

## The Choice Concept Takes Hold

*Mary Anne Raywid*

**T**he Department of Education is committed to "a new trilogy" in education. The three C's will now supplement the three R's. They are "content, character, and choice." So the choice theme has really been elevated. One could wish for a bit more compatibility among Secretary Bennett's three elements, however; because, although he is urging choice, I'm not sure he would want to extend that to content. He seems to have rather firm ideas about what constitutes appropriate content, and I'm not sure he would be enthusiastic about your choosing something else. It seems even less likely that he would want to see choice applied to character, since he's rather forceful about which character traits are desirable and which are undesirable. But he has announced for expanding choice with respect to schools, and I think that commitment is going to have some important impacts on public education in this country.

Lots of interesting things are happening with respect to education, including some fascinating self-contradictions and reversals. I want to say something about this by way of background, since it has

strong ramifications for the future of schools of choice.

As we all know, the mounting school criticisms of the past dozen years gave rise a year or two ago to the Excellence Movement now under way. This movement has been driven by several themes. One of them is curricular standardization, with stronger, more academic dominance. Another is increased requirements and higher standards. A third is a preoccupation with quality checks — with verifying the quality of inputs and outputs. (In education, at least for now, "inputs" include such things as course outlines and teaching, and "outputs" consist of scores.) And permeating each of these components of the Excellence Movement is the spirit which unifies them: A "get tough" stance maintaining that things will improve in education when we insist that they do — when teachers and students realize that playing around and goofing off simply will not be tolerated. (Excellence Movement fans may not be entirely happy with this rendering of what the Movement stands for, but the themes would be difficult to deny.)

Yet at the same time that the public has

extensively supported the Excellence Movement — and 43 states have accordingly upped curricular requirements — some other things have also been happening. Educators have been forced to increasing awareness and concern over dropouts. And there has been a burgeoning interest in choice — an interest that in some ways appears truly remarkable.



### Choice moves school control in exactly the opposite direction from that espoused by the Excellence Movement.

In the past year, four governors have recommended schools of choice. One of them, Governor Rudy Perpich of Minnesota, made choice the centerpiece of his plan for school improvement, which he calls "Access to Excellence." Tennessee's Governor Lamar Alexander has identified choice within public education as a major challenge for his state. As a fellow Republican, he has also urged President Reagan to endorse the idea. (The President is one of the nation's leading choice advocates, of course. But to date, and despite Governor Alexander's urging, he seems actively interested only in expanding and subsidizing the right of choice to apply to non-public schools. The new Secretary of Education has, however, enthusiastically embraced the idea of public schools of choice.)

Colorado's Governor Lamm supports the idea of enabling youngsters who have failed in — or been failed by — public schools to choose other public schools or private school. Thus, he has become a choice advocate too, if only for a limited population. The same is true of New York's Governor Cuomo, who favors establishing regional specialty high schools across the state — although Governor Cuomo's schools would be designed for bringing choice to the particularly able student rather than to the

low-achiever.

For those interested in the politics of education, one of the many fascinating things about the growing prominence of the choice idea is its striking contrast to the Excellence Movement's strategies for educational reform. Instead of increasing curricular requirements, hence uniformity, choice recommends diversity — maybe even deliberate differentiation. Instead of state-level regulation of the crucial "inputs," it would decentralize control and encourage stronger governance at the individual school level. Thus it moves school control in exactly the opposite direction from that espoused by the Excellence Movement. Instead of expanding student testing programs, the choice idea encourages parent and community involvement and close interaction. And instead of the "get tough" stance, the choice proposal suggests that maybe even a little user-friendliness wouldn't hurt schools.

But if the Excellence Movement is so prevalent, how can these six prominent political leaders be espousing something so out of step? Is it possible that they have seen something which others have not? It's just possible that they have. And perhaps it is this: Accountability is today's non-negotiable. The public's confidence in the schools (as well as in other institutions) remains too shaken for any relaxing of accountability demands to occur very soon. One way or another, the schools must be held accountable. There are only a limited number of ways to accomplish this. (One) is by tight supervisory control. This is the major strategy of state officials (departments of education, legislatures or governors). A (second) accountability strategy is to monitor outputs. This means extensive testing and wide announcement of test results, which has the effect of holding the schools accountable to the general public. Choice is the (third) strategy. It makes the schools accountable to the families who do the choosing, as well as to other members of the community who are involved in other ways with the school program.

