**Getting a Diploma Instead of an Education**

by David F. Labaree

We hear a lot these days about how we could save American schools if we would just make them more responsive to the educational consumer. Supporters of school vouchers, choice, and charters tell us that we should destroy the government monopoly that has protected school bureaucracies from having to meet the demands of their own customers. Make the educational consumer king, they say, and ineffective schools will simply go out of business.

But the sad fact is that schooling at all levels is already catering to the customer in ways that are harmful to both education and society. For years now the trend in public schools has been toward educational consumerism. That is, increasingly we have been putting schools in the position of trying to sell educational products to student customers, where the primary selling point is the prospect of getting a good job rather than a good education. This consumerism is turning public education into a private good and turning the pursuit of learning into a chase for credentials; and the result is a growing divergence in the availability of educational opportunities and a growing disengagement of students from the learning process. Efforts to intensify consumer pressures on schools by moving openly toward market control of education would only serve to accelerate these disturbing trends.

One problem is that supporters of educational consumerism construe public education narrowly as a private good that is owned by the students who acquire its diplomas and that exists in order to meet the individual needs of these customers. This vision of education is reasonable as far as it goes, since diplomas do provide opportunities for graduates by giving them access to good jobs and a comfortable life. But the consumerist approach chooses to ignore the ways in which schooling is very much a public good.

One public purpose of schooling is political. We all depend on schools to prepare good citizens – which means giving all members of society the thinking skills, cultural knowledge, and democratic values that will allow them to play their roles as citizens competently and constructively. Everyone benefits when voters and jurors know what they’re doing.

Another public purpose of schooling is economic. We all depend on schools to prepare productive workers – which means giving all members of society the skills, knowledge, and attitudes that will allow them to carry out their work roles effectively. Everyone benefits when worker productivity is high.

Public education, therefore, is a public good whose effects we cannot escape. For better or worse, we all consume what our schools produce. However, the advocates of vouchers, choice, and charters are not seeking to make schools more responsive to the needs of the entire community. They want to make schools responsive only to the demands of a minority of the population – families with children in school.

As citizens or taxpayers, we are all concerned about schooling as a public good, and we want schools to turn other people’s children into good citizens and productive workers. But as parents, we are compelled to focus on schooling as a private good. Quite naturally, we want education to do what is best for our own children. This means we work to make sure that our own children end up with the best teachers, the best programs, and the best schools – even if the result is that other people’s children receive an education that is vastly inferior.

The effort to enhance the power of the educational consumer reinforces a tendency in education – treating public education as a private good – that has already done a lot of harm. This consumerism has created the huge gulf in educational quality that currently separates suburban from urban school systems, pitting the wealthy against the poor in a zero-sum game where the larger community is a consistent loser. And within individual educational institutions, it has created a series of unlovely distinctions between students that benefit some – in the high reading group, the gifted program, or the advanced-placement class – at the expense of others.

There is a second problem with the effort to make schools more responsive to student consumers, one that poses a direct threat to education itself: The student consumerism that is already rampant in American schools clearly undercuts learning.

As a private good, education exists in order to benefit the individual consumer. And the primary benefit that motivates individuals to devote time and energy in pursuit of education is the possibility of getting ahead. Every student and every parent knows that the way to get a good job is to get a good education. Or more precisely, a good diploma.

And this is the heart of the second problem with educational consumerism. By its emphasis on getting ahead, consumerism undermines getting an education. Students quickly figure out that the primary value of schooling is what you can buy with it – a good job, a comfortable standard of living – and not the knowledge it provides. They come to understand all too soon in their educational careers that what really matters is not what you learn but what you get on the test.

The essence of schooling, from this angle, is the acquisition of grades, credits, and degrees. These tokens of learning become the primary focus of a student’s effort. And the result is that, like cagey consumers anywhere, students resist spending more time or energy than they have to in order to get the educational credentials they want. Why pay full price when you can buy at a discount? Why learn more than you need to in order to get a good grade? Consumerism, in short, undermines the motivation to learn.

Of course, this outcome is just the opposite of what many supporters of market-based schooling want to bring about. Discouraged by what they see as a lack of authentic learning in the public schools, some reformers see choice, charters, or vouchers as ways to enhance the learning process. But the evidence shows that consumerism within existing public schools has already diminished student learning, and therefore efforts to increase schools’ vulnerability to consumer pressure (through the threat of losing both students and money) are likely to make matters even worse.

The point is this: We shouldn’t try to make the consumer king in American education, because this change has already taken place behind our backs. We are already too much in the business of schooling consumers rather than educating citizens and workers. The result is that students are focused less on getting an education than on consuming school.

*David F. Labaree, associate professor of education at Michigan State University, is the author of the book “How to Succeed in School Without Really Learning: The Credentials Race in American Education” (Yale University Press, 1997).*