



Choice

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Is Choice Here To Stay?

Mary Anne Raywid

I am very pleased to be here and honored to be invited to open your Tenth International Magnet School Conference. I spend enough of my time trying to persuade the uncon-

vinced that visiting with the vanguard seems a special privilege. I also think you're a critically important group today. If anybody is going to save public education — and I'm no longer so sure that anybody can — it may be this group here today that will have to do it. I say that because I assume you to be already sold on the desirability of diversifying schools and making them accessible by choice.

It should come as no shock to you, however, that a great many of your colleagues in education are far from sold on that. The latest polls have it that school administrators and board members stand about 2:1 against choice.¹ I've seen four state and regional meetings in my own state cancelled for insufficient registration on the part of New York State school and district administrators. (If other speakers hadn't also been involved, I'd start to worry. But you are doubtless as aware as I of the way eyes narrow and colleagues kind of increase the space between you when they learn you've good things to say about choice.)

In any event, it's good to be with you and to help launch your discussion of Tomorrow's Schools Today, because I believe that most of the things we'll be celebrating about American schools of 2000 — or 2020 — are already visible in many of today's schools of choice. I want to talk with you about some of the things I've seen and studied about such schools and about the systems which have established them. I also want to share some other news on choice, and several of the conclusions I've reached on how to maximize the benefits.

Let me begin by saying that if I were titling this address today, I don't think it would be "Is Choice Here To Stay?" That's not only because of the way my remarks have shaped up

but also because as I stared at it, that title began to look like one of those patronizingly fatuous questions we sometimes ask children: ("Do you think the world is round?" or "Will we get hurt if we fall down?") Besides, it looks like the really interesting question is: "What kind of choice is likely to prevail?"

Any idea that the public backs 2:1, and that's already been either adopted, recommended, formally considered, or enacted in some form in all but six states, seems pretty well on its way.² And for a variety of reasons, I don't think the process is likely to reverse. These reasons include the likely durability of school problems and of Americans' widespread disaffection with large institutions, the

growing conviction that public school choice is a *right*, not a privilege; and what some are now calling the "globalization" of the choice movement, both in education and in other institutions. When such factors get combined with the political difficulty of withdrawing a prerogative once granted, it hardly seems risky to venture that choice is likely to be with us for some time.

What is less certain, however, is what *kind* of choice, and structured to serve what purposes. We've got all kinds of proposals now, not just the familiar four, of inter- or intra-district, vouchers and tuition tax credits. Now there are second chance programs, and postsecondary options, and governors' schools, and charter schools, and soon New American schools. We are now hearing about choice among the authorizers of public schools, and among the suppliers of public education, as well as among schools and programs. The varieties have grown and the choice scene is rapidly becoming far more complex. We knew that vouchers represented the transfer of public funds to non-public institutions, and tuition tax credits represented the

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Houston's High School for Health Professions Builds Upon Twenty Years of Excellence

Lana C. Edwards

The High School for Health Professions in Houston, Texas, was the first magnet school of its kind in the nation. Founded in 1972 as a partnership between the Houston Independent School District and Baylor College of Medicine, its mission is to provide a challenging, well-balanced college preparatory program which focuses on educational experiences in science and the health professions.

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HSHP students share a moment with Dr. Michael E. DeBakey, world renowned heart surgeon. From left to right, Amanda Plaisance, Precious Williams, Justin Zachariah, Dr. DeBakey, Maricar Miranda, and Alejandro Vasquez.

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use of public funds to underwrite tuition in private schools. But at least some of the newer types appear puzzling hybrids. For instance, is David Bennett's firm, Educational Alternatives, Inc., a move toward privatization? It operates by contract with boards, and it has contracted to manage several public schools. One state commissioner of education is seeking an agreeable public school district for it to manage, and meanwhile it is supplying a superintendent for a district in another state. (I ran across an article on the corporation several months ago, in a column titled "Stock Tips." It recommended Educational Alternatives, Inc., as a "buy for aggressively oriented growth portfolios.")³

My point is that the numbers and types of choice arrangements are both proliferating and complexifying. It is increasingly difficult to sort them out. Several months ago, I identified four different choice agendas currently being advocated in this country, with proponents seeking different goals and making quite different, even conflicting sort of cases.⁴ Those who sometimes seem to have captured the discussion want to see schools compete as businesses in a marketplace. This is the economized version of choice. Others who are running a close second turn to choice as a way to force changes in school governance. A third group, which probably include most people at this gathering, have pursued choice as a way to implement national policy — namely, the nation's commitment to equity. Finally, there are those who have argued for choice on a fourth basis, embracing it as the best route to school reform and improvement. (I find myself more often to be making the fourth than one of the other three cases.) Not surprisingly, the implementation plans differ according to the

inspiration, and we end up with choice schemes that differ considerably from one another.

