DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 332 350 EA 023 007

AUTHOR	Elmore, Richard F.
TITLE	Working Models of Choice in Public Education. CPRE Report Series RR-018.
INSTITUTION	Center for Policy Research in Education.
SPONS AGENCY	Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.
PUB DATE	Dec 90
CONTRACT	G008690011
NOTE	30p.; For related studies, see EA 023 004-006.
AVAILABLE FROM	Publications, Center for Policy Research in Education, Eagleton Institute of Politics, Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey, New Brunswick, NJ ($7.00 prepaid). Also available as part of a 4-title "School Choice Package" (Order No. PK-001, $21.00 prepaid).
PUB TYPE	Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Reports - Evaluative/Feasibility (142) -- Guides - Non-Classroom Use (055)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Educational Change; *Educational Policy; Elementary Secondary Education; *Equal Education; Models; Parent Participation; Political Influences; Program Implementation; *Public Policy; *Public Schools; *School Choice; *Supply and Demand
IDENTIFIERS	Minnesota; New York City Board of Education; Washington

ABSTRACT

Controlled educational choice, defined as parental or student choice of educational programs within the public school system that is regulated for public purposes, has become a leading proposal for educational reform. This paper reviews evidence from three working models of choice: the Minnesota Postsecondary Enrollment Options program (PEO), the Washington State Educational Clinics program, and the Community District 4 Alternative School Choice program in New York City. Each program was characterized by early opposition, followed by relatively smooth implementation. All three programs show evidence of positive effects, though none has demonstrated the extent to which choice enhances student or school performance. In none of the models is choice available to, or exercised by, all the system's intended clients. Introducing controlled choice does not necessarily result in a deregulated system stressing parent and school association around common purposes. In fact, all three choice models are heavily regulated on either the demand side, supply side, or both; this regulation is largely responsible for their effects. The programs demonstrate a wide variety of design issues that interested policy makers must confront, including the degree of regulation on supply and demand, the possible negative effects of choice systems benefiting active or inactive choosers, and the limited effect of choice systems on the broader systems in which they operate. (9 references) (Author/MLH)

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Working Models of Choice in Public Education

Richard F. Elmore

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December 1990

CPRE Research Report Series RR-018

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ABSTRACT

Controlled educational choice, defined as parental or student choice of educational programs within the public school system that is regulated for public purposes, has become a leading proposal for educational reform. This paper reviews evidence from three working models of choice: The Minnesota Postsecondary Enrollment Options program (PEO), the Washington State Educational Clinics program, and the Community District 4 Alternative School Choice program in New York City.

Each program was characterized by early political opposition, followed by relatively smooth implementation. All three programs show evidence of positive effects, although none has demonstrated the extent to which choice, by itself, enhances the performance of schools or students. In none of the models is choice available to, or exercised by, all the intended clients of the system. The programs also demonstrate that the introduction of controlled choice results in something considerably less than a deregulated system in which parents and schools associate around common purposes. In fact, all three models of choice are heavily regulated on either the demand side, supply side, or both, and this regulations is in large part responsible for their effects.

Finally, the programs demonstrate a wide variety of design issues that policymakers interested in choice must confront. These issues include the degree of regulation on supply and demand, the possible negative effects of systems that benefit active or inactive choosers, and the limited effect of choice systems on the broader systems in which they operate.

In addition to this analytical paper on educational choice, the Center for Policy Research in Education has published three case studies which provide more details on the programs discussed here: The Minnesota Postsecondary Enrollment Options Law: A Case of Choice by Doug Archbald (1990); Community School District 4, New York City: A Case of Choice by Richard Elmore (1990); and The Washington State Education Clinics Program: A Case of Choice by Richard Elmore (1990). These cases may be used for teaching purposes to introduce students and practitioners to the study of policy and organization in education.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author wishes to thank Charles Davis, William Gormley, and Susan Fuhrman for their comments on earlier drafts of this report, and Ron Perry, Betty Jane Narver, Seymour Fliegel, and Doug Archbald for their assistance in various aspects of the research leading to this paper.

This report appears under the title "Public School Choice as a Policy Issue" in Privatization and its Alternatives, edited by William Gormley. The book contains additional articles on education policy as well as articles on privatization and its alternatives in other policy arenas. The book is available for $40 clothbound; $19.75 paperback from the University of Wisconsin Press, 114 North Murray Street, Madison, WI 53715; telephone: (608) 262-8782.

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CHOICE AS A POLICY ISSUE

The idea that parents, students, and teachers should have greater latitude to choose among public schools is gaining currency with state and local policymakers. The National Governors' Association signaled that public school choice had achieved a new political legitimacy in its 1986 report on education reform, *Time for Results*. The report called attention to a number of recent state and local choice initiatives, including interdistrict transfer schemes, open enrollment systems in desegregating school districts, and "second chance" programs that allow school dropouts to return to the educational program of their choice.

By the most current count (Nathan 1989), 25 states have programs that encourage choice among schools. Ten states have laws establishing magnet schools, either statewide residential magnets or within-district magnets. Eleven states have laws that permit students to transfer within or between districts, or that allow secondary school students to take courses at postsecondary institutions. Four states have second-chance programs that permit students who have failed in secondary school, or dropped out, to enter alternative high school completion programs at state expense. A number of leading figures in education policymaking, including the President of the United States, governors, and leaders of both major teachers' unions, have endorsed some form of increased state and local experimentation with choice. Controlled choice, usually defined as choice limited to the public schools and regulated for public purposes, including racial balance, appears to be entering the mainstream of education policymaking.

The appeal of choice as an instrument of education policy stems from the expectation that it will make the public schools more responsive to clients. The NGA report sets the problem this way:

> Today, the public school system controls both production and consumption of education. The system tells the students what they will learn, at what speed and what quality. Students and their parents have little to say about it. A more responsive system would incorporate what students and their parents say they need with the education services necessary to meet those needs. (p. 67)

Choice is seen by its advocates as a remedy for a public school bureaucracy grown increasingly unresponsive and complacent in its virtual monopoly over a fundamental public service. Choice advocates envision public schools populated with teachers and students who willingly associate around common means and ends.

Opponents and skeptics argue that choice will provide little incentive to improve teaching and learning in schools if it is not accompanied by significant improvements in working conditions, teaching practices, and curriculum in schools. In the absence of well-designed limits on choice, skeptics further argue, it will simply reinforce and

legitimate segregation by race and class and further entrench unenlightened teaching and curricula that appeal to cohesive groups of parents (for example, see Levin 1987).

