

## Open Enrollment and Curriculum Centralization in Acton, Massachusetts

Acton's experience with open enrollment shows that a system can develop a common curriculum while allowing individual schools and teachers to decide how they will teach it.

The Acton, Massachusetts, Public Schools have provided an open enrollment program since 1972. It all started amidst much turmoil and controversy with the institution of an alternative school. This new elementary school was envisioned as a means of meeting the desires of the growing population of "liberals" migrating to the town, who found Acton's schools overly traditional and rigid. Many of the "old-timers" in the community saw the liberals as a threat to their educational values. They viewed the alternative school as a way to siphon off the pressure the liberals were putting on the Acton schools to change.

The new alternative school was considered "way out." It symbolized the split the community was feeling between the old guard and the newcomers. If you lived in Acton in those days, you had a position on the alternative school: *for* or *against*. But after it became a reality, everyone came to agree that *all* parents should have the opportunity to choose a school for their children, not just the parents who wanted to have their children in the alternative school. What began as a divisive movement in the town was soon regarded as an opportunity for all Acton parents to select the school which best matched their own educa-

*Photograph Courtesy of Gary G. Baker*



*Eighteen years ago in this traditional community, newcomers pressed for change in the schools, and the old-timers resisted. Now all parents select their children's schools to match their philosophies and the children's needs.*

tional philosophies and the specific needs of their children. As a first step toward meeting this goal, the school board resolved to provide transportation for children to and from any one of the elementary schools, no matter what neighborhood they were in.

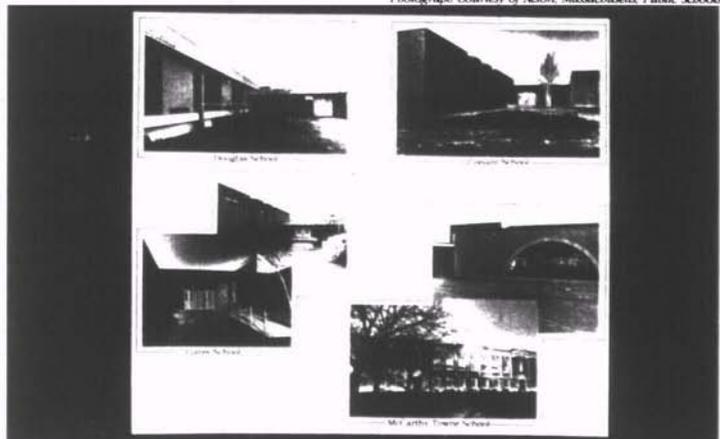
Each of Acton's five elementary schools, under the leadership of its own principal, developed its own curriculum with its own instructional materials and its own philosophy. Because we assumed that differences could evolve only where school autonomy was encouraged, "school-based management"—although we didn't use that label then—was seen as a necessary part of the open enrollment policy. And, sure enough, each school evolved toward different points on the spectrum, from liberal to middle-of-the-road to traditional.

Each school, however, had a practical problem: it had to appeal to enough of the community to remain a contender for a sufficient number of students; otherwise it would face the prospect of having students placed in the school by lottery (as their second, third, or fourth choice). The schools struggled to remain true to their philosophies while appealing to at least some portion of the community. And they seem to have met this challenge, because more than 90 percent of the parents succeed in having their children placed in their first-choice schools.

### The Down Side of Autonomy

Despite all the successes, it soon became apparent, as parents, teachers, administrators, and school board members began to express concerns, that open enrollment as conceived in the early 70's had a number of pitfalls, such as the following:

**Competition.** An open enrollment program intensifies competition among schools. Although supporters of choice programs see this as a factor that will improve school quality, many teachers, administrators, and parents in Acton felt it caused unwarranted tension among the schools and some unhealthy back-biting. For example, now that children from different schools shared school buses, children from one school might taunt children



*It's all very well to develop a program to support a school philosophy, but what if enrollment drops? The Acton schools learned how to appeal to parents; now more than 90 percent place their children in their first-choice schools.*

from another. And sometimes parents would scoff at the practices of other schools. A general consensus developed that somehow the intense competition among the schools should be minimized.

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**Pressures for curriculum conformance.** Increasingly, it became clear that the community wanted to make sure that all schools, no matter what their orientation or philosophy, had common curriculum objectives, especially those related to the basic skills. After completing their separate elementary schools, all students in Acton go to one junior high school. Thus, many parents wanted assurances that, no matter which elementary school they attended, their children would be well prepared for the junior high school. The school board began to exert pressure on the administration to provide this assurance to parents by monitoring each school.

**Enrollment dilemmas.** A big problem for the open enrollment process occurred when it became obvious that the popularity of a school begat more popularity for that school and the unpopularity of a school led to more unpopularity for *that* school. This often occurred for no good reason other than that there were more people in the more popular schools (because they had been allowed more class sections per grade), and the parents of the students in those schools would simply advocate them to other people, who would jump on the bandwagon.

