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ABSTRACT

This paper summarizes the major recommendations agreed on at a conference of parents, educational administrators, and educators from 21 school systems in five New England states. The subject of the conference was choice in public education. First, excerpts from opening remarks and a note on the conference are presented. Then, major recommendations are outlined, including: (1) Parents must be involved in deciding which different kinds of educational options should be offered in their district and which are best for each of their children. (2) Teachers and principals must be able to choose the kind of schooling they wish to practice. (3) A permanent system-wide Parent and Citizen Planning Council should be established, and its members should conduct parent/professional surveys, operate a city-wide Parent Information Center, and perform other similar functions. (4) School-based management is preferred, and every school should have a School Parent Council elected by the parents whose children attend that school. (5) Parents should be involved in the selection and retention of all school staff. (6) When possible, schools should have full-time, paid parent coordinators or liaisons. (7) Parents should have access to technical assistance to aid them in their school involvement. (8) Parents should have access at all times to each individual school. Appended are lists of conference participants, planning board members, and workshop leaders and recorders. (KH)

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OPENING THE DOOR FOR PARTNERSHIP:
CHOICE IN OUR PUBLIC SCHOOLS

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OPENING THE DOOR FOR PARTNERSHIP: CHOICE IN OUR PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Final Report of the New England Regional
Conference on Parent Participation and
Choice in the Public Schools,
May 6, 1985, Worcester, Massachusetts

Evans Clinchy,
Senior Field Associate

The New England Regional Conference on Parent Participation and Choice in the Public Schools and the preparation of this Final Report were made possible by the support of the U.S. Department of Education, Region 1.

The New England Regional Conference on Parent Participation and Choice in the Public Schools was held on May 6, 1985 at Holy Cross College, Worcester, Massachusetts. The conference was hosted by the U.S. Department of Education, represented by Bayard D. Waring, the Secretary's Regional Representative, and the Institute for Responsive Education. The conference was also co-sponsored by the Boston University School of Education (Paul Warren, Dean) and the Massachusetts Chapter 636 Urban Superintendents Consortium (John Durkin, Chairperson). This report was compiled and written by Evans Clinchy, Senior Field Associate, Institute for Responsive Education.

"Quality education requires an equal partnership between educators and parents."

"Our public school systems should be based upon diversity and choice."

"Parents, teachers, principals and students should be able to choose their schools on the basis of mutual agreement on the educational philosophy to be practiced."

"Parents must be allowed to participate in the formation of attractive, competitive schools and in the evaluation and monitoring of the goals and programs."

"Parents must be surveyed to determine their educational preferences."

"The competition between public schools created by parent and professional choice is one of the best ways we could possibly invent to promote excellence in our public schools. Such competition creates an almost automatic system of evaluation and accountability. Excellent schools will thrive, poor schools will not long survive."

--Comments and recommendations drawn from the various conference workshops and reports

CONTENTS

I. The Creation of Excellence: A Message from the Secretary's Regional Representative.....1

II. The Power of Choice: Excerpts from the Welcoming Remarks of John H. Lawson, Commissioner of Education, the Commonwealth of Massachusetts.....2

III. A Note on the Conference and its Organization.....3

IV. Diversity and Choice: What Our Public School Systems Should Look Like.....5

A. System-wide Recommendations Applying to All Systems and All Schools.....5

B. System-wide Recommendations Describing Ways and Mechanisms Necessary to Promote and Insure Parent Participation and Choice.....6

C. Recommendations Concerning the Operation of Individual Schools.....8

APPENDIX A: Conference Participants.....11

APPENDIX B: Planning Group Members.....19

APPENDIX C: List of Workshop Leaders and Recorders.....20

The Creation of Excellence
A Message from the Secretary's Regional Representative

The reason for holding this New England Regional Conference was both simple and straightforward.

