

# A Look at Choice in the Netherlands

The Dutch experience with family choice has broad implications for the U.S., particularly in the areas of finance, governance and innovation, and equity.

Policy analysts speculate about the potential long-term positive benefits of school choice in the United States, ranging from improved teacher morale (Murnane 1986) to higher achievement (Coleman and Hoffer 1987, Chubb and Moe 1990, Raywid 1989). Giving parents and students the opportunity to determine which school to attend is widely viewed as a stimulus for educational improvement and general productivity (Levin 1989, Wahlberg 1989, Finn 1990). But other educators express concern that choice will have a variety of negative consequences, ranging from increasing socioeconomic differences in exposure and attainment (Moore and Davenport 1990) to the undermining of educational standards (Levin 1986).

These arguments are largely theoretical. Choice options in the United States have, until recently, been limited and experimental, although as Nathan (1989) points out, they are becoming increasingly common within the public sector. Discussions about longer term consequences have typically ignored the experiences of other countries with choice. There are, of course, constraints in making cross-national comparisons since educational and political systems are unique in structure and

history. However, "freedom of education" in the Netherlands has existed for more than 85 years, and the experiences of this country present useful lessons about issues—both positive and negative—that may arise in a mature system of family choice.

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## The Status of Dutch Education

The passion for education in the Netherlands stems from the dependence of the Dutch economy on international trading, which demands a well-schooled population (Schama 1987). One of the first countries to institute government-funded schools for all children, the Netherlands had in place, by the middle of the 19th century, a well-developed system of publicly supported gymnasiums for academic study (Huggett 1983).

This tradition has been richly continued (OECD 1989a, MOW 1989b). Children begin school at age 4, and the proportion of students who go on to tertiary education lags behind only the U.S. and Canada.<sup>1</sup> More than 6.5 of the Dutch GNP is allocated to educational expenses, a level second only to Sweden.<sup>2</sup> Although the secondary school system is highly tracked, approximately three-quarters of students above the age of 15 (minimum school-leaving age) enroll in a full-time course of study.<sup>3</sup>

While Americans may envy the high scores that Dutch children achieve on international math and science tests, the educational issues now being discussed would make them feel very much at home (MOW 1989b, Louis et al. 1990). The Dutch economy is currently in excellent shape (OECD

1989b). However, national deficits have continued to dog efforts to maintain social services over the past decade. As part of reductions in the national budget, the government was (and is) forced to make significant cuts in education and to press for a variety of measures to increase efficiency. Other leading concerns include:

- establishing minimum standards for student performance, particularly at the levels equivalent to junior high;
- high dropout rates and functional illiteracy, particularly among minorities and those from poorer families;
- the rapid increase in the special education population, fueled by changing patterns of emotional and behavior problems;<sup>4</sup> and
- the poor articulation of the educational system with pressing labor market needs in the context of European unification.

Finally, critical governance questions are framed in terms of the need to increase local control over education while decreasing that exercised by the national government (MOW 1989a, Louis et al. 1990). Thus, just as in the U.S., decentralization and "school-based management" are at the forefront of policy discussions.

### Choice in the Dutch System

There is one distinctive feature of the Dutch educational system that U.S. visitors would notice (if they read a little Dutch). At certain times of the year, local newspapers are full of advertisements for schools; for example, "Come to our primary school, and see what good Christian education is like" and "A superior Catholic vocational school will hold a parent and student open house on . . ." Are schools really competing with each other for pupils?

This market-like behavior derives from a critical feature of Dutch society: *verzuijing*. Roughly translated as "pillarization," the term refers to the tendency for Catholic, Protestant, and "neutral" organizations to exist in every sphere, from unions to libraries to hobby clubs (Schetter 1987). The role of pillarization in determining the jobs, friends, and political affiliations of Dutch citizens is rapidly diminishing. In the educational sector, how-



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For more than four decades, Dutch parents have been able to choose to send their children to schools that correspond to their pedagogical or religious convictions.

ever, it continues to be influential because it is supported by the Dutch Constitution. Article 23 states that "all persons shall be free to provide education" and that "private primary schools that satisfy the conditions laid down by Act of Parliament shall be financed from public funds according to the same standards as public-authority schools." This critical provision—passed in 1917 as a result of industrialists' concerns about the poor education offered in privately funded religious schools—obligates the government to fund all schools at an equal level (MOW 1988).<sup>5</sup>

The basic implication of Article 23 is that any group of parents who share a set of values can establish a school without financial constraints. In practice, this means that more than 65 percent of all schools in the Netherlands are private (MOW 1988). Most of these are Catholic or Protestant (about equal numbers of each at the elementary level and a slightly larger number of Protestant schools at the secondary level), with a small number (slightly more than 5 percent) of "neutral" private schools (Montessori, Jena, Steiner, and so on). A foundation and a board of directors composed largely of parents and appropriate community

members govern private schools; municipalities provide the administrative and policy-making authority for public schools. Parents may freely choose any school, and private schools may select among those children who apply.

