

Carnegie Council Privatization Project

The Case for Structural Reform Through Private Innovation



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Benno C. Schmidt, Jr. addresses a Privatization Project breakfast audience of almost 200 at the University Club in New York City.

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I am delighted to join you this morning and want to salute the organizers of this project. This general issue of privatization is changing the world we live in, and we in the United States need to try to understand its potential as well as its problems.

When I am asked, as I often am, why I left the presidency of Yale to head up The Edison Project, I think of what Woodrow Wilson said when he was asked why he left the presidency of Princeton, first to become governor, and then ultimately, of course, president of the United States: "Couldn't stand the politics," is what Wilson used to say. I've often thought that in my case the comparable answer might be: "I wanted to get involved in education." I mean this not in the sense of the stereotype of the modern university president, a harried and rather comical figure, buffeted by pressures of finances, fund raising, and football. That is not the role of the president at Yale, nor indeed at any other great university that I know, where presidents are immersed in basic questions of educational philosophy and purpose, and have the enormous satisfaction of seeking to organize the energies of institutions that are the envy of the world, to further the objectives of teaching and research.

But I came to the conclusion during my six years at Yale that Yale University and places like it, although critical to the future of this country and the world, are not in fact the vortex of the great challenge education presents to America. Our colleges and universities are not where this nation is in jeopardy. Those of us who have had the privilege of learning, working, and teaching in our institutions of higher learning need to turn our attention to the foundations of our educational system—foundations which are, in fact, crumbling beneath us.

We hear a lot about the troubled state of education in America today, and I will continue to raise those alarms this morning, but we should remember, as we consider the problems in our schools, that our country has the demonstrated capacity to support and create a vast educational enterprise that is the standard of excellence in the world. For all the intensely self-preoccupied problems of our colleges and universities, they are in fact the envy of the world. They are marked by a vital diversity, from small liberal arts colleges spread across the country to specialized institutions teaching the arts or agriculture or engineering, to bustling community

colleges, to great sprawling state universities, to the elite public and private research universities.

Across the nation our colleges and universities are marked by a creative balance of publicly and privately financed institutions. They exist in an intense, if on the whole friendly, competition—competition for faculty, for students, for funding. Few of us who have worked and lived within modern American colleges and universities would minimize the challenges facing them, or indeed the forces of institutional inertia within them that tend to resist change. But it's worth remembering that our colleges and universities embrace the latest discoveries in science and technology and, indeed, in other fields of knowledge as well; they engage in creative partnerships with government—state, federal, and municipal; with business and industry; and with each other, in the cause of advancing knowledge. They attract vast voluntary philanthropic funding through the excellence of their programs and the excellence of their purposes. Students from all over the

world flock to them for graduate and professional studies. In the greater and greater number of Americans that come to them, and the greater and greater diversity of their students, our colleges and universities, I think,

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bear witness to our best democratic values.

The condition of primary and secondary education in this country presents a drastically different picture. Far from being the envy of the world, our schools have become an international symbol of America's decline; like our deficits, our decaying cities, and our crumbling infrastructure. But in the long run the condition of education in this country is more important to our future than any of these.

Reference was made in the introduction to a report issued about ten years ago by a well-informed moderate group of Americans who summed up the state of our schools in the title, "A Nation at Risk." Many of you read that report and will recall the chilling and well-documented statement in it that if an unfriendly foreign power had imposed upon America the condition and performance of our schools, Americans would be justified in regarding that as an act of war.

The painful realities underlying these conclusions, and those of many other studies like the "Nation at Risk" report, have caused more and more Americans to view our schools with dismay and alarm. Indeed, the problems of education,

and efforts to improve it, have become one of the two or three most pressing domestic political issues. So great and so unending in the press and in our politics is the level of coverage of the problems in our schools, that I think we almost have become enured to the concrete reality of a situation in which one in five students in this country will never finish high school and will drop out to a life of almost certain frus-

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tration and poverty. One third of the students who *do* finish high school are not even close to meeting the most mediocre academic standards. Fewer than one in three seventeen-year-olds can find France on a map of the world, and fewer than one in ten high school seniors can write a reasonably coherent paragraph or is ready for mathematics at the college level. Over a third of our high school seniors reported in the latest Gallup educational poll that they read fewer than six pages a day of any kind of reading in or out of school; yet three, four, or five hours of television, largely unsupervised, is the norm.

