

The Many Facets of School Choice

A Minneapolis parent and teacher says choice is alive and well after 20 years.

Choice in education? Can it happen? Would it be valuable? As parent and professional, I can't imagine another way.

When I sent my oldest child, now 21, off to kindergarten, the Minneapolis Public Schools' federally funded "Southeast Alternatives" program was in its fledgling years. I had the choice of four schools, each with a different philosophy. The school I chose fit with my philosophy of child development; my child's education complemented our family's values. At one point I had seriously considered moving out of the city, but, in the end, I just couldn't imagine buying into a suburban school system that believed there was only one way to educate all children. One system can't meet all of the diversity of our human interests and multi-intelligences.

As my last child prepares to enter high school, her choices are even broader—the Open Magnet, the International Baccalaureate, the Arts School, the Technology Magnet, the Liberal Arts Magnet—and, if none of these fully meets her needs, she has the right to enroll in classes at the University of Minnesota.

I am also an elementary teacher in a K-8 Minneapolis public alternative school, where parents, students, and teachers all have choices. Parents choose to send their children to our school and we have been over-enrolled for years. Every spring parents visit our classrooms and give their input on choice of teacher for their child's next school year. For 10 years, we've held "Goal-Setting Conferences" each September, during which parents, teacher, and student discuss

the student's strengths, interests, and needs, including academic, physical, interpersonal, and artistic goals. Together, they choose specific goals for the student, going beyond traditional curriculum. Our school's "whole child" emphasis includes interdisciplinary thematic curriculum, experiential curriculum, hands-on manipulatives, the direct teaching of social skills, and attention to each learner's distinct style.

In my multi-age classroom, students have many choices. They may elect to sit in the pillow corner or at the tables; they may decide to interact with peers for "teaching"; and they may choose what mini-courses to take or teach, how to organize their work time, what topics they believe are most meaningful to investigate within a theme, and when to eat a healthy snack. Our staff believes it is important for students to make choices and evaluate the results of their choices. We give students the opportunity to make many choices in

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order to help them learn how to make good choices.

As a teacher in this site-based managed school, I also make many choices each day. Some choices involve next year's budget, the staff development focus, and the day-to-day operation of our school. Most important, however, I choose how to facilitate the growth of my students. I determine the interdisciplinary themes that incorporate our district's curriculum guidelines, and I select the wide variety of materials for teaching each theme rather than relying on standard textbooks. I also choose the math manipulatives, the problem-solving situations, and the novels for my literature-based approach to reading. I am accountable for the success of each of my students; therefore, I choose the strategies that nurture each child's learning based on my understanding of his or her learning style, interests, skills, and deficits. I am the professional educator who determines—who chooses—how to help them focus their energies.

Over the years, my opportunity to make educational decisions has increased my commitment to excellence, to success for every student. Over time, increasing student choices has also significantly decreased my discipline problems. Maybe William Glasser has been right all along. After basic physical needs, we seek to have power, freedom, and fun. It certainly is a lot more fun to have the power and freedom to make choices than to have them made for us. □

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