Article 23 also ensures that schools (or municipalities) are free to develop their own curriculum. Current interpretations support government regulation of many aspects of educational quality standards: teacher qualifications, minimum number of basic subjects, use of finances, and so on. However, the government may not interfere with the right to determine how the "quasi-autonomous" schools will instruct students, the textbooks used, or the precise content of the curriculum. The government can only indirectly intervene in the curriculum through specific and narrow interpretations of the Constitution and by setting the final examinations for secondary schools.

Studies disagree about the importance of religious affiliation in determining parental school choice (Versloot 1990), but the principle of freedom of education is fiercely protected by the Center and Right political parties and is also privately valued by many Socialist and other Left party members.

### **Current Issues Rising from Choice**

Of the many consequences of the Dutch choice system, we will focus on three that seem particularly germane to the U.S. environment: finance, governance and innovation, and equity.

#### **Finance**

U.S. analysts disagree about whether choice would increase educational costs or make the current system more efficient (Levin 1989, Wahlberg 1989). However, the budgetary implications of Article 23 in the Netherlands are clear: freedom of choice has resulted in a relatively large number of "educational units" (schools), which, in turn, increases inefficiency and administrative overhead. In the most densely populated country in the world, the average size of an elementary school is only 175 pupils, and in a decade when minimum enrollment requirements rose and student numbers declined, the number of schools has increased (MOW 1989b).

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Thus, although schools are financed primarily on a capitation basis, the obligation to maintain schools that reflect family choice accounts for, according to recent research, 2 billion guilders out of a total educational budget of 30 billion.<sup>6</sup> Consider, for example, the overhead created by 4,000 independent boards, governing 8,000 primary and 2,000 secondary schools in a country with a population of 14 million people—fewer than in the New York State school system. In each small school, a headmaster must be funded at least part time, and the possibilities of under-enrolled classrooms and underutilization of staff exist.<sup>7</sup>

Taxpayers increasingly chafe at this news: recent polls suggest that considerably less than half the population feel that this price is fair (Schetter 1987). But politicians have been reluctant to address the costs of choice directly, largely because the dominant (and growing) Christian Democrat party strongly supports a broad interpretation of the Constitution on this issue.

#### **Autonomy, Competition, and Innovation**

Supporters of choice in the U.S. assume that if parents freely decide which school their children will attend, choices will reflect available information about the effectiveness of the school and that less popular schools will respond by improving their performance (Wahlberg 1989). The Dutch experience to date suggests that this free market model is naive.

First, even a casual familiarity with Dutch education indicates that despite the freedom to found and run alternative schools, a relatively uniform curriculum, pedagogy, and structure are the norm. As Glenn (1989) points out, the Dutch have not used the potentiality of their own system. In particular, freedom of choice does not seem to have promoted debates between producers (school boards and staff) and consumers (parents and pupils) about the quality of the content or delivery of education. Instead, content and instruction are firmly vested in the

hands of professional interest groups and organizations.

A variety of interesting new curriculums and structural programs have been introduced over the last decade (van den Berg and van Wijk 1990), but it would be difficult to conclude that the Netherlands is a hotbed of innovation. Larger scale national experiments to promote alternative education, such as the effort to develop new middle school models, are regarded as reform failures because they did not succeed in comprehensively transforming the system.<sup>8</sup> According to most observers, the requirement that schools develop and revise their own "school work plan" has challenged only a few staffs and boards to engage in serious change or improvement programs.<sup>9</sup> Finally, and perhaps most telling, the proportion of schools actually implementing distinctive educational philosophies has not increased markedly over the past two decades.

Why such uniformity when the opportunity for variety seems virtually infinite? Several factors seem to account for this.

First, there is little demand for variety or for dramatic efforts to change. Most parents are satisfied with their schools and, despite U.S. arguments that "client accountability" will increase pressures for quality, families generally use other criteria to determine which school their child should attend, at least at the elementary level.<sup>10</sup> Religious affiliation is more important to a significant minority, as is the distance the child would have to walk to get to school (Louis 1990, Glenn 1989, Versloot 1990). In contrast to the U.S., Dutch research has produced limited evidence that private schools are more effective than public schools (Dronkers 1989). However, many parents avoid public schools, particularly in urban areas, because of "image."<sup>11</sup> On the other hand, image and reputation are the only data that are easily available to parents: schools do advertise but do not compete by widely publicizing their student achievement outcomes. Such a strategy for increasing enrollment appears to be regarded as un-

professional.<sup>12</sup> Although more than half of the elementary schools test 6th year students using a state-developed examination, the results are not widely used to compare schools (No national testing is required until the school-leaving examinations at the end of secondary school, nor is there much consumer demand for more test data). Thus, we conclude that parents determine quality more on the basis of the visible socioeconomic mix of students or the school type than by reference to effectiveness or instructional innovativeness.