Public policy issues are often distinguished as much by what they are not about as by what they are. Public policymaking about educational choice is not, at least for the moment, primarily about privatization. Policies directed at school choice are presently confined to choices among publicly financed educational institutions, rather than choice between public and private institutions. One can read policymakers' avoidance of pure privatization in either of two ways. Opponents and skeptics fear that policies designed to enhance public school choice are the opening wedge for a more ambitious privatization agenda. Advocates, on the other hand, see public school choice as a way of avoiding privatization by making public schools more responsive, hence more competitive with their private alternatives (for example, see Raywid 1987). Indeed, most uses of public school choice in local districts (e.g., magnet schools, open enrollment plans, and controlled choice desegregation plans), are explicitly designed to make public schools more attractive to "active choosers" within the public schools who might otherwise migrate to private schools. In an important sense, then, public policymaking on educational choice is about alternatives to privatization, rather than about the introduction of privatization. Some alternatives, however, do rely on the private sector to perform limited services for the public sector, as discussed in the Washington state example below.

POLICY DESIGN ISSUES

Advocates argue that public school choice will improve responsiveness of the public school bureaucracy to differences among children and introduce incentives for improvements in performance. Achieving these results, however, requires consideration of several issues of design.[1]

SUPPLY AND DEMAND

Most public school choice advocates refer to choice as an issue of client control--from the demand side--because they are essentially anti-bureaucratic in their posture toward public education. Hence, most public school choice policies are advocated primarily as a way for parents to choose their children's school. But increasing demand-side choice without also increasing supply-side choice--for educators, in what they teach and with which schools they affiliate--will result in predictable problems. If parents and students are encouraged to choose among alternatives that are similar in content and pedagogy, and over which educators exercise little influence, the result is likely to be increased client dissatisfaction rather than increased responsiveness. Likewise, if educational alternatives are crafted from the immediate experience of educators, without substantial infusions of new knowledge, then the programs that are offered are likely to be more similar than different. Any consideration of public school choice, therefore, must include both the demand and the supply sides.

PUBLIC VS. PRIVATE GOOD

Choice affects those who actively choose, but it also affects those who, for one reason or another, do not choose. Choice policies are typically designed with more attention to their effects on active choosers than on inactive choosers.[2]

But public education combines elements of both a private and a public good (Levin 1987). That is, education provides private benefits to specific individuals, such as enhanced appreciation of literature and enhanced income, and it provides collective

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[1]. The information in this section is drawn largely from Elmore, "Choice in Public Education," in Boyd and Kirchner (1988).

[2]. The distinction between active and inactive choosers is developed in Elmore, "Choice in Public Education" in Boyd and Kirchner 1988 (p. 83). In any given structure at any given time, some clients actively exercise the options available to them while others acquiesce in what the structure deals them. Clients cannot, however, be neatly divided into choosers and non-choosers, because any client is a potential chooser under the right set of circumstances. Hence, the underlying policy issue is not who chooses and who doesn't, but what incentives a given structure offers for some people to be active choosers and some to be inactive.

benefits to society as a whole, such as a literate voting citizenry. Different individuals have different preferences and interests in education, but the welfare of every individual in society depends on each person having a certain level of knowledge and skill. The fact that educational choice may be beneficial to those who actively choose, then, is only one criterion against which choice schemes should be evaluated. The other criterion is the effect of active choice by some on those who do not choose and on certain collective ends that society decides are worth valuing in their own right. Racial equality and access by each citizen to the basic prerequisites of democratic participation are two such collective values. Advocates of public school choice focus mainly on the predicted and actual benefits to active choosers, assuming that a system which is more responsive to active choosers will benefit everyone. In fact, choice policies may have negative effects on inactive choosers and on society as a whole. For example, siphoning off talented students and concentrating low-achieving students in a few schools, or allowing low-quality programs to persist because they have a loyal following, could lead to a decline in educational levels.

ALTERATION OF EXISTING STRUCTURES

Policy decisions on choice are almost never decisions about whether to allow choice or not to allow it, but rather are about how existing structures of choice can be altered for certain purposes.

The education choice issue is ordinarily stated thus: "Should parents, students, and educators be allowed to choose schools?" In fact, even in the most heavily centralized education systems, parents, students, and teachers already exercise some degree of choice. Some of these choices, such as choosing a residence or a private school, are costly to make and difficult to reverse and are highly sensitive to differences in income, race, and social class. Others are less costly and difficult, such as pressuring the school principal to change a child's assigned teacher, or choosing science fiction instead of English literature as a high school elective. These choices are influenced more by whether people see themselves as active or passive choosers in the organizations that provide them services.

Policy debate usually focuses more on the predicted benefits of new choice proposals, rather than on the relationship between existing systems of choice and proposed changes in those systems. Choice policies often make certain options, which were previously available to only a small number of active choosers, more explicit and available to a wider clientele. In addition, choice policies often alter the structure of opportunities and the costs of choice, sometimes intentionally, sometimes inadvertently. In order to understand the effects of choice policies, then, one must understand how they alter the existing regime of choice, not simply what new choices they offer.

The success of public school choice policies, then, depends in large part on how well policymakers and implementors grapple with these inherent problems. One way to observe this problem solving is to examine actual working models of choice.

THREE WORKING MODELS OF PUBLIC SCHOOL CHOICE

This analysis focuses on three working models of choice: the Minnesota Postsecondary Options Program, the alternative school choice program in New York City's Community District 4, and the Educational Clinics Program in the State of Washington. These examples were chosen for a number of reasons. They represent a range of uses of choice, so they allow for a consideration of how choice works under different circumstances and for different purposes. They exist in very different social, political, and fiscal circumstances, which allows for an analysis of the interaction between those proposing choice and the political actors involved. All three models are reasonably well known and widely cited as examples of how choice might work as an instrument of public policy. These cases are discussed around a relatively simple scheme: a brief description of each model followed by an outline of the social, political, and economic context within which the model developed, the operating characteristics of the model, and the results of implementation.[3] The paper concludes with an examination of how the models confront the three inherent policy design problems discussed above--demand-side vs. supply-side choice, public vs. private good, and alterations of existing choice structures.

