

The Dynamics of Success and Public Schools of Choice

by Mary Anne Raywid

I became interested in the idea of choice in public education about a dozen years ago. I did so out of a growing sense of how difficult it is to change public schools — and the notion that the choice feature might just prove to be the mechanism that would do it. I arrived at the hypothesis before having ever seen a school of choice, or an alternative school, as they were called in the 60s and 70s. When I began actually looking at such schools, I was fascinated.

One early experience was a meeting that featured a panel of high school kids who tried valiantly to make the audience understand how terrific their schools were. Hard to believe, isn't it? But I have since seen it repeated on a number of occasions, with adolescents setting aside their cool to try to convince people how much their school means to them. Anybody who has seen adolescents up close, or tried to teach them under the standard conditions of the comprehensive high school, will know right away how extraordinary this is. When I first encountered it, I used to think it was "a bit of magic." Having now spent a decade trying to figure out this "magic," I

want to share my thoughts on the dynamics that seem to be at work.

I begin, however, with a couple of caveats. The first is that not all schools of choice are successful. The choice feature is of considerable value in and of itself, and is also quite typically a good catalyst in introducing some other conditions and arrangements of value. But if for any reason these conditions and arrangements are blocked, then a school of choice can prove less than successful. To put this a bit differently, the evidence seems clear enough at this point to suggest some of the other conditions that need to be present in order for a school of choice to really soar. The schools still need more extensive and direct verification than is now available; but from findings in a lot of related areas, it is possible to map out the dynamics with considerable plausibility.

It ought to be added that researchers might well find my "success dynamics" a conflating and confounding of independent and intervening variables — and perhaps there are even some instances of covering the same thing from several perspectives. These would be serious confusions in pursuing research. They can be useful, however, in trying to make research findings come alive for the rest of us.

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So with these warnings about the uses to which such a list can be put, let us move to what appear to be the most important success secrets of schools of choice. In effect, a number of positive cycles are launched which sometimes overlap and buttress other positive cycles simultaneously under way. Those most knowledgeable about the Excellence Movement will recognize that my list of success dynamics supplements rather than duplicates its curricular focus. This is partly to underscore some overlooked essentials — and partly because I believe school effectiveness hinges far more on the environmental characteristics of schools than is generally recognized.

We need to start with the choice feature itself, of course. Choice is a value per se in our society; to extend choice is to open new options — to broaden freedom and possibility. And that is a benefit in and of itself. It is a particular benefit to those who have been unhappy with the pre-choice situation, but it is a boon even to those who have not. Choice means instant empowerment for those who receive it, and it significantly alters the relation of chooser and chosen. It institutes a mutuality and lends a dignity to the chooser that is missing from a relationship in which one of the parties is a captive. (If you think I exaggerate the lack of dignity in being a member of a captive relationship, recall the now all too familiar situation of the State Motor Vehicle Bureau — with long lines of “customers” seeking audiences with bored and often arrogant clerks.)

The sheer existence of more than one

game in town immediately transforms the relationship of every student and family with the school of enrollment. Bureaucratic indifference undergoes a miraculous metamorphosis. One of the reasons for this is that the role of students and their families is altered significantly by choice. They become, as one analyst expressed it, *agents* or *origins* instead of mere *pawns* in all that is to follow.¹ Thus, a first set of success dynamics appearing in schools of choice has to do with transforming roles and relationships within the school.

A second set produces significantly improved teaching. The baseline conditions of the classroom are changed from the outset. Instead of 30 disparate souls assembled by a computer, shared choices yield a group that is similar in some educationally significant way, which is far more useful in directing their instruction than similar ability levels. They share a particular set of interests or goals or approaches to learning. This permits a degree of coherence as to mission and focus that is elusive in other classrooms.

In consequence, teachers in schools of choice start out with better odds — with higher chances of success from the start. This means greater teacher efficacy which in turn yields enhanced student achievement. And the higher success rate leads in turn to a heightened sense of professionalism on the part of teachers. That is, to a far greater extent they are able to experience themselves as engaged in professional practice than are teachers who work day after day under conditions that predictably can yield them few successes.

We sometimes underrate the impact of such a situation on teacher morale and performance — although the pride with which teachers relate success stories provides a strong clue. Their experiences in schools of choice point up what a difference teacher success can make: staff morale and satisfaction are higher and this conduces to greater commitment and effort, which in turn yield further increases in efficacy. Thus, the classroom conditions initially established by the choice feature can set an enviable circle in motion, whereby increased efficacy leads to higher morale which yields greater effort, and then improves efficacy still further.

