

# How the Other Half Chooses

Originally intended as a night school for adults, the Caddo P.M. Senior High School in Shreveport, Louisiana, helped dropouts choose to stay in school and earn their diplomas.

My initial reaction to the concept of school choice when the issue emerged a few years ago was probably typical of the education community: choice would allow conscientious middle-class parents to vote with their feet. They would abandon old, neglected urban schools in favor of modern structures in pleasant environments run by dedicated administrators with highly competent faculties and virtually unlimited financial resources.

Left behind would be schools with skeletal curriculums, heavily oriented toward pseudo-vocational instruction, unable to challenge their students to grow intellectually. Choice, in short, would result in even stronger schools for society's "haves" and weaker schools for its "have-nots."

## My Opposition to Choice

This thinking was in large part a result of my own experience as an assistant principal for curriculum and instruction in a predominantly black high school serving one of the most economically disadvantaged communities in Shreveport, Louisiana. Though the physical facility was essentially comfortable, it was geographically situated so that the attendance zone included almost no white students. The few whites who were inside the school's attendance boundaries "chose" to attend a private school in order to avoid integration.

Furthermore, the local school board had negotiated a consent decree with the Justice Department that provided for a wide range of magnet options throughout the system. The result was a diminution of the number of academically able students remaining in the neighborhood school and, therefore, a reduction in many of the more rigorous course offerings.

Another provision of the consent decree allowed parents to "choose" to withdraw their children from the schools in which their race was in the majority in order to send them to schools in which they were in the mi-

nority, with transportation provided by the school district. Many black parents chose to send their children to predominantly white schools, believing, with some justification, that they would thereby receive a better education.

A good deal of choice thus already existed in the school system, and I believed that it served elitist ends at the expense of the children who remained in their neighborhood schools. As with many school districts, we faced declining enrollments at the secondary level, and many staff members and parents were convinced that as our student population continued to fall, there was a real possibility that the school would close. Hence my opposition to school choice.

## A New Point of View

And then I changed jobs. I assumed responsibility for the operation of the Caddo P.M. High School. Suddenly, I was administering a program driven wholly by choice, with no attendance lines, no compulsory attendance law, and no attendance supervisors. Students enrolled and attended only to the extent that they believed the school was serving their purposes. This new position made me realize that there is another dimension of choice.

Not only do people leave schools that they feel are not good enough; many leave because they are not con-

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sidered to be good enough for the schools. We call such students "at risk," and the numbers are devastating, in Louisiana ranging from 30 to 40 percent, depending on how one interprets the data.

Yet these dropouts—or "push-outs," as one of our assistant superintendents more accurately describes them—genuinely wish to be educated. Despite their occasional indifference, their seeming inability to conform to guidelines, and their often explosive tempers, they have bought into the idea that the only path to economic security is through the schools.

Contrary to my initial expectations, many students come to the P.M. School from schools that are generally considered to be excellent. Fully a quarter of them, furthermore, have solid, middle-class families. They leave their day schools for a variety of reasons—some fall behind their age

group academically; some have trouble arranging for child care; some have to go to work to help their families out financially; quite a few simply cannot get along with the school administration or have trouble getting to class by 7:45 a.m.

Whatever their reasons for dropping out, hundreds of them find their way to the P.M. School to drop back in, where most of them do remarkably well. I asked one young man who had previously attended the most prestigious high school in town why he had left. He replied that he liked to fight and was therefore suspended most of the time.

Of course, fighting is not allowed at the P.M. School either, and I asked why he had not pursued this interest since joining our program. His response was that people in P.M. School act like adults, and adults just don't fight in school.

Night schools traditionally have been adult programs, and the P.M. School was originally established to offer state-approved diplomas to adults for whom a GED was inadequate preparation for their career goals. The school's metamorphosis into another chance for day school dropouts has been gradual and has given us the opportunity to see to it that every student is treated as an adult, regardless of his or her age. I personally interview each applicant and discuss our expectations with all.

The P.M. School does not have an elaborate set of rules. There are systemwide discipline, attendance, and dress policies that must be followed, but essentially the only business of the school is teaching and learning, and no one in the school has a right to interfere with this process and thereby violate someone else's right to an education. Because we are a school of choice, every student has the right to choose not to comply by not enrolling.

However, almost all of them consider this arrangement to be reasonable, enroll, and fall into the P.M. routine with very little difficulty. I try not to be a disciplinarian, encouraging the students to work out difficulties on their own in a collaborative spirit with their classmates and teachers.

### A Challenge, Not a Threat

At the conclusion of the 1990 school year, we were pleased to bestow high school diplomas upon 47 young people who would otherwise have been abandoned by the educational system and required to fend for themselves, uneducated, in a desperate economic environment.

As a result of my experiences and observations at the P.M. School, I now believe that school systems will be forced to offer choices to students, especially those at risk who cannot conform to the organizational regimen of the typical secondary school. Taxpayers, parents, and students themselves will demand it, and professional educators should feel challenged, not threatened, by the opportunity. □

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