times, and since the achievement of American Independence, the universal and ever-repeated argument in favor of Free Schools has been that the general intelligence that they are capable of diffusing, and which can be imparted by no other human instrumentality, is indispensable to the continuation of a republican government. This argument, it is obvious, assumes, as a postulatam, the superiority of a republican over all other forms of government; and, as a people, we religiously believe in the soundness, both of the assumption and of the argument founded upon it. But if this be all, then a sincere monarchist, a defender of arbitrary power, or a believer in the divine right of kings, would oppose Free Schools, for the identical reasons we offer in their behalf. A perfect demonstration of our doctrine,—that Free Schools are the only basis of republican institutions,—would be the perfect reasoning to his mind, that they should be immediately exterminated. (p. 61)

So if a "monarchist" would logically oppose his version of public schooling, Mann used a rhetorical sleight-of-hand, implying that those who question his plans were not true republicans—an effective tactic popular with the common school reformers (see, e.g., Kaestle, 1983, p. 95f).

Likewise, charter school and choice proponents often describe the legacy of Mann's "republican" schools in terms of soviet-style central planning (e.g., Friedman, 1994, 1995; Meyerson, 1999). By equating public bureaucracy with socialism, they implicitly question whether their opponents are true Americans. In attacking the public monopoly on public funding, they see themselves tearing down an iron curtain. For example, Edison founder

Christopher Whittle portrays chains of charter schools and privately managed public schools in terms of liberation: “You have to have a West Berlin for East Berlin to fall” (quote in Kozol, 1992, p. 274; see also Kozol, 1993; Finn in Brodinsky, 1993; and Weld in Wyatt, 1999). In Michigan, Governor Engler embraced such rhetorical imagery, calling elected school boards “East Germany with the wall being torn down” (quoted in Borowski, 1995).

But despite the parallels in political and rhetorical means, there are obviously pronounced differences in the primary themes of these two reform efforts—differences that point to the overriding question of what constitutes a “public” school. The common school reformers expressed a concern for the future of democracy. Thus, they argued that the broader public would be served by public schools that were under direct public control. Popular education was a public good in terms of benefits and ownership. In that sense, “public” meant “political” control, exercised through democratic processes. This has usually come to mean democratically elected local school boards—a majoritarian system administered by a bureaucracy, which often acts to protect minority rights. Thus, it is messy and inefficient (Hirschman, 1970), and often frustrating to the majority (Plank & Boyd, 1994).

On the other hand, charter school advocates demonstrate a concern for the values of responsiveness and effectiveness in how schools serve the public. Indeed, based on surveys of parental satisfaction, they may be doing that very effectively. But it is important to note here that “the public” is redefined to mean the immediate “consumers” of schooling. For this public—now identified as the students, their parents, and, to some extent, the employers that will hire skilled graduates—education is a private good to be pursued (and provided) in terms of individual self-interest (Labaree, 1997). Thus, there is a subtle yet significant shift in the language from public education as a public good to a private good.

Charter schools are “public” in many ways: they are publicly funded, open to the public, and chartered by a public authority, and accountable to that authority, as well as to the families that choose them. But they are less “public” in other ways. In Michigan, where most charter schools are now run as parts of chains by for-profit corporations (resembling privatized districts), they increasingly mirror private schools in areas such as staffing, asset management, admissions practices, and administration (Horn & Miron, 2000). They are not open to public scrutiny in the same way as district-run schools, for instance. Being placed in a competitive market, charter schools have an added incentive to manage perceptions in order to appear to potential consumers in a favorable light. Indeed, some private management firms running Michigan charter schools refuse to open their school records to the public on the grounds that they are “private” entities (Dykgraaf & Lewis, 1998; Horn & Miron, 2000; Schulz, 2000; Schulz & Golder, 2000; see also Borsuk, 1999).

But they are also less “public” in one respect that the common school reformers argued was of critical interest to a democratic society: democratic control (Mann, 1847). Of course, in defining “public” schools in terms of governance, the common school reformers may have been wrong in a number of ways (in addition to the many other elements of their program). First, it is quite possible that common school reformers erred in linking public control and public benefits of education in claiming that they were necessary for the survival of democracy. Secondly, they may have misinterpreted or misrepresented the “crisis” of the precommon school era in arguing that the public had to administer schools in order for the public to benefit appropriately. Thirdly, even if they were correct in linking control of education to the future of the Republic, it is quite possible that the socioeconomic and cultural conditions that justified that relationship then have now changed to such a degree that direct democratic control of schooling is no longer appropriate. Finally, it is possible that people simply now wish for a different “mission” for schools—a purely academic one, as opposed to a primarily social one that purportedly requires public control. On the other hand, some could argue that the tenets of republican democracy are universal, and, consequently, the need for democratic control of education is not dependent on context. After all, even though contextual variables change, democratic values are still an essential part of the national landscape.

