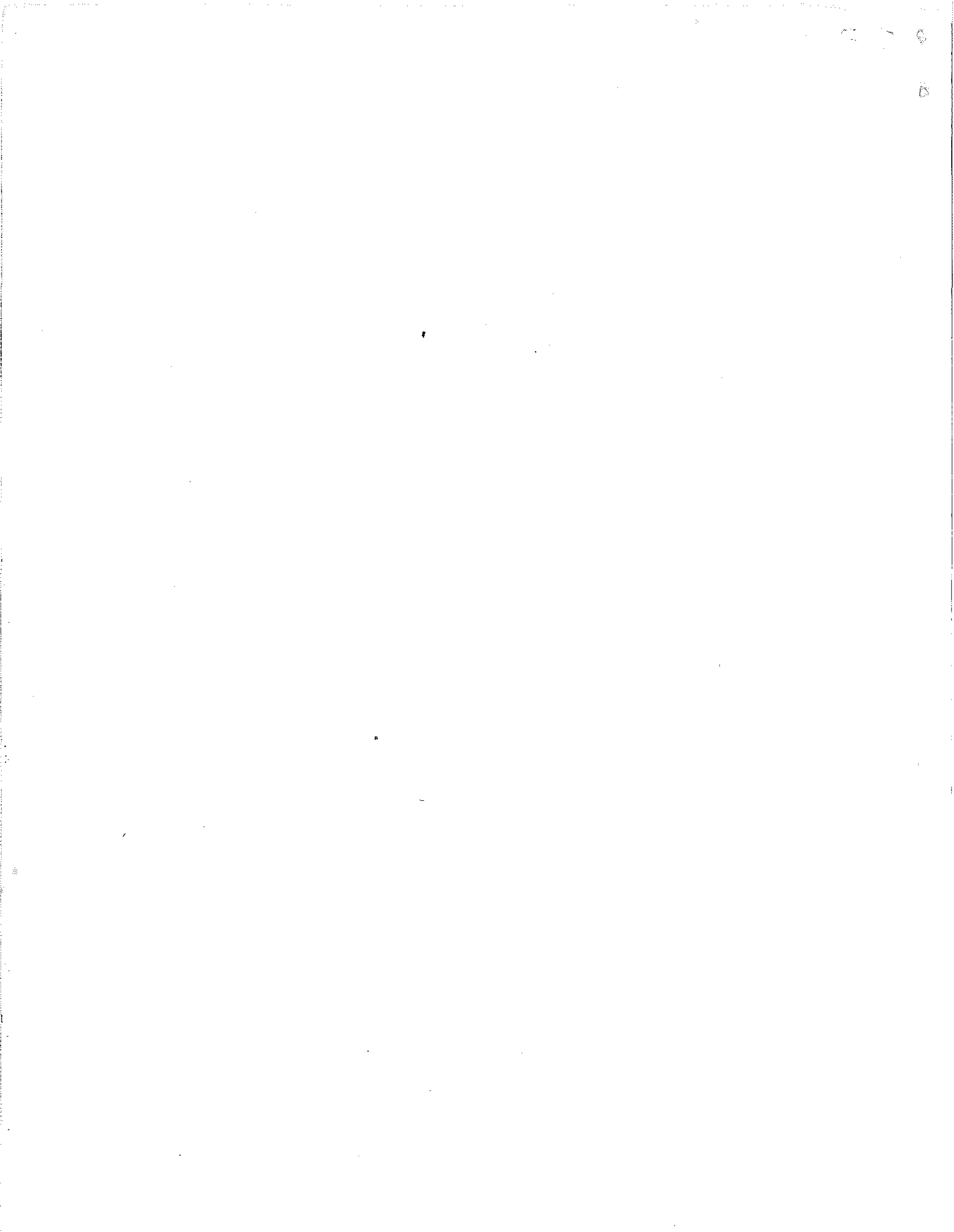


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**THE MOUNTING CASE FOR SCHOOLS OF CHOICE**

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## THE MOUNTING CASE FOR SCHOOLS OF CHOICE

Family background, economic status, residence all matter a great deal in determining whether a youngster will succeed in school; but it is possible that the particular school attended -- and *whether he or she is there by choice* -- matter even more. (Ortiz-Chaparro, 1980; Sexton, 1985) This report reviews the case for public schools of choice and cites the major strands of evidence supporting the choice idea. Following examinations of the cases for student choice, parent choice, and teacher choice, there are brief summaries of the extent of schools of choice and the nature of their support, their organizational features and impacts, and finally of their accomplishments.

"Schools of choice" is a broad category. Its critical feature is that the school is selected by the student and family. As used here, the term applies to any school -- or separate administrative unit within a school -- that has its own personnel (students and teachers) who are affiliated with the program by choice, and its own separate program. The two major types of schools of choice are alternative schools and magnet schools. Alternative schools are usually established in districts as a single program, or one of a very few, <sup>designed</sup> established to respond to the unmet needs or interests of particular groups of students, parents, or teachers. Magnet schools more usually exist as one of a number of such schools

within a district, launched to the purpose of desegregation or of school quality improvement. Thus, alternative schools typically develop as single programs, magnet schools as one within a system of such programs.

