

## UNDERSTANDING THE DEMAND FOR SCHOOLING

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### I. CONCEPTUAL ISSUES

Around the world, schools are provided by the state, at public expense. In the latter half of the twentieth century the critical dynamics in the education system reflected efforts by the state to enhance the supply of schooling, both by increasing access and by improving the quality of education provided. The focus on the supply side of the market originated in the increasingly wide acceptance of a notional “right” to education (see below), which ultimately resulted in the virtually unanimous affirmation that states are responsible for ensuring that **all** young people have access to educational opportunities of at least minimal duration and quality (World Conference on Education for All, 1990). These “supply-side” dynamics continue to drive educational policy in countries around the world. Standards and expectations for the duration and quality of schooling have inexorably risen, accompanied by efforts to ensure equal access to educational opportunities for young people from previously excluded or marginalized groups including girls, racial or linguistic minorities, and the handicapped. While the poorest countries are struggling unsuccessfully to provide universal access to primary school, many OECD countries are moving toward policies that will ensure universal access to post-secondary education and training.

In many countries the public school system traditionally comprised a highly diversified set of educational opportunities, with access to different options dependent on criteria that included measured aptitude or ability along with gender and race/ethnicity. Access to valued outcomes including university enrollment was dependent on participation in higher-status “tracks” in the education system, which provided access to higher levels of the system. Access to these educational opportunities was often contingent on examination performance, but sometimes on other criteria including race and gender. Until recently, some children were excluded from the education system altogether.

The role of “demand” in the public education system has traditionally been articulated almost entirely in terms of access to more, better, and higher-status opportunities within the existing system, rather than for alternatives to the standardized, highly-regulated opportunities provided by the state. Initially disadvantaged households and groups have sought to improve their position through the education system, while prosperous and ambitious households have sought to maintain theirs. Responding to these demands has posed little difficulty for the state; indeed, growing demand for educational opportunities has supported and accelerated the state’s efforts to increase the number of young people enrolled in school and the length of time they spend there.

Where the “demand” for schooling was weak or absent (e.g., in rural and some religious communities), the state has worked actively to persuade or coerce parents to send their children to school. One consequence of government efforts to encourage participation in the education

system has been progress toward equalization in the distribution of educational opportunities, partly through the provision of compensatory services for otherwise disadvantaged young people and partly through steady moves toward common standards and comprehensive educational programs for all students.

As standards and expectations for minimal educational attainment have risen, the internal diversification of the public education system has declined. The very success of the state's efforts to equalize opportunities has produced new demands on the education system, as households have sought to ensure that their own children have privileged access to the best schools and programs. In some countries this has involved strategic investment in real estate; in others, the purchase of elite private education. In other countries the demand for schooling has found its expression in the "shadow" education system of *juku*, cram schools, and supplementary tutoring, which thrive on the margins of state control (Bray, 1999).

From the point of view of the traditional public education system, demand is not problematic as long as it is homogeneous, and congruent with the state's expectations. In education systems where the state is the monopoly supplier, "demand" generally expresses itself in terms that are readily compatible with the state's efforts to equalize and standardize educational opportunities. Communities and households demand that the state provide more and better schooling for their children. Those who find themselves excluded or marginalized in the public education system demand full inclusion and equal access to educational opportunities. These manifestations of demand are easily managed; indeed, governments themselves often seek to influence the demand side of the market, by shaping and strengthening the private demand for schooling. (See Text Box I.)

In recent years, however, countries around the world have been confronted by the articulation of increasingly differentiated "demands" on the public school system, which are less easily managed within the constraints of the traditional education system. The critical policy question at present is how governments should respond to these new demands. To date, their response to variation on the demand side of the market has been ambivalent at best, for reasons discussed below.

### *A. Why the State Supplies Schools*

The traditional rationale for the public provision of schools was essentially political. Schools were expected to produce citizens, by providing young people with canonical knowledge including familiarity with national languages and civic traditions. The primary function of public education was tutelary, aimed at incorporating young people into the state by fostering civic unity and national homogenization through the schools.

More recently, an economic rationale has been adduced for the public provision of schooling. Schooling is what economists characterize as a "merit good." Like other goods including housing, food, and romance novels, the consumption of schooling confers private benefits on those who participate in it. The knowledge and skills that young people acquire in school prepare them for productive employment, and for effective civic participation. People with more

education enjoy higher wages, along with a variety of non-pecuniary benefits including better health and longer lives.

