

Touro College Jacob D. Fuchsberg Law Center

From the Selected Works of Michael E Lewyn

October 7, 2016

The Middle Class, Urban Schools and Choice

Michael Lewyn



Available at: <https://works.bepress.com/lewyn/117/>

It is common knowledge that middle-class parents tend to prefer suburban public schools to urban public schools, and thus that urban public schools make suburban life more attractive. What I would like to do in this talk is first explain why this is so, and second discuss a variety of solutions to the problem. My ultimate conclusion is that there are a lot of plausible solutions but no perfect solution.

First of all, let me discuss the cause of the problem. After all, good restaurants and good universities are as common in cities as in suburbs. Why should good schools be any different?

The root of the problem lies in school residence laws. The general American rule is that you have to go to public school in the school district you live in, and in a government-dictated attendance zone within that district. So if a city has lots of poor people, the schools in that city have lots of poor people too. Because cities tend to be more diverse than suburbs, city schools tend to have more poor children than suburban schools. Because low social status and low educational achievement go together, city schools also have lower test scores than suburban schools and are thus less attractive to parents.

This explains why urban schools developed a bad reputation as soon as school desegregation began. Before then, affluent city neighborhoods had schools full of affluent children, causing their schools to have good reputations. But after desegregation, the federal courts ordered urban schools to achieve racial balances roughly comparable to that of the school district as a whole (and since black children tended to be lower-status than white children, this meant that every urban school had to have lots of poor people). But the federal courts didn't require suburban schools to do anything of the sort, reasoning that if a suburb never had any African-Americans to discriminate against, it had never discriminated and thus didn't need to do anything about discrimination. This meant that city schools had to be diverse while suburban schools got to be overwhelmingly white and affluent- thus ensuring that suburban schools were more attractive.

In other words, schools full of poor people's children have poor reputations, schools full of rich people's children have rich reputations- and so suburban schools have better reputations.

This conclusion is uncomfortable for both liberals and conservatives. Liberals tend to argue that urban schools are underfunded. But in fact, urban school districts tend to spend a little more per pupil than their suburban counterparts. In Kansas City, a 1980s desegregation decree required city schools to spend more- so much more than the city spent twice as much per pupil than some suburbs. But the results were pretty comparable to those of other urban school districts. Now having said that, I want to add a huge qualification: since disadvantaged children might cost more to educate, it might be the case that if city schools spent enough (say, five times or ten times as much as suburban schools) the disadvantages caused by poverty might be eliminated. Since this strategy seems even more politically impossible than the other policies I am going to discuss, I am pretty agnostic as to its likely success or failure.

Conservatives might not like my conclusion because they prefer to blame urban schools, by arguing that they simply have worse bureaucrats than suburban schools. But this

argument fails to explain why urban schools that can screen out low achievers actually outperform suburban schools. For example, U.S. News & World Report ranks public schools in every state, and nine out of New York's ten best public schools are in the New York City school system (not otherwise known for great schools). Why? Because these schools are exam schools- that is, schools that can screen out low achievers.

Now having said that, in theory there might be plenty you can do to improve lower-class students' performance. But I'm not going to pretend to be an education expert, so that's not what my paper is about. My paper is about a much less important but still interesting (at least to me) topic: how to make cities attractive to parents even if you can't fix that problem.

So given that, what can you do to make city life attractive to parents? There are really two types of options: egalitarian options and market-oriented options.

On the egalitarian side, you could simply eliminate the demographic differences between city and suburbs. A state or federal government could consolidate all the schools in a metropolitan region in one super-district, and make every school have the same number of low-income children. For example, if 30 percent of the Nashville area's children were low-income, every school would have to be 30 percent low-income. So schools would not be able to compete based on demography.

Since some neighborhoods are pretty segregated this would require lots of busing across long distances. And in the absence of strict land use controls people might move even further out. For example, Jacksonville, Florida merged with its county in the 1960s and now encompasses 800 square miles. So you might think parents are happy with its school district. Right? Wrong. When I lived in Jacksonville, many of my colleagues lived in St. Johns County for the schools, even if it meant a 20 mile commute. Moreover, an egalitarian strategy would be politically radioactive, since suburbanites would be losing precisely what they moved to suburbia for: socially homogenous schools.