### THE CASE FOR STUDENT CHOICE

The three fundamental pillars of the choice idea are the beliefs that (1) there is no one best school for everyone, and accordingly (2) the deliberate diversification of schools is important to accommodating all and enabling each youngster to succeed. Moreover (3), youngsters will perform better and accomplish more in learning environments they have chosen than in environments which are simply assigned to them. All three of these basic premises have gathered empirical support over the last several years.

The need for diversity in order to accommodate the full range of youngsters is strongly suggested in the nation's dropout and failure rates. Dropout figures ranging as high as 75% have been estimated for some areas and some populations. Yet documentation of real 'reversals' or 'turn-arounds' on the part of previously unsuccessful and disaffected learners shows that many failures simply need not happen. A number of studies have shown remarkable improvement for low achievers located in new and different learning environments -- improvement, for example, in relation to attitudes toward school and learning, in attendance and behavior patterns, and in achievement. (Foley & McConaughy, 1982) Such students have

frequently turned from chronic truancy to regular attendance. And they have sometimes arrived at multi-year learning gains within a matter of months, as such gains are measured by standardized tests. (Konrad, 1979)

An analysis of dropout patterns in Portland, Oregon, showed clearly that the school attended has more to do with whether a youngster drops out than does his or her economic circumstances or race. (Sexton, 1985) The figures also revealed that students who attend a school by choice have much lower dropout rates than do students attending by assignment. Broadening the choice opportunity, the researcher concludes, could do much to prevent dropping out. A team that studied at risk students in Chicago reached the same conclusion. (Kyle et al., 1986)

For many, the different learning environment appears the key. Poignant, but often misunderstood testimony to this effect comes from the dramatic improvements some youngsters make in an alternative environment, only to revert to the earlier problems once returned to the 'regular' school. (McCann & Landi, 1986) A number of districts operate programs that are only short-term 'alternatives.' It is assumed that after special remediation, students will function adequately in the 'regular' program. Many blossom in the new environment, only to return to failure in the old.

Our traditional assumption that there is a 'right' or 'preferable' way in which to learn forces us to interpret such cases as remediation failures, where the counseling or academic

'beefing up' has failed to take sufficiently. But such cases may be more appropriately seen simply as evidence of the need for a learning environment other than the standard school. It is not just an umbrella haven for the non-successful that is needed, since it seems clear that one alternative to the conventional program does not suffice. The needs of youngsters vary sufficiently that a variety of learning environments is necessary if all are to succeed. (Ghory, 1978; Sinclair & Ghory, 1987)

Schools are typically designed for youngsters with particular cognitive and personal orientations, and are maladapted to others. Conventional schools place a premium on the ability to sit still, and to learn from listening to an authority. This is perhaps what best explains those school districts which have officially classified up to 30% of their boys "hyperactive," and as many as 35% abnormal or brain-damaged. (McGuiness, 1986) It seems more plausible that many of these youngsters were simply the "active learners" that learning style specialists have identified (Reckinger, 1987)

The work of Robert Fizzell has suggested that the very traits enabling youngsters to succeed in one program would probably make for low performance in another. Thus Fizzell has helped start and evaluate varied learning environments. One type requires the ability and disposition to work largely independently in carrying out an agreed-upon plan, with minimal interaction and external support along the way. (Fizzell, 1975) Another demands considerable skill in collaborative activity (Fizzell, 1987) and

yet another makes active learning -- as opposed to more typical classroom approaches -- the salient feature. (Fizzell, 1979)

Fizzell's findings make a 'one best way' approach to schooling, with the uniformity and standardization we have pursued, both logically arbitrary and morally questionable. The evidence suggests that if given a choice among a variety of school environments, many more youngsters could succeed.

What we have discovered about the power of preferences, as well as about learning styles, strongly suggests that people of all ages are likely to be more productive in learning circumstances they prefer. This is direct support for the desirability of choice. A series of studies carried out in the Pacific confirm this. One examined learning outcomes in 116 junior high school classes, some featuring environments preferred by the particular students enrolled, and others reflecting different kinds of environments. Results showed that matching students to preferred environments enhances both cognitive and affective outcomes.

— 7. (Fraser, 1983) Indeed, Barry Fraser suggests that the person-environment fit may eventually be shown to be just as important to positive learning outcomes as the adequacy of an environment. (Fraser, 1983)

— 8. Stern (1970) hypothesized some years ago that complementary combinations of personal needs and environmental 'press' or demands will enhance student outcomes. Several investigations of schools of choice have since used this work to show the importance of person-environment congruence. (Corda, 1987; Gluckstern, 1974)

These and other studies confirm the importance to learning of the particular fit between the individual student and the learning environment.

More direct empirical support for the value of school choice is also accumulating. The classic study was done by Richard Nault (1975) who found major differences in the school commitments of adolescents who had chosen their school for themselves and others whose parents had done the choosing. His findings have since been replicated (Hartman, 1980), and a study of the effects of choice on youngsters who selected the public mini-school which they attended, compared to others in the same program who did not, also found stronger commitment and higher achievement on the part of the choosers. (Kottkamp, 1979) A number of studies have found student satisfaction levels higher in schools of choice than in the parent or host school. (Livingston, 1982; Nicholson, 1980)

These several lines of research, then, support the conclusion that there is no single best approach to learning for all youngsters, and hence they make a case for the need to diversify schools and to attempt alignment of school programs with student needs and interests. This underscores the importance of student choice.

