



Success Dynamics of Public Schools of Choice

by

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I became interested in the choice idea for public education about 10 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 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! Sound like one of those conversations that never took place doesn't it?--A real credulity test. But I have since seen it repeated on a number of occasions, with adolescents setting aside their cool to try to convince you how much their school means to them. Anybody who has seen adolescents close up, or tried to teach them under the standard condition of the comprehensive high school, will know right away how extraordinary this is. When I first encountered it, I used to think it "a bit of magic." I have now spent a decade trying to figure it out with more precision and replicability than that explanation yields. I want to share here my thoughts on what those dynamics seem to be.

I begin, however, with a couple of caveats. First is that of course not all schools of choice are successful.

It out to be added that researchers would surely find my "success dynamics" a conflating and confounding of independent and intervening variables--and perhaps there are even some instances of double-listing for a single factor, in effect covering the same

thing from several perspectives. These are serious confusions, of course, in the *doing* of research; they can be useful, however, in trying to make research findings come alive for the rest of us.

I believe school effectiveness to hinge far more on the structural 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. 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. They become, as one analyst expressed, *agents* or *origins* instead of mere *pawns* in all that is to follow.

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. Choices yield a group that is similar in some educationally significant way. 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.

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

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the effective conduct of education. 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. The choice arrangement conduces to just this sort of reversal, producing centrifugal forces within the system.

Yet another cluster of dynamics which choice sets in motion in public schools are those 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.

Quite a different sort of feature releases yet another set of assets for schools of choice: most such schools appear committed to a personalizing of education in contrast to more prevalent patterns. 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. 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. Such arrangements, and the benefits they yield, seem to make a major difference in adolescents' attitudes toward school and teachers. 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 in supplement to changed attitudes. When teachers know students sufficiently well to be acquainted with their achievement levels and 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 the success itself functions as a stimulus to further effort and great subsequent accomplishment.

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

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 relevant and 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 to 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 today's. In schools of choice, however, the responsiveness orientation, including the personalization just discussed, conduces 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 drops telegraph problems, or shifts in community interests, and they recommend the diagnosis and resolution of programs, and the modification of a program no longer being sought. And at the same time that 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 collegialship earlier identified as 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 place 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, as I have done here, 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.

*(Ms. Raywid's article was condensed
by the editor)*