

League of Women Voters  
Saunders

RESPONSES TO THE NATIONAL GOVERNORS ASSOCIATION

ON

PUBLIC SCHOOL CHOICE

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## QUESTIONS ASSIGNED BY THE NATIONAL GOVERNORS ASSOCIATION

1. What happens when the ARB follows the student out of the system?
2. What are the implications for contracts with teachers?
3. How do we retain standards in the face of increased responsiveness to the consumer?
4. What is the role of governors, legislators, and departments of education in encouraging and assisting choice in public education?
5. How are transportation problems resolved and what are the costs?
6. Aside from programs designed for targeted groups such as dropouts or the gifted, how have system-wide programs worked?
7. Implied in choice is increased school-site accountability. Are teachers being fired? Are principals? How do teachers protect themselves from weak administrators?
8. What are the ways districts and departments of education have educated parents to make intelligent and informed decisions when offered choices among schools?
9. What are the characteristics of choice programs that work? What are the characteristics of programs that don't work?
10. How do school districts maintain racial balance in districts offering choice?
11. How do districts handle timelines so that parents make decisions about schools in time for districts to plan for the following year? How do schools make plans about district or school size and under- or over-utilized facilities when enrollments may vary from year to year?
12. How are rural schools affected by choice when it is either statewide or for urban districts?

## 1. WHEN THE MONEY FOLLOWS THE STUDENT OUT OF THE DISTRICT

There are some who have claimed that one major benefit of the choice arrangement should be forcing improvement on a change-resistant system -- by putting the weakest schools out of business entirely, and forcing somewhat better ones to improve in order to attract a clientele. Others have suggested, however, that entirely the opposite effects are possible: that instead of forcing improvements on weak schools, the choice provision tends to weaken them still further by permitting the departure of the strongest families -- who then are no longer bringing reform pressure.

Whether these or other results will ensue will depend more, perhaps, on what system decisionmakers choose to make of the situation. In New York City, a "High School Redesign Program" instituted by the former chancellor closed down the poorest schools and extensively redesigned them. The old Ben Franklin High School, for instance, which was graduating a grand total of only 7% of its students, was shut on orders from the chancellor. In its place emerged a school of choice, the Manhattan Center for Science and Math (which now boasts the highest daily attendance rate of any high school in the City).

In Minnesota this year, 11th and 12th graders have had the option of pursuing individual courses or a full program in post-secondary institutions (technical institutes, colleges, universities). The program has been successful so far as the students are concerned, but there have been fears on the part of the districts involved about the state funding they take with them. (A proportionate share of state funding follows the student, calculated on the amount of work s/he is pursuing at the new institution.) The Legislature has subsequently introduced some clarifications and modifications in the Post-Secondary Options Act, but overwhelmingly reaffirmed its confidence in the program.

Another kind of evidence from New York also suggests something of the effects which choice-related financial losses can bring. Manhattan's District 4 has operated on the choice principle for more than a decade. It has attracted almost 2,000 out-of-district students. In the last several years it seems to have inspired a choice system in neighboring District 5; and another neighbor -- District 3 -- is now in the process of setting up such a system. Thus, given the quality improvement which choice typically brings, it appears that the arrangement can prove a rather effective reform catalyst -- bringing highly positive effects to other area schools, not the more negative ones some critics feature. In Manhattan, school funding is based on building enrollment. Thus as out-of-district youngsters have transferred to schools in District 4, they have in effect taken their funding with them.

Milwaukee and St. Louis represent two somewhat different ways of handling the financial questions raised by inter-district options systems. Both have choice agreements with surrounding suburban districts. When suburban youngsters enroll in St. Louis magnets, the state's funding share moves with them -- the same being true when a St. Louis youngster transfers to one of the twenty-four suburban districts that are part of the plan. In

Milwaukee, however, both sending and receiving districts receive the state allotment for the student who transfers -- thus relieving the stake of the abandoned district in retaining the student. In both cases the state assumes transportation costs so that those are not an expense issue for either of the districts involved. X

It must be added, however, that both St. Louis and Milwaukee are operating under court-approved desegregation plans and are able on that score to claim out-of-district funds. Cross-district choice systems that are otherwise inspired might lack such advantages. One possible response might be transfer of state funds to the chosen district with one or the other paying transportation costs. Another might be a jointly worked out credits and debits system entered into by several districts, whereby an equal balance of students sent and received is expected to be maintained by each participant over a specified period.

Such a system might well serve one challenge to which some districts must respond: the maintenance of full, high quality programs in the face of enrollment declines. Thus, cooperative inter-district magnet programs -- enabling one to offer a performing arts magnet, and another to provide the area's science and math magnet, and another to sponsor its dropout-prevention program -- are in varying stages of exploration and development in suburban and semi-rural areas.

## 2. IMPLICATIONS FOR CONTRACTS

For many, one of the strongest arguments for the choice arrangement is the restructuring and de-bureaucratizing it can bring. Such an outcome would be of recognized benefit to teachers; yet teacher organizations are understandably reluctant to sacrifice important protections standing them in good stead under current conditions.