THE MINNESOTA POSTSECONDARY ENROLLMENT OPTIONS PROGRAM (PEO)

Passed by the Minnesota legislature in the summer of 1985, the PEO program provides that eleventh and twelfth graders in public schools may enroll for courses in postsecondary institutions, including community colleges, public universities, postsecondary vocational-technical schools, and private colleges. Students may elect to take either secondary or postsecondary credit for their coursework. The law provides for the transfer of funds from the student's school district to the receiving postsecondary institution according to a formula based on the district's per pupil expenditure and the portion of the student's academic program taken in the postsecondary institution.

THE COMMUNITY DISTRICT 4 ALTERNATIVE SCHOOL CHOICE PROGRAM

Community District 4 is located in East Harlem, on the upper east side of New York City, one of the poorest neighborhoods in the country. The District 4 model began to emerge in 1973 with the formation of an alternative school, later called Central Park East Elementary School. Between 1973 and the present, the district has formed

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3. Unless otherwise noted, all evidence in the following analyses is drawn from these the three case studies on educational choice published by the Center for Policy Research in Education (Elmore 1990a, 1990b; Archbald 1990).

more than 20 alternative programs which offer parents a wide choice of educational options. At the elementary level, most students attend their neighborhood school, although a substantial number voluntarily choose to attend an alternative school. At the junior high level, all students and their parents participate in a formal process of choosing their school. While the community district is not formally authorized to run high schools, which are administered by the citywide Board of Education, District 4 runs two high school alternative programs under an agreement with the board.

THE WASHINGTON STATE EDUCATIONAL CLINICS PROGRAM

The educational clinics program was passed by the Washington legislature in 1978. The clinics program is designed to serve young people between the ages of 13 and 19 who have dropped out of school. The law permits organizations, including private, for-profit firms, to run remedial programs that provide short-term, intensive, individualized education to dropouts to prepare them either for re-entry to school or to take the Test of General Educational Development (GED) for a high-school equivalency certificate. Eight clinics are currently in operation, serving about 1,800 students. They are run by a variety of organizations, including community-based human services groups, employment training organizations, and American Indian organizations. The two largest clinics, serving nearly one third of the total participants in the program, are run by Educational Clinics, Incorporated, a private, for-profit firm which was instrumental in securing the passage of the clinics legislation and which developed the prototype on which the legislation was based.

THE PROCESS OF ENACTMENT

Each of the three models of choice owes its existence to the work of a handful of determined political entrepreneurs with strong anti-establishment views about public school bureaucracy. In the Minnesota case, PEO was one of a number of proposals advanced by Governor Rudy Perpich, legislative reformers, and citizen groups. Minnesota reformers did not deny that the state's education system was one of the best in the nation, by such objective measures as graduation rates and college entrance examination scores. Their concern was that public education had grown complacent, resistant to thinking creatively about improvement, and, above all, demanding of increased financial support during a time of austerity. According to legislative sources, the idea of using choice to light a fire under public school bureaucrats had been discussed frequently in the 1970s. In 1982, the Citizens League, a Minnesota good government group, issued a report containing a number of education reform proposals including one which would have given education vouchers to low-income families. The low-income voucher was introduced by state legislator John Brandl, a public policy professor from the University of Minnesota's Hubert Humphrey Institute. It garnered support from a variety of sources beyond the Citizens League, including organizations representing private schools. The low-income voucher proposal did not come to a vote in the 1984 session of the legislature but it mobilized strong opposition from

establishment education groups, including teacher, administrator, and school board organizations.

The Minnesota Business Partnership announced a reform agenda in late 1984 that included state-funded "stipends" for 11th and 12th graders to attend either public or private schools. In early 1985, Governor Perpich announced a broad education reform plan that included an open enrollment proposal for all of the state's 11th and 12th graders. The Governor's proposal shifted the debate away from vouchers to open enrollment. The Perpich open enrollment proposal galvanized political opposition of establishment education groups and was defeated after an extended and divisive political debate.

At the same time the open enrollment proposal was defeated, the legislature passed what many considered to be a modest expansion of an existing 1982 law allowing 11th and 12th grade students to enroll in postsecondary institutions. The 1982 law, sponsored by House Majority Leader Connie Levi, was weak and permissive; it gave school districts the authority to make agreements with postsecondary institutions and gave districts and postsecondary institutions the authority to decide whether academic credit would be awarded for courses taken. Levi's 1984 expansion provided, among other things, that the postsecondary choice could be initiated by the student and that public money would follow the student. When the legislature defeated the Perpich open enrollment option, Levi's postsecondary enrollment proposal was revived. Political insiders speculate that Levi's proposal was seen both by legislators and education interest groups as a relatively minor adjustment to an existing law and that education groups were reluctant to upset their generally smooth relationship with the House Majority Leader by opposing her bill. In June of 1985, Democrat Farm Labor Party Governor Rudy Perpich, joined Independent Republican House Majority Leader Connie Levi, in announcing that the postsecondary options proposal put Minnesota in the vanguard of educational reform.[4]

The Washington State Educational Clinics Law was no less clear a case of political entrepreneurship. Rex Crossen and Charles Davis, the principal officers of a small for-profit firm called Education Clinics, Incorporated (ECI), decided to capitalize on their experience running job training programs for difficult-to-employ adults by expanding their business to include young people who were having trouble in school. They initially ran summer and school-year tutoring programs and that seemed to be successful with troubled students.

In the mid-1970s, ECI made a series of proposals to local school districts, including the Seattle Public Schools, for public support to run clinic programs for high school dropouts. These proposals were uniformly rebuffed. They took their case to the state legislature, but the office of the state Superintendent of Public Instruction (SPI) and established education groups opposed their proposal. They formed a network of

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[4]. Parts of this account are drawn from Tim Mazzoni, "The Politics of Educational Choice in Minnesota." In Boyd and Kirchner (1988).

supporters from the state's corporate and civic elite and found a key legislative supporter in the House Majority Leader, John Bagnariol, whose daughter had been rescued from academic failure by a similar program. On a first attempt, an ECI-initiated proposal passed the legislature but was vetoed by then Governor Dixy Lee Ray, on the advice of established education interests. The following year, 1979, the proposal passed with funding of about $400,000. In its early years the clinics program weathered political opposition from the superintendent and local school districts and a high level of legislative scrutiny. By 1987, the program had grown to about 1,800 students in eight clinics, two of which are run by ECI and the remainder by nonprofit organizations, with an annual appropriation of over two million dollars.

