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*What Is the Research Saying about School Choice:
A Discussion with Mary Anne Raywid*

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Raymond J. Domanico

Director

Memorandum

TO: Educators and Sponsors

FROM: Raymond J. Domanico

DATE: April 9, 1992

The Manhattan Institute recently hosted a forum for David Osborne, one of the co-authors of an influential new book titled Reinventing Government. Published through Addison-Wesley, the book provides case studies of governments that are successfully coping in the challenging environment of the nineties. The thesis of the book is that governments *must* change in the years ahead. "The bureaucratic model" they write, "developed in conditions very different from those we experience today. It developed in a slower-paced society, when change proceeded at a leisurely gait." The introductory chapter, titled "An American Perestroika," provides ten guiding principles for what the authors call "entrepreneurial government." These principles - or concepts, if you will - include *competition, empowerment, outcomes, missions, customers, decentralization, and market mechanisms*.

All of this by way of introduction to the enclosed report which the Center for Educational Innovation has just published: an interview with Mary Anne Raywid on the topic of restructuring public schools through the parental choice mechanism. It is clear that the concepts Osborne and Gaebler develop in their book are also those which inform Dr. Raywid's analysis.

We are proud to have this opportunity to bring Mary Anne Raywid's insights to our network of educators and sponsors. She is a leading scholar in the field of alternative education and has published widely in the professional literature. A Professor of Education at Hofstra University and a CEI/Manhattan Institute Fellow, she is currently writing a book that will document successful strategies for implementing schools-within-schools, or "mini-schools," which are the business end of school choice systems.

We hope you find the report valuable.

CENTER FOR EDUCATIONAL INNOVATION: What does the research say about the impact of choice on student achievement?

DR. MARY ANNE RAYWID: Choice has quite a positive impact on student achievement. When you put kids in a program that they've had some voice in selecting, there is likely to be a better match — a better fit — between the child and the program than when students are zoned into schools. It figures that youngsters who have selected their school are apt to be more interested in what they're doing, exert more effort, and thus reach higher levels of achievement. There is also some evidence that to have schools of choice in a district improves general achievement across the district, even in the schools that are not schools of choice. This was a finding of a 1985 study of New York State's magnet schools.

Q: Isn't this evidence disputed?

A: It's increasingly difficult to dispute. One study after another seems to come out favoring choice — most recently, a careful study of the magnet schools in 14 New York districts, a study in Montgomery County, Maryland, and another in Montclair, New Jersey.

People who say there isn't any clearly positive research evidence on choice will claim that there may be some factor other than choice which is really giving rise to the improvement. Well, some of the studies I've just cited go a long way toward answering this sort of objection. My argument is that we can be pretty certain as of now that choice is one of a cluster of factors, such as school size, student-teacher relationships, and breadth of teacher responsibility, that have been linked to improved achievement levels. That certainly is enough evidence on which to base policy, particularly when so many schools are in trouble, operating on policies that obviously aren't working.

Q: How does the research evidence for choice stack up against the evidence for other modes of educational reform?

A: Well, for many committed to school improvement, the need is no longer for reform, but restructuring. A number of both researchers and policymakers have become convinced since the mid-1980s that the

reform effort wasn't working very well and that it is necessary to restructure schools. Only two broad strategies have been devised for restructuring; one is school based management, and the other is choice. There is no contest as to which is the better catalyst for change: choice wins, hands down. Ironically, school-based management which reformers have bought wholesale in this country has a rather dismal record for making any difference. Its record fails to show that it accomplishes what it sets out to change — school governance or influence patterns — and second, school-based management doesn't show any kind of positive impact on student achievement. Even its biggest fans say that the arrangement takes years to impact academic achievement. The most frequent guess offered by speakers at the last American Educational Researchers Association meeting was seven years. But this is not the case with choice. If you design a choice policy right, you will begin to see at least some achievement changes immediately. The reason is that such a policy zeroes in on instructional change rather than on other things. Just as soon as diversified school programs go into operation, process and outcome changes are introduced.

