

More Public School Choice Can Mean More Learning

Public school choice plans, if designed and implemented carefully, promise dramatic benefits for educators, parents, and especially students.

Although bright, Stacy ranked in the bottom third of her class. She planned to drop out of school at 16 to become a drummer in a rock band. Then she learned about Minnesota's Post-Secondary Options law, which pays for public school juniors and seniors to take all or part of their courses at a college or vocational school. Recently Stacy simultaneously graduated from high school and completed her first year of college with 45 credits and a high "B" average. Her mother wrote, "Stacy had the ability to succeed but without an alternative I am convinced she would not have graduated" (Montano 1989).

Nancy Smith, whose son is attending an award-winning public alternative school in Tallahassee, Florida, recently told the school's principal that she has "seen more positive growth in my son in six weeks, than in a year and a half of intensive counseling" (Wood 1989, p. 198).

During the last decade, teachers in the East Harlem district were given the opportunity to create distinctive programs from which families may choose. Lynn Kearney, who has been working in the New York City schools for 16 years, recently described what this experience has meant to her: "People are here because they want to be. And that's shown by the kind of attendance we have. There's a camaraderie, because this place doesn't have to exist... If it didn't meet needs, it would fold..." (Morrow 1989).

Having more public school options can benefit educators, parents, and students, producing countless success stories like the three above. Carefully designed public school choice plans can be justified on

several grounds. First, there is no one best school for all students, parents, or educators. Second, increasing choices means expanding educational opportunities for students from low- and moderate-income families. Third, con-



The most rewarding success stories involve students, who often flourish when given the opportunity to attend schools that are well suited to their particular needs.

trolled competition can help stimulate systemwide improvements.

However, not all public school choice plans are equally effective. Let's look at a few examples throughout the country to understand both the problems and the possibilities of school choice programs.

From Personal Experience

I first learned the value of choice plans from personal experience. In 1970, the St. Paul, Minnesota, Board of Education allowed a group of parents and educators (including me) to establish a K-12 public school that developed individual plans for all students, used an advisor-advisee system, combined classroom work with community service, and required demonstrated competence rather than accumulation of credits for graduation. The St. Paul Open School won a federal award for being a "carefully evaluated, proven innovation worthy of national replication."

While some teachers and students flourished at this school, however, others wanted more structure. They convinced the board of education to establish the K-8 Benjamin E. Mays

Today more than 40 states have developed some form of public school choice plan.

Fundamental School. Both schools enroll a cross section of the city, both are extremely effective with certain young people, and both are still open 17 years later.

Though both schools help students develop basic and applied skills and positive attitudes, the parents and ed-

ucators involved in the two programs disagree strongly on how schools should be organized and instruction provided. A school environment that works well for some young people (and teachers) will frustrate others.

Is this inconsistent with effective schools research? Not at all. Effective schools require a clear philosophy and a statement of goals, along with a faculty and staff committed to them. These are also among the characteristics of the finest public alternative schools, which attract an academic, racial, and socioeconomic cross section of students. Part of their strength comes from their *distinctive* high-quality programs. Effective schools are not *identical* schools.

Some people argue that more choice may be fine in theory, but that in practice it is the most affluent and informed who will benefit. Whether or not this is the case depends on several critical details. Next we review various public school choice programs to illustrate what features are vital to their success.¹

East Harlem's Choice Plan

East Harlem is a typical very poor inner-city area. For the last 10 years, the district has developed a system of choice among its public elementary and junior high/middle school programs, which includes an extensive parent and student information program. There have been no neighborhood schools at the middle school level for the last several years—*each* is available on the basis of choice.

When East Harlem started this program, its students ranked 32nd among the 32 community districts in New York City. Today, depending on the test, its students rank 15th or 16th. Further, vandalism is down dramatically, and there is a waiting list of teachers who want to work in East Harlem. Administrators attribute this improvement to the district's choice plan (Morrow 1989; Fiske 1988, p. 13).

Choice Plans in Massachusetts

During the last seven years, the Massachusetts legislature has allocated

The Most Effective Public School Choice Plans:

- include a clear statement of the goals and objectives that all schools are expected to meet;
- encourage and assist many educators within a given geographical area to develop distinctive schools, rather than simply concentrating resources on a few schools;
- provide information and counseling to help parents select among various programs;
- avoid first come-first served admissions procedures;
- make transportation within a reasonable area available for all students, with a priority given to those coming from low-income and non-English-speaking families;
- do not allow admission to schools on the basis of past achievement or behavior;
- develop and follow racial balance procedures that promote integration;
- require that dollars should follow students;
- include provisions for detecting oversights and for making continuing modifications.

more than \$40 million to help school districts and educators develop distinctive schools from which parents may choose, as part of integration programs. State funds, allocated by the state's Department of Educational Equity, have supported planning, building, and parent information activities. The state has helped educators plan various programs and then helped support a parent information center. This "controlled choice" plan allows parents to select among various schools, within racial balance guidelines.

