

The melting pot and school choice

Mark Gradstein*, Moshe Justman

Department of Economics, Ben Gurion University, P.O. Box 653, Beer Sheva 84105, Israel

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Abstract

In the United States, parents are offered free public education in the mainstream culture but must pay the full cost of tuition if they educate their children privately. This creates strong economic incentives for remaining within the public system, which promotes the assimilation of minorities. A Pareto improvement can be achieved by subsidizing private education in exchange for modifying its social content so as to reduce polarization. Popular opposition to voucher programs that facilitate school choice without regulating cultural content may partly reflect voters' concerns that such programs threaten to erode the common ground created by public education.

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1. Introduction

In the United States, as in other countries, public education has played a key role as an agent of social integration, assimilating people from widely varying backgrounds in a common cultural identity in the course of two or three generations—a role many consider to be as important as its contribution to building human capital (Edwards and Richey, 1963; Bowles and Gintis, 1976). Its effectiveness in this role is greatly reinforced by the way public education is financed in the United States. Parents who opt out of public

* Corresponding author. Fax: +972 8 647 2941.

E-mail addresses: grade@bgumail.bgu.ac.il (M. Gradstein), justman@bgumail.bgu.ac.il (M. Justman).

education must continue paying the taxes that fund public education in addition to private tuition, thus effectively paying twice for private schooling. This creates a strong economic incentive for sending one's children to public school—where minority groups are more rapidly assimilated in the mainstream culture. Proposals for offering education vouchers or tax credits that reduce the financial burden of private schooling (without modifying its content) weaken this incentive, thus threatening to increase social polarization. The academic or fiscal benefits that voucher programs may offer must be weighed against the possible erosion of social cohesion as a result of fewer people attending public schools.

This paper examines the assimilating role of public education within the framework of a simple growth model in which parental education choices both contribute to the accumulation of human capital and affect the degree of social cohesion. Analysis shows that neither a fully decentralized system, in which parents individually choose the cultural orientation of their children's publicly financed schooling, nor the current system of education finance, which requires parents to pay for public schooling whether or not they use it, is Pareto efficient. Under a fully decentralized system, minority parents ignore the external benefits of a mainstream education, resulting in too little cultural assimilation; under the current system, the cost to minority parents of a private education exceeds its social cost, resulting in too much assimilation. Both regimes leave scope for Pareto improvement through a mutually beneficial contract that reduces the cost of a private education while modifying its social content so as to reduce polarization.

Institutional arrangements that achieve this—subsidizing minority schools while modifying their social content—have been implemented in various settings, either by incorporating minority schools within the public education system as separate autonomous streams, or individually subsidizing private minority schools. Public education in 19th century Prussia is an early example of the former arrangement, comprising separate streams of Protestant and Catholic public schools, each operating under the supervision of its own clergy (Lamberti, 1989). Contemporary examples of multiethnic countries operating separate cultural streams of public education for different communities include the separate school systems of the French, Flemish and German communities in Belgium, French and English language schools in Canada, Hebrew and Arabic schools in Israel, and so on.¹ In addition, many countries in Europe and elsewhere—Chile and New Zealand are leading examples—allow private schools with separate cultural or religious orientations to apply individually for full or partial public funding subject to accreditation. In each case, publicly funded minority schools enjoy substantial cultural autonomy while submitting to external supervision, which ensures that they do not promote divisive, separatist tendencies.

However, in some circumstances this may not be possible; institutional constraints or a lack of common trust may impede the regulation of minority school curricula by the state. The United States is a case in point, as most private schools in the country have a religious affiliation, and as such are shielded from public intervention by the constitutional separation of church and state. This raises the question whether it can

¹ A number of countries operate separate religious streams within the public school system.

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