Q: What does a choice policy that's been designed right look like?

A: There's been enough experience now to indicate a number of the necessary components of successful schools of choice and of successful choice systems. One, for instance, is that teachers as well as families must choose their programs if we really want maximal teacher engagement. Another is that the programs must be designed by the teachers who are to operate them. Yet another, is that the innovative range of a new school of choice has to be fairly broad to sustain the innovation. If you plan an innovative curriculum, for example, you'll probably need instructional changes and schedule changes, and perhaps evaluation and decision making changes, in order to allow it to work. These are just a few of the important components of successful schools of choice that a well designed policy addresses.

Q: Can the success of schools of choice be attributed to extraordinary leadership or is it truly the result of the choice arrangement?

A: Some people are convinced that heroes make history, but it can always be asked whether the events create the leader. Maybe one of the most important things to note is that schools of choice generate teacher leadership and thus tend to create new leaders. It need not be the principal, as the Effective Schools literature would have it. Perhaps the most prominent case in point is Deborah Meier, now one of the nation's most renowned principals: until very shortly before she was invited to help form Central Park East, Debbie was a kindergarten teacher.

Q: Does that mean that leadership is unimportant ?

A: No, I certainly wouldn't say that. It surely helps in fashioning a new program if there is some individual who has an idea about the shape it ought to take and who is willing to guide the creation process. But it may work even better when you have two or three people who have designed and share that idea than to have one who has projected the vision. And there is a question, too, about whether a program launched by a strong and creative leader needs such a person to sustain it.

I'm not trying to suggest that leadership is unimportant. But if it took a giant to start a good school of choice, then choice would be a lot less useful a change strategy than it is proving to be.

Q: Has choice increased racial segregation of students?

A: No. In fact, choice has promoted integration in school systems that have made segregation an arrangement to be avoided. One of the nation's leading authorities on school desegregation — Christine Rossell of Boston University — has concluded that choice yields more desegregation than do mandatory assignment plans. And in Massachusetts, choice has been the major desegregation strategy, as well as a major school improvement strategy.

Q: But if schools of choice have aided desegregation, why is there so much concern that they will segregate?

A: There are several historical reasons, and one that remains current. First, in the '60s and early '70s white academies were launched in the South specifically to avoid the desegregation called for by the Brown vs. the Board of Education decision. These programs invoked choice as a means of perpetuating segregation.

Second, some of the early magnet programs really didn't seek school desegregation, but focused instead on bringing district desegregation: some programs sought explicitly to bring white middle class students back into urban public school districts. So they selected magnet themes calculated to appeal directly to this group. Not surprisingly, such schools segregated. A lot depends on what it is you focus on desegregating: a district or a school.

Third, some magnet systems continue to segregate in a combination of two ways: through selection requirements limiting eligibility to motivated, achieving, and behaving students, and through restricting the number of magnet schools available — and hence, the number of youngsters who can be accommodated.

Obviously, choice systems needn't operate this way. In some districts, all schools are schools of choice. In others, such a situation evolves over a period of time. It is not hard to set up theme or focus schools that appeal across ethnic and class groups, and across youngsters' performance and aspiration levels. A couple of examples include a micro-society school and a performing arts school like those in Lowell, Massachusetts, or a communications school like Oakland California's Media Academy, or a program like the new Downtown Law, Public and Social Service Magnet, in Wichita, Kansas. Each of these can attract a variety of kids to a school of choice. My ideal magnet or choice system would incorporate a number of different schools, or schools-within-schools, which collectively would satisfy the interests of all the youngsters within the area.

Q: Has choice resulted in community divisiveness?

A: Diversity is a must among schools of choice; the public must have real options to choose among. But they should be linked by a broad and deliberate common curricular base. We can't have completely separate subcultures in this country without any overarching culture or what we'll have is sets of separate peoples rather than a nation. Magnet schools exclusively for Black males, for example, risk setting up divisive situations if they mount programs that teach militant separatism. Beyond simply avoiding divisiveness though, there needs to be some common goals.

