

# Will Boston Be the Proof of the Choice Pudding?

Boston's experience may, in time, shed light on the potential of choice plans for school reform.

For now, there are some early lessons about the obstacles and the potential rewards.

Choice has been touted as the sovereign remedy for the many ills of public education. The American education system is, according to this view, as fundamentally dysfunctional as the command economies of Socialist nations. Only by letting the fresh breeze of competition into an educational marketplace will schools—and teachers—reach their potential (Shanker 1985, Kearns and Doyle 1988, Glenn 1990c).

There is much in this view that I share. Twenty years of responsibility for strengthening urban education in Massachusetts through aggressive state interventions, massive state funding, and countless teacher training programs have convinced me they can't do the trick; more fundamental reform is necessary. Diversity and choice should be part of any strategy to revitalize education.

Some voices insist that choice policies embracing only *public* schools will not produce sufficient pressure for real change, that entrepreneurial energy and the discipline of the market will be evoked only when the competition can be joined, on equal terms, by existing and new nonpublic schools (Coons 1990, Chubb and Moe 1990). Others go even farther, arguing that public schools are essentially unreformable and that government should get out of the business of providing education altogether (Blumenfeld 1985, Lieberman 1989, Glenn 1990a).

Despite these theoretical arguments, new laws and policies to encourage

choice among public schools are being adopted across the country. Choice has become part of the reform agenda, embraced with more enthusiasm by parents, business leaders, and governors, however, than by educators. Can choice provide the energy and the elbow room for real school reform?

While research confirms that choice can lead to effective *individual* schools (Blank 1984, 1989; Raywid 1984, 1989), those who argue that choice will result in *overall* improvement—or disaster—for American education have little solid evidence. The success of magnet and alternative schools can be dismissed as derived from selection of students and staff, and too often the result is further weakening of the "ordinary" schools from which they draw students (Moore and Davenport 1989).

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A more valid test for the impact of choice on school effectiveness would be those cities that have adopted policies under which *all* school assignments are based upon parent choice, subject to space and desegregation restrictions. Cambridge, Massachusetts, may have been the first to abolish school attendance zones, in 1981, and a dozen other Massachusetts cities have subsequently implemented variations on this model (Alves and Willie 1987, Rossell and Glenn 1988).

## Controlled Choice in Boston

Boston is the latest city to implement a universal choice policy, and it has done so under circumstances that should, over time, demonstrate whether choice can deliver on the promises frequently made for it. The new teachers' contract, shaped by the professionalization agenda of the American Federation of Teachers, is strongly oriented toward school-based management. Local universities and businesses remain committed to working with the public schools. A newly created unit of the Massachusetts Department of Education, the Boston/Chelsea Team, has been given responsibility for funding and compliance in all program areas (except Special Education), and state desegregation funds have been provided for parent information and school improvement efforts (see Glenn 1990b).

Since March 1989, then, Boston has been working to implement three elements deemed essential to a successful program of parent choice of

schools by experience in other Massachusetts cities. First, the assignment procedures must be perceived to be fair and must provide safeguards against racial segregation and against manipulation by those with influence. Second, there must be a truly effective information effort for parents, including individual counseling about the options available, that is built into the process by which they make decisions. And, third, there must be interventions to help—and require, if need be—the schools that are not attracting pupils to take stock of what they must do to become more “competitive.”

Some supporters of school choice assume that it is enough to set the market to work, and it will produce all the desired results. We have learned otherwise in Massachusetts, where more than 150,000 pupils now attend public schools that enroll them on the basis of choice. For example, school staffs do not necessarily respond to declining applications by self-examination and change; after all, inner-city schools have become very familiar with abandonment by those with other options, and most have responded by hunkering down rather than by trying harder. And given the organizational context of public schools (Chubb and Moe 1990), the impact of failure in competition, as in teaching children, is muted. Further, teachers and principals with seniority do not face unemployment, even if their schools should close, and urban school systems are seldom in a position to close schools, in any event, because of the continuing in-migration of Hispanic and Asian families. Thus, interventions are needed to stimulate and help schools respond to educational market forces.

### Strategies for Improvement

Boston's controlled choice assignment plan, implemented in 1989 for certain grades on a pilot basis, was an attempt to stimulate school improvement and to reduce the role of mandatory assignments in meeting the desegregation obligations of the system. The plan provided for school improvement councils in each of four zones (three K-8 and one for high schools) that would advise the zone superintendent

on measures to strengthen any schools unable to attract a sufficient number of applicants and on the use of state and federal funds to meet this goal.

How successful was controlled choice in Boston last year? The assignment procedures themselves were quite successful on three measures: the extent to which the affected grades were desegregated, the proportion of parents (nearly 90 percent) receiving assignments they had requested for their children, and the ability of schools to hold their assigned pupils. The procedures were generally perceived as fair.

