

THE WISDOM OF CHOICE

I have submitted to the Task Force a skeletal version of the paper I shall be completing next month. I plan today to offer a brief supplement, rather than a repetition of what I have submitted. And I want to begin by congratulating the Task Force on its interest in seeing through the reform plans and the Excellence aspirations that have emerged over the past several years. All too many would-be reformers have left schools with hardly realizable goals and expectations, and very little help in bringing off what they are being asked to accomplish. So I applaud your determination in helping the Excellence Movement to make good its promise, and I applaud your wisdom in looking to schools of choice as a major means of doing so.

We need to maximize parent options within public education, because schools of choice are an excellent route to improving school quality, while at the same time rendering a key public institution far more responsive to the individuals and the community it serves. I am a strong supporter of the choice provision in public schools because the record shows it is good for students; it is good for teachers; it is good for parents and other community members; and it is good for schools themselves.

Rather than document these claims with the detailed evidence that could be cited, let me just share with you several things that have come my way in recent weeks. I am thinking first of a small public school of choice in Great Neck, NY. It had a graduating class of 17 last Spring, just a tiny 2% of its district's graduates. But it proudly claimed ^{almost} 20% of the district's ¹² National Merit finalists.

I'm thinking now of another public school of choice. This one in State College, PA. Its students averaged above the 90th percentile on

13 of Pennsylvania's 14 indicators of educational quality. And the nice thing about reports out of Pennsylvania is that they not only tell you outcomes; they tell you how to interpret them, in terms of reasonable expectations for a given group of youngsters. In the particular school I'm referring to, achievement outstripped expectations on more than half of the 14 indicators.

I am thinking now about a public school of choice in Jackson, Mississippi. With a student body that is ~~absolutely~~ representative of the city in terms of race, socio-economic status, and ability levels, this school produced the highest standardized score averages of any of Jackson's 39 public elementary schools. Too clear to be coincidence.

Finally, I am thinking of a whole choice system in one of New York's poorest inner-city ghettos, Spanish Harlem. The district is approximately two-thirds Hispanic and one-third Black, and more than 80% of its students qualify for free or reduced-cost lunches. In the early 70s, only 15% of its students were reading on grade level, and the district ranked 32nd of New York's 33 districts on reading achievement. Schools of choice were introduced in 1973, and today there are 25 different educational programs at the elementary and junior high levels for families to choose among. Two-thirds of the district's youngsters are enrolled in the "alternative concept" schools and more than 1,000 youngsters come from outside the district to attend them. Today, more than half the youngsters in these schools are reading on grade level, and the district's rank among New York's 33 districts has risen from 32nd to 18th.

Perhaps this will suffice to suggest some of the extraordinary accomplishments associated with schools of choice. I want to emphasize that such performance is not tied to any particular grade levels. There are

successful options at all grade levels. And it is not tied to any particular kinds of students: the choice feature well serves the ablest students, the weakest, and those large numbers in between whom we've tended so often to neglect. Moreover, schools of choice are recognizably concerned with a much broader spectrum of human development than are conventional schools. They assume their share of responsibility for the full intellectual and character development of young people, and they pursue this responsibility in ways both students and teachers recognize as responsive to their own concerns.

Schools of choice appear equally good for teachers. It seems to increase their dedication, and they work harder in such schools than in their previous assignments. But their morale and satisfactions rates are extraordinary, and they experience their work in schools of choice as far more professional in nature than in other schools. The secret seems to be that teacher efficacy and success are far greater in schools of choice than in others. Why? Because teachers in these schools have more leeway to devise their own strategies and activities; they work far more closely and extensively with colleagues in doing so.

Parents and other adults also react most favorably to public schools of choice. They find them more responsive and far more likely to deliver on what the parents hold important. It also appears that the introduction of schools of choice has substantial impact on local perceptions of school quality. Confidence and trust in the community's schools goes up even among people without children in those schools.

Finally, the choice feature is good for schools. It encourages them to develop distinctive features and personalities. And because those choosing a particular school tend to be alike in some educationally significant way, schools of choice typically reflect an agreed-upon mission and a

strong sense of affiliation and community. The choice feature thus conduces to greater differentiation among schools, as they seek to respond to the needs of their students and the concerns of their parents. This in turn means a break in the standardization and centralized control which have choked off innovation and improvement -- a de-bureaucratizing of public education. Finally, choice functions as a built-in mechanism for continuing improvement, by enabling schools to become self-renewing systems: enrollment shifts telegraph the need for revision, and the collective autonomy of the staff facilitates modifications.

What this means is that schools of choice constitute a remarkable response to what are widely perceived as the major educational problems of the day: improving educational quality while placing excellence within the grasp of all kinds of students; encouraging and providing the organizational support for maximizing teacher performance; enhancing public perceptions and confidence; and modifying the organization of schools in ways that allow such changes to occur and to keep on occurring.

The choice arrangement also stands as a solution to what will be the major educational problems of the coming decade. I foresee four of horrendous difficulty, all of which we are still generating and intensifying. The first is the standardization we are imposing in the name of excellence and standards. Whatever good this may have brought, it has also introduced controls of unprecedented specificity into the nation's classrooms. Research clearly shows such restrictions to be incompatible with good teaching. As Assistant Secretary of Education Chester Finn has put it, unless we can create some "strategic independence" for classrooms, we're not very likely to have effective schools.