However, a set of diversified schools don't necessarily generate common curricular goals all by themselves. Such goals have to be provided by the community. Schools should be held accountable for realizing community curricular goals, albeit in their own way of doing so. Schools of choice must also be free to supplement the common goals with aims of their own choosing. This should be an important part of their diversity

Q: Does choice harm poor choosers?

A: Good choice systems don't harm poor choosers because all of the schools should be offering viable programs designed by professionals. The idea is not that there are good schools if you're clever enough to discern them and poor ones for the rest. It's that there should be an array of good but quite different options. Under such an arrangement, poor matches can occur. But I find no reason to assume that a poorly chosen school could be any more injurious to a particular youngster than many assigned schools are now — and in a choice system, unlike an assignment system, the student caught in such circumstances has the advantage of being able to transfer.

Q: Well, if choice doesn't harm poor choosers, why do people seem to be convinced that it will?

A: Particularly in cities offering choice programs with insufficient space to accommodate the choosers, those who fail to choose can be penalized. They end up in the programs no one chooses. The solution to this is establishing enough choice programs to accommodate the

population, and helping families select wisely among them. To reject the idea of schools of choice because some choosers aren't dealing with it effectively is to level down in preference to levelling up: if the choice feature is an effective lever for improving schools, then it would seem the thing to do is create enough of such schools to go around and try to help all deal effectively with them.

Q: Do special needs students — physically and mentally handicapped, disabled, emotionally disturbed and 'at risk' kids — have the same options as more able students in choosing programs?

A: They do in a choice system that is not tracked. Good choice systems do not exclude such youngsters and, in fact, are more likely to operate on a 'mainstreamed' basis than are schools of assignment that isolate them or have them in 'pullout' programs for a substantial part of the day.

Moreover, choice should really substantially decrease the need for classifying youngsters as 'special needs' cases. Many students appear to need remedial or other sorts of intensive care when the problem is simply that the standard school environment doesn't suit them. There are large numbers of cases where kids who have appeared to be slow, learning disabled, or emotionally troubled are simply transformed in a different school environment, and the special services are no longer needed.

Q: Do the schools of choice you have studied use different approaches to grouping and tracking than traditional schools?

A: In the very nature of the case, the choice arrangement groups youngsters according to preference — the family's or child's interests or approach to learning — rather than according to ability. Thus, choice provides an alternative to tracking. When, for instance, a micro-society school draws youngsters of all ability levels, you've managed to eliminate tracking. When the preference for collaborative activities that marks many schools of choice is added, there is considerably less need for in-class grouping than traditional schools find necessary.

For me, this is one of the real strengths of choice, because I have reservations about ability grouping and tracking. The separation of groups on the basis of ability can only be argued as an advantage to the uppermost echelon students; even honors students are deprived by their exclusion from learning in the same classroom with high honors students. Tracking systematically deprives 98% of all students and therefore is impossible to justify as far as I'm concerned.

Q: Has the logistical support necessary to making choice systems equitable been realistically provided — i.e., transportation, information, and other services?

A: I'm afraid I can't argue that most places have done it right, but there have been sufficiently good answers worked out in many places so that we know how to do it. In Cambridge, Massachusetts, for instance, public school buses transport children living a mile or more away to the school of their choice and a central Parent Information Center advises parents and is responsible for assignment decisions.

Q: Has choice given way to an undesirable stress on marketing schools?

A: In a good choice system, schools do not overemphasize marketing because no longer needs to try to accommodate every student. The virtue of a choice system is that it can provide a school that's a good fit for every youngster; each school can look to enroll youngsters interested in a particular theme, area of study, or a particular kind of learning approaches. In a choice system, each school isn't screaming "I offer the best product." Collectively, the system is saying, "We've got an array of programs where every student can find a fit."