#### THE CASE FOR PARENT CHOICE

There is also much to be said for parent choice; and it consists of a slightly different case. Its premises are (1) There are many viable, desirable ways to educate, and (2) no one best

program can prove responsive to the diverse preferences a pluralistic, democratic society accepts as legitimate. Hence, (3) the diversification of schools to accord with family value patterns and orientations is desirable.

Paralleling the case for the need for diversification, there is also support for its desirability. The evidence comes from investigations of private schools and effective schools, as well as from inquiry into public schools of choice. It is frequently found that parent satisfaction rates in public schools of choice are unusually high (Blank, 1982<sup>3</sup>; Raywid, 1982b) and that they dramatically outstrip approval levels in comparable local schools (Nicholson et al, 1980). Donald Erickson suggests several plausible explanations for such findings. "The act of choosing," he writes, "may sensitize parents to special school benefits that would otherwise go unnoticed." Moreover, "Having made a choice, human beings do not like to be proven wrong and, hence, tend to demonstrate commitment by attempting to ensure that the choice turns out well." It is also possible that "Freedom to choose may generate a sense of power that itself enhances commitment." And finally, "Voluntary affiliation means that a school cannot take its patrons for granted." (Erickson, 1982: 407-8)

The choice provision earns parent support for yet another reason as well. It apparently has salutary effects on schools, which increase their effectiveness in facilitating student growth and accomplishment. Considerable contemporary research on private schools and on effective public schools suggests that the

intervening variable is value and mission consensus, and the social cohesion which ensues. (Erickson, 1982; Grant, 1981; Salganik & Karweit, 1982; Purkey and Smith, 1983) Since public schools of choice, as well as private schools, are likely to have a distinctive, identifiable focus, they attract a group that is likeminded in some educationally significant way. To the extent that teachers, parents, and students, are agreed upon a mission, the school can represent a single focus which generates commitment and enables the school to become a community. This in turn makes it more effective. Sociologists have long noted the difference between *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft* communities. The latter are not genuine communities, simply people assembled by legal or formal means such as by law or contract. *Gemeinschaft* communities, on the other hand, represent genuine communities of people who are tied to one another by mutual sentiments and loyalties and shared beliefs. Groups of the *Gemeinschaft* type have increasingly been recognized as important to successful education. Erickson et al. draw this policy conclusion for the public schools: (1982: 16:24)

If ... *Gemeinschaft* is generally an essential attribute of effective schools, then it would seem to follow that different types of schools should be created for people with different preferences and life styles, that school clients should be reasonably homogeneous and socially cohesive, and that mechanisms should be created to filter out parents who will not be supportive of a given school...

The last several years have added substantial evidence that it is, indeed, school climate differences that most clearly distinguish successful from less effective schools. Moreover, the very comprehensiveness long viewed a virtue of the American high school can also be seen as a lack of focus and a source of discord. (Powell et al, 1985; Salganik & Karweit, 1982) "Schools with diffuse, unarticulated, or even contradictory goals probably inspire little commitment," concludes (Erickson, (1982: 410)

Erickson and his colleagues are probably the only group to have undertaken comparison study of the climates of private schools, regular or 'mainstream' public schools, and public schools of choice. (1982) Although they found the private school climate superior, they found public schools of choice to have a clear advantage in relation to other public schools. "It appears," they concluded, "that the public alternative schools have found a way of creating the same kind of school social climate that distinguishes private schools, though not to the same degree." (1982: 15:22)

The superiority of private to public schools is now being argued on a variety of grounds in addition to climate. Parochial schools in particular have been claimed to produce more and better learning, especially for disadvantaged youngsters. (Coleman et al., 1981; Lee, 1985) Some researchers now claim that the private school advantage is innate and inevitable. (Chubb, 1987) Whether or not this is eventually borne out, current research attributes considerable advantage to the choice feature alone, which public schools can certainly adopt. As we shall later see, there is

abundant evidence that public school parents want choice; that they are more satisfied with and have more confidence in schools that provide it; that parent choice increases the commitment and cohesion within schools extending it; and that these attributes combine to improve school quality and make schools more effective.

### THE CASE FOR TEACHER CHOICE

Schools of choice have pronounced positive effects on their teachers and administrators. A recent statement by an alternative school teacher/coordinator suggests why: (Seymour, 1988)

Alternative education stimulates personal and academic growth of staff as much as students.... I admit it! I'm in alternative education for many selfish reasons -- I like pleasant working conditions, enjoy growing as a person, and love interacting with healthy people. What continues to amaze me is that these selfish considerations have encouraged me to provide a more stimulating, growing, healthy environment for my students. How great! I think it's called synergy!!

The enthusiasm is consistent with findings of remarkable satisfaction levels among teachers in alternative schools. Gladstone & Levin, 1982; Lytle, 1980; Kottkamp, 1974; Mahon-Lowe, 1986; Raywid, 1982) It is also consistent with the organizational ideal wherein the personal goals of workers dovetail with the formal goals of the organizations in which they work.

