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School Choice Policies in the Political Spectacle¹

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Abstract

This article presents research on school choice. It takes the case of a school district in Boulder, Colorado, through the decade of the 1990s and shows how interest groups took advantage of federal, state, and district policies meant to promote school choice and molded them into a system of schools that met individualistic interests rather than the common good. Extensive interviewing and analysis of documents and media reports served as sources of evidence. The authors argue that district officials accommodated the demands of elite groups of parents to transform the district. The study is framed by revisionist theories of policy, particularly Murray Edelman's theory of political spectacle wherein real values are allocated to a few groups, the allocation

occurring largely out of public scrutiny. For most of the public, however, policies are largely symbolic.

When George W. Bush took office in 2001, he proposed legislation that would require all students in grades three through twelve to take a national test. A student's scores would determine whether he or she could pass to the next grade or stay in the same grade for another year. Scores would also determine whether high school students could graduate. Moreover, the average test score of a school's students would be used to determine whether the school itself was improving. Schools that failed to improve would be held accountable to "market forces." Parents of children in failing schools would be given a sum of money (\$1500 is the amount usually mentioned) to spend on tuition at schools of their choice, whether public or private, sectarian or not, other than the neighborhood school that their children would normally attend. In theory this plan would be good for everyone, because parents could opt out of schools that were failing and go to the schools of their choice. Faced with the threat that families might leave, administrators of neighborhood schools would have to take steps to improve. Those that did not respond to these market forces would eventually find the school doors closed permanently, the parents exiting with their \$1500 to spend elsewhere.

To Bush advisors, it was important that the press refer to this policy as "school choice." To his critics, it was important to call it "school vouchers." Language matters. Choice sounds like a good thing. Choice sounds American. If we can choose a Hoover upright canister from the array of vacuum cleaners on the market, why shouldn't we be able to choose the schools that satisfy our individual preferences and needs?²

As a policy, school choice has a history, a theory, a community of belief, research, and politics. Milton Friedman, noted economist and advocate for the free market and its application to all aspects of political and social life, introduced the concept of choice as a remedy for underachieving schools. He reasoned that public schools were ineffective because they belonged to the State. As creatures of government they became bureaucratic, entrenched, and unresponsive to parents. Overall, they were inefficient, especially compared to private and parochial schools, producing less achievement for greater cost. Like the U.S. economy of the 1970's public education under performed and underachieved. Conditions were bad enough, he argued, that fundamental reform was only possible by injecting the discipline of market forces. Freed of obligation to send their children to neighborhood schools, parents would educate themselves about options and then select the ones that would best meet the needs of their own children. Public schools, forced to compete, would improve and diversify their programs. Parents with options would be more likely to participate in the education of their children. The key policy issue, however, was to divert public funds for private use. A pupil's state allocation should be given to parents to use as they saw fit. The invisible hand would move across the landscape of education and improve it for everyone. So thought Friedman, who created a large following among neo-liberals. Along with Friedrich Hayek, Friedman's work made a significant impact on Margaret Thatcher, British Prime Minister, and spread to many parts of the world. *A Nation at Risk*, the report released by the Reagan administration (National Commission on Education, 1983), mentioned market choices as a response to the crisis in public schools.

School choice (as we will call it here) gained adherents in several categories (e.g., Apple, 2001). Together, these groups bought choice policies space in the national discourse about schools:

- Political conservatives viewed choice policies in light of their general distrust of and antipathy toward all government institutions. Since they believed that the size and power of government should be constrained, they also slanted their discourse, calling public schools "government schools," monopoly schools, or even "socialist schools." They likened the privatizing of education to the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the soviet states.
- Religious conservatives viewed school choice policies as ways of escaping the wickedness—sex education, secular humanism, assault on family rights and values, absence of school prayer, and promotion of homosexual and other nontraditional life styles, even satanism—that to them was evident in public schools.
- Cultural restorationists (or neoconservatives) such as E.D. Hirsch (whose Core Knowledge curriculum package played a role in the Boulder case), William Bennett (speaking on behalf of the Reagan and Bush administrations) and others viewed choice policies as a way out of the quagmire they believed progressive "educationists" and "educrats" had made of public schools. Advocates of home schooling and traditional pedagogy made common cause with them.
- Existing parochial schools, in light of declining enrollments, identified choice policy as a way for their institutions to survive.
- Activist parents in some predominantly non-white urban neighborhoods, having lost faith in the schools their children attended, identified choice as a way to escape those schools. Groups such as the Black Alliance for Educational Options in Milwaukee often received funding from foundations such as the Friedman and Walton Foundations to press their case.³
- Entrepreneurs and corporations that desire to construct private schools for profit as well as those that want to market products and services to public, choice, and private schools alike.

Although the aims of these groups sometimes diverged, they forged an effective coalition to provide political support, funding, and discourse in favor of various policy instruments under the school choice umbrella. A number of conservative think tanks provided strong communication networks for these groups to pool their ideas and resources. The same networks funded research, which resulted in studies that seemed to provide an intellectual justification for choice.

The choice coalition favored vouchers as the most effective instrument of school choice and the closest to the free-market ideal. However, it also pushed for several "second best" alternative policy instruments including charter schools, magnet schools within districts, tuition tax credits, inter-district and intra-district transfer policies, as well as incentives for education corporations that arose from the private sector. As states turned down legislation and referenda on voucher programs, advocates pursued these other alternatives. Even outside the choice coalition, some people who believed that vouchers would undermine public schools also advocated charters as a way to avoid them.

But is school choice, particularly embodied by charter schools, a rational means to save public schools? Will charters make the school system more effective? Or will charter schools simply open the way to more extreme forms of privatizing them? Is there any way of knowing whether any such contradictory claims could be answered at all?

In this article, we present a case of school choice policy. We consider policies in general through the theory of political spectacle, which contrasts radically from

conventional notions about policy and politics. Anne Schneider and Helen Ingram's (1997, pp. 3-4) definition of politics fits our sense of deep contradictions:

The term "politics" is associated in the popular vernacular with the strategic manipulation of power to serve personal or narrow special interests at the expense of more legitimate concerns. This construction has eclipsed the classic understanding of politics as the means through which collectivities make decisions to serve the general (public) interests of the entire society.

Most people and many scholars define policy as the authoritative and rational allocation of values. That is, policies arise as sensible responses to public needs. A consensus about the common public good develops out of citizen and political debate; administrative authorities develop regulations, instruments, and programs that are likely to meet those needs. These means are enacted and the public learns about the relationship of means to ends—how well the instruments and programs meet the needs and goals of the policy. The conventional view conceives of the policy process as relatively linear and straightforward. Politics, the struggle for relative power among constituent groups, is in the background. Deborah Stone called this "the rationality project." To counter the conventional, rational view of policy, Stone argues that a conception of policy with politics in the foreground provides a better fit with the experience of history. As an alternative to the rationality project she offers the study of policy within the "polis," or political community. The model for studying policy should "account for the possibilities of changing one's objectives, of pursuing contradictory objectives simultaneously, of winning by appearing to lose and turning loss into an appearance of victory, and ... of attaining objectives by portraying oneself as having attained them" (Stone, 1997, p. 9).

She goes on to argue that the production model in the rationality project "fails to capture what I see as the essence of policy making in political communities: the struggle over ideas. Ideas are a medium of exchange and a mode of influence even more powerful than money and votes and guns" (Stone, 1997, p. 11).

The case we present here can be understood as a case of political spectacle. Political spectacle theory holds that contemporary politics resembles theater, with directors, stages, casts of actors, narrative plots, and (most importantly) a curtain that separates the action onstage—what the audience has access to—from the backstage—where the real "allocation of values" takes place.

Murray Edelman describes it thus:

[There] is a distinction between politics as a spectator sport and political activity as utilized by organized groups to get quite tangible benefits for themselves. For most men most of the time politics is a series of pictures in the mind, placed there by television news, magazines, and discussions. The pictures create a moving panorama taking place in a world the public never quite touches (Edelman 1985, p. 5).

Edelman identifies seven elements of the theory: symbolic language; casting political actors as leaders, allies, and enemies; dramaturgy (staging, plotting and costuming); the illusion of rationality; the illusion of democratic participation, disconnection between means and ends; distinguishing action on stage versus action backstage.

Symbolic Language

Language is at the heart of political spectacle, and language is always ambiguous. In political campaigns, the use of such words as patriotism, democracy, and compassion is metaphorical. So is the use of such words as "accountability," "high standards," "freedom of choice", and the like in conversations about school policy. Concrete referents to these abstract words are lacking, so that no tether exists to tie them to the world of experience and intractable, concrete details. Or rather, there are so many different mental pictures that form in the minds of the public when these words are spoken that one can scarcely pin down the specific meaning of the person who spoke them. According to Edelman, "[D]ictionary meanings are operationally close to irrelevant" when words are used for political purposes" (Edelman 1985, p. 139) .

Such linguistic ambiguity creates a kind of fog. It holds the public in a thrall. Politicians use ambiguous language to unite a public and create an impression of consensus that does not exist. For example, "accountability" suggests something quite different to accountants, to educators, and to testing experts. When teachers hear the word, they might be imagining professional and moral responsibility for the welfare of their students. In the corporate world, people might imagine something different, a mechanism for tightening controls over teachers' actions.

Ambiguous, multivalent meanings create anxiety in the public when politicians use words to evoke crisis. The paradigm case of using lurid language in educational policy is *The Nation At Risk*. Its author claimed that the decline in educational achievement was so drastic that had a foreign power done to our country what our schools have done it would be considered an act of war:

[T]he educational foundations of our society are presently being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a Nation and a people. (National Commission on Education, 1983, p. 1)

This use of graphic, metaphorical language made a connection in people's minds between academic achievement and national defense and between achievement and economic competitiveness. Such language evokes images of a depleted, diseased, and failed public school system, and one that endangers U.S. economic health and even its security. These images have been engrained in the background assumptions the public hold, evidence to the contrary notwithstanding. The metaphors used in political spectacle have long since lost any concrete referents they might have had. Whether or not the crisis in *A Nation at Risk* and subsequent reports is realistic, it serves the political spectacle in two ways. First, it serves as a pretext for radical actions offered by policy makers to correct the alleged problem, and secondly, it arouses emotional rather than critical responses in the public.

Political language is banal (the public has heard the words so often) and ritualistic. Political language is strategic (officials use it to advance a political goal). Political language generates emotional responses rather than critical responses or concrete actions. Political language bemuses, obfuscates, befogs, mystifies, lulls, glosses.

Casting Political Actors as Leaders, Enemies and Allies and Plotting Their Actions.

In the second element of political spectacle, characters are cast to play certain roles. The constituent groups construct and then take on roles such as leader, ally and enemy.

The public generally believes that such roles are natural and inevitable and fails to recognize them as social constructions. The public believes that leadership is a trait that people have more or less of, based on their genetic endowment or early upbringing. This is the cult of personality.

A belief that better fits political spectacle theory is that leadership is a role that certain individuals take on and shape themselves to fit. Politicians in the policy arena take advantage of the common ideology that some people are born leaders and thus are different from the rest of us, according to Edelman. Persons who would be seen as leaders reinforce images of themselves as leaders by acting in formal, public settings, as leaders are supposed to act, that is "through a dramaturgical performance emphasizing the traits popularly associated with leadership: forcefulness, responsibility, courage, decency, and so on" (Edelman 1985, p. 81).

