

# On Public Schools of Choice: A Conversation with Seymour Fliegel

When he was director of alternative schools and deputy superintendent of New York City's District Four in the 1970s and '80s, Seymour Fliegel created a districtwide free choice plan and a nationally recognized network of 24 alternative concept schools. Here he argues the merits of choice and suggests ways in which schools can implement such programs.

## **What choices are available to students and parents in District Four?**

If you were to go to District Four today, you would find 56 schools in 20 school buildings. Each building has one or more autonomous alternative schools in addition to the regular school. For example, there are 4 open education—or progressive—schools, 4 science and math schools, 2 performing arts schools, a maritime school, a sports school, a writing school, a career academy, and a school for children who are not doing well in regular schools.

## **What's the advantage of such diversity?**

Well, most educators agree that there's no one best way to learn. But most schools still try to teach everyone the same way. With choice, youngsters understand that you're interested in what they're interested in. You're extending ownership—and not just to



youngsters and parents, but to teachers. In most school systems you have 16 different philosophical viewpoints in one school. With choice, a teacher who believes in open education can work with colleagues who also believe in it, while a teacher who prefers the prep school approach can do what she believes in.

It also gives you an idea of where you're trying to go. I think that schools should have a vision, a dream, a goal. Go into a school and ask, "What's important in this place?" Everyone in that school should have an answer that's pretty much the same. Then you know that a vision has been clearly communicated.

**Will you say a little more about how the schools in District Four actually differ from one another?**

Okay. If you go into one of the science and math schools and ask a youngster what's important, he'll say, "Listen, you've got to know your science and math here. It's important to know how to use a computer." On the other hand, if you go into one of the Central Park open education schools and ask what's important, they're liable to say, "The individual child's important." In the early grades you'll see some kids at the sandbox, some kids working with blocks, some kids reading in the loft up above. There could be 12 different activities going on. In those schools the teacher will be moving around among the groups and individuals—getting to know youngsters, sitting down and talking with one group at a time.

**That's the kind of education I have a soft spot in my heart for.**

That's why I gave you that answer. On the other hand, the Science and Humanities School is very much like a parochial school. The kids wear blazers and same-colored skirts and so on; they march from the 4th floor down to the cafeteria in perfect order. And that also works, because everyone in that school thinks that's what's important.

**How did the District Four program come about? Did you deliberately set out to have all these**

**choices, or did the program just evolve?**

I could say, "We had a long-range plan, we envisioned a choice program 10 years down the line"—but things don't work that way; it developed organically.

We had a tremendous advantage in District Four; we were the worst district of 32 districts in New York City. Believe me, failure can be a tremendous catalyst. You're willing to take risks. It's the districts with mediocre achievement who are afraid. "Why should we try something different? As long as those other districts are failing, we're doing okay." Believe me, District Four was a poor district: 32nd in math and reading, with every problem you could think of. We started with 3 schools, one of which was the Beta School. Now, the Beta School was the easiest alternative school in the world to start, because it was for "acting out" youngsters. There isn't a principal in the world who will not support an alternative school that takes the most difficult youngsters away from them.

The second kind of alternative school—we started three at the same time in 1974—was what we call an open education school, a progressive ed school. Now, that's not hard to start either, because the parents who are interested in progressive education



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are pains in the neck. They're always bothering the principal: "Why aren't you doing this?" The teachers who like that kind of education are just as bad. They get up at staff meetings and say, "Aren't there things more important than reading scores? Shouldn't our youngsters be reading books for enjoyment?" So we decided, "Let's take all those complaining teachers and all those complaining parents, and put them together in the same school where they can ask each other those questions, ad infinitum. The rest of us can continue our very successful educational program."

**You're joking about "successful," of course.**

Sure. But the point is that you'll always find people interested in a progressive school. Teachers and parents get recruited for it and become very supportive.

The third school was the East Harlem School for the Performing Arts. That's another easy school to start, because it's nonthreatening. Principals in the other schools say, "Performing arts is not academic. Our institution is academic. We may be failing, but we're failing *academic* institution, and not a frivolous performing arts institution." We started with these three schools, all small. It's very important that they be small.

**Did you have three small buildings?**

No. To our way of thinking, a building is not a school. If you go into an office building in New York City, there may be 20 businesses in that building. That's how we think of schools. Schools are collections of teachers and students who share a common vision of teaching and learning.

Most of our schools started on the top floor or in the basement. You accept that. You go to the principal of a school and say, "Listen, we'd like to have an alternative school here. It'll be good for you. Why don't you give us your best floors and all your best facilities?" The principal will say, "I have rooms on the 5th floor. You can have them." But that's okay. You take the 5th floor, you take the basement,

because what we're doing is giving you the autonomy in decision making that everyone is talking about today. In our district we've had it for years because we've been allowing these folks—most of them teachers, by the way—to carry out their visions.

