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ABSTRACT

This essay reviews research pertaining to the relative merits and drawbacks of expanding family choice in public education. A primary objective is to identify and explore tensions among competing objectives in the design of expanded choice systems. After an introductory section on goals and definitions, the second section explores how more family choice might improve public education by providing incentive for students and teachers to work hard and cooperate. A third section addresses ways in which more family choice might be detrimental to the United States's commitment to universal and compulsory education. Problems raised include (1) availability of information, (2) criteria for students' choices, (3) teacher accountability, and (4) access to education for the disadvantaged. The fourth section explores the present consequences of family choice in private schools, addressing two relevant concerns: (1) Do children in private schools learn more than they would in public schools? (2) If so, what practices contribute to private schools' effectiveness? The fifth section concerns presently available choices in public education, including choices of residence, choices within schools, choices among schools, and choices among programs (with particular attention to magnet schools as the fastest growing family choice plan in the United States today). Issues discussed include consumer information, access, location, and role of teachers in program development and management. The sixth section summarizes (1) research issues (limitations in sources of evidence), (2) what family choice can and cannot accomplish, (3) sources of tension in the design and operation of family choice plans, and (4) the importance of program design. References are included. (TE)

FAMILY CHOICE IN PUBLIC EDUCATION:

POSSIBILITIES AND LIMITATIONS

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I. GOALS AND DEFINITIONS

This essay explores the merits of expanding family choice in public education. A central theme is that it is not useful to discuss the consequences of expanding choice without specifying the details of the regulations that define the system. A second theme is that the design of expandec choice systems would be characterized by significant tensions among competing objectives. A primary objective of the paper is to identify and explore these tensions.

I begin by defining terms. By family choice I mean institutional arrangements which permit a student, in consultation with parents, to either choose among, or apply for admission to, alternative academic programs, staffed by identified teachers, and located at identified sites. (The distinction between "choose among" and "apply to" is discussed later in the essay.) I implicitly assume that parents play the dominant role in choosing programs for elementary-school-aged children, and that high-school-aged students play the primary role in their program choices. I do not, however, discuss potential conflicts between the preferences of family members.

I interpret the expression, choice within public education, as meaning that all academic programs are free to all participating families and that teachers' job security is not dependent on attracting students to the programs in which they teach. This interpretation implies that choice within public

education differs from the operation of c ·etitive markets in two significant ways. First, explicit price differences play no role in sorting students among programs. Consequently, other mechanisms must bear the full burden of rationing scarce places in popular programs. The choice of these alternative mechanisms plays a large role in determining the outcomes of family choice systems.

Second, desire for personal profit and fear of job loss, two mechanisms that stimulate entrepreneurial activity in competitive markets, are not stimuli for the creation and sustenance of alternative academic programs in public education. Consequently, an important issue is what incentives do exist for the creation and sustenance of alternative academic programs among which families can choose.

II. HOW MORE FAMILY CHOICE MIGHT IMPROVE PUBLIC EDUCATION

A. Effective Schools

I begin by describing an effective school as an organization in which both students and teachers work hard and actively cooperate with each other in the task of increasing students' skill levels. Some readers may find this description trite and empty. It is simple; however, attempts to develop a more comprehensive description have not been very fruitful. Moreover, this description has certain desirable attributes. First, it is in sharp contrast with descriptions of students and teachers that have appeared in recent critical reports on U.S. education.

These reports have emphasized the apathy and boredom that characterizes life in many U.S. schools. Second, it emphasizes the importance of the active behaviors of teachers and students in making schools work. This leads to the critical question: what motivates students and teachers to work hard? Third, it focuses attention on students' and teachers' needs for each other. While some descriptions of schooling acknowledge that students need teachers, very few acknowledge that teachers also need students. A teacher cannot do a good job without the active cooperation of students. Consequently, it is important to ask what factors influence teachers' and students' willingness to cooperate with each other. I posit that it is by influencing students' and teachers' willingness to work hard and cooperate with each other that expanding family choice can influence the effectiveness of schools in raising students' achievement.

B. Students' Behaviors

How might expanding family choice stimulate students' efforts and cooperation with fellow students and teachers in the task of learning? Three mechanisms seem plausible: matching, choosing, and being chosen.

Students may have differing capabilities for learning under particular curricula and teaching styles. Allowing families to choose among alternative programs with clearly defined curricula and known teaching staffs may facilitate the matching of student interests and capabilities with program characteristics and thereby stimulate effort and cooperation.

The act of choosing itself may stimulate effort and cooperation by providing an occasion for students and their families to discuss education goals and the kinds of actions that are needed to accomplish the goals. In other words, the process of decision-making may help students and their families to appreciate the extent to which educational achievement depends on a student's efforts and the support of parents.

Being chosen from a pool of applicants to participate in a competitive program may also stimulate effort and cooperation. This may be particularly important when students understand that a record of sustained effort and cooperation is necessary for continuation in the program.