The defining of policy actors as leaders functions to insure quiescence and justify unequal privileges and authority. In the political spectacle leaders identify crises and must launch programs that can produce dramatic outcomes in a short period of time. The public seldom has the chance to judge a program by its long-range benefits and burdens. Because the leader accentuates the dramatic response, the success or failure of the acts of the leader can seldom be traced. Often, the leaders are long-gone before the effects become clear, if they ever do.

Likewise, leaders create enemies and stage battles for dramaturgical effects. Media reinforce the aspects of spectacle rather than substance. According to Edelman, "Because politics involves conflict about material advantages, status, and moral issues, some people are always pitted against others and see them as adversaries or as enemies... They help give the political spectacle its power to arouse passions, fears, and hopes..." Leaders have much to gain by exaggerating the threat the enemy poses and by distorting the facts of the enemy's record. The leader has much to gain by discounting the arguments of enemies and portraying them as irrational and ideological (while the leader is rational and fair-minded)" (Edelman 1988, p. 66, p. 73).

Stone states that "Symbolic devices are especially persuasive and emotionally compelling because their story line is hidden and their sheer poetry is often stunning.....The most important feature of all symbols, both in art and politics, is their ambiguity [because a] symbol can mean two (or more) things simultaneously.... Ambiguity enables the transformation of individual intentions and actions into collective results and purposes.... [A]mbiguity allows leaders to aggregate support from different quarters for a single policy.... [A]mbiguity allows leaders of interest groups and political movements to bring together people with wishes for different policies.... (Stone, 1997, pp. 152-158).

Dramaturgy: Political Stages, Props, and Costumes

According to Edelman, political acts take place in contexts that suggest that a few individuals are actors and most are spectators. These formal settings reinforce and justify the social distance between the two groups and legitimize " a series of future acts (whose content is still unknown) and thereby maximizing the chance of acquiescence" (Edelman, 1985, p. 98). Policies announced from in front of the presidential seal, rules handed down from a Federal Court bench or from other formal or evocative settings have this function. ⁴

Democratic Participation as Illusion⁵

The conventional model of the policy process conceives that the public, once informed of the objective facts about the details of a policy, will be in better position to participate in the policy process. They can deliberate in a more informed way. But Edelman argues that "the public is constantly reminded that its role is minor, largely passive, and at most reactive. The intense publicity given to voting and elections is itself a potent signal of the essential powerlessness of political spectators.... an individual vote is more nearly a form of self-expression and of legitimation than of influence and that the link between elections and value allocations is tenuous" (Edelman, 1988, p. 97).

In the political spectacle, leaders act. Others react. Most people believe they participate in democracy by voting or at most by testifying at hearings where policies are under consideration. According to Edelman, however, in politicized policy making the actions of the public amount to mere rituals—highly formalized and far removed from where the real decisions are made. The broad visions and fine details of policies are worked out backstage.

Realizing that participation is a formality creates a self-fulfilling prophecy. If a person believes she lacks control over government and policy making, she then takes less active interest in it and rarely takes action in relation to it. Passivity and cynical or resigned detachment exacerbate political spectacle.

The widespread use of opinion polls has largely displaced authentic participation in policy decisions and the allocation of educational values. Indeed, political actors look to the results of polls to formulate a set of symbolic gestures. For example, politicians often point to the results of polls that show the majority of the public favors "ending social promotion." The findings of polls thus provide a justification for such policies.

Politicians also use polling results to indicate what kinds of symbols best promote themselves. They then adopt hair styles, hand gestures, and slogans that the polls show would be popular.⁶ Susan Herbst (1993, p. 50), in her book *Numbered Voices*, emphasized the hypocritical use of polling results: "Machiavelli believed that if a ruler was to gain control over the populace, he must seem humane to the masses regardless of his true feelings for them.... Superficial appearances matter most of all."⁷

Polls distance the public from authentic political action. Over time, as the extent of polling increased, public cynicism toward government has also increased, along with general political alienation. "[R]esponding to polls is a *reactive* form of political expression.... Because of its routinized procedures [polling] does not demand the same level of emotional (and physical) intensity as does [sic] striking, demonstrating, door-to-door canvassing or attending meetings." (Herbst, 1993, p. 153)⁸

Since the questioning takes place privately and anonymously, a person can answer without fear of being held accountable for consistency over time or among issues. The respondent may speak without having any information or thoughtful reflection and conversation about the topic. Since polling takes place privately, citizens lack the chance to discuss issues with others, thereby having the chance to learn more about the issues and perhaps modify them. Private polling tends to atomize the public, isolating them from one another and therefore disempowering them. It tends to diminish the kinds of grass roots collective action that requires social interaction among people.

Illusion of Rationality

In the rationality project, policy analysts would like to think that their concepts are above politics, but this is not possible. Instead, policy analysis is "itself a creature of politics; it is strategically crafted argument, designed to create ambiguities and

paradoxes and to resolve them in a particular direction" (Stone, 1997, p.7). Edelman adds, "any political analysis that encourages belief in a secure, rational, and cooperative world fails the test of conformity to experience and to the record of history" (Edelman, 1988, p. 4).

According to Edelman, "complete rationality in decision-making is never possible... because knowledge of consequences of any course of action is always fragmentary, because future values cannot be anticipated perfectly, and because only a few of the possible alternative courses of action ever come to mind" (Edelman, 1988, p. 68). In political acts, actors evoke symbols of rationality. They point to the results of public polls, census statistics, or declining test scores to justify actions they want to take on political grounds.⁹

Although rationality is an illusion, the public must believe in the rational and ethical underpinning of the action or else it will fail the test of credibility and authority. Thus do policy researchers become political actors or pawns of politicians by producing studies and statistics that appear objective and rational.

In the rationality project, people are believed to be rational actors who make reasoned choices. But Stone points out that in the political world, actions come about for emotional reasons. Social reasons may govern who cooperates with and who fights with whom. Building coalitions, taking sides, and negotiating deals replace or stand equal to reason in explaining actions in the political spectacle.

Disconnection of Means and Ends

One can distinguish instrumental from symbolic policies by judging whether their goals have credible relationship to the means provided or suggested to achieve them. Is there a technology or research base that connects programs to desired outcomes? Are teachers equipped to deliver the programs? Have enough time and material resources been provided to develop and implement them? Is there any provision for monitoring implementation or assessing effects? If not, one suspects a primarily symbolic policy. Symbolic policies reinforce the leadership image of those that proposed them and instill quiescence among others—a dulling of critical response. Calling for a reduction in class size positions the political actor as a friend of education and defender of high achievement standards. The public is lulled into acquiescence: something seems to be done to address the problem that worried them. People in such a state are unlikely to ask about the potential side effects on teacher supply and classroom availability (or what children are most likely to be taught by uncertified teachers as a result) (e.g., Fetler, 1994). The high costs of the program may make implementation prohibitive. The leader symbolically benefits while material benefits for children will be unequally distributed and largely out of sight—or entirely absent.

Even the notion of means and ends assumes rationality in politics that is seldom present. Problems and courses of action (policy goals and policy instruments) are themselves social constructions. That is, some political actors view poverty as a problem to be solved, others as an inevitable part of the natural order and thus beyond the means of policy to remedy.

According to Edelman, "The language that constructs a problem and provides an origin for it is also a rationale for vesting authority in people who claim some kind of competence. Willingness to suspend one's own critical judgment in favor of someone regarded as able to cope creates authority.... People with credentials accordingly have a vested interest in specific problems and in specific origins for them" (Edelman, 1988,

pp. 20-21). "A 'policy' then, is a set of shifting, diverse, and contradictory responses to a spectrum of political interests" (Edelman, 1988, p. 25).

But symbolic policies still have effects, though they are not necessarily related to the problem they were set to solve.

The construction of problems sometimes carries with it a more far reaching perverse effects: it helps perpetuate or intensify the conditions that are defined as the problem, an outcome that typically stems from efforts to cope with a condition by changing the consciousness or the behavior of individuals while preserving the institutions that generate consciousness and behavior.... Imprisonment may help perpetuate crime by exposing prisoners to knowledgeable criminals who teach them techniques. It also eventually releases most prisoners into a society from which they have become even more estranged than they were before their imprisonment and in which they lack resources to cope in any way other than renewed resort to crime. (Edelman, 1988, p. 68)

Distinction Between Onstage Action and Backstage Action

The conventional view of policy asks the key question: who reaps the benefits and who bears the burdens and costs of a policy? The traditional view defines policy as the authoritative allocation of values. Of an educational policy one ought to ask how it affects the resources and opportunities of students, educators, and the public as a whole; how it spreads the risks and cushions the blows that sometimes attend to policies and programs.

In the political spectacle there is a sharp distinction between those values allocated to the general public and those values that are allocated to a favored few. Edelman believes that only a few members of society reap real benefits. These benefits include material profits—dollars and cents, contracts and tax abatements. But they also encompass opportunities for political office and administrative posts, such as ambassadorships. In addition, we would include real benefits to the status or public relations image of a person or organization (which then can be parlayed into material benefits). Finally we include benefits to special interest groups with particular ideologies and contacts with the politician. Benefits such as these are negotiated behind the scene and out of sight.

Political spectacle theory such as Edelman's and revisionists theories such as Stone's challenge our perspectives on school policy. In the following case history we record not only the radical changes in one district experienced in a single decade and more importantly, the process by which the changes were made. No conventional theory of policy change explains it. Each element of political spectacle theory shapes the changes that occurred.

School Choice in the Perfect Town¹⁰

Boulder, Colorado, ought to have been the last place where unhappy parents should seek escape from the public schools. In 1989, Boulder Valley School District could boast that it had responded to the full program of progressivism. Scores on achievement tests were high, as one would expect from the district's demographic profile. Up to that time, the public was generally satisfied with the quality of schools (or at least complaints

were no more than what one would typically expect in suburban schools) and demonstrated this satisfaction by passing most bond issues the district proposed.

Typical students in the valley attended public schools in their neighborhoods. Two small, expensive and elite private schools, one parochial school, and a residential school for problem students drew only a tiny percentage of eligible students away. The town of Boulder proper had long ago reached icon status, a desirable place to live, a place of natural beauty and liberal politics. Years of focusing on the preservation of its environment and quality of life had led city councils to adopt open space ordinances and control growth.

Demographic trends, including in-migration from the west coast and ordinances to control growth inside the city, infused new money and contributed to vast expansion outside of the city in surrounding communities east of Boulder, filling existing schools and pressuring the district to build new ones. Housing costs skyrocketed inside the city limits. Young, middle class families soon found the costs too high, so that, as the children in city schools grew up, no new children took their desks. City schools soon found themselves short of students and at risk of being closed. Increasingly, students from one neighborhood were bused to another. It sometimes seemed that kids from the mobile home parks or low-income housing were most often the ones on buses. In the schools with the most affluent parents, the periodic threats of closure were successfully fought off even when many of its chairs remained empty.

Deep currents of social change began to threaten the apparent consensus on education. The small university town of the 1950s and 60s and the laid back liberal sanctuary of the 1970s and 80s had begun to give way to a much more affluent and conservative population, people with different ideas and expectations for the education of their children. Conspicuous consumption altered the previously egalitarian social landscape. The school district, however, did not yet feel this local social current as it occupied itself with implementing a complete package of progressive reforms.