An interesting way to address this question would be to examine the statements of current charter school advocates on the conditions of democratic society and the role of the schools in that society. However, at least in Michigan, current reformers generally refrain from such topics in their rhetoric—outside of a more libertarian concern for individual or consumer rights. Indeed, many proponents of charter schools and other school choice plans implicitly or explicitly identify democratic or political processes as the problem plaguing public schools (e.g., Chubb & Moe, 1990). This is evident in the fact that charter schools essentially stretch or sever the “direct democratic control” that many believe inhibits schools from serving their academic function effectively because of the quagmire of external regulation. So charter school proponents redefine “public” education by expanding the term in the institutional sense to schools outside traditional “public” (i.e., state governed) sector, to include previously nonpublic agencies with an academic mission. But in practical terms, this means that the “public” is effectively narrowed—as indicated in the broader public’s role in education, which has typically been reflected in governance structures. That is, the franchise is effectively restricted to immediate users rather than to taxpayers or citizens in general. As Rogers (1992) writes in another context, referring to another institution that was initially linked to the sustenance of democracy,

It is as though, if public libraries were able to opt out and be run by a management committee (which would decide who could withdraw books, which books would be stocked, what the fines would be, etc., whilst the council—i.e. local tax payers—went on paying for the service), the decision would rest with those who happened to have a book out *at the time*. (p. 129, emphasis in original)

Despite the theme of “anti-politics” that underlines much of the rhetoric of charter school advocates in Michigan and elsewhere (Plank & Boyd, 1994), the reforms do have immediate political repercussions for democratic processes (which, when not used, according to Hirschman (1970), fall in to a state of atrophy). To illustrate: the average citizen in Michigan is a taxpayer with no children currently in the schools. If that person were upset with a particular aspect of the neighborhood public school down the street (whole language instruction, Afrocentrism, evolution, etc.), theoretically, the means to express dissatisfaction would be democratic—through the locally elected school board, which would then convey that sentiment to a superintendent and/or building administrator. Of course, the process is not immediately responsive, and the complaint may or may not be acted on, depending on a number of factors. Lobbying a school board, or opposing one in an election, certainly does not guarantee results. But on paper, at least, that “direct democracy” represents a few steps from the citizen to the school.

With charter schools in Michigan, the channels for expressing dissatisfaction are now more immediate for some. If something about a charter school is objectionable for the parents of a student, they can talk to the teacher or building administrator; if the concern is not addressed, the parents have the market-style option of withdrawing the student (and the per capita public funding) from the institution and finding a more preferable school. The options are neat and immediate (Hirschman, 1970).

However, most citizens are not parents of school-aged children, although they pay taxes to educate those children; for them the steps for influencing the school are now effectively extended. Thus, the options are much less direct if such a person were upset by the practice of a local charter school—if the school were teaching “creation science” or “new math,” or if students were required to pledge allegiance to the “African nation,” for instance. Using an economic channel, the disgruntled citizen would most likely have to complain to a corporation, often in another state, since over 70% of the charter schools in Michigan are now run by for-profit management firms like New York-based Edison or Beacon Education Management of Massachusetts (Horn & Miron, 1999; Khouri, Kleine, White, & Cummings, 1999). But since the citizen, as a nonparent, has no real leverage with the company in the form of per student funding, the corporation has virtually no reason to consider such complaints.

On the other hand, since charter schools are chartered by a "duly-constituted public authority" (Finn, 1997), there is still a political avenue available in such a case. However, the recourse is much less direct than contacting a local elected official. In Michigan, most "public school academies" receive their charters from institutions of higher education. By far, the most prolific of these has been one university that had, at one time, chartered the vast majority of charter schools (Bulkley, 1999). That university administers these arrangements through a charter school office, which ultimately answers to the university's president. The president is appointed by the board of trustees, which is appointed by the governor. So, rather than voting just for a local school board member, the hypothetical citizen instead casts one of millions of votes for governor. If the Governor recognizes the complaint, the issue then follows a long, albeit "public," administrative chain of appointments to the local charter school, which may or may not act on the issue, depending on the terms of the agreement with the chartering authority. Therefore, for some, charter schools represent an improvement in responsiveness and efficiency; they are part of an economic-style approach that is neat and effective. For others, the chain of influence has been greatly extended to one of indirect democratic control, at best.