**What happens when you put an alternative school into the same building with an existing school?**

There's a real possibility of some conflict, because you know how we educators are. I know teachers who tell me that a particular seat in the teachers' cafeteria is their seat. You know, "I've been sitting here for 25 years—it's my seat." I say, "Let someone else sit there; you'll still enjoy the meal." Basically, the principal has to be given some support, too. If the principal comes to me and says, "Look what they're doing on the 4th floor," I say, "Don't tell me what they're doing on the 4th floor. What do you want to do on 1, 2, and 3?" "Well, if I could I would . . ." "What do you need in order to do that?" And I give them something. This is a materialistic world. The principal says, "If I could get buses, we'd go on a camping trip." "Why not? Why don't you think about that? Do you want to do that? Fine!" So they begin to see that there's an advantage to having an alternative school in their building.

**If you were a school administrator now who didn't have a choice program, would you set out to create one? The other one evolved; would you do it straightforwardly now?**

I suppose I wouldn't do anything straightforwardly.

**Deviously, then?**

Sometimes it's better to dance in the dark. What I would do is free the leadership that I know exists. People have said to me, "Well, you have special folk in New York City, special leadership." In every district in this country there are people who have the potential for leadership. You encourage them; you call them forward. I'm sure I'd find somebody in the district who believes in choice, and I would start in a very small way with that person's building. "Tell me, what are

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you interested in? Do you have a few teachers who you're willing to give some autonomy to?" And then you support it.

And, by the way, you have to be willing to support people who make mistakes—because I guarantee you, they're going to make mistakes. Just picture our situation. Four schools in one building—originally there was one principal. Do you think those alternative directors aren't going to do something really stupid from the standpoint of the principal of that school? I guarantee you, they will do it. They will insult that principal, they will do something without checking that breaks any number of rules. I can't tell you the number of times I've said to a director, "That was a dumb thing to do." And the best way to deal with it is to say it was a dumb thing to do and then work it out and get on with it. You must make decisions. Is this a good person for youngsters? If so, you support her. Listen, if all you support is people who do everything right, who needs you?

But you always exclude people, too. If you make it too easy, no one thinks it's of any value. Most critical, you have to have schools of quality and diversity for choice to be meaningful. It scares me when I hear of a district or a whole state

going choice overnight. It bothers me, because it takes time to develop.

**Let's look at it from the principal's standpoint for a moment. Suppose you're in a district that doesn't have a choice program. What can you do at the building level?**

I'd find the people in the school who are interested in setting up smaller units and who have a pretty clear philosophical base for what they want to do—I assure you they are there: people who believe in child development, people wild about the arts, or science, or math—and give them a little autonomy. I'd give them two classrooms on the 3rd floor. Always start small, never start big—because you want it to be successful.

You can do that very quietly, without asking the superintendent. But don't forget: If it works well, you always share the credit with "our brilliant superintendent who encouraged me and supported me through all these difficult times."

**Let's broaden the discussion a bit. Some people, including a number of federal officials, contend that simply by providing for choice, you create competition which will automatically improve the quality of schools.**

It would be so easy if we could find the one thing that would change all of our schools. It's never one thing, it's a combination of things. I see choice as a catalyst. For a catalyst to work, if I remember anything about chemistry, there have to be other elements involved. Otherwise, there's nothing for the catalyst to work on. I mentioned the need for vision—knowing where you're trying to go. Other factors are a focus on teaching and learning, higher expectations, a sense of ownership. What may be most important of all is the size of the school; kids don't get lost in small schools. But it's never one thing.

Now, for choice to be a catalyst, you must have diversity. You see, the one thing a central bureaucracy demands is conformity. That's why we're there. But if you're going to go out into the marketplace to attract people, you're not going to say, "We're another school just like the

school you're going to. The only reason to come here is to waste a half hour getting here." That's why quality and diversity are so important.

**But is diversity really that important to parents? Some would argue, "You don't have to be freakish. The issue is quality." "We can reach agreement," they'd say, "on a good educational program all kids ought to have—but the people down the street don't do it very well. So parents should be able to send their children to a good school."**

Well, that's the second role of choice: accountability. Take the issue of school-site management. I think a principal and staff should have tremendous autonomy. But I'm not a romantic who feels that parents should run schools. In a poor community, parents have enough to do just struggling to survive. So I want autonomy as a professional, but I want parents to have a mechanism for accountability. Now, what's a better accountability mechanism than the ability to select your school? "You professionals run it as you want. All I want is the right to say whether my youngster goes to that school or doesn't." I think that's a fair deal.