### TEXT BOX I

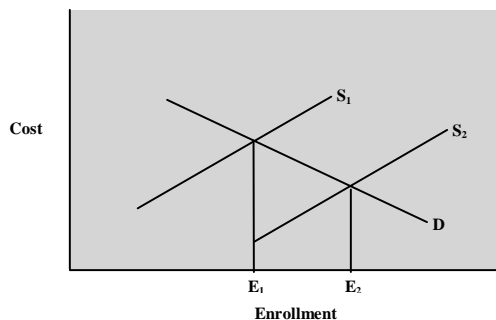
#### PUBLIC POLICIES AFFECT BOTH SUPPLY AND DEMAND

Like other goods, the quantity of schooling that households consume depends on the price, which in turn depends on the supply of schools and the strength of household demand for schooling. Many households are willing to send their children to school when the private cost of schooling is low, but the number diminishes as the cost rises. Households in which the demand for schooling is especially strong have shown themselves willing to bear very high private costs in order to send their children to school. Governments around the world have sought to increase the quantity of schooling that their citizens consume by adopting policies that affect both the supply of schools and the demand for schooling.

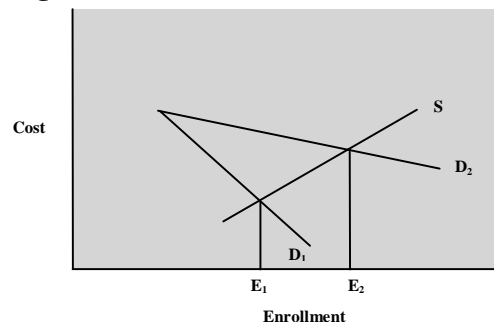
On the supply side, governments have worked steadily to reduce the cost of schooling and thereby make educational opportunities more accessible. In recent years their efforts have moved beyond the construction and staffing of schools toward the provision of a growing variety of distance and on-line alternatives to traditional schooling. They have also allocated resources to encourage student attendance at all levels of the educational system, ranging from school feeding programs in primary schools to massive subsidies for students in public universities. These policies aim to increase enrollments by reducing the private cost of schooling and shift the supply curve outward. (See Figure 1.)

On the demand side, governments have sought to encourage households to send their children to school through policies that encompass both gentle persuasion and active coercion. On the one hand, governments have invested substantial resources in “social marketing” campaigns aimed at convincing households of the benefits of sending their children to school and keeping them there for ever longer periods of time. On the other hand, they have also adopted policies including compulsory schooling and child labor laws that reduce the relative cost of schooling by raising the cost of alternative uses of children’s time. Both kinds of policies effectively shift the demand curve upward by shaping and strengthening households’ demand for schooling. (See Figure 2.)

**Figure 1**



**Figure 2**



Achieving the state’s most ambitious goals for the schooling of its citizens may require that the private cost of schooling be negligible or even negative, as Figure 1 suggests. In Mexico and Brazil, for example, governments have provided targeted subsidies to poor households that enroll their children in school. Governments in other countries have similarly adopted policies aimed at reducing the private cost of schooling including higher education for households from otherwise disadvantaged groups. One of the key policy challenges facing governments around the world is how to restrict the incidence of these subsidies to households whose decisions about enrollment in fact depend upon them, while obliging households where the demand for schooling is stronger to pay a larger share of the private cost.

Unlike most other goods, however, the private consumption of schooling also produces external benefits that accrue to the advantage of the broader society.<sup>1</sup> The general diffusion of schooling supports gains in productivity, public health, and economic growth that improve the lives of all citizens, not just those who go to school. In recent years, for example, the World Bank has argued that spending on girls' education is the single best investment that governments can make in terms of future economic growth (Summers, 1994). This argument is completely independent of parallel arguments based on affirmations of human rights or equal opportunities, and independent also of the private gains that girls might achieve through greater access to schooling.

Under both political and economic arguments, the case for the public provision of schooling is strong. The state is responsible not only for building schools, but also for ensuring that citizens avail themselves of educational opportunities. Accepting this responsibility, governments around the world have committed vast resources to expanding and improving their public education systems. Over time, as a result, the number of young people attending school has steadily increased, as previously marginalized or excluded groups (e.g., rural children, girls, the handicapped) have steadily been brought under the authority of the public school system. In a parallel development, the length of time that children spend in school has steadily increased as well. In most OECD countries the vast majority of young people now complete at least 12 years of schooling, and efforts are underway to extend the "normal" period of schooling to 14 or even 16 years.

