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As policymakers continue to seek new methods of reforming public education, school

choice--the practice of allowing parents and students to choose among a variety of schools--has emerged as one of the most widely supported issues of the decade. Yet, for many, it is not clear how choice should be structured or how to assure that those students with the fewest resources will not be shut out of the best schools.

Recent debates on school choice are concerned less with whether there should be more choice in education than with how much choice should be offered to whom. Existing choice plans vary dramatically in size, shape and purpose. How students are matched to schools, the degree of government regulation, percentage of students given choice, distance traveled by students, and participating schools' admission criteria are examples of choice plan characteristics that differ from one district or state to the next.

Seven states have now adopted statewide open enrollment choice plans that permit students to transfer from one school district to another, taking state funds with them. Meanwhile, hundreds of individual public school districts across the country have instituted some degree of school choice through magnet school programs and voluntary desegregation plans. Wisconsin recently extended school choice to private non-sectarian schools by offering low-income students in Milwaukee state-financed tuition vouchers (Wells, 1990).

While it may not be necessary for all school choice plans to look exactly alike, researchers point out that different types of choice programs have different impacts, especially on the education of low-income and minority populations.

THE POLITICS OF SCHOOL CHOICE

The school choice movement has widespread, diversified political appeal. Reasons for this support include the following:
It can, given the right circumstances, enable low-income and minority families to avoid poorly run and overcrowded urban schools.

It infuses free market, competitive principles into a sluggish public education system.

It allows individual families, not bureaucratic school systems, to have more control over which schools their children attend and what services are provided there.

It is considered a low-cost solution to what are considered enormous problems in public education.

It is purported to lead to better matches between pupil needs and school offerings.

It may increase parent involvement in education.

But school choice is not without its critics. They argue that many choice programs

discriminate against poor and minority parents who are less informed about how the educational system works or are too overwhelmed with day-to-day survival to research the various educational options; by default, some students will be left behind in the less popular schools, which often end up with fewer resources.

WHAT THE RESEARCH SAYS ABOUT SCHOOL CHOICE

The varied opinions on school choice and its potential impacts are grounded in little empirical research, mainly because there is a dearth of well-documented experience on how school choice programs affect either academic achievement or educational opportunities. As McDonnell (1989) points out, studies of existing choice arrangements within the public schools are merely "suggestive of the conditions" that could make a more universal system of public school choice work effectively.
Yet, some school districts with choice programs, such as New York City's District 4 and the Cambridge, MA, public schools, have already experienced higher achievement test scores since their choice programs began (Paulu, 1989).

A recent study by Chubb and Moe (1990) employs a national longitudinal survey to show that "a well-organized school can make a meaningful difference for student achievement, regardless of the ability and background of its students" (p.129). They argue that a deregulated, free-market system in which schools are run autonomously without government bureaucratic constraints will better meet the needs of individual parents and students.

Yet, other researchers question whether a deregulated choice system will necessarily result in more effectively run schools or will only encourage schools to add features attractive to choosers (i.e., an enhanced sports program) but extraneous to good education, and to develop sophisticated marketing techniques (Clune, 1989).

Riddle and Stedman (1989) question the assumption that more school choice will improve parent involvement in education. They point to a study in New York City's Community School District 4 that shows no evidence of greater parent involvement as a result of enhanced educational choice. They also raise the issue of whether parents who transfer their children outside of their home school districts will find their ability to influence the new school diminished because they will not vote for the school board members who control their children's school and may not always have the time or the transportation to go to meetings and events at the school.

Elmore's extensive review (1986) of the literature on school choice provides some evidence that parents differ by race and social class in the amount of information they have about available educational options; and in their preferences for academic content, discipline, and instructional style. He concludes that a possible consequence of

experiments with increased choice is a situation in which "nominally neutral mechanisms" produce highly segregated school populations. Competition among families to get their children into the "best" schools will lead them to use their "market power"-- i.e. money, time, influence, and access--to ensure that their children are accepted at their desired schools. Unstructured, deregulated competition would leave students from less "powerful" families in less attractive schools.

Yet, in a 1985 study of parental decision-making about schools, Darling-Hammond and Kirby surveyed 476 parents of public and private school students and found that although lower-income parents had fewer choices in terms of which neighborhood they would live in, they were more likely to seek out school alternatives at the time of enrollment. Those least likely to make choices were residents of rural areas and parents who had themselves attended only private schools.