**Acton Public Elementary Schools  
Acton, Massachusetts  
K-6 population 2,000**



- 1) open enrollment - parents may choose one of four schools\*
- 2) system-wide guidelines set for each grade level - schools select materials and methods
- 3) strong administrative support for in-service, curriculum development and special projects

*Photograph Courtesy of Marget Grallert and the Basic Challenge Project*

**While the schools are different in critical ways, they have a common sense of purpose and commitment.**

Sometimes negative rumors or isolated blunders in a school were blown out of proportion in community conversations, and a school started a precipitous decline in preferred enrollment. Although information meetings and booklets were offered every spring by the central office and each school, parents still felt a need for an ongoing objective perspective. They began to turn to the central office as a source of accurate information on all the schools.

**"Simultaneous Loose-Tightness"**

As we encountered these problems, we realized they couldn't be adequately addressed by any one of the schools alone. Although Levin (1982) suggests

that a centralized curriculum is not possible in a system in which parents are given a choice of schools, the Acton experience indicates the opposite. A centralized curriculum, with certain critical features in both its development and implementation, may indeed be required if an open enrollment program is to address successfully the concerns that we encountered.

Early in the 80s, some people declared open enrollment a faulty concept that should be abandoned, but most parents supported choice, despite its frustrations. One reason people supported open enrollment was our implementation of Peters and Waterman's (1982) concept of "simultaneous loose-tight properties," described by the authors as "the co-

existence of firm central direction and maximum individual autonomy." The idea is that schools can develop common curriculum objectives that embrace shared community values and expectations, along with accountability procedures to assure the effective implementation of that curriculum (central direction). At the same time each school is allowed latitude in how and with what instructional materials it will implement that curriculum (individual autonomy). This helps give teachers a sense of ownership, confidence, and enthusiasm.

Thus, while the schools are different in critical ways, they have a common sense of purpose and commitment. Without such a "loose-tight" combination, both the parents' desires that their concerns be addressed in a coordinated, systematic way—which require centralization—and the desires of teachers to control their own instructional practices without unwarranted interference—which require decentralization—would not be met. But how could we implement these seemingly contradictory goals?

### Meeting Both Requirements

In 1984, teachers and administrators formed a systemwide committee to research ways to meet both requirements. The committee drafted a plan that included a procedure for the development and review of a K-12 articulated curriculum. The plan gave teachers and administrators the opportunity to directly construct a curriculum through a consensus making process that they also designed. Individual teachers have the freedom to teach the curriculum however they think best, within their own time frames, as long as pupil evaluations show satisfactory performance. If performance falters, teachers can learn to become more effective instructors through our staff development program. Although monitoring of instruction is intentionally loose, there are some tight requirements regarding the development of curriculum:

- Curriculum areas should demonstrate coherence over the grade range.
- Each curriculum area establishes the means to evaluate the degree to

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which students are attaining curriculum objectives.

● Curriculum specialists meet with teachers to make sure they understand the curriculum expectations for their grade levels. They offer assistance to teachers as needed.

To help assure the effective implementation of the curriculum, teachers receive several forms of support. They are provided with a curriculum notebook (Glatthorn 1981) outlining related systemwide goals, the specific curriculum objectives for the grade level of each teacher, and the "articulated" objectives for the grade level just before and just after. They are encouraged to request the resources they need to teach the curriculum, and every effort is made to provide the needed materials. In their evaluations, they are given specific, positive feedback for effectively teaching the curriculum. Finally, a professional development program is designed annually based on the staff suggestions. The program's primary goal is to help teachers develop the skills they need to teach the agreed-upon curriculum.

At the same time, teachers are also given a meaningful amount of instructional autonomy—in selecting their instructional materials and methods and in carving out a certain amount of time, perhaps 10–20 percent of the total in-

structional time, to fulfill needs they or their students identify that are not necessarily part of the formal curriculum.

### A Successful Balance

Many people in Acton feel that the Acton schools' ranking among the highest-scoring districts on state and national tests—despite per pupil expenditures that are about average in the state—is due to both open enrollment and the factors described above that both limit and allow autonomy in specific ways. Too much school autonomy was fraught with too many uncertainties and negative side effects. Because all concerned decided it must be restricted slightly, the central office now moderates the schools' competitive urges and emphasizes that district-wide cooperation, articulation, and sharing among schools are critical for school success. But although the central office serves as a process leader, the content of the curriculum objectives that grow out of that process are reached through consensus among the professional staff and parents of each individual school.

In the 70's, many Acton parents approached the choice of their children's schools with anxiety and uncertainty. Now, though they still have their preferences, they have confidence that all Acton schools provide a good education. Ironically, by modifying school autonomy, teachers, parents, and administrators allowed the school choice program in Acton to thrive. □

### References

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