We wanted to explore the widely-held but not always practiced belief that we can create excellence in our public schools only if our clients -- the parents and students of this country -- become true partners in the educational enterprise, only if they are intimately and powerfully involved in all of the operations of public education.

And as I listened to the workshop discussions and read the recommendations that emerged from them, I began to hear a direct and simple message: One of the best ways to guarantee and promote such involvement and participation and therefore to achieve educational excellence is to provide parents, older students and also our professional staffs with a diversity of schools from which they may choose the one or ones they believe will best provide the kind and quality of schooling they want.

Such a system of parent and professional choice will also create better ways for us to determine whether or not excellence is actually being achieved. Choice creates healthy and thoroughly democratic competition between our public schools, and this can only lead to increased efforts on the part of all schools to satisfy the demands of its clients.

Indeed, it appeared to me that what the conference participants were talking about -- and asking for -- was nothing less than a quite new and different approach to the enterprise of public education, a new and more vital kind of public school system.

It is my hope that this conference -- and the broad outlines of such a new system of public schooling that is contained in this report -- will mark the beginning of a new era for public education in this country.

Bayard D. Waring
The Secretary of Education's
Regional Representative

The Power of Choice
Excerpts from the Welcoming Remarks of
John H. Lawson, Commissioner of Education, the Commonwealth of Massachusetts

Choice is not a new element in education. Parents have always made choices: about where they would live, about public versus private schools, about which public school their children would attend under open enrollment or transfer policies.

Too often such choices have reinforced racial separation (as Judge Garrity found in Boston) or economic separation or separation on the basis of ethnic identity....

But what if choice can be wed to equity? What if the undeniable power of choice can be put to work to meet our equity goals:

- to increase the satisfaction of parents with the education their children receive?
- to increase their involvement in education as full partners in defining the educational mission of a school and carrying it out?
- to make schools more diverse, and thus better able to meet the varying needs of students?
- to bring students and parents of varying backgrounds together across racial, ethnic and economic barriers on the basis of a shared interest or goal or set of values?
- to teach children to respect the pluralism of our society, not by offering a lowest common denominator education but by providing schools of distinctive flavor within the common enterprise of public education?
- to strengthen the educational effectiveness of our schools by stimulating initiative, accountability and team-building at the schoolhouse level?

We have seen encouraging signs here in Massachusetts that the use of choice to achieve desegregation can also have these other effects. We have seen the involvement of parents become more meaningful as some have helped to develop the educational mission of schools, and many have responded to surveys or made decisions about which school to support by the enrollment of their children.

We have seen new energies at the schoolhouse level and an enhancement of the strategic role superintendents and school committees play. We have seen solid and growing support from legislators who have increased the appropriation for voluntary desegregation each year I have been Commissioner.

Now we look forward to sharing with our fellow-educators and fellow-parents from across New England the approaches to parent involvement and to choice which we have found effective and powerful for educational excellence. It is my privilege to welcome the experience and the commitment which you represent.

A Note on the Conference and Its Organization

This New England Regional conference was attended by some 150 people -- parents, school board members, teachers, middle management administrators, superintendents and state department of education officials -- from twenty-one school systems in five New England states. The sixth state -- Vermont -- wished to attend but its representatives were prevented from doing so by an emergency situation.

This diverse group of conference participants representing widely varying backgrounds, interests and experiences gathered in Worcester, Massachusetts to pool its wisdom and experience on the subject of achieving educational excellence through greater parent participation and choice. Out of the intensive, day-long discussions among all of these people came the series of recommendations contained in this report.

"Quality education is not the same for every child."
-- Susan Harris, Massachusetts League of Women Voters

The conference day was first organized into nine morning workshops in which the various participants met with their peers -- parents met with parents, school board members with school board members, superintendents with superintendents, and so on.

The members of each of these workshops were asked first to describe what was going on in their school systems in the way of parent participation and choice. Thus, every recommendation the conference participants eventually made was based upon an actual program now going on in one or more of the participating school systems.