Choice, the third means of holding schools accountable, has several major advantages over the first two strategies. Since this is a discussion of choice, I will not review the problems with the first two strategies. Such problems have been widely discussed, so I want to focus instead on something else: specifically, on the advantages of the choice idea for holding schools accountable, in preference to the input control and the output monitoring strategies.

151 Perhaps the major advantage is that the choice strategy is far less coercive, substituting incentives for mandates. It looks to the carrot instead of the stick in dealing with teachers, students, and parents; and the simple truth is that in human affairs the carrot consistently works better. The evidence comes from classrooms and corporations and small businesses and civic groups and hospitals and just about everywhere else where one group of individuals seeks the compliant efforts of another. The carrot is more successful than the stick. If you want to elicit the best and most productive efforts of people, you must win their voluntary compliance, you cannot force such effort. (This is one of the many ironies of the Excellence Movement, I think. There are many conceptions of excellence, but the one thing they share is an emphasis on intense effort and peak performance. Consider any virtuous performance you can recall — for instance, the runners of *Chariots of Fire* — and ask yourself whether that kind of dedication can be dictated or coerced.)

2 A second major advantage of the choice approach to accountability is that it returns a greater amount of control to individual schools. That would be a real plus, given the way such control has been eroded for decades. One needn't buy into full decentralization models in concluding that a return to an earlier balance would be desirable, permitting individual schools a larger voice in determining the activities and events of their days. Indeed, an increasing amount of evidence is suggesting that only in this way can any lasting improvement occur in education:

if it is to happen, it must take place on a school-by-school basis with each school having a voice in the charting of its course.

Before moving on to a discussion of the development of the choice idea, and of its distinctly educational advantages, it seems worth noting how much of the support for schools of choice — beyond that which accompanies the use of choice as an accountability strategy — has come for non-educational reasons: from people and interests primarily concerned with other causes (such as crime prevention, desegregation, unemployment problems, urban salvation and renewal, etc.). That a number and variety of such interest groups have made educational choice a part of the solution to *their* problems has considerably strengthened the prospects of choice.

Let me briefly review the history of the idea of public schools of choice, noting its important forebears which we've been ignoring. It all began in the late 1960's, inspired by individual schools begun outside the public system — some partly as clusters of protest and dissent and others as vanguard centers of innovation and reform. Some of both types began to emerge in the public schools, as schools-within-schools or as separate alternative schools. Impetus for these individual alternatives came from parents, students, and teachers seeking a different, often a more challenging education than the conventional school was offering. Or individual alternatives were initiated to meet the needs of particular groups of students — the apathetic or the underachieving or the disruptive. Both types of individual alternatives have been present from the start.

The first choice systems — as distinct from individual alternatives — got under way several years later, in the early 1970's. The impetus here came from the Federal government. One office launched a program to examine the possibilities of systemwide change within school districts, and another sought to test the voucher concept. Five years later, the government offered assistance in launching choice sys-

terms in the interest of school desegregation — what came to be known as magnet schools.

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## Noticeable declines in a formerly popular school telegraph the need for self-examination and change.

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These efforts were not unmitigated success stories. Although one of the first systems was a real success, for a variety of reasons two others were not. The elementary school choice project in Minneapolis worked well, and the arrangement was eventually adopted throughout the city. The Berkeley project, however, seemed plagued by a number of problems, many of them related to differences between local and Washington authorities, and the officially designated evaluator dubbed it "a \$6 million <sup>of</sup> understanding." The third of these first choice systems was the Alum Rock "public voucher" experiment. The multi-volume report on processes and outcomes in the 25 elementary schools involved suggests that Alum Rock, too, may have been as instructive about grantor-grantee relations as about choice systems. In retrospect, it also seems clear that the experience of these three ventures underscored the need for strong district-level commitment to the choice idea, and for support for its implementation. Thus, the early individual alternatives tended to be far more successful than the schools or programs comprising options systems. But not all of their lessons have been heard, because the two types of schools of choice haven't tended to be in much contact. This unfortunate split continues. Earlier this year, for instance, I attended a meeting of the New York State Alternative Education Association, and there were lots of individual alternative schools represented, but no options systems.