Some local teacher organization leaders have recognized the potential of choice for the increased professionalization of teaching, and for the substantial improvement in teacher working conditions which choice can bring. The result has often been an agreement tacit or formal, to suspend application of at least some contractual provisions in choice programs. This has enabled teachers to choose and be chosen for such programs, thus suspending seniority rights as well as other facets of normal school appointment procedures. It has also enabled teachers in choice programs to take on after-hours assignments without pay, and to share in policy decisions, curricular design, and other administrative functions. X

There seem to have been no formal contract modifications yet made explicitly to accommodate the choice arrangement -- although such accommodations are apparently now under consideration in at least some districts as a preventive against desegregation suits and orders. Several of the districts which have been involved in inter-district desegregation arrangements have included plans for teacher exchanges.

In Milwaukee, plans were discussed for facilitating suburban-city teacher exchanges, but such discussion ended upon the filing of litigation. The plan had been to enable teachers to choose the exchange arrangement for a specified period. They were to assume the obligations designated by the receiving district, while retaining the salary and rights of the home district. X A staff exchange program is part of the St. Louis arrangement and perhaps 20 teachers have been involved this year. The exchange is for a year's duration. It is encouraged by an incentive (a \$2500 bonus) for those requesting such transfers.

As this suggests, however, the questions which choice poses for the intra-district bargaining process, and for particular contractual provisions, have largely gone unaddressed to date. It has been impossible to locate districts that have formally confronted such questions as the revision of seniority rights and the augmenting of mobility advantages for teachers who might wish to exercise choice prerogatives.

Meanwhile, agreements to relax the application of some contract provisions to choice arrangements continue to occur. Such an arrangement may become a formal provision of collective bargaining agreements. If this sounds unlikely, it is based upon the various evidences of gathering teacher organization conviction that the choice arrangement may also be in their best interests. As AFT President Albert Shanker said in his written testimony to the NGA Task Force in December, "I believe that we in the teacher union movement ought to support the greatest possible choice among public schools by parents, students, and teachers." X

### 3. RETAINING STANDARDS

Concerns about the fate of standards in a choice arrangement typically involve three kinds of matters: whether desired common learnings will be taught; how much (or how little) will be learned; and how we are to find out about these things.

Choice and diversity are not necessarily incompatible with common learnings. Certainly there are skills which all young people should acquire, and there is knowledge that all should have. Such common learnings can and should be specified by states and the list supplemented by school districts. But this requires specifying the required learnings in particular ways. As some states are currently doing so, they are in effect mandating each fact to be learned (and even by implication, which instructional methods to use in teaching it). Such detailed specification is not compatible, of course, with a diversified school system. But neither is it compatible with good teaching in any sort of educational system.

Common skills to be learned can be specified without much difficulty of the sort under consideration here. But common knowledge needs to be specified in terms of the understandings and concepts to be acquired, not as content to be memorized. This makes it possible for different schools to present different content, and to package and sequence it in different ways and in different contexts. This kind of specification of common learnings requirements is necessary to the compatibility of such requirements with the idea of school diversification. But it is also important, in the eyes of many educators, to the effective conduct of schooling of any sort, diversified or uniform. John Goodlad, for instance -- perhaps today's single most respected educational scholar -- insists that knowledge goals for schools can only be specified as concepts, not detailed content, if teachers are to be able to teach effectively. For education, unlike some other endeavors, makes differential means essential to arriving at common ends. If framed the way Goodlad urges, there is no reason why common learnings requirements cannot be carried out more effectively in choice programs than in other schools. X

This is not to say, however, that there are no common knowledge learnings to be acquired. Youngsters need to achieve a degree of cultural literacy, along with the skills and common understandings mentioned above. This requires, for example, that they know who Shakespeare was and something of what he accomplished, that they know what the Civil War was and when it occurred and what precipitated it. But it is probably unnecessary that the 'cultural literacy' agenda loom so large for high school students as recent state mandates have required. A better content balance might call for higher proportions of skills and concepts than of specific cultural literacy items.

It remains to be seen how much curricular diversity schools of choice will be permitted to retain. Current arrangements in a number of states call for prior state approval of departures from mandated curricula (e.g., Pennsylvania, New York). It is as yet uncertain how readily such approvals

will be obtainable.

Concerns about standards in schools of choice are appropriate: although responsiveness to youngsters and their families is much to be desired, it is no guarantee of educational quality (educational free market advocates to the contrary notwithstanding). District and state have an important interest in assuring quality, and at least in public schools parents are entitled to feel confident that their youngsters' achievements reach reasonable levels: that they are learning a reasonable amount and learning it reasonably well. This calls for some sort of measure external to the school, that yields some kind of commensurability enabling parents to understand their child's progress in relation to that of youngsters in other schools. The challenge is how to devise such a measure without tying it to the particular content taught in some schools, and thus penalizing youngsters at others. Such bias, of course, yields entirely erroneous notions about how effectively the several schools are performing. It is a serious problem with most standardized tests, virtually all of which focus on factual material that has either been presented and memorized or has not been. Tests that were conceptually oriented -- to match and complement the way in which Goodlad and others urge that content goals be specified in the first place -- would solve this problem. It would be entirely appropriate for states and/or districts to require administration of such measures to assure that choice programs were maintaining proper standards.

