

Rethinking School Choice

JEFFREY R. HENIG

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RETHINKING  
SCHOOL  
CHOICE

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Limits of the  
Market Metaphor

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Advocates of school vouchers and other choice proposals couch their arguments in the fashionable language of economic theory. Choice initiatives at all levels of government have succeeded, it is claimed, because they shift responsibility for education reform from government to market forces. This timely book disputes the appropriateness of the market metaphor as a guide to education policy. Engaging the debate on the levels both of empirical analysis and democratic theory, Jeffrey R. Henig traces the evolution of school choice as an idea and in practice. Its legacy, he observes, is a mixed one. Sometimes it has been a vehicle for racial and economic segregation, with divisive and corrosive effects. Where school choice has worked, the record shows, it has depended less on the magic of the market than on an elusive combination of strong political leadership, resolute governmental commitment, supportive coalitions of private interests, and a willingness on all sides to challenge parochial gain in the name of the larger social good. The real danger in market-based choice proposals, Henig argues, is not that they might allow some children to attend private schools at public expenses, but that they tend to crowd out the public forums that must flourish if questions of national policy are to be democratically resolved. Rather than concentrating on the comparative merits of private and public institutions as service-delivery mechanisms, the urgent need in the years ahead will be to focus on their relative advantages in promoting deliberation, debate, and decision-making.

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