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May 30, 2006

Choosing a Charter School—The Pain of It All (Kevin R. Kosar)

A few years ago, I landed a very good job in Washington, DC. After a few months, I dropped to my knee, and asked a lovely woman to marry me and join me in DC. She agreed. Lucky me.

After living in New York City, we both had hoped to maintain a critical part of what we considered urban living— the ability to walk to work and shops. After a bracing search, we managed to land an old row house on Capitol Hill. There is a convenience store 500 feet from our front door, there are a few restaurants within five blocks, and we both can hoof it to our jobs. Lucky us.

Then we got pregnant. Among the things that we began pondering – equipping the nursery, acquiring books on babies, etc. – was the question of public schools. Sure, the kid needn't enroll for over four years. However, if our current school options proved inadequate, then we may need to move to another part of town or to another city. Which means figuring out where to move, which is a lengthy process and a pain. Since my wife is busy carrying the baby and working full-time, I volunteered to assume the task of beginning the research.

My examination of the data available on DC's schools confirmed what I had read elsewhere. Generally, the government-run schools in DC are not doing well. The elementary school just two blocks from our home was typical. Among fourth-graders, only 30 percent were scoring proficiently or better in mathematics. The reading scores were abysmal— just 14 percent of pupils performed at the proficient or advanced level.

The District of Columbia does have an open enrollment plan, whereby parents can apply to place their child in a school other than the one in their neighborhood. However, the demand for placements in the few good schools in the District is high. Public school choice in DC, then, is more of a lottery than a viable option for parents. Unlucky us.

So, quickly, my thoughts turned to charter schools. One would think that my wife

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schools were and whether they were reachable in a reasonable amount of time during the morning rush hour. I also wanted some information about the curricula of these schools. What books are used to what end is much of what learning is about. And...

At this point, the larger moral of this tale may be painfully evident. The charter school movement was designed to provide parents with options. Parents would be free to choose and private operators would be forced to compete for parental school dollars. The result would be more and better options for parents. Hoorah for the market!

Yet, in moving from a bureaucratic non-choice system (where parents sent their children to the governmentally assigned neighborhood school) to a mixed public system (with assigned schools and charter options), we have placed huge demands upon parents. Shopping for schools is much more difficult than shopping for toothpaste. For all my research, I haven't even enough information to put the initial menu of options in front of my wife's fair nose. Unlucky us.

Assuredly, parents benefit from having options. However, in order to shop intelligently, they must acquire and digest heaps of information. The World Wide Web provides some data, but the school search task remains time-consuming and, except for data geeks, challenging. Just a few hours into our search, my desk began looking, perhaps, a bit like a general's during a war—a computer screen aglow on with multiple windows showing colored charts, a printer spitting out paper covered with numbers, stacks of papers, a map with circles scrawled on it, calendars for plotting dates for site visits or at least drive-by views... I could see how many parents might begin this process only to cry out, "No more—it's just too much!"

This, then, seems to be a challenge for government or enterprising private parties—providing parents with clear, concise, and up-to-date information about the charter schools in their communities. The whole model of charter schools depends on it. Without good information, only a minority of parents who want to send their kids to charter schools will be able to wisely choose schools, the market for charter schools will remain underdeveloped, and the quality of charter schools sub-optimal. Unlucky all of us.

Kevin Kosar is the author of Failing Grades: The Federal Politics of Education Standards (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2005).

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