Charter schools directly address reformers' concerns about "direct democratic control" by moving control from the democratic polity to the individual. But common school reformers argued for reform in the opposite direction, for the sake of the public good. That raises a question that cannot be answered here: Can we rely on the aggregate of individual choices to promote the public good? Although some have tried to answer that (e.g., Hardin, 1968; Olson, 1965), the two reforms studied here rely on assumptions regarding that issue. The common school reformers believed that rampant individual choices were hurting the communal republic. Charter school advocates see the opposite. They hold that constraining choice is the problem, and liberating choice and competition is the solution.

PRIVATIZATION OF THE PURPOSE OF PUBLIC EDUCATION

The issue of whether or not charter schools are "public" is directly relevant to the question of whether or not they are a form of privatization. Many charter school advocates note that they do not necessarily endorse privatization because charter schools are "public" schools—publicly funded, open and accountable to the public. For example, Edison V. P. Deborah McGriff insists: "It's not privatization. No one is selling a school. It's a public-private partnership. We're bringing resources to a public entity. We're responsible to a public authority and we operate as other public schools operate" (quoted in Williams, 1999).

Indeed, we often define privatization in terms of the ownership of the means of provision. But what about the nature of the good itself? The

contrast between the common school reformers and the charter school advocates suggest that specific forms of privatization of resources may not be the most important area of attention. Perhaps much more consequential is the way the rhetoric promotes depublicization and a redefinition of the “public” in education away from that of an institution of and for the public good. In education, such proposals do not necessarily require the privatization of the funding or the *means* of the provision of education. Instead, they may represent privatization of the *purpose* of education because such rhetoric acknowledges only an individual private interest, and only on the part of those thought to be immediately involved in education—the children and their parents (as proxies), or employers—but not the interests of taxpayers, community, or society. Thus, such reforms encourage parents to treat education as a private consumer good to be obtained from a competitive market for essentially private ends. Even the conversation about public schooling may be privatized, as individuals pursue their own interests—preempting any need for public or democratic dialogue on how to educate the next generation (Sandel, 1996).

In conclusion, both the common school reformers and charter school advocates used rhetoric to shift popular understandings of the “public” in undermining previous conceptions of public education. Whereas the common school reformers narrowed that definition to apply only to schools that were under public-democratic control, charter school proponents are expanding the definition to include any schools—including ones previously considered to be private—that serve the public. However, that expanded definition also narrows the “public” to immediate consumers. At least one major “public” aspect of the various forms of “public” education—going back several centuries to European antecedents—was the public good function of schools in their mission and orientation. In an age of institutions, the common school reformers tried to institutionalize that aspect along with other values. Now charter school advocates want to maintain the public finance structures of that institution but divorce it from an explicit orientation toward the public good located in that governance structure. Private interests will drive the institution and hopefully approximate the public good.

The attempt to redefine “public” education is a direct challenge to the traditional, popular, and common symbiosis between public and private spheres. To the extent that this redefinition attempts to “blur” popular distinctions between public and private schooling, it should be seen as a form of privatization (Chitty, 1997). This *de facto* privatization of the *purpose* of public education encourages citizens to view themselves as consumers of an educational product, maximizing self-interest in competition with other consumers for desirable opportunities. Although this does not necessarily require the transferring of ownership of the means of provision to private hands, the effects are essentially similar. The “product” is still held

before the "consumer" to be treated as a private good, with the same disenfranchisement of the general public good that would be seen in a purely privatized system.

Notes

1 For a useful description of the commonly acknowledged attributes of public and private schools, see Witte (2000), especially Chapter 2.

2 Such rhetorical flourishes regarding "the children of the Republic" seem naïve, offensive, or even fascist now. But this statist paternalism was not uncommon in the debates around the common school era. For example, a reformer in New York declared that "the most backward, the most ignorant, the most indifferent, are the very portion of the population we wish to enlighten. The state wishes to stretch its paternal arms around them." In another case, a state teachers' association held that "children are the property of the state" (quoted in Kaestle, 1983, pp. 150, 158). Certainly, such optimistic views of the young Republic preceded Marxist conceptions of the state, as well as current popular concerns about "big government" and parental rights. But there was also a sense of self-righteousness that guided middle-class reformers. And this was particularly pronounced when they turned their attention to the children of the impoverished and immigrant communities. There was a general sense that families in these communities were deficient in important values and habits, thus causing their poverty—not unlike the deficit theories that guided reformers and researchers in the 1960s. As active citizens, reformers saw the state as an appropriate tool to address their concerns. Thus, while not excusing their arrogance, we must also consider the context.

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