Evidence, Values, and the Revitalization of Schools
Response to Raywid

I appreciate Raywid's critique of Public Schools of Choice but take issue with her analysis of the research on choice and her advocacy of choice as key to revitalizing the schools.

Mary Anne Raywid has taken an important step toward extending the discussion about "public schools of choice" addressed in the recent ASCD monograph of the same name. She and I agree on the importance of finding ways to encourage the ongoing revitalization of public schools and creating more democratic governance structures for them. But here I would like to address two aspects of the discussion about choice on which we do not agree. First, I look at Raywid's analysis of the research about schools of choice. Then, I examine whether choice by itself is sufficient for revitalizing public schooling.

The Research Issue
Raywid's analysis of the research poses two problems. First, no matter how large the database and sophisticated the analysis, correlations cannot answer any questions about cause. This becomes especially apparent when policymakers and others anticipate predictable results of the same policy across diverse community and school contexts. Second, even if choice is associated with certain effects in a stable manner, other concurrent, less desirable effects may also arise. For example, if improved test scores are a consequence of a choice system but so is stratification, is choice worth it? Thus, we see that the values debate cannot be avoided.

The issue of "experimental evidence" is, as Raywid suggests, problematic, yet I cannot share her conclusion that we can infer a causal link between choice and student learning from the data available. I believe that in her critique Raywid has gone beyond the evidence, as the panel suggested the claims of choice advocates often do. For example, she states that "correlational studies begin to give us glimmers of more... and when subjected to sophisticated statistical treatment like multiple regression and path analysis, they can yield the kind of evidence often accepted as tantamount to having established causation." The data she cites, however, have been derived largely from evaluation, survey, case, and/or ethnographic studies. Causality cannot be established from the results of such studies, even if they do number in the hundreds (Asher 1976). The data she cites, however, have been derived largely from evaluation, survey, case, and/or ethnographic studies. Causality cannot be established from the results of such studies, even if they do number in the hundreds (Asher 1976).

If public policy and institutions are to benefit from research and demonstrated practices, whether or not cause can be ascertained, we must engage in debate about fundamental values, concepts, and assumptions in research and in practice. All of these construct our sense of the world, of experimental, case, and ethnographic studies—indeed, of any practice. Thus, attention must be paid to these fundamentals so that they do not mislead the researcher, policymaker, or practitioner.

The values issue becomes both more apparent and more controversial as we note that Raywid's cited schools of choice, whether public or nonpublic, are homogeneous, "problem-free" schools (see, for example, Coleman et al. 1982; see also Chubb and Moe 1990 and Coleman 1977, pp. 3-4). These settings are not congruent with our attempts to prevent and reduce social class and ethnic stratification, which is a likely outcome of purposeful homogeneity.

It is widely conceded that certain ethnic, racial, and economic groups do not fully participate in or receive the benefits of schooling, the economy, and the society. No one plans for this stratification, but it happens. Hence, for
Public Schools of Choice encouraged us to consider and try a variety of revitalization activities in addition to choice.