In Minnesota, Education Commissioner Ruth Randall has said repeatedly that Governor Perpich's "Access to Excellence" plan offered to substitute competency demonstration for mandates. The strategy was to leave schools free of dictates, but to hold them accountable instead through statewide student achievement tests. It remains to be seen whether such tests can be devised without penalizing legitimate and desirable curricular differentiation.

Other choice systems look to different kinds of evaluation in assuring standards. For instance, Jefferson County, Colorado, which offers several choice programs, conducts a detailed curricular audit every five years. The process involves both local committees (of teachers, administrators, and parents) and external evaluators who work together in assessing each program's curricula. A panel of outside experts is also the way in which other choice programs attempt validation of their curriculum and emphases. This kind of procedure is probably preferable to a reliance on mandates and standardized testing programs. And it may prove necessary to reversing the strong current pressures toward uniformity.

There are also other ways in which choice programs are under constant scrutiny and assessment. Nor is academic achievement the sole measure of success. There are also other things for which parents should and do hold schools accountable -- e.g., the nature and quality of the experiences the child is undergoing there; the kinds of attitudes and values the child is taking on; the extent to which the child is developing, as fairly distinct from what s/he is learning. Parents of youngsters in choice programs tend to have a strong advantage with respect to accountability of this second general sort, since they may well have selected the choice program precisely for the kinds of experiences it affords and encourages. Because they tend to have more contact and involvement with the school, there are

more opportunities for parents to observe what is occurring and how their children are reacting and behaving. It appears, then, that the added responsiveness of choice programs to those most closely associated with them need not come at the cost either of standards or accountability.



#### 4. THE ROLE OF STATE OFFICES IN ENCOURAGING CHOICE

The present juncture of several trends in educational history makes this a time for setting real precedents with respect to education-related responsibilities: in the first place, the state share of educational funding has increased markedly; in the second, public interest in education and its improvement is at peak levels; in the third, state activity in almost all the states has imposed extensive new requirements on schools and teachers. We have made some mistakes in who should do what, and how. The choice matter poses opportunity not only to realign present roles, but to redress the impacts of recent errors.

In brief elaboration of these points, it seems clear that the increased state responsibility for financing schools would and should be accompanied by increased responsibility for their effective operation. But early state response to these new obligations has brought mixed results. It appears that some of the requirements imposed by the ensuing legislation may actually have exacerbated school problems instead of solving them. Legislation offering encouragement to the choice arrangement may prove an ideal antidote -- an effective way to deal with the resulting situation, as well as to improve education.

State governments can contribute substantially to the spread of choice in public education. Governors can do so through recourse to the bully pulpit which Washington has used so effectively, as well as through their more formal leadership functions. Governors can do much, for instance, by emphasizing the centrality of choice to our national values. Both public interest in school reform, and the burgeoning difficulties stemming from the "excellence" legislation of the past several years, also recommend formal leadership at the state level in opening the choice possibility.

State governments can assist and encourage the choice arrangement by providing incentives for intra- and inter-district choice programs. Incentives seem preferable to mandates or to any other form of coercion for two major reasons: (1) to impose the choice arrangement is inescapably to render it less effective and successful than when it is voluntary for all involved; and (2) arrangements that are coercive in nature are bound to rally and congeal opposition, whereas voluntary arrangements arouse far less.

It should be pointed out, however, that an incentive system would undoubtedly impact fewer districts, schools, and children than would a mandate opening enrollment in all of a state's schools: some districts would undoubtedly elect to forgo the incentives, and families in those districts would be deprived of choice opportunities. It is also possible, of course, that those districts which proved most resistant to the choice idea would be precisely those where it is most needed. On the other hand, however, as suggested above, mandates may be a lot less politically viable and, simultaneously, less successful in improving schools.

It might be possible to seek both sets of goods this way: an incentive arrangement that provided bonus incentives to those districts which both

established a choice arrangement and accepted enrollees from neighboring districts. The second bonus might well cover tuition costs for out-of-district enrollees. In some states such a provision would also have to explicitly free families from any control by their district of residence. Such an arrangement could open choice opportunities to residents whose districts do not extend them; but it would do so without forcing the arrangement on all districts. It might therefore combine the advantages of maximal political viability and maximal educational promise.

Through the provision of incentives for launching individual choice programs and choice systems, state governments can encourage school districts to do so. Special start-up funding is especially important. States can stimulate cross-district arrangements through incentives like Wisconsin's, whereby the state pays transportation costs, and both sending and receiving districts receive full funding when a student crosses district lines to attend a choice program. States can also stimulate the generation of choice programs for particular groups where emphasis may be needed -- e.g., for the dropout prone -- by raising funding levels for schools targeted for such groups, or for the students involved.

In addition to monetary incentives, state governments can offer yet another quite different and equally powerful inducement to the spread of the choice arrangement. By offering exemption to choice programs from the detailed regulations now governing instructional content, scope, treatment, and evaluation in many states, state governments can provide (1) a powerful start-up incentive, and simultaneously (2) a mechanism vital to school improvement. Such an inducement is not just coincidental to the choice arrangement: if choice is to mean anything then schools must be diversified and differ identifiably from one another. To be able to differ, they must be freed from the uniformity imposed by the tightened controls of the last several years. This in turn will introduce the shifts in responsibility and prerogatives which researchers increasingly hold critical to school improvement. Choice, then, can prove an important link in the restructuring and de-bureaucratizing of public education.