The District 4 choice plan emerged more gradually, but also bears the imprint of political entrepreneurship. New York City's present system of 33 community school districts emerged in the late 1960s out of a political battle over community control of the schools that ended in significant decentralization. Soon after the creation of District 4 two leaders in that community--Community Board President Robert Rodriguez and Community Superintendent Anthony Alvarado, began to press for changes in the schools. Alvarado, a native of East Harlem and a former teacher there, was ambitious and determined to raise the quality of education for children in one of the city's poorest neighborhoods. His early attempts to elicit initiatives from principals and teachers in the district failed. In 1974, he recruited Deborah Meier, a practitioner of open classroom education and member of a citywide network of teachers with similar interests, and invited her to form her own school. Also in 1974, Alvarado recruited Seymour Fliegel, a veteran New York City educator who shared Alvarado's ambitions for innovation, and charged him with the development of alternative programs.

Central Park East Elementary School, started by Meier and her colleagues, was joined in 1974 by two other alternative programs--BETA, a program for 7th and 8th graders with serious emotional and behavioral problems, and East Harlem Performing Arts, a 4th through 9th grade program. These three programs became the nucleus of more than 20 alternative programs developed in District 4 over the next 15 years. Fliegel says that he and Alvarado had no overarching strategy in the early stages of developing alternative programs other than demonstrating that it was possible to offer high quality education to poor, minority, inner-city children. As the number of alternative programs increased, District 4 developed a philosophy of public-school choice in which an array of alternative programs would be made available to community members, in addition to "regular" schools, and in which teachers were encouraged to form alternatives if they had a coherent plan and a group of colleagues willing to collaborate in that plan.

District 4 personnel observe that the establishment of the alternative programs was accompanied by significant problems. Alternative programs, because they were small, were typically housed in "regular" school buildings, under the nominal authority of the principals in those buildings. This situation produced friction between the schools and the alternative programs which over time was resolved by both personnel shifts and program relocations. At various points in the development of the alternative programs, opposition has emerged from a number of quarters--dissident faculty within and outside

alternative programs, unhappy parents and community activists, and suspicious teacher and administrator union representatives. District 4 administrators dealt with this opposition on a piecemeal, non-confrontational level, adjusting political interests by moving personnel, offering inducements to unhappy teachers and administrators, and adopting an accommodating posture toward community opponents. On the whole, alternative programs have developed and thrived out of the persistence of district administrators and program personnel who feel strongly about the basic principle of high quality education for inner-city children.

District 4's alternative school choice program has never been accorded anything more than token support by the citywide school administration. According to early participants, the attitude of central administrators was that the situation couldn't get any worse in District 4, so anything District 4 wanted to do was alright as long as it didn't generate controversy outside the district. As the alternative programs expanded and as the District 4 administration began to tread in areas that were the traditional prerogatives of the central administration--like the establishment of alternative high schools--frictions developed between District 4 and the citywide administration.

In each case, the public school choice initiatives emerged from outside the established political and organizational structures of American education, and owed their existence to the persistence of political entrepreneurs. In Minnesota, the entrepreneurs were political leaders who were dissatisfied with the complacency of established educational interest groups. In Washington, the entrepreneurs were critics from outside the public school establishment who had a proposal about how to reach a particular group of students who were ill served by the public schools. In District 4, the entrepreneurs were renegades within the system who seized the opportunities offered by decentralization in New York City to promote a different approach to the education of inner-city children.

MAKING THE UNWORKABLE WORK

The conditions under which these public school choice initiative emerged did not bode well for their success as operating programs. The Minnesota Postsecondary Options program was passed without the active political support of education interest groups whose constituencies would be important to its implementation. The Washington Educational Clinics program was seen by mainstream education interest groups as a marginal, special interest issue that distracted attention from the main issue of school finance reform. The District 4 alternative schools program was born in large part out of the frustration of community district administrators over the failure of existing school personnel to offer good ideas for the improvement of education. In no case was there much cause for optimism about the success of the initiatives.

The early implementation of the Minnesota PEO program was accompanied by predictable implementation problems. High school counselors, already overburdened by large case loads and recent state minimum competency requirements, were informed of their responsibilities under the PEO law on the first day of school in the fall of 1985. A large share of the start-up costs of the program were borne by these counselors, who had to understand the terms of the law, handle parent and student inquiries, assist in placing students in postsecondary courses, and adjust the high school schedules and academic programs of students who took postsecondary courses. Some local school administrators engaged in public posturing designed to discourage postsecondary transfers, such as accusing postsecondary institutions of recruiting, arguing the superiority of high school courses over community college courses, and suggesting that students who took postsecondary courses lacked loyalty to their schools. Local school personnel developed a litany of horror stories about students who would lose high school credit, and fail to graduate on schedule because they might enroll in postsecondary courses and drop them.

The Minnesota Education Association, the state's largest teacher organization, proposed an amendment to the PEO law in 1986 which would have limited postsecondary courses to those for which there was no equivalent high school course. The amendment proposed a "comparability review" to determine equivalency between high school and college courses, which would have effectively shifted the control of access from students and parents to educators. The amendment was defeated.

Despite these political and administrative problems, the implementation of PEO proceeded with remarkable smoothness. By the end of the first year, the majority of districts (272 of 434) had students enrolled in postsecondary classes. A substantial minority of principals and teachers remained unconvinced of PEO's merit. Fewer than half the teachers surveyed in the first year classified themselves as supportive of PEO and almost 40 percent of principals reported that PEO had adversely affected staff morale. On the other hand, counselors, who shouldered most of the initial

implementation costs of the program, were reported by their principals to be overwhelmingly supportive of PEO.

The Washington State Educational Clinics program was characterized by greater resistance and slower implementation. Responsibility for the program was lodged in the Office of the State Superintendent of Public Instruction, one of the program's strongest opponents during the legislative debate. Start-up was slow; the legislature had to prod SPI to spend the appropriation for clinics in the first two years of the program. Superintendent Frank Brouillett eventually responded to the prodding and certified a diverse collection of clinics. At the local level, clinics met severe resistance from local school administrators, who regarded them as interlopers, as purveyors of inferior education, and as drawing attention to the failures of the public schools. Over time, this adversarial relationship has softened to the point where the majority of students in some clinics are referred by their local school systems.

In its mature form, the program serves about 1,800 of the state's estimated 11,000 dropouts in eight clinics located in 7 of the state's 39 counties. The program is administered through SPI's Office of Private Education, where its complex certification, reimbursement, and evaluation functions have been thoroughly routinized. The budget for the program has steadily increased, but not enough to expand significantly the scale of the program. The state has recently begun to focus political attention on the dropout problem, but clinics are seen as a small part of the state's overall strategy.