Is it any wonder that America's young people now routinely score near the bottom in virtually all international comparisons of academic performance? And not only in science and math, but in the humanities, in language arts, and in history? The latest comparisons of America's schools with their counterparts in Japan, Taiwan, Korea, and even on the mainland of China, show American students, including students in our best public and private schools, falling farther and farther behind.

Every sensible person I know believes that America's future will tend inevitably and inexorably to reflect the quality or the absence of quality of our schools. I know there are splendid examples of innovation and excellence, of great teachers inspiring students, bucking the system, and producing great acts of imagination and learning. I want to make it clear that I do not believe the problems with our schools lie in the quality or, by and large, the commitment of the people involved in them. I know I could not do nearly so well were I a teacher in a typical public school in America, as do most of our teachers. The problem is not with our people. The problem is with a system that is caught in an anachronism and is finding it very difficult to accomplish systemic change.

Our educational system is, in fact, now a tragedy for our aspirations to be a good and just society. A nation at risk of course begins with children at risk, and there are few injustices that any of us can find more appalling than those visited upon children through no fault of their own.

In Chicago, fewer than half the students in the public school system will make it through and the ones who manage to do so will rank, on average, in the bottom five percent of academic performance measured by the average performance of our nation at large. So a young person who is born in Chicago and who fights her way through a public school system in which half her peers will drop out, will, on the average, rank near the very bottom of academic performance and achievement. That, more than any other factor, will determine her capacity for productivity and prosperity, and that will determine our society's capacity for a reasonable standard of justice, as well as for our

security and prosperity.

What is to be done? As I have indicated, I do not believe that the essence of our problem lies with the quality of the people involved in education. We have seen, over the past two decades, funding for public education in this country more than double, in real terms. We've seen standards of teacher training improve. We've seen levels of teacher compensation go up. We've even seen some efforts at more efficient administration of our public school systems; certainly more dollars have flowed into them. And yet, over this two-decade-long period of heightened funding, growing alarm, and many reform efforts, the educational performance of our young people has not improved at all.

Consider a few mundane but basic facts about our schools. The model I am describing is in fact not only the model of our public schools, but of most of our parochial and private schools as well. Consider that with all of the dismay and alarm about education, with all our intense efforts to improve it in this country, and with our understanding of its fundamental importance to our future, our schools are still only open an average of 180 days a year, for about six hours a day.

Now, you can scribble on the back of the envelope as



Left to right: Alan Stoga, Kissinger Associates; Steve Davis, Le Boeuf, Lamb, Leiby, & MacRae; and Benno Schmidt.



Fred Rose (left) of Rose Associates greets Benno Schmidt.

well as I can. I think that means that we are not seriously trying to improve the quality of our schools. It means that young people spend less than nine percent of their time on academic work—assuming that all the time they spend in class is productive time, which of course is not the right assumption.

But more than that, our school year and our six or six-and-a-half-hour school day assure that parents can take no significant active role in their children's education if they are working, as most parents now are in American society. Imagine how unresponsive our schools are to the typical needs of America's parents and children. It is our anachronistic school schedule that creates our latch-key children. Think of the consequences if we were able to do something as modest as expand the length of the school day to ten or twelve hours and expand the length of the school year to 210 days and make it possible for parents to be involved. Indeed, we at The Edison Project are looking into whether it would be possible to require, by contract, that our parents spend significant amounts of time working in our schools. It would be possible to more than double the amount of time our children spend on academic work and, far more important than that, I believe it would be possible to engage parents seriously in the education of their children. There is considerable research that indicates nothing could be more productive for American schools than to engage parents seriously in their work.