I find myself in sympathy with some and aghast at others. The British version of choice is one we ought to look at very carefully — not because we should emulate it, but because we ought to be alert to avoiding it. Analysts who have been watching it in action report that it operates to precisely opposite purposes from most of our public choice systems, sanctioning exclusivity instead of equity, by trading existing comprehensive schools for selective ones.⁵ It permits individual schools to opt out of the British equivalent of our districts to become independent entities with respect to operation and management. They remain public in only two regards, in that they must administer a national curriculum and in that they are publicly funded. Now despite my frustrations with bureaucracies, I find such a system disturbing — both in principle and pragmatically: in principle because I think the public's interest in education is a lot broader than the curriculum presented. (Are there no aims we want to serve, no traits or dispositions to be cultivated, no process goals to be met, no experiences we want youngsters to share in, no restrictions on the way we want the nation's children treated?) Pragmatically, the arrangement seems questionable because surely it cannot take long for a public thus shut out of public schools to ask why it should concern itself with sustaining them.

The British experience offers considerable evidence against the free market version of choice. Experience in Scotland as well as in England suggests that such an arrangement comes at high cost to a number of groups, and for a number of the principles that have been central in American public schools. Moreover, the promised quality and efficiency are far from guaranteed either. A British researcher has noted that as market advocates of choice talk,⁶

the market model is idealized and concomitantly the [public] . . . system is caricatured . . . There is a tendency . . . to talk about markets only in terms of positive effects and outcomes . . . a market utopia where every school gets better . . . and the magic of competition ensures that every consumer is happy — Adam Smith meets Walt Disney.

What the British version of choice has to teach us, I think, is that society — the people acting collectively in some way — must continue to provide direction for the nation's educational system. Solutions that cast us not as citizens but only as a nation of consumers are not the answer.⁷ What we must seek instead of markets is new forums and new machinery that will permit the various interests in education to be heard, and provide a voice that is both effective and appropriate to

each. This, it seems to me, is far preferable to wholesale abandonment of the effort to arrive at such a balance.

An adequate solution will probably require real reforms, and educational leaders could be helpful and influential in designing them. I suspect the day is past when we can stonewall or stave off efforts at this sort of change. I find it worrisome to hear about the large numbers of education committees in state legislatures that are killing education reform bills — not that those bills are always good, but because I don't find the educational establishment which is behind the committees' decisions offering very much leadership for what ought to be done instead. I'm afraid we are dangerously approaching the point where we've won so many battles it could cost us the war.

My Research Agenda

Now rather than pursuing that sort of possibility further, I want to shift a bit. Don Waldrip told me you wanted to hear about my research. So let me describe for you the several sorts of inquiries I've got under way, in addition to the policy interests I've just been exploring. First, I am part of a team doing a longitudinal study of the effects of school restructuring on teachers and students — a study being conducted by the National Center on Organization and Restructuring of Schools at the University of Wisconsin. Together, the team is working in schools in three different states. I'm studying two schools of choice in New York, one well established and the other struggling to get on its collective feet. Others on the team are studying schools in Minnesota and Chicago.

Second, I'm working with several schools, including two in Hawaii, trying to help them design and launch mini-schools of choice — actually, schools-within-schools — which strike me as perhaps the surest catalyst we've got for transforming existing schools. In not too long, I hope to have a book on the nitty-gritty on developing effective schools of choice. Third, I'm finalizing an interpretive study of what's needed to change New York City schools for the better. Fourth, I'm doing a brief documentation of a fascinating school in the Bronx — an E. D. Hirsch Cultural Literacy school. Fifth, I'm part of a group named by the National Center for Research in Vocational Education that's trying to draft New Designs for the Comprehensive High School. And finally, I try to keep a finger on reform and restructuring developments across the country — on the burgeoning policy scene, as well as on the research findings that are now coming in from this country and abroad.

