

## Enlightenment on the Diversification of American Schools Since 1980s: From China's Perspective

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### Abstract

Since 1980s, the United States has conducted a reform to diversify primary and secondary schools in the name of “school restructuring”. The strategies used in the reform include diversification of management models, diversification of business entities and diversification of school-running subjects. Although the effects of such reform on American schools remain to be seen, diversifying schools is still a meaningful value pursuit. In this sense, drawing some ideas from the diversification of American schools is of benefits for us to retrospect on the fairness, evaluation mechanism, and strategies of education reform, thus obtaining good inspiration.

**Key words:** America; Diversification of schools; Education reform

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### INTRODUCTION

Since 1980s, finding fault with the unified school system in America has become a fashion. It is believed that the traditional and single public school system in America lacks flexibility and cannot meet students' needs for a diversified education; besides, the operation of American schools is not efficient. Under these circumstances, the

education world in the United States began to diversify schools in the name of “school restructuring”. The reform has not only caused a profound change in the American public school system, but also produced far-reaching effects on the basic education in the world. Hence it is worthy of studying and learning.

### 1. BACKGROUND OF “SCHOOL RESTRUCTURING”

Many scientists invariably regard 1980s as a brand-new historical stage in the history of education reform in America. Compared to the curriculum reform in 1950s and 1960s and to the pursuit of educational equity in 1970s, the focus of the reform at that stage is to improve the quality of school education through improving school organization. Due to the influence of several important factors, the United States have put the concept of diversifying schools into practice, which are as follows: first, the changes in governance concepts have brought changes in the strategies of education development. After the Reagan administration came to power, the political conservatism in American politics began to rise and the neo-liberalism in its economic policies also emerged. As far as education is concerned, conservatism opposes educational mediocrity, adhering to the highest standards of education, while neo-liberalism advocates reducing intervention and support for public education, hoping to introduce market competition mechanism. This gives the diversification of schools a unique theoretical inspiration to explore different policies. Secondly, the worsening economic conditions in America in 1980s sparked people's concern about educational issues once again. People believed that education was the driving force of economic development, which made the actual performance of public schools become the focus of attention. Nevertheless, the most important and most direct reason leading to the education reform was people's

disappointment of public school's education quality in 1980s. As was reported in "The State is in Crisis" published in 1983, American education quality was facing serious problems, which had been a threat to the security of the state and to the vitality of the economy. Thus, the primary challenge facing the United States in the field of education was "to promote the education of students from diverse backgrounds to succeed (Lü & Zhou, 2004)." Such criticism led to "school restructuring" movement in 1980s. The so-called "restructuring" means to change the structure, thus it is the reform in school's institution and school's structure. After experiencing the failure of the "effective school" movement in the early 1980, reformers held the view that reforming institution was to no avail. So by the mid 1980s, the reform movement sweeping the United States transferred its focus from the efforts to improve school to the reconstruction of the school organization and institutions. The driving force of school reform was so hyperactive that all sorts of school reform plans were produced, thus creating diversified school models.

## 2. CONCEPT AND BASIC STRATEGIES OF DIVERSIFYING SCHOOL

"School restructuring" movement is not a reform conducted under the guidance of a unified idea, but could reflect different ideas in the policy of reform. Since the public school system is often attacked as "bureaucratic system" which is neither flexible nor efficient, some scholars develop a school-restructuring concept of neo-Weberian on the basis of opposing to the "bureaucratic system", which contains four orientations. They are the orientation of managerialism, of multiculturalism, of neo-conservatism, and of radical humanism (Tyler, 1988). Managerialism emphasizes effective leadership and management, so as to let the school run beyond the influence of the external environment. For example, vitalizing teaching unit at the grassroots level through decentralization of power, improving curriculum and teaching methods in accordance with local conditions, and so on. In this way we can develop distinctive school cultures; multiculturalism refers to achieving harmony through a series of integration methods in a divided community, such as bilingual education, racially-mixed school enrollment system, etc.; radical humanism believes that any professional management is a form of repression, thus it advocates institutionalization. Neoconservative schools' restructuring program is to completely open schools to the market, that is, to reduce government's intervention and support for public education, and to introduce school into the market mechanism.

Although the reform programs advocated by the above-mentioned concepts are different, they all try to innovate school models from two aspects which are openness of system and mode of management. Besides, from all

the reform programs, we can see great impact given by private schools to public schools. We can say that since 1980s, the basic strategy of diversification of American schools is to make public schools share the educational ideas and management models enjoyed by private schools. The specific content is as follows:

### 2.1 Diversification of School Management Models

According to the study of "effective school", private schools are more efficient than public schools, because private schools are good at management, particularly in the aspects of its accountability mechanism and participatory management mechanism. This enlightens public schools to reform their management systems. For instance, school-based management and total quality management (TQM) receive widespread attention. These management philosophies emphasize delegating the power of education management to the lower levels, taking the primary and secondary schools as the main decision-maker, and using the principles and techniques in Organizational Behavior such as decentralization, empowerment, teamwork to build a new relationship between schools and the outside units. Through innovating management model, the development of schools shows a trend of diversification, which is totally different from that of the traditional public schools.

