What Research Shows about Schools of Choice

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AMONG the educational innovations introduced during the 1960s, alternatives—or schools of choice—have proved one of the most durable and are increasingly finding support from research. This support may be one reason why schools of choice continue to proliferate.

In looking at the research on schools of choice, it is necessary to understand that they are a curricular, an instructional, and an organizational proposal in combination. The following series of characteristics is common to most alternatives, albeit not all:

1. The alternative constitutes a distinct and identifiable administrative unit, with its own personnel and program. Moreover, substantial effort is likely to be addressed to creating a strong sense of affiliation with the unit.
2. Structures and processes generative of school climate are held important and receive considerable attention within the unit.
3. Students as well as staff enter the alternative as a matter of choice rather than assignment.
4. The alternative is designed to respond to particular needs, desires, and interests not otherwise met in local schools; a program results that is distinctly different from that of other schools in the area.
5. The impetus to launching the alternative, as well as its design, comes from one or more of the groups to be most immediately affected by the program: teachers, students, and parents.
6. Alternative schools generally address a broader range of student development than just the cognitive or academic. Typically, the sort of person the learner is becoming is a matter of first concern.

Organizational forms and structures. Schools of choice differ as to organizational type, though most are small in relation to conventional schools. Over half have fewer than 100 students, and 69 percent enroll fewer than 200. Some are schools-within-schools. Magnet schools, designed for desegregation, seem currently to be the largest subtype of schools of choice, but there are numerous types of alternatives in addition to magnet schools—learning centers, continuation schools, schools without walls, street academies—each identifiable by a particular student group or type of program. Not since the mid-1970s have alternatives been associated with any specific ideological tendencies; today, they range from relatively free schools to fundamentalist types, with even a military academy or two. In a recent survey of alternatives, 63 percent of respondents indicated that their foremost point of departure from other schools lay in interpersonal relationships within the school, rather than in curricular distinctiveness.

Perhaps one of the greatest contributions of alternative schools was to institutionalize a means for introducing variety into school systems. They were also recognized by some as a means whereby school systems could inform, as well as reform, themselves: The demand for a new alternative would serve as an important indicator of community needs and interests, as would underenrollment in an existing option. Schools of choice provided early opportunities to see what happens when typical central-district-control patterns are relaxed and greater control reverts to individual schools. They have also facilitated study of novel social control arrangements, of human interaction patterns in nonbureaucratic institutions, and of the impacts of school structure on program and behavior.

Organizational processes. The feel and flavor of schools of choice are noticeably different from those of conventional schools. The *choice* aspect of these schools serves to heighten one's investment in what has been chosen. The participants, unlike those in a comprehensive high school, are agreed upon a particular type of educational mission or environment. The importance of this likemindedness and cohesion has been underscored in recent years, both in the private school literature and in the effective-schools research.

Analysts have often named smallness as a key ingredient of the type of environment alternatives provide. Everyone knows everyone else; bureaucratic controls are unnecessary. The roles of both staff and students tend to be more expanded and diffuse than in conventional schools. Teachers feel they exert considerable control over their own programs, and students feel much less like pawns than in other schools. The reason for such feelings of autonomy is not always apparent, however, since alternative students in alternative schools sometimes report such feelings even though their teachers describe the program as highly structured! If teachers are perceived as "caring," and relationships are marked by trust, formal enfranchisement may appear less vital to having one's concerns taken into consideration.

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Such distinctive elements in the climate of schools of choice seem closely tied to the remarkable levels of satisfaction of both students and their parents. Postgraduation surveys of students of the alternative school, for example, suggest that they continue to regard it as a place where they received help that has proved relevant and adequate to their pursuits after high school.

Individual Treatment

Goals. Most schools of choice demonstrate concern with multiple sorts of development in their students. The broad concern with the sort of person each youngster is becoming yields several tendencies common to many schools of choice. One is a program consciously designed to abet social growth and such personal development as decision-making ability, moral maturity, and self-knowledge. Often, these schools are more strongly preoccupied with realizing individual potential than with achievement in relation to group norms. In these schools, students must become known as individual human beings to school staff; this personalization feature seems strongly associated with the appeal of schools of choice to students, and to parents and teachers as well.

Instructional methods. Alternative school staff report instructional methods to be one of their main points of departure from conventional school practice. There is also evidence that instructional practices in alternative schools do not differ very extensively from the methods of other schools; yet, interestingly, both teachers and students in alternatives *think* that they do. One reason for this discrepancy may be that despite the group instruction often found in schools of choice, they manage considerable flexibility and have devised ways to respond to student needs and interests that are unshared. Perhaps the most typical mechanism is independent study, allowing for the pursuit of individual interests, advanced work in traditional subjects, remedial work, and experiential and service learning. There is substantial evidence that experiential learning stimulates moral development, enhances self-esteem, expands the interest of adolescents in social problems and their inclinations toward community involvement, and increases a sense of social and personal responsibility. Recent studies are also providing increasingly conclusive demonstration of the efficacy of experiential learning in relation to traditional academic content; and there is evidence that experiential learning contributes to higher-level mental processes, such as problem-solving ability.

Curriculum. In magnet or specialty high schools, curricular distinctiveness is the school's most distinguishing feature; the arts are reported the most prevalent concentration, with humanities or social sciences coming second. At the elementary level, basic-skills magnets predominate, with Montessori or individualized learning programs coming second, and arts third.

Some curricular tendencies are identifiable within self-identified "alternative" schools. Teachers in alternatives frequently prefer to organize content by themes, rather than leave it separated by disciplines. The Foxfire combination of experiential and classroom learning has been used by some alternatives, as has the Walkabout idea, which organizes the curriculum around a specified set of challenges. Still another curricular emphasis has been the "Just Community" schools inspired by the moral development theory of Lawrence Kohlberg. Nevertheless, it appears that most schools of choice develop their own curricula.

The people in alternatives and how they are affected. Although 73 percent of respondents to a 1982 survey of alternatives indicated that their districts associate alternatives with all kinds of students, a large number of schools of choice have been established to deal with groups posing special problems—the turned-off, disruptive, underachieving, or dropout-prone. The early success of a number of alternatives probably made it inevitable that they would be embraced as solutions for the most educationally challenging groups. There have been instances of impressive success—effectiveness at improving student attitudes toward school and learning, self-concept and self-esteem, attendance, and behavior. They also lead to greater academic accomplishment by "marginal" students. The evidence suggests—though more research is needed in this area—that similar benefits accrue also to average and above-average students. Not all alternative schools are successful, but perhaps subsequent research will further clarify the requisites of success and identify the pitfalls to avoid.

Alternative school teachers report unusually high levels of satisfaction, which they attribute to increased collegiality, and to greater professional autonomy and personal agency in their work. Although many report working harder in the alternative than in their previous school, morale is clearly enhanced.

Pluses and Minuses

It would appear, then, that schools of choice offer heightened satisfactions to the several groups most immediately associated with them: staff, students, and parents. They also claim other advantages with respect to climate and productivity. Commentators and observers have expressed some challenges and reservations—over cultural divisiveness, increased social-class isolation, diminution of the quality of nonchoice schools, etc. Investigation of these questions is certainly needed, along with much more extensive study of correlates of success in schools of choice. We need much more of that kind of evidence, which will help practitioners to decide just which features are vital for such schools and which can and should be omitted. □