What I want to share with you today is a bit of what I've learned from each of these endeavors. Let me tell you first about a couple

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DID YOU KNOW? . . .

. . . that two companies sponsored major activities at the Kansas City meeting; they are **Computer Curriculum Corporation** and **Jostens Learning Systems**.

Choice

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of recent and very positive additions to the research in choice. The newest is a study in New York City just announced two weeks ago. The good news is that after studying 4,200 kids in the City's 133 career magnet schools, the investigators concluded that these schools "encouraged students to stay in school, raised reading scores, . . . [enabled] . . . more students to pass the advanced math tests, and gave students more credits toward graduation."⁷ Indeed, the investigators found that average students in the career magnets "gain over twice as much in reading as do similar students in [regular] comprehensive programs!"⁸ And they earn one-fourth more course credits than do their counterparts in schools of assignment.

Poor readers were not nearly as well served, however. Although the opportunity to attend such a program kept more of them from dropping out between junior high and high school, the attendance and reading levels of some of them suffered in the magnet programs. (It remains uncertain whether this is because the career magnets aren't serving this group as well as other programs do — or whether the absenteeism is the result of something else. But this study is to run for at least two more years, and the answer may become clear later.) Even after its first year, the study has provided important information on youngsters' preferences, what seems to work best for which students, and some of the factors that make for successful magnet programs.

The bad news, which I want to come back to in a few minutes, is that only about one-third of all New York City's students can be accommodated in these college-prep career magnets, and they evidently turn large numbers away. New York offers an impressive number of choice programs in its 120 high schools — both the figures 250 and 400 are cited⁹ — but it is very difficult to find out just how many students can be accommodated in these optional programs, and how many must enroll in the regular programs very few choose. More about this problem shortly. Meanwhile, some more of the good news.

As you are probably aware, the research community keeps saying there is virtually no research supporting choice. Now actually, there is a fair amount of certain kinds of evidence — for instance of the sort assembled by school and systemwide evaluations. There are also a number of surveys and some fairly careful ethnographies. What is meant by the claim that there is no research case for choice is that there are few studies isolating the choice factor as the cause of the benefits frequently associated with it. We are now beginning to see the comparative studies, the experimental studies that the skeptics have demanded. To cite several, there have now been studies of kids of similar achievement levels at the point

some enter a school of choice and others continue in an assigned program, and comparing their achievement several years later. Not only do the kids in the choice program achieve more, but the longer the student has been in the school of choice, the greater the difference.¹⁰

A second example is even more telling. It is a study designed to respond to the charge of selection bias, and that choosers differ sufficiently from non-choosers as to invalidate comparisons. This study compared two groups of choosers, one which had been in schools of choice for seven or more years, the other who were relative newcomers averaging only a year's experience. Quoting from the study:¹¹

[Longtime] magnet school students outperformed . . . [the comparison group] in . . . standardized test results, GPA, number of math and science courses taken, grade retention (non-promotion), attendance, extra-curricular activities, and school awards . . . These compelling findings cannot be attributed to initial achievement differences between students, student background factors, and selection bias, since the samples were equivalent on these factors.

The New York City study I mentioned earlier is the most extensive and elaborate of this new breed of choice studies. It is important not only because of the numbers involved (more than 4,000 students and 133 programs) but also because the design of the study established a randomized experiment. The study looked at how students fared in their first year in the City's career magnets, as opposed to a matched group who applied but were not admitted and who attended a regular comprehensive high school instead.

Successful Magnet Schools and Systems

Although the experimental research is too recent to ground a great deal of knowledge on how to do schools of choice, there is substantial evidence of other sorts and considerable experience upon which to build. I'd like to turn at this point to sharing some conclusions I've reached about what makes a school or a system of choice strong or weak. I fear we've got choice schools and systems of both sorts, good and bad, and there are certainly things we can do to prevent some of the mistakes. I'd like to share six inter-related and somewhat overlapping conclusions I've reached about the requisites of success. It's not an exhaustive list; instead it seeks to highlight those factors which most often seem to turn up missing.

First, in my experience one can make a pretty fair prediction of the probable success of a new school of choice or a new choice sys-

tem by the time it leaves the drawing boards. That's not to say the implementation to come is inconsequential — but that it's extensively implicit in the design. We've heard enough to know that the planning and design process is crucial. There's been far less said about something else that's perhaps as important: it's what I call the design's innovation range.