**Let me ask the really tough question, then. Some of the advocates of choice think it should apply to all schools, including private and religious schools. Most public school people, though, are adamantly opposed. Are you?**

I'm not adamantly opposed, because there are too many things that are more important to me. For example, as I travel around the country, I find there's tremendous opposition to schools of choice in public education. When I ask why people feel that way, half the time they tell me it's a Republican conspiracy for vouchers and tuition tax credits. Now, if that's the way people feel, we're never going to get choice in public education.

But the reason I'm against the idea on an even more pragmatic level is that kids in private schools already have choice. All I want is for poor folks to have choice. Think about the people you know, including educators

themselves. The question is not whether they should have choice; they've already made their choices. When they chose where they wanted to live, probably one of the most important factors was where the kids would go to school.

**They paid for that choice.**

But it's still a choice. And I'm saying poor kids don't have that choice. Let's get to that level first. Twenty years from now, when public education has had a chance to really improve, I'll be happy to discuss the issue of private schools. But not now, because it's not going to happen anyhow.

**How about inter-district choice? In Minnesota and several other states with a lot of rural districts where there aren't many choices available within a district, legislatures are giving parents the right to choose another district.**

I'm in favor of inter-district choice. If I'm for choice, I'm for choice. In New York City, a number of youngsters now come into District Four from other districts. We used to lose a lot of kids to surrounding districts, and those superintendents never complained when they took our brightest kids. But it was embarrassing for those superintendents when East Harlem started drawing kids from the Upper West Side and the East Side of New York, because East Harlem isn't all that attractive; East Harlem is one of the poorest communities in this country. My argument is that parents will send their kids wherever quality education is being offered. I could take you to the 5th floor of a 90-year-old building in East Harlem where the plaster is peeling, and so on, and show you youngsters from the West Side coming into that school.

Again, that's why quality is so important. I'll bet that where you have quality education in Minnesota, you'll not see large-scale movement of youngsters. Still, there's something healthy about parents' knowing that they *can* leave that school.

**And contrary to what I just said, you can probably provide inter-district choices even in rural dis-**

**tricts if you really want to.**

Yes, I believe you can.

**One of the big concerns about choice is equity. An obvious concern—especially in places where they've worked hard for years to desegregate the schools—is that choice can lead to resegregation.**

Choice is a mechanism, a tool. It's how one uses the tool that determines the results. It's easy to specify—as they did in Minnesota, as they did in Cambridge, Massachusetts—that choices will not be permitted if they increase racial isolation. They call it "controlled choice."

But let me say something about equity. When all of our kids were failing, no one raised the equity issue. We had a high school in East Harlem called Benjamin Franklin High. I guess that many years ago it must have been a fine high school, but for the last 20 years it had been a disaster. Seven percent of the youngsters who went to Benjamin Franklin graduated. Ninety-three percent never made it. If you took attendance in the morning—no one had the courage to take it in the afternoon—it was 44 percent.

So the school was closed, and we went to the central board and said, "We want to become your partner in that building you call Benjamin Franklin. We want to recreate that school, close it and reopen it." And we did. We went around the city of New York in May and June recruiting youngsters. The only thing we told them was, "If you come to this school, you'll go to college." We opened three schools in that building: River East, an elementary school; Isaac Newton, a traditional alternative science and math school; and the 9th grade of a new high school, The Manhattan Center for Science and Math. Four years later, we graduated every youngster—and every youngster went to college. Every single youngster.

Now, you might say, "Isn't that marvelous!" The next year the central board cut our allocation because it wasn't equitable. I ask, "Where were they when all those kids were failing?" No one raised the equity issue then. When a school starts doing something that embarrasses other schools, you'll

start hearing about equity. Now, I'm for equity, but I'm not for equity that levels down; I'm for equity that levels up.

**But what about curriculum equity? We've heard from Ernest Boyer, John Goodlad, and other authorities, that schools should have a common core of learning. Schools of choice can be very different from one another. How can you guarantee that kids are getting a common education?**

State boards of education have the right to say, "These are the outcomes we want." But it's up to schools and districts to develop the strategies to get those outcomes. You allow different ways to get there, knowing that everybody doesn't learn the same way.