We have come a long way, though, in

finding out just how successful the choice arrangement can be, and in identifying the elements that make it work. Let me summarize some of these findings for you in the following way: It appears that schools of choice are good for students, for teachers, and for schools as institutions.

All types of youngsters seem to prosper in such schools — the ablest, the average, and the weak student. What's more, all benefit in multiple ways — social and emotional as well as academic. Typically, their attitudes toward school and education and effort change; these changes in turn bring highly visible effects on school behavior and attendance records, as well as on achievement. Quite simply, kids like schools of choice better, and that pays off.

The choice arrangement has very positive effects on teachers, too. Like students, they tend to identify much more strongly with a school of choice than they did previously with the conventional schools from which they came. They commonly report that teaching is far more professional in nature in the choice school, and that is a major plus. They experience more collegiality and professional collaboration with fellow teachers, and this contributes in turn to increased effectiveness, as well as to increased feelings of efficacy. Teachers in these schools probably put in longer hours and work harder than their counterparts in conventional schools — yet the morale and satisfaction rates of teachers in schools of choice are consistently significantly higher than those of teachers in other schools.

The choice arrangement also has direct positive effects on schools, as well as on the teachers and students associated with them. Implicit in the provision of choice is the acknowledgement that schools can, do, and perhaps even should, differ. This corollary to the choice notion has served in many districts to pave the way for innovation and rejuvenation. In fact, for more than a decade alternative schools have been perhaps the single most important mechanism for introducing change and diversity into a system that is otherwise highly resistant to change.

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Moreover, since enrollment patterns in a school send very direct signals about school responsiveness and effectiveness, the choice arrangement functions to help schools remain self-renewing systems. Noticeable declines in a formerly popular school telegraph the need for self-examination and change.

Choice is also good for schools as institutions because the differentiation it brings calls for decentralizing school control. There are many today who claim that this is an absolute *must* if any significant, durable improvement is to occur. (It's ironic that the Excellence Movement has tended to take more decisions out of the school, and to move them farther away than before — from district headquarters to state capitals. In doing so, it may well be significantly weakening the prospects for educational reform.) I tend to agree that we will not see much improvement until individual schools can exert greater direction over what they do. If for no other reasons than *scale* — and there are other reasons — school control needs to be divided. We have seen too much of what happens otherwise.

I collect bureaucratic horror stories so I'm prompted to share several recent ones to dramatize how large-scale, bureaucratic control of schools is bankrupt and unworkable. In Manhattan this year, plans for mainstreaming a bright, eager, little boy with spina bifida had to be cancelled — because of regulations restricting special education buses only to youngsters in special education programs. No exceptions. A kidney transplant candidate had to be refused when a state university medical center couldn't obtain a kidney without first announcing competitive bidding. Finally, in New York City a sum of money was appropriated for reducing the terrible drop-out rate there; somehow it all went to a computer monitoring system programmed to call the homes of absentees and report them missing.

In each of these cases, the capacity of the institution to respond with effectiveness, compassion, and good sense was

sacrificed to the bureaucratic demands of scale. Far superior solutions were readily available if the individual schools involved had had the authority to pursue them.

Finally, the choice arrangement improves schools as institutions because it repeatedly brings an enhancement of quality and effectiveness. This was the unexpected finding of the major magnet school study completed in 1983: The establishment of magnet schools appears an excellent way to improve school quality. It is also an excellent means for enhancing the school's image and improving community perceptions of school quality — no small accomplishment under today's circumstances, and of critical importance in those urban schools where survival is a real issue.

Thus, schools of choice appear good for the school as an institution, as well as for students and staff. Those familiar with the most prominent sets of reform literature will have recognized in what I've said, the pet theories of school improvement of a number of different camps. To put it otherwise, schools of choice represent the implementation or application of a number of different theories of reform. If you were to set out to devise ways to carry out a number of such theories, you would create schools that look a great deal like schools of choice. There isn't this congruence, of course, with the major themes of the Excellence Movement as I was describing those above. However, there is a *new* Excellence Movement in the making with which schools of choice are very closely attuned.