A recent state study of the impact of expanding public school choice found that state and local officials are delighted with the results. In Cambridge, for example, *all* neighborhood schools at the K-8 level are options. Since the plan was initiated about five years ago, average student achievement has *increased* every year. Moreover, the gap in achievement between black and white students has *decreased*. As Robert Peterkin, superintendent in Milwaukee and former Cambridge superintendent, recently wrote, "Controlled choice ... is hard work. The benefits to be derived, however, more than offset any drawbacks you can possibly imagine" (Peterkin and Jones 1989, p. 148).

Minnesota's Choice Options

Minnesota legislatures have passed several laws expanding parental choice among public schools (see Nathan 1989). The *Post-Secondary Options* law allows public school juniors and seniors to attend colleges, universities, and vocational schools with state funds following them to pay for tuition, books, and other charges. The number of participants increased from about 3,600 students in 1985-86 to about 5,700 in 1988-89 (about 6 percent of those eligible). First-year results showed that:

- about 6 percent of the participants had dropped out of school;
- about half of the participating students lived in rural areas;
- two-thirds of the students had average grades of B, C, or D;
- the high school students earned a grade point average as high as or

Types of Public School Choice Plans

- *Local*: Local public school districts offer magnets, schools within schools, and/or alternative programs from which families select.
- *Program Development*: States provide funds explicitly to help school districts plan and develop different kinds of public school options.
- *Specialty School*: Statewide or regional magnet schools, drawing from several districts, are funded by cooperating districts or directly from the state.
- *Open Enrollment*: Students may move across district lines under certain circumstances without permission of the district in which they live.
- *Post-Secondary Options*: Students may attend post-secondary programs with state and/or local funds paying their tuition and fees; families not in the district decide whether to participate.

higher than the freshman class at most post-secondary institutions;

- 90 percent of the parents said their children learned more than if they had taken courses only at the local high school;
- 95 percent of the students said they were "satisfied" or "very satisfied" with the program (Minnesota Department of Education 1987).

The program also helps students who stay in high school. For example, the number of Advanced Placement

courses offered by Minnesota public high schools has quadrupled since *Post-Secondary Options* began. In addition, more than 50 high schools have established new cooperative courses on their campuses for which both secondary and post-secondary credit is available.

The *High School Graduation Incentives* and *Area Learning Centers* laws were passed in 1987-88, permitting students from age 12-21 who have not succeeded in one public school to attend another public school outside the district. The only stipulations are that the receiving district must have room and that the students' transfers cannot harm desegregation efforts. The *Area Learning Centers* legislation provides state funds to help plan programs for these students and then gives extra financial support to four of the best programs. Eligible students include those with low grades, chemical dependency, or excessive truancy, and those who are pregnant. During the program's first year, about half of the participants were re-enrolled dropouts. Since the program began, several thousand students have participated.

Under the state's fourth law, the *Enrollment Options Program*, beginning in 1989-90, school districts lose the power to prevent students from leaving, unless the movement will have a negative impact on desegregation plans. This law is now being

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phased in. During 1987-88, 95 out of 435 districts allowed students to leave under the law. That September, 137 students from 94 families used the law to transfer. During 1988-89, about 440 students used the law, with 51 percent moving from larger to smaller districts and with minority students slightly over-represented in the number of participants. About 3,500 students applied to use it for the 1989-90 school year.

The Minnesota Department of Education's survey of 1987-88 participants found that 100 percent of the parents whose children were not graduating intended to use the program again the following year. When asked their major reasons for participating in the Enrollment Options Program, 44 percent of the families cited better curriculum and academics, 26 percent preferred the location (closer to day care, job, or home), 23 percent liked having more options, 21 percent mentioned either social benefits or social problems alleviated, 16 percent cited better teaching, 14 percent favored the more specialized classes, 7 percent opted for a particular school because they themselves had attended there, and 7 percent participated in the program so that their child could complete high school or to maintain continuity after a family move (Zastrow 1988).

Desegregation Programs in St. Louis and Milwaukee

For Missouri and Wisconsin, public school choice is a way to promote metropolitan integration (St. Louis and its suburbs, Milwaukee and its suburbs). Movement between city and suburban public schools (via bus or

taxi) is permitted so long as it promotes integration, and suburban districts may reject students who have created discipline problems. During 1987-88, 11,655 black students transferred to suburban St. Louis districts. Because only about 626 suburban students transferred during 1987-88, transportation costs were very high: the average transportation cost for a suburban student was \$3,517 (Todd 1988).