Lest it sound a bit Pollyanna-ish, it doesn't always happen this way. And even where it does, such gratifying circles of improvement undoubtedly are not without limit. But as one looks over a period of time at a successful school of choice, such dynamics as these appear evident.

Still, a third sort of cycle introduced by the choice arrangement is the breaking down of tight bureaucratic controls in schools. Study after study lends increasing confirmation to the conclusion that such control is inimical to the effectiveness of education.² Accordingly, a number of recent reports urge the return of more governance authority to the school level, and of pedagogical authority to the classroom level.³ The choice arrangement contributes to just this sort of reversal, producing centrifugal forces within the system.

For a variety of reasons, school control has gravitated toward centralization and over the years has become increasingly remote from the classrooms it governs. There is considerable criticism of the resulting pattern, and conviction that things should be otherwise; but such arrangements are highly resistant to change.⁴ The choice feature functions as an excellent mechanism for redressing the balance. It works this way: centralized control both presupposes and produces uniformity. But it makes no sense to pursue a remote control arrangement for a collec-

tion of enterprises that differ extensively from one another. Their goals, functions, structures, and processes require different regulation and internal coordination. Only where it is assumed that the units to be controlled are essentially similar does a high degree of centralization make sense. Otherwise, another control pattern is likely to prove more efficient and effective.

Highly centralized control arrangements not only presuppose sameness among the units governed, but also bring constant pressure toward even further uniformity. This occurs as a consequence of centrally-promulgated regulations which standardize practices and procedures, and thus narrows the range these would otherwise assume.

The introduction of the choice feature into a school system serves as a considerable impetus to modifying its control patterns. For while centralization presumes and produces standardization, the choice arrangement represents the reverse. It both assumes and yields uniqueness and differentiation, since it makes no sense to offer choice among several units unless it is supposed that those units differ from one another in ways that matter. This acknowledgement relaxes the pressures toward school-to-school uniformity, which permits even further differences to develop. Meanwhile, the particular constituencies attracted to each school can become more prominent a factor in shaping the school, which also functions to increase school-to-school diversity.

Thus, schools of choice serve to redistribute control within public school systems, and in effect, to restore the conditions of "The Little Red School House." That is, more authority reverts to the school level, and typically an increased share of that authority goes to the classroom teacher. The result is that the choice arrangement tends to recreate what Assistant Education Secretary Chester Finn calls "strategic independence." Such independence, he has argued persuasively, is important if our effort to improve schools is not just going to cripple them instead.⁵

Another cluster of dynamics that choice sets in motion is one that researchers have associated with corporate excellence.

Some worry that the relaxation of regulatory control over teachers may negatively affect school quality. Another set of dynamics to which choice gives rise makes this unlikely. What is at stake is not a matter of control versus chaos: control and coordination are essential in any large enterprise, and particularly so in one where the functions of one worker must be essentially determined by the functions of others. But the *type* of control, and the way it is exercised, is of utmost importance. Bureaucratic organizations promulgate rules and regulations to achieve the necessary control and coordination. Through a careful combination of demands and constraints, they seek to direct the behavior of workers. But when there is extensive fundamental agreement among workers, detailed behavioral control is superfluous. The common values guiding the decisions of each person can be trusted to provide enough "glue" to coordinate the activities of all.⁶

Obviously, this kind of coordination is much easier for teachers to live with than the sort experienced as requirements and prohibitions, and it may make a difference in the relative effectiveness of schools employing the two control strategies. Analysts seeking to explain the superior effects of private schools on student achievement have suggested that the difference in control patterns may be a central part of the answer.⁷ Less centralized control seems to produce more satisfied teachers, and allows them the freedom to adapt instruction to particular classes and individuals. This instructional leeway

— less available in detailed control arrangements — has repeatedly been found important to successful teaching.⁸

Yet another cluster of dynamics that choice sets in motion in public schools is the one that researchers have associated with corporate excellence. The superiority of outstanding corporations, said Peters and Waterman, lies in their ability to elicit extraordinary performance from ordinary people.⁹ One way in which such corporations achieve this goal is by encouraging collegiality.

In schools of choice, this develops out of necessity; a magnet school must develop its own curriculum because that has not already been done for them; new learning activities must be designed; relationship patterns must be set up between staff and students, parents, and community. These are activities that demand collaboration, especially given the commitment to school uniqueness and diversity inherent to the very idea of choice. The need to create and invent makes it necessary that teachers work together to generate and maintain new answers to perennial educational questions. This means not only that teachers interact more among themselves in schools of choice, but that they interact a great deal more over professional matters. There are questions and problems which can only be solved jointly. Such a situation serves as an antidote to the isolated condition in which most teachers must work, substituting the sorts of collaborative conditions which Peters and Waterman (among others) have found in excellent corporations.