Perceived deficiencies in the supply of schools nevertheless continue to constrain enrollments in many parts of the world. The state's failure to provide the schools that parents (or students) want at a price they are willing to pay is among the most important factors preventing the accomplishment of the state's most ambitious goals for increasing enrollment at all levels of the education system.

### ***B. Why Demand is Problematic in the Education System***

In the past decade there has been a shift in the educational policy discourse in many countries. In response to the twin challenges of global economic integration and the emergence of an increasingly knowledge-based economy, policy-makers have begun to give more explicit attention to "demand" in the education system. Until recently (and, in many countries, still) policy debates were almost entirely focused on expanding and improving the supply of schooling, within the constraints defined by a system operating to procedures laid down primarily by educational authorities, schools and teachers. Under these traditional arrangements the demand for schooling was shaped and indeed to a very large extent created by the state. Demand was homogeneous, and almost by definition congruent with the educational opportunities provided in state schools. The state's interest in a well-educated populace was advanced by popular demands for more and better education, and the private demand for schooling was largely (if not entirely) satisfied through expanded state provision. Insofar as this remains the case—insofar as popular demand remains focused on the achievement of publicly sanctioned goals—the move

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<sup>1</sup> Private choices about schooling may produce external costs as well as benefits, as discussed below.

toward greater responsiveness is not seriously problematic for the state's education project. The emergence of new and heterogeneous educational demands may pose significant new challenges for national education systems, however.

The articulation of "demand" in the education system may have both private and corporate dimensions. Under emerging policy arrangements, these may correspond increasingly closely to Hirshman's (1970) "voice" and "exit." (See Text Box II.) "Demand" may be troubling to the traditional state-centered education system in both of these dimensions.

## **TEXT BOX II**

### **"EXIT" AND "VOICE" IN THE EDUCATION SYSTEM**

According to Albert Hirshman (1970), "exit" and "voice" represent alternative responses by consumers to organizational decline. Parents (or others) who find themselves dissatisfied with the performance of their local schools may either exercise voice (by speaking up and urging the authorities to improve the situation) or exit (by moving their children to another school). Recent developments in education policy suggest a growing role for exit, and a changing role for voice. Both of these trends pose significant challenges for the traditional, state-centered public education system.

With respect to exit, policy-makers in countries around the world have decided that the appropriate response to parental dissatisfaction with the schools their children attend is to provide them with alternatives, including charter schools, home schooling, and private schools. The policy move toward choice reflects a growing reliance on markets as a strategy for addressing public policy problems, and illustrates the growing importance of exit in the education system. As Hirshman pointed out, exit from public institutions like schools may impose significant external costs on those who remain behind, and the consequences for institutional improvement are not always positive.

In Hirshman's account, voice is mainly restricted to the articulation of dissatisfaction and demand through the traditional institutions of governance, whether in firms or in public institutions like schools. The demand for schooling is assumed to be essentially homogeneous; parents complain about schools that fall short of their educational expectations. In recent years, however, new demands have emerged in the education system, for schools and curricula that better reflect the goals and interests of particular constituencies including linguistic and religious groups. It is not a simple matter to accommodate these demands within the traditional, state-centered education system and, as a result, a growing number of these groups are demanding the right to establish publicly-funded schools that better reflect their corporate interests.

In the private dimension, "demand" measures the variable aspirations and expectations of households and students with respect to educational access and quality. These may be perfectly congruent with the supply of educational opportunities provided by the state, as households seek to maximize the educational advantages of their children. Under some circumstances, however, the educational demands of individual households may diverge from the goals of the state. Some

households may prefer educational opportunities that fail to produce the external benefits that justify state provision, while others may wish to consume less education than the state regards as optimal or even acceptable. The private choices that households make may even produce external **costs** for other households or for the larger education system. For example, decisions by some households to leave particular schools or school districts may reduce the range and quality of educational opportunities provided to the students who remain behind (Fuller, Elmore, and Orfield, 1996).

In the corporate dimension “demand” measures the articulation by specific interests—whether defined by region, ethnicity, or language—of demands for educational policies and practices that better serve the interests of the group. As above, the satisfaction of these demands may be perfectly congruent with the state’s education project. In the United States, for example, the demands of African-Americans for equal educational opportunities in the middle years of the twentieth century conformed closely to and served to advance the state’s goal of an increasingly well-educated populace.