The parent information effort was less successful, though not for lack of printed materials and four state-funded parent information centers, which were staffed and busy. The problem—which can be solved by staff training—lay in a lack of effective individual counseling to overcome the inexperience of most urban parents in making decisions about schools. It is not enough to provide information about individual schools and assignment procedures; parents must be individually counseled by staff who speak their languages, listen and respond to their concerns, and are patient as they make decisions.

After the first round of all-voluntary assignments were issued, some schools were filled up while others had many vacancies. This was the opportunity to counsel parents who had not received one of their choices about the options still open and to find out what educational offerings could attract them to a school in an unfamiliar part of the city. It was also a chance to link up the staffs of the less attractive schools with parents who were “shopping” for a place. Too many of the parents who were disappointed in the first round, however, were again disappointed in the second, because the parent information effort had not counseled them effectively to select among the schools with space available.

Parent information efforts and a fair and orderly process for assignments are meaningful only if the school choices available are distinctive in their approach to education in ways that are meaningful to parents—though equivalent in quality.

### Targeted Assistance for “Vulnerable” Schools

It was clear from the start, in Boston, that school improvement efforts would have to be targeted to schools that experienced difficulty in attracting a sufficient number of pupils. Experience in other Massachusetts cities had shown that additional resources alone would not make the critical difference, without a school-level process of setting ambitious goals and organizing to attain them.

The highly centralized school department showed little inclination at first to encourage schools to accept this challenge, even after the state board called for the development of “strategic plans” for improvement of schools that failed to satisfy assignment guidelines. The plans were to address program placement/scheduling, leadership, discretionary funds, facilities improvement, and outreach/recruitment. Commissioner Ron Reynolds got the ball rolling, however, by offering state assistance, through the newly established Boston/Chelsea Team, to “those schools experiencing difficulty attracting applicants.” This assistance, Reynolds stressed, could include both funding and “flexibility in program guidelines to support school restructuring.”

Then the state's Boston/Chelsea Team set in motion a three-stage process tied to the outcomes of parent choice, anticipating the implementation of the new teachers' contract. The first stage involved negotiations with the Boston schools' central office to identify all available resources for school improvement and, “equally important, a mode of administering resources as well as local, state, and federal requirements that will support fundamental change in the vulnerable schools.” During the second stage, the zone superintendents and planning councils allocated resources—including placement of programs and commitment of external funds—and developed intervention strategies.

The third stage was the actual process of planning for improvement by individual schools, which fitted in very well with the system's new emphasis on school-level decision making and on schoolwide Chapter 1 projects in-

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volving fundamental restructuring. Eighteen "vulnerable" schools, whose staff were committed to the coordination of services, were allowed to submit a single—and simple—proposal for a variety of state and federal funding programs. They were also encouraged to seek waivers of any requirements that made it difficult for teachers to work together effectively.

Further, the Boston/Chelsea Team developed a catalogue of models of educational restructuring to simplify further the task of conceptualizing and writing proposals. These models or prototypes were not designed to substitute for school-level efforts to come to grips with questions of goals, organization, pedagogy, and accountability but, rather, to provide a framework for asking the right questions. They emphasized integration of regular and special education, two-way bilingual education, cooperative learning, school-parent linkages, family literacy programs, and other approaches to restructuring that have been more talked about than implemented in urban school systems.

**A Fundamental Shift**

As Boston moves into the second year of controlled choice, it is clear that there is nothing simple or automatic

about harnessing choice to school improvement. State and local budget crises, heated controversy over whether layoffs should be on the basis of race or of seniority, proposals that responsibility for special education and vocational education be taken away from the school system, and political conflict over the firing of the superintendent and the proposed abolition of the elected school committee—all these have raised questions about whether urban school systems are capable of managing something as delicate as the process of education.

Despite a system that has lurched from crisis to crisis, however, the fundamental strength of Boston's choice policy and of individual schools has become apparent. For example, while only 6 middle schools attracted more than 100 first-choice applicants in 1989, 12 did so in 1990, suggesting that school improvement and parent information efforts are increasing the number of schools capable of "competing." Most of the 18 schools identified for restructuring assistance have gone about the task with real enthusiasm, despite the discouraging events around them.

During Boston's first round of assignments for September 1990, 72 elementary classes were closed in schools that had not attracted sufficient applications; during the second round, as parents made additional choices, 36 classes were added, mostly in other schools that had been more successful in recruitment. The message was unmistakable: *win the confidence of parents, or go under.*

Public school choice will not produce overnight miracles, and the Boston experience—like that of Soviet-bloc economies—shows how very difficult it can be to reform an entrenched institution with a monopoly position and a tradition of top-down decision making. To a long-time observer (and the parent of Boston schoolchildren for 20 years), however, it is clear that something fundamental has begun to shift, as schools become more accountable to parents and less to "downtown." The pace of that shift sometimes seems glacial, but the working of parent choice has had a way of raising the stakes. □

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