I'm referring to a whole spate of newer excellence reports which differ quite drastically from *A Nation At Risk* and the twenty or so reports appearing about the same time that seemed so much like it. These more recent reports sound quite different themes. One of the first was *Pride and Promise*. It urges school improvement by, among other things, cultivating teacher efficacy and collegiality and encouraging schools to be user-friendly. Another of these newer reports is titled *Barriers to Excellence: Our*

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## \* Features of Schools of Choice

Children At Risk; another, dealing only with Hispanic youngsters, is poignantly titled Make Something Happen; and still another is called The Human Factor: A Key to Excellence in Education. As the titles alone suggest, schools of choice are highly congruent with what this second phase of the Excellence Movement calls for.

There is also another "excellence movement" with more carefully elaborated ideas about what yields high quality and productivity in any kind of human enterprise, schools or hospitals or automobile manufacturing. This literature comes from organizational researchers. Their findings suggest that the quality of worklife, and the extent to which people are encouraged and supported in their efforts, are the critical determinants of their productivity. I am referring to the popular In Search of Excellence, by Peters and Waterman, and to such more scholarly works as The Change Masters by Rosabeth Kantor. Schools of choice, of course, look like the major application to education of this "sociology of work" research and theory.

Several distinct approaches to school improvement each have their own literatures and theories. One is the Effective Schools movement. Another is the research on private schools and their effectiveness. In both cases, public schools of choice manage to embody a number of the elements that Effective Schools and the private school researchers find central to success. It can also be said that schools of choice are congruent with — they follow a number of guidelines suggested by — the major full-scale school studies of our time. I am referring to the studies of John Goodlad, Ernest Boyer, and Ted Sizer. I don't mean to suggest that all of these studies recommend schools of choice. They don't. But they recommend organizational emphases, qualities and components that are probably more prevalent in schools of choice than in any others.

And what are these elements that are so widely recommended as crucial to school success, and are so prominent in schools of

choice? I want to list just four or five. Size seems important. And while I know that there are some urban magnet schools that are vast, keeping them small enough to permit personalization seems a major contributor to the success of students and to the productivity and morale of staff. \*

Cohesiveness is another key feature. For many decades, educators have spoken in exalted terms of the virtues of a comprehensive common school where all groups interact and learn to deal with one another. The events of recent years have deflated the rhetoric. The omnibus comprehensive high school simply does not deliver open, democratic exchange and interaction. Instead it makes for a climate with which few students affiliate strongly, and for an institution with so little commonality and shared commitment that it appears rudderless and adrift. By contrast, a school of choice reflects a population that is likeminded in some educationally significant way. Its students and staff are likely to share not only the educational preferences immediately prompting their choices, but also some key assumptions and beliefs undergirding those choices. Thus, they share a lot more than the accident of a single building. \*

Autonomy is another crucial factor. A number of studies have noted that serious efforts to improve school quality can only occur at the school level. There is also considerable emphasis — and growing concern — with the importance of teachers being left enough discretionary authority to manage their own classrooms. For a variety of reasons, schools of choice often reflect more freedom from central district control than do other schools. And within the school, teachers exert more control over their classrooms than is commonly the case in other schools. \*

Collegiality is another factor having to do with the quality of workplace for both students and staff in schools of choice. For staff, collaboration is frequently essential to getting the job done — for students, it is far more often permitted or even encouraged than in more traditional schools. \*

Finally, the evidence shows that, in

\* varied ways, schools of choice attempt to really respond to student interests. They select and package content so as to do so; they design schedules that yield variety and novelty; and they tailor instructional methods and activities to maximize motivation. Research continues to show that large numbers of students remain bored and unchallenged in classrooms. Teachers in schools of choice seem to work harder at keeping youngsters genuinely engaged in what they are being asked to do: Once more, a carrot in preference to a stick.

There are many other important ingredients in the success of schools in general, and of schools of choice in particular. But instead of more singing of praises, I'm going to turn to another issue. It may have occurred to you: If schools of choice have all of these virtues and advantages, then why aren't they even more popular? In fact, why aren't they prevalent in every district across the land? In responding, I want first to note the sad truth that most education legislation is not passed primarily for educational reasons at all but for others. So just because schools of choice are a documented good thing is no guarantee of their broad adoption. Many other factors enter into the passage or rejection of education laws and arrangements, and documented success may not prove in the least compelling.