All this suggests new roles and responsibilities for state departments of education. They are the appropriate agencies for establishing guidelines for choice programs that will qualify for the incentives; and they should promulgate evaluation criteria for monitoring and assessing the programs thus created. This will be a new realm of responsibility for almost all state education departments, since few have much to do with existing choice programs within their states. Only where states have encouraged choice in connection with desegregation have state education departments had much official responsibility associated with such programs. But new state incentives will make education departments responsible for state guidelines to specify such matters as: equity expectations; overall goals choice programs must meet; the parameters of curricular and instructional possibility; and student achievement expectations.

It will also be reasonable for states to directly monitor choice systems -- and either to provide direct monitoring for individual choice programs, or to arrive at ways for sharing that responsibility with districts. State departments need, then, to develop criteria for evaluating choice programs and the achievement of their students, as well as suggested indicators for

ascertaining that criteria are being met. Since national standardized tests are strongly biased in favor of conventional curricular offerings and organization, it follows that measures other than such tests are necessary to avoid loading any evaluation system with negative bias against the newer programs. The challenge of balancing (1) the interests of achievement commensurability, and school-to-school comparisons, against (2) those of inappropriate comparisons and accountability measures needs to become a primary responsibility of state education departments.

Meanwhile, a range of more specific and concrete encouragement of schools of choice is under way in a number of states. In at least four -- Virginia, New Jersey, New York, South Carolina -- "Governors Magnet Schools" are in various stages of development. These are regional, specialty high schools (e.g., in science, math, technology, performing arts) for high ability students. Such programs, while doubtless offering fine educational opportunities to the ablest students, do not substantially affect the choice opportunities of the large majority, nor bring the improvements to existing schools that are often tied to choice. And they may even decrease choice prospects, since the Governor's Schools have generated charges of elitism, and protests against tracking, from a number of people who might otherwise prove highly supportive of the choice arrangement.

A number of states offer information, advice, and even technical assistance to schools and districts interested in establishing or improving choice programs. The California State Department of Education, for instance, has a full-time specialist in such programs, and people in other state education departments are assigned such functions in addition to others. In a number of states -- e.g., Washington, Iowa, California, Florida -- such individuals have played key roles in the launching of state associations of educators interested in schools of choice. They have facilitated networking and exchanges among such programs, published newsletters and directories, etc. In some states where the choice idea is new there have been attempts to contract with universities to build relevant expertise and capacities.

To date, there have been few statewide choice programs operating. Governor Perpich's open enrollment plan for all of the state's elementary and secondary schools was defeated. California's Commission on School Governance and Management recommended that states move toward open enrollment, but Education Commissioner Honig's commitment to another agenda he found incompatible undermined its prospects. Minnesota's post-secondary options program has now however been in operation for a year -- and Florida has evidently quietly operated a somewhat comparable program for a number of years. There appears to be considerable interest in the choice arrangement for weaker students: Colorado's Second Chance legislation was the most explicit, but Illinois appropriated \$10,000,000 this year for alternative programs for students in difficulty, and both Oregon and Washington provide funding for clinics as an option for such students. And while these states have opened the possibility of choice as a solution for weak students, other states are looking to choice as the answer to weak schools. As elsewhere described in this report, in South Dakota, California, and Iowa there has been interest in legislation enabling students to opt out of very small schools, and poorly performing schools. (See Section 12.) It appears, then, that states can do, and are beginning to do, a variety of things that encourage and abet the choice arrangement.

## 5. TRANSPORTATION PROBLEMS AND COSTS

Transportation problems are very different, of course, in urban, suburban, and rural districts. In most urban districts, students attending schools of choice are able to use public transportation. In suburban districts, typical patterns include public transportation where accessible, and a combination of school buses or vans. (For example, a student may take the early bus to the nearest high school and there 'transfer' to a bus or van headed for the program s/he has chosen.) Rural choice programs sometimes combine parent and school bus transportation.

Within urban districts, where options systems have to date been more numerous, students sometimes receive passes for use on public transportation facilities. Elsewhere, they are sold tokens at reduced rates. One plan provides families directly with a transportation 'voucher' to cover the costs involved.

The transportation costs occasioned by most extant choice systems have been in the interests of desegregating a city's schools. This has meant that these costs have often been borne by state and federal sources, and not by the district in question (an arrangement that has permitted a reduction in school costs in some districts). But the desegregation purpose has also meant that transportation costs have been high, since considerable travel has sometimes been necessary to overcome the effects of residential segregation.

Accordingly, the best single source on the transportation costs of choice systems found these costs to be 27% higher than the costs associated with schools of assignment in the same districts. This was the finding of a study of 45 magnet schools in 15 districts, by James H. Lowry and Associates. But their report adds an illustration helpful to interpreting this differential:

The magnitude of the difference can be illustrated by examining a hypothetical district with the same total pupil transportation budget as the average district in our sample (\$6.5 million). If this district has 15% of its pupils enrolled in magnet schools and has to bus all of them, the difference of \$37 per pupil in magnet vs. non-magnet school transportation costs adds approximately \$175,000 to the transportation budget or about 5%.