Clearly, the three mechanisms are closely related. It is useful to distinguish among them, however, because each implies a different emphasis in program design. The matching hypothesis implies that the critical need is for each student to participate in the "right" program, but that the process used to achieve this match is not important. Consequently, the full benefits of choice might be achieved if an informed school district official made the program choice for students whose parents do not focus on the task of choosing. The other two hypotheses imply that the decision process itself is important, although in different and competing ways.

The choosing hypothesis implies that the system design should encourage students and their parents to weigh the merits of alternative programs and consider carefully the responsibilities that participation in each program implies. Operation of this

mechanism implicitly requires that students be permitted to enroll in the program the family chooses. Thus, a critical task in system design is to encourage expansion of popular programs.

The being chosen hypothesis implies that the system design should encourage competitive admissions to popular programs so that those chosen will have the sense of participation in something special.

C. Teachers' Behaviors

Expanding family choice in public education might stimulate teachers' effort levels through mechanisms similar to those hypothesized to influence students' behaviors. Students' choices of academic programs staffed by identified teachers may motivate teachers to high effort levels, both by providing the teachers with students whose interests match their own, and by imparting a sense of pride and accomplishment in being chosen.

In addition to the effects of matching and being chosen, expanding family choice might stimulate teacher effort levels by altering the conditions under which teachers work. Since this mechanism is not usually associated with family choice, I will explain it in some detail.

There have been many reports in recent years about the poor quality of much public school teaching in the U.S. (Kerr, 1983). While many diagnoses have been offered, one recurring theme is that the conditions under which many public school teachers work do not attract talented college graduates to the profession, and do not stimulate the best efforts of those teachers who do work

in the public schools. Aspects of the poor working conditions include administrative subservience, lack of control of the resources needed to teach effectively, loneliness, lack of recognition for excellence in teaching, and lack of support. Teachers are often criticized when their students do not acquire high skills levels, yet teachers often have little influence over the curricula that they teach. They also often lack control over the resources that might be used to stimulate students' interests, and they often work alone without the support, help, and companionship of colleagues with similar interests.

How might institutional changes designed to expand family choice alter teachers' working conditions? One possibility concerns teachers' role in developing the program alternatives among which families choose. It may be that one way -- perhaps the only way -- school district officials can stimulate the development of distinct program alternatives is to give teachers greater control of curriculum, resources, and choices of colleagues and staffing patterns. These changes in working conditions may stimulate high effort levels, and may also attract to public school teaching talented college graduates who find appealing the opportunity to have significant control over the structure of their jobs. In other words, an increase in <u>family</u> choices among public school programs may stimulate new approaches to professional decentralization that many teachers desire, while maintaining some mechanisms of accountability analogous to the ones enforced by a centralized bureaucracy.

III. HOW MORE FAMILY CHOICE MIGHT DAMAGE PUBLIC EDUCATION

A. American Education: Universal and Compulsory

The issue of how to organize elementary and secondary education in the United States is immensely complicated by the legal framework which defines the role of public education in our society. In the U.S., education is a universal service, meaning that all children are guaranteed an education in public schools. In some states the entitlement extends to a commitment to quality. For example, the New Jersey Constitution guarantees all children a "thorough and efficient" education in public schools.

Education in the U.S. is also compulsory. All children between certain ages (six to sixteen in most states) must attend school, irrespective of their interest in being in school or their parents' support for schooling.

The U.S. commitment to universal and compulsory education means that analysis of family choice must consider the consequences for all families, not only those parents and students actively searching for the best available education, but also those not accustomed to making educational choices, and those who do not view education as a powerful investment in the future. Seen from this perspective, family choice poses a number of difficult questions.

B. Difficult Questions

1. Information

Would all families, including families in which parents have little formal education, have sufficient information to make informed program choices? None of the mechanisms through which family choice was hypothesized to improve students' effort levels and cooperation (matching, choosing, and being chosen) would be operative for students who did not have good information about the attributes of alternative programs. It is possible that such students would be no worse off than under systems without program choice. It is also possible, however, that increases in choices among programs might diminish the effectiveness with which parents or their advocates could demand better treatment for children within particular programs. In other words, increases in choices might increase the probability that complaints would be met with responses like: "If you don't like what we are doing, choose a different program." (See Hirschman (1970) for an extended treatment of the potential tradeoffs between "exit" and "voice.")

2. Students' choices

Would many students choose programs with the principal attraction that they required little work -- and, as a result, stimulated little skill building? This a potentially serious concern, not because students are irrational, but because it does take hard work to master complex skills. It is rational for students to ask what return in the form of future income they can

expect from an investment in school work. Economists disagree on the extent to which students in general, and students from low income and minority group backgrounds in particular, benefit from educational achievement in terms of higher lifetime earnings. However, in the face of unemployment rates for teenagers that were high throughout most of the 1970s, and exceeded 30 percent for teenaged minority group members over that period, the question of whether a large number of students would choose programs that demanded little work and provided few skills must be taken seriously. To the extent that peer pressure may currently be stimulating such students to work and cooperate under the current regime, expanding choice might do away with the last incentive to engage in hard work -- instead they could simply choose an undemanding program.

