SCHOOL: A MATTER OF CHOICE

Moves to give parents and pupils a greater choice of schools are transforming education systems, according to the OECD’s Centre for Educational Research and Innovation (CERI).

A CERI report issued today examines policies in six OECD countries (*). It identifies a real demand for greater choice from education’s "consumers", but warns that such choice can damage education systems unless it is managed carefully. The study looks both at subsidies to private schools and at measures to create greater choice among public schools.

In practice, the biggest problem with attempts to create school "markets" has been that consumer choice does not automatically lead to an increased supply of good schools, and sometimes simply creates queues at the most popular ones. The worst result thus can be hierarchies of schools, with the most popular able to choose pupils among already-privileged groups. Moreover such policies have caused intense political controversy in some cases. The CERI study takes a balanced look at the real experience of school choice offered in the countries examined. It shows that well-planned policies for school choice can reduce the danger by:

-- creating diversity among schools, with each having a special character that appeals to some parents;

(*) Countries examined are Australia, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Sweden, the United Kingdom and the United States. Sixteen specific case studies of choice in practice draw examples from these six countries and from Denmark and France.
-- enabling less privileged groups to choose more effectively, through provision of good information, and help with transport where necessary;

-- improving the links between school provision and demand, rather than allowing planning or political criteria to take precedence.

Journalists may obtain a copy of the report from the OECD Press Division, 2 rue André Pascal, 75775 Paris cedex 16 (tel. 45 24 80 88 or 80 89 – fax. 45 24 80 03).

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