From its beginnings in 1976, the clinics program has operated under stringent controls. The legislation stresses cost control and performance by establishing a well-specified reimbursement schedule based on levels of service and group size, strict limits on the length of time a student can spend in the program, and evaluations based on clear output measures, such as GED completion, return to school, or entry into the workplace. The legislation also required clinics to hire only state-certified teachers. These operating controls have meant that clinics have achieved a relatively high degree of success at per-student costs of $600-700 per student per year, while alternative programs for high-risk students administered through the public schools have per-pupil costs of over $2000. The per-student costs of clinics are tightly constrained by a funding formula that reimburses clinics at a set rate for specific activities.

It is also clear that these efficiencies have been achieved at some cost to program quality. One clinic manager observed, for example, that the curriculum in his clinic had not been revised since it was created in the mid-1970s and that teaching had not kept pace with developments in the field. While teachers and students attach high value to the individual attention students receive in clinics, the facilities, materials, and conditions of work in clinics are well below the public schools. An incentive structure based on strict standards of performance and efficiency, in other words, has resulted in a lack of resources for continued development of new techniques and materials and for amenities comparable to the public schools. Overtime, these conditions could seriously limit the capacities of clinics. Since clinics must hire only certified teachers, they must compete for staff by offering either comparable compensation or superior working conditions. The existing incentive structure does not allow clinics to be competitive on

compensation. For the most part clinics have relied on the commitment of staff to high-risk students and on the opportunity for more flexible interaction between students and teachers to retain teachers. The absence of resources for curriculum development and improvement of working conditions undermines the ability of clinics to compete for talented staff.

A final irony in the implementation and operations of the clinics program has been that ECI, the for-profit firm that initiated the program, has never made a profit and has, in fact, been in and out of financial insolvency throughout its involvement in the program. Established educational interests saw the introduction of public payments to for-profit firms as a dangerous precedent. But what began as a venture in doing well by doing good has in the end turned out to be a venture in the use of private enterprise to subsidize the public interest. ECI's continued commitment to educational clinics is more a testimonial to its dogged persistence in its initial idea than to the power of the profit motive. Whatever the usefulness of the educational clinics program, it does not provide a particularly significant case of privatization.

The District 4 alternative schools program represents an incremental approach to the introduction of public school choice. Seymour Fliegel, a major actor in the development of the District 4 program, argues that the district had no global strategy at the outset of the program. He argues, instead, that the district simply wanted to create some examples of how education could work for inner-city children and use those examples to spawn other examples. The array of alternative programs and the idea of using parental choice to encourage better performance came later. About 10 percent of the district's elementary students are enrolled in alternative programs. Approximately two-thirds of the junior-high students (all of whom must choose their own school) are enrolled in alternative programs.

Serious problems arose in the initial implementation of alternative programs. Central Park East Elementary School weathered a series of challenges, first from the principal in the building where it was initially housed and then from a faction of dissident teachers and parents. Throughout the history of the program, the alternative schools have been challenged by community groups and educators within the district as exclusive, elitist, and too highly specialized. The incremental approach used by District 4 administrators was well adapted to anticipating problems and opposition and accommodating them. The alternative schools program has never been considered, either in District 4 or in the broader New York City school system. The program has instead been worked out as a series of specific decisions about specific alternative programs and specific accommodations to specific objections by specific teachers, principals, and parents. The philosophy of District 4 administrators has been that most opposition can be handled without provoking major political disagreements that would draw the entire alternative program structure into question. Objections by principals to having alternative programs in their buildings, for example, have been accommodated either by negotiating transfers or by providing compensating benefits. Objections by dissident teachers and parents have been met by providing access to other programs or by negotiating over differences of opinion within existing programs. Tensions with the

citywide Board of Education have been resolved largely by adroit tactical maneuvers that allow downtown administrators to take credit for District 4 successes.

The pace of development in District 4 has been slow by the standards of those who would implement public school choice with a single comprehensive policy decision. The initial three alternative programs were established in 1973. Thereafter, no more than three alternative programs were established per year. In some years none were established, and in some only one. Twenty-three programs have been started in 16 years. One program--The Sports School, designed to motivate academic learning through involvement in athletics--was "refocused" when district administrators determined it did not meet quality standards. It is now called New York Prep, and it has a primarily academic focus. Another program--BETA, one of the original three alternatives established in 1973, which focused on problems of students with serious emotional and behavioral problems--was closed at the end of the 1989 school year. Its students will be offered positions at other schools. District administrators cited problems with quality as the main reason for this decision also.

District administrators have made clear that there is an open invitation to establish new programs. Development of new programs is encouraged by allowing them to grow at one grade level per year and by accommodating staff size to low enrollments during initial start-up years. But the message is also clear from district administrators to potential program developers that the core ideas of new programs have to be educationally sound and the programs have to be able to sustain faculty and parent support in order to survive. Choice without quality, the argument goes, is no choice at all.

Choice operates differently at the elementary and secondary levels. Of the 23 existing programs, 5 serve elementary children. The remaining programs serve mainly junior high students. Two high school alternative programs are available in District 4, but most District 4 high school students enroll in the citywide system of high schools. Overall, the majority of District 4 students participate in alternative programs, about one-fifth of the elementary students and all of the junior high students.

The choice system itself in District 4 poses few, if any, operating problems. Parents are notified of their options by variety of means, including native-language brochures, school meetings, and neighborhood outreach efforts. All parents of junior high students receive information, since all are expected to choose a program. Information on elementary alternatives is readily available, but parents must initiate the process. In winter and spring of each year, parents and students are encouraged to visit alternative programs. Applications are collected in the district's central office and are circulated to programs by first preferences. Initial selections are made. Then applications are circulated by second preferences, and so forth. District administrators estimate that about 90 percent of parents and students receive one of their first three preferences. The process may be initiated by parents at the end of any term, but turnover within the school year is modest. Administrators and school personnel report no significant operating problems with the choice system, and community complaints seem to be minimal.

District and school-level personnel in District 4 have actively changed organizational constraints that most educators regard as beyond their influence. Alternative programs have demonstrated that many of the "realities" of urban schools that most people take for granted can be changed. Alternative programs, for example, have broken the correspondence between buildings and schools. Several programs, usually embodying different educational approaches and different age groups, are located in the same school building. Uses of staff time and grouping practices within alternative prcgrams are often highly flexible. Alternative programs are typically administered by "directors" rather than principals, because the scale of the programs is smaller and the director's role permits a blurring of the distinction between teacher and administrator. The result of these and other changes in the traditional structure of schools is that the alternative programs offer greater adult-student interaction, more attention to individual student learning, and a higher level of agreement among instructional staff, parents, and students over the expectations and academic content of the program.