Good choice schools make it clear that they are looking for students who belong in their programs, not just for any and all students. They require prospective applicants to spend a day attending classes, and talking to teachers and students, to find out whether the program is for them. I like the statement, for example, that Central Park East in New York used to send to prospective applicants (and perhaps still does). It said something like "We stand for A, B, and C. If you want Q, P, or R for your child, then we are probably not the place for you."

Q: Is competition among schools of choice the key element in providing educational improvement?

A: I don't believe that in a choice system it is competition that motivates teachers and schools to improve. I'm convinced the dynamics are a lot more complicated than that — and I fear that the way some choice advocates feature competition has tripled the reservations of educators about choice. What yields the school improvement, I suspect, is that choice enables teachers to make real the dream that most entered teaching to fulfill in the first place: to work harmoniously and successfully with kids. The intervening dynamics are that choice puts teachers in programs they can believe in (not a standard situation by any means) and fulfills their need to create. This forces collaboration with others, and most adults prefer that kind of situation to working alone. As with the kids, the more positive circumstances evoke greater commitment, greater effort, and greater efficacy. This, it seems to me, probably comes a lot closer to what causes the improvement in schools of choice than to attribute it simply to "competition."

Q: Is it necessary for principals to become directors of marketing and promotion for their schools in addition to their other duties?

A: I hope not! Principals ought to be strong spokespersons for their programs, but not salespeople. There are several alternative strategies for matching up students to schools. I've already mentioned two of the strongest: having prospective choosers visit each school and talk with people there; and having a district office collect and disseminate information on the options available, and help the willing to make their selections. The visiting arrangement is preferred by a lot of New York City's choice programs; the central office arrangement was pioneered in Cambridge and is used in other choice districts in Massachusetts.

Q: What is the appropriate role for district officers and state departments of education in a choice system?

A: Both states and districts have sometimes played key roles in the launching of choice systems. Manhattan's Districts 3 and 4 are good examples of district inspiration, and Massachusetts and Minnesota are strong cases of state leadership. It's done with a combination of support

and license — for instance, by inviting teachers to create schools-within-schools and then depart from standard procedures.

Beyond the launching stage, a careful line has to be maintained between help and support on the one hand, and top-down control on the other. Schools of choice will need more than a simple hands-off policy to thrive, but too much help and guidance will destroy their strengths. A choice system needs to be decentralized to a very considerable extent. Otherwise, the diversity will be stifled and the ownership taken away. On the other hand, common goals need to be set, and performance expectations need to be established and monitored. I see these as important roles for district and state officials.

Q: How do alternative schools of choice differ from traditional ones?

A: I'm glad you said "alternative" because not all schools of choice do differ from each other, or from the traditional. Simply opening enrollment doesn't do it. A diversification policy is also necessary. When this is in place, two types of changes can occur in the alternatives or optional programs, programmatic change and organizational. Programmatic change — in the curriculum and/or in instructional strategy — is a necessary feature if a choice system is to offer diversity, and hence choice. But in the better choice systems, schools are also marked by organizational changes. I say the "better" systems because without organizational changes, it's very hard to maintain programmatic distinctiveness. Schools as organizations, after all, have been designed to maintain uniformity and homogeneity, not distinctiveness. The organizational changes in diversified schools can include role changes, decision making patterns, scheduling, school climate, and more. A prominent difference between many alternative concept systems and magnet systems has been that the former reflect organizational as well as programmatic change. The organizational change is almost always accompanied by more extensive programmatic departures than can occur otherwise; thus it brings greater diversity.

Q: How does the choice feature affect school effectiveness?

A: For teachers, it means they can operate within an educational environment they themselves can believe in and want to sustain. It also means they can help design and modify their own school. For

youngsters, it means that they are more likely to attend a school where they can succeed. It's likely to be a better fit in terms of their interests and preferences and those of their parents. From both teacher and student standpoints, this situation makes for a more pleasant and satisfying experience, as well as for greater effort and productivity. There is fairly extensive evidence of high satisfaction rates on the part of those associated with schools of choice — teachers, students, and parents — and also of school effectiveness in making students successful.