Under other circumstances, however, the articulation of new corporate demands may represent a serious challenge to the accomplishment of the state’s educational objectives. In many countries, for example, demands for instruction in local languages and the affirmation of local cultures in the curriculum may advance local autonomy at the expense of the state’s nationalizing project. Demands for the acknowledgement of religious beliefs and rituals in publicly-supported schools may alienate students who do not share the dominant religion, or foster “Balkanization” along confessional lines. These new and diverse demands may conflict with the tutelary, nation-building purposes of the public education system, and with the state’s economic objectives as well (e.g., if religious traditions restrict the educational opportunities available to girls). Balancing responsiveness to these newly-articulated demands with the core purposes of the state’s education project is not a simple matter.

The private and corporate dimensions of the demand for schooling may diverge and intersect in a variety of ways, further complicating the problem of how to respond. For example, the corporate demand for local control over local schools may conflict with the demand of individual parents for educational opportunities that improve the social and economic prospects of their children. African-American parents in Detroit may endorse corporate demands for local autonomy in the city’s education system while simultaneously seeking alternative educational opportunities for their own children.

The genie of demand is nevertheless out of the bottle. The policy challenge now facing governments is how to respond to increasingly urgent and articulate demands on the education system while ensuring that the character of the response does not undermine the public goals pursued through schooling. The nature of the dilemma reveals itself over and over again: in debates over the design of school choice policies; in public disputes over the wearing of headscarves and other ostensibly religious regalia in public schools; in controversies over curriculum content in history and science. The authority and legitimacy of state control in the education system can no longer be taken for granted, and the emergence of diverse demands means that many decisions that were once simply ceded to the state are now open to contestation. Different governments respond in different ways. France has drawn a very tight boundary

around the legitimate expression of diverse or dissident demands on the education system, while Spain and Sweden have been significantly more responsive. But the dilemma facing each of these governments is essentially the same.

## **II. EVIDENCE FROM THE US**

### **A. How does demand feature in educational debate, how are schools regarded by society, and how well are expectations met?**

#### *1) Demand in the education policy debate*

Educational policy debates in the US continue to focus attention on the supply side of the market, and on the question of how and by whom schools should be provided. Competing assumptions about the demand for schooling are integral to discussion of key issues, but the nature and validity of these assumptions are seldom explicitly addressed.

Current debates on educational policy issues turn on the question whether the state as a monopoly provider of educational services can respond effectively and efficiently to the increasingly rigorous demands placed on the public school system by parents, employers, and others. Defenders of the present system argue in the affirmative, asserting that schools do a reasonably good job of meeting the expectations of parents and other key constituencies, and that adequate state support in concert with the professionalism of educators are sufficient to ensure that the education system will continue to meet their expectations in the future. In this view, accountability policies including No Child Left Behind provide a limited and distorted perspective on school performance (e.g., Meier et al., 2004). The introduction of competition drains resources from the traditional public school system, and shifts them to schools that perform no better—and often worse—than traditional public schools (e.g., Wells, 2002). Where schools are clearly falling short of public expectations—as in many urban centers—defenders of current arrangements argue that the infusion of additional resources (early childhood and after-school programs, smaller classes, better teachers) is the key to improved performance.

Critics, in contrast, have begun to argue that the traditional education system is incapable of meeting new and more ambitious expectations for the performance of schools and students. They have introduced strict new accountability policies aimed at strengthening incentives for educators to meet rising expectations for student achievement, and they have championed a variety of policies aimed at introducing competition into the education system, on the grounds that the monopoly provision of schools under state auspices is inherently inefficient. The burden of their argument is that other agencies may be more efficient or effective than the state in pursuing the state's educational objectives of increased access and improved quality (Finn, Manno, and Vanourek, 2001; Chubb and Moe, 1990; Bryk, Lee, and Holland, 1995). In this view, the professionalism and good intentions of educators cannot be relied on to improve the performance of schools and students; enhancing external accountability and providing more choices empower parents in their efforts to oblige the state to meet their expectations, by strengthening their capacity for both voice and exit and thereby giving their demands more "bite."

It is essential to note that despite their clear policy differences both defenders and critics of the present system share the underlying assumption that the demand for schooling is intense, and that it is frustrated by constraints on the supply side. On the one hand, these may include the scarcity of educational resources or the absence of “political will;” on the other they may be traceable to the self-interested complacency of educators. For both sides, however, “demand” is the ghost in the machine, mysterious and powerful but not fundamentally problematic. Students, parents, and employers are simply assumed to seek the same goals as the state (productive workers, engaged citizens); citizens are assumed to demand educational services that are mostly congruent with the state’s educational objectives. “Demand” is a homogeneous function, and enhanced state action can respond effectively and appropriately to the demands placed on the education system through the traditional expedients of expanding access and improving quality. “Demand” that is not congruent with the goals of the state continues to be viewed with suspicion by both sides in these debates.