Progressive School Restructuring

In keeping with its progressive policies and in response to nationwide restructuring efforts in public education, the Boulder Valley School District (BVSD) adapted a middle school philosophy in 1989. The middle school restructuring, to be phased in by fall 1992, followed the report of the Carnegie Commission entitled *Turning Points*. That policy document recommended that schools for young adolescents be reorganized so that students from sixth through eighth grade could be placed, not in homogeneous ability groups but mixed with students of all types and levels of prior achievement. Instruction should be delivered in blocks, so students could spend longer periods of time with teachers who covered multi-curricular areas. The centerpiece of the philosophy was its focus on practices appropriate to the developmental needs and characteristics of young adolescents. The resulting programs would feature thematic and integrated instruction that followed student interests. In the plan for district restructuring, the aim would be to make schools more effective for all students. Most teachers and parents who participated in restructuring plans called this "the middle school philosophy." Conflict over the middle school philosophy would soon erupt into broad institutional changes over the next decade in Boulder.

In January of 1990, the district hired Dean Damon,¹¹ a known innovator and progressive educator, as superintendent. Damon set up School Improvement Teams (SIT), the Institute for Development of Educational Activities schools (IDEA), and Site

Based Management (SBM). All of this alphabet soup of restructuring consisted of teachers, parents and administrators at schools throughout the district. They met regularly to envision a new direction for education with a focus on site-based decision-making and progressive reforms. By that time the district had a full staff of specialists on various aspects of progressive curriculum and a thoroughgoing program of professional development for teachers. Things seemed to be going well and going in a particular direction.

Choice Options Introduced by the District

The initial school choice options that the district launched matched its vision for progressive education. For nonconformist students the district had already opened, in 1988, an alternative school based on William Glasser's philosophy of reality therapy and integrated pedagogy. For its patrons who favored a wholistic and student-centered program, the district opened an elementary school in 1991. For parents wishing bilingual education for their children, the district opened an elementary school in that same year, where Spanish-speaking children would learn English (and English-speaking children could learn Spanish) along with their academic subjects. Each of these schools operated as a magnet school that any parent in the district could select over their neighborhood schools. And in each instance, designing, planning, and implementing were conducted by professionals in concert with the parent groups, with rich contributions from the experts in curriculum and pedagogy from the district office.

First Sounds of Discontent

Those initial forays into choice by the local district ignored or contradicted the discourse about schools at the national level, exemplified by *A Nation at Risk*. Whatever the condition of public schools elsewhere, Boulder schools were not in a state of crisis. The message of national school crisis was first brought to the Boulder consciousness by Janet Jones, a parent from the affluent southwest corner of Boulder. She believed—and a considerable number of other parents believed with her—that the district plans would de-emphasize rigorous academic preparation. She focused her attention especially on the plan for converting junior high schools to middle schools. She believed that this reorganization would reduce the already declining academic performance of Boulder schools, and, more especially, would end up detracting from her own children's education. She based her complaints on her analysis of district achievement test scores. Not receiving any attention or satisfaction from the district, she next took her statistics to the local newspaper, the *Boulder Daily Camera*, which not only published her analysis but also endorsed its findings and recommendations:

The excellence of Boulder Valley schools is widely taken for granted, but this analysis by a parent and informed critic suggests a deepening mediocrity. Her prescription: Take the system back from the education "experts" and restore a real commitment to academic excellence.

Media Creating Spectacle

If the *Camera* had taken a balanced position on the subject of school achievement it would have reanalyzed test scores to confirm or disconfirm Jones's interpretation. Or,

newspaper staff might have interviewed internationally recognized experts in testing who worked at the university. It might at least have requested clarification and reinterpretation by the appropriate district officials. The *Camera*, however, did none of these things. Instead it accepted Jones's claim that achievement was declining in Boulder and even referred to her as an "informed critic." It punched up the message of discontent and crisis by printing a half-page cartoon depicting a student with a dunce cap in one hand and a mortarboard in the other. Although the *Camera* printed a variety of letters to the editor on both sides of this debate (more perhaps of the critical ones), a response from Superintendent Damon did not appear until a month later. When he did respond, Damon defended the district restructuring and the goal of improving education for all—for the common good. In his op-ed piece, he claimed Jones's analysis was wrong and showed that, by using the correct metric recommended by the test publisher, most of Boulder schools exceeded expectations and were high over all. In contrast with the torrid and emotional language of Jones and her group, Damon's language was measured, rational, and tepid—almost offhand.

Aware of the threat that lay behind Jones's analysis of Boulder school achievement, the district hired Lew Romagnano, associate professor from Metro State University, to analyze math achievement test scores from 1987-1995. His analysis showed that, contrary to the Jones conclusion, "the district's efforts to improve the mathematics education of its students have already begun to show positive results."

But you cannot un-ring a bell. By the time Professor Romagnano pointed out the fallacies of Jones's analysis, the picture of mediocrity she constructed had impressed itself on the public consciousness.

The Jones episode illustrates some principles of political spectacle theory and the role of media. First, a political agenda is usually launched by an actor who bases his or her message of crisis by reporting statistics more dramatic than technically accurate. The apparently scientific reports provide the illusion of rationality so necessary to policy makers. In this case, Jones intended for her analysis to provide the pretext for adoption of school choice policies as well as exclusive programs for the top students. Second, newspapers construct and reinforce a sense of crisis in policy matters. As noted above, the *Camera* could have checked to see if her analysis created or reflected a factual decline in district performance. Third, media reduce complex situations to simple sound bites and visual symbols, such as the mortarboard cartoon and the table of scores that Jones created. Fourth, media take strong perspectives on policy issues and craft news articles and select or solicit opinion pieces that reinforce those perspectives. It seems clear that Jones's opinion piece reflected a point of view that was held by the *Camera*. From 1991 to 1997, few articles and opinion pieces that the *Camera* published were favorable to district schools. Fifth, the perspective that local newspapers take is often consistent with corporate interests nationally rather than local concerns.¹² During these years the *Camera* took an anti-public school and pro-choice perspective that echoed the national discourse about the decline of schools. In addition, the newspaper seemed to align with the elite critics, irrespective of local evidence to the contrary. Paraphrasing David Berliner and Bruce Biddle, choice advocates and the local media had "manufactured a crisis" (Berliner and Biddle, 1995). Political spectacle thrives on a sense of crisis even when a fair reading of the local facts shows otherwise.

The Rise of the Local Elite

Scholars define "elites" in various ways. For example Harold Lasswell defined

elites as the "influential" (Lasswell, 1965). Amy Stuart Wells and Irene Serna defined local elites as "those with a combination of economic, political, and cultural capital that is highly valued within their particular school community" (Wells and Serna, 1996, p. 94).

Many people who fall into these categories would object to their inclusion. But, as Edelman argued, it is essential in the political spectacle to appear to be both democratic and rational, even though one's true intentions and actions point toward private benefits backstage and out of sight. In the conflict that followed, critics of choice often used the word elite to refer to the programs that Parents and Schools (the group that formed to resist Superintendent Damon's progressive reforms) created. The elites, meanwhile, rejected the label and jeered its use. For example, when choice parents crowed about high test scores, choice critics attributed those scores to the privileged status of "elite" students. Angry choice parents countered:

This is misinformed at best, and a deliberate lie for the purposes of political attack Their [Adams parents'] xenophobia is the true elitism and prejudice."

No one active in his or her child's education, whether through Parents and Schools, a school committee, a booster club, or otherwise, needs to apologize for trying to "get what they want for their kid." Many of the interests of each of our children are not for everyone, but this fact should certainly not diminish our commitment. If the school district has a problem with that, so be it.

On the other hand, some members embraced this designation, as one can see from the following letters to the *Camera*:

The argument for denying the option for hard academics seems rooted in the notion that a sense of inferiority will be engendered in those students who do not avail themselves of the opportunity. The entire program thereby grovels for inferiority.... The above observation will draw charges of elitism. Yes, and the world is based on elitism, delineated by those who can and those who can't process and communicate information (Smith, 1995a, 3B).

Our goal should be singularly directed at assuring every BVSD kid the opportunity to end up at the upper end of the food chain (Smith, 1995a, 3B).

Radical egalitarianism has become the basis for a scorched earth policy when it comes to academic rigor. Something happened to public education a few decades ago, around the time that the federal government injected itself and social engineering into the process. A cannibal joined the family picnic and calmly began to eat the children. Perhaps in a couple of decades ... we will all conclude that certain things, like war and public education, are too important to be left to the experts and politicians (Smith, 1995b, 4C).

Credit Janet Jones for tapping into a reservoir of discontent among affluent parents, particularly about district plans to convert junior highs to middle schools and to eliminate tracking students by ability. Among the well-educated and affluent parents whom Jones enlisted was Nobel prize-winning chemist Tom Cech, a professor at the University of Colorado. Cech added his voice and prestige to Jones's group and recruited

other well-educated, powerful parents, many from the scientific community. This core group called a meeting in March of 1992 to challenge Superintendent Damon and the board of education. Five hundred people, almost all critical of district programs, attended this meeting. The core group administered a questionnaire. The results of this poll showed that the majority in attendance favored academic rigor, doubted the middle school philosophy and claimed that the district was unresponsive to the concerns of parents. Thus the activists formed the group called Parents and Schools. Soon the group was making headlines. For example, a *Camera* headline read, "District is under siege: Organized Parents Posed to Change the School System." Local and national political and educational experts said that the group possessed the characteristics of a "powerful political movement:"

Its message is broad. It uses both passionate rhetoric and quantitative research. Its leaders are well known and have captured community attention.

In April, Parents and Schools circulated a petition that reflected the themes of the March poll. It presented this petition, with over 3000 signatures, to the school board. The board, however, refused to back away from its plan for middle school restructuring. Undaunted by the board's decision, the activists continued organizing.

Parents and Schools aimed first to organize political action that would force the district to offer school choice. To this end the group began a campaign to recruit and expand its membership to others who were critical of schools. Indeed, the rhetoric of Parents and Schools was almost exclusively critical, even damning and derisive. With Jones as its leader, Parents and Schools put together an e-mail network. It regularly published a newsletter that disseminated reports and letters critical of the schools and promoting their slant on curriculum and school organization. Through this communication network members were encouraged to speak out to the district administration, school board members, teachers and the public about the lack of academic rigor in the school system. One Parents and Schools newsletter solicited "horror stories:"

Stories Sought: What is your favorite example of the lack of challenge to students in our schools? Please send your 'horror story' to Parents and Schools.

A letter writing campaign was organized, and the *Camera* published dozens of letters critical of the district's plans. Parents and Schools enlarged its power through networking. Many members also participated on school governance groups and site-based teams. They used these groups as platforms to express their complaints about the district and recruit more parents. Through extensive media coverage, the group had convinced many that the public schools in Boulder were failing and that immediate action was necessary. One of its first action items was to pressure the district to institute an International Baccalaureate (IB) program at one of the high schools. The IB program would offer students a rigorous curriculum and an internationally recognized diploma. For Parents and Schools, this program was an antidote to what they saw as the watered-down district curriculum and just the thing to provide an edge for their children into the most desirable college. Always the group used the threat of voucher legislation and charter schools to push their agenda of academic rigor.