Both states have also funded development of inner-city magnet schools. During 1986-87, the St. Louis magnet elementary schools spent \$5,590 per student, 42 percent more than was spent at neighborhood schools. Magnet high schools spent \$7,602 per pupil, 27 percent more than the \$5,403 spent on neighborhood high schools. The Wisconsin program pays both suburban and urban districts for each student who moves, in effect "double-funding" students who transfer. Moreover, suburban districts receive a 20 percent basic aid increase if the number of minority transfer students they accept equals or exceeds 5 percent of their overall enrollment. Critics of the Wisconsin program recently have suggested several changes. These include discontinuing bonus payments to suburban districts, eliminating double-funding, and prohibiting suburban districts from choosing among inner-city students (Mitchell 1988).

Four-City Magnet School Study

Many large cities have created magnet schools to promote integration, with most schools continuing to serve a certain geographical area. Districts of-

ten have allowed magnet schools more flexibility, given them more financial resources, and allowed them to select faculty and students. Recently two Chicago-based researchers studied the impact of magnet high schools in Boston, Philadelphia, Chicago, and New York.

Moore and Davenport (1988) found a "six-tier" system in most cities, with non-selective schools on the bottom and selective exam schools on top: "Many schools in the upper tiers operate as separate, virtually private schools, while those in the bottom tier, catering almost exclusively to low-income students, provide essentially custodial care" (p. 3). Low-income, black, Hispanic, special education students, and those with attendance problems were significantly underrepresented in academically selective schools but were heavily concentrated in low-income and low- to moderate-income non-selective schools.

Moore and Davenport urge changes in school district procedures so that "neighborhood" schools have more opportunities to compete with other schools: "Study results call into fundamental question the naive view that loosely structured choice systems will yield improved schools for all students through 'competition'" (1988, p. 10).

Their report recommends features of choice plans which must be included if the plans are to benefit the overall student body, rather than just a select few. These recommendations include suggestions about admissions policies, development of options that meet needs of a representative cross section of a school system's students, distribution of resources and opportunities for staff selection, staff training, upgrading of facilities, and discretionary funding.

A Vital Part of Reform Efforts

Attitudes toward public school choice plans have changed in just the last five years. Today many states and school districts are expanding their choice programs; more than 40 states have developed some form of public school choice plan. These plans include local, program development,

Choosing a School

Choosing a School for Your Child helps parents explore the many options, ask the appropriate questions before and during school visits, and then select the school that meets their child's specific needs. Prepared by Susan Perkins Weston (with contributions from Joe Nathan and Mary Anne Raywid) and published in May 1989 by the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Educational Research and Improvement. Single copies of the 36-page booklet are free, courtesy of the U.S. Office of Consumer Affairs. Send your name and address to: Department 597V, Consumer Information Center, Pueblo, CO 81009.

specialty school, open enrollment, and post-secondary options (see "Types of Public School Choice Plans").

The federal government's role has been one of advocacy and limited financial assistance. Congress has provided millions of dollars to help urban districts establish magnet schools. In the 1988 reauthorization of the federal elementary and secondary school program, Congress increased funding for urban magnet schools that are a part of desegregation programs.

National Gallup polls find widespread support for choice among public schools. A recent poll (Gallup and Clark 1987) found that 71 percent of the public (and 77 percent of minority adults) feel parents should have the right to choose among public schools. The same poll found that only about 44 percent of the public support programs involving private and parochial schools, so the public is much more supportive of public school choice than it is of voucher proposals.

While there is no one best approach for each state, certain features ought to be included in any plan (see "The Most Effective Public School Choice Plans"). Failure to include these features will make these programs less effective, especially for students from low-income and limited-English-speaking families.

Choice can be a vital part of education reform efforts. As educators, parents, and, most important, students, have testified, being allowed to select among public schools can result in rapid, dramatic benefits. □

Author's note: I edited *Public Schools by Choice, Expanding Opportunities for Parents, Student and Teachers* (Bloomington, Ind.: Meyer-Stone, 1989), from which this article is adapted.

¹ For a review of more than 100 studies on public school choice plans, see Raywid (1989). She concludes that in well-designed public school choice plans, students achieve more and like school and themselves better, parents have better attitudes toward school, and educators feel more like professionals. While Raywid supports public school choice, she strongly opposes providing tax funds to private and parochial schools.

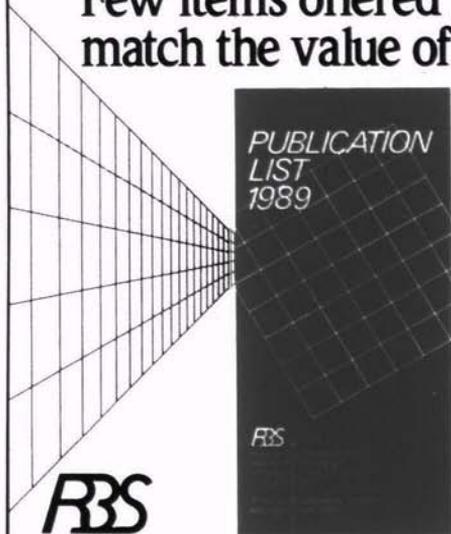
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