

Editorial

"School choice will decrease dropout rates in the Golden State"

*By
John E. Coons
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THE HIGH SCHOOL dropout rate is a crucial measure of educational quality, but states vary in the candor with which they report it. California has led in the art of camouflage; our Department of Education has sheltered behind the unaudited data of local school officials who conveniently assume that the student who disappears has merely transferred schools.

From this the department typically has reported only the one-year dropout rate, rather than the overall four-year rate.

Last January, a reawakened state Board of Education ordered the department instead to report each year the total number of dropouts over the four-year cycle just completed.

It also ordered the use of U.S. Census Bureau data showing that about one in five California high school kids doesn't make it to graduation day—a statistic that probably undercounts the most disadvantaged, who are at highest risk of dropping out.

Most of these casualties, in fact, do take place in the high schools of urban low-income communities.

These schools transmit so little academic learning that the cynic might view dropping out as something to be encouraged. For two reasons he would be wrong.

First, even in the inner-city, high-school graduates are more likely to be employed, off welfare, and out of jail. This last attribute is especially important given the six-fold increase in California's prison population during the last 20 years.

Second, these dysfunctional schools might both keep their students and resume their teaching function, if the state were to apply to them the principle that makes suburban education more successful.

This "suburban principle" is nothing more than the free market as it applies to choice of residence and public schools, Middle-class families buy their way into specific public schools by buying housing in the district;

customers, who are in a position either to move or to enroll in private schools. Of course, private schools are an even more vivid example of the benign effects of the free market. As should be the case, if they do not serve the family well, these schools simply cease to exist. No one is forced by the state to attend them at taxpayer's expense.

But, while the law gives middle-class parents the schools they want, for the children of the poor or working-class family the state itself chooses a specific public school on the military principle of conscription.

For the have-nots the public school is a monopoly, and the only escape for the child is to drop out. It is not surprising that the horrendous rate of dropping out is a problem of the urban poor.

Children enrolled in a school of their own or their parents' choice rarely quit. Even those low-budget private schools that serve the most disadvantaged neighborhoods have a very high graduation rate.

They also graduate their students as competent and civic-minded human beings. Every systematic study over 35 years confirms that these children who emerge from private schools –city and suburban– score high on the standards of citizenship.

They are exceptionally tolerant, law-abiding and active in their communities. If the fruit of conscription by the state is apathy, violence, and dropping out, the fruit of free choice is the graduate's affirmation both of civic responsibility and the hope for a just society.

The message of the dropouts is plain: Our disadvantaged children will stay in school and be successfully educated when society offers them the same liberty and responsibility that works for the rest of us.

As a matter of justice and common sense, California desperately needs school choice for low-income families.

Coons is a professor emeritus at UC-Berkeley's Boalt Hall School of Law, and the co-author, with Stephen Sugarman, of "Making School Choice Work for All Families," published by the Pacific Research Institute.