Finally realizing the heat of dissatisfaction but suspicious of its extent and distribution across the entire district, Superintendent Damon asked the League of Women Voters to solicit a broader range of views from the community as a whole.

Meanwhile the district fulfilled its plan to open the middle schools by the fall of 1992. It assigned ninth graders (who previously would have been assigned to junior high) to high school and students in grades six through eight to middle schools. Among other consequences, the restructuring decreased elementary school enrollments by 15%—a decrease in enrollment that would later prove to be significant in arguments about school choice.

A comment from Superintendent Damon illustrates the district perspective at the time.

The whole issue of focus schools was begun in this community as a way of being responsive and at the same time, good stewards of resources, responsive to a community that increasingly sees value in choice in public education. They (the board) have done a number of things to try to accommodate the community's interest in choice. One of them is the open enrollment policy which has been liberalized incredibly in the last three years because of legislative interest as well.

Choice and Political Spectacle

So far this story reflects positively on the arguments in favor of school choice. Perhaps the "government" schools of Boulder were less than responsive to the demands of parents. But the story can also be told through the lens of political spectacle.

Parents and Schools adopted the rhetoric of national achievement crisis, even against the evidence of the local test scores. Edelman points out that policy makers and political actors often invoke crises — whether real or not — to justify actions on behalf of private rather than public values. In this case the parent group wanted schools to return to homogeneous ability grouping and the most advanced and accelerated academic courses. They wanted these options so that their children would receive the most advanced and accelerated curriculum and preparation in academic subjects that would pay off, they believed, in higher college entrance test scores and enhanced transcripts. Parents and Schools lobbied the district to initiate a weighted grade system so that students who took advanced classes could still attain perfect grade averages. Whether the consequence of their proposed policy changes disadvantaged anyone else's children was not their concern. They wanted to return to the way things were before the progressive restructuring. This was cultural restoration, writ small.

Was the reaction of the elite parents rational in its pursuit of individual interests? Probably. Would attaining private goods accrue to the common good, as market theorists claim? Would it not be more valuable for the society as a whole for the best students to attain the best and highest academic slots? Would it not be more efficient? In the political spectacle, one always must speculate about differences between on stage and backstage benefits of policy decisions. Parents and Schools regularly claimed that the common good would be served if the group attained its goals. After all, they reasoned, every parent would have the right to choose, so everyone would benefit. Based on their private words and actions, however, it seems clear that its members pursued private, individual goals through the manipulation of public policy and public institutions.

David Labaree argued that a retreat from broad public interests toward private ones is a feature of a society that is driven by the values of social mobility rather than democratic equality or even human capital. At a time when the number of people attaining any given level of educational credential (junior high graduation, high school diploma, junior college certificate, college graduation, and so on up the educational

pyramid) is increasing, the market value of that credential goes down. The newly dominant perception in American society identifies education as a commodity that individuals can acquire and then use to exchange for better positions in the occupational or educational world. Furthermore, the credential race is a zero-sum game; one person only gains relative to another's loss. As more people gain a credential, the elite of society press for higher standards and more selectivity at the next level, because they want to preserve their existing standing in a hierarchical social order whose topmost places become ever more scarce as the population size increases (Labaree, 1997).

Labaree's argument implies that elite parents in Boulder were trying (whether intentionally or unconsciously) to position their children more favorably to compete for the best spots at the next educational level. A rigorous and exclusive academic experience at junior high might get their children into the honors track at Boulder High, which would position them to gain admission to a prestigious university, which could then lead to better law schools, and so on. But acquiring these commodities for their own children also had the consequence of denying them to other children. Pursuing credentials to the detriment of others, however, was not part of the discourse onstage.

Local and Non-Local Discourse on School Choice

By 1992, Parents and Schools had tapped into an abundant source of pro-choice discourse. Communication and consultation networks provided advice, canned arguments, and "research" that supported "solutions" to "crises" of school achievement—more educational options—different choices. It tapped into both national and local advocacy papers, for example, a report by Professor Richard Kraft of the University of Colorado. The Independence Institute, (a conservative think tank designed to do the political work of the Coors family) published and distributed the report, which recommended that Colorado adopt a choice policy. The purpose of the paper was to influence state legislators who were then considering various plans including vouchers. Citizen groups had brought forward several initiatives, and in spite of its conservative origins, this paper and many others galvanized support for choice across the political spectrum.

In November 1992, Colorado voters defeated a measure that would have provided school vouchers statewide. Heeding polling results, advocates for choice realized that sufficient support for vouchers was lacking, they instead concentrated on the next best alternative: Charter schools. Advocates showered legislators with papers and briefs put out by various foundations and think tanks. They pushed newspapers to promote the values of choice. They sponsored a Charter School conference designed to win over enough legislators to pass the bill. Through their efforts, a long list of legislators in both houses sponsored the bill, which passed in 1993 with strong majorities.

Unlike charter school legislation in, for example, Arizona, Colorado's was not particularly permissive (or, as choice advocates usually describe it, "strong"). The law in fact placed charter schools within district governance. That is, private groups or individuals inside district boundaries could propose charters, but the local board would have to approve those proposals. A result of this devolved decision-making about charter schools created substantial variation among districts in both the number of charter schools they approved and the extent of oversight each district imposed.¹³

Suborning Participatory Democracy in Boulder

In his attempt to get a handle on the extent of the public's criticism of the progressive reforms underway, Damon asked for help from a respected outside agency, the League of Women Voters. The League attempted to address this request by hosting a conference to discuss the direction of public education and propose a new plan. They wanted democratic participation by all the community, every constituency. To accomplish this the League appointed parents and educators to a planning committee. After the initial planning sessions, however, Parents and Schools staged a protest, withdrew its members from both the planning committee and threatened to withdraw its members from the conference itself. In a letter to the League president, Parents and Schools stated that the proposal for the conference was the work of the superintendent and "smacks of the kind of manipulated, impotent "process" that has frustrated many parents and contributed mightily to the district's current plight."

Apparently, the League's efforts were too democratic for Parents and Schools, which then began planning a conference of its own. Despite its earlier withdrawal, when the League-sponsored conference finally commenced in February of 1993, Parents and Schools people turned out in force.

The conference agenda called for dividing into small groups, each with a separate issue to discuss in regard to the future of education in Boulder. One of those groups was "Choice Vision" whose assignment was to discuss the possibility of choice schools in the district. More than one third of the members of the group of 33 was affiliated with Parents and Schools, including Janet Jones and her husband. After the conference, a spin-off of the Choice Vision group was formed, made up of primarily Parents and Schools members. The stacking of the committee precluded open debate about both the pros and the cons of charter schools and other choice options. The self-selected composition of the subgroup co-opted the agenda and transformed itself into an advocacy committee. Thereafter, this subgroup was absorbed by Parents in Schools, but still retained the semblance of a League and district sponsored, fair-minded free-speech deliberation.

The spin-off Choice Vision Action group planned a second conference three months later that they called the Conference on Magnet Programs for BVSD. The district name was part of the conference title that made it appear to be district sponsored, but it was not. This time there was not even the semblance of district involvement that might have assured a broader perspective or any voice for the good of all. To symbolize its autonomy from the district, the group invited the superintendent to attend as just another conferee, like the parents or other invited guests. Because the Choice Vision Action group relied on Parents and Schools to publicize the Conference on Magnet Programs with its well-organized network of parent volunteers, the composition of the magnet school conference, its agenda, and guest speakers were all controlled by Parents and Schools. The mailing address for the conference was also the Parents and Schools mailing address, the home of Janet Jones. The group prepared summaries and full news releases for the media. Most of the names listed as further contact resources were Parents and Schools members. Two of those members were employees of the Colorado Department of Education. Another member sat on the Governor's Advisory Council for Math and Science. Nineteen days after the Conference on Magnet Schools was held in Boulder, Governor Roy Romer signed the Colorado Charter School Act of 1993.

Focus Schools in Boulder: Threats and Opportunities

The district was already changing. The hard work and diligence of Jones and Parents and Schools paid off when the district approved adoption of the International

Baccalaureate program at Willowbrook High School. To Parents and Schools, "this is just the beginning."

In the summer of 1993, anticipating the effects of the new charter school legislation, Lydia Swize, Executive Director for Administrative Services for the district, assembled a group of parents and administrators. Their task was to design a process by which schools or private groups could apply for a new kind of school: a Focus School. Focus schools would function much as magnet schools (like those that operate in other parts of the country, primarily to desegregate urban districts). Like magnets, focus schools would draw students from throughout the district to schools with a specific curricular emphasis.

Both district administrators and choice advocates defined focus schools as alternatives to charter schools, but they imagined different kinds of functions. District employees imagined that focus schools would satisfy advocates of charter schools (the more extreme solution) as well as redistribute students to under-enrolled schools. Choice advocates, on the other hand, imagined that focus schools would be the thin edge that would eventually widen toward charters.¹⁴

The contrasts between charter and focus schools were ones of relative autonomy and application of market ideology. In the public arena choice advocates concentrated on those values. A charter school had to be approved by the district, and if approved, the district had to fund it. Once the money was assigned to the charter school, the district would have little control over day-to-day operation. A charter school could waive the district policies and contracts. In contrast, to establish a focus school in Boulder, the parties did not have to adhere to state oversight, and the application process was much simpler and more streamlined than what one had to do to apply for a charter. Once approved, the focus school would have to provide students with the district curriculum as well as any specialized curriculum inherent in the focus application (e.g., Montessori or Core Knowledge). It would be funded by the district, would have to comply with district policies and the teacher contract. The budget of the two options differed as well. Funding for focus schools remained under the authority of the district. Students who joined charter schools, in contrast, took the amount of their expenditure with them. In retrospect, it is easy to see why the district favored focus schools.

Five administrators, three parents, and one teacher sat on the Process Design Committee for Focus Schools in late summer 1993. In addition to these members, Dr. Lydia Swize functioned as the group's facilitator. Although charter schools were intended to allow teachers and parents to design effective schools, the focus school committee had only one teacher member, the president of the Boulder Valley Education Association (BVEA). In any event, all three parents were active members of Parents and Schools—including Janet Jones. The group constructed a process that individuals would need to follow to design a focus school.

"Designing Our Dream School"

Looking back two years, while the political movement for choice developed to influence district governance, Parents and Schools served as a focal point for individuals disenchanting with their neighborhood schools for various personal reasons.

Jane Barillo disliked whole language and blamed this progressive approach for her daughter's inability to spell or write. When she asked her daughter's teacher to provide spelling instruction, she was told to buy her daughter a spell checker. Later, Jane's

husband Jeff campaigned successfully for membership on the School Improvement Team in the hope of influencing school practices and found the staff intransigent on the question of basic skills versus whole language. The staff seemed to feel that instructional decisions should be made by trained professionals but Jane began to dwell on what she and her husband defined as absence of accountability—to her family—of the school, principal and teachers.

Jane's neighbor happened to be Janet Jones, the founder of Parents and Schools, who shared her analysis of test scores with Jane and Jeff. This seemed to confirm their growing belief that district schools were declining. Jones also gave them information about the emerging options of school choice in the district and state.

Jane ran into Maria, an old friend, while shopping for groceries. Maria had been frustrated by the district's failure to provide the services required for her gifted child. Maria had to fill in the void with academic activities at home. She had complaints about the music teacher. Since the school would not remove the teacher, Maria removed her daughter from music class and even showed up during music period to supervise her daughter. She campaigned to remove a principal she didn't think was effective.