It appears then that although the transportation costs of connecting youngsters to choice programs are higher, they have not to date raised overall transportation budgets very significantly. Where more youngsters were involved, total cost would be higher. On the other hand, were there more schools with choice programs, reduced travel distances would undoubtedly reduce costs. Nevertheless, those writers who have addressed the challenge of the transportation needs of choice systems are unanimous in their suggestion that the costs involved should be assumed at the state in preference to the district level, perhaps with an assist from the federal government.

## 6. HOW HAVE SYSTEM-WIDE PROGRAMS WORKED?

System-wide choice arrangements have been of two main types, one merely facilitating transfers and the other offering more clearly delineated options. The first are generally known as 'open enrollment' programs and they presuppose the desirability of letting people leave a poorer school for a better one. This approach operates, then, on the presupposition that the differences between schools are largely qualitative, along a single continuum locating each somewhere between "poor" and "outstanding." In contrast, a second type of approach presupposes that there is no one best way to educate all students; accordingly, there is much greater variation among the schools to be chosen on this kind of choice arrangement. Their differences, and hence the uniqueness of each, may be largely a matter of distinctive emphases or goals; a distinctive theme or curriculum; a unique instructional approach; or a unique school environment and climate.

By and large choice systems of the second type are far more popular and successful than those of the first. Several studies of New York City's open enrollment plan suggests that relatively few families take advantage of it, despite evaluators' conclusions that there are, indeed, qualitative differences among the schools to be chosen. The open enrollment plan may operate more generally as the opportunity to 'flee from' than to 'move toward.'

One difference among extant choice systems pertains to their extent. In some districts, schools of choice are intended simply to solve enough peripheral problems to enable the bulk of the system to continue intact on a 'one best way' principle. In other districts, however, the intent is for more extensive diversification, to enable substantial numbers to opt for schools of choice. This may mean an array of such schools, or even the full placement of particular levels on an options basis (e.g., all elementary schools or all high schools). Save, however, in the cases where all schools at a given level in effect become schools of choice, the choice programs tend to fill up, with demand outstripping supply.

A recent national study found more choice programs at the elementary school level than at secondary levels -- an unfortunate situation given the widespread conviction that secondary education is in far greater need of improvement. The defining elements of choice programs tend to differ at different grade levels. Elementary schools of choice are likely to feature different pedagogical styles and orientations (e.g., open schooling, Montessori, traditionalist). Secondary options are likely to differ in terms of content, featuring particular themes (e.g., maritime or environmental), academic disciplines (e.g., math and science), or career areas (e.g., health services or aviation). Increasingly, particularly as schools move to respond to the burgeoning proportion of disadvantaged youngsters (minorities and poor, low achievers), choice programs are also being designed to feature a particular kind of school environment and climate.

Schools of choice often -- although not always -- display unusual success. (See Section 9 for the features associated with those that work and those that don't.) Youngsters attending them generally achieve more, and in

various ways exhibit more positive attitudes toward school and education. Their academic achievements in the school of choice almost invariably outstrip their achievements at the prior school, and they show progress in other ways as well -- social and emotional growth and greater responsibility and maturity. They also display better attendance records in the choice program and pose fewer discipline problems. Teachers in such schools are more successful, more committed, and far more satisfied with them, both personally and professionally. The evidence suggests they work harder in choice programs, but their morale and satisfaction rates are extraordinary.

Parents, too, are more satisfied, since the choice program is likely to prove a better match for their own educational orientations and more responsive to their child's needs. Virtually every comparative study finds parents far more positive and enthusiastic about the performance of schools they have chosen than are the parents of youngsters attending schools of assignment in the same area. The general image of local schools is enhanced, in the eyes of both parents and other adults in the community, as parent confidence improves. In districts where there are magnet programs, and the possibility of choice among a variety of alternatives, more positive public perceptions of school quality have ensued. Not every school of choice is such a success story, of course. By and large, however, to the extent that teachers are there by choice -- and are supported in developing and maintaining programs of their own design -- the likelihood of improvement over schools of assignment is high.

The following outline offers a brief summary of the research findings related to schools of choice. Although cited here without documentation, substantial warrant is available for each of the following conclusions:

#### The Effects of Schools of Choice on Students

On average and stronger students:

- More school involvement and interest
- Greater awareness of school, self, responsibility
- Improved attendance
- Dropout declines
- Higher achievement and performance levels

On marginal or at risk students:

- Improved attitudes toward school and learning
- Enhanced self-concept, self-esteem
- Improved behavior
- Improved attendance and lower dropout rates
- Greater effort, success, and achievement

### Effects on Teachers

Stronger identification with school and work  
Increased collegueship and professional collaboration  
Heightened efficacy  
A sense of engagement in professional practice  
Longer hours, more effort  
Outstanding morale and satisfaction rates

### Effects on Parents

Unique school approval and confidence rates  
New modes of involvement and participation  
More positive student-home interaction  
Extraordinary identification with and loyalty to school

### Effects on Other Community Members

Greater, more varied school involvement  
Increased knowledge and awareness of schools  
Perceptions of enhanced school quality

### Effects on Schools

The choice feature improves schools by serving as:

