
What Kind of Choice?

Issues for system designers

by Mary Anne Raywid

If, as I believe, choice is here to stay, then the real question is, "What kind of choice is likely to prevail?"

Any idea that the public backs two to one 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. 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 will be adopted and structured to serve what purposes. We've got all kinds of proposals now, not just the familiar four of inter- or intradistrict, vouchers, and tuition tax credits. Now there are second-

chance programs and postsecondary options and governors' schools and charter schools and 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 nonpublic institutions and that tuition tax credits represented the use of public funds to underwrite tuition in private schools. But at least some of the newer types appear to be 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.")

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My point is that the numbers and types of choice arrangements are both proliferating and becoming more complex. 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 sorts of cases. 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 has 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 making the fourth than one of the three other 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. It permits individual schools to opt out of the British equivalent of our districts, to become independent entities with respect to operation and management. Schools that opt out 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

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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. A British researcher has noted that as market advocates of choice talk

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. (Ball 1992, p. 3)

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. What we must seek instead of markets are new forums and new machinery that will permit the various interests in education to be heard and provide a voice that is effective yet 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 that 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 that 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 may have won so many battles it could cost us the war.

The Elements of a Successful System of Choice

Perhaps the most important question facing us is one that most of the articles in this issue in some way address: 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 interrelated 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 that most often seem to come 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 system 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: 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 interconnections among them. Thus, in envisioning a new magnet school, or a system of such schools, if one seeks change that will make much 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: (a) role assignments for all the parties involved; (b) the particular school "personality" sought; (c) whether there is to be a particular instructional strategy emphasis, and if so, what it will be; (d) decision-making arrangements; (e) how both students and program will be evaluated; (f) the nature of the relationships desired with parents and community; (g) the kinds of traits and capacities the school wants to foster for its students; and (h) 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 — that is, the greater the number of these components that have been rethought and redesigned, 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 innovation 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 prerequisites for successful choice schools and systems was suggested more than a decade ago by Mary Haywood Metz, one of the first researchers to study magnet schools. She issued this warning about something that still remains a danger:

It seems likely that most of the magnet schools will survive in name, but that they will gradually lose . . . most support for their distinctiveness from the district except the symbolic power of their names . . . will constitute a symbolic effort at the system level which has little impact in practice at the school level. (Metz 1981)

I think Mary was right and that this remains a major risk. The research on change conducted in the '70s makes the case against top-down 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-ons until the pressure to maintain them goes away and they disappear altogether. 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, official commitment's leanings 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 will 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 that 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

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school that will 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" (Schlechty 1991). I think that's what is necessary if we are to substantially transform school 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, 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 a 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 collecting examples on how to do so and hope soon to have an article on meeting the challenge.)

Perspective and Its Place

I want to close on a broader, more general note about choice systems. To a considerable extent, the kind of system you end up with depends on the intentions and assumptions and commitments with which you begin. With this in mind, I'd like to share some of my own related commitments.

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 because 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 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. ■

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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 lesser of two evils—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 two 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 that 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" (Hill, Foster, and Gendler 1990, p. x). 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 like-minded 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 composed largely of programs such as gifted and 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—for example, 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—for example, themes such as 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 articulating 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 that 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. The schools we've got now just don't seem to work for the kids we've got now. Rethinking schooling 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

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