Now consider some other facts about our schools. Along with the extraordinarily anachronistic basic scheduling by which they work, our schools are for the most part still largely untouched by the technological revolution of our time. I know there are a number of schools that represent impressive exceptions to this and I have seen schools in which teachers and

young people are being liberated by the capacity of the new marvels of information science to free them for individual work, to make education truly an individual exploration for which a young person can take the most responsibility. But in most of our schools computers operate on the periphery of the educational process. The great capacities of multimedia and electronic data systems and information banks are largely untouched. Think of it, education depending as it does on the creation, transfer, and analysis of information, yet I think it is the only major activity in our society—perhaps our religious institutions would also qualify—which has been essentially untouched by what is probably the most formidable and important intellectual revolution of our time: the revolution in information.

Why is this? It is in part because our schools, in their structure and to a considerable extent in their economics, still essentially resemble the last of the cottage industries. They get very little benefit from the possibilities of "system." In The Edison Project one of our hopes is to create the first national system of schools that truly will be a system in an organic, technological sense. We hope to create a system which can invest seriously in research and development, in experimentation, and in innovation.

Did you know that the research and development budget of a single, middle-sized drug company in the United States is greater than the total research and development budgets of all public school systems in this country put together? We have a vast economic and social enterprise which is organized in such a way that research and development, risk-taking, experimentation, and the systematization of innovation essentially play no part.

As I said before, there are splendid schools in this country, and exciting classrooms. But the excitement, the innovation, the techniques, and the new approaches that work find

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extraordinary difficulty in being incorporated into a system whose primary character, I would argue, is its unresponsiveness to change.

In addition to thinking about the school day, the school year, getting parents seriously involved, getting the benefits of system, and creating a sophisticated technological national system of schools, we in The Edison Project are seeking to make a vast investment in curriculum development. The most modest figures for spending on public education in this country are about \$250 billion a year, and if the capital costs of

our public education effort were truly accounted for, my guess is that our yearly spending well exceeds \$300 billion a year. Yet this vast economic and social structure is like a huge Atlas rocket with a pea on the end of it: when one thinks of the

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investment that we make in lessons, in new curriculum, and in teacher training—we make almost no serious investment in our curriculum. If you consider the entire gross product of the textbook and workbook industry in this country compared to the level of spending in our public schools, it is infinitesimal.

We are seeking to reverse that ratio and spend much more investing in lessons, instructional methodology, teacher training, and in the content of our curriculum, while trying to keep to a minimum the huge system costs that dominate public education in this country.

If we can better focus our curriculum in the context of a school day and a school year that are much longer and that permit more focused relaxed time, we can revolutionize the human dynamics in our schools and make them more like so many successful religious schools—for example, I think of the Quaker schools—where the children take much of the responsibility for the welfare of the schools. That’s what happens in Japan and China. The children do the cooking and serving, they clean the school, they take care of the place physically, they become responsible for their school as a community, and they become active members of an academic community.

When Ernest Boyer did one of his series of fine books for the Carnegie Corporation, he conducted a test to see what the one word was that high school students would use most often to describe any of the various aspects of their schools: the curriculum, the environment, what they did in the class, or what they did outside the class, and the word they chose was “boring.” We have created, by and large, schools in which the extraordinary excitement—I dare say even the joy—of learning, of individual exploration into the world of ideas, is imposed on our youngsters in a role of such passivity that the word they use to describe this potentially wonderful activity and institution in their lives is “boring.” And it *is* boring. If any of you have been in the typical frenetic, overcrowded public schools

in our great cities in America, you know that.

These are a few of the particular changes that we are exploring in our Project. They will all be anchored in a philosophy of education which I believe is not the philosophy that obtains in most of our public schools. This is a philosophy that calls on the best of the liberal tradition in education and seeks to infuse those traditions with America’s democratic values. It is a philosophy that believes that our approach to education for every child should be the same.

When Aristotle wrote, “All people by nature desire to understand,” he did not mean all people who were going to college, and he did not mean except for people who will work with their hands, or even except for people who will not work at all but will concern themselves with their family and



ABOVE: President Albert R. Dowden, president and CEO, Volvo North America Corp., introduces Benno Schmidt. LEFT: Left to right, Benno Schmidt; Gloria Gilbert Stoga, Carnegie Council; and Abe Hoppenstein, Allen & Co., Inc. BELOW: Left to right, Benno Schmidt, Albert R. Dowden, and Gerald Wigdortz, Salomon Brothers.