- A way of making them responsive to the different needs of different students
- A way of making them responsive to parent preferences
- A stimulus and mechanism for school rejuvenation
- An impetus to school differentiation and diversity
- An impetus to maintaining organizational flexibility and blocking bureaucratic rigidity in school systems
- A stimulus to school decentralization
- A different, less stultifying plan for holding schools publicly accountable
- A mechanism for assuring continuing school renewal

## 7. SCHOOL-SITE ACCOUNTABILITY

As Section 9 suggests, the shift to the kinds of choice programs that work is simultaneously a shift to a different kind of authority and control structure within the program. It is a shift from controlling teachers through regulations governing their behavior, to assuring cooperation and coordination through shared values. This means, as private school research has recently documented, that the challenges are not so much a matter of getting rid of the incompetent teacher, or end-running the incompetent administrator, as of creating mutually supportive teams and the esprit de corps which enable all to function at maximal performance levels.

The choice arrangement is not desirably seen as a means of controlling or expelling the incompetent. If run according to the requisites necessary to its success, such a program will probably prove no more effective at this than has the prevalent bureaucratic system. It will, however, make the bureaucratic machinery a lot less necessary to invoke. It does so by encouraging and enabling each teacher and administrator to function at the highest level of which that individual is capable. Successful choice programs have tended to reformulate the traditional administrative challenge of assuring that minima are guaranteed, to a focus on the opposite end of the performance spectrum. They are, in effect, engaged in the task researchers have associated with excellence in the corporate world: that of eliciting extraordinary performance from ordinary people. Given the nation's need for so many educators, and the range of ability levels among them, this strategy seems to make far more sense than to gear accountability focus and strategy to picking off the weakest of the lot.

This is one reason why the thoroughgoing consumerism which would terminate teachers who aren't chosen is ill-suited to the choice arrangement in education. We could establish among schools and teachers the market situation in which the poor product goes unpurchased and its producer is driven out of business. To do so, however, would undercut and eliminate the very features that recommend educational choice in the first place. Schools do not need a strategy for identifying their weakest performers nearly as much as they need a plan for building the kind of staff collaboration necessary to long-term educational accomplishment.

The foregoing primarily addresses the general accountability orientation of schools of choice. There is another accountability issue which also needs discussion: The choice arrangement shifts the mode as well as the general orientation of school accountability. Our primary accountability machinery today consists of formal, quantified data -- test scores and counts on such matters as percentages graduating and college admissions. Choice programs yield a different sort of accountability. First there is the matter of shared responsibility, since the chooser becomes a partner in the production of the resultant educational outcomes. Second, the changed relation this creates between school and family is likely to yield a lot more occasion for families to observe the nature and quality of the school's work. Thus, formal, quantified accountability measures assume a lot less importance, given the frequency of informal qualitative assessment opportunities.



## 8. HELPING FAMILIES CHOOSE

Several major approaches have been worked out to facilitate informed choices among the programs comprising options systems. The first efforts were limited largely to distribution of the printed word: to newspaper announcements, supplemented by brochures containing program descriptions. But it was found that such media are broadly effective only with middle and upper class parents. They used the printed descriptions and supplemented them as they found necessary; but lower class and minority parents tended not to do so. These parents tended not to exercise the choice prerogative -- or sometimes to do so only to choose the neighborhood school.

Initial interpretations of indifference have since given way, however, to somewhat different analyses: it has been found that instead of indifference the situation sometimes represents a deference to expertise and a degree of confusion emanating from the expectation that school staff are in a better position to make such decisions. Many districts are now meeting this situation through personal contacts -- home visits, neighborhood meetings, school meetings -- instead of relying solely on publications to do the job. Where choice systems have been in operation for a while, and are known in the area, meetings at schools draw substantial numbers to learn about the choices available.

Some districts have made advisors available to parents to aid in choice-making, and in many, teachers are willing to offer advice to parents requesting it, as to which choices might best suit a particular youngster. In some cases, school selection involves the agreement of three parties: the parent, the student, and the receiving school. In such cases, the school may be seeking minimal achievement levels and/or it may be seeking a seeming 'fit' between the kind of environment it provides and that which the student seems to need. In cases such as these, parent judgment is aided and supplemented.

Some districts take a further important step, as is the case in Manhattan's District 4 (where almost all parents are minority and a large majority of the families receive some sort of government financial assistance). The district has no junior high schools of assignment: all junior highs are schools of choice. Accordingly, all of the district's sixth graders receive regular instruction on decisionmaking strategies and skills, as well as on the nature of the options available. In this way, the schools directly augment family knowledge of the choice arrangement and of the particular options it makes available.

A final way in which some early choice systems operated was to limit the types of options available, in the interests of holding to a small enough total to permit all families to acquire information on each, as well as in the interests of equity (i.e., denying a choice to some that was not accessible to all). Minneapolis, for instance, had only four models that were replicated throughout the city, and Alum Rock had 10. Subsequent research suggests that this is not an optimal arrangement, since it both places arbitrary limits on teacher creativity and innovation, and it precludes the distinctiveness contributing so substantially to success. Thus, other means are advised for aiding parents to choose, and for meeting equity concerns.

