

Parent Choice Works for Us

One California school district has a 17-year history of success with offering alternative programs.

For the first time in many decades, the issue of parent choice among public schools has risen high on the education agenda. Governors, state school superintendents, business leaders, and many parents are echoing President Bush's assertion that "choice programs are the most promising new idea in American education."

The responses from field educators are mainly cautious, largely skeptical, occasionally passionate. Among the many questions that need answers, the following are the most common:

- Is "parent choice" just the latest buzzword?
- Is competition among schools healthy? Is it fair?
- Will it jeopardize ethnic and racial balance?
- Will it give parents a sense of ownership?
- Will it make rich schools better and poor schools worse?
- Will it advance the cause of educational excellence?
- Will it cost more money?

Being bold prognosticators, we bravely assert that the answer to all these questions is . . . maybe! We can't give definitive answers, but we can shed light on these questions by reflecting on the 17-year history of parent choice in the small California school district of Lagunitas.

Choice in Lagunitas School District

Lagunitas School District is a K-8 school district with 320 students on

two adjoining campuses, located in a semi-rural valley in Marin County just north of San Francisco. While relatively homogeneous in racial and eth-



Lagunitas students may be more motivated to achieve because they attend the program that best suits their individual needs.

nin composition, the population comprises craftspeople, artisans, business people, farmers, executives, professionals—with lifestyles ranging from very traditional to countercultural. We have our share of drug dependency and other social problems and a higher welfare count than the county average. And we also have more than our share of strong-minded independent thinkers and activists!

Seventeen years ago, in response to this diversity, the district made a commitment to honor the wide range of parent values and expectations by setting up alternative programs. We offered the first alternative in 1972: a multi-grade Open Classroom, the character of which had a distinct local flavor but was heavily influenced by the thinking of Jean Piaget, John Holt, and the British Infant schools. The values emphasized included "respect for the individual and individual learning styles, emotional growth, and freedom of choice."

In the early 1970s we added a 3R's program. Over the next decade, the 3R's program merged with the traditional program to form Academics and Enrichment, a program that emphasizes "basic academic skills and subjects and the establishment of good independent study habits."

In 1982, a group of parents who were active in a Montessori preschool persuaded the school board to launch the county's first public Montessori classes for elementary grades. Starting with one K-2 class, the program has grown to have the largest enrollment of all, now distributed among five multi-graded classes covering grades K-5. While adapted to the public school setting, the program still reflects Montessori's philosophical commitment to "the discovery of the child" and "education for peace."

To keep the system responsive, we have continued to make changes. A new option was started in 1988: an independent or home study program in which parents retain major responsibility for instruction, with weekly conferences with a teacher.

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The options that Lagunitas parents now have are:

- Academics and Enrichment Program (K-5),
- Montessori Program (K-5),
- Open Classroom (K-6),
- Middle School (6-8),
- Home Study Program (K-8),
- or . . . transfer to another school district.

Few school districts have offered transfer as an option. Yet Lagunitas' governing boards have offered it consistently, even though the loss of revenue that goes with loss of students has threatened to compound financial problems for the district. Parents who commute to work in other communities and those who think a larger school better meets their needs have transferred their children out. But other parents have heard about the offerings in Lagunitas and have transferred in, and now the "balance of trade" is almost even. Perhaps most important, the parents who have transferred in and those who have left have chosen their children's schools—with all the motivation that accompanies self-direction.

To be responsible and successful, of course, the exercise of choice must be informed. We invite—and expect—parents to visit classes, confer with teachers, and study brochures before selecting a program for their child. The Open Classroom council has a professionally produced videotape ("To Make a Difference") used for orientation, promotion, and in teacher

education programs around the country. The Montessori parents and teachers have developed a slide/tape program for similar use.

Signs of Success

Despite inadequate funding, the system of choice in Lagunitas is thriving, and parents value the options and support the programs that they choose. One sign of satisfaction is the 17-year history of maintaining alternatives when options have withered and died in other districts. Parent councils in each program have surveyed client opinions and have monitored satisfaction as part of their decision-making and planning process. And in 1987, 72 percent of the voters in the community approved a tax increase—at a time when most California communities were still suffering from the taxpayers' rebellion.

But what about test scores . . . are kids learning? The simple answer is yes, to the extent that standardized test scores can provide answers. Over the past four years, students in grades 3, 6, and 8 have achieved well on the California Assessment Profile (CAP): most scores are in the 80th or 90th percentile ranges, and there has been a general pattern of rising scores over the last four years.

But parents in this school district don't place much confidence in standardized paper-and-pencil measurements. So we provide informal assessments of student and parent satisfaction and follow the success of our graduates in high school, college, and the workplace. We are also exploring alternative assessment strategies that get at deeper kinds of learning.

What We Have Learned

In 17 years, we have learned many useful things about parent choice:

- Administratively, the four programs can sometimes resemble a four-ring circus. Parent and teacher leaders complement the efforts of administrators, but more resources are needed to create time for communication and coordination.

● Districtwide curriculum coordination, articulation, and alignment are much harder to achieve, and they suffer if adequate resources are not invested in the communication and coordination functions.

● Some operational costs are higher, especially for a small district. The most obvious example is class size, where dividing a small enrollment into different options may produce teacher-pupil ratios that are desirable but expensive. Higher operational costs must be compensated for somehow—by parent volunteers, donations, underfunded materials and equipment budgets, or deferred maintenance. If extra resources cannot be found, there is a danger of burnout for teachers, administrators, and parent volunteers. Moreover, when resources are inadequate, competition for what is available can sometimes be overly vigorous and counterproductive.

We believe that the criticisms and the problem solving we experience in Lagunitas are signs of a dynamic and democratic school community.

● In coordinating and managing the school system, administrators and board members must bend over backward to avoid favoritism, especially in

the distribution of resources. This is particularly difficult for board members, who frequently are elected by constituent groups identified with a particular program.

● There are potential political and public relations problems with other school districts that have not yet embraced the practice of choice. Parent councils (especially those for the Montessori and Open programs) have publicized their particular offerings and have actively promoted transfers—sometimes to the dismay of people in other communities.

● We are sensitive to the concerns of critics of free choice that it could produce social isolation among ability/racial/socioeconomic groups. That hasn't happened in Lagunitas, but it warrants careful monitoring.

● While the satisfaction level is relatively high, there are some parents, teachers, and students who would prefer a more traditional program for the whole district, and that option is not available. Partly in response to this concern, however, the number of cross-program and districtwide activities has expanded radically over the past two years.

What we have learned may be helpful to readers who are considering launching a parent choice program. We believe that the criticisms and the problem solving we experience in Lagunitas are signs of a dynamic and democratic school community. Most important, the members of our community—students, parents, teachers, administrators, other staff members, school board members—all feel invested in our schools. Our success hinges on a sense of efficacy, self-direction, and a movement toward autonomy, growth, and informed choice. Many of us in the Lagunitas school community feel that is what schools in a democratic society are all about. □

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