Even as mainstream policy debates continue to focus on the supply of schooling, however, and to assume homogeneity on the demand side, a wide array of new and increasingly heterogeneous demands on the education system has begun to emerge. These new demands come from a variety of sources, including religious groups and ethnic/linguistic minorities. Their common feature is the claim that the education system must be “opened up” to accommodate differentiated demands and expectations (Fuller, 2003). This claim is less easily reconciled with the state’s traditional educational goals than is the straightforward demand for more and better schooling.

These new demands have manifested themselves most clearly in the emergence and growth of alternative educational institutions including charter schools and home schools. Many parents choose charter schools or home schooling for their children in order to provide them with a “better” education, on terms that are generally congruent with the state’s educational objectives (Finn, Manno, and Vanourek, 2001; Hill, Lake, and Celio, 2002). Other parents, however, select these alternatives in an effort to educate their children in institutions that are better aligned with their own cultural, linguistic, or religious values. Among charter schools, for example, there are many where curricula reflect a specific cultural orientation (Native American, Arab-American, African-American, etc.), and others that promise to adhere to “traditional” (or, in some instances, “progressive”) values (Arsen, Plank, and Sykes, 1999; Fuller, 2002; Rofes and Stulberg, 2004). Home schools are characterized by similar diversity, with many parents choosing to teach their children at home in an effort to ensure that they receive an education that conforms to the parents’ own values (see, e.g., Klicka, 2000; Basham, 2001, 5-6).

These new demands have emerged in the company of highly-charged disagreements about appropriate state responses to religious, cultural, and linguistic differences and preferences. These disagreements range from conflicts over bilingual instruction to conflicts over the appropriate treatment of evolution in the science curriculum, and they inform policy debates on a broad array of issues including school choice, student assessment, and affirmative action. It is essential to recognize that differences with regard to the state’s response to these new demands do not necessarily conform to traditional political divisions. Advocates of policy changes that would lead to a more diverse and differentiated education system may be found on both the left



and the right sides of the political spectrum, as may opponents. Uniting the latter group is the belief that parents' demands on the education system should be congruent with the larger public goals articulated by the state, including civic unity and economic growth, which might be undermined by the potential for "Balkanization" that accompanies diversification in the supply of schools.

2) *Public expectations and public satisfaction*

The "official" account of American public education has increasingly come to focus on the extent to which US schools and students have failed to meet apparently reasonable performance standards, both globally and with respect to particular groups of students including minorities. The widespread conviction that schools are doing less well than they should (and perhaps less well than they once did) was most powerfully articulated in 1983, in a report from the US Department of Education entitled *A Nation At Risk* (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983). The argument put forward in *A Nation At Risk* was echoed and amplified in a host of reports sponsored by individual states and a variety of "blue-ribbon" commissions (Ginsberg and Plank, 1995). The intervening two decades have seen a steady stream of state and federal policy initiatives aimed at enhancing performance in the education system, culminating in the federal No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2002.

The official account of the education system has had a powerful impact on educational policy, and it has increasingly come to shape public expectations of schools as well. The view that the U.S. education system is doing a relatively poor job is widespread, with a substantial majority of Americans awarding the nation's schools a "grade" of C or lower. (See Table 1.) Only 2 percent of citizens award the system an A, with an additional 24 percent awarding a grade of B (PDK, 2003).<sup>2</sup>

**Table 1**

**Percent of Respondents Assigning Different Grades to U.S. and Local Schools, 1975-2004**

	1975		1980		1985		1990		1995		2000		2004	
	Nation	Local	Nation	Local	Nation	Local	Nation	Local	Nation	Local	Nation	Local	Nation	Local
A	13	13		10	3	9		8	2	8	2	11	2	13
B	30	30		25	24	34		33	18	33	18	36	24	34
C	28	28		29	43	30		34	50	37	47	35	45	33
D	6	9		12	12	10		12	17	12	14	8	13	10
Fail	5	7		6	3	4		5	4	5	5	3	4	4
Don't Know	20	13		18	15	13		8	9	5	14	7	12	6

SOURCE: *Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup Annual Poll*

On the other hand, public evaluations of local schools are significantly more favorable than evaluations of U.S. schools in general, and parents' evaluations of their own children's schools

<sup>2</sup> In 1974, in contrast, 48 percent of respondents awarded schools grades of A or B (Tyack and Cuban, 1996, 30).

are more favorable still. Only one quarter of survey respondents award grades of A or B to the nation's schools, while nearly half award such grades to their local schools. More than two-thirds give "the school your oldest child attends" an A or a B (PDK, 2003).