Schools of choice offer teachers opportunities for self-actualization that other schools do not. And job satisfaction depends upon the opportunity a job affords for satisfying a variety of personal needs. (Lippitt & Rumley, 1977) It is for this reason that some have suggested that the choice feature makes for "a 'teachers' school." (Lytle, 1980)

Schools of choice are able to minimize if not eliminate major sources of teacher dissatisfaction. These have been identified as powerlessness, professional isolation, the extreme fragmentation of the work day and the educational task, the depersonalized circumstances of large schools, the low esteem in which teachers are held, severe discipline problems, and external mandates which interfere with effective teaching and productive interaction with students. (Cohn et al., 1987; Olson, 1986) The conditions of schools of choice respond to each of these sources of dissatisfaction, in ways that subsequent paragraphs show.

As a result of various frustrations -- and of the socialization effects of teachers who have been experiencing them longer -- new teachers have been found to come rather quickly to a custodial orientation toward students and perception of the task of the school. (Hoy, 1968; Hoy, 1969) <sup>They concentrate on top order, +</sup> They routinize their work and hence become less creative and less responsive to students. (McNeil, 1988a) This is likely to place a premium on the need for discipline, and teachers with a custodial perception of teaching do in fact spend comparatively more time on classroom discipline. (Cusick, 1983)

But custodial tendencies are not inevitable, and the debilitating cycle is avoidable. The choice arrangement provides an alternative. It combines opportunities for professional development for teachers with the need to pursue such development. In other words, instead of an environment conducive to routinization, there is an environmental press in the direction of invention and creation instead. In short, teachers are spurred to professionalize their operation: The opportunity to teach in a school of choice entails the responsibility to create and sustain a distinctive program -- one that differs recognizably from the traditional. This necessitates collective reflection on school purposes, and it requires collaborative effort to design and implement a program. Teachers in schools of choice must thus confront questions they do not deal with in most schools, and they must collaborate in designing and then implementing answers to these questions (Kottkamp, 1974) -- expectations that are non-existent in most traditional schools. (Lortie, 1975; Sarason, 1978-79)

Such responsibilities bring teachers in schools of choice much more autonomy than is common in other schools. (Mahon-Lowe, 1986; Raywid, 1982) The school must be more autonomous within the system if it is to be distinctive, and within the school the teachers must be more autonomous if they are to design and implement distinctiveness. Under such circumstances, the formal controls of traditional schools tend to shift in schools of choice, from regulation by rules and role definitions to regulation by conscious attention to shared purposes. (Swidler, 1979; Talbert, 1988) Most

people find this kind of control easier to live with than more formal control arrangements -- less restrictive and oppressive. Thus, teachers in schools of choice perceive their work as substantially more professional in nature than is the role of the teacher in other schools. (Gladstone & Levin, 1982; Kottkamp, 1974)

Additional features also render schools of choice easier to deal with for teachers than other schools: they tend to be smaller, with less hierarchy (Raywid, 1982) and fewer status differences (Duke, 1976; Swidler, 1979), and they yield more opportunity for the individual to define his or her own role. (Hamilton, 1981; Swidler, 1979) Where roles and responsibilities are less explicit, there is room for more personalization -- thus more responsiveness to the strengths, weaknesses, and desires of individual teachers.

Under such circumstances, a number of the conditions producing teacher frustration in other schools do not appear. Teachers in schools of choice typically have the authority to vary instructional conditions as they find necessary; they are not isolated since they must work collaboratively; and their work is defined less by sharp divisions of labor than by personal strengths and interests. There are also fewer external directives hemming them in. Finally, teacher-administrator relations tend to be less adversarial because administrators are more involved in the instructional questions that concern teachers (Blank, 1986; Kottkamp, 1979; Raywid, 1982), and because they tend to function as leaders, not just as managers. (Bindman, 1981; Blank, 1986; Wolf, Walker, & Mackin, 1974)

Student-teacher relations in schools of choice tend not only to

be easier to live with but simultaneously more rewarding. First, they are likely to be a lot more pleasant. Since everyone is there by choice, they begin with a common interest, orientation, or preference of some educationally-relevant sort. The result, according to teacher testimony, is that student control measures become less necessary in schools of choice. (Blank, 1983; Trickett, 1977) <sup>There is less custodialism.</sup> Disciplinary steps and the behavior prompting them are noticeably reduced in such schools. (Perry & Duke, 1978; Raywid, 1982) Students perceive teachers as more caring and helpful (Annove & Strout, 1980; Sweeney, 1983) and respond positively. There is more trust (Sweeney, 1983) between students and teachers, and students acknowledge the centrality of their teachers to their success; they credit teachers with their own accomplishment. (Kottkamp, 1974; Moilanen, n.d.) Certainly these conditions differ markedly from those where teachers complain of little awareness of, or recognition or reward for what they do.