3. Teachers' choices

Might not some teachers, especially those who have tried unsuccessfully, under adverse conditions, to help students learn, offer students a program that basically consisted of peaceful coexistence, with neither teachers nor students working hard or placing demands on the other group? Some critics have charged that this occurs often under the current regime. Conceivably it could occur either more or less often under choice systems, depending on the accountability incentives incorporated into the design.

4. Access

Would students who did not appear to be hard working and cooperative learners, perhaps as judged from their family

backgrounds, be able to gain access to popular programs? Or would program staffs deny access to such students on the grounds that accepting them would make it difficult to either offer a high quality program or to retain the type of students who help make a program successful? In other words, would a potential strength of an expanded family choice system -- that students' efforts are stimulated by pride in being chosen -- also be a weakness in that students not chosen would be disheartened and would work less hard?

Low morale is already a problem that is frequently encountered in schools serving the poor, but it is far from ubiquitous. A choice system that had the effect of isolating poor children and labelling them as undesirable could make it so, and make such children worse off. The same can be said for teachers who are not chosen to participate in choice schemes.

The question of whether public education would be damaged by an expansion of family choice depends, to a significant extent, on the tricky question of whether students who might be poorly served under choice plans are the same students who are poorly served under the present system and consequently might not be worse off. The potential sources of damage to public education are no more and no less than warnings that evidence is needed -- evider how students, teachers, and school systems respond to mechan of choice.

C. Old Hypotheses: Some New Evidence

The hypotheses stated above concerning the potential benefits and costs of expanding family choice in education are not new. All have been stated before, most in the context of the debate during the late 1960s and early 1970s about the merits of education vouchers (cf. Center for the Study of Public Policy, 1970). At that time, however, there was almost no empirical evidence with which to evaluate the significance of potential benefits and costs and the sensitivity of outcomes to regulatory design. This situation has changed somewhat in the intervening years as a result of recent research on private schools and on existing family choice options within the public sector.

IV. PRIVATE SCHOOLS

A. Why Interesting

Approximately ten percent of the students in U.S. elementary and secondary schools attend private schools. In some respects -- for example, the payment of tuition -- families' decisions to use private schools are different from the decisions families would make in expanded public school choice systems. However, in other significant respects, such as the process of choosing among alternative school programs, each of which typically has a known reputation and is offered at a particular site, the decision processes are similar. Consequently, in examining the merits of expanding choice in public education, it is useful to explore the consequences of families' choices of private schools. Two sets

of questions are particularly relevant:

1. Do children who attend private schools learn more on average than they would in public schools?

2. If so, what practices of private schools contribute to their effectiveness? Can public schools adopt these practices?

B. New Data

Until 1981 there was no systematic data that permitted comparison of the relative achievement of students attending public and private schools. In that year, however, the baseline data from the High School and Beyond (HSB) project became available. This project is a longitudinal study of 58,728 U.S. high school students who were either sophomores or seniors in 1980 in one of 893 public schools, 84 Catholic schools, or 38 non-Catholic private schools. The data include achievement test scores for almost all students in the sample.

Since 1981 more than 30 studies have been conducted using the HSB data. The first, and by far the best known, study is High School Achievement (1982) by James Coleman, Thomas Hoffer, and Sally Kilgore (henceforth CHK). In fact, most subsequent studies either comment on CHK's work or re-examine their conclusions. I try to interpret CHK's and their critics' research in a manner that clarifies what it can and cannot tell us about the consequences of expanding family choice in public education. In doing so, I focus attention primarily on public school-Catholic school comparisons for two reasons. First, in many respects -- student-teacher ratios, income distribution of students' families

-- Catholic schools are more similar to public schools than to other private schools. Second, the small number of non-Catholic private schools in the HSB sample, and the wide variation across these schools in school characteristics, student characteristics, and student performance has led most analysts to conclude that there are insufficient data to derive reliable conclusions about the population of such schools.

C. The Central Finding and Its Meaning

A central conclusion of CHK's research is that Catholic schools are more effective on average in helping students to increase their cognitive skills than public schools are. CHK's critics argue that this conclusion is unwarranted because CHK's methodology does not fully account for differences in the skills and motivation levels of public and Catholic school students (eg., Goldberger and Cain, 1982). Consequently, the contention is that CHK' findings are contaminated by selectivity bias.

The issue of selectivity bias has dominated the debate between CHK and their critics. This is understandable since the question of whether children really do learn more on average in Catholic schools than in public schools is of great interest. The preoccupation with selectivity bias is unfortunate, however, in that it diverts attention from an issue of great importance for the design of family choice systems, namely, whether a school's admission and dismissal policies influence the school's effectiveness. The lack of attention paid to this question is not coincidental: it stems from the way the selectivity bias

issue is framed. In particular, "selectivity" is usually viwed as a sampling bias problem rather than as an illustration of how the ways students come to attend certain schools affects their work and cooperation.