Beyond that, however, educational and related interests have not been universally enthusiastic about the choice idea. In exploring why, let's look at what happened in Minnesota in response to Governor Perpich's proposal which was defeated in that state's legislature. There were some special circumstances in Minnesota that do not arise in all areas — most notably the fears of small rural districts that choice would force consolidation upon them. But a look at the reactions of key groups in Minnesota might still be instructive for the rest of us.

The state school boards association opposed the Governor's plan. Some school board members may have had reservations similar to those a Congressman

might have over shifting from a representative, congressional system to a direct democracy or town meeting system. He might fear that he'd be out of a job. It's not quite the same thing, however, because school boards are still needed in a choice system. They no longer select a One Best System to be imposed on everybody, but they are still important to selecting the kinds of programs or schools to offer, and for representing the interests of the community as a whole in the policies that gov-

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ern each program. There is a need to preserve commonalities in a choice system and this is a responsibility of the board. The role of boards changes in a choice system which is not run on a binding majoritarian principle; but boards remain a very important part of such a system — and very probably a more important part than the Excellence Movement allows them to be.

In Minnesota, the school administrators association also opposed the Governor's plan. The opposition of central administrators is understandable, since in choice systems it makes sense for control to revert to individual schools. Some central administrators, however, are strong supporters of school site management plans, which seek to shift power in just this direction. But the concern of other central officials about the lack of coordination and cohesion which differentiation could bring is understandable. Given the present governance and communication structures of most school districts, deviation is incompatible and problematic. (I would challenge such reasoning, however, in its assumption that present structures are necessary or even desirable.)

The prospective effects on building-level administrators, on the other hand,

would be just the opposite of those on central administrators. If more matters are left to individual school determination, their roles become more varied and more challenging. Thus, it would figure that principals should be strong supporters of schools of choice. And indeed, the available research suggests that those who experienced the role are every bit as positive and enthusiastic as are teachers in schools of choice. Both the elementary and secondary school principals' associations in Minnesota were early supporters of the Governor's options plan.

Teacher groups in Minnesota initially appeared undecided and ambivalent about the Governor's proposal. This was perhaps partly political, but I'm afraid it was also in part due to the way some of the proposal's supporters billed it. Some of them suggested that the choice arrangement will bring competition, and the discipline of the marketplace, and would force poor schools out of business. With friends like that, the Governor's plan needed no enemies! But talk of competition and market discipline is not just impolitic; it signals a misleading and erroneous conception. I am strongly in favor of schools of choice and I think they will make for better and more responsive education. But they will, not do so for reasons economists can explain to us, but for educational reasons, that is, not because schools of choice will compete and do one another in, but because there can be no one best system of educating; different youngsters need different educational environments, and different families prefer different educational orientations. Different schools provide the opportunity for more people to find better fits. Moreover, since schools of choice optimize the conditions of teacher efficacy and satisfaction, teachers as well as students and parents are major beneficiaries.

It is too bad that Minnesota teachers and administrators did not come to see that. If they had listened to the testimony of their own who have experienced schools of choice, they would have seen that it is amazingly unanimous in support of the

arrangement. Perhaps they will realize it, in time. Meanwhile, teachers everywhere can do much to aid the prospects of choice. They can help spread the word about its benefits and advantages. One effective way of doing this — and of helping themselves in other ways as well — is through networking with other schools of choice.

I am not aware of any statewide networks linking the schools in choice systems. But I do know that approximately twenty states have state or regional associations of alternative school educators. There is also a national alternative school journal and an annual conference of alternative school educators attended by people from across the nation.

The benefits of communication and mutual support could be many, and contacts between individual alternatives and choice systems could prove highly advantageous to both. Those who work in choice systems need the alternatives folk who work in individual programs — because they are the source of tremendous vitality and momentum. On the other hand, alternative school people need those working in choice systems because it is with the choice systems that the power and political advantages lie today. Let's take advantage of that power and potential. One doesn't have to agree to all three C's of Secretary Bennett's education trilogy in order to recognize that in "choice" he has picked a real winner.

*An earlier version of this piece was given as the keynote address for the "Challenge of Choice Conference" in Norwalk, Connecticut on May 8, 1985.*

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