Second, the presence of privatization and choice does not mean there is less interest in controlling schools than in other countries. These controls have also increased uniformity. Two mechanisms have evolved in the Netherlands:

1. Lobbying organizations, which include representation from teacher unions, parents, school boards, and so on, have formed to represent schools associated with different groups (Catholic, Protestant, Reformed Protestant, Independent, and Public). These groups actively work to develop national policies consistent with the interests of their members. The "umbrella associations," rather than individual schools, are able to negotiate directly with the Ministry of Education, and competition between schools tends to be more visible at this national political level, rather than at the level of the "market." These organizations control the boards of various "support agencies" that work directly with schools; they promote the development of curriculums, position papers, and so on, that circulate among and influence their membership. Although the "umbrella associations" do not have authority over the schools, their ability to exercise indirect leverage is high.

2. While private schools predominate, a strong social consensus supports the view that students must be protected from incompetent schools. As a result, government regulation has increased rapidly, particularly over the last 20 or so years. Among all political parties, there is agreement that central regulation has gone too far and that more autonomy must revert to the schools. However, in practice the issue

of control is more complex. Local educators speculate that a diminution of national control would simply create a vacuum for regional or religious authorities or other groups to step in. The Ministry is, paradoxically, viewed by professional educators as a protection against a possible tyranny of more local control that might arise in a deregulated environment (Louis et al. 1990).

### **Equity**

Some American educators argue that choice will exacerbate problems of equity, particularly racial and social class segregation (Murnane 1986, Moore and Davenport 1990), while others contend that choice will foster equality of opportunity (Finn 1990). The Dutch experience supports the first position, raising new issues that have not been extensively discussed in the U.S.

Although the absolute percentage of non-native permanent residents in the Netherlands is small (about 4 percent), the relative rate of increase has been particularly high since the late '70s. Most minorities are concentrated in Amsterdam, Utrecht, The Hague, and Rotterdam. Over the past 15 years, Dutch policy on minorities and immigrants has been among the most vigorous and constructive in Western Europe. Initially, immigrants from Third World or poorer European countries were viewed as "guest workers" who would, in the near future, return to their country of origin. Later, however, the government introduced many programs for bilingual and compensatory education, and recent policies have emphasized a balance between respectful teaching of the "mother tongue" and culture and the need for permanent residents to integrate fully into a multicultural Dutch society (Glenn 1989).

These policies, however, do not directly address the increasing racial segregation of non-Dutch from Dutch children. "White flight" from schools with increasing numbers of immigrant children has occurred in most European countries, but the rate is particularly rapid in the Netherlands because of Article 23. One principal

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of a public elementary school in The Hague reported, for example, that her school went from roughly 50 percent non-Dutch to virtually 100 percent non-Dutch in only three years (Louis et al 1990).

This presents the Dutch with a critical policy dilemma: minority students in segregated classrooms appear to perform more poorly than those in integrated classrooms despite compensatory policies (MOW 1989b), but Dutch parents are using the policy designed to guarantee freedom of religion to desert "black schools." In this case, the commitment to choice conflicts with the equally strongly held (but non-Constitutional) commitment to open social and educational opportunities for all. Serious discussion of this conflict, however, is typically avoided by simply asserting that "there is nothing we can do under the Constitution."<sup>13</sup>

The challenges continue to increase for private religious schools. If they do not accept immigrant children because their parents do not support the school's religious programs, they will

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*The high regard placed on education in the Netherlands derives in some degree from the economy's reliance on international commerce, requiring the country to develop a well-informed populace*

be accused of becoming "white havens" in a period of increasing social polarization. If they decide to contribute to assimilation policy by accepting non-white Muslim children, they run into political opposition from the public school "umbrella association," which argues that their doing so unfairly protects private schools from the real consequences of declining student enrollments and represents an indirect additional public subsidy of religious education.

The question of possible negative effects of Article 23 on the development of an integrated multicultural society are further exacerbated by the increasing tendency of Muslim permanent residents to demand schools of their

own—schools that will focus not only on non-Christian religious values (protected under the Constitution) but also on cultural values that directly conflict with the dominant society (for example, gender segregation in school and a focus on education for gender-segregated adult roles). More than 10 Muslim elementary schools have been founded in the last 3 years. Again, authorities are placed in a conflict between fully supporting the desired freedom of choice of school and fully supporting the policy of assimilation.

