

## The Accomplishments of Schools of Choice

*Mary Anne Raywid*

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*Mary Ann Raywid is a Professor of Education at Hofstra University at Hempstead, New York. She has conducted national surveys of alternative education and has been studying the development of magnet and other alternative schools in the 1970s and 1980s.*

Much has been written about the organizational and instructional properties of schools of choice, but what are the outcomes of such schools? Do they really provide more and better learning? How do they affect students' attitudes toward school and their behavior and willingness to work?

Learning outcomes have not always been paramount for those establishing magnet schools. Until recently, many schools were designed primarily to desegregate schools, not to enhance or increase the learning within them. Sometimes the focus was on reducing the achievement gap between majority and minority youngsters, rather than improving learning for both groups. This shift in focus resulted in educational improvements primarily for the disadvantaged. Elsewhere, the aim at many magnet schools was to provide an enhanced education primarily for those most willing and able to take advantage of it.

In examining learning achievement in schools of choice, it should be noted that there is a wide range of individual learning alternatives available for inspection. Magnet programs

for high achievers may focus on math or science or the humanities—or they may emphasize specialized skills in learning and development, as in performing arts or vocational programs. They may focus, for particularly disaffected low achievers, on instilling a firmer sense of control over one's life and creating more positive attitudes toward learning and achieving. All of this makes difficult the accurate and appropriate appraisal of a school's success and the learner's accomplishment within it. Nevertheless, we are still properly concerned with how well a school does in generating learner achievement.

We might begin by noting that this is the area where skeptics have charged there is little data. A more accurate conclusion appears to be that there are considerable data on outcomes of schools of choice, but that it has not been aggregated nor widely disseminated. Much of it has not been published at all — and of that which has been, a great deal is distributed only locally. Some of it is, nevertheless, thorough and extensive. The findings that follow are drawn from those research studies and evaluation-documentations which appear particularly careful and reliable, and most of which offer comparative information on outcomes.

We will look first at selected individual alternatives and magnet schools, and then at outcomes in several choice systems. Some of these schools identify themselves as alternative schools, others as magnet schools. In the past there have been some systematic differences between these two major types of schools of choice. Alternatives, for example, began in the 1960s, almost entirely as single programs within a district, established for the purpose of responding to the interests or needs of particular groups of students, teachers, and parents. Magnets began in the 1970s (a) to provide several schools of choice within districts and (b) to establish a means for voluntary school desegregation. Increasingly, however, the two labels have been used interchangeably, and the two types of programs have come increasingly to borrow from one another. Hence, it is not surprising to find districts whose schools of choice might just as well be called magnets. One New York City district, for example, calls its programs "alternative concept schools" but the federal government has recognized them as "magnets" for funding purposes. Another

school calls itself an alternative, but its district counts it as one of several magnet programs.

Whatever the label by which they are known, individual schools of choice differ quite extensively. To provide a sense of the considerable array — and the differences in their "personalities" — brief summaries of six successful programs are offered here. As will be seen, the programs differ as to their organization, orientation, student population, and particular claims to fame. Yet those described are similar in important ways—not least notably in their success, and in the pride and commitment shared by the constituents of each.

### THE METROPOLITAN LEARNING CENTER

MLC is one of the nation's relatively few K-12 alternative schools, and it makes frequent use of the inter-age groupings such a range permits. MLC people allude frequently to the importance of helping youngsters build a sense of responsibility for one another, and of having each student both receive and provide nurturing. The Portland, Oregon, school is a 19-year-old alternative with an enrollment of 450. It has grown by 25% in the last three years, and there is still a waiting list. Openings are relatively scarce because the student population is fairly stable, with few voluntary leavers, and even fewer suspensions. The MLC dropout rate is 2%, as compared with district rates of 30%. Thus, on all of these frequently used indicators, MLC performance surpasses that of its district. The same can be said for achievement: the SAT scores of MLC students exceed district averages, and the school enjoys the highest per capita scholarship rate in Portland (Harris, 1987).

Quite apart from such documentary evidence, several other forms of success are quickly apparent to visitors. One is the ease with which guests are greeted: Last year, MLC had more than a thousand visitors, including a number of educators from this and other countries. Another is the number of parents and others who fill an amazing variety of volunteer instructional roles at MLC—about 100 of them last year. A third feature, discernible in the conversations of most staff, is a commitment to unearthing and facilitating exactly what each student needs. The result is an extraordinary range of learning possibilities, with youngsters pursuing a vast vari-

ety of activities in school and out. But what lends as much to the distinctiveness and flavor of MLC is the insistence on keeping school experience varied and vital. Field trips are a weekly occurrence for most students. Moreover, the total school community shares a series of annual events culminating each year in Egg Drop, where students and staff are challenged to invent a product or strategy for dropping a raw egg from the school roof without breaking it. As witnesses tell it, the occasion is "an all-school success for all but the custodian" (Smith, 1987).