### 2.2 Diversification of Business Entities

Diversification of business entities is mainly reflected in the fact that medium-small schools are inclined to be privatized. Privatizing means giving private institutions or individuals the power to run schools without changing schools' "public" nature. It is a reform on school-running mode. America's charter schools are public schools which have been privatized. So far, 40 states and the District of Columbia in the United States have passed a charter school law (He, 2008). This kind of school is mainly supported by public education funding, and is run by teacher organizations, social organizations, enterprises or individual teachers after going through application procedures. Besides, it is considerably independent of the leadership and management of the school district. In 1990s, another important form of privatized school began to emerge, which was profit-making private company. Such education management companies, on the one hand, started their own charter school; on the other hand, they were entrusted to manage schools.

### 2.3 Diversification of School-Running Subjects

With the penetration of neo-liberalism to the field of education, market-oriented education reform sweeps throughout the United States, and public education begins to develop towards the market operation. In addition to traditional public schools, the number of private schools and church schools increases, making the school-running subjects in the United States diversified. Most private

schools are financially independent, but the phenomenon that private schools receive public aid is not uncommon in the United States. Because of the controversy caused by giving funds to private and church schools, the U.S. government has changed its funding ways in recent years; instead, it tends to distribute public education funding to private schools through “education voucher program”, which is currently the main form of giving funding to private schools in the United States. Besides, family school becomes a new form of giving funding to private schools. Many children learn at home through government’s public funds, which is also a major feature of the basic education system in the United States.

### 3. DIVERSIFIED SCHOOL MODELS AND THEIR FEATURES

Due to the dissatisfaction with the traditional public school system, “alternative school”, “school choice”, “new school” and other words frequently appear in school reform plans. Owing to the frequent emergence of new school models, primary and secondary schools have increasingly showed a pattern of diversified development. Some of these new schools are famous for their special curriculum, such as magnet school and basic school; some have innovative teaching styles and learning styles, such as not-graded school, open school and free school, community school, and school without walls; some are unique in their management, such as charter school, private schools, etc. ; the organizational form of some schools is different from traditional schools, such as family school, online schools, etc. ; others have some individualized educational choices, such as conducting religious education, multicultural education, vocational skills training or special education to meet the needs of disabled children and so on. Although these schools belong to different types and their names are different, all of them have some common characteristics. For example, different from the traditional public education which emphasizes sameness, they emphasize individuality; in addition, they pay attention to creating a family-style cultural atmosphere and stress collaboration over competition; what is more, they are concerned about and participate in community life in the process of education. Apart from the above-mentioned features, these schools have some obvious characteristics, such as small scale, aggressive atmosphere, selectiveness (in accordance with students’ needs and interest), participation from both parents and teachers, diverse teaching methods, innovated curriculum, as well as independent management and the implementation of school autonomy (Yoshiyuki, 2006). These school models are diversified, breaking the sameness of public schools as the main school-running subject, so it is refreshing and agreeable. From the functional point of view, the

educational goals of alternative school are manifold. For example, it could serve as a supplementary education for “problem” students, give special education for gifted children or children with learning disabilities, or serve as the continuation of progressive education to carry out an individualized education centered around children.

### 4. REFLECTIONS ON THE DIVERSIFICATION OF AMERICAN SCHOOLS

The so-called diversification refers to developing singleness and unification towards variety and dispersion. It reflects the trend of American public school system which turns from unified to diverse. This diversification is markedly manifested in the fact that public school system and private school system influence each other. However, there is no demarcation between private and private education in school systems. They generally belong to two different aspects which are bureaucratic management and self-management, showing a continuously changing spectrum. This provides a meaningful picture for us to make researches on the diversification of school systems. To what extent and in which way could we keep a school’s development pattern diversified? It depends on the performance of public and private schools.

Currently, the marketization and privatization of American school reform keep a good momentum. This is because, “school restructuring” plan is put forward to compensate for the drawbacks of public school education. Since people think that private school and market competition are the fundamental ways to improve public schools, the basic strategy of the reform is to introduce different school models, encourage parents and students to choose school at will, thus forming a competition among schools to improve the quality of school education. In order to improve public schools, a variety of alternative school models and school reform programs have been implemented. But there is no definite evidence showing that providing diverse choices of schools to attend has improved the quality and efficiency of the schools. On the contrary, people are suspicious of the reform. According to Kapan / Gallup polls about education, with respect to the best way to improve public schools, 3/ 4 people support maintaining the traditional system; only 1/ 4 people are willing to choose charter school and other alternative schools. However, under the strong promotion of education policy, the proportion of the public in favor of charter school keeps increasing steadily year by year, from 42 % in 2000 to 6% in 2007; and nearly 40% of the public support studying at home or studying courses through the network (Fan, et al. 2009). From this, we can see that diversification policy of schools begin to be accepted by increasingly more people, but its effectiveness remains to be seen.