VARIATIONS IN SCHOOL CHOICE PLANS

Controlled Choice. In what are commonly called "controlled choice" programs, such as those in Montclair, NJ, Cambridge, MA, and 17 other districts in Massachusetts, parents must choose a school for their children because there are no assigned or zoned schools. Schools are given the freedom to develop special educational programs to attract students, and the most popular programs are duplicated in more than one school to avoid a monopoly.
Parents in these districts register their children for school at parent information centers where they confer with parent liaisons and student assignment officers about the various educational programs available. School visits are also encouraged. Each parent submits a list of preferred school choices in rank order. Matching the enrollment of each school to the racial makeup of the district governs student assignments to schools. If the demand for a particular school is greater than the number of spaces available, students are randomly assigned to schools in a manner that maintains racial balance. In fact, controlled choice plans have been found to be viable alternative desegregation mechanisms in cities such as Boston, where forced busing had created major upheavals.

Somewhat similar to the controlled choice plans in Cambridge and Montclair is the program in New York's District 4, widely heralded as an example of how providing more choices in education can help poor, minority students achieve in school. In the 18 years since the District converted all of its junior high schools into 21 alternative school choice programs or schools within schools, test scores there, where almost 60 percent of the students fall below the poverty line, have risen dramatically. While back in 1972, less than 15 percent of the District students were reading at or above grade level, today, 64 percent are now doing so (Paulu, 1989).

Because in District 4, as in Cambridge, students and parents are forced to choose a junior high school program, the District is prevented from splitting into two groups of

students--what Elmore (1987) calls "active choosers" who end up in what are perceived to be the best programs and "inactive choosers" who either feel unable to make educational decisions, don't have information concerning various options, or are satisfied with what they have.

Also, because these more controlled choice plans take place within a single school district, and state funding for the students remains in the district, school officials are able to work with the "failing," less popular schools to help them improve, instead of draining their resources until they close.

Magnet Schools. Other types of choice programs that take place within a single school district are less controlled and less universal. Many school systems have established magnet school programs for only a small percentage of their students. Gaining popularity during the 1970s as alternatives to mandatory desegregation plans, they offered specialized programs to attract both black and white students to the same school. By the early 1980s, there were approximately 1100 magnets within 140 urban school districts (Blank, 1989).

While magnet school programs have been extremely successful at desegregating students in a seemingly unobjectionable way, a recent study (Moore & Davenport, 1989) of four urban school systems--Boston, Chicago, Philadelphia, and New York--found that school choice plans, in which there was not room for all students in the schools of choice have become a new form of segregation by race, income level, and previous school performance. Moore and Davenport report that offering choice in the form of magnet schools just to some students resulted in a "creaming process" whereby only the highest achieving students with the most involved parents were likely to be attending the magnet schools with the most resources. Many of the present-day administrators' disillusionment with the inequitable distribution of resources in systems with magnet and non-magnet schools (Charles Glenn, personal communication, 1990).

Interdistrict and Open Enrollment. School choice programs that set up a system of active and inactive choosers are also found in the newer, interdistrict, and statewide open enrollment choice plans, in which some students move from one school district to the next, often taking state education dollars with them. Such plans tend to have relatively few regulations placed on them compared to the single district, controlled choice plans. They raise several issues, the most important of which is what happens to the students who are left behind in the less popular districts that are losing enrollment and state money. Unlike controlled choice plans in which the ailing, less popular schools are often given extra resources and attention, those schools that fail to attract students in statewide open enrollment plans are left with less state money and thus are less able to improve.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR MORE EQUITABLE

CHOICE

Given the variety of choice programs that have been implemented across the country, and the broad-based support for expanding school choice options in the future, specific recommendations for making choice as equitable as possible should be heeded. They include the following (Nathan, 1989; McDonnell, 1989):
o a clear goal statement.

o outreach to, and information and counseling for, parents.

o a fair, unrestrictive, noncompetitive, and equitable admissions procedure, with particular attention paid to criteria for enrollment in the most desirable schools.

o Provision of adequate transportation for students.

Finally, as Riddle and Stedman assert, the conditions for success in education may indeed come through choice plans, but will ultimately have more to do with the commitment of school systems to improving the education of choosers and non-choosers alike.

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