The level of public satisfaction with the education system has remained remarkably stable over the past two decades. The percentage of survey respondents who award the nation's schools an A or a B has held steady or perhaps increased slightly since 1997 (from 22 to 26 percent), as has the percentage awarding their local schools an A or a B (from 46 to 48 percent).<sup>3</sup> When asked whom they trust to bring about the necessary improvements in school and student performance, parents continue to place their trust in local educators and officials (Public Agenda, 1994), and citizens in general affirm their support for reforming the existing public school system rather than developing an alternative system (PDK, 2003). Teachers continue to rank very high on rankings of professionals based on perceived honesty and ethical standards, just behind nurses but ahead of clergy and well ahead of journalists and elected officials (Mitchell, 2004).

Not all Americans are equally satisfied with the performance of the education system, however. Data from Michigan show that African-Americans and urban residents are far less likely than other citizens to award their local schools an A or a B (Reimann, Lee, and Donohue, 2004). Only 15 percent of African-Americans award an A or B to local schools, compared with 60 percent of whites. The percentage of survey respondents from suburban and rural communities who award their schools an A or a B is twice as large as the percentage of urban residents who do likewise. (See Table 2.)

**Table 2**

**Percent of Michigan Respondents Assigning Different Grades to State and Local Schools, by Region, Race, and Parental Status, 2003**

<b>Community Type</b>	<b>Grades of A or B for Local Schools</b>	<b>Grades of A or B for State Schools</b>
Rural	56%	40%
Small City, Town or Village	61%	47%
Suburban	55%	37%
Urban	27%	28%
<b>Race</b>		
White	60%	43%
African American	15%	23%
<b>Respondents</b>		
With children <18 years old	55%	42%
Without children < 18 years old	53%	40%

SOURCE: Reimann, Lee, and Donohue (2004)

<sup>3</sup> Trends appear to show increasing support over time, but observed changes are within the survey margin of error.

### *3) Media Coverage*

Teachers and other educators generally view media coverage of the public school system as excessively negative, while education journalists believe that their coverage is more balanced (Public Agenda, 1997a). There is some justice in both of these views. Feature stories on local students and classrooms may appear often, but they are likely to receive less attention and to exert less influence than less frequent but more powerful stories focused on test scores, financial mismanagement, and school violence. The media's general tendency to focus on bad rather than good news has contributed to widespread disenchantment with public schools, and with the view that the education system is failing to perform as well as it has in the past, or as well as it must in the future (Bracey, 1994; Maeroff, 1998).

In recent years the media have given considerable attention to the academic performance of the US public school system, in terms both of generally discouraging results on international assessments including TIMSS and PISA and also of local schools' lack of success in meeting state and national standards including the NCLB standard of "adequate yearly progress". Educational success and failure are increasingly framed in terms of policy moves by the state to measure performance and enforce accountability through the use of standardized assessments, and results on these assessments generally tell a negative story. Though relatively rare, episodes of school violence and scandals involving teachers or administrators may also take on a disproportionate weight in media coverage of schools, further reinforcing public disenchantment with the education system.

#### **B. What do parents expect of schools and how satisfied are they?**

The best evidence on what parents expect of schools comes from a survey conducted by Public Agenda in 1994 (Public Agenda, 1994). There is no direct evidence to suggest that parents' views have shifted dramatically in the intervening decade, and such recent evidence as is available tends to confirm the main findings from the survey (Public Agenda, 2003).

According to Public Agenda, parents want schools to "put first things first." By overwhelming margins, parents believe that schools should place greater emphasis on providing a safe and orderly environment for student learning, and making sure that children master the academic "basics" of reading, writing, and mathematics. In the 1994 survey, nearly three-quarters of the respondents identified "too much drugs and violence in schools" as a serious problem, and three out of five identified "not enough emphasis on the basics." (See Table 3.)

