

**By Mary Anne Raywid
and Robert B. Kettkamp**

Skeptics of public school choice have over the years issued a number of warnings: Weak students stand to lose under such an arrangement; it would turn education into a sorting machine channeling poor and minority youngsters into one set of schools and the more fortunate into another; there would be no choices for the weaker students; and it couldn't help desegregation because people would just enroll their youngsters in neighborhood schools anyway.

A study we completed recently of Community School District 3 in New York City's Manhattan borough suggests that the dire predictions are misplaced. While our findings don't suggest that choice is a magic wand solving all of schools' problems, they do suggest it is advantaging a lot of youngsters—and that under the right conditions, virtually all families exercise the options made available to them.

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Equity and Choice in a Manhattan District

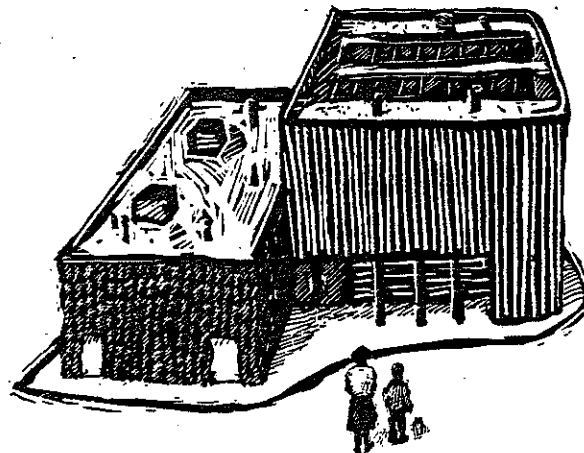
The Perfect May Be the Enemy of the Better

Thus, choice has reduced the racial/ethnic isolation of children in District 3 schools. There is evidence that choice is prompting significant numbers of children to attend schools other than the nearest one. So they are exercising their options and increasing the diversity of school populations.

The system is also working in other ways. Large numbers of students are getting their first or second choice of schools—78 percent in one of the years we studied. The total is lower than that reported by some

less than perfect. But when compared with traditional school-assignment policies, and the only other alternatives to them that we know, choice clearly appears to have enhanced equity in this New York district. It has also bestowed on large numbers of youngsters, including weak as well as strong students, the right to make decisions of lifelong consequence that they would otherwise have had nothing whatsoever to say about. It may also—although our study was not designed to investigate it—have improved a number of the schools these youngsters attend.

Our study was primarily an inquiry into equity. Its findings confirm that District 3 in New York City cannot assure that the advantage gained by every student is identical to that of every other student. What we have learned thus poses the question: Is it most important that we make certain no child gets a benefit that any other is denied? Or is it most important that we offer as many youngsters as we can reach the greatest chance to succeed? Someday we may have strategies assuring maximal success for all children—or for more of them than does anything we know now. Meanwhile, however, this study suggests that choice can render school access more equitable than does the long-prevalent neighborhood-assignment arrangement.



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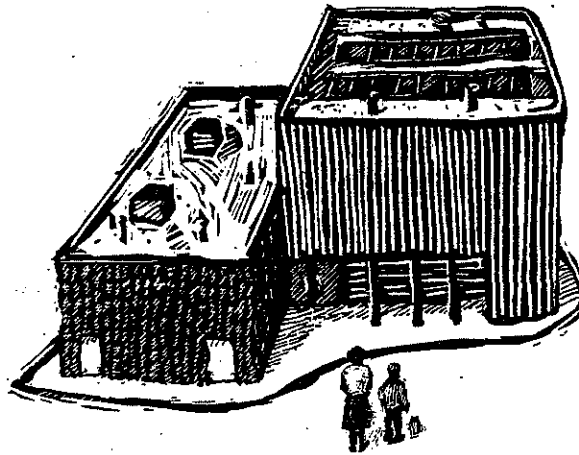
A study we completed recently of Community School District 3 in New York City's Manhattan borough suggests that the dire predictions are misplaced. While our findings don't suggest that choice is a magic wand solving all of schools' problems, they do suggest it is advantaging a lot of youngsters—and that under the right conditions, virtually all families exercise the options made available to them.

Four years ago, District 3 multiplied its several alternative schools and became a "choice" system in which all middle schoolers select the school they will attend. Fifth graders currently have 26 options from which to choose (with four more in the offing, at various stages of design). Eleven of the current total are for special-needs students—six for youngsters with disabilities, four for the English-deficient, and another that serves youngsters with both traits. Five additional schools of choice mainstream handicapped students. Thus, it can hardly be said that those needing special help are being ignored or excluded from the choice arrangement.

Like most of New York City's community districts, District 3 is a minority district. Moreover, this West Side district contains three fairly distinct population areas: 61st to 96th Streets, with a fair amount of racial and ethnic integration; 96th to 110th, with a large Latino population; and 110th Street and above, which is primarily African-American. Due to these neighborhood patterns, more than half the district's elementary schools (to which, as elsewhere, students are assigned) reflect the strong numerical dominance of one group or another. In more than half, the school population is 70 percent or more Latino or African-American. Fewer of the middle schools show this pattern of racial/ethnic dominance: 37 percent, or 11 schools (of which four exist to aid Latino youngsters needing help with English).

Thus, choice has reduced the racial/ethnic isolation of children in District 3 schools. There is evidence that choice is prompting significant numbers of children to attend schools other than the nearest one. So they are exercising their options and increasing the diversity of school populations.

The system is also working in other ways. Large numbers of students are getting their first or second choice of schools—78 percent in one of the years we studied. The total is lower than that reported by some



other choice systems, in part because District 3 deliberately reserves 10 percent of the seats in each school for making adjustments needed in the interests of equity for the system and fairness for individuals. This "system corrective" distinguishes the District 3 choice arrangement sharply from a market system that would bar such intervention. The seats set aside make it possible to extend to youngsters not gaining entry into any of the four schools they had chosen another chance at getting the one they want. It also opens another avenue of help for each youngster in finding the best school match for him or her.

This system demonstrates that choice can benefit weak and poorly motivated students as well as the more accomplished ones. Although more strong students than weak ones get their top preferences as to schools, the figures are substantial for both: Eighty-eight percent of the highest-scoring students get their top choices, while 72 percent of the lowest-scoring do. Some conceptions of equity would condemn the disparity, since it leaves benefits unequal. Compared with an ideal, the situation is

less than perfect. But when compared with traditional school-assignment policies, and the only other alternatives to them that we know, choice clearly appears to have enhanced equity in this New York district. It has also bestowed on large numbers of youngsters, including weak as well as strong students, the right to make decisions of lifelong consequence that they would otherwise have had nothing whatsoever to say about. It may also—although our study was not designed to investigate it—have improved a number of the schools these youngsters attend.

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