Together the two friends discussed their frustrations and the declining test scores. They began meeting periodically to discuss what could be done. Jones put them in touch with Kay Harbruck whom Jones had pegged as a critic of the district, but in her case it was the vocational programs that she deemed a failure.

Dot Enwall was a well-respected teacher, having taught foreign language at the secondary level in BVSD for 14 years. For a frustrating year and a half she had worked as the foreign language coordinator for the district. She believed that teachers had too much autonomy and not enough accountability and that they jumped too quickly on any new fad that came their way. Now that her daughter neared school age, she began to pursue the idea of an alternative school. Janet Jones introduced her to Dot and Jane.

After much discussion, they decided to propose a focus school rather than go through the tedious work of applying for a charter. The group then turned to curriculum and teaching methodology. Although the four parents seemed sure of what they didn't want for their children, formulating a plan for what they did want was more difficult. Reasoning that the district would be more likely to respond favorably to a program with a national cachet, they fixed on Core Knowledge, a program that Parents and Schools targeted as promising. As the group studied the literature that Jones provided, Core Knowledge sounded promising. Their beliefs matched those of its creator, E. D. Hirsch, that there were facts that every student in America should know. The package that Hirsch sells focuses on basic skills. After the skills are mastered, the program takes them to ever higher levels of knowledge. The women began to think of themselves as the Core Knowledge group. With the help of Parents and Schools they arrived at a school name, Apex Elementary School. News of their plans spread through the affluent southwest corner of Boulder where they all lived.

In summer of 1994, district Executive Director Lydia Swize met with Apex founders and seemed satisfied with its proposal for Core Knowledge. Now came the question of where to put the school. Swize suggested that the founders hold meetings to gauge which schools might be interested in inviting Apex to share its facilities. Of course, the founders would have preferred their own building, but this did not seem to be a reasonable possibility. Swize named the buildings that were then or would soon be under capacity: Stonegate, Franklin, and Adams Elementary schools, all on the south side of town.

Capacity was a central issue in the district, which had to balance the demand for new schools in the east suburbs with the needs of each city school to survive. In the

previous year, in fact, Swize had met with the staff of each school in the district that threatened to fall below the dreaded ratio of enrollment to number of seats. When she met with Stonegate staff and parents, she let them know that closure was a distinct possibility. To prevent that eventuality, Swize said, the staff and parents might consider the possibility of inviting a Focus School into its building. The school would operate as two different entities within a single school building. She hinted that a group of parents were in the process of designing such a focus school for south Boulder.

Versions differ about what happened at that meeting, whether Swize had merely hinted about or in fact had formally notified the staff and parents that the board had already pegged Stonegate as the primary contender to site Apex.

Apex founders held its initial meeting in August 1994, at Stonegate. The meeting was well attended. Although its stated purpose was to provide information about the proposed focus school, the Stonegate community believed it had been targeted. The defenses went up.

Stonegate staff and parents strongly opposed any action that would threaten the integrity of their school. They had explored, since Swize's meeting the previous spring, alternative means for increasing enrollment or otherwise warding off this, as they saw it, attack. By October, when the board announced that Stonegate was a likely choice for siting Apex, a full counter offensive was under way.

Stonegate's well-educated, affluent corps of active parents held neighborhood meetings, gave short speeches at school board meetings, wrote letters and phoned members of the school board and Superintendent Damon. They engineered a letter writing campaign to the *Camera* and distributed flyers and letters to all the homes in the neighborhood. In addition, a "Town Meeting" was held at Stonegate two days before the board was scheduled to consider the Apex and Montessori proposals for focus schools. When the board met on October 25 most of Stonegate's teachers and parents were there to press their case. Thirteen of them spoke, relating their concerns: that Stonegate had been left out of the planning phase of placement; that plans for placement had been rushed through; and that sharing the building would have a negative impact on both programs. They also brought with them a plan to turn their whole school into its own focus school, operating as a magnet for families throughout the district to choose. In contrast with the Apex focus, Stonegate Focus would retain its identity as a student-centered school with progressive curriculum and pedagogy. It would remain as a neighborhood but attract students from outside its boundaries to its progressive curriculum. More importantly from their point of view, this focus would be planned and implemented by teachers with parents rather than by parents alone, as was true of Apex.¹⁵

The board decided to find another place for Apex. It cited several reasons, but Stonegate's successful defense lay mainly in the economic and political clout of the families in the neighborhood who overwhelmingly supported Stonegate as it was.

With its new insights about allegiances between staff and parents of neighborhood schools, and without any guidelines to follow for siting focus schools, the school board turned its attention toward other schools with unfilled seats. Franklin Elementary, which was part of the less affluent part of south Boulder proved to be an inviting target. Enrollment at Franklin had been declining for years, but the board had kept it open to provide temporary housing for the overflow from the suburbs. Trying not to repeat the Stonegate mistakes, Swize convened meetings between the Apex planners and Franklin staff and parents (which were no less unhappy than Stonegate had been about the prospect of siting Apex there).¹⁶ By then the board was fully aware that, although few

had ever raised objections to the idea of choice, the siting decisions were turning into political nightmares.

Finally a solution was proposed. The first two focus schools approved (Apex and Montessori) would be sited at an annex of Madison Elementary School. The annex would be empty the following fall. The Madison community had planned to add new language programs to be housed in the annex for its considerable population of children of foreign students at the university as well as a magnet bilingual education program for children bused in from the rest of the city. Last minute notification prevented the Madison community from pressing its case.

The board's next move foreshadowed problems to come. It appointed Claire Sauer as principal of both Apex in the Annex and of Adams Elementary School. The board reasoned in public that Adams would soon lose its bused children from the eastern suburbs to their new neighborhood school. As a result, Adams enrollment would then shrink by half. Claire Sauer could surely handle both assignments.

Following months of planning and staffing, Apex and Montessori focus schools opened their doors at the Madison annex. But everyone acknowledged that neither school could stay there for long. Both were filled to their capacity and already planning to expand, and the Annex had no more space. So the politically charged process of siting them more permanently began again. But this time, Apex had an advantage: a sympathetic principal it shared with Adams.

To the school board, siting Apex at the Adams building made sense. Nevertheless, it put off the political conflict until the election in November.

In September, a new east side school opened and 300 previously bused children who lived in its catchment area, along with their prized teachers and fund-raising parents, moved out of Adams. As eagerly as the Apex group looked to its future, Adams staff and neighborhood somberly contemplated its own. Sensing the inevitable course of policy, Claire Sauer, shared principal, suggested that the Adams School Improvement Team meet with the Apex group, as a friendly, welcoming gesture. The early meeting went well as the three parent leaders discovered what seemed to be similar goals for their children. There was no reason to believe that the two schools could not form a productive relationship.

Sometime before the November school board election, however, Adams parents had a change of heart. Principal Sauer hinted about the desire of Apex founders to maintain a "separate identity" from Adams. Ensuing phone conversations between representatives of the two schools confirmed the rumor that Apex parents did not want the two school populations to mix. To the Adams parents, the phrase "separate identity," was really a code for segregation of children from the two schools. Mutual wariness and suspicion clouded subsequent relations. With little time to spare before the school board made its final siting decision, Adams parents attempted to organize its opposition. They wrote letters to the school board, superintendent, and the *Camera* and held neighborhood meetings, but it was really too late. Unlike the parents at Stonegate, Adams parents possessed little ammunition—what some writers refer to as cultural capital—to effect the course of politics in the district and city.¹⁷

While the Apex founders pursued a "separate identity" from Adams, Parents and Schools directed its political activities toward the next election and the composition of the school board.

Colonizing the School Board

The school board election in November 1993 added two new faces and a shattered consensus on the board in regard to progressive restructuring. Although not among the founding members of Parents and Schools, Stephanie Hult and Kim Saporito were certainly sympathetic to its mission, always keeping "academic excellence" at the forefront of any debate. This was not the board majority they had hoped and campaigned for, but Parents and Schools finally placed some advocates there. As long as they were in the minority, they could not change policy. They could, however, radically change the style of discourse in board meetings. And change it they did, and made civility a thing of the past.

In 1994, as the focus school drama played out, one school board member resigned, leaving room for an appointee to complete the term. Of the fourteen who applied, the board voted unanimously for Don Shonkweiler. It soon became clear that Shonkweiler's ideas about education were closer to those of Hult and Saporito than to the board's majority.

The diligence of Parents and Schools, meanwhile, began to pay off when an International Baccalaureate program opened at Willowbrook High. In addition, one high school opened as a focus school and a middle school applied for a charter. Parents and Schools viewed the IB program as having a "ripple effect" on the rest of the district. Right away, the group began to push for a pre-IB program in a middle school that would prepare students for the IB program.

Parents and Schools went to work in earnest as they planned for the 1995 election. Professing interests in equity, its candidates practiced stealth techniques, keeping much of their platform out of public view. In November, an incumbent and another candidate that Parents and Schools endorsed won the election and shifted the board majority. Within its first five weeks, the new board, which everyone referred to as the Hult board, approved seven applications for focus schools and one charter school. The placement of Apex at Adams was one of those decisions.

Relations between the board and founders of Parents and Schools changed drastically. The new board majority appropriated Parents and Schools goals for its own. Academic excellence, choice and fiscal responsibility were its top stated priorities. Then the board went to work on a different variety of restructuring.

The Hult board made no secret of their disdain for the past reforms (e.g., middle school restructuring, inclusion, heterogeneous grouping, collaborative, site-based decisions made by parents and teachers, and progressive pedagogy). Empowered by the "will of the voters," the school board immediately got to work on the agendas of the new majority, spending most of its time approving various focus schools, schools-within-schools, "strands" within schools, and wholesale adoption of basic skills curriculum for elementary schools. So much choice activity went on that the board finally had to declare a moratorium to catch its breath. And even after that, groups approached the board behind the scenes to press for additional choices, and in some cases, getting them.

But not everyone got to choose.

Within the administration building a new type of "restructuring" was occurring. Since the 1970's the district boardroom placed the board members and the superintendent at a long, slightly elevated table in front of a small auditorium. Soon after the election, Superintendent Damon's seat was lowered to spectator level. This gesture

Efforts of Parents and Schools to portray itself in a good light exemplifies Edelman's theory of the social construction of self, friends, enemies, and leaders. The group did not forbear from manipulating symbols and statistics to promote its image and mission. Beginning with Janet Jones's misleading analysis of achievement scores in 1991, there followed a series of other such attempts. For example, Jones often cited studies that she claimed demonstrated the effectiveness of Core Knowledge and of its effectiveness for disadvantaged children. She did not (nor did the Core Knowledge Foundation web site when we tried to track them down) provide the foundation for her claim.²¹ In another example, Parents and Schools compared the achievement scores of children in schools of choice with children in neighborhood schools and attributed the advantage to superiority of the curriculum of choice schools. It ignored the selectivity of choice schools. It ignored lower class size and the amenities at choice schools. Instead, it attributed the higher test scores of schools of choice to parent involvement and superior programs. No matter how fallacious such accounts are constructed, the public seems not to question their validity. Nor did experts try to correct the misleading use of statistics. When ordinary citizens raised doubts, Parents and Schools called them amateurs, statistical illiterates, or enemies of school choice. This is how research is used in the political spectacle, as a rhetorical sword for partisans to wield, a way to appear rational and technical without the discipline and even-handedness of science at its best.