Let me begin my explanation of this important point by summarizing briefly CHK's methodology. CHK used multiple regression analysis to estimate the impact of 17 student background variables on the chievement of students in public schools. In a separate regression, they estimated the impact of these same variables on the achievement of students in Catholic schools. They then used the regression results to predict the achievement that a hypothetical student with the characteristics of the average public school student would have if he or she attended a public school or a Catholic school. The predictions indicated that the hypothetical student would have higher achievement in a Catholic school: hence, the conclusion of a Catholic school advantage.

Critics pointed out that this methodology may not control selectivity bias (e.g., Murnane, 1981). In response to these criticisms, CHK and other analysts employed a variety of alternative techniques to investigate the selectivity bias question (cf. CHK, 1982: Fetters et. al., 1981: Noell, 1982). An explicit assumption common to all these techniques is that the factors that influence family schooling choices, such as family incomes, families' knowledge about programs, schools' admission and dismissal policies, make it difficult to compare school programs because they result in nonrandom assignment of students

to schools. Techniques for controlling selectivity bias attempt to control statistically for the differences in skills and motivations that students bring to different schools.

There is a second assumption implicit in the strategies for controlling selectivity bias that has not received much attention, namely, that the factors affecting families' school choices do not themselves influence the effectiveness of school programs. In fact, it is this assumption of a conceptual distinction between the determinants of school effectiveness and the factors that influence families' schooling choices that justifies framing the evaluation question in terms of asking what the relative effectiveness of public schools and Catholic schools would be in educating randomly assigned samples of students.

An alternative view of the relationship between families' schooling decisions and school effectiveness is that some of the factors that influence families' schooling choices also influence the effectiveness of school programs. For example, control over admission and dismissal policies may not only help a school to attract (already) talented students: it may also improve a school's effectiveness by making it easier to attract high quality teachers, many of whom do not want to work with disruptive students (Antos and Rosen, 1975), and who therefore value the school's distinctive "working conditions.". Similarly, selecting students on a competitive basis from a large applicant pool may stimulate students who feel that they have been "chosen" to engage in the hard work and active cooperation with teachers that contributes to an effective school.

Viewed from this perspective, comparing the effectiveness of public schools and Catholic schools in educating randomly assigned students is not the appropriate conceptual experiment for learning about the policies that would improve the effectiveness of public schools. Instead, we must learn the extent to which each of the many factors that influence families' school choices also influences school effectiveness. Then we could consider which of the effective private school policies could be incorporated into the design of public sector choice systems.

At several points in their book, CHK endorse the view that many of the factors that influence families' school choices also influence the effectiveness of school programs. For example, they discuss the impact that control over admissions and dismissals may have on the quality of school programs (p. 100). A weakness of CHK's book, however, is that they do not explain clearly the implications of this view for the interpretation of their results. I will try to provide this explanation.

CHK's research compares Catholic schools as a group with public schools as a group. They find that the package typically associated with Catholic schools (tuition charged, significant control over admission and dismissal of students) is associated with higher student achievement than is the package typically associated with public schools (no tuition, no control over admissions, limited control over dismissals). If one believes that CHK's methods eliminate selectivity bias, then one might predict from their findings that a public school that adopted the

entire Catholic school package would be able to increase its effectiveness.

This is not the type of family choice policy that is currently being considered, however. Instead, the policies under discussion would provide families with choices among alternative public school programs. The key questions concern the sensitivity of teacher and student behaviors under these choice systems to the specifics of their design, especially to the rules governing the admission and dismissal policies of individual schools. CHK's work does not inform these design issues because they do not explore whether the variation among schools in the private sector in control over admissions and dismissals policies explains the variation in the effectiveness of individual school programs.

It is possible that future research using the HSB data may provide information about the role of admission and dismissal policies in influencing the effectiveness of private schools. To evaluate the usefulness of such policies for public education, one additional question must be addressed squarely faced. Would policies that increase family choice (and which thereby alter the procedures under which schools select and dismiss students) bring about beneficial changes in the in-school behaviors of troubled and indifferent students or would such policies only make it easier for individual schools to avoid working with such students (thereby relegating them to another school whose effectiveness would suffer as a result)? This distinction is not critical in predicting how the effectiveness of an individual school would be

influenced by a policy change. However, the distinction is critical in evaluating whether specific family choice policies would improve the performance of school systems legally committed to educating all students.

D. Hypotheses about Effective School Practices

Although recent research on Catholic schools does not provide answers to the questions that are most important in evaluating the merits of expanding family choice in public education, the research does indicate that Catholic schools have been successful in raising students' skills while operating with per pupil expenditure levels and teacher salaries considerably lower than those in public schools. In light of this track record, it is useful to recognize practices of Catholic schools that might contribute to their effectiveness and which might be incorporated into the design of public sector family choice systems.