Undoubtedly, the circumstances outlined here conduce to greater teacher success. <sup>For</sup> The widely reported higher levels of student achievement in all kinds of schools of choice are reflective of greater teacher success as well. (Magi, 1985; Di Blasi, 1987; Los Angeles, 1983-84, 1984-85, 1985-86; Larson & Allen, 1988) And a heightened sense of efficacy is undoubtedly a source of teacher satisfaction. It contrasts markedly with the despair of inner city teachers who feel that their chances to succeed at their goals are so slim. (Purkey & Rutter, 1987)

Thus, the idea that a school of choice is "a teachers' school"

is not far-fetched. Such schools combine the opportunity for personal and professional growth with conditions that require and evoke it. As Mary Metz put it, they combine "official license and obligation to innovate." (1988) Such schools reward staff with working conditions that teachers find more pleasant and more supportive of instructional success. It is thus not surprising that teachers in schools of choice appear so committed to them and to their work within them, and why they prove so unwilling to leave. (Magi, 1985) In Philadelphia, after retrenchments brought involuntary transfers into and out of an alternative school, those forced out wanted to return and those involuntarily assigned opted to stay. After a year, 38 of the 39 involuntarily shifted teachers chose the alternative school in preference to any other assignment. (Lytle, 1980)

#### THE CHOICE CONTEXT

Demographic data about schools of choice are relatively scant. There have been only two national surveys of such schools in the past decade, one focusing on public alternative high schools (Raywid, 1982), and the other looking at magnet schools at all grade levels. (Blank, 1983) The magnet school study located 1019 such programs. The alternative school study located 2500 alternatives, but estimated that the actual total might be three or four times that number. Both these surveys were done in <sup>conducted</sup> 1981 and now appear dated. Although there is thus no way to fix current totals accurately, there are reasons to believe that they are now

substantially higher.

The first such reason is the continuing spread of magnet schools which are being opened now for several different purposes. Court desegregation orders, and the threat of such orders, continue to underlie magnet school openings in many areas. Five hundred school districts remain under desegregation orders -- and others seek to avert such orders by launching choice systems. Meanwhile, other districts are adopting the magnet concept as a general reform strategy or a mechanism for school revitalization. This, too, has served as a stimulus to the spread of magnet schools. Recent interest in dropout prevention has served as a separate impetus. Some districts have assumed that the opportunity to select a different learning environment might entice marginal students to remain in school, and improve their chances for succeeding there.

Together, these three concerns -- desegregation, revitalization, and dropout prevention -- are probably responsible for a large percentage of the schools of choice launched in the 80s. Because these challenges are likely to appear more urgent in urban than in suburban or rural areas, a higher percentage of schools of choice are probably now concentrated in cities than was earlier the case. During the 70s it appeared that the choice idea was almost as likely to be adopted by suburban as by urban districts. (Raywid, 1982) The 80s have probably swung the numerical balance more sharply toward cities.

The magnet school study confirmed that only relatively small proportions of youngsters within districts offering choice were

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enrolled in schools or programs of choice. The figures reported ranged from 1% to 37%. (Blank, 1983) Those percentages have doubtless changed somewhat now, with at least some districts having placed groups of schools on a choice basis. Acton, Massachusetts, for example, has for several years had such an arrangement at the elementary school level; Rochester, New York, has announced such a plan for its high schools; and in Harlem's District 4, all junior highs are schools of choice. District 4 also offers options at the elementary level, and now at the secondary level as well. It reports that more than 55% of its youngsters attend schools of choice. ~~The percentages~~

By and large, however, the tendency seems to remain strong even in districts with several schools of choice, to keep most students in schools of assignment. Typically this occurs not from apathy on the part of choosers but because of limits on the number of spaces made available. In New York's District 4, which is an exception in this regard, interest in one elementary school program prompted the opening of another like it, then a third, and now the extension of the original elementary school to the secondary level. Elsewhere, however, district decisionmakers often fail to respond to such interest, and thus one reads of parents standing for days in a line in order to enroll their youngsters in a particular school of choice (Kalson, 1986; Feinberg, 1986) and even of a high school with 900 openings and 35,000 applicants. (Ravitch, 1986)

The choice arrangement attracts large numbers of students and their families who take advantage of such opportunity. But it also

appears that this sort of 'consumer' appeal has not always convinced school districts to make choice widely available. To put it differently, the choice idea has evidently appealed only to ~~some~~ boards and school officials, and many of these have adopted it only on a very limited basis, not as an arrangement for all or most schools. (Block, 1981)

The choice concept has, however, been receiving substantial support from three other important groups: political officials, business interests, and the public at large. The political support has come largely from governors, occasionally from legislators. As described elsewhere in this volume, the governors have proposed a variety of choice arrangements, ranging from schools of choice for the ablest students (so-called 'Governors Schools') to providing second chance options for the weakest. There have been proposals to permit high school students to pursue college courses and to permit students in the smallest schools to opt to attend larger ones across district lines.

Business organizations, too, have supported the choice concept. At both state and national levels, they have produced influential reports in which choice is recommended as a means for improving school quality, and simultaneously as a means of rendering schools more responsive to diverse student needs, more accountable to parents, and better equipped to satisfy the economy's needs. At the local level, too, business, as well as political and civic groups are recommending the choice arrangement as a way to enhance public education. In Hawaii, for example, the League of Women Voters

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- 7. (1987), United Way, and the Health and Community Services Council, (1987) have all endorsed choice and are urging it in the interests of school improvement.

The conviction that choice would yield better schools appears to be a major reason for the remarkable public agreement about its desirability. Indeed, the American people share more extensive agreement over the desirability of choice than on any other educational matter! (Gallup and Clark, 1987) Last Spring, an impressive 71% of the adults polled expressed the view that parents should be entitled to select the public schools their children will attend. And 76% of public school parents took this position, evidently including many who are quite satisfied with their children's present school.