### PARTNERSHIP ACADEMIES

A new California program for at risk youngsters offers a solution for the alleged deficiencies of vocational education. It also manages to tie a standard academic program to a number of features widely deemed important to successful dropout prevention, including local business participation, adult mentorships, hands-on learning and supervised work experience, the school-within-a-school format, and assurance of employment on successful completion of the program. These are the main ingredients of California's 60 present and projected Partnership Academies. The first such Academies compiled an enviable record. According to an external evaluation, the Academies' attendance and dropout rates, as well as achievement and graduation rates, were clearly more favorable than those of comparison groups. Moreover, the youngsters' job performance while still in school was rated positively by employers, and it appeared that graduates were able to maintain stable employment after completing the program (Dayton & Reller, 1987).

The newer Academies have yet to graduate their first classes. But a preliminary evaluation done by PACE (Policy Analysis for California) shows high potential. Indications to date suggest that the Academies will continue reducing dropout rates and assuring employability and employment for high risk students (Policy Analysis for California, n.d.).

### METRO

The Chicago Metropolitan High School—better known as Metro—is an inner-city school with many of the features one might expect to find there, and others which astound. Its

students are 91% minority, and more than half of them come from low income homes. But in a city where the dropout rate hovers at 50%, Metro graduates a whopping 90% of its students (School Report Card, 1985–86). It ranks second among Chicago's 64 high schools on this crucial success indicator. Metro students score above city averages on reading and math tests, and indeed the reading levels of its seniors in 1986 placed Metro eighth in the city on this particular measure of success. To cite another, Metro graduates do not stop there. A study of the alumni of its first five years found approximately 70% of them in college (Quanbeck, 1977). They attended a variety of institutions across the nation, with a surprising number enrolling in Ivy League schools (Olshan, in press). One interesting constant among many of the early graduates was the large number of them who were drawn to the study of the Humanities (Quanbeck, 1977). Metro alumni now include doctors, lawyers, teachers, and professors (Olshan, in press).

Schools of choice typically cultivate and pride themselves on a particular feature constitutive of their uniqueness. Metro was one of the nation's first school-without-walls. Located initially in Chicago's Loop, its students made their way to ancillary classes at Roosevelt University, or DePaul, or the University of Chicago—or to less typical institutions such as the Field Museum or the Art Institute. They studied Merchandising at Marshall Field, Earth Science at the Adler Planetarium, the Human Body at the University of Illinois Medical Center, and TV Production at NBC (Metro High School, 1970). For a number of reasons, the emphasis on the "ancillaries" is no longer so pronounced. But Metro's 350 students—chosen by lottery from across the city—continue to find it a supportive place where they are respected and taken seriously by their teacher, encouraged to become genuine participants in the school community, and helped to grow into autonomous and responsible young adults.

### THE ALTERNATIVE PROGRAM, STATE COLLEGE, PENNSYLVANIA

State College is justly proud if its Alternative Program, which enrolls 125 seventh through twelfth graders. The "AP," as it is called, began as a senior high, 9–12 program and then

expanded to accept younger students. It overcame some local concerns about admitting seventh and eighth graders with a careful study citing evidence that there is greater variability as to learning potential, intelligence, weight, and speed within any single-age adolescent group than there is between age groups! (Lear, 1982) The AP is particularly proud of its advisement teams, with a separate team for each student consisting of his or her parents, a staff member, and often a community representative knowledgeable in a field of particular interest to the student. Community service, career internships, and independent study are also regular features of students' programs within the AP. Courses range from Snowboarding and Yoga to Beginning Chinese, Quantitative Analysis, History of Fascism and Nazism, and Looking at a Pennsylvania German Community (Catalogue of Courses, 1981-82).

Pennsylvania has for some years now had a state testing program that identifies student achievement in relation to that of other schools throughout the state. It also assesses achievement in relation to what might reasonably be expected of each school in light of its demographic characteristics. Originally the particular accomplishment measured was progress toward a set of 14 official state goals. The 14 included skills and attitudes as well as knowledge. Today, the measures have changed somewhat but the procedures and comparison possibilities remain. As of 1980, eleventh graders at the Alternative Program scored in the 99th percentile on 13 of the 14 goal areas (and fell to the 90th percentile on the 14th). Moreover, they surpassed reasonable expectations on eight of these measures. Their scores are believed to continue to hold the record as the highest ever recorded by the State (Alternative Program, 1983). The 1985 scores pale in comparison. That year's eleventh graders were at the 99th percentile on only six of the 11 areas then being assessed. All but one of the rest remained at or above the 95th percentile (Division of Educational Testing and Evaluation, 1985).