1. Student admissions process

The process of applying for admission to a Catholic school often includes not only completion of an application form, but also an interview. These interviews may not only serve to select students, but also to inform students and their parents about how a particular school works, and as a first step in helping students to adopt behavior patterns that lead to high achievement for them and their peers.

2. Structured curriculum

As discussed below, most public high schools offer a wide

range of elective courses from which students can choose. In most Catholic schools a large part of the curriculum is mandatory for all students. Bryk et. al. (forthcoming) argue that the common curriculum in Catholic schools explains in part CHK's finding that the achievement of Catholic school students is less dependent on family background than is the achievement of public school students. The reason may be that students from low socioeconomic backgrounds are denied the option of choosing a curriculum that does not require the hard work needed to increase skill levels.

3. Teacher hiring process

In most public school districts, teachers are hired by a central office personnel administrator, often without input from the principal of the school to which the teacher will be assigned, and without the applicant's knowledge of his or her assignment. Individual Catholic schools typically hire their own teachers. Not only does the school principal know about the attributes of applicants, but applicants also know the type of program they would work in, the type of students they would teach, and the types of colleagues they would have. This greater certainty about working conditions may be one of the reasons Catholic schools have been able to hire teachers at lower salaries than those paid by most public school districts. Note that Catholic school hiring practices do not directly stem from family choice, but rather from school-level accountability that family choice may encourage.

E. Variation in Effectiveness Among Private Schools

One finding of recent research on private schools relevant to the design of family choice systems is the extraordinary wide variation in effectiveness among Catholic schools, and especially among non-Catholic schools. In fact, even the largest estimates of a private school advantage are small relative to the variation in quality that exists among different Catholic schools and among different non-Catholic private schools (as well as among public schools (CHK, 1982)).

One interpretation of this pattern is that families choose private schools for reasons other than their ability to help students acquire cognitive skills. Aren't families likely to make similar choices in a public sector choice system? This raises difficult questions of system design. Should program alternatives that do not emphasize cognitive skill development be sanctioned? If not, how can cognitive skill development be encouraged without significantly constraining the diversity that some hope will accompany an expansion of family choice?

F. Summary

The new evidence on private schools can be interpreted as suggesting that expanding family choice might improve the achievement of students who applied for and were accepted by competitive academic programs. There is no evidence from the private schools about the extent to which it is possible to make all children seem special ("being chosen") or about how choice

influences the behaviors and achievement of students not chosen for admission to competitive programs.

V. CHOICES IN PUBLIC EDUCATION

A. Different Types of Choices

Contrary to rhetoric that characterizes U.S. public education in terms of monopoly without choice, families currently exercise a range of choices in U.S. public education. These include choice of residential location, choice of courses within a school, and choices among alternative schools. The evidence, such as it is, on each of these types of choices throws light on the merits of expanding family choice.

B. Choice of Residential Location

In the majority of public school districts in this country, a family's residential location determines which school their child attends. There is compelling evidence that families do pay attention to perceived school quality in making housing choices. Families pay premiums for housing in school districts with reputations for good schools (Edel and Sklar, 1974: King, 1977: Oates, 1969, 1973: Pollakowski, 1973: Reinhard, 1981). Families also pay premiums to live in neighborhoods served by schools in which the average achievement of the students is high (Grether and Mieszkowski, 1974). Thus, for families that can afford to pay premiums for housing, choice of residential location is an effective mechanism for acquiring high quality public education

for their children.

For most low-income families, however, choice of residential location is not an effective means of acquiring high quality education. In fact, sorting of families by residential location systematically excludes low-income students from many high quality schools. This suggests the importance of paying particular attention to the effects that expanding family choice in public education would have on the options available to low-income families, those families least able to take advantage of some powerful existing forms of school choice. Two possibilities need to be considered: first, that family choice plans would make better school programs available to poor families: second, that such plans would intensify residential sorting as affluent families left districts where choice plans were introduced. Obviously, the literature on successfully implemented desegregation plans is relevant here.

C. Choices Within Schools

Since the turn of the century, there has been a dramatic increase in the number of curricular alternatives available to students in U.S. comprehensive high schools (Lynd and Lynd, 1937). While the consequences of this trend are not well understood, there is at least some evidence that the growth in curricular alternatives has contributed to a reduction in the basic skills of high school students. The nature of th evidence is as follows. The increase in curricular alternatives has been accompanied by a reduction in the number of math courses

and other basic skills courses that students take (CHK, 1982). The number of math courses a student takes is a strong predictor of the student's score on a standardized math test (Bryk et al., forthcoming). This evidence, while by no means conclusive, suggests that expanding family choice by increasing further the number of elective courses offered in a school is not a promising policy alternative. It also suggests that, in a system that provided students with choices of alternative academit programs, there would be a demand for programs that did not emphasize increases in basic skills.

There remains, however, the unaswered question of whether the policy of reducing curricular alternatives and requiring that all students take more demanding courses might not create incentives for new forms of work-evading choice -- for example, non-attendance, or disruptive behavior.