A difference in the questions put to respondents in 1986 and 1987 may mask an even more significant change in public sentiment than the numbers reveal. In 1986, 68% of public school parents polled desired choice; as of 1987, 76% felt they were even entitled to it. At the same time, however, it is clear that the public is not moving toward public support for private schools. In fact the percentage reacting positively to the voucher idea has declined significantly, from a high of 51% in 1983 to 44% as of 1987. (Gallup & Clark, 1987) Thus, while trends provide strong evidence that choice sentiment for public schools is growing, at least for the moment support for private school subsidization seems to be on the wane.

## ORGANIZATIONAL FEATURES OF SCHOOLS OF CHOICE

For nearly two decades educational researchers have tried to trace the sources of the differences between effective schools and those that are less so. The feature most often identified as the key is school climate, which many now take to be the central determinant of school success. (Purkey & Smith, 1983) It appears that ultimately what is at root are such intangibles as how people in a school interact with one another, and the fundamental beliefs and commitments underlying their behavior. Schools of choice seem to enjoy pronounced advantages in this regard.

Thomas Gregory and Gerald Smith have done extensive study of the climates of public schools of choice. They have now examined 44 schools in 14 states, and they have queried almost 4000 students and 1000 teachers. (1982, 1983, 1987) They have also undertaken comparative study of the climates in schools of choice and in the school of assignment choosers would otherwise have attended. Their findings in several separate studies consistently favor the choice arrangement, and <sup>the advantage</sup> ~~they appear to hold~~ irrespective of the sort of program the alternative school reflects, the sort of students, or the locale.

Gregory and Smith asked both students and teachers in the schools they studied about the climates of their schools and about the climate a school ought to have. They found that alternative school students have both higher expectations of their schools than do their peers in regular schools, and more positive judgments about

the extent to which the school lives up to their expectations. The same is true of teachers in the two types of schools. (1982)

Gregory and Smith tried to determine the extent to which a school responds to individual needs as identified by Abraham Maslow's needs hierarchy. They have found that in the judgment of both students and teachers, alternative schools far surpass conventional schools in this regard. In fact, the least responsive alternative schools were still found to be more so than the most responsive of conventional schools. Smith and Gregory do not always examine academic outcomes, but in one comparative study of alternatives and their conventional school counterparts, they found higher achievement levels to accompany the climate advantages in the schools of choice. (1983)

School climate is not independent, of course, of a school's organizational structure and processes. Thus it may be no accident that many schools of choice differ strikingly in this regard from other public schools. The first such schools, in the late 60s, were typically inspired by parents and/or teachers deliberately seeking something different, and they were recognized as exceptions necessitating departures of various sorts from existing procedures. It was early apparent that the departures were producing quite different kinds of organizations than conventional schools represent, and the organizational features of schools of choice became perhaps their most studied dimension.

It was typically found that alternative schools, and both their teachers and students, enjoy more autonomy and responsibility than

typically obtains in other schools (Mahon-Lowe, 1986; Raywid, 1982); that they did not organize themselves hierarchically and did not operate according to bureaucratic controls and procedures (Swidler, 1979); that the alternatives were marked by an unusual flexibility in role definition, instead of the more clearly and narrowly delineated roles of conventional schools (Ducharme, 1981); and that they reflected far more collaborative activity on the part of teachers than is usually the case. (Warren, 1976)

These organizational traits are now seen to explain high levels of teacher satisfaction and low absenteeism rates, as well as positive student response to school programs. (Erickson, 1986) They are believed to explain school climate and ethos, and thus to account for school environments successful in promoting achievement and accomplishment on the part of all involved. (Erickson, 1982; Grant, 1981; Grant, 1982)

Unfortunately, then, there is reason to believe that many of the schools of choice launched during the 80s have been much less organizationally innovative (McNeil, 1987; Raywid, 1987) and that the focus in schools comprising choice systems (magnet schools) tends to be programmatic only, and not organizational (Metz, 1988). This is unfortunate in light of the mounting evidence of organizational impacts on the attitudes, behavior, and accomplishment of workers in all types of organizations. (Gitlin, 1981; Sizer, 1984; Peters & Waterman, 1982; Stevens, 1985) The shift seems to be occurring at a time when research into private schools and others is revealing powerful evidence that these

organizational features may be precisely what most needs changing in public schools. (Chubb, 1987; Chubb & Moe, 1985; 1986) Among the features now being found particularly important to success <sup>are</sup> ~~is the~~ importance of focused, internally coherent goals (Salganik & Karweit, 1982); of control by shared values and goal agreement in preference to directives and constraints (Talbert, 1988); of teacher autonomy and control over their own classrooms (Darling-Hammond, 1984) -- features, in short, which were typical of the early schools of choice and which remain well within the grasp of more recent ones. As Mary Metz has suggested, schools of choice have an "innovative charter." (1988) It might well be construed more often to include organizational innovation.