The resulting sense of joint endeavor tends to heighten teacher engagement in and commitment to the enterprise — and this, too, is a trait among workers in outstanding corporations. Moreover, the challenges which have been met together involve matters that the evolving education “industry” has largely closed off to teachers in most schools. The divisions of labor that have developed in education over the years have made specializations of counseling, testing, or designing curriculum — to the extent that most teachers have little to do directly with such matters. Youngsters needing counseling or other “special services” are expected to be referred by teachers, who become the beneficiaries, not the providers, of such service products. Such divisions of labor have been celebrated, on the one hand, as yielding highly expert products and services. But they have been criticized on the other as having the effect of de-skilling teachers, so that a great deal of the knowledge and activities that once defined the teacher’s role have become largely tangential to it.

The possible negative consequences of such a situation have been variously discussed as the de-skilling of a vocation, the under-utilization of professionals, and the alienation of people within an enterprise which strictly defines a narrow role and function for them. Such dangers have been addressed by those urging the socio-technical design of work: i.e., the establishing of roles and divisions of labor that make sense in terms of worker functioning, as well as in terms of the separability of product parts.¹⁰ Hence, the famous Volvo reorganization that replaced the traditional assembly line mode of production with multiple groups of workers responsible for full production. Such an arrangement has been argued as the way to obtain maximal worker skill utilization, satisfaction, and productivity. It may be that schools of choice have serendipitously discovered the analogous reorganization plan for the educational enterprise.

Quite a different sort of feature releases yet another set of assets for schools of

choice: commitment to personalizing education in contrast to more prevalent patterns of alienation. High schools are typically so large, and the division of tasks within them so allotted, that many youngsters can go through school in virtual anonymity. Increasing evidence suggests, however, that those who do so may benefit only minimally from school and remain substantially untouched by its mission.¹¹

Thus, the personalizing of what have sometimes been extensively impersonal institutions represents an important step in rendering them more attractive to and effective with youngsters. A determination to make sure that every youngster is known fairly well to one or more of the adults in the school leads to a variety of organizational provisions — e.g., to advisor or mentor systems, to integrated curricula keeping students with a single teacher for extended periods, to reduced student loads for staff. Such arrangements, and the benefits they yield, seem to make a major difference in adolescents’ attitudes toward school and teachers. Even youngsters who have previously experienced teachers as indifferent and uncaring people typically come to see them quite otherwise, and begin to behave differently in an environment they perceive as supportive. This in turn not only contributes to the moral order of the school; it also enables schools to succeed at transmitting values central to their mission — e.g., values related to citizenship and character.

The personalizing of education simultaneously yields another set of effects that supplement changed attitudes. When teachers know students well enough to be acquainted with their achievement capacities and learning styles, it becomes possible to tailor instruction so as to provide the right combination of challenge and support. This leads in turn to more successful teaching and student achievement. And success itself functions as a stimulus to further effort and greater subsequent accomplishment.

One final set of dynamics introduced by the choice feature functions to make schools

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self-renewing systems. The importance of this contribution is hard to over-estimate. The reason is that without self-renewal capacities, it is difficult for any organization to remain effective, or for its workers to sustain high levels of mission commitment.

This is particularly true of large-scale, bureaucratically organized, non-profit institutions where profits and losses don't supply immediate feedback and incentives for change. In such organizations, the absence of self-renewal capacities lets the solutions to yesterday's problems remain so firmly entrenched as to interfere with perceiving and meeting those at hand.

In schools of choice, however, the responsiveness orientation, including the personalization just discussed, contributes to continuing preoccupation with how well the school is serving its current population. Enrollment shifts yield immediate feedback on the school's image and the size of the group interested in the program it offers. Enrollment decreases telegraph problems, or shifts in community interests, and recommend the diagnosis and resolution of problems, or the modification of a program no longer being sought. And while the general commitment to responsiveness is yielding more feedback on what needs fixing, the relatively small size and ensuing flexibility of schools of choice is permitting the necessary changes to take place — and the collegiality identified earlier is being marshalled to support and implement the changes. Thus, the choice feature serves as the catalyst not just to the creation of desirable new programs, but to

their continual regeneration.

These, then, constitute six distinguishable sets of dynamics which the provision of choice in public schools seems to set in motion. They are not all present in every school of choice, and not all have been fully developed in every such school to enable it to flourish. But when one begins to explore what it is that accounts for the outstanding success achieved by many public schools of choice, these are the dynamics which appear to be operating.

Notes

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