Following these reports, each morning workshop was then asked to come up with a series of recommendations that would begin to describe the way those participants believed all public schooling should be conducted, concentrating on the issues of parent and professional choice and the ways parents and professionals might begin to develop genuine partnerships.

In the afternoon, the participants of the nine morning workshops were re-organized into three larger sessions, each of these now composed of at least one representative from each of the morning workshops. Thus, members of each of the "special interest" workshops now reported their recommendations to a larger group made up of parents, school board members, middle management people, superintendents and state department officials.

The conference's final session was then devoted to reports describing the recommendations from each of the three afternoon sessions that the mixed group of participants now all wished to pass on as the final recommendations of the conference as a whole.

As it turned out, there was a surprising consensus among the recommendations of both the morning and afternoon workshops. Not every workshop, of course, came up with precisely the same set of recommendations. But there appeared to be no major disagreements about or objections to the main set of recommendations. It should be noted here that all conference participants later saw a draft of this report and could comment on the accuracy of our reporting.

The section that follows, then, attempts to describe the conference's vision in the most general terms. Again, it should be remembered that not every recommendation turned up in the results of every workshop. And since the largest single group at the conference was composed of parents and since the main themes of the conference were parent participation and parent choice, it is the voice of parents that is here most clearly and most fittingly heard.

DIVERSITY AND CHOICE:
WHAT OUR PUBLIC SCHOOL SYSTEMS SHOULD BE LIKE

A. System-wide Recommendations Applying to All School Systems and All Schools
Recommendation A1:

Parents must be involved in deciding what different kinds of schools or educational options their public school system will offer and then be able to choose the school or schools they believe will provide high quality, effective education for each of their children.

This recommendation was made by all nine morning workshops and all three afternoon sessions. In almost all cases, the participants added a qualification, saying that choice on the part of parents must be limited to ensure equality of access and equality of opportunity for all children. In this sense, both desegregation and integration were assumed to be a primary aim of any system of parent choice.

"If the school is going in one direction and the parent in another, the kid is caught in the middle. Choice is better for parents, children and schools."
-- Frances Cooper, Cambridge, Massachusetts, School Committee member.

Several of the workshops spelled out this recommendation in greater detail, saying that all public schools should be "magnet" schools or "schools of choice" and parent (and older student) choice should be the way in which all students are assigned to schools. In this sense, then, the conference participants were proposing that public school systems establish what could be called "a public school voucher system" based upon a diversity of public schools from which parents could select the one or ones they believe will provide excellence.

"Parent choice is vital to the success of any child's education and to the success of the schools." -- Parent Workshop No.5

Participants also felt strongly that parents should be involved in deciding what the range of different kinds of schools will be through surveys of all parents (in all appropriate languages) asking parents to specify the different kinds of schools they want.

Recommendation A2:

Teachers and principals must also be able to choose the kind of schooling they wish to practice, the kind of schooling they believe will provide them with the greatest professional satisfaction.

Again, almost all of the workshops made this recommendation. Several of the workshops also added the following provisos:

- the choices of parents would have the first claim on what schools were actually created;
- professional choice must be limited by the need for educational equity and staff desegregation;
- teachers and principals should and must be involved in the decisions as to what schools will be created through teacher/principal surveys similar to the parent surveys;

"If there are two oranges, even if one's a little sweeter, that's OK. But if there is an orange and a lemon, boy, I want the orange."

-- Edward O'Connell, Winchester, Mass., School Committee Chairman

- the assignment of teachers and principals to particular individual schools should be by teacher and principal choice;
- after choosing to apply for a vacant position in a school, teachers and principals would be screened by a committee including parents. This committee would then make recommendations to the superintendent and school board.

Several of the workshops pointed out that such choice on part of teachers and principals would be one excellent way to move public school teaching towards true professionalism.