**Still, equity is an issue in another way. In some parts of the country, magnet schools have been so popular that parents have had to compete for places. In the Washington area, newspapers report that determined parents line up overnight to get their kids into a particular school. Some parents can't or won't do that, so their kids don't get the special programs.**

I agree that's a problem. But I don't understand it. In East Harlem, we started with Central Park East One. It became oversubscribed, so we did a tremendously creative thing: we opened up Central Park East Two. And when Central Park East Two became oversubscribed, we didn't want to appear noncreative, so we opened up River East, which is really Central Park East Three. Limiting choice to a few options is like a big corporation saying, "We have a tremendous product here. Isn't it too bad we can't make any more." They wouldn't say that. They'd open another factory.

**But magnet school programs cost extra money, so you can't always just open another one.**

Okay, I guess so. But why rap magnet schools because everybody wants to go to them? To me, the answer is open up more schools to do the same thing. I assure you, there's a teacher in that magnet school who's sure she could open up a much better school

**Wouldn't it be nice if wherever you went, people felt they were there because it was the right place for them?**

somewhere else if only she had the opportunity.

**That leads to a question about teachers. Teachers ought to have choices, too, as you've said. But what happens if the parents and students want one kind of school and teachers want another? Will some teachers have to do what they don't believe in?**

That's not the way life is, you understand. I'd be suspicious of a group of teachers who want to have a school that nobody wants to go to. I'd say, "Listen, where've you been? No one's coming to your school; doesn't that tell you something?" But you're not going to have that situation. You're going to have diversity. And teachers will move toward the places that do attract kids, be it open education or the military academy.

**You've told us about advantages, but there must be some problems to a choice program.**

Yes, there are problems. Space is always a problem. There's probably an increased cost in transportation in a large district. East Harlem is compact, so it's not a problem there, but in a larger district, transportation can be a major problem because offering choice without transportation is not providing choice.

Some things that are supposedly problems I don't see as major problems. Wherever I go I hear people saying, "Under a choice system, you need a tremendous information system." And I say, what about regular schools? Shouldn't they have an information system?

A lot of people in authority don't like the idea of choice because it means, "You could close this place, couldn't you?" But you never really close a public institution entirely. All you do is reorganize it and reopen it. Still, that concept is frightening to people.

But I see that as healthy. It cuts down, I think, on central bureaucracy. Instead, administrators pour resources into the schools—because they're competing.

**Is competition between schools really a good thing?**

I think so, because it makes educators think about what they're doing. In East Harlem, we had a junior high principal who wouldn't let anybody come to his school who didn't live in his zone. Now, you see him running around the district with his carousel and slides; he's broken his school into four different mini-schools, and he has developed a good school. Remember that in East Harlem we have alternative schools and regular schools in the same building. Do you think you can have a school on the 4th floor having interesting trips and performances and all kinds of exciting things happening, and people on the 3rd floor saying, "That's okay, that's good for them up there but not for us"? Doesn't work that way. In the building where we have our performing arts alternative, the regular school has one of the strongest performing arts programs of any regular school. So competition does, from my perspective, upgrade quality—but there are many other things involved, too.

**An administrator who has a choice program in his district says that in his experience, people are sometimes attracted not so much to a program as they are to personality. It's like picking a church because you like the minister.**

Now, is that bad? Or do we go to a church where we don't like the minister? Think how choice applies to a really important issue, like my getting a haircut. I now live in Queens, but I get in my car and drive to the Bronx where I used to live to get my hair cut. No one would ever suggest that I have to get a haircut in my own neighborhood. I would take them to court! But

then again, getting your hair cut is an important issue. What school you go to is not considered quite as important.

The same thing in terms of medical care. What if we said to people, "You have to go to the doctor or dentist in your building"? In New York City, no one goes to the doctor or dentist in their own building. They make it their business to find a dentist in the other end of town.

I hope I haven't given the impression that every parent understands the philosophical base of the school he or she chooses. They don't—except in open education, where they're experts. But there are other ways to find out about a school. Educators ask, "How can poor parents make an intelligent decision about something like that? They didn't go to Harvard to learn how to select a good school." Well, parents know something about schools. They talk to their neighbors, they talk to older siblings, they visit the school, and they say, "This is a good place for me." Now, wouldn't it be nice if wherever you went, people felt they were there because it was the right place for them?

**You said earlier that if a school is popular, open another one like it—but it's pretty hard to duplicate personality.**

Interestingly enough, we don't have that problem. Again, take your favorite school. There's a whole network of folks out there committed to open education. They're true believers; they go to conferences day and night. And they're determined. If you go to an existing open school and ask, "Who wants to move on?" you'll find some who think they could do it even better. All you have to do is ask them.

If we're dependent on one or two personalities to educate the kids of this country, we've got a major problem. I'm convinced that we don't have that problem. In every district in this country, there are people who can do it. All they need is to be given a chance. All they need is support. □

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