

2 sides on debate over school options not hearing each other

A week's worth of interviews with leading protagonists in Minnesota's continuing struggle over public school choice plans produces fascinating conclusions and titillating questions. Perhaps the clearest message is that, even after 21 months of discussion, the educational merits of Gov. Rudy Perpich's choice proposal have yet to be considered. There are projections of dire consequences and great benefits — but virtually no discussion of actually how schools and classrooms would change.

Having studied choice among public schools for more than a decade, I came to Minnesota to explore the reactions of education-related groups to Gov. Perpich's historic proposal. I chose this state on the assumption that the idea of having families select public schools would have received more examination and discussion here than anywhere else in the country. During late September, I interviewed 19 people prominent in the debate, including leaders of groups of teachers, school boards, administrators, businesses and citizens.

Unfortunately, people on different sides of the issue appear not to be hearing each other. There may be more jousting than discussing, and not enough recognition that people on all sides of the issue are deeply concerned about improving Minnesota schools.

Proponents of public school choice have described benefits to students, parents — and teachers. But they have not made their opponents understand that their concern is to improve education for all students, not just those who decide to move to another school. A choice system can stimulate educational improvements by encouraging school self-examination and renewal — features research finds central to continuing effectiveness in any organization. But I heard little awareness of that.

Proponents have not managed to convey that choice enhances teachers' professionalism. The best choice plans enable teachers and principals to create distinctive, outstanding programs. Where families have the opportunity to select among public schools, teacher effectiveness and hence morale increase substantially.

MARY ANNE RAYWID VIEWPOINT

Nor have choice advocates managed to show that schools can differ from one another in ways other than being better or worse. Research shows clearly that a particular school can be an excellent place for one group of students (and teachers), and not so effective for others. While sharing similar goals (such as competence in reading, writing, problem-solving and mathematics), schools can and perhaps should differ in instructional approach and generation orientation. There appears to be little appreciation of this possibility.

Many people with whom I spoke seem to make equality and equity synonymous with sameness and uniformity. Yet schools certainly can differ without being inequitable. In fact, given the vast difference in human beings, schools *must* differ if all youngsters are even to approximate the same goals.

It is entirely possible that three schools, all judged

Choice of schools is one of the most controversial elements in the education reform movement. We present here Viewpoints favoring two different types of choice: choice between public and private schools and choice within the public school system. The public-private debate is an old and passionate one in Minnesota

excellent on anybody's criteria, would attract different students. People might want to leave even a very good school. This should reassure those who project embarrassment if students go elsewhere.

Philosophy aside, there are ways to improve the original open enrollment proposal. For example, it did not recognize the place of schools in the life of small towns. A small town's school is often a major source of entertainment and employment, as well as a center for learning. Proponents of expanding choice should acknowledge this, and ease possible negative impact on rural areas. The Minnesota PTA's recommendation is worth considering: that

(and elsewhere). Open enrollment in public schools is a newer idea, but no less controversial. A governor's discussion group on education is torn over the issue, but expected to reach some sort of consensus this week.

— The Editor

small districts not lose funds if they have a net loss of students. Public choice plans in Wisconsin and Florida have used this principle to cushion the impact of student movement.

Opponents of the governor's plan are concerned to protect public education, save rural communities and block business domination of a major public institution. Their reservations rest on legitimate concerns about job security, ability to plan and marketing of schools. While these are important questions, other public choice plans around the country have dealt successfully with them. For example, Massachusetts funds parent information programs, equipping parents to make informed decisions well short of large expenditures for marketing schools.

Minnesotans are justifiably proud of their schools. Apparently many who have worked hard in those schools are reading choice demands as assertions that Minnesota's schools are poor. I found no convictions of this sort. Yet all agree that schools can and must do an even better job. Sometimes, as may be true in Minnesota, "the good is the enemy of the best." It would be unfortunate if past accomplishments were permitted to block even greater success for the future.

Opening the possibility of choice among public schools can prove an extremely valuable way to improve them — a way less expensive and better assured than other improvement strategies. A great deal is riding on what happens in Minnesota. The nation hopes that your conversations will become more mutually responsive and, simultaneously, more enlightening for us all.

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