D. Choices Among Schools: Individual School Success Stories

More than one-fourth of the 16,000 school districts in the U.S. provide some students with choices of academic programs (Bridge and Blackman, 1978). This means that there are more than 4000 programs of explicit family choice already operating in public school systems in the U.S. Learning about the structures of these many programs and how the structures relate to student achievement outcomes would be extremely valuable in assessing the merits of increasing family choice in public education. Unfortunately, evidence is available on only a few programs, and

there is no reason to believe that the available evidence accurately portrays the range of programs in operation.

The evidence that does exist can be divided into three types: descriptions of success stories, detailed studies of a few family choice programs, and the results of the first large scale study of magnet schools. This section reviews the lessons from the success stories.

Newspapers and magazines often report stories about schools that are unexpectedly successful in raising the achievement test scores of students from low-income families and minority group backgrounds. A careful reading of the description of what these schools do often reveals that certain forms of choice are central components of their strategies. I will illustrate with two examples.

The New York Times (Malcolm, 1983) recently reported the successful rejuvenation of Lincoln Park High School, located in a low-income area of Chicago. This school had changed from a history of low achievement and violence to a reputation for innovative curricula and excellence. A critical ingredient in the rejuvenation effort was the district superintendent's effort to recruit students who would help make the school work. As part of the city-wide voluntary desegregation program, she was able to recruit students citywide, using Board of Education records to find high-achieving eighth grade students, to whom she sent a distinctive pamphlet on Lincoln Park. These efforts led to an increase in enrollment in the school, including an increase in the number of white students, and eventually to a waiting list of

1200 applicants.

Another success story is that of Beasley Elementary School, located "within a block or two of...one of the most notorious housing projects" in Chicago (Fuerst, 1981). Beasley also has a long waiting list, and accepts only students with average or better skills. Students who do not do homework or who are behavior problems are transferred to another school. The principal of Beasley is allowed personally to select two-thirds of the school's faculty.

Success stories such as Lincoln Park's and Beasley's must be interpreted carefully because the only evidence of causal relationships between program characteristics and student achievement are reporters' judgments. The stories do suggest, however, that public schools that are allowed to function like private schools in selecting and dismissing students and teachers can often achieve remarkable results in raising the skills of students from poor families, and that the schools' successes are related to strong support from parents that is stimulated by family choice.

In one respect these success stories are encouraging because they suggest that certain types of public sector choice can help some students from low-income and minority group families to acquire high skill levels. In another respect, however, the stories are discouraging in terms of the potential for greater family choice to improve the education of all students. The reason is that the successes seem tied to the ability of schools to be selective of students and teachers. "Being chosen" appears

to be a powerful mechanism for stimulating high effort levels, particularly when continued participation requires clearly specified behaviors.

What about those students who would like to attend Lincoln Park or Beasley, but were not accepted? What about those students who did not apply? Where did they go to school? The accounts of the success stories do not tell us. But it is troubling that being chosen -- in the cases of Beasley and Lincoln Park, from long waiting lists -- appears to be so important in stimulating the high effort levels and cooperation that make schools effective. It is hard to envision an expanded public sector choice system that could make all students feel that they had "been chosen."

E. Choices Among Schools and Programs: Studies of Choice Plans and Magnet Schools

The most in-depth research on family choice plans consists of a series of analyses entitled A Study of Alternatives in American Education, conducted by the Rand Corporation. These studies examine family choice plans in four public school districts: Alum Rock, California; Eugene, Oregon; Cincinnati, Ohio, and Minneapolis, Minnesota. One other less detailed, but interesting, study of a family choice plan in an unidentified city was conducted by Nault and Pchitelle (1982).

The available evidence on the consequences of family choice plans was enhanced recently by the completion of a major study of magnet schools in the U.S. (Blank et. al., 1983). This study is

the first comprehensive attempt to document what magnet schools do, what they accomplish, and what factors influence their effectiveness. This is particularly relevant to this analysis since magnet schools are the most rapidly growing type of family choice plans in the U.S. (In 1981 there were more than 1000 magnet schools in operation.)

All of these studies of public sector family choice plans have one significant drawback: limited information on student achievement. As a result they provide little direct evidence on the critical question of how choice affects students' achievement. These studies do, however, provide important information about a number of questions related to the design of family choice plans.

1. Consumer information

There are two lessons concerning families' knowledge of educational alternatives. First, choice plans do appear to enhance parents' knowledge about school programs. Nault and Uchitelle (1982) found that parents who lived in a school district that did provide educational alternatives were more knowledgeable about school programs than were parents from similar backgrounds who lived in a district that did not provide options.

Second, parents with low income and low educational levels are much less knowledgeable about how choice plans work and about the attributes of alternative programs than are parents with higher incomes and more education. This pattern has been

reported in studies of two different choice plans (Nault and Uchitelle, 1982: Bridge, 1978). As Nault and Uchitelle explain, "our findings reinforce the argument...that...designers of choice programs who seek to attenuate the educational disadvantages of socioeconomic class will need to include mechanisms that will compensate for the advantages of income and occupation" (p. 97).