The second problem we are even now generating is that caused by the accountability measures introduced to ascertain whether and how well

schools are doing what we've told them to do. Medicine well recognizes what education reformers have not: that some measures are just prohibitably invasive and would destroy the very health they seek to investigate. To put it in different terms, there is only one way to be sure that an onion is really growing: that is to pull it up. I join those who fear that that is tantamount to what accountability demands are doing to schools and education.

What I project as the third challenge of the coming decade is what to do with the marginal student -- those we have called 'at risk' and dropout-prone. Dropout rates approaching 50% are already fairly common for our cities. Among some minorities the figures are well in excess of 50%. And the Council of Great-City Schools has already confirmed what many have warned: that the higher standards and demands we have adopted are going to increase dropout rates. Coupled with changing demographics, one of the most intense educational problems of the coming decade will surely be how to accommodate the disadvantaged, 'education-resistant' student. Such students are recognized to predominate in city schools. What we have not realized is that they are likely to predominate elsewhere, as well. One analyst has estimated that 30% of the nation's current school population are disadvantaged youngsters. In the State of California, within five years that number is expected to exceed 50%.

Finally, the fourth major educational problem now in the making is how to make those new standards and curricular requirements go in most classrooms, even with average kids. A number of studies have indicated quite clearly what an uphill struggle teaching is today. To cite an array of these reports, a number of researchers are talking about the minimal demand 'bargains' and 'treaties' struck in classrooms. The teachers acquiesce

to making low demands and the students acquiesce to moderate conformance and acceptable behavior. One investigator offers the explanation that today's youngsters simply are not interested in knowledge acquisition. Others suggest that schools have chosen to ignore and deny the link industrial excellence researchers have found between interest, satisfaction, and productivity. And one inquiry team suggests that perhaps two-thirds of the student population of the nation have simply "disengaged from... academic learning..." TWO-THIRDS. Not just the bad kids or the slow ones, but two-thirds of the whole lot. It seems to me that when two-thirds have disengaged, the message is pretty clear. It makes little sense to be moan that kids aren't what they used to be, and a lot more to start trying to re-engage them.

And that's one of the major strengths of the choice arrangement. Let me contrast that disengagement report with the testimony of one group of adolescents I watched last week. They were from a school of choice in East Williston, NY, and I watched them describe their school to a class of graduate students. With obvious pride and ownership -- and impressive openness -- they identified the heart of their program as "learner responsibility." What seemed to strike the kids as most remarkable about their own rather extraordinary accomplishments was something they repeated over and over again: "You learn to be excited about learning." So the choice arrangement can certainly serve as an effective antidote to student disengagement.

I think schools of choice will prove similarly responsive to the other three major problems I see emerging. They have yielded some spectacular successes with disadvantaged students; and there are some who say that the best way to transform an existing, failing school for such students into an effective one, is to re-create it as a school of choice.

That is what was done with a New York high school which regularly graduated only 7% of its students. Ben Franklin High School was closed down, and redesigned. It re-opened as the Manhattan Center for Science and Mathematics, and the building where 93% used to fail now boasts the highest daily attendance rate of any high school in New York City. So the choice arrangement has already proved its effectiveness with disadvantaged students.

For the accountability measures which are already emerging as a major barrier to effective education, the choice arrangement offers to substitute a different sort of accountability. The standardized tests assume larger import when parents lack access to and simply are not heard in assigned institutions. But when they have chosen their youngster's school, and are welcomed in it and involved in its activities, a very different sort of accountability system is functioning. It seems a far more appropriate form of accountability for the partnership which should bind home and school than are the standardized tests. Moreover, this sort of accountability is conducive to better education -- not interruptive of or even inimical to it.

Finally, the choice arrangement will prove an effective solution to the fourth major problem of the coming decade, the extensive standardization which the Excellence Movement has brought to schools and classrooms. Such standardization makes schools as impervious, of course, to parent preferences as to teacher discretion. The choice arrangement, on the other hand, will increase school to school differences. As it restores a measure of control to individual schools, and as parents choose the school that best accords with their own education orientation, one can see dynamics set in motion for reversing the homogenization.

Thus, I see tremendous possibility in the choice arrangement. Not only does it appear responsive to the major problems of today, but also to the major problems of tomorrow -- those now in the making. But to date, most schools of choice -- and especially the most successful ones -- have been launched as small, separate alternatives to the conventional school. Typically, school districts have established one, or at most two, either to satisfy a group that's demanding such a program or to take care of some 'problem' students. What is needed are more choice systems like the one in Spanish Harlem, more large-scale attempts to provide all the approaches that an adult community looks for, and all the orientations that its youngsters need in order for all of them to thrive. That's not a matter of infinite variation, but it may call for a dozen different orientations. Is that too much to ask of an institution to which parents are compelled by law to send their children? Is it too much to expect of the institution which largely assigns the futures of its charges? Is it too much to demand of an institution from which a democratic society rightfully expects so much?

I applaud the wisdom of your interest in schools of choice, and I wish you well in your efforts to enhance them.