The Minnesota PEO initiative, the Washington Educational Clinics Program, and the District 4 alternative schools program embody different approaches to the implementation and operation of choice programs. The Minnesota PEO initiative was intended to be available to all 11th and 12th grade students in the state and was implemented state-wide immediately after it passed. After initial start-up problems, the program became routinized within its first year of operation. The Washington Educational Clinics Program was intended to permit a small number of organizations to operate clinics. Its initial development was constrained both by budget and by the limited support of state agency personnel. After initial state and local resistance, clinics established a modest presence in the state serving a small proportion of the dropout population. The District 4 alternative schools program grew at a slow rate by design, because district administrators subscribed to the belief that choice was meaningless in the absence of quality. Implementation problems were resolved on a case-by-case basis over a long period of time. The system of alternative programs and parent choice is now fully functioning for all junior high students and for about one-fifth of elementary students.

While the policies grew from different implementation and operating strategies, they embody common experiences. Initial political resistance was overcome in each case by persistence and skill. Key operating problems in implementing choice were either surmounted early in the development of the programs or were dealt with on a piecemeal basis over time. In no case has the choice program raised insurmountable operational problems. In all cases, the implementation and operating problems were simplified by the deliberately limited scale of the programs.

EVIDENCE AND QUESTIONS

Evidence exists on the effects of each of the choice programs. The Minnesota Department of Education, at the request of the legislature, maintains data on students'

use of the Postsecondary Enrollment Options program. In the first year of the program, a little over 3 percent of 11th and 12th graders, in about two-thirds of the state's school districts, participated in the PEO option. Seven school districts had participation rates of 15 percent or more. The largest share of the students (49 percent) was enrolled in community colleges, with smaller proportions of students enrolled in state universities (34 percent), private colleges (6 percent), and vocational-technical schools (10 percent). Most students took between one and three courses during the year. And most students (87 percent) completed the courses with passing grades. Participants reported being highly satisfied with their choices and reported that the content was more difficult and that they learned more from postsecondary courses than from secondary courses.

Evaluations of the Washington Educational Clinics program have been conducted regularly by the Legislative Budget Committee, an independent audit arm of the legislature. The most recent studies indicate that incoming clinic students have become increasingly disadvantaged each year, as measured by grade-level achievement lags, and proportion of students from families on welfare. The most recent data available (1984) indicate that the average clinic student was about three years behind in grade-level achievement measures, and had been out of school for about five months when entering the program. For those students tested (about two-thirds of the total participants), the average length of participation was 30 days and the average gain on standardized achievement measures was about one grade level. The ECI clinics, which are the only for-profit clinics in the program, consistently perform in the top two or three in all performance measures. Somewhere between one-half and two thirds of clinics participants leave clinics for work, military service, or further schooling. These results compare favorably with results from conventional school dropout prevention programs, which typically cost more than three times as much. Overall, the evidence on education suggests that the program has significant positive effects on its intended clients, that for profit clinics perform as well or better than nonprofits and that clinics are able to hold the majority of dropouts long enough to significantly improve their learning. The evidence also suggests that clinics are cost effective relative to other dropout programs, but there is insufficient evidence to determine whether there is a difference on cost effectiveness between for-profit and not-for-profit clinics.

District 4 administrators calculate their successes in terms of citywide achievement measures. In 1973, when the alternative schools program was established, District 4 ranked 32nd, or last, among community districts on the citywide reading test, with 16 percent of its students scoring at or above grade level. By 1982 the district's ranking had risen to 18th, with almost half of its students scoring at or above grade level. And by 1987, the district had risen to the middle of the distribution of districts, with almost two-thirds of its students reading at or above grade level. The number of students accepted at citywide competitive high schools has risen from 10 in 1973 to over 250 in 1987. School-level personnel in alternative programs report significant gains in retention of talented teachers, staff morale, and teachers' perceptions of the quality of their work lives.

This evidence paints a generally positive picture of the effects of choice programs, and it reinforces a growing consensus among policy makers that the introduction of

choice can improve both the conditions of teaching and learning and performance of students. At the same time, the evidence is insufficient to support a general proposition that choice works, or to describe the conditions under which choice might contribute to positive effects on teachers and students. In the case of the Minnesota PEO program, the evidence deals with the exercise of choice (i.e., how many students used the option with what kinds of institutions for what kinds of courses), but not with the educational effects of choice on choosers and non-choosers. The most one can say from the evidence is that a small, but significant, proportion of students successfully exercised their option to choose postsecondary courses, with undetermined effects on their learning.

In the case of Washington State Educational Clinics program, there is direct evidence of participants' achievement and relative costs of clinics and other institutions serving similar clients. But there is no direct evidence on the relative educational effects of clinics versus other possible options. Nor is there any direct evidence on the exercise of choice, per se (e.g., comparisons of the educational experience and achievement of students with similar risk profiles who did and did not choose to enter clinics.

In the District 4 alternative schools program, the aggregate data on student reading achievement and high school entrance are adequate to demonstrate that the district has managed a general improvement of its educational program relative to other community districts in New York. But the data do not support any specific conclusions about the role that choice has played in that improvement. We don't know, for example, how much of the gain in reading scores at the elementary level is explained by the proportion of students participating in alternative schools versus those in regular schools. Nor do we know whether gains in regular schools can be explained as spill-over effects from alternative programs, or as effects of program improvement independent of choice. At the junior high level, we have no profile of achievement in alternative and regular schools as the district moved to full implementation of choice, so we have no way of knowing whether increases in alternative school enrollment pulled achievement up or whether achievement was tending up in all schools independent of alternative school enrollment.

As circumstantial evidence, data on the effects of choice programs are intriguing. As evidence of the dynamics of choice and the role that choice plays in teaching and learning, the data do not support any specific conclusions.[5] This result does not reflect negatively on either the evidence or the programs. In each case, the evidence was gathered to answer specific questions that did not necessarily bear on the more general dynamics and effects of choice. Likewise, the programs themselves should not be judged on the basis of whether they improve our general knowledge of how choice operates, since they were undertaken for other reasons. The conclusion is only that the evidence does not support general claims about the effectiveness of choice. Such claims would have to be based on a more systematic understanding, and on more specific evidence, of

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[5]. For a fuller treatment of the effects of choice, see Richard F. Elmore, "Choice as an Instrument of Public Policy: Evidence from Education and Health Care," in Choice and Control in American Education, Vol. 1, edited by William H. Clune and John F. Witte (Falmer Press, 1990).

how choice operates. The practical experience embodied in working models of choice has much to contribute to this understanding.