### SIERRA MOUNTAIN HIGH SCHOOL

Sierra Mountain High School is located in the foothills of Northern California. Its district, limited solely to secondary education, consists of four schools and twelve programs. Its

superintendent is committed to reducing the dropout rate to zero by 1990 (Barkhurst, 1988).

Sierra Mountain is quite a different sort of alternative school from others described here (Smith, in press). It cannot claim impressive achievement scores. In fact, the unwillingness of some of its students to bow to the testing process late last Spring resulted in the embarrassment of post-test scores lower than pre-test averages. (Two or three students confounded the averages irretrievably by making total scores of three on the Reading Power Test, where a score of 77 is possible.) What attests to the remarkable character of Sierra Mountain High School, however, is the challenges it confronts daily and the way it moves to meet them. Despite difficulties and long hours, most of the staff wouldn't consider transferring. The successes of this school have been documented by the National Center for Effective Secondary Schools which last year selected Sierra Mountain for detailed study, as one of 14 schools across the nation of particular promise for dealing with at-risk youngsters (Wehlage, in press).

Sierra Mountain High School is actually two schools. About 85 freshmen and sophomores daily attend its regular program. They are students who do not fit into the comprehensive high schools of this northern California rural area. Sierra Mountain's teachers also run an independent study program in the late afternoon, for students who reject school altogether, and for adults trying to complete high school. (California has an elaborate system of independent study and continuation schools for nontraditional students.)

Although Sierra Mountain offers electives designed to catch student interest and attention, students must complete a fairly traditional curriculum in order to graduate, and staff have gone to great lengths to make traditional fare palatable to their students. In so doing, they have tinkered to advantage with school structures that go unquestioned elsewhere. For example, they have modified the school calendar, beginning early enough in August to permit one-week breaks every five weeks throughout the school year. This kind of frequent punctuation and pause fits their students well (and incidentally enables staff to do the kinds of planning other teachers can only do in the summer). They also give partial

credit for courses in preference to the all-or-nothing practice of most schools. This way, even some of the students who have not done well may avoid adding another total failure to their biographies. Teachers have also devised ways to assign learners in traditional courses more active roles—and to intersperse inert with physical activities. (Several of the teachers have found that a boy who bench presses 225 pounds is more ready to tackle academic fare successfully in the next class (Smith, in press).

But the ethos of Sierra Mountain High School and the staff's tireless commitment to it probably figure more prominently in the school's successes than do any particular practices. The principal is effective at the symbolic leadership currently drawing researcher interest. He has ably distilled what the school stands for into an often repeated motto: "All people need the four As." They are: Acceptance, Appreciation, Affection, Attention. The youngsters who attend Sierra Mountain High School get a lot of all four.

#### DAVIS ALTERNATIVE ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

Davis Alternative Elementary is one of Jackson, Mississippi's two magnet schools. It emphasizes broad goals for its students and provides an environment stressing personalization, involvement, interaction and responsibility, and choice for its students. Now in its eleventh year, Davis accepts applicants from throughout the city. It draws youngsters from local private schools as well as from the public school population, and there is always a waiting list. One manifestation of its success was the launching several years ago of an alternative high school in Jackson, inspired by the efforts of Davis parents whose youngsters were nearing graduation.

Students enter Davis on a first-come, first-served basis (Scarboro, 1985), and its youngsters are reflective of district racial and socio-economic distributions (Scarboro, 1983), with a non-white population this year of 62%, and 36% of its students eligible for free or reduced cost lunches (Evaluation and Planning Office, 1987). But achievement in the school is far from typical. Last year 49% of its fourth graders scored above the 71st percentile on the California Achievement Tests, and in 1983, mean scores at Davis were the highest in all of

Jackson's 37 elementary schools (Scarboro, 1985). There is also evidence that test performance is associated with length of time in the school, so that the longer a youngster has been at Davis, the better he or she is likely to do on the standardized tests (Nevins, 1983).

The success may well be related to teacher attitudes and expectations, which are atypically positive and minimally custodial (Scarboro, 1983). The result is a great deal of mutual respect between child and adult. This may, in turn, have something to do with the low incidence of disciplinary problems at Davis. For several years, there have been no long-term suspensions or expulsions although these are not unheard of in Jackson. It has also been several years since a single dollar has had to be spent on vandalism or property destruction at Davis.

