

Response to Nathan: Choice Is a Double-Edged Tool

Nathan stresses the positive side but does not address the obstacles to choice plans and other hard issues.

Joe Nathan suggests several important requisites for a good public school choice plan and reviews the more positive examples. What he does not do, from my perspective, is tackle the hard issues: the real barriers to implementing choice in a positive way and the real damage a bad choice plan can do.

The heart of the debate is open enrollment. While the "choice" banner covers college credits, dropout prevention, and other alternative programs, these options have been around in a variety of forms and labels for some time. The controversy arises when "choice" means a system of unzoned, competitive enrollments in place of neighborhood schools.

Can "choice," as an open enrollment system, be a crucial leverage point for school restructuring and school improvement? For every positive example or anecdote, there is an

equally negative story to tell. In fact, the choice record is quite uneven, thin, and short-range. And when we look at inter-district and statewide choice, the record barely exists. How then are we to judge?

I propose that we evaluate choice plans very specifically and very carefully, not according to their avowed intentions. We should heed Nathan's criteria, particularly regarding desegregation impacts, but we should also address the following concerns:

The heart of the debate is open enrollment.

Equity: Are there enough good schools to go around? How far should a student have to go to get a decent education, and who will do the traveling? What's the plan for the schools and the kids who get left behind? Are we resegregating schools through self-selection? These are critical equity issues, which suggest to me that choice should be subordinate to a much more comprehensive school improvement strategy than Nathan indicates.

School improvement: What are the real problems in existing schools? Troubled school systems share many difficulties: rebuilding their teaching corps, modernizing pedagogy and curriculum, lowering school enrollment and class size, repairing crumbling facilities, integrating youth support systems, securing fair and adequate funding. Choice in itself doesn't solve any of these problems. Does this particular choice plan account for these

other needs or divert attention from them?

Parent involvement: Will this choice plan provide timely and extensive information programs for all families, along with solid in-school guidance? And what about active involvement after the selection—how far and how familiar will the school of choice be, especially for poor and minority parents?

Teacher empowerment: Will this choice plan increase teacher satisfaction and involvement in school decision making? Where there are significant shifts in enrollment, over large areas, teachers will have to shift, too. Will parent choice negate teacher choice? And will the logistical burdens of choice increase administrative authority at the expense of teacher empowerment?

School assessment: How will we judge between schools? Competitive enrollments could well increase the pressures on schools to put marketing before substance. They could also increase our obsession with test scores, at the expense of real innovation and learning.

Community accountability: If a body of parents doesn't reside or vote in the district where their children go to school, how will they influence policy and budgets? How will schools of choice become responsive to students' home communities and cultures, particularly minority cultures? Will schools remain important community institutions to taxpayers and voters?

Funding: Will choice increase or decrease funding resources and funding equity among schools? Contrary to popular impressions, a fair and well-constructed choice plan requires either more money or a major reallocation of money—because it will help

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every school address its improvement needs, subsidize transportation costs, offer an extensive parent information program, and cushion school budgets from enrollment fluctuation. Does this choice plan come with funding reforms and commitments adequate to the job?

Choice can be a valuable tool, serving both quality and diversity, if we remember it is double-edged. Choice works best when it is intra-district, when it follows from a school-by-school improvement effort, when it encourages collaborative and complementary programs instead of competition, when it upholds the highest equity standards, when it is properly funded, and when it promotes the linkage of schools to parents and home communities.

At present, there are not many choice plans that meet these standards—which is why I believe we should be building careful models, not fueling or following any choice bandwagons. We cannot afford to be simplistic. We cannot afford to let our poor schools get poorer. And we need to get beyond the marketplace rhetoric, remembering that American schools belong to citizens, not consumers.

This suggests a final caveat: no one should evaluate a given choice plan

(or any major education initiative) without checking for hidden agendas. Is choice being used as the Trojan horse for rural school consolidation? To disinvest in urban schools or to accommodate white flight? Is it being used as a "new improved sorting machine" to replace discredited tracking models? Or as an opening wedge for private and parochial school funding? Or is it a vehicle for political careerists and educational entrepreneurs? When we're designing or confronting a choice plan, we need to know the political, as well as the educational, contexts.

It may be that three-fourths of the public does support the idea of choice, as Nathan says, but did anyone ask how many wanted to abolish their neighborhood or community schools? Let's face the dilemmas squarely. □

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Suggested Readings

- Bastian, A. (Forthcoming). "School Choice: Unwrapping the Package." Chapter in a book to be published by McCutchan, Berkeley, Calif.
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- Price, J.R., and J.R. Stern. (Spring/Summer 1987). "Magnet Schools as a Strategy for Integration and Reform." *Yale Law and Policy Review*.
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ASCD Looks at Choice

ASCD is currently conducting a policy analysis of public school choice. Both intra- and inter-district choice plans are increasing across the states in response to increased student diversity, dropout rates, and desire for parental involvement in decision making. The ASCD analysis, which will address equity, fairness, and other issues involved in choice policies, is being developed by a national panel of practitioners and researchers. Their report will be available in spring 1990.

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