First, these cases demonstrate that any systematic understanding of the effects of choice has to take its point of departure from a clear understanding of the demand-side conditions of choice. The effects we expect to find are, in part, a function of how people select themselves into programs. At least two distinctive sets of demand-side conditions are apparent in the models we have examined. One set might be called *option demand*, where everyone in a particular set of clients is required to choose. The Minnesota PEO is predicated on the assumption that a specific population of students, 11th and 12th grade students, should have the option to choose postsecondary courses, but not that all eligible students should have to choose between secondary and postsecondary courses. The Washington State Clinics program likewise stresses option demand for a particular population, 13- to 19-year old dropouts, rather than universal choice. The District 4 alternative program, on the other hand, is an option demand program at the elementary level and a universal choice program at the junior high level.

Option demand and universal choice set very different conditions for access. Option demand systems have at least two levels of self-selection--choosing to exercise the option and choosing among alternative programs--while universal choice systems have only one level of self-selection--choosing among alternative programs. In effect, option demand systems say to the client, "If you are interested in choosing, you have the following alternatives." Universal choice systems say to the client, "You must choose among the following alternatives."

Because option demand systems involve two levels of self-selection, one would expect them to produce more homogeneity of preferences among the people who choose any given alternative. If group homogeneity of preferences promotes engagement in learning, then option demand systems should produce greater effects for active choosers, other things being equal, than universal choice systems. But differences between active and inactive choosers in option demand systems should also grow over time. If there is no universal requirement to choose, and if choice promotes effects, then active choosers should gain relative to inactive choosers.

By this logic, universal choice systems should have an equalizing effect, relative to option demand systems. If everyone is required to choose, then distinctions between active and inactive choosers become less important; they are simply translated into differences in preference among alternatives.

Second, the cases demonstrate that effects can be influenced by supply-side conditions on choice. The cases embody at least two different approaches to supply-side design. The Minnesota PEO program is a relatively unregulated system of supply within well-defined institutional structures. That is, the PEO program does not attempt to regulate what is taught within the postsecondary courses that PEO students take; it only stipulates the set of institutions within which students may choose courses. By contrast, both the Washington State Clinics program and the District 4 alternative schools program involve relatively explicit supply-side regulation. The state bureaucracy, for example, regulates the duration of the program, the qualifications of clinic staff, and the

nature of expected outcomes. District 4 administrators have exercised extensive controls over the number and content of alternative programs in the name of academic quality.

What students learn, and how learning differs among students with different attributes, is a function of what and how students are taught. If supply is relatively unregulated, one would have to know a great deal about the range of available educational offerings and what clients are actually choosing in order to predict what effect choice would have on specific types of learning. One would not expect choice to have a large effect on knowledge of science, for example, if relatively few students were choosing science courses, or if parents were choosing educational programs for their children with little or no science content. With a more heavily regulated supply, the expected effects become easier to predict, but the possibilities for matching clients' preferences with educational programs become more limited. So for example, as in District 4, where alternative programs were allowed to develop around distinctive themes but were still required to cover basic academic subjects, then one would expect all alternative programs to meet some level of performance on science, but some might exceed that level because of special attention to the subject. The point is that one cannot say how choice will improve student learning without some knowledge of how choice systems influence what is taught to whom.

Furthermore, the cases demonstrate that the incentives embedded in choice systems can have a considerable effect on the quality of educational experience for students. This is especially true where quality is defined, for example, according to the nature and duration of adult-student interaction, expectations for student learning, the content of materials, and teaching practices. The Minnesota PEO system assumes that if there are significant quality differences between secondary and postsecondary institutions, students possess adequate information to make those judgments and to choose accordingly. In other words, the PEO program assumes that program quality is adequately handled by self-regulation within educational institutions. The Washington State Clinics program embodies significant controls on eligibility, on teacher-student interaction, and on duration of contact, as well as significant financial incentives for clinics to produce gains on standardized educational outcome measures. While these controls and incentives seem to produce significant results with students, clinic staff report that curriculum and instruction in clinics are not keeping pace with changes in the field. In District 4, teacher initiative provides the supply of ideas on which alternative programs are based, but district-level standards of quality significantly influence the range of programs available. Whether choice systems explicitly regulate quality or not, they introduce incentives that affect quality, and quality is presumably a key supply-side determinant of the educational effects of choice.

Whether choice generally improves teaching and learning, then, is not a question that can be fully answered simply by citing positive evidence from evaluations of existing models. The issue requires a much more systematic understanding of the demand- and supply-side conditions that determine what gets taught to whom. While existing models of choice have much to teach us about these conditions, the evidence on program effects does not support a general conclusion that choice by itself is associated with positive effects on student and learning.

CONCLUSION

As noted at the outset, the success of public school choice policies, in political, administrative, and educational terms, depends on how well these policies grapple with certain inherent problems. These problems are: (1) how demand-side and supply-side choice interact to affect conditions of teaching and learning; (2) how differences among active and inactive choosers affect the public purposes of education; and (3) how new policies affect existing structures of choice. While the three working models analyzed here do not represent the full range of possible uses of choice as an instrument of educational policy, they do provide some useful conclusions about how policymakers and practitioners have grappled with these inherent problems.

The three cases demonstrate the interdependence of supply-side and demand-side policies and the need for a more complete understanding of this interdependence. The Minnesota PEO program is primarily a demand-side policy which, in effect, delegates supply-side issues of what gets taught to whom to existing institutions on the assumption that these institutions are well equipped to make judgments of content and quality. Hence, it is not surprising that evaluations of PEO stress how many students choose to take courses in postsecondary institutions rather than what students actually learn in those courses. The policy is well equipped to influence the former, and not equipped at all to influence the latter. The Washington State clinics program and the District 4 alternative schools program are examples of policies that are designed to actively influence both the demand and supply sides. In the clinics program, demand is regulated by restricting student eligibility and supply is regulated by personnel and content controls as well as financial incentives. In the District 4 program, demand is regulated by using option demand at the elementary level and universal choice at the junior high level, while supply is regulated by teacher initiative and central decision making about program quality.