District Accommodation

Parents and Schools could not have been so successful if the school district had not accommodated its values and interests. By accommodation, we mean acquiescence—the gradual adaptation of the institutional values and the common goals of the representative body of decision-makers and administrators to the goals of a special interest.

This case study presents compelling evidence that district officials accommodated choice parents. The election of pro-choice school board members constitutes legitimate political activity. The accommodation by the district of political activities—both public and private, both conscious and unconscious—constitutes the politics of spectacle, bifurcating on-stage and back-stage actions. District officials accommodated simply by looking away. Perhaps they accommodated out of fear of reprisals, political or institutional. The Hult board's firing of administrators who challenged its pro-choice and anti-progressive policies represents an institutional reprisal. The following quotation from Parents and Schools literature represents a political threat of reprisal:

If the local school board refuses to approve requests for magnet programs with merit, we will elect better representatives in November. There is growing, powerful support for magnet programs in the state legislature and in the Colorado Department of Education. If the charter schools legislation is approved, as expected, during this session, we will have the option of appealing local school board decisions on magnet programs. Parents have the right and responsibility to define the education they want for their children.

Perhaps district accommodation can be thought of as a way of avoiding trouble from part of the community that had political power, as this quotation from a frustrated critic suggests:

The Apex parent leadership has become absolutely intoxicated with the

power the board majority increasingly bestows upon them.... Why is the board majority willing to wholesale turnover the education of our children to these zealots?

The district accommodated by failing to adjudicate conflict and weigh in with factions with less power. Instead of substantive help the district offered only symbolic democracy. An Adams parent commented on the conflict between the Adams and Apex transition teams. Meeting of these committees:

...made this appear to be a decision that the school governing body, teachers and parents, had actually made. But really we were just duped by the whole process.... but the administration knew what was happening and they left it up to her to maneuver it through. We were just a rubber stamp for a decision that was already made. It had the appearance of a democratic process but it really wasn't.

But was district accommodation inevitable? To answer we describe contrasting cases of districts that acted differently.

In Boulder's closest neighbor to the north, St. Vrain Valley School District, elite parents did not exert enough pressure on the district administration to obtain special treatment. The superintendent and board took a strong stand when they declared that any charter school in the district would be subject to strict oversight. In particular, the board made known its intention to take legal action to counter any attempt to establish schools that would select a single stratum from the student population. When asked to compare the St. Vrain district with Boulder's, the board president stated that the St. Vrain community was generally satisfied with its schools. Two applications for elementary charter schools and one application for a charter high school were submitted. The board ruled that since the two elementary school proposals were substantially the same, they should be merged into one. That charter was subsequently approved and opened. The board denied the only application for a charter high school application because the proposal failed to include a "responsible" fiscal plan. The charter school applicants appealed the district's decision to the Colorado Board of Education, an appeal built into the Colorado law. The State Board overturned the district's decision, and the school opened. Less than one year into its operation, the school's poor management had culminated in financial shortages, and the district took over the school's operation.

Cherry Creek District south of Denver, with demographics similar to those of Boulder, also provides relevant comparisons. The board approved only two choice options because the programs proposed were different from the district's regular programs. Elite parents exerted pressure, but a Cherry Creek administrator, responding to a question about why so few choice schools operated there, said, "We fund our schools and we know how to say no."

These two examples show that, even considering the pro-choice policies at the state level, capitulation to the elite parents in Boulder was not inevitable. There were alternatives that the district could have pursued that could have led, potentially, to a more even-handed outcome. First, the district could have insured that all students had an equal opportunity to enroll in choice programs. While racial quotas have recently been ruled unconstitutional, the district could have required that choice schools enroll the same percentage of free lunch students as reflected in the district. The net result of this policy would tend to serve the same purpose as a racial quota. Second, the district could have monitored enrollment procedures, particularly to insure that enrollment priority

pools of choice schools conformed to state law and district policy.²² Third, the district could have required choice school applications to provide unique programs that did not duplicate existing district programs. BVSD has many programs that market themselves as academically rigorous. Fourth, the district administration or the board could have closely scrutinized the business and financial plans and operations of the choice schools. Although most choice schools in Boulder have not had financial problems, prudent monitoring by the district would have required schools to follow policy regarding fund raising and private donations.²³ The district could have insisted upon broad and fair discussions involving all constituency groups with a stake in the policy. It could have intervened to make the discussions more equal. The district could have analyzed the potential costs and risks of choice schools to the broader community. The district could have performed an evaluation of the schools after they were in operation. The district did none of these things.

Democracy: Deliberative and Faux

Just because the post-Hult board and administration did nothing to mitigate the hegemony of elite parents does not mean it did nothing at all. What happened next represents a triumph of symbolic politics over deliberative democracy.

Contemporary political theory and philosophy recommends democratic deliberation as a way of broadening participation on civic projects and strengthening its fairness. Amy Gutmann described the deliberative process as one of three cornerstones by which citizens can deal with disagreements in democratic societies.

Procedures are necessary for the fair and peaceful resolution of moral conflicts.... If political equals disagree on moral matters, the greater number rather than the lesser number should normally rule.... But for procedures to be fair, citizens must appreciate the value of fairness.... Fundamental constitutional values...serve as constraints on majority rule.... American constitutional democracy recognizes certain substantive values not only as preconditions to a fair democratic process but also as fundamental values independent of that process, and as such, they represent a second basis for resolving political disagreements.... The third way that democracies can deal with disagreements is by citizens and public officials deliberating over the moral disagreements that proceduralism and constitutionalism, taken alone, leave unresolved. Deliberation is public discussion and decision making that aim to reach a justifiable resolution...and to live respectfully with those reasonable disagreements that remain unresolvable..... individual citizens should be regarded as moral agents who deserve equal respect in any justifications of basic procedures and constitutional rights.... Deliberation calls upon citizens and public officials to try to justify our political positions to one another and in so doing to take into account the viewpoints of others who reasonably disagree with us. (Gutmann, 2000, pp. 73-76)

When the post-Hult board in Boulder contemplated the complex set of changes that the district had experienced over the previous decade, it backed away from confronting them head on. The mood seemed to be that decisions already made to enhance school choice could not be remade, even if the board had the political will to do so. Instead it commissioned University of Colorado researchers Kenneth Howe and Margaret

Eisenhart to study the consequences of school choice.

The district did not wait for the results of their study. Meanwhile, the new superintendent still faced the dilemma of growth in the suburbs. To build new schools he believed it was necessary to close some schools on the west side. His dilemma was how to accomplish the closings without causing a new generation of political upheaval. An administrator from that era admitted:

Parts of our community are much less likely to be included in an effort like consolidation because of the perceived power of that community. That's a hard issue but it's somewhat the way things are.... If they had a powerful population maybe we wouldn't have chosen that school [for closure].

In April, 1998, the superintendent announced his "hit list" of schools under consideration for closure. Some of the schools on the list had high rates of poor and non-white students. The board called public meetings to present the proposal. The meetings turned into shouting matches when neighborhood families resisted the district proposal to close their schools. They complained that the district had neglected to inform them or to give them a voice in the decisions. They argued that the district had failed to justify its decision on adequate statistical information. Some members of the Facility Master Plan committee, which the board had appointed to assist them, agreed with the parents. The board retreated from its plans and postponed consolidation talks to a later time when the public could be more involved.

In September the board passed a resolution to start a deliberative process to advise the board on future school consolidation. Item #4 of the resolution stated:

That the Board make decisions regarding facility usage by January of 2001. Implementation of any Board decision would take place no sooner than fall of 2001, giving staff, students, and parents time for transition.

At the same time the Facility Master Plan Committee was working to gather information about district buildings so that it could be used as a guide for future decisions regarding facilities. Some committee members were concerned that consolidation would necessitate bussing of children, which in turn would exacerbate traffic and pollution problems. In September the committee presented its report to the board. The Master Plan included 13 strategies to address enrollment shifts. One of those strategies was school consolidation.

Since decisions regarding closures/consolidations are not popular with affected neighborhoods, the School District should develop a comprehensive public process for evaluating possible consolidations/closures.

Thereafter, the board began discussions with the Colorado Association of School Boards (CASB) to aid the district in designing a deliberative process. At first board members seemed genuine in their efforts to gather information and include the public in facilities usage decisions. But they also knew that a decision had to be reached. Whatever their intentions, the deliberative process that CASB implemented failed to yield recommendations.²⁴ Thus intentions failed to match policy instruments, but were transformed in the process of implementation.²⁵ By April, board minutes indicated a

change in the committee's responsibilities. The committee would no longer advise the board on school consolidation, as the resolution stated but rather deliberate as "a public exercise."

The new charge to the Committee was to

...give the process legitimacy throughout the community; create a dialogue with the entire community; reach out to community members whose voices are not often heard; empower the committee to be productive by investing them with the responsibility for the success of the process.

Thirty-six members were appointed to serve on the committee. Board members appointed one member each. The rest of the members were selected to represent the municipalities within the district as well as proponents of school choice. District officials selected other members, primarily people of color, to insure diversity. Although it was a goal to find representatives that hadn't already served on district committees, many members were familiar faces to school district committees and politics. At the time choice schools enrolled less than 15 percent of the district's students. Almost 33 percent of the group's representatives were affiliated with choice schools.

The first meeting for the deliberative process was held in April 1999. CASB Facilitator Jane Urschel started the session by explaining the group's charge:

The board does not expect the community to make a decision-that is the board's responsibility.... The advisory committee will not take a vote. Its job is to help the citizens of the district deliberate and reach a "public judgment." The board wants to "listen in" on the community as it works toward a public judgment and wrestles with the tough choices confronting the district.

One member took umbrage, saying afterwards:

I volunteered for the committee because the District's notice said that the committee would be making recommendations to the Board about pressing issues of closure/consolidation and choice.... It's a bait and switch.

A district administrator noted that committee members came with a variety of expectations and personal agendas:

Some were there to fight consolidation. Some were there because of the school choice stuff, to make sure their interests were being met. Most of them came with some type of territory they were protecting.

During an 8-month period the advisory group met more than 12 times. Each session was about three hours long. Members attempted to redirect the discussion to the issues of closure, consolidation and choice, the topics they believed were the primary charge they had been given. But Urschel insisted on the symbolic process of general discussion. Finally, the committee members, many reluctantly, gave in.

The first task for the committee was to frame the issue the public would deliberate. After many sessions the group framed the following question, "Making Choices: How can we best use our resources to ensure all children receive an excellent education?" The group then grappled with writing five responses, both pro and con, with arguments for each. Committee members spent many sessions debating and refining the responses.

After eight months the question and responses were compiled into booklets that would serve as the guide for future study circles that the public would be invited to participate in.

In December 1999, as the committee finalized the booklets and before any study circles had met, the board announced the closure of two elementary schools. There could no longer be any mistake. The Committee was just a symbol, a shadow of democratic deliberation, nothing like Gutmann's model. The board had based its decision on recommendations that district administrators had made and on behind the scenes discussions with its constituencies, but irrespective of the Committee. The marks of choice advocates were apparent. According to a district administrator, during these months, the parent board of Promontory Charter Middle School had:

...stayed very quiet during consolidation. They knew that if people caught on to the possibility that they might get their own school they'd be ticked off about it.... They were worried that if they were seen as advocating for it (consolidation) it would fire up the opposition.