#### THE ACCOMPLISHMENTS OF SCHOOLS OF CHOICE

It is sometimes said that there is little real evidence about the outcomes of choice. That is not really the case, but there are limitations in the kinds of evidence available. First, virtually none of it is experimental, so conclusions are drawn from correlational studies. Many come from studies and evaluations of individual programs with no comparisons to help interpret findings. The absence of experimental studies makes it difficult to discern specific causes -- e.g., to tell whether major academic accomplishment in a particular school is more appropriately attributed to the choice feature, the nature of the program, or the superiority or dedication of a particular group of teachers. Thus, explanations must remain hypotheses. Within such limits, however,

there are extensive findings on both choice systems and on individual schools of choice. This section is based largely on four studies identifying the accomplishments of 139 schools of choice located in 11 cities and suburban areas across the country. The primary sources are careful investigations of the magnet schools of Buffalo, Los Angeles, Mt. Vernon, Newburgh, New Rochelle, New York City, Poughkeepsie, Rochester, Syracuse, and Montgomery County, Maryland. All of the schools involved are at the secondary level, except the 14 elementary school magnets in Montgomery County.

Based on the prevalent success measure of scores, schools of choice are highly successful. In Manhattan's Spanish Harlem, where test scores used to place District 4 at the very bottom of the City's list of 32 community school districts, 62% of the youngsters now read at or above grade level. And state tests last year found 75% of the district's eighth-graders to be competent writers as well. (Di Blasi, 1987) Meanwhile, studies of 41 magnet schools in New York State, of 84 in Los Angeles, and of 14 in Montgomery County, Maryland all found students' reading and math scores above district and/or national averages. (Magi, 1985; Los Angeles, 1983-84, 1984-85, 1985-86; Larson & Allen, 1988) Furthermore, there is evidence that the longer youngsters have been in the school of choice, the greater their relative advantage. (Los Angeles, 1983-84; Larson & Allen, 1988) In Montgomery County, it was ascertained as well that the magnet school youngsters who exceeded the control group's achievements in the sixth grade had not simply done so from the third-grade starting point. Thus, their performance is

associated with the magnet school, and on this most conventional of indicators, the accomplishments of schools of choice seem clear.

One possible explanation for such success is that classrooms in choice programs apparently display a stronger task orientation than others. This was a finding in one of the annual studies of Los Angeles' magnet schools (1984-85), and it has also been confirmed by research undertaken elsewhere: students are academically engaged for a higher percentage of the time in classrooms of choice than in other programs. (Tricket, 1978)

Another way to assess a school is in terms of student attitudes toward it, toward their teachers, and toward education in general. Here again, schools of choice appear to have a strong advantage. Annual evaluations of Los Angeles magnet programs consistently find students' school-related attitudes to be more positive than those of the majority of the nation's students at the same grade level (1983-84; 1984-85; 1985-86) Moreover, the longer a student remains in the school of choice, the more positive are his or her attitudes toward the program. (Los Angeles, 1983-84) One feature of student attitudes appears particularly noteworthy. It is not unusual for successful students in any school to be positively disposed toward their school. What seems unique to schools of choice, however, is the finding of positive attitudes among less successful students. (Larson & Allen, 1988; Stevens, 1985) It is an important achievement in two regards: first, in keeping the door open to permit future success, and second in helping assure positive behavior prior to the time of success. Thus, the ability of schools

of choice to generate a liking for school even among weak students is an important accomplishment.

Improved student behavior is still another accomplishment of schools of choice. Vandalism rates have long been reported to contrast impressively between these and other schools within a given area. (Arnove & Strout, 1980) Daily attendance rates were found higher in 90% of New York's magnet schools than in others (Magi, 1985), and the attendance rates of particular students was found to improve over their previous records in 81% of alternative schools responding to a national survey. (Raywid, 1982) Dropout rates in schools of choice consistently fall below district averages. (Magi, 1985; Sexton, 1985) Student behavior also improves substantially within such schools (Perry & Duke, 1978; Raywid, 1982), and New York State magnets reported suspension rates below district averages. (Magi, 1985)

A major national study documented magnet school success in winning the approval of parents and other community members, and in enhancing general perceptions of school quality. (Blank, 1983) Parent response to the choice idea in general appears highly positive. In New York State, 98% of the parents responding to an opinion survey indicated they would recommend magnets to other parents. Two out of three responding parents felt magnet schools did a better job of instruction, motivation, and personal development. (Magi, 1985) In Montgomery County, too, over the last several years parents have rated their magnet schools "a strong B+." (Larson & Allen, 1988)

There is also evidence of parent involvement and participation, which has been a concern to some as children move to schools less easily accessible to their parents. Yet both the New York and Maryland reports suggest that parents engage in conferences with teachers, make classroom visits, and do volunteer work in the magnet schools. In Montgomery County, three-fourths of the parents make at least one classroom visit per year, and almost half undertake volunteer activity. (Larson & Allen, 1988) In New York, 50% of the parents regularly participated in school activities in almost half the schools studied -- an extraordinary rate for the inner city where a number of these schools are located. (Magi, 1985)

Teachers are comparably positive. A majority of those involved in the Los Angeles 1985-86 evaluation recommended expansion of the magnet program. They felt magnets had improved academic achievement and self esteem and substantially enhanced post high school opportunities for their students. (Los Angeles, 1985-86) In New York, an overwhelming percentage of teachers also expressed support for the magnet concept (96%) and reported positively on the climate of their school -- with 83% finding it a good working environment and 87% reporting considerable autonomy in managing their own classrooms. It is not too surprising, then, to find unusually low rates of teacher turnover in the magnet schools studied. A comparison of staff stability in particular schools prior to and post magnetization shows major differences. Schools of choice average approximately half the turnovers that marked these

same schools when they were schools of assignment. (Magi, 1985)

Given these several indications of teacher response, it is not surprising to find that 80% rated their magnet schools superior to schools of assignment. Certainly some of the evidence reviewed here offers support for such a conclusion. There are grounds for concluding not only that the conversion of a school to a school of choice serves to revitalize that school and its impact on students; there is also reason to believe that magnet schools may positively affect their districts. (Magi, 1985) Districtwide improvement of student performance has been found to follow the introduction of magnet schools. (Magi, 1985) And in Montgomery County, parent perceptions of non-magnet schools have risen to the point that they are now coming to rival the high esteem in which the schools of choice are held.