B. System-wide Recommendations Describing Ways and Mechanisms Necessary to Promote and Insure Parent Participation and Choice

Recommendation B1:

There must be a permanent system-wide Parent and Citizen Planning Council made up of at least one elected parent representative from every school in the city and, if desired, representatives of other governmental, civic and cultural agencies.

"No (public school) system ever does anything voluntarily. Either the parents or the state force the issue."

-- James Leonard, assistant to the superintendent, Lynn, Mass.

This Council, which would serve in an advisory capacity to the superintendent and the board of education, would also be the permanent voice of parents and other citizens in the conduct of the educational enterprise.

The Council would be also responsible for the annual parent/professional surveys to determine not only the choices parents and professionals want but also to determine the level of parent and citizen satisfaction with the public schools (as part of the system's evaluation and accountability apparatus. See below).

The Council, in addition to helping to design the system of diversity and choice, would also be responsible for parent information activities and for educating parents about how to make choices and thus would be intimately involved in the education of their children. The Council, and therefore parents, should also be involved in curriculum development, the creation of new kinds of schools as these are requested by parents and teachers, and in the on-going evaluation of the school program.

"In a lot of places, a parent is OK as long as he goes along."

-- Leonore Toro, Bridgeport, Conn. Board of Education member

The Council should have its own operating budget and be staffed by a permanent, full-time city-wide parent coordinator and additional staff and technical assistance as necessary, all of these selected by the Council itself.

The Council would make regular recommendations to the superintendent and the board of education and perhaps issue an annual report on the state of the school system.

Recommendation B2:

The Council should conduct parent/professional surveys, developed jointly with the superintendent and his/her staff, to determine the choices parents, teachers and principals want and to determine the degree of satisfaction parents and the citizenry at-large have with their public schools. At least one of the parent workshops recommended that such surveys be conducted annually and that they should be mandated by the state, but this position was not supported by all conference participants.

Recommendation B3:

The Council should also operate, in close cooperation with the superintendent and other central administrators, a City-wide Parent Information Center that would provide all parents in the city with the information they need in order to make wise choices -- brochure and/or descriptions of the "magnet" or special qualities of each school in the system and advice on which schools might be appropriate for particular children. The Council might also serve as a complaint and grievance service if parents have particular problems with individual schools.

"A system of parent choice should allow parents to choose between different types of schools and not between 'good' schools and 'poor' schools."

-- Recommendation of combined Workshops 10 and 11
(superintendents and state department people)

The Center should have its own staff and operating budget, including technical assistance as needed (unless it is a part of the Council's staff and budget). The school system's student assignment office should perhaps be located at the Center so that parents may know immediately whether their children can be assigned to the school of their choice.

The Center should publish an annual publication describing all of the choices and options available to parents in the school system. This should be distributed to all public school parents, non-public school parents and parents of pre-school children.

The Center should also publish a regular newsletter sent to all parents and provide other informational literature as needed.

"NO LEMONS ALLOWED! All schools must be excellent."

-- Final recommendations of combined Workshops 6 and 7 (school board members)

The Center (and the Council) should also be responsible for the parent education activities--the informational education and training of parents to make choices and to exercise their rights and responsibilities as full partners in the public school enterprise.

C. Recommendations Concerning the Operation of Individual Schools of Choice

Recommendation C1:

Each individual school of choice in the public system must have the autonomy to develop its own educational philosophy, its own curriculum, its own approach to the organization and the operation of the school.

After making this recommendation clear, several of the workshops added the qualification that every school in the system would be part of a system-wide evaluation and accountability system to insure that all children acquired the basic skills of reading, writing and mathematics. The way each individual school chooses to teach those subjects, however, and what it chooses to teach in addition to the basics should be the province of the individual school's faculty and parent body.

"The first item on the school board's agenda at each meeting should be an open forum so that parents may state their issues and interests that are limited to citywide or local school issues -- not personal ones."