Departments of education can help assure that parents are suitably informed about the choice arrangement and the options it provides by mandating information programs, or making them necessary in the claiming of incentives. They can promulgate guidelines which parent information programs should meet -- stipulating parent education media (i.e., personal contacts as well as printed material), and the kind of information to be included in descriptive materials (e.g., number of students and teachers; kind of program available, and its goals, emphases, and expectations; kinds of students who will profit most from the program, and those it will serve less well).

## 9. CHARACTERISTICS OF CHOICE PROGRAMS THAT WORK -- AND DON'T

There is now considerable evidence as to features marking successful choice programs -- and at least by inference, the traits associated with unsuccessful programs are becoming clearer. Compiling the evidence from an array of research types and sources, the lists which follow enjoy substantial empirical support.

### Characteristics of Successful Choice Systems

1. The design of most or all programs to accommodate the range of students generally representative of the district -- avoiding the identification of target populations in terms of ability levels, such as "Gifted and Talented" or "Low Achievers."
2. Sufficient freedom from 'standard' requirements and procedures to permit the design and operation of genuinely diverse educational programs differing as to goals, curriculum, instructional treatments and environment, and/or evaluation strategies.
3. Sufficient diffusion of authority to permit the staff in each program the opportunity to design and implement their own vision of schooling.
4. Genuine positive appeal of each program to a group of students within the district.
5. A blending of majoritarian and minority concerns -- so that the school board is satisfied that each program falls within the parameters of majority or collective interests, and the minority represented in each program can find the program responsive to its particular concerns.
6. Both students and staff become affiliated with particular programs as a matter of uncoerced choice -- no assignments, 'or else,' or 'last chance' placements for either group.
7. Genuine support and backing for the choice arrangement from central district officials.
8. Encouragement to each program to maintain its own uniqueness and distinctiveness.
9. Periodic evaluations of each program in its own terms as well as on the basis of criteria specified by the district.
10. The locating of each program so as to make it accessible to all who might be interested.
11. Provision of good transportation services.

12. Continuous watchfulness to prevent such inequitable choice outcomes as segregation by race, class, or ability -- and willingness to deal with such problems with due regard both for equity and for individual educational choice.
13. Willingness to provide start-up funding to enable new programs to be designed, equipped, and launched.

#### Characteristics of Successful Individual Schools of Choice

Successful schools of choice identify choice "programs" as distinct administrative units with their own personnel (students and staff), spending most or all of the school day together. This kind of definition is important to distinguishing schools, or schools-within-schools, of choice from the less attractive and less successful opportunity to choose curricular electives.

1. Educational goals representing a broader concern with student accomplishment than content and skill mastery. A sustained interest in student cognitive, personal, and social development is typical -- character as well as intellectual development.
2. Each is small enough to permit the personalizing of education -- and organized so as to realize this purpose.
3. Avoidance of the usual power structure of schools, with authority concentrated in the principal's office. Education-related decisions are made by individual teachers and groups of teachers.
4. School organization is sufficiently non-formalized in official policies and regulations and non-bureaucratized to permit organizational flexibility and thus responsiveness to individual cases.
5. Structure, scheduling, and general expectations within the school all conduce to professional interaction and collaboration among teachers.
6. Extended roles and responsibilities for both staff and students. Teachers are more broadly responsible for student growth and accomplishment, and for total school effectiveness, than elsewhere; and students feel more responsibility for the school, as well as for their own progress.
7. Each school has a clear set of goals -- specifying a mission that is embraced by all staff members.
8. There is considerable self-consciousness within the school about the type of place it is and wants to be -- a preoccupation with school climate, ethos, or moral order.
9. Instructional approaches enriched by the inclusion of experiential learning strategies, and by independent study possibilities.

## 11. THE CHALLENGE OF TIMELINES

The challenge of planning for a constituency of unknown size is a difficult one for new choice systems. Once programs are fairly well established -- i.e., after the first two or three years -- this is much less of a problem since subsequently changing interest patterns far more typically emerge as gradual trends than as sharp fluctuations. Particular programs gradually become high demand options -- and typically, it is only gradually that a program becomes unpopular (barring major changes in an existing program). But any new choice program or arrangement poses a challenge with respect to timing. One partial solution has consisted of needs assessments, or interest surveys of eligible families at the time a choice system or new program is being planned. A carefully designed survey can predict with fair accuracy which families, and how many, are likely to enroll in which programs. Such a survey can accompany, or be made part of, the periodic school census needed in any case to project enrollments.

To facilitate parent informing, as well as school planning, Spring selection of Fall choices is best. Informings (including meetings and canvassing) might well begin in February with choices made by the end of April. This permits two months before the school year's end to facilitate central office planning, and that period plus the summer to facilitate program planning. (The provision of adequate planning time for programs is repeatedly emphasized in the literature as necessary to their success. Staff planning time is vital during the summer before a new choice program opens. It is also important, albeit in smaller amounts, over subsequent summers.)

Two sorts of exceptions might be noted, however, to the April target date of selection: selection needs to be geared, of course, to the time of adoption of the school budget -- to permit funds to follow enrollments the subsequent year. Thus, if the budget must be adopted earlier in the Spring, the selection dates need to be adjusted accordingly. Second, inter-district choice plans may appear to many to pose special timing challenges: here, choices outside the district alter total sums available within it. This is why the Wisconsin plan, with state coverage of transportation costs, and allotments for both sending and receiving districts, appears such a good idea: it reduces tensions that might otherwise function as real counter-incentives to the choice arrangement. (Here again, however, a careful advance assessment of interests can respond at least in part to such concerns by making family preference and likely choices apparent well in advance.)

