

Stop Patronizing Parents' School Choice Decisions, Please

Whenever we engage in discussions around school choice (charter schools, vouchers, and so on), it's important to remember the origins of the mass schooling apparatus. In the mid-19th century when the first compulsory schooling statutes took hold—mandating attendance under a legal threat of force—the bureaucrats most responsible for compelling school for the masses had no intention of sending their own children there.

Horace Mann, who implemented the nation's first compulsory schooling statute in 1852, homeschooled his own three children. His biographer, Jonathan Masserli, writes: "From a hundred platforms, Mann had lectured that the need for better schools was predicated upon the assumption that parents could no longer be entrusted to perform their traditional roles in moral training and that a more systematic approach within the public school was necessary. Now as a father, he fell back on the educational responsibilities of the family, hoping to make the fireside achieve for his own son what he wanted the schools to accomplish for others."

The veil of hypocrisy and paternalism that surrounds mass schooling endures today, and is strikingly apparent in the school choice debate. An [article](#) this week in the *L.A. Times*, for instance, criticizes the allegedly poor decisions that parents make when allowed to choose their child's charter school in New Orleans. Ideas around safety, a gleaming new school building, a top-performing athletics program, a recently started school without the poor reputation of an older one—these are some of the factors that, the article claims, lead parents to choose schools with lower academic

outcomes than more high-performing ones. The article's author, a New Orleans schoolteacher, laments: "Over and over again, I watched parents make choices that weren't academically sound – a giant wrinkle for parent-choice theory."

But is it?

Privileged parents with an abundance of choice make these same types of decisions all the time. They may choose, for example, not to move to a pricey suburb with a stellar school system, and instead stay in the city and send their kids to comparably lower-performing schools because they appreciate other aspects of the urban school and the community. They may send their kids to a progressive school, with no grades and no testing, because they feel it is a good fit for their children and their values. They may keep their kid in a lower-performing high school rather than send her to a private school because she is a star basketball player and she likes her teammates.

Parents with privilege get to make these choices all the time, often not based on academics but on intuition. So why should we criticize parents with far fewer choices for exercising the same discretion?

The key is to expand choice to all parents. Everyone should be able to choose from an array of educational options, with different learning philosophies, different resources, different strengths and weaknesses. And they should be free to make changes, to adjust their choice, as their child grows.

In short, all parents should have the same suite of options available to them as are widely available to privileged parents. They should also receive the same respect for their choices, for their parental intuition, and for the care they show for their child's well-being.