their community in other ways. *All* people by nature desire to understand, and need to understand. Who says a person who is not headed for college, and perhaps will work her lifetime with her hands, does not need to understand the constitutional

tributes, bears no resemblance whatever to the current needs of American families and children. This is a system that needs—that fairly begs—for change. My own view is that our best chance for fundamental change, for real innovation, lies not only in the very important reforms within the system that we all need to dedicate ourselves to encouraging and pursuing, and lies not only in following the example of the splendid islands of ex-

“You can see all across the country where systems that are set up initially to support public enterprises come to dominate them, and if there is one problem in our major public school systems it is that the children aren’t at the heart of the school. The adults are.”

system of this country, our history, the philosophy on which it rests, and the extraordinary cultural achievements of other countries and societies in the world? Who says such a person has less interest in music, in the arts, in the humanities? Who says such a person is going to confront less the great issues of life and death and tragedy and hope and promise in her life? Yet, since World War II, more and more of our schools have been engaged in separating, effectively, the philosophy of education with which they approach young people, based by and large on ungrounded predictions about their future. So The Edison Project begins with a philosophy that urges a broad liberal education infused with democratic values for every child; an education that will minimize, to the greatest possible extent, inequalities that arise.

I saw a study the other day by Professor Slavin of Johns Hopkins—one of the most creative and best-informed educational researchers in this country—who discovered that it is the length of the summer vacation that is the primary cause of inequality between disadvantaged youngsters in our schools and their more advantaged counterparts. It is the fact that during these lengthy summer recesses children go into radically different environments in terms of the level of educational stimulation, not to mention chaos and disorganization.

We are stuck in a school year and in a school schedule which not only limits our children to less than nine percent of their time engaged in serious work, but may be the greatest cause of inequality in terms of retention of knowledge between disadvantaged youngsters and others. We need to change these things. I don’t know if The Edison Project has now or will have the answers to creating better schools, and it would be enormously presumptuous of me to suppose that we would have the answers. But what I do know is that our system, so unresponsive and essentially unchanging in some of its most basic at-

excellence and innovation that are out there in our private, parochial, and many of our public schools, but it lies also in the possibility of creating completely new schools on a clean slate. New schools that question every conceived assumption about education; new schools that build on the best of our traditions as well as seek new approaches; new schools in which the problem of overcoming the tremendous institutional inertia of our bureaucratic public education systems will not be a problem.

We hope to do that—and we hope that others, too, will do that—at the same cost per pupil as public school systems around the country. We hope that by having our schools open (we do not plan to have any admission requirements), and that by having twenty percent of the students in our system on scholarship so we can operate schools in inner cities and in rural areas (unlike public school systems, we can move dollars across political lines), we hope to be able to demonstrate that fresh new approaches can generate radical improvement. Improvement not only for the youngsters in our schools but, more

importantly, improvement that can serve as a model for change; that can be affordable for public school systems and others around the country; and, most of all, improvement that will serve as a model and an inducement for others to come in and create their own new systems of schools. If we can manage this, I think our success can truly be a success from which all young people in America can benefit.

We have many hurdles to cross and the challenges are enormous, but I, for one, cannot think of a more interesting, or constructive challenge for the future of our country and our young people. ■



“Unions that would like to see accountability, innovation, risk-taking, new approaches, and merit-based approaches will like what we do. Unions that don’t, won’t.”

Questions and Answers

Q I have a two-part question. You've said that the teachers involved in public education are not to blame for the poor performance of our children in public schools, but you neglect to mention the role of the National Education Association in opposing sensible reform and, indeed, of even opposing The Edison Project. I was wondering if you could comment on that. The second part of the question is that schools are unresponsive to research, development and education, it seems to me, largely because the curriculum is influenced by social problems. AIDS, for example, has led to condom education in New York, illegitimacy to sex education, drug abuse to drug education, and so on. Will you resist those kinds of social pressures?