Schools are made up of a number of components. The long and familiar list of failed change efforts is due at least in part to our failure to understand the inter-connections among them. Thus, in envisioning a new magnet school, or a system of such schools, if one seeks change that will make a difference, it's got to be a lot more substantial than taking on a set of new electives. Here are some of the other components that must be considered and designed: role assignments for all the parties involved, the particular school 'personality' sought; whether there is to be a particular instructional strategy emphasis, and if so, what it will be; decisionmaking arrangements; how both students and program will be evaluated; the nature of the relationships desired with parents and community; the kinds of traits and capacities the school wants to cultivate in its students; and the kind of organization needed within the school to carry all this out. All of these matters need examination *in addition* to the question of curriculum and how to organize it.

I suspect that the broader the innovation range — this is, the greater the number of these components that have been re-thought and re-designed, instead of just carried over from previous practice — the greater the chances for success of the new school or system. This isn't the whole story, of course. There are certainly other requirements to be met. But in my experience, those other requirements seem to be satisfied more often; and when new schools launched with high hopes turn out to be pretty much just more of the same, it is the innovative range challenge that has not been met. (I'm working on how to get teachers to confront and deal with these components in designing their programs, and I'm hoping in the next several months to finish a book that will help.)

The second item on my list of requisites for successful choice schools and systems was suggested more than a decade ago by Mary Metz, one of the first researchers to study magnet schools. She issued this warning about something that still remains a danger:¹²

it seems likely that most of the magnet schools will survive in name, but they will gradually lose . . . most support for their distinctiveness from the district except the symbolic power of their names . . . they will constitute a symbolic effort at the system level which has little impact in practice at the school level.

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I think Mary was right and that this remains a major task. The research on change conducted in the 70s made the case against topdown imposition by showing that changes imposed this way simply fail to take root; they are trivialized by those responsible for carrying them out and remain superficial add-on's until the pressure to maintain them goes away and they disappear altogether.¹³ What the 80s and 90s have added to that understanding of the change process is the importance of support from the top. Freedom is important but it's not enough; administrators must sustain a commitment to divergence in practice and procedure, in preference to the neater and more comfortable policy of uniformity. They must supply the essential resources and provide moral support. As we all know, whether official commitment leans toward divergence or uniformity gets played out in a thousand ways in a school. But it makes no sense to urge school people to innovate, to invent distinctive new programs — and then tell them they all have to teach the same curriculum and/or that their kids will all have to pass the same tests (President Bush to the contrary notwithstanding).

Third, a successful set of schools of choice needs another sort of commitment from the top, a commitment to *responding* to the preferences youngsters and their families express in their choices. When a school consistently has a waiting list two or three times the size of its enrollment — and when the total number of seats available in the schools of choice is regularly only a fraction of those who apply — district officials must recognize an obligation to respond. This sort of support marks the difference between those who have adopted magnet schools as a safety valve, or a court-ordered evil — a divergence to be tolerated — and those who are genuinely committed to a choice system. Choosing, and being permitted to express a choice, are really quite different matters. The support needed here is to a policy of diversification and responsiveness on the part of both the board and the superintendent. I'm not suggesting that new schools have to be cranked out every year, or that every fluctuation in program application figures should be immediately reflected. But successful schools of choice need to be able to count on a general commitment to *providing* the options students and families want.

Fourth, the advantage of a theme or a focus is increasingly acknowledged in educational circles, even beyond choice fans. A Rand study concluded two years ago that "Focus schools . . . are probably the best form of school for the vast majority of students now served by . . . zoned comprehensive high schools."¹⁴ We all know that magnet schools need a focus or theme, but there is less agreement about what makes a *good* theme or focus. Especially among people who come fresh

to the challenge, there is often a tendency to select a focus lacking in any sort of logical coherence — so that the program's theme becomes in effect "Lotsa Good Stuff." Whatever that may recommend to the teachers who get to do their favorite things, it defeats a lot of the purposes of themed or focused programs — such as enabling people to make informed choices and to count on continuing themes, and assembling a group of students who are likeminded in some educationally significant way.