Q: How do the relationships among staff differ in schools of choice? Is the difference an improvement?

A: There are likely to be major differences, and all are positive. In the first place, since many schools of choice are deliberately downsized — representing either schools-within-schools or schools with limited enrollments — it is a smaller, cozier environment and the staff are more likely to know one another. Moreover, they are far more likely to work fairly closely with one another than in a traditional school. The reason is the obligation to offer a fairly unique program. To do so, they need to collaborate with each other in designing and sustaining it. This makes for a tremendous difference in the interdependence of teachers and in the closeness with which they work.

Q: What type of leadership necessarily emerges in schools of choice?

A: That depends on whether the organizational changes I've referred to are allowed to develop. Many schools of choice are less formal than larger schools have to be. They tend to reflect fewer status differences than you find in traditional schools. The leader or leaders are more tightly integrated with the staff. Many alternative schools of choice have more democratic governing patterns, with the major decisions made by the whole staff. A thoughtful teacher in one of the schools I'm currently studying told me a few weeks ago, however, "What you really need is a king with strong democratic preferences." That says a lot about the way leaders need to operate. The control has to be low profile if the staff is going to feel ownership of the program. This calls for leaders who keep things together otherways than by the traditional approach of controlling through rules and regulations.

Q: How important is legislation, as opposed to administrative initiative, in the longevity of choice systems?

A: I probably wouldn't have thought so a few years ago, but I suspect now that legislation is preferable. It's likely to be more stable than the vicissitudes of administrative appointment. In so many cases a single board of education member changes, the board balance tips, and a new superintendent comes in. Does Richmond, California still have a choice system since Walter Marks left? I'm not sure. The national average for superintendents is only about three years in office. A law is likely to prove more durable than that, and so it's important to maintaining a system. Furthermore, we know that the continuing renewal of an organization is likely to depend on some external pressure as well as support. This is probably as true for districts as for schools. A good choice law may provide the right combination.

Q: What's a good choice law?

A: It ought to stimulate diversity, not just choice, by offering incentives and support for innovative schools. The incentives should take the form of some financial help to underwrite planning time, as well as release from some external requirements and procedures. I think this is preferable to requiring all to become schools of choice — which produces open enrollment without diversity, or choice without much real choice (except on the basis of invidious distinctions). It should permit evolutionary development of a full choice system, not mandate it from the start. And probably it ought to offer alternative routes to schools in restructuring themselves.

I think it quite legitimate that schools be required to improve. But if you really want to see that happen, then it's wise to offer them alternatives on how to go about it. Converting themselves to a school of choice, or establishing internal mini-schools or schools-within-schools, is the best way in my judgment. But if a school wanted to go the school-based management route instead, probably it ought to be able to. And in the event a school wanted to do neither, there should probably be a third option: having the district come in and design and monitor a reform plan.

Q: How do you see the future of choice in this country?

A: I suspect it's just getting started. The public is determined to see educational improvement and the insistence on accountability is not likely to go away either. I think choice is probably one of the most non-invasive forms of accountability we'll find, and one of the least injurious to education.

Beyond these reasons, the demand for choice may well be permanent because, the fact is, a sizeable majority want it. Apparently the public favors choice within the public sector by a 2:1 margin.

We've all heard about alternative schools, alternative concept schools and magnet schools. I suspect we'll soon be hearing as well about some new forms of public school choice. Charter schools, for one, are likely to become a prominent part of the scene. Thus I suspect that public schools of choice are likely to grow in both number and variety.

Q: Can you sum up your own perspective on choice — why you favor it?

A: Two major reasons loom largest for me. First, as I've tried to suggest, I think choice is the best route we know to school improvement, the best lever or catalyst we have for reform. Second, I think parents have a right to more say in their children's education than traditional schools allow them. Choice seems to me the most appropriate way to empower them. It doesn't invite them to design schools, which I think is a challenge for educators. It does give them the opportunity to select the kind of education they want for their children.

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