A One of the happiest—and I suppose I can even say proudest—aspects of my time at Yale is that I think I'm the only modern Yale president who never experienced a strike. I got along very well with our friends in the union, and I'm trying to get along with Al Shanker and his friends right now. It is true that the unions do see our project and similar efforts as a threat. There are about forty-five million youngsters in public education in America. In our schools we'll almost certainly bring children in at a much earlier age, with their parents, so the population will rise to fifty million. If we are successful, we aim at setting up about a hundred campuses and envision that we might have on these campuses different schools that would offer education to perhaps as many as two thousand students. So we would have about two hundred thousand or so students across the country in our schools. That's not a serious challenge in any true, competitive sense. The challenge that we present is that we might show that there are better ways to work with young people than the ones that now prevail in our public schools. The challenge that we present is a challenge that we might cause a response from parents, or a public response, or a political response, that would require change. Our current schools operate so that an adult is responsible for a child for about eight months, and then another adult takes over. Indeed, in high school, it's a whole group of adults for eight months, and then another group, and anyone who knows anything about accountability or span of control will tell you that this is a prescription for no one being held accountable. So unions that would like to see accountability, innovation, risk taking, new approaches, and merit-based approaches will like what we do. Unions that don't, won't.

The second part of your question asks about social issues. There is a very important issue of philosophy here. In 1918 a group of prominent Americans—I'm sorry to say there were university presidents among them—got together and established a "philosophy" of education, and I believe they had it fundamentally wrong.

They viewed education as a process of socialization for certain roles. They even listed good health as the number one objective, as if the purpose of education is therapeutic—to make people feel good, to educate them so they can play out designated roles, thought to be socially constructive. I think on the level of philosophy that is very wrong, and is, in fact, a terrible mistake. Isaiah Berlin said that taken to its logical conclusion it portends the end of the human race. The utilitarian, therapeutic philosophy of education in this country is, I think, all wrong. And it's a disaster. It leads to the kind of sorting out that I described before, that I think is unprincipled and not consistent with our democratic values. It leads to confusion about what ought to happen in the classroom. It leads to politicization of the curriculum that is utterly inconsistent with the intellectual and academic values that ought to dominate educational philosophy. I would say we need to get our philosophy right. But, this is a free country. Let's have schools that embody a variety of philosophies and see what Americans choose.

Q My understanding is that you propose to charge tuition of \$5,500, and you mentioned earlier that twenty percent of students will be on scholarship. You also propose to invest in research and development. You have no physical plant as of now, no string of schools or buildings, and yet you also propose to make a profit. Can you be a little bit more specific as to the mathematics and the ways in which you expect to do this?

A What we have said is that we would operate our schools at roughly the same per-pupil cost as public education. Per-pupil spending has been rising at more than five percent a year for many years now and we intend to try to peg our costs to that.

As you point out, public schools have no one on scholarship. We are trying to have twenty percent of our students on scholarship, and we need also to invest in our physical facilities. So you're right; we will have to operate differently, we will have to get more out of the people who work in our schools. We'll rely more on students to take care of the schools—right now students are not allowed to take care of the public schools, much less invited to do so. We will have parents in our schools doing real work. And we'll have some advantages. In New York City a few years ago the average length of time that it took to build a new school, after the site was selected and the money authorized, was twelve years. It's not going to take us twelve years and we're not going to have fifty or sixty percent of our

budget never getting into our classrooms. We're going to get the benefits of technology, which in addition to being truly liberating can also generate enormous efficiencies. Technology can help us break out of the current group dynamics of education and into much more individualized processes in which youngsters can take much more individual responsibility. You would be right to say you'll believe it when you see it. I can only say that we've done some pretty careful planning and we think we can make this work. Indeed, there are many people who believe that this, purely as a business activity, is the most interesting opportunity in America. Our friends who criticize us assume that it will work economically, I should add, and worry about other matters.

Q I have two questions. One is that your Edison Project seems to be modeled after an independent education to a great extent. You charge tuition, you provide scholarships, you believe in independence. The only difference is that you are trying to nationalize it. Have you visited a number of outstanding independent schools to learn something from them? Secondly, I'm a bit bothered by the fact that you are trying to nationalize private education just like chain stores such as Macy's and Gimbels and create this humongous organization.

A Let me say three things. We believe that this Project ought to rest on very careful research and development. In fact, we believe that the relatively modest amount of funding that we have for research and development on this Project, which is about sixty million dollars for the first phase, is by far—and this is shocking—the largest single focused amount of research and development on early childhood, elementary, and secondary education in this country. Research and development budgets for education—like so many other aspects of a bureaucratic political system—get spread all over the place, and they are not at all focused.