Educational choice policies are frequently touted by their advocates as a means of "deregulating" education--that is, substituting the discipline of market incentives for external regulation. These working models of choice demonstrate that the introduction of choice is not really deregulation, but a change in the regulatory regime, or incentive structure, within which schools operate. The Minnesota case demonstrates that the decision not to regulate the supply side, except by specifying institutions from which students might choose, is, in effect, a decision to let the internal structures of those institutions control content. It is, in other words, a form of supply-side self-regulation. The Washington State and District 4 programs involve significant regulation of both the supply and demand sides, but the resulting incentive structure under which schools operate in those programs is very different from that under which most schools operate. In other words, choice policies are less about deregulation than they are about changing the regulatory regime of schools to allow more demand- and supply-side influence over who gets access to what types of education.

The three working models also demonstrate the influence of public school choice programs over active and inactive choosers. The Minnesota PEO and Washington Clinics programs, as noted above, operate on the principle of option demand. Option demand policies provide access to alternative programs, but do not require all eligible clients to choose. The major consequence of this approach is that the programs can be considered successful even if they serve only a relatively small proportion of the total pool of eligible clients. The Minnesota PEO program serves about 3 percent of the state's 11th and 12th graders; the Washington Clinics program serves about 12 percent of the state's total estimated dropout population, and about 16 percent of the estimated dropout population in the seven counties in which clinics are located. Yet evaluations of these programs regard them as a success, because these evaluations focus on the clients served, rather than on the larger system or the total pool of potential clients. Option demand systems should demonstrate significant effects with their clients, since they are well designed to capitalize on the motivations of active choosers, and only those who are motivated to choose are served.

But one would not expect option demand systems that serve a small proportion of the total client pool to exert great influence on the overall quality of the educational system or on the educational opportunities and performance of the remainder of the client pool. If option demand systems stabilize at levels like those of the Minnesota PEO program and Washington Clinics program, then institutions and clients can adapt quite easily to the existence of choice by making relatively minor changes in their standard ways of doing business. One would not expect the Minnesota PEO program, for example, to result in major changes in high school curricula that would benefit all students. One would predict only relatively small changes on the margins of the curriculum designed to retain the small proportion of active choosers. Likewise, one would not expect establishment of educational clinics to result in major changes in high school curricula or significant reductions in dropouts. Given the difficulties that most potential dropouts pose for public schools, one would predict what, in fact, has happened, which is that high schools have learned to use clinics as referral agencies rather than to compete with them.

Universal choice policies, such as the junior high alternative programs in District 4, present a much different set of incentives to clients and institutions. If all clients are required to choose among programs upon entry to the system, and if there are effective supply-side incentives and regulations to induce quality, then one would expect client choice to have relatively broad effects on clients and institutions. It is more difficult for schools to adapt to universal choice systems with minor changes, since all clients are required to choose.

While universal choice policies attempt to eliminate the distinction between active and inactive choosers at the entry level, the distinction may reappear again in the daily operation of schools. Universal choice policies require all parents to choose which program their children will attend, but they cannot then coerce parents into exercising active engagement in their children's schooling after the choice is made. Hence, whether clients stay engaged in schooling after they choose is as much a function of program design and supply-side regulation as it is of initial choice. In fact, District 4

demonstrates this principle quite clearly. It combines a strong emphasis on demand-side client choice with teacher-initiated alternative programs shaped by strong supply-side regulation.

Whether public school choice policies operate to the benefit of active and inactive choosers, then, seems to be heavily dependent on whether choices are defined in option demand or universal terms and whether supply-side incentives induce quality improvements. In any case, it seems implausible to argue, as some advocates of public school choice do, that choice benefits all clients because it introduces strong incentives for school improvement. Who benefits from choice and what those benefits are depends not just on whether choice exists, but also on how it is structured.

Finally, the three working models demonstrate how the introduction of new choice policies might affect existing systems of choice. Active choosers exercise some degree of choice in all public school systems, whether in the selection of a residence, in influencing the assignment of students to teachers, in the choice of courses at the secondary level, or in the assignment of students to special programs within or between schools. The underlying policy issue in these examples, then, is not whether choice exists, but how extensively the introduction of new policies changes the ground rules under which choices are made.

The enactment and implementation of the Minnesota PEO and Washington Clinics programs seem to be exercises in the domestication of new choice policies by existing political interests and organizational structures. In principle, both programs could have had potentially far-reaching positive effects on students and educational institutions. In practice, the programs have been easily accommodated by the existing systems without serious disruption of operating routines of high schools, or major changes in most students' educational experience. Shifts in enrollment under the two programs have been small and high schools seem neither to have been seriously inconvenienced nor to have substantially changed their usual way of doing business. While established educational groups feared these proposals prior to their enactment, their fears seem to be largely unfounded. By the same token, the programs have not had the galvanizing effect on public education that their sponsors hoped they would have.

The District 4 alternative school program is a rather different case. The evidence is strong that the program has significantly changed the terms of public school choice for students and parents, at least at the junior high level, and the operating routines of the community district and schools. On number of dimensions--the size of schools, the nature of teachers' work in schools, the way individual schools' missions are defined, the assignment of students and teachers to schools, and the relationship of the community district to schools--District 4 operates differently from other community districts in New York and from other school districts generally. These changes, one must hasten to add, are the result of dogged persistence over a period of 16 years, a much longer period than most school systems are willing to devote to an educational innovation. So for students, parents, and educators in East Harlem, the alternative school program has changed the structure of choice that existed before the program was introduced, and

those changes have been largely in the direction of equalizing choices between active and inactive choosers and putting choice in the service of educational quality.

From the perspective of the whole school system of the City of New York, however, District 4 seems to have had little effect. None of the other 30-plus community districts has undertaken anything like District 4's system of alternative programs. While the citywide administration's posture toward District 4 has evolved from oblique disregard to uneasy support, it has scrupulously avoided any suggestion that District 4's experience might be generalized to other community districts. From the citywide perspective, the, District 4 looks like another case of the domestication of choice to the existing system, even though its effects are much more extensive when viewed from within.

Overall, then, this analysis of working models of choice has demonstrated, first, that significant changes in the structure of public school choice are feasible, politically and administratively; second, that the effects of these new systems of choice on students and schools are highly sensitive to the details of their design; and third, that changes in the structure of public school choice are to have the dramatic effects that their advocates suggest are possible, then there will have to be a good bit more attention to the design of new structures and to implementation strategies.

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