#### DISTRICT 4

Manhattan's District 4 is probably the nation's most celebrated choice system. And rightly so. As columnist Robert Maynard 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 "romanced the children of Harlem into the pleasures of the life of the mind (Maynard, 1987)." It has happened since the mid-70s, and it has transformed Spanish Harlem from the city's worst performing District to a pedagogical showplace where visitors from all over the world come to learn its secrets. The District, whose reading scores placed it thirty-second of New York's thirty-two community school districts in 1973, now has 62% of its children reading at or above grade level (Di Blasi, 1987). Recently, the state's required tests found 75% of its eighth graders to be competent writers. Although district-wide figures are not available, a follow-up study of graduates of one District 4 elementary school could identify only two high school dropouts in eight years (Bensman, 1987). Yet this school, like the District, is overwhelmingly Hispanic and Black, and city-wide dropout figures for Hispanics are reported at 78%, and at 72% for Blacks (Bensman, 1987).

Almost two-thirds of East Harlem's population is Hispanic, and approximately one-third is Black. It is an area of high poverty, with almost one in three of its residents receiv-

ing some sort of welfare assistance from the city, and 61% of its children coming from low income families (New York City Board of Education, 1987). Such demographics, placing virtually all of District 4's youngsters in the disadvantaged and at-risk categories, render its success all the more remarkable.

The District has 23 schools or programs of choice, at elementary, junior high, and more recently senior high levels. They have concentrated on the particularly challenging young adolescent age group and have placed all junior highs on an options basis. Each school has its own unique theme or thrust, some representing a special content focus (a Center for Communication Arts, the Sports School, the Maritime School, Issac Newton School for Math and Science), others reflecting different sorts of emphases such as parent involvement (the Block School), or an updated Progressivism (Central Park East), and still others pinpointing special groups as their focus (underachievers needing remediation, talented and gifted). They manage to draw approximately 1500 students from the district each year, who come to enroll in one or another of the choice programs (Fishman, 1986). In consequence of the attractiveness of the programs, and the need for selection at the junior high level, approximately 55% of the District 4's students are in schools of choice—probably a record, since one-third has seemed the upper limit of commitment to the choice arrangement in other districts (Blank, 1983).

But District 4 has pioneered choice in several other crucial respects as well. Perhaps the single most important is its combining of the major emphases of magnet and alternative schools. The distinctiveness and advantages of alternatives have tended to lie in their organizational features, including their remarkable climates. Magnets, on the other hand, have emphasized content—substantive themes—instead. The East Harlem programs, which the District calls "alternative concept schools" can claim both sets of features. Their organizational structures are different right from the start, in that most of the programs are teacher-initiated and designed, and teacher-directed. (Teachers with an idea for a new program come to a district official with it and, if it sounds viable and the proposer has a willing team, a new school is born.)

Space considerations have spawned another sort of innovation with the need to house several programs in the same building. They have gone beyond the mini-school idea by severing the connection between a school and a building. In District 4, a single school building houses up to five separate programs, each with its own director and without a building principal. "Why is one needed?" asks Deborah Meier, Director of Central Park East. "An office building houses many organizations without a single governing official."

Certainly it is in part the personal characteristics of the District's administrators—their flexibility and their willingness to risk such novel innovations—that have made District 4 such a success story. But it also appears that the combining of the particular assets of the two major types of schools of choice—structural and organizational strengths with substantive and programmatic ones—also contributes substantially to their remarkable achievements.

## LOS ANGELES

Perhaps some of the most extensive periodic evaluation attempts of public schools of choice are being undertaken in Los Angeles. There, an externally designed evaluation seeks annually to assess the effectiveness of the district's 84 magnet schools and programs. Los Angeles is under court desegregation orders and so the focus of the evaluation is an assessment of the success of schools of choice in reducing the harms of racial isolation. The data generated and analyzed offer a good measure of the success of these programs with respect to effective, academic achievement outcomes, and students' postsecondary school plans. An extensive testing program, plus surveys and records, provide the data upon which the evaluations are usually based, although supplementary interviews are conducted on some questions. Moreover, a more detailed supplement is undertaken each year on a different aspect or segment of magnet school practice and effectiveness. The 1983–84 evaluation, for example, explored the relation of achievement to several other factors; the 1984–85 evaluation looked in detail at program fidelity and at the district's four K–12 alternative schools; the 1985–86 evaluation examined magnet school withdrawals, as well as the administrative processes of these programs.