Secondly, yes, we do intend to learn from private schools. The difference is that most private schools operate like a cottage industry. They use the same textbooks and chalk and, to a modest degree in some cases, even the same hardware and software as other schools, but they essentially operate in a totally separate manner. I know you have your meetings and so on, but the difference between private schools and a truly technologically and organizationally integrated system is like the difference between the oil industry before and after Rockefeller. If you believe that there could be tremendous educational gains that come from having a system operate in an integrated way, rather than in the fragmented way that schools now operate, then you would think intuitively that we may have some interesting opportunities in The Edison Project, and that we will be a system to explore.

Thirdly, you mention the profit motive. That's something that troubles a lot of people, and it is something that troubled me, in fact. The only other jobs I ever had be-

fore this were jobs in the government and in nonprofit universities; I've spent my whole life in those areas. But running over the problems I described, I asked myself a question. If you believe, as I do, that part of the answer lies in creating a nationwide system; lies in a very heavy investment in research and development; lies in a focused investment in curriculum development and instructional methodologies; and lies in designing new facilities in which the facilities can themselves be an engaging and inspiring teacher; what is the chance that our politics and the economics of public education in this country will provide the freedom and investment to create such a system? The chance is zero. Hannah Arendt was right when she said that bureaucracy is the great problem of the late twentieth century. I have nothing against bureaucracies. They are necessary, and in many ways they do good things. But they're not innovative, they don't take risks, and they don't invest in research and development to cause change; they are the reverse of that.

I then asked myself what is the chance that the nonprofit sector can come up with the capital necessary to invest in a new system of schools? We estimate that the total capital costs of this project will run somewhere in the neighborhood of two and a half billion dollars. I know something about fundraising in the nonprofit sector and the chance of the nonprofit, charitable sector making that kind of focused investment in education at this stage in the country is, I believe, also approximately zero. So if this is going to be done, and we're going to break out of our cottage industry fragmentation and create a whole new system with the vast investment I've described, the private sector is the only way to do it. I think it's worth taking the risks of a for-profit effort in this area in order to get the tremendous potential benefits that could come from systemic innovation and operation.

Q I would like to hear you describe the typical day for a typical child. Let's say he or she is eight years old. Is it a ten-hour day? Is it a twelve-hour day? Is it sitting in front of a computer terminal all day? Is it a class of ten kids? Is it a class of fifty kids? Are there specifics? I'd also like to hear about the experiences for a child.

A I joined The Edison Project on July 1. There were several colleagues who had been working on it for a few weeks before that, but not for very long. We are now in the middle of our research and development effort in which we are trying to create a design just of the sort that you described. Indeed, we have created about five different designs so we would have some concrete options and various different alternatives among which to choose. We're not nearly at the point yet where I can fully answer your question, and we won't be at that point for another five or six months. But I can tell you this: the school day will be longer;

the curriculum will be more focused; and the youngsters and teachers will have much more time to work with that more focused curriculum. We will put very heavy stress on the arts and the humanities, as well as mathematics and science and the social sciences. We will not, in all likelihood, go rushing after every social issue that's agitating the moment, but we will have a curriculum that is very hands-on and applied, as well as theoretical. Yes, I imagine that each of the youngsters will have what's sort of the electronic equivalent of Virginia Woolf's *A Room of Your Own*. There is, I think, in addition to a pervasive passivity, a lack of privacy in our schools that creates an environment in which it's hard for young people to regard themselves as truly responsible for their own education, and that makes it hard for them to see their education as an exploration rather than as something delivered to them by an adult. This is what we call sort of a "yak-in-the-box" model: one adult and twenty or twenty-five youngsters together. We hope to liberate teachers to work much more with youngsters as individuals.

Q If you look at the things that the military has been doing in its education training programs during the last seven or eight years, they've really revolutionized the way they bring young people from the inner-city schools into the military and bring them on board, and teach them new skills.

A It is the example of the military, among others, that leads us to think that there are tremendous advantages of approaching this in a technologically integrated, systemic way. The successes of military training are very good examples of what's possible.