Such evidence of accomplishment, drawn from research involving large numbers of schools, is more authoritative than the studies and evaluations of individual schools of choice. But it is also a lot less vivid, and in averaging success rates, it obscures the real triumphs of individual schools. Any examination of the accomplishments of schools of choice must note the particular achievements of at least a handful of them:

Several years ago, the Alternative Program in State College, Pennsylvania scored at the 99th percentile on 13 of the 14 areas measured by the state's standardized exams. The students are obviously an able group -- but the state concluded that ability alone did not explain the success in more than

half the areas tested. (Alternative Program, 1983)

Metro High School in Chicago, where dropout rates hover around 50%, graduates an impressive 90% of its students. A substantial number go on to college. Ninety-one percent of these youngsters are minority, and more than half come from low income homes. (*School Report Card*, 1986)

Several years ago, students from the Davis Alternative Elementary School in Jackson, Mississippi achieved the highest scores recorded in any of Jackson's 37 elementary schools. (Scarboro, 1985) Davis has not had to spend a single dollar on vandalism or property destruction for several years now. (Thompson, 1988)

A recent graduating class of the Village School in Great Neck, New York -- a small alternative program -- had almost 20% of the district's National Merit finalists, but only 2% of its graduates. (Raywid, 1985)

The Metropolitan Learning Center in Portland, Oregon, is a 19-year-old alternative school that is still growing -- by 25% in the last three years. The dropout rate is 2% (compared with the district's 30% rate). The school has the highest per capita scholarship rate in the city. (Harris, 1987)

It is not surprising, then, that these schools sometimes inspire strong sentiment and high praise -- as in the case of Manhattan's District 4, perhaps the nation's most celebrated choice

system. As one awestruck columnist commented, "If a renaissance in public education could occur in East Harlem, it can happen in any city in America." The District, he concludes, has managed the impossible: it has "romanced the children of Harlem into the pleasures of the life of the mind." (Maynard, 1987)

### CONCLUSION

We have sampled now, research findings that lend support to the choice proposal. We have seen evidence supporting choice for students, parents, and teachers, and we have looked at selected features of schools of choice, as well as at their outcomes and impacts. There seems to be considerable evidence favoring choice in both principle and practice.

In fact, this history is sufficiently positive that some have asked why schools of choice have not been more widely adopted. (Higgins, 1980) Three possible explanations stand out. First, to adopt choice on anything but the most limited of scales (e.g., venturing one small program that departs minimally from the rest, and keeping it low profile) requires structural change within a school district, not just incremental. Individual schools must have more control over their programs, teachers' roles must expand, and district policy and administrative practice must change accordingly. Not only are large-scale organizations resistant to structural change, but its immanence is likely to remind all the individuals within the organization of their own particular

stakeholder interests.

A second reason why choice has not been more widely adopted is that it challenges one of education's most deep-seated and broadly pursued assumptions: that there must be a right answer to questions of educational practice, and that all other answers can thus only be inferior. As the mandates of the '80s have demonstrated, this assumption operates as strongly among politicians as it does among educational researchers and administrators. The diversification that underlies the choice arrangement denies this widespread epistemological assumption.

A third highly plausible reason why schools of choice are not more widespread is that the documentation of their successes remains so little known. People continue to assert that there is really minimal evidence in their support. There have been several national studies that have commanded some attention. But the bulk of the extant evidence is in local studies that never achieve national visibility. An estimated 70 such studies were reported as of 1985, and undoubtedly the total is now above 100 (Magi, 1985). But one rarely hears of them or their findings. Despite their methodological soundness, the New York State and the Los Angeles evaluations examined in this report apparently remain unknown even to some of the interested parties in their own locales.

Alternative schools, it is said, appear the "Cinderella" of the current reform movement in education. (Gregory, 1985) There are a remarkable number of arrangements now widely recommended as

reforms that have for some time been quite typical of alternative schools. They include: reduced size and increased personalization; for large schools, houses or schools-within-schools; a strong ethos and sense of community; greater school site autonomy; recognition of the school as the unit of change; more parent and community involvement in a wider variety of roles; greater teacher participation in school decisionmaking; more collaboration and collective responsibility among teachers; themed or otherwise integrated curricula; more learning by doing and more interweaving of action learning with conventional school work; more challenging and engaging school fare; cooperative learning; more adaptation of content and method to individual learners; more small group and individualized instruction; service learning; independent study options; and the transfer to students of greater responsibility for learning. All of these proposals have long been realized in alternative schools. The 'Cinderella' metaphor seems appropriate, indeed, for schools of choice. <sup>for a lot more people,</sup> The discovery remains to be made.

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