#### **What Works?**

Choice in the Netherlands appears to achieve some of the objectives U.S. proponents hope for. First, there is clearly a lower level of conflict over education—particularly questions of the values that are embodied in the educational system—than in the U.S. Parents are free to send their children to a school with a staff that operates according to their pedagogical or religious values. And, if they cannot find such a school, they can seek out kindred spirits to establish their own. Not surprisingly, parental satisfaction with the educational system and the degree to which their children's schools reinforce family values is high. Further, while teachers in the U.S. often report feeling beleaguered and unsupported

by parents, teachers express few of these concerns in the Netherlands.<sup>14</sup>

Second, although most schools are very similar, the outlets for educators and parents who want to try something different are there. Earlier we emphasized the uniformity of most schools, with the exception of the religious values embodied in their curriculum. The other side of the coin, however, is that between 6–8 percent of all schools are identifiably "alternative," a rate that far exceeds that in the U.S. Not all of these schools are private—for example, there are a variety of Montessori and open-education schools within the municipal school systems, particularly in larger towns and cities.

Third, although we have emphasized the problems that Article 23 creates for the development of national solutions to problems of racial and ethnic segregation, the private educational sector has responded to the need to integrate minorities into Dutch culture by enrolling and accommodating children of different faiths and backgrounds. Thus, we suspect that the Netherlands may, as a consequence of its unique Constitution, develop interesting models for voluntary integration.

Finally, freedom of choice has not eliminated regulation of the educational sector, but it has clearly protected schools from the shortsighted and poorly deliberated legislative interference that has characterized educational policy in some U.S. states over the past decade. In the Netherlands, schools respond to social trends and pressures, but in a more gradual and less intrusive way.

#### **Lessons From the Dutch Experience**

The recent review of the Dutch educational system by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development concluded that, despite its generally excellent quality, the system remains an expensive one, which, particularly at the secondary level, needs to better accommodate the changing economic, educational, and social needs of students and society (Louis et al. 1990). This judgment can-

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not, of course, be traced solely to choice, any more than can the high achievement levels in math and science. However, as we have argued above, choice in the Netherlands has not helped solve problems such as variability of innovation and productivity between schools or inequality of opportunity, and it may, indeed, even exacerbate them. Further, the Dutch experience suggests that choice will not result in an open, competitive market in education, since both professional standards and a variety of political and public interests will arise to constrain the market.

This paper should not be construed as an argument against choice but, rather, as an attempt to clarify the potential benefits and drawbacks. While there are clear benefits that lead the public to be generally willing to maintain this expensive system, they are not necessarily along the lines proposed by U.S. policy analysts. □

<sup>1</sup>This is a recent trend, facilitated by policies of expansion of higher education initiated in the 1970s.

<sup>2</sup>As has often been pointed out, such international comparisons are difficult. Nev-

ertheless, there is little question in our view that most comparative measures indicate that the Netherlands is among those countries that invest most heavily in education.

<sup>3</sup>In the Netherlands, unlike the U.S., a variety of part-time options and short courses are available for vocational students who choose apprenticeships.

<sup>4</sup>As in the U.S., many parents are themselves subject to social and personal dislocations that make them less able to cope with their children's problems than in the past (Social and Cultural Planning Bureau 1989, p. 158).

<sup>5</sup>Schools must meet a minimum enrollment level, which is specified by parliamentary act.

<sup>6</sup>This estimate is based on Koelman's (1987) analysis of the primary school system. Glenn (1989) reports earlier research showing that the figure may be much higher.

<sup>7</sup>Another consequence is that small schools are perceived to present teachers and administrators with more overloaded situations and role strain, as well as inferior teaching situations (Louis et al. 1990, Social and Cultural Planning Bureau 1989).

<sup>8</sup>Follow-up research suggests that schools participating in some national innovation programs have experienced lasting, albeit small-scale, effects.

<sup>9</sup>Schools do, however, report that the process of developing a school work plan is useful for internal development and staff cohesiveness.

<sup>10</sup>Because the secondary school system in the Netherlands is extremely differentiated and complex, studying parental and student choice at this level is exceptionally difficult.

<sup>11</sup>We emphasize that the U.S. research (Coleman and Hoffer 1987) points to the slightly greater effectiveness of parochial schools, which, in the largely public U.S. system, serve a narrower population than the predominantly "confessional" private schools in the Netherlands.

<sup>12</sup>Public schools, which by law are not permitted to advertise, have begun to document their achievement results in order to make them available to parents who ask for them.

<sup>13</sup>Because there is no equivalent of the U.S. Supreme Court, the process of reinterpreting the Constitution in the Netherlands is slow and ambiguous.

<sup>14</sup>It is fair, however, to note that teacher morale in the Netherlands is very low as a consequence of financial cutbacks, changing student populations, and poor staff and personal development possibilities (Besnard and Berger 1989, Franssen et al. 1989).

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