I also think that our schools need to be open to groups other than the ones from which we traditionally draw our teachers. There are a lot of great people who retire from the military at the prime of life (this is another wonderful aspect of bureaucracy, that people stop working when they are forty-five or fifty), but who typically aren't able to crack the mold of elementary and secondary education. And our colleges are full of great, able youngsters who would like to get into teaching but are terribly turned off by the barriers to entry that exist in most public—not in the private—school systems.

Q As the mother of a young child I must say I have a particular interest in what you are saying and applaud your efforts. I am not worried about my son, however, because I will do everything I can to ensure he gets a good education. It's the children north of 96th Street that I'm worried about; children whose parents can't provide them with an alternative.

A I'm going to violate one of my standing rules, which is not to get involved in the voucher debate. It's an interesting thing that you mention people north of 96th Street. All of the recent polls indicate that people in this country who are most affirmative about educational choice are

minority citizens in our inner cities. They are the least well served by our current systems of public education. The polls as well as their own behavior in many other respects indicate that they understand very well that a possible avenue of improvement lies in competition and diversity and real choices being available to people.

I don't want to get into politics about this, and The Edison Project includes people who are opposed to vouchers as well as some people like John Chubb and Chester Finn, who are probably, in a scholarly sense, the "gurus" of educational choice. The ones who are doubtful about it—and I'm in that category—don't want to see anything happen that would take resources away from public schools.

But on the other hand, there is a clear sense sweeping this country, and most profoundly in our inner cities, that competition and choice, including private school choice, is a big part of the answer. There is an intuitive understanding out there that monopolies do not work well, whether they are public or whether they are private. They are not responsive, they are not innovative, they do not take risks. I was interested in the editorial in yesterday's *Wall Street Journal* that pointed out that in Poland, Sweden, and Russia, private school choice is becoming a basic aspect of their educational policies. This is no longer a liberal or conservative issue. The most disadvantaged people in this country have the most to gain in competition in this area. I am very hopeful about what the future may hold for the people we are currently serving the least well, if our current political trends continue.

Q A lot of people would suggest that the crisis in our schools has a lot to do with family, home life, and living conditions. What is The Edison Project going to be able to do about these problems?

A I don't think there is a simple answer to that, but I would say this: schools obviously exist in the vortex of some of the most important changes in our society that have ever taken place in our history. I mentioned the revolution in information sciences; the changes in the American family and in our environment are also hugely important. What these changes call for, among other things, is responsiveness. When I mention the mundane matter of the length of the school schedule and the fact that this is a schedule that was created for an agricultural society in which the assumption was that mom was always home, that's just one of many examples of how unresponsive our schools are. Yes, there are serious problems with the American family and in our cities, but the answers to those problems lie in part in trying to respond to them constructively. So, bring parents into school. Oblige them to come if you can, and if you can't get a parent to come, get another adult to come in. Get students to take responsibilities for their schools, including some of the responsibility for teaching their colleagues and the young. I know that educators in this room know very well the

tremendous potential of cooperative learning experiments across age groups. We need to fundamentally build that into our design. I don't know if schools are capable—I doubt that they *are* capable—of mitigating the kind of chaos, disorder, and disillusion that is endemic in American society, but they haven't even tried; and we ought to try. There are some very basic things that would make a huge difference to young people and to their parents and to their families, and we need to explore those. We need to experiment with those. We need to open this closed system up. As I said, I don't know if we have the answers, but I am sure that the answers lie in opening up the system and getting some new models out there. Let's try them, experiment with them, take some risks, reject what doesn't work, try to systematize that which does,

and invest heavily in innovation instead of what we have now. You can see all across the country where systems that are set up initially to support public enterprises come to dominate them, and if there is one problem in our major public school systems it is that the children aren't at the heart of the school. The adults are. It's the interests of the adults which are dominating education today, and we need a kind of Copernican revolution in education, where the child is at the center of that universe, not the political and economic interests of adults expressed through bureaucratic forms. That's just a recipe for what we now have, which, I'm afraid, is a closed and largely unresponsive system, that needs more than anything else to change. ■

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