I talk about four choice-oriented options in my paper. The first is a traditional voucher system- every student gets to attend every school at public expense. Ideally, the money follows the child. The advantage of this system is obvious: a parent can live in the city and send their child to a private school, thus staying in the city without having to go to urban public schools. Vouchers have been tried in a few cities- but usually only for lower-income children, not as a sprawl control policy.

If private schools were as cheap as public schools, a pure voucher system would be workable. And this may have been the case in the 1960s, when Catholic schools were common and had a cheap labor force of priests and nuns. But the Catholic system seems to have declined, so this isn't as much of an option as it once was. The sort of private schools that well-off parents prefer are actually more expensive than public schools. For example, my brother sends his children to a Jewish school that costs about \$20,000 per year, twice the per pupil cost of most public schools- and his school's revenues don't just come from tuition so the real cost is probably even higher. Good secular private schools are equally expensive.

So if we want a voucher system that fully funds private education, it would be more expensive than the status quo. An alternative would be to just fund vouchers at the same level as public schools. So if the public schools spent \$10,000 per pupil, the private school vouchers would be \$10,000 per pupil (minus some amount to compensate for the fact that public schools have fixed costs, so they would save less than \$10,000 for each pupil lost). So if this was the case, city residents wouldn't get to attend private schools free, but would at least get a discount- so their incentive to move to suburbs would be reduced, but would not be completely eliminated.

A second option is a public schools only voucher system. Under this system, any child could go to any public school in the region or state, as long as it was public. So parents could stay in the city and send their child to suburban public schools. But this option would involve significant transportation costs- either for the government (if it paid for extra school buses to the suburbs) or for parents (if they did it themselves). And if the expense was placed on parents, it would reduce their incentive to stay in the city. After all, if you have to drive to the suburbs to get your child to school, why not just move there?

A third option is reforming the charter school system. Today, charter schools are schools that are more or less publicly financed and are free for children, but are not subject to the same level of bureaucratic regulation as public schools. When charter schools were invented, some people might have thought of them as a solution to the city school problem. But most charter schools, like most public schools, are dominated by the poor. Why? Because charter schools have to choose students by lottery or on a first-come first-served basis rather than screening out low achievers, which makes them pretty similar to typical urban public schools. For the people who feared that charter schools would become segregation academies, this is great news. But for people worried about suburban sprawl, it is not such good news.

By contrast, if charter schools were allowed to be more choosy, you might have high-end charter schools that, like the upper-class public schools of pre-1960s urban America, were dominated by smarter, richer children, and thus appealing to the middle classes. But here too there is a cost: if charter schools became choosy, what happens to the weaker students in charter schools? They might get dumped back in the urban public school system. Now if you believe (as some of the scholarly literature argues) that charter schools aren't any better than urban public schools, this is not a problem. But the parents who sent their children to those schools probably believe otherwise.

A fourth option is exam schools. As I mentioned earlier, exam schools sometimes outperform suburban public schools. So why haven't they made suburban schools less popular? For two reasons. First, most of them start at high school, by which time most well-off parents have already moved to the suburbs. Second, there aren't enough of them to go around: many of them cover the top 5 percent or so of city students, which means that if your children are bright enough to fit into suburban schools but might not be quite bright enough for the city exam schools, you are probably going to prefer the suburbs. So one obvious reform is more exam schools- for example, schools for the top 10 percent and top 20 percent and top 30 percent. But that might cost more money. Even if the new exam

schools used existing buildings, I would imagine that it would cost some money in transition costs, as schools were shifted around the system.

Finally, I mention the traditional argument against market-oriented options: that they would increase social segregation, as low-achieving students were left behind in crumbling city schools. I find this a less plausible argument. Here's why: as long as they have another option, middle-class parents will always want to avoid schools with low-income children and low test scores. The only question is: can we let them do it while staying in the city, or do we make a suburban address their ticket of admission to the schools they want?

In sum, there are several ways to make urban life more appealing to middle-class parents. But all of them have costs- either financial costs or other social costs.