

report PUBLIC JUSTICE

First Quarter, 2005

Vol. 28, No. 1

Education Reform That Serves the Poor

Month after month, news reports call attention to the number of students losing out in the rapid development of today's information society. They are not getting the education they need to compete for jobs that pay a decent wage or salary. Bill Cosby rails against those who fail to help young people develop the disciplines they need in order to become mature contributors to society and healthy adults themselves. In certain technology fields America is relying more and more on new immigrants, better trained elsewhere, to pick up the slack. For all that is supposedly "best" about America, our educational system is failing far too many of its citizens.

Meanwhile, most of the attention in Washington is focused on ways to spur economic growth, to generate more jobs via private enterprise, and to find more ways to let individuals bear responsibility for their own health-care and retirement decisions. But how will all of this help those who don't have access to an education sufficient to prepare them for such jobs and responsibilities?

One of the leading spokespersons for serious education reform that will benefit the poor is Boston University professor and former public official, Charles L. Glenn, who has been working at and writing about this subject for more than three decades. Among his books are, *The Ambiguous Embrace: Government and Faith-Based Schools and Social Agencies* (Princeton University Press); *Choice of Schools in Six Nations* (Washington, D.C.: Office of Educational Research and Improvement); *The Myth of the Common School* (University of Massachusetts Press); and (with Jan De Groof) *Balancing Freedom, Autonomy, and Accountability in Education* (3 vols., Wolf Legal Publishers, The Netherlands).

A new book by an author who has drunk deeply from the well of Glenn's research and writing has the title *Empowering the Poor: Why Justice Requires School Choice* (Lanham, Md.: ScarecrowEducation, 2004). The author is David B. Van Heemst, a professor of political science at Olivet Nazarene University in Illinois. Those concerned to overcome the failures and inadequacies of American schooling—particularly for the sake of the poor—should read this book. And through it, they will gain access to the best that has been written by Charles Glenn and many others in recent years on the

importance of education reform that gives parents a genuine opportunity and the equal right to choose schools for their children.

Van Heemst's aim is simple and clearly focused. He concentrates on how education affects the poor. His first chapter looks at how the poor are doing in our current education system. Then in Chapter Two he makes the argument for justice and not merely for efficiency, economic advantage, and pragmatic consequences of a school-choice system. If education for all children should be a matter of principle in a democratic society, then all children, not only the well to do, should have access to schools of choice as a matter of justice. In the book's third chapter the author looks at positive steps that have been taken in recent years by the U.S. Supreme Court to affirm decisions made in a few states to enlarge the scope of school choice.

Chapter Four of *Empowering the Poor* outlines ten main elements of a school-choice plan. Chapter Five looks at the empirical evidence of how school choice is faring in the United States today. Van Heemst's final chapter makes the case for why school choice will benefit the poor and why they want it. "The poor want school choice because it will provide them with the options they find lacking in the present system. Poor children will have access to better schools, poor parents will experience a sense of empowerment, and poor parents will increasingly participate in a more just educational system."

I have a quibble with only one of the ten elements of Van Heemst's school-choice plan. That is his idea that the tuition voucher, which parents would be able to use at any number of schools, "should cover no less than 50 percent of the average state school cost, since anything below that might be insufficient for a small group of parents to start a new school." A voucher worth 50 percent of the average cost of schooling is simply insufficient. It won't work if the aim is to do justice to all parents and students. What justice is there in saying to poor parents that they may send their children to failing schools at no cost, but if they want a good school, they will have to pay half the cost? Lower middle-class families and some very hard working families at the upper level of the poverty class, may be willing and able to make this sacrifice. But the poorest of poor families will still have no choice if the voucher is worth only half the cost of schooling. I agree with Van Heemst that gradual implementation of any choice plan is wise, but the goal must be equal treatment of all children by a means that gives every family the same option of free schooling. And that means a tuition voucher worth 100 percent of the cost of schooling for every student

Over the last decade, more and more education-reform experiments have been attempted, using magnet schools, charter schools, and home schooling. Some degree of school choice has become a reality for more and more people, as it always has been for the wealthy. The challenge now is to achieve full justice through education reforms in order to make sure that all parents enjoy equal opportunity for choice so their children can have access to the quality of education necessary for meaningful employment and a productive life in our fast-changing society.

—The Editor ©