School administrators sometimes fear that instability will accompany a choice system, and particularly one which permitted transfers at any time. Initial inclinations are sometimes to bar or rather narrowly restrict transfers during the school year. Experience suggests, however, that such restrictions are not necessary. People evidently tend to have a stake in what they have chosen, and they also apparently are fairly good predictors of what will prove satisfactory to them. Hence, transfer requests during the school year do not appear to be numerous. And responding positively to them is a part of the individual concern and flexibility which the choice arrangement seeks to introduce.

## 12. RURAL SCHOOLS AND CHOICE

Can rural districts offer choice? It appears that a number of them can. Many rural districts are so situated that they can expand the choices available to local youngsters by means of collaborative arrangements with neighboring districts. Such arrangements have been pursued in Oklahoma with the assistance of state funding. It is possible also to send students to other schools for particular courses or to set up 'specialty' schools in neighboring districts, with one specializing, for example, in science and math, another in humanities, etc. This kind of arrangement is being pursued in a small South Carolina district with three small high schools, and there is no reason why it cannot be adapted to at least some rural settings elsewhere.

Moreover, choice need not necessitate multi-school possibilities, or even very large individual schools. There is no reason, for example, why a six-teacher elementary school might not be broken up into three mini-schools, each offering a separate pedagogical style and orientation among which parents might choose. And a high school of 300-400 students might similarly be divided into three or four mini-schools, each with a distinct theme or emphasis. It is conceivable, of course, that choices could be unevenly distributed and one program far more popular than others. Yet even under these conditions, the arrangement could yield the sorts of benefits to performance and morale that have been associated with schools of choice elsewhere.

Undoubtedly there are some rural areas that are so sparsely populated and so remote that none of the above-suggested arrangements is feasible. In such areas, 'distance education' possibilities (via television and computer), and independent study arrangements, have been used to expand an otherwise very narrow curriculum. And in some remote areas of California, transportation allowances have been used to help subsidize weekly boarding expenses for students living too far from a sizable school to commute on a daily basis.

But there are other rural districts that are not nearly so remote and where cross-district options are practicable. An Iowa district's recent experience is informative in this regard, and has inspired relevant legislation. The Lakota District is near enough to two others to enable the district to run collaborative programs with them in connection with two particular courses. But Lakota has suffered from dwindling enrollments and now has only a handful of youngsters at each grade level. Several sets of parents have successfully petitioned the state to force Lakota to pay tuition for their youngsters in a neighboring district. The ruling, made in January, is pursuant to an interesting provision adopted last year. It grants the right of state review to students denied an "appropriate" education by their districts. The term "appropriate" is intentionally borrowed from the Federal PL 94-142. The law's sponsor wanted to obtain the same rights for normal youngsters as special education students are guaranteed under the Federal law. It is conceivable that the law's assurance of an "appropriate" education could prove a substantial stimulus to choice in Iowa. Certainly it can be argued that a school in which a youngster is disinterest-

ed, or a chronic failure, is not an "appropriate" educational environment for that youngster.

But the Lakota case, as well as recent experience in both Minnesota and South Dakota suggest that legislation establishing cross-district enrollment options is perceived as a threat to the survival of rural districts. This threatens the political viability of a choice proposal. It would thus appear that states with substantial rural areas might be better advised than others not to mandate open enrollment plans. To accommodate the concerns and fears of such areas, it might prove wiser to offer incentives of sufficient strength to attract rural as well as other districts to investigate within-district and cross-district choice possibilities. On the other hand, however, as the Lakota case and others make plain, individuals can be held hostage by recalcitrant school officials -- and states ought to find some mechanism, as did Iowa, for extending options to such victims. Not all proposals will succeed. For instance, one defeated California bill would have enabled youngsters to opt out of schools whose students scored lowest on state tests. And provisions could not make it in South Dakota and Iowa which would have extended out-of-district choice to students in very small districts. Yet, it is indeed the case as South Dakota's Governor Janklow put it, "It is wrong to imprison kids in a bad school."

## Sources

The article attached to this report, "Synthesis of Research on Schools of Choice," lists 51 references. All should be considered sources for the findings about schools of choice cited in these pages. Additional published sources include:

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Additionally, the state education officials formally charged with responsibility for schools of choice were polled. A survey conducted in 1985 by Karen Shapiro at the University of Miami concluded that 48 states have named such officials and all were contacted. Replies were received from 29 states and these statements plus materials sent, are reflected in foregoing pages.

Finally, telephone interviews were conducted with several individuals who supplied information and materials reflected here. They are:

- David Bennett, Superintendent, St. Paul, MN, Public Schools.
- Glenn Campbell, Executive Director, Desegregation Monitoring Office, St. Louis Public Schools.
- Daniel U. Levine, Professor of Education, University of Missouri-Kansas City.
- Chris Pipho, Deputy Director, Information Clearinghouse, Education Commission of the States.