One board member commented to a small group of people that the Promontory founder "was drooling" over this possibility of moving into one of those soon-to-be-vacated elementary school buildings and having it for itself.

Most members of the deliberative process team were angry that the board would proceed with such plans before the Deliberative Process had completed their work and before the 2-year moratorium on school consolidation had lapsed:

We are a committee that is supposed to be pulling the community in to have these conversations about what we want our district to look like. This big heavy-duty stuff is going on over here by the administration and the school board. Essentially it was a smoke screen because they never wanted to hear from the community anyway. They decided that in order to have an excellent education you had to close schools and that's what they were going to do anyway.

At the center of much of the public debate on the board plans to consolidate was the actual choice of schools:

When they actually closed and consolidated schools they hit the most politically incompetent schools.... But not Jefferson! Those people created politics. And nothing ever happens to Monroe because those people are too politically suave.

The two schools destined for closure were located in neighborhoods like the Adams neighborhood—some of the few affordable places left in Boulder for young families to buy a home and where many less advantaged families lived. At one of them, for example, thirty nine percent of its 312 students were eligible for free lunch (compared to less than 20 percent across the district as a whole). Almost one-third were Limited English Proficient (LEP). Forty-three percent were children of color. Once again, the board had taken the more expedient route, targeting the families with the least cultural capital, those who would likely put up the least resistance. It was unclear whether the proposed closures would result in any savings.

The deliberative process committee, working in public, had contributed nothing to the district's off-stage decision making. Specifically, said one member:

The Ed center had no time, no respect, and no regard for this task force. It was just thought of as a cumbersome waste of time.... They saw it as something keeping them from doing their job. They wanted to get on with closing schools and we were standing in their way.

Unlike the school district, the city of Boulder was committed to preserving its neighborhood schools. One city council member discussed the possibility of using city excise tax to keep the schools open. Although committing money from excise taxes turned out to be illegal, city officials offered several recommendations to the board, among them to give neighborhood children priority enrollment into schools converted to choice schools. The city also recommended that the district conduct an impact study to assess public and private costs for transportation, and a mitigation and safe access plan. The board resisted any attempt by the city council to interfere with board decisions and did not act on any of the city councils suggestions.

After the board made its official decision, one member of the Deliberative Process committee resigned. Others stopped attending meetings. He commented:

I can't do this anymore. I'm not going to waste time on something irrelevant. They (board members) wanted to get Promontory [charter school] in somewhere and that was their hidden agenda. I think they ... decided it among them because when they took the vote there was no discussion [at the board meeting].

In February the few remaining Deliberative Process committee members—more than half of them advocates of school choice --organized study circles to discuss the question and responses they had spent the past year creating. Nineteen study circles were held, none of them in the areas affected by the consolidation. The report the committee issued to the board (August, 2000) contained five themes that the study circles generated. But everyone was aware by then that any deliberation that took place did not affect decisions made by the board, at most the committee served as a cover for decisions on behalf of the most advantaged parts of the community, not necessarily for the common good.

Choice Effects in Boulder and Beyond

Parents and Schools echoed neo-liberals worldwide when they claimed that choice benefits all parts of society. They scoffed at the idea that choice policies actually exacerbate existing inequalities in social life generally and school achievement specifically. They discounted the possibility that families with fewer resources and less cultural capital might lack complete information on which to make a choice or might value schools in their neighborhood. They went further to label as "racist" any such doubts. They held fast to the notion that free market solutions were preferable to government imposed neighborhood school boundaries, which tended to isolate poor children in bad schools. They ignored issues of community, transportation, and dispositions that might discourage the willingness or ability of some people to make such choices. So deep were the beliefs of the members of Parents and Schools that they readily looked beyond equivocal or negative evidence or found reasons for discrediting it.²⁶

In the political spectacle, however, one set of claims is made onstage (e.g.,

enhancing equity) and another is hidden behind the scenes (e.g., maintaining privilege).

In Edelman's words:

In politics, moreover, the incentive to preserve privileges or to end inequalities is always crucial, offering fertile psychological ground for using language and action strategically, including slippery definitions of means, ends, costs, benefits, and rationality (Edelman, 1988, p. 109).

Clearly, elite parents manipulated the instruments of choice policy in Boulder. But they were not alone. Research by Elizabeth Graue and Stephanie Smith showed that elite parents used back-stage political pressure to undermine progressive reforms in math classes. The educators had attempted to remove ability grouping and implement problem-solving and cooperative learning. But the parents believed that homogeneous classes with traditional instruction had successfully prepared their children to win the credentials race, (Graue and Smith, 1996) as Labaree described it (Labaree, 1997).

In their study of schools that attempted to eliminate ability grouping, Amy Stuart Wells and Irene Serna identified four strategies that elite parents used to undermine this reform.²⁷ First, elite parents threatened to withdraw their students from the "detracked" school if their children were not given the specialized curricula they demanded. Second, elite parents co-opted institutional elites by directly influencing school administrators, pressing their case until they gained advocates from within the school to create specialized placements for their students. Third, high status parents recruited the "not quite elites" to press their case for them. Parents of students in Advanced Placement classes convinced the parents of students in the next highest track to lobby for a return to tracking. The authors point, in particular, to school site-based decision-making teams that end up pushing for programs such as Advanced Placement, honors programs, and other programs that select on the basis of academic ability. In response, schools offered bribes to elite parents to keep their children in a de-tracked school or a magnet school. For example, a school might promise small classes or the best teachers to elite parents to convince them not to withdraw their children and send them to another school that offered high, homogeneous, and selective tracks (Wells and Serna, 1996). Graue and Smith believe that such strategies to restore the hierarchically arranged classes and schools have the effect of increasing stratification among schools and diminishing the quality of educational opportunities for the poor (Graue and Smith, 1996).

In their case study of choice programs in four large urban systems, Donald Moore and Susan Davenport found that students, after the introduction of magnet schools, seemed to have a broader array of schools and programs from which to choose. But many of these options were open only to select groups of students. Choice schools were less than fair in their admission practices. Students at risk were much less likely to apply to or be selected by the schools that advertised themselves as advanced academically. Most working class and poor parents did not comprehend the application process to select schools. They were less likely to catch on to what elite parents knew: that if the schools were pushed hard enough they might well admit students who fell below the required admission standards. Junior high school counselors, even when they were available, tended to direct low-income students into less selective high schools. Programs such as the International Baccalaureate selectively advertised to students with only the top academic records and scores. Academic schools systematically excluded special education students and students whose first language was not English. The high track, academically selective schools also attracted the best teachers and the most resources from the district. Even when admitted to an academically selective school,

students who failed to conform to its profile found themselves forced out. Finally, districts pressured school administrators to raise and maintain high test scores lest elite parents remove their high scoring children.²⁸ All of these practices further segregated children of color and poverty in the least desirable schools or tracks or schools-within-schools and thereby consigned them to the fewest educational opportunities (Moore and Davenport, 1990).²⁹

Hugh Lauder and David Hughes conducted research in New Zealand where school choice policies have had more influence than they have in the United States (Lauder and Hughes, 1999). Their research was conducted in an urban setting where transportation to schools outside students' neighborhood did not prevent choice of schools, as it often does in American settings. Their research tested hypotheses gleaned from both critics and advocates of school choice by statistically examining the relationships among social class and ethnicity of students, the level of academics in four high schools, and academic achievement (both of students prior to admission and to the schools' effect on subsequent achievement). They found that most lower class students in high academic schools were there not because of successful application, but because they lived in the schools' catchment area. Of the students who applied to the high status academic schools, there was a strong relationship between their successful admission and their social class. Furthermore, the following conditions exacerbated stratification of the schools:

Students from high SES background have the greatest opportunity to avoid working class schools, and most take it.... students with the highest SES background in a neighbourhood [sic] are most likely to exercise choice..... exit from working class schools induces a spiral of decline,³⁰ ... whereas schools with more applicants than spaces "effectively insulate themselves from the effects of the market (Lauder and Hughes, 1999), 101.

The authors argue that stratified opportunities result in disparities in subsequent achievement, and that such effects accumulate over multiple years of disparate opportunities.

Despite the remarkable consistency of findings among the studies of the effects of school choice, we do not have to look beyond Boulder to get a reading on the effects of the choice movement there. In 1999 the board of education finally decided to commission an independent analysis of the ramifications of its decisions about school choice. As a result of that analysis, Ken Howe and Margaret Eisenhart concluded that the district's policy had resulted in 16 choice schools attended by 20 percent of the district students. But families that availed themselves of choice options were not representative of the district as a whole.

This deserves the name 'skimming' because some schools are drawing a disproportionate number of students from the high scoring pool... whereas other schools are losing a disproportionate number (Howe and Eisenhart, 2000, p. 10).

Their study also showed that, "Race/ethnicity is a prominent feature of open enrollment patterns.... students are leaving regions with higher percentages of minorities. Whites are disproportionately requesting open enrollment in schools with high test scores" (Howe and Eisenhart, 2000). Boulder schools have become substantially more stratified by ethnicity since the district adopted school choice policies.

Howe and Eisenhart concluded that the process by which choice schools recruit families contributes directly to the increased stratification. For example, applications that are contingent on donations, requirements that parents volunteer a certain number of hours, and transportation costs all discriminate against families with low incomes and constrained schedules. They took to task priority pools, stating that giving priorities to founders' children and others produce unfairness.

Howe and Eisenhart also pointed out that, because of the district's system of funding schools, when advantaged families leave their neighborhood school for a charter or focus school, district funds follow. This drains the budgets of the neighborhood schools, thus exacerbating the disparities in resources. Those schools then enter a downward spiral for those who are left behind. They suggested several remedies for the vast disparities that exist in private funds parents donate to schools of choice in contrast to neighborhood schools, particularly in less advantaged neighborhoods.

Although surveys showed that parents of both neighborhood schools and schools of choice were satisfied with their schools, the majority of respondents also believed choice had negatively affected both the sense of local community and the collegiality of the professionals. Finally, the authors recommended that the district oversee the application process, particularly of the lottery, to increase fairness (Howe and Eisenhart, 2000).

But in Boulder, the decisions were already made. All five neighborhood schools in the city that were closed because of low enrollment have since been converted to schools of choice.

School Choice and the Illusion of Democracy

Horace Mann envisioned a system of schools financed by state taxes and available to all, indeed, providing equal education to all. He believed that providing equal education for all children, irrespective of family origin and wealth promotes the common good. Democratic participation by citizens in the goals and operations of schools would direct schools toward fair (or at least majoritarian) ends. Mann's vision was realized, in part, even though the U.S. Constitution and Bill of Rights made no mention of public schools. That the system was constructed at all, let alone that it has endured, must be testament to deeply held sentiments about educational rights and the public good.

To neoliberals, democracy is not something like the cultural vision of citizens gathered around the pot-bellied stove at the general store, debating and voting on the ways to run schools. Instead, neoliberals define democratic participation as individuals exercising their rights to make choices in a free market of schools. The public good they define as the aggregate of individual choices of schools. The school choice movement means to take the public out of public schools.