Los Angeles has magnet programs at all three levels: elementary, junior high, and senior high school. Some feature content specialties such as computer science or humanities or performing arts, while others define themselves in terms of a particular approach, including the open and fundamental schools and those called alternatives, which emphasize student options and decisionmaking, experiential learning, and participant interaction. Only two of the programs, those for gifted and highly gifted students, have special admissions criteria. Elsewhere students are accepted as space permits, with advantages going only to former magnets students entering a new level (junior or senior high school), to students who have been on a waiting list, or to those seeking to leave schools that are overcrowded or predominantly minority schools (Los Angeles Unified School District, 1985-86).

The evaluations show students in virtually all of the programs scoring at or above both district and national levels on tests of reading and mathematics achievement (Los Angeles Unified School District, 1983-84; 1984-85; 1985-86). Furthermore, the longer they have been in the magnet school, the greater is their relative achievement and the more positive their attitudes toward school (Los Angeles Unified School District, 1983-84). Their admissions prospects for California's four-year public colleges and universities appear above district averages. Magnet students at all levels feel more positive about school than do other students, according to national norms (Los Angeles Unified School District, 1984-85; 1985-86).

Characteristics that earlier studies have associated with schools of choice make some of the differences observed by Los Angeles evaluators difficult to assess. For instance, teachers reported that their contact with building administrators and their instructional leadership activities were somewhat infrequent (Los Angeles Unified School District, 1983-84). This can be variously interpreted as leadership shortcomings or as a non-managerial administrative orientation and, hence, a stimulus to teacher autonomy. The latter interpretation receives some support from the finding that teachers in the programs where student achievement is highest reported significantly less administrative contact than those in lower achieving schools (Los Angeles Unified School District, 1983-84).

To cite another finding posing difficulties of interpretation and assessment, students in Los Angeles' four alternative schools score least well of the schools of choice, and reading and math scores at several levels fall slightly below national norms (Los Angeles Unified School District, 1983-84; 1984-85). This may be due to lower achievement, or, as the evaluators suggest, it may simply reflect the inappropriateness of the tests—the inability of standardized tests to measure academic achievement within non-traditional programs (Los Angeles Unified School District, 1984-85).

### NEW YORK STATE STUDY

In 1984-85 an unusually thorough study was made of the 41 magnet schools in the eight New York districts receiving special state support. According to the report (Magi Educational Services, 1985), the 41 represent a substantial share of New York's approximately 100 magnet programs. The report provides extensive evidence of magnet school accomplishment in improving educational quality. It calls repeated attention to the effective school characteristics marking magnet programs, and this team of external evaluators concluded that the establishment of schools of choice is a powerful stimulus to improvement in all of a district's schools.

After detailed comparisons of the performance of magnet school students to that of students in control schools, other district schools, and in the same school prior to magnetization, these investigators concluded that magnet schools do, indeed, help students to arrive at higher achievement levels. On standardized tests, 58% of the magnet school performed better on reading, and 65% performed better on math. This was true of magnets at both elementary and secondary levels, and for both minority and majority students. The extent to which students met behavioral standards also showed magnet schools to surpass other schools in their districts. Average daily attendance rates were higher in 98% of the magnets, nearly three-quarters had fewer dropouts, and all had fewer suspensions. Both parents and staff reflected high satisfaction with the magnet schools. This was true of virtually all parents (98%) who responded to a questionnaire. As the evaluators summarized, their replies displayed "overwhelming confidence and belief in magnet schools" (Magi, 1985,

p.40). They also showed evidence of clear parent acquaintance with, and understanding of, the program. And in as many as half the magnets, more than 50% of the parents were regular participants in school activities.

The same sort of picture emerged from teachers in these schools, with 96% expressing satisfaction with their school's theme, and 83% reporting a good working environment. Eighty-seven percent of the teachers and principals reported considerable teacher autonomy with respect to classroom management, while a smaller but still substantial 65% reported staff to be involved in decision-making. In all but one of the schools involved, teacher turnover was lower in the magnet school than it had been prior to magnetization. Not surprisingly, 80% of the staff in these programs rated the schools of choice as generally superior to non-magnets.

### CONCLUSION

This study also addressed a question that seems to have received scant previous attention: whether schools of choice influence their districts. This is a legitimate question (a) because such schools have seen themselves as a vanguard pointing the way toward a better education, and (b) because districts are adopting the choice idea for the express purpose of improving all schools, not just the options. Earlier evidence seemed to suggest some degree of diffusion and adoption of particular innovative practices (Galluccio-Steele, 1986). But the New York State study also yielded evidence that the establishment of magnet schools is associated with quality improvement within other schools as well, throughout a district. As the investigators pointed out, they have not built a tight case for causation in connection with this or other findings. But they have certainly substantiated that a cluster of changes are associated with the development of choice systems. That, after all, is a factor that should be meaningful to all persons who establish policy for our schools.

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