-- Recommendation of Parent Workshop No. 3

Recommendation C2:

The management of each individual school should be school-based, with each school having control over its own budget -- and to the greatest extent possible -- over its personnel policies.

Recommendation C3:

Every individual school of choice should have a School Parent Council elected by the parents whose children attend that school.

This Council would serve as an advisory group to the principal and the faculty of the school and would work collaboratively with the school staff on curriculum and in determining how the school's budget will be allocated and spent.

The Council should be responsible for electing the school's parent representative to the Citywide Council.

"Make children the priority, not politics."

-- Recommendation of Parent Workshop No. 4

Recommendation C4:

Parents should be involved in the selection and retention of all school staff.

Several of the workshops differed on precisely how this should be done, but most seemed to suggest that, minimally, parents should serve on screening committees that would interview all applicants for positions on the staff (including the position of principal). These screening committees would then make recommendations to the central administration for the actual hiring or firing of staff.

Recommendation C5:

Wherever and whenever feasible, schools should have full-time, paid parent coordinators or liaisons to serve as staff to the Parent Council, to organize school parent activities, to provide parents with any and all information desired and to act as a liaison with the City-wide Parent Information Center.

One possible additional job of the parent coordinator would be preparation of a school handbook for each school describing the school's philosophy, curriculum, discipline code and parental rights and responsibilities. In small school systems, of course, the function might well be performed by a single coordinator serving several schools.

Recommendation C6:

Parents -- at both the city-wide and individual school level -- should be able to call upon outside technical assistance and training to help them become more deeply involved in the partnership with the system's professional staff.

Recommendation C7:

Parents should have access at all times to each individual school.

These, then, were the major recommendations made by the conference's participants. There were, of course, many other (and often quite specific) recommendations that the participants made, including suggestions about a process by which the recommendations could be put into effect. This possible process will be described in future Institute for Responsive Education publications.

The above recommendations, if some are implemented, (and we believe that, with determination and effort, they could be) are first steps in what could be viewed as the creation of a much more democratic system of public education, a system much more responsive to the desires, hopes and aspirations of the American people and, therefore, a system worth supporting and even fighting for.

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APPENDIX C: List of Workshop Leaders and Recorders

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Workshop I Facilitator: Margaret Gallagher
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Recorders: Linda Arendt
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Workshop II Facilitator: Elisabeth Cody
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Lena James
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Workshop III Facilitator: Patricia Higgins
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Recorders: Ann Bolger
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Susan Desruiseux
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Workshop IV Facilitator: Joseph Molligi
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Recorders: Sharon Afutu
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Phyllis Newton
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Workshop V Facilitator: Lucille Koch
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Recorders: Deanne Dixon
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School Board Member Workshops

Workshop VI Facilitator: David Allen
School Committee, Lowell, Massachusetts

Recorders: Deborah Pugatch
Parent, Cambridge, Massachusetts

Loretta Kehaylas
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Workshop VII Facilitator: Patricia Jehlen
Board Member, Massachusetts Association of
School Committees, Somerville, Massachusetts

Recorders: Loretta Roach
Staff member, Citywide Education Coalition

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Middle Management Workshops

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Recorders: James Leonard
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Workshop IX Facilitator: Willie A. Wilson, Jr.
Chapter 636 Department Head
Brockton Public Schools, Brockton, Massachusetts

Recorders: Peter Colleary
Student Assignment Officer, Cambridge Public
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William Bagley
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Superintendents and State Department Workshops

Workshop X Facilitator: John E. Durkin
Superintendent of Schools, Worcester Public
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(Workshop X) **Recorders:** Michael Alves
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Frank Walker
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Workshop XI **Facilitator:** Henry Mroz
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Recorders: Frank Brown
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Recorder: Jorge Cardoso
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Session II **Facilitator:** George Tsapatsaris
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Recorder: John Simoncini
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Session III **Facilitator:** Dorothy Jones
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Recorder: E. Martin Barney
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