The temptation to use magnet themes as surrogate tracking devices is likely to require continuing vigilance. And equity-minded critics are surely justified in complaining about magnet systems comprised largely of programs like Gifted & Talented and Science and Math. We need to enlarge the range of students attracted and well served in magnet schools — which is in part a matter of enlarging the range of themes selected. We've figured out how to do career magnets that are more than just entry level vocational schools — e.g., Health, Professions and Services, Communications Arts, Social Services. But the themes that attract needn't end there. Pedagogic themes could prove as attractive to some youngsters at the secondary level as they are in the elementary school — e.g., themes like the opportunity to learn largely from experiential opportunities, or from individual study, or from teamed inquiry. And interest themes would prove attractive to others — perhaps Space Travel, or Sports, or Leadership, or Democratic Communities. My Point is that although themes for magnet schools must be selected carefully, there is an enormous range of possibilities that so far remains largely untapped. Attracting youngsters not sold on academics may in considerable part be a matter of finding the right themes.

Fifth, good magnet schools must not only be themed schools, but they should also be restructured schools. Not to attempt this is to waste what may be our best opportunity for much needed school transformation. And in recommending transformation, I want to remind you that urban schools are not the only ones in trouble. The major studies of the high school of the past decade have documented this fact for us — with the estimate, for instance, that two-thirds of the students in U.S. secondary schools have simply disengaged themselves from academic learning, and the conclusion of another study that boredom is epidemic.¹⁵ The schools we've got now just don't seem to work for the kids we've got now. Re-thinking school seems in order everywhere. And to change the way those involved actually *experience* school requires that schools be restructured. Magnet schools shouldn't stand as an *alternative* to restructuring, but as the most powerful way to bring it about. We don't change enough simply by

offering youngsters the opportunity to specialize in a particular discipline or career area — not even when we go on to really accomplish a merger between the theme courses and the rest. Curriculum just isn't that salient for most youngsters. It's not what matters most to most of them. Thus, a school that will really get and hold their attention must transform more than curriculum.

One compact definition makes restructuring a matter of "altering systems of rules, roles, and relationships."¹⁶ I think that's what is necessary if we are to substantially enhance schools effectiveness. So I would urge that at the same time magnet schools are created, with their distinctive themes and emphases, attention ought to focus also on making the new magnets restructured schools.

Sixth — and finally — although all schools, including schools of choice, are probably going to have to learn to get along on less money, there is one kind of resource that is absolutely indispensable there. It is the time for faculty to interact regularly. One can try to do it without such provision, of course, and I'm afraid a number of choice systems have fallen prey to this. But what I suspect will eventually be identified as one of the real keys to magnet school effectiveness is that they create a situation of mutual interdependence requiring collaboration among their teachers. If so, it is highly self-defeating not to provide the occasions for the collaboration to occur. Certainly, under such conditions teachers cannot be blamed for reverting to previous practice or for the disappearance of distinctiveness from the program. It's not easy but I don't think it's impossible either to provide regular collaborative time without adding substantial costs. I've been working on how to do it for a year or so now, and I'm hoping to have an article soon on low-cost or no-cost ways to build collaboration time into the school day for teacher. (If any of you have any suggestions on ways to do it, I'd like very much to have them to add to the list.)

A Stand on Choice

Now it seemed to me that a talk scheduled to open a conference ought to have a little inspiration in it. And so, after having talked about new developments and research on the magnet school scene, I thought it might be well to close with a statement of commitment. Your commitments may differ from mine, but at a juncture when everyone is talking choice — when everyone's suddenly begun singing our song, and sometimes it sounds unrecognizable — we may all want to think out our stands. Here is mine (with apologies to John Dewey and a few others):

I am an advocate of public school choice:

- Not because choice brings competition but because it brings cooperation.
- Not because choice is a panacea but be-

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cause it's a good catalyst for bringing a wide array of sorely needed improvements.

- Not so as to provide an escape from bad schools but so as to be sure all kids have the sort of good schools they need.
- Not because it is perfect and failsafe and without problems, but because it is the most effective change mechanism we've discovered.
- Not as an arrangement coercing teachers and administrators to shape up, but as a structure enabling everybody to become more effective.
- Not because it is the best way to control teachers and force them to apply themselves, but because it effectively entices them to grow.
- Not because it's elitist but because it's our best hope for arriving at equity along with excellence.
- Not because it's radical enough to replace school as we know it, but because it may be our last hope to stave off such a revolution.
- Not because parents should hold the final power, or represent the sovereign consumer — but because the right to choose among public schools seems the most appropriate way to honor both the rights of families, and the collective interest in sustaining the best schools possible.

Endnotes

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