This is consistent with the evidence on parents' choices among schools. In surveys parents who have chosen charter schools express typically affirm that their choices are based primarily on teacher quality and the quality of the academic program, and on the school's approach to discipline (e.g., Arizona State Board for Charter Schools, 2003; Texas Education Agency, 2003). Evidence on parents' revealed preferences suggests that their choices are also based on concerns about order, safety, and the social composition of a school's student body (Ladd, 2003; Schneider and Buckley, 2002). There is surprisingly little evidence of diversified or specialized demand in the US education system, except along ethnic/linguistic and religious lines (Brown; Arsen, Plank, and Sykes, 1999). Parents who choose their children's schools are consistently

more satisfied than those who enroll their children in the schools the state chooses for them (See, e.g., Texas Education Agency, 2003; Arizona State Board for Charter Schools, 2003).

Parents consistently rate their own children’s schools higher than schools in general, as the data in Tables 1 and 2 show. This fact is accounted for in large part by parents’ sources of information about schools. According to Public Agenda (1997), nearly three out of four parents rely on “personal observations and conversations” for information about their local schools, while three out of five rely on the media for information about schools outside their own community.

**Table 3**  
**Problems Facing Local Public Schools**

Percentages responding “very serious” or “somewhat serious”	General Public	White Parents	African-American Parents	Traditional Christian Parents
There’s too much drugs and violence in schools	72%	58%	80%	66%
Academic standards are too low and kids are not expected to learn enough	61%	49%	70%	57%
There is not enough emphasis on the basics such as reading, writing, and math	60%	52%	61%	56%
Schools are not getting enough money to do a good job	58%	67%	77%	69%
Kids are not taught enough math, science and computers	52%	46%	66%	56%
Schools don’t teach kids good work habits such as being on time to class and completing assignments	52%	36%	47%	37%
Classes are too crowded	50%	55%	63%	54%

SOURCE: *Public Agenda (1994)*

**C. How open to external influence is decision-making in schooling - in local governance and day-to-day influence – and who exercises such influence?**

The most significant development in the US education system in recent decades has been the steady centralization of financial responsibility and administrative authority within the system, with a growing role for federal and especially state agencies and a correspondingly diminished role for local actors. Efforts to raise standards, equalize opportunities, and strengthen accountability have reduced local variations in the character and quality of schooling, and

consequently reduced the range of issues on which local school systems might be open to external influence. Despite widespread resistance to the development of national curriculum standards, for example, the increased importance assigned to standardized assessments has resulted in a steady homogenization of curricula across and within states. Conflicts continue to erupt periodically over the teaching of particular subjects in specific school districts, but these are increasingly infrequent.

A more recent but closely related development has witnessed the reduction of the traditional institutional autonomy of local education systems, and a closer integration between the public schools and the other institutions of government. In a number of major cities, for example, mayors have come to exercise a far greater degree of influence over local schools. Governors and state legislators have usurped policy-making roles once reserved for state boards of education.

These changes have shifted the ways in which external influence is felt in the education system, in two ways. On the one hand, of course, the centralization of administrative and financial control has opened the education system to increased external influence at the state and national levels. Conflicts that were once played out in local school districts are now produced on a larger stage. In the 1990s, for example, an effort by the federal government to develop national history standards ended in a political conflagration, as a variety of interests fought to protect their preferred version of US history (Nash, 1997). Similar conflicts have broken out at the state level, in subject areas including mathematics (Wilson, 2003). Disagreements over fraught questions including evolution and sex education produce almost perpetual turmoil in states where textbooks are chosen at the state level, including Texas.

On the other hand, the political space reserved for educational issues is no longer as distinct as it traditionally was from the realm of “normal” politics. Candidates for mayor and Governor (and even President) put forward competing educational proposals, which are subsequently debated in the Legislature. Education budgets are presented along with budgets for other public functions, and increased or reduced in accordance with the respective power and influence of competing interests. Disagreements about the best way to teach reading or mathematics are enlisted into ongoing battles for partisan advantage.

These shifts in the character and locus of school politics have accompanied (and supported) a shift in the balance between “voice” and “exit” for parents and citizens at the local level. The centralization of authority in the education system raises the stakes in school politics, and pushes most individuals and local interests out of the game. The closer integration between school politics and “normal” politics has similar effects, as it invites a variety of new players into debates over education policy. The efficacy of individual and local “voice” is consequently diminished; parents who might once have expressed dissatisfaction at a local school board meeting must now compete to be heard among a variety of competing voices in the mayor’s office or the Congress. Rather than seeking change by exercising “voice,” therefore, local actors who are unhappy with their schools may now be more inclined to “exit” the local school system in search of educational opportunities better suited to their own preferences.