In spite of Mann's ideals, almost from the beginning of American public schools, parents sought to abandon them. Elite families avoided the public schools in favor of selective private schools for their children. For their own children, they did not want what was available to all. Irish immigrants withheld their children from public schools because of their profound Protestant bias. White southerners pressed the state to provide schools for their children that would exclude former slaves. When the Supreme Court struck down that possibility, they sent their children to private academies for whites only.

Contrary to what neoliberals and the rest of the choice advocates say, therefore, public schools have never been monopolies, let alone socialist schools or government schools, or whatever incendiary labels they might deploy. School choice was ever available, at least to some families.

Families with sufficient financial resources could always separate their children from the common school. Anyon's history of Newark public schools followed its centripetal course from commons and commoners.³¹ Industrial leaders moved their families from the core to the periphery of the city, later from the periphery to the suburbs. The fathers commuted by trolley, later by car, from their homes to their factories, passing within sight of the increasingly congested and poor neighborhoods. Wives and children of the industrialists lost visual access to the neighborhoods and schools they had left behind. Later still, the industrialists moved the factories themselves away from the city. They lost, therefore, even the chance to see the conditions they left behind.

This trajectory created the relationship between neighborhood and school, between class, labor, and education. The cultural and political capital of the industrial elite solidified the relationship by vesting school finance at the local level. The economically poor would become educationally poorer over time. A two-tiered system was in the making.

As the wealthiest families abandoned the poor and working class families to the schools in the core cities, they took with them not only their financial advantages to pour into their own schools. They also invented justification for separation and relative deprivation. They were able to tolerate school conditions for the poor that they would never have tolerated for their own children. They invented the ideology of the neighborhood school. Later they used that image to justify a system highly differentiated by class and race and to resist judicial efforts to desegregate. Still later they used the image of neighborhood schools to persuade Federal courts to lift long-standing desegregation orders (claiming that the virtues of neighborhood schools for their own children outweighed the virtues of desegregated schools for minority children).

So school choice has always been. What is new about school choice is the political pressure by elite parents on the State to subsidize—from the public treasury—the abandonment of the common school. Just the contrary of Horace Mann's ideals. Demands for charter schools and private school vouchers count merely as an extension of the more-than-a-century-long desertion of advantaged families from public schools and the common good.

In Colorado, choice policy provided political opportunities. In Boulder, elite parents took advantage of those opportunities to exert disproportionate power over the distribution of values. They professed public interests in public while pursuing private interests in private. They silenced opposition, practiced the discourse of derision, made a mockery of democratic deliberation. They conducted business in private and capitalized on connections and media savvy. They thoroughly cowed the district officials (who ought to have taken responsibility for re-balancing cultural and financial capital) to get what they wanted for their children—for only their own children. And so they did: special tracks, programs, trips, opportunities, smaller and more exclusive classes and schools. Parents won the right to control the schools, select the teachers and curriculum, select students like their own while excluding others.

Absent political spectacle, could choice policies have transformed public schools so thoroughly in Boulder, in Arizona or New Zealand? Political spectacle diminishes democracy. Weakened democracy nourishes political spectacle. In the political spectacle, even the words "choice," or the word, "market," fog the mind. Most people eat the thin gruel of words while the few operate backstage to obtain more tangible items for themselves.

No matter how much political conservatives dress up demands for school choice in the language of equity and liberty and free market, the sad truth is that not every parent

will make choices, or will make informed choices, or will make choices that further the common good or that the best educational choices will be available to all or even available at all. Further, compelling research suggests that the fate of American schools in the hands of people with the most cultural and political capital is one of even greater separation, segregation, and differential opportunities than exists now (Lauder and Hughes, 1999; Cobb and Glass, 2000; Moore and Davenport, 1990; Wells and Serna, 1996; Wilson, 2000).

And what might that bring? A post-Fordist analysis would suggest that schools and programs will proliferate, but what is available to some will not be available to all. Schools and types of students will be increasingly segregated and separated. There is every reason to predict, therefore, that wealth and cultural capital will diverge even more. Free markets create winners and losers. Devolution of responsibility will benefit only the schools for the socially advantaged. The State will retain ultimate authority for system goals and means of accountability and will exercise these means to punish and further isolate schools for children of poverty and color. And it all will happen off-stage.

Notes

¹The material in this report is a version of chapter three in *Political Spectacle and the Fate of American Schools* (Smith, M.L. with Miller-Kahn, L., Fey, Patricia, Heinecke, W. & Noble, A.). The book will be published in 2002 by Routledge/Falmer Press in Michael Apple's series in critical perspectives in education. The authors appreciate the cooperation among editors and publishers to be able to include this research in the Archives.

²On the Public Broadcasting Network broadcast of *The History of American Schools* (September 4, 2001), former Reagan Department of Education official Chester Finn made this argument—that schools are the only things that Americans cannot change. The producers failed to ask him about the place of libraries, fire and police departments, prisons, public hospitals, highways, trash removal, and a long list of other public institutions that occupy the same relationship between individual and state. Such is the role of language in the political spectacle—it fogs the mind to the point that audiences fail to question it.

³Other parts of the coalition invoked these parents of color whenever they needed to counter the claims of critics that school choice favored the already advantaged parts of society.

⁴Recall an incident that occurred during the 2000 post election campaign, in which one candidate held a press conference. Behind the podium with the official seal were two American flags. Later, a candidate from the other party gave a press conference with five American flags backing him. Still later a candidate appeared before a huge array of flags. This time, the candidates went too far, and their posing provided fodder for comedians. The transporting of disputed ballots from Miami to Tallahassee provided another opportunity for dramatic staging. Television cameras in helicopters focused on the trucks the entire length of the trip. Media over reports the dramatic and the visual.

⁵Edelman refers to democratic participation and rationality as myths. We prefer the possibility of both, but recognize that in the political spectacle, they are apt to be absent.

Therefore we refer to them as illusions.

⁶The movement of both national parties to the political center may then result from both listening to the same polls.

⁷Herbst, S. (1993). *Numbered voices: How public opinion polling has shaped American politics*. Chicago, University of Chicago Press, p. 50.

⁸Herbst, p. 156

⁹The arguments above do not discount entirely the place of research in policy. Far from it. Properly interpreted, research studies can contribute to policy arguments. Moreover, for politicians and policy makers to ignore the research literature may also constitute irrationality. George W. Bush, when he was governor of Texas, aimed his education policies at ending "social promotion." He sought to replace the movement of students from grade to grade based on age with a procedure based on test results. Those who failed the test failed the grade. Anyone that advocates a policy such as this must deliberately ignore a body of contrary research that consistently shows the ineffectiveness of grade repetition. Not only do repeaters make little progress they are also much more likely to drop out of school instead of graduating. Bush also had to overlook the inconvenient fact that even before his policy Texas schools practiced little social promotion. Grade retention rates were high in comparison with other states.

¹⁰A reference to the Lawrence Schiller (1999) book *Perfect Murder in a Perfect Town* about the Jon Benet Ramsey case in Boulder about the same time as these data were collected.

¹¹In this article, we use the names of public figures. Any other characters have been given pseudonyms.

¹²At the time the parent corporation of the Camera was Knight Ridder. Note that examples and tallies are available in Miller-Kahn, 2000.

¹³State statute and district policy also must conform to Federal law, specifically the Improving America's Schools Act of 1994. Part C—Public Charter Schools, allows for federal grant money allocated to states for Charter schools. The exact language follows: "In General—The Secretary may award grants to State educational agencies having applications approved pursuant to section 10303 to enable such agencies to conduct a charter school program in accordance with this part."

¹⁴These disputed images of focus schools vis-a-vis charter schools echoed the disparate images of charter schools vis-a-vis vouchers. Choice advocates see charters as entrees to the preferable alternative of vouchers where as public school advocates see charters as ways to preempt vouchers. Parents could use the Charter School Act as a "threat" to force the district to create magnet schools. Districts propose the lesser evil from their point of view to cool out or dampen the determination of parent advocates of choice.

¹⁵One year later Stonegate was approved as a focus school in its own right. Active

parents at the school believed that the designation protected them from advances from other focus school proposals and a school board sympathetic to school choice.

¹⁶Swize and the Adams principal (also a close friend of Swize) met with Apex's founders to discuss the eventual situating of Apex at Adams but parents and teachers were never informed of the meetings.

¹⁷See, for example, (Bourdieu, 1977).

¹⁸Hult proposed deleting Marine's resignation speech from the board minutes but that motion failed.

¹⁹At the Montessori Focus School, priority listed students also took most of the available slots. The founders of Zenith, the K-12 charter school, adopted similar guidelines but defined as "founder" anyone who paid a fee to get on the list of applicants. That way, any family on the list would be exempt from the lottery and there would be fewer slots determined by lot.

²⁰Apex teachers threatened to walk out on two occasions because parents interfered with professional decisions. The district knew of the problems and once again paid for a trained mediator to help teachers and parents work out their problems. The mediator found that the teachers' concerns were real and suggested that the governance structure be revamped to include more faculty representation on the Lead Team.

²¹A further investigation of the Core Knowledge Foundation website listed its own research to support the claim that Core Knowledge curriculum was superior to the curriculum of most school districts. The website did refer to a recent, independent, longitudinal study on Core Knowledge conducted by John Hopkins University. The study was funded by the Walton Foundation, a group that has issued grants to Core Knowledge schools across the country for several years. In an abstract written by a Core Knowledge employee, the researchers claimed that in schools where Core Knowledge was consistently implemented the results were promising. They did, however, state that the positive results were not necessarily due to the Core Knowledge curriculum, but more likely the result of a consistently applied program (Marshall, 1999).

²²Nine months after the CU report on open enrollment that recommended that the district handle all choice applications to insure an equitable process the Zenith web site still instructed parents to send two applications directly to the school. One application was for school purposes and the other would be turned into the district for oversight.

²³Fund raising was another problematic area according to the CU report.

²⁴The National Issues Forum format, selected by the CASB facilitators for the deliberative process, was not designed to create recommendations, especially the kind that Resolution 98-18 required. This may have been a plus for board members who felt that their decision-making abilities might be threatened by the group's outcome.

²⁵Intentions of policy makers frequently get transformed through the various layers of

implementation. See (Hall, 1995).

²⁶ Anyon, J. (1997). *Ghetto Schooling : A Political Economy of School Reform*. New York, Teachers College Press.

²⁷ This study focused on de-tracking within schools. Only two of their ten cases were magnet schools per se. Nevertheless, their findings are relevant here, because schools of choice in a position to select their students will select the students that best fit their profiles, whether arts magnets or accelerated academic achievement magnets. Selecting within a school building for homogeneous groups of successful students follows the same principle (Wells and Serna, 1996).

²⁸ (Moore and Davenport, 1990).

²⁹ Both of the studies just described emphasized the negative consequences involved with the use of achievement tests to select students or to establish accountability. Most standardized tests are systematically biased by socio-economic status. Therefore, to use test scores as the basis of admission to special schools or programs is automatically to produce schools stratified according to social class, and by extension, to race (Moore and Davenport, 1990) and (Wells and Serna, 1996).

³⁰ They decline rather than close, as the market theorists would have predicted, these schools stay open and work on advertising and public image such as pushing increases in test scores (Lauder and Hughes, 1999).

³¹ Also see (Anyon, 1997).

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