



ISSUE BRIEF

WHO SHOULD DECIDE HOW CHILDREN ARE EDUCATED?

By Jack Klenk

Executive Summary

This pamphlet by long-time Department of Education policy expert and proponent of educational reform, Jack Klenk, asks the following questions: “Who has the primary responsibility for making critical decisions about the education of school-aged children? Their parents? Or government and the school system it operates?”*

Klenk presents an extended overview of the development of American public education and demonstrates that we now have a “top-down” educational model that has been designed to promote the preferences of experts, bureaucracies, and unions above those of parents. Klenk maintains that a system must be developed that overturns old assumptions. The current educational system is overdue for a modernization; the system should be flexible, less bureaucratic, and more family-friendly. To be authentically *public*, it must serve *all* parents from the whole public.

For education to truly serve the public, it must give parents access to a variety of schools, not just a government option. The old system is a monopoly that is not suited to modern life. As with other monopolies, it gives disproportionate weight to itself and special interests and not enough to the customers – the parents and children. Furthermore, monopolies always resist improvement-forcing competition. Any new system of education for the public must leave behind the mindset that only government schools can serve the public. Parents should be allowed to select the educational institutions that best suit their needs.

* Jack Klenk served for twenty-seven years in the U.S. Department of Education under five presidents and eight secretaries. He directed the Office of Non-Public Education which is responsible for fostering the participation of nonpublic school students and teachers in federal education programs and initiatives. Mr. Klenk worked on policies and programs affecting school choice, private schools, home schools, urban faith-based schools, and the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program.

However, the reforms must be accomplished in a manner that does not interfere with the freedom and distinctive identities of nongovernmental schools. This is a critical point. Government financial support of parental educational choices cannot be allowed to threaten the independence and distinctive features (*e.g.*, religious education) of schools that are not operated by the government. Vouchers, tax credits, and charter schools are all part of wave of educational change that appears to be on the horizon as the public realizes that government schools are very costly and are not performing well.