What should these mechanisms be? One study of alternative voucher systems recommended that school district officials act as consumer ombudsmen, disseminating information about alternative programs, and advising parents of application procedures and transfer options (Center for the Study of Public Policy, 1970). Evidence from Alum Rock suggests that this strategy is likely to introduce significant tensions between ombudsmen and program staffs concerning the types of information that should be distributed. In Alum Rock, program staffs resisted release of information on student achievement, and fought with consumer representatives about who should control entry to oversubscribed programs.

This finding is not merely a case of "politics" or implementation failure. It indicates a tension between the "matching" and "choosing" mechanisms of family choice proposals, which require broad consumer information, and the "teachers' working conditions" mechanism, which may be disturbed or undermined by such information requirements.

2. Access

There is no evidence that students encountered persistent problems in gaining access to any academic program offered as

part of the family choice plans studied by Rand. In one sense, this is encouraging since it suggests that the fear that children from low-income families would be denied access to popular programs may have been exaggerated.

On the other hand, the lack of complaints about access are puzzling. There were some oversubscribed programs. Why didn't parents whose children were not admitted to a program complain? Was the reason that admission procedure were so scrupulously fair that there was no cause for complaint? Or were no programs so much better than alternatives that parents cared very much? We don't know the answer.

The very limited evidence from Alum Rock indicates that the achievement of students who participated in the family choice plan was not significantly higher than that of children who did not participate. This supports the view that parents did not complain about access because the program alternatives did not include any dramatic success stories. In trying to understand the access issue, it would be valuable to know about the responses of families whose children were not admitted to Lincoln Park School, Beasley School, and other success stories. Unfortunately, the reports of these success stories do not address this important question.

The evidence on the access issue from the recent study of magnet schools is modestly encouraging. While 89 percent of the magnet schools that were studied were somewhat selective in choosing among applicants (p.58), most based admission on interest in the theme of the school and on students' desire to

participate in the school's program. Eighty-seven percent of the schools admitted students of average ability, defined as academic performance at grade level. Moreover, magnet schools with these admission criteria seemed to perform as well as those that accepted only very able students.

The encouraging aspect of Blank et al.'s findings is that they refute the notions that magnet schools are highly selective, or that they need to be very selective to be successful. At the same time, however, the findings clearly indicate that magnet schools are not for all students. For example, the common entrance requirement of academic performance at grade level eliminates half of the students in the typical school district. Moreover, Blank et al. report that magnet schools as a rule deny admission to students with social or behavior problems, as indicated by poor attendance or frequent disciplinary actions (p. 60). Thus, in evaluating the role of magnet schools in a public school system committed to serving all students not attending private schools, one must ask: what happens to those students who are not admitted to magnet schools?

Blank et al. also report considerable variation among magnet schools in their dedication to desegregation. Many magnet schools enhanced school district's desegregation efforts. Others thwarted desegregation -- for example, by admitting minority students and them failing them out (p. 92). Consistent with a theme of this essay, Blank et al. emphasize that desegregation of magnet schools is not automatic and that consistent efforts toward this goal are needed both in designing magnet schools and

in operating them.

3. Location

For parents of elementary school children in Alum Rock, the location of alternative educational programs was a critical determinant of their attractiveness. Parents wanted their children to be able to walk to schools. In fact, parents' greatest fear about the introduction of program choices was that their child might be denied access to the neighborhood school (Cohen and Farrar, 1977). To meet this concern while still encouraging program choice, several educational programs (called minischools) were offered in each of the schools participating in Alum Rock's family choice plan.

The evidence from Alum Rock and Eugene suggests that locating several programs in the same school is not without cost. Conflicts arose in some schools between the staffs of different programs, usually over access to equipment and materials. There is also some evidence that programs housed in the same school became less distinct over time (Thomas, 1978, p. 55, fn). Thus tension in program design is likely between satisfying parents' desires for programs close to home and creating conditions that encourage program diversity.

The magnet school study also suggests that location is an important design issue, particularly in regard to desegregation (pp. 88-90). However, there is no sinmple story on where magnet schools should be placed to maximize desegregation. The definition of a good location depends on a variety of factors, including enrollment trends, and the location of other magnet

schools.

Blank et al. do report one pattern also found in other studies of family choice plans, namely, that locating choice programs within facilities used for other school programs creates problems. They find that "where the key magnet leader is not the principal -- as is typical for magnet programs within schools -- conflicts, confusion, and leadership vacuums can arise (pp. 68)."

4. Role of Teachers in Program Development and Management

Teachers must play a central role in the initiation and development of program alternatives if the alternatives are to be sustained. This is one of the most important lessons from Alum Rock, where this condition was not met. Family choice came to Alum Rock not because teachers thought it a potentially valuable way to improve public education, but because family choice would bring federal money that the district badly wanted. Teachers' acceptance of the program was purchased with a pay raise (Weiler, 1974). When the superintendent who had negotiated the introduction of a family choice plan went on leave, the plan collapsed (Rasmussen, 1981).