#### **D. What do we know about the aspirations and expectations of young people themselves, and how well these are met through schooling?**

In discussing the aspirations and expectations of young people it is essential to draw a sharp distinction between their goals for educational attainment and their goals for learning. On the one hand, most young people aim to complete secondary school and enroll in post-secondary education; according to Public Agenda (1997b, 11) “few see any alternative path to an acceptable future.” On the other hand, “they view most of what they learn in their classes—apart from ‘the basics’—as tedious and irrelevant” (ibid, 17). The educational aspirations of African-American and Hispanic youngsters are not significantly different from those of whites (ibid, 31); indeed, “black and Hispanic teenagers believe even more strongly than white teens in the advantages of a sound academic education” (ibid, 32).

Students participating in the Public Agenda survey identified a variety of obstacles to achieving their educational objectives, including disruptive peers, low standards and expectations for student behavior and performance, and bad teaching. The results display “a yearning for higher expectations and closer...monitoring by schools and teachers (ibid, 23),” reflecting the respondents’ recognition that they could accomplish far more in school than their teachers now require them to do. These findings suggest a complex interaction between intrinsic and extrinsic motivations. Neither by itself is sufficient to ensure student engagement in learning. Under the right circumstances, however, the two may reinforce one another in support of improved student performance.

At the same time, there is a substantial number of young people whose demand for schooling falls well short of publicly articulated norms and standards. Some of these young people remain enrolled in school, but are only weakly engaged in educational pursuits. Many others drop out of school before completing their secondary education. Their disengagement from the educational system has a variety of negative consequences, both for the young people themselves and for the broader society of which they are a part. On the one hand, as young people themselves recognize, it is increasingly difficult for those who have not completed secondary education to find the kind of employment that makes possible a minimally acceptable adult life. On the other hand, disengagement and drop-out may produce significant negative externalities in terms of increased disaffection, economic marginalization, and public dependence. The problems posed by weak demand and disengagement take on a special urgency in the US, where drop-out is concentrated among young people from marginalized or disadvantaged groups, including urban students and members of racial and linguistic minorities.

There are significant gender differences in educational performance and educational attainment, and these are increasing with time. Boys are significantly more likely than girls to drop out of school; young women are more likely than young men to enroll in post-secondary education and to complete post-secondary degrees. Gender differences are especially pronounced among African-American and Hispanic young people; for example, more than 60 percent of the bachelor’s degrees awarded to African-Americans are awarded to women.

**E. How is diversity of demand recognised in the “supply” of schooling and how broad is the influence over the contents of formal school education?**

The move toward centralization of authority in the education system reduces the value of “voice” and increases the salience of “exit” as strategies for dealing with dissatisfaction. Parents and other constituents have less opportunity to influence the education system at the local level, because of increasing federal and state regulation and prescription. For those who find themselves unhappy with the increasingly standardized educational offerings provided by the state the exercise of “voice” may no longer be an effective strategy for encouraging change, when confronted by the clamorous array of powerful interests seeking to influence the system at state and federal levels. “Exit” may consequently emerge as the preferred option, as parents and others seek to create educational opportunities more closely aligned with their own values and preferences. A variety of recent educational initiatives—including policies on charter schools, home schooling, and vouchers—represent efforts to accommodate dissatisfaction with the education system by facilitating “exit.”

The educational alternatives that have emerged as a consequence of increased “exit” from the traditional public school system are not in the main offering educational programs that are dramatically different from those provided in the traditional system (Mintrom, 2001). As noted above, parents’ preferences are generally conservative when it comes to schooling (Public Agenda, 1994; Brown), and the educational choices they make for their children tend to reflect these preferences. Most of the parents who choose private schools, charter schools, or home schools for their children are seeking schools that put “first things first” rather than innovation and experimentation. Schools that promise safety, order, and a focus on the academic “basics” are attractive to parents, whether these are in or outside of the traditional public school system.

The adoption of school choice and other policies that facilitate “exit” from the traditional state-centered education system has also created space for the articulation and accommodation of a variety of heterogeneous demands. By far the most important of these represent efforts to institutionalize educational opportunities that are responsive to and supportive of the cultural and religious preferences of particular groups. Among charter schools, for example, diversity manifests itself primarily on the dimensions of ethnicity and language, and not on the dimensions of curriculum and instructional strategy (Fuller, 2003). The political controversy over vouchers is focused on the question of whether the state will provide public support for schools that seek to reflect and advance religious convictions, or whether the traditional legal boundaries will be maintained. Many parents who school their children at home have chosen this option in order to protect cultural and religious values that are not sufficiently honored in the traditional public school system.

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