As the tone of the reform is to emphasize “excellence” instead of “diversification” regardless of the fact that “diversification” is the means used to achieve “excellence” or is the by-product of “excellence”, the current diversification of American schools violates the original intention of diversification. As a consequence, although many alternative schools have been set up, market competition fails to effectively promote schools’ diversification; on the contrary, many schools which were established according to market model have regressed to traditional public schools under the pressure of scores (Lubienski, 1999). This reflects the fact that the diversification of American schools is at the stage when guiding ideology of schools is confused and there is a lack of good planning. In fact, the diversification of schools is not only to diversify school models, but to diversify schooling philosophy, meeting the diversified needs of different groups of people through diverse forms of school organization. This is the real aims of the diversification of schools.

Nevertheless, the diversification of American schools is developed on the basis of criticizing unified school systems, thus system innovation has become a driving force for reform. In particular, market mechanism breaks the monopoly of America’s traditional public schools which are densely bureaucratic and are one-size-fits-all. In this sense, diversification of schools is to adjust and balance the public school education system. Joel Spring, an educational historian in America, believes that the educational events in the United States after 1980s, such as school voucher system, charter school, privatization, etc., can be regarded as the end of public schools (Webb, 2010). This view may be too pessimistic. But what is certain is that the marketization and privatization of school organization, to some extent, broke the single school-running pattern in public schools, brought competitive pressure to public schools, but at the meantime was beneficial for their reform and development to a certain degree. Although the controversy caused by diversification of schools lasted thirty years and no consensus was reached, the practices and exploration in the diversification reform have given impetus and richness to the ongoing research on basic education reform, and also exert profound impact on many countries’ education reform.

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## 5. ENLIGHTENMENT ON CHINA’S BASIC EDUCATION REFORM

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Since the diversification of Schools conducted in America has its own characteristics and is carried out under different national conditions, it is difficult to apply all their experience into China’s basic education reform. For example, Professor Zhao Zhongjian maintains that the popular small charter schools in America find it difficult to become the models for China’s public or private

schools. The reason is that such a small-size school is not economical from an economic point of view. In fact, the biggest challenge facing the American charter schools is financial problems as well as lack of start-up costs and routine maintenance costs. Therefore, the focus of understanding and learning American charter school is mainly on its spirit instead of its form (Zhao, 2010). Facing complex issues of school reform, we are suggested to regard diversification as a meaningful value pursuit. By learning from the ideas of American school diversification, we can draw some valuable insights which are as follows:

First, we should reflect on the concept of education fairness and advocate differences in equality. As far as the system designing is concerned, diversification of schools is to cater to the diverse individualized needs of students, that is, “to give each person an education which is most suitable for him or her”. Diversification means differences, but often people tend to interpret differences as unfairness. In fact, education fairness in a real sense is not to ensure equality without any difference, but to make everyone get the opportunity fitting for his best development. According to the histology, a mature organization is bound to be composed of diversified units. Diversity causes benign competition among units, achieving a balance between them and forming a harmonious complementary relationship among them, which is called the “symbiosis” in Ecology. Therefore, such a diversified school organization is likely to enable everyone to find the most suitable educational opportunity for his or her development, thus guiding education fairness towards the diversification of people. Undoubtedly, diversifying schools is a meaningful direction for exploration. Second, we should reflect on the education evaluation mechanisms, and promote a diversified education quality. What is a good education and a good school? Different people may have different answers. Obviously, a single academic standard cannot replace diversified education needs. Schools must first have a rational education evaluation mechanism to ensure their independence to develop, and then take a development road with characteristics. If the “bottleneck” problem in education evaluation mechanism is not solved, despite the decentralization of education power, it is very easy to make reform deviate from the expected direction after induced by the wrong values. Therefore, the future direction of school reform should be a further reflection of the nature and goals of education, and try to proceed from the establishment of a diversified education evaluation mechanism, so as to explore a new school education system which enjoys a coordinated development of unity and diversity. Third, we should reflect on schools’ reform strategies and try diversified paths to improve schools. Experience has shown that school reform is not simply to replace one system with another. The diversification practice of American schools offers another possibility, which

enables schools themselves to become the subjects of reform and to implement reform measures in accordance with their local conditions. As is revealed by Goodlad, there is no universal guiding principle that can be used to guide the work of all the schools. When these schools whose contact is extremely loose are regarded as the parts of an interlocking large system, and you give them blood transfusion, it is just like to transfuse AB-type blood to all the patients who went to hospital from streets just now. The consequences could be quite disastrous (Goodwin Levin, 2006). It should be noted that the education status in every part of China is very complex, so it is not feasible to use a package of reform programs to treat illnesses in education once and for all. Diversification of schools, as a new way of thinking, could be promoted in different situations, which is no doubt a healthy complement to the traditional reform model.

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