Do public school teachers want to develop new programs among which families can choose? (Recall the hypothesis introduced early in the essay that changes in working conditions accompanying family choice could make teaching a more attractive profession.) None of the family choice plans studied by Rand had been operating long enough to learn whether existence of the program attracted energetic teachers to the district. The evidence from the family choice plans studied by Rand is that

some teachers, but a distinct minority of teachers already in the district, did find attractive the challenge of accepting responsibility for the design and management of new programs. They also found, however, that program management required much more work than traditional classroom teaching had. This led to demands for low teacher-student ratios and funds for summer preparation. In effect, the claim of many teachers was that they were doing a more difficult job and needed additional resources and compensation to do this job well (Rasmussen, 1981).

The arguments of teachers in family choice plans suggests yet another tension in program design. Retaining teachers' willingness to do the hard work and accept the significant responsibility associated with managing distinctive programs may require that these teachers receive more resources than teachers working in more conventional schools. However, providing more resources and support to teachers working in alternative education programs than to other teachers in the same school district creates ill will and may undermine the family choice system.

Teachers were not a primary focus of Blank et al.'s research on magnet schools. However, the evidence that is presented indicates that guarded optimism is warranted about the effects magnet schools have on the quality of teaching in public schools. Almost all magnet schools drew teachers from a pool of volunteers. There is no evidence that any magnet school had difficulty in recruiting teachers. The study reports high morale among the staffs of magnet schools and low staff turnover.

The study emphasizes the importance of having teachers participate in the design of magnet school curricula. No evidence is presented indicating that such partipation led to widespread complaints excessive work loads. However, the extent to which teachers received extra compensation for curriculum design is not explored.

Critical unanswered questions concern how the creation of magnet schools affects the quality of education in non-magnet schools. What happens to staff and student morale in schools whose best teachers leave to teach in magnet schools? What happens to the morale and teaching performance of teachers who apply to teach in magnet schools, but are not chosen? We do not know the answers to these questions. Consequently, we do not know the extent to which the achievements magnet schools are a net gain to public education, and the extent to which these achievements are made at the expense of teachers and students in non-magnet schools.

VI. SUMMARY

A. Research Issues

Each of the three primary sources of evidence on family choice in education has a distinct limitation:

-- Studies of the performance of private schools lack information on the admission and dismissal policies of individual schools;

-- descriptions of public sector success stories provide no information about what happens to students not admitted to these schools;

-- studies of existing family choice plans lack detailed evidence on student achievement.

A consequence of these limitations is that one must view as tentative inferences about the consequences of expanding family choice in public education. Keeping this caveat in mind, interpretation of existing evidence suggests three types of lessons: conclusions about what family choice can and cannot accomplish, sources of tensions, and the importance of system design.

B. What Family Choice Can and Cannot Accomplish

Artfully-designed family choice plans can improve the quality of education provided to some children, including some children from low-income families. These are likely to be children whose parents value education and encourage cooperative in-school behavior and regular completion of homework.

Family choice plans will not improve the education of all children. In fact, one of the most powerful mechanisms of eliciting students' effort and cooperation, selection for participation in a popular, competitive program, implies that some students will be left out. Family choice cannot make every student feel special. Those students most likely to be left out are students from low-income families whose families are not able to provide consistent support for cooperative in-school behavior and regular completion of homework.

The greatest danger of family choice systems is that their limits may not be recognized. Consequently, expansion of choice may be accompanied by reductions in support for programs, such as the one described in Comer (1980), that can sometimes help those children most likely to be left out in a regime of expanded family choice.

C. Sources of Tension

Likely sources of tension in the design and operation of family choice plans include:

1. information provided to families about program attributes

Families' want information on students' achievement; program staffs resist publication and distribution of this information.

2. rules regarding admission to popular programs

Program staffs want control over admissions and transfers; representatives of low-income families want admissions procedures that guarantee access (or at least equal probability of access) for children from low-income families.

3. location of programs

Locating several programs within the same school satisfies parents' demands for choices close to home: it also increases conflicts among program staffs and threatens the distinctiveness of individual programs over time.

4. resources for family choice programs

Programs staffs want higher than average resource levels and extra compensation for extra work: non-participating teachers want equal treatment of all teachers in the school district.

D. The Importance of Program Design

Many of the potential benefits, and the possible sources of grave damage to public school systems adopting family choice programs can be expected to depend critically on the specifics of the regulations, options, and accountability procedures that define the plan. These specifics are not administrative details, of second-order importance: they are central design issues. The importance of these design issues implies that there is no simple answer to the question: Is more family choice good for public education? The consequences of family choice for students, teachers, and families depend critically on the design and implementation of the particular program. Hopefully, this essay will help to focus attention on some of these critical design issues.

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