

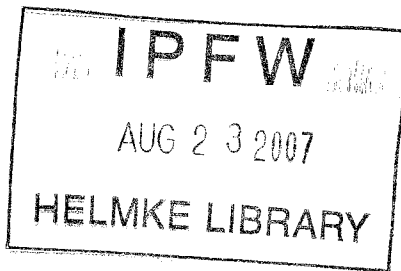
# TAKING SIDES

Clashing Views on  
**Social Issues**  
FOURTEENTH EDITION, EXPANDED

Selected, Edited, and with Introductions by

**Kurt Finsterbusch**  
*University of Maryland*

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*To my wife, Meredith Ramsay, who richly shares with me  
a life of the mind and much, much more.*

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# ISSUE 14

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## Is Competition the Reform That Will Fix Education?

**YES: Clint Bolick**, from "The Key to Closing the Minority Schooling Gap: School Choice," *The American Enterprise* (April/May 2003)

**NO: Ron Wolk**, from "Think the Unthinkable," *Educational Horizons* (Summer 2004)

### ISSUE SUMMARY

**YES:** Clint Bolick, vice president of the Institute for Justice, presents the argument for school choice that competition leads to improvements and makes the case that minorities especially need school choice to improve their educational performance.

**NO:** Educator and businessman Ron Wolk argues that school choice and most other educational reforms can only be marginally effective because they do not get at the heart of the educational problem, which is the way students learn. Too much attention is directed to the way teachers teach when the attention should be placed on how to stimulate students to learn more. Wolk advocates giving students more responsibility for their education.

**T**he quality of American public schooling has been criticized for several decades. Secretary of Education Richard Riley said in 1994 that some American schools are so bad that they "should never be called schools at all." The average school year in the United States is 180 days, while Japanese children attend school 240 days of the year. American schoolchildren score lower than the children of many other Western countries on certain standardized achievement tests. In 1983 the National Commission on Excellence in Education published *A Nation at Risk*, which argued that American education was a failure. Critics of *A Nation at Risk* maintain that the report produced very little evidence to support its thesis, but the public accepted it anyway. Currently, much of the public still thinks that the American school system is failing and needs to be fixed. The solution most frequently proposed today is some form of competition from charter schools to a voucher system.

Today 99 percent of children ages 6 to 13 are in school. In 1900 only about 7 percent of the appropriate age group graduated from high school, but in 1990, 86 percent did. Another success is the extraordinary improvement in the graduation rates for blacks since 1964, when it was 45 percent, to 1987, when it was 83 percent. Now this rate is almost at parity with white graduation rates. And over two-thirds of the present American population has a high school degree. No other nation comes close to these accomplishments. Nevertheless, most voices are very critical of American education.

American education reforms of the past 40 years have focused on quality and on what is taught. In the late 1950s the Soviet Union's launch of the first space satellite convinced the public of the need for more math and science in the curriculum. In the late 1960s and 1970s schools were criticized for rigid authoritarian teaching styles, and schools were made less structured. They became more open, participatory, and individualized in order to stimulate student involvement, creativity, and emotional growth. In the 1980s a crusade for the return to basics was triggered by the announcement that SAT scores had declined since the early 1960s. In the 1990s the continued problems of public schools led many to call for their restructuring by means of school choice, that is, competition.

The debate today is whether or not competition will finally make American schools succeed. The answer depends on whether or not the current structure of schools is the main reason why schools seem to be failing. Many other trends have also affected school performance, so the structure of the school system may not be the key to the problem. For example, many argue that curricula changes away from basics, new unstructured teaching techniques, and the decline of discipline in the classroom have contributed to perceived problems. Perhaps the quality of teachers needs to be raised. There is evidence that those who go into teaching score far lower on SATs than the average college student. In addition, societal trends outside the school may significantly impact school performance. Increasing breakdown of the family, more permissive childrearing, the substantial decline in the amount of time that parents spend with children, and the increased exposure of children to television are trends that many believe are adversely affecting school performance.

In the selections that follow, the costs and the benefits of school choice are debated. Clint Bolick argues that school choice applies to college education and U.S. higher education is the envy of the world. The role of competition in producing excellence in business, sports, and elsewhere is well-known. And from the moral point of view, the parents should have the right to choose. Wolk argues that most educational reforms, including school choice, do not get at the heart of the educational problem, which is the way students are taught. Too much emphasis is placed on better teaching and not where it belongs, which is on students' learning. Wolk advocates shifting considerable responsibility from teachers to the students for their education.