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ABSTRACT

School board members' new leadership roles in planning and implementing school choice programs are described in this article, which draws on the experience of a former Minnesota Commissioner of Education. The first task of the board is to set high expectations in the district and to establish specific policies. Despite the extent of state-legislated criteria for program implementation, the local boards are responsible for deciding how to make programs work. Local boards must also provide consumer information to parents and students. Tips for what kinds of information to provide are suggested. The board also plays a funding role to cover open enrollment and information costs by lobbying for state funds. The board also has the responsibility to provide for diversity in the site-managed school; some options include creating magnet schools and area learning centers. (LMI)

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Editors note: "Choice," sometimes referred to as open enrollment, is a blanket term for a variety of programs allowing parents to choose which school their children will attend. Eight states have adopted state-wide, inter-district choice (see map, page 5) More than twenty others are still considering choice programs. Our January 1990 issue outlined the various formats, benefits, and challenges posed for school districts when considering choice. This month, Dr. Ruth Randall draws on 6 1/2 years of experience as Minnesota's Commissioner of Education (July 1983 - January 1990) to examine school board members' new roles in providing leadership for such programs.

Members of local boards of education assume new roles as they respond to legislation on educational choice. After a law is passed and the state mandates policy on choice, it is the responsibility of the local board of education to set local policy for implementation. The areas for which new policies will be needed vary from district to district, but in most cases choice does require board members to wear several new hats. In addition to new policies for welcoming and orienting new students, boards also assume responsibility for providing consumer information to potential "customers" and providing diverse learning environments, offering something different for parents than they had before choice came to the district.

The very first task of the board is to set high expectations in the district. Board leadership is crucial for establishing positive attitudes by superintendents, principals, counselors, teachers, and support staff about the implementation of choice. Choice, by nature, will result in an initial turnover of students. The board may want to set policies which provide for welcoming and orienting students and parents new to the district. When state-wide open enrollment came to Minnesota, it was met with a range of attitudes — from optimism and zeal to resentment and dragging of feet.

For example, when post-secondary options were first introduced, many students did seek upper-level courses at nearby colleges and universities. In some cases, their high school teachers and administrators encouraged the students to pursue these opportunities and in other cases, these students were chastised and denied privileges offered to students who stayed on campus all day. There were other instances where students choosing to enter new schools altogether were not welcomed by teachers and administrators who opposed the legislation. The demeanor of board members and superintendents, and of the total staff, will make a difference in how parents and students view the options given them by law.

As is the case with almost any sweeping change in education, peer pressure among educators to "go along" with the innovation or to maintain the status quo can place extraordinary stress on adminstrators and teachers. School board policies can diminish the effects of these mixed attitudes on students. The board may consider providing for two-way communication with new students and parents — opportunities for discussion and feedback as opposed to a letter or brochure which does not elicit response from the recipient. These policies not only voice the board's leadership in establishing a school climate, but provide an "out" for adminstrators who must bear the brunt of criticism from parents or peers. Such leadership will send a message to the community that says, "This is the kind of district we're going to be." Students and parents should understand that the board members' strongest desire is that every child is getting an education best suited to him or her, whether it is in one district or another.

Legislative guidelines

The legislature may have included guidelines for implementation in the law. In Minnesota — where the first state-wide open enrollment law was passed in 1987 — the law indicated that desegregation must continue and that districts must accept students if they have space. They also set timelines for parental decision making and district response. They allocated dollars for transportation for low-income parents. They specified that districts must counsel parents prior to parental decision-making as well as provide information to them.

continued on page 2

Dr. Randall, is a professor at the University of Nebraska's Dept. of Educational Administration, presented these views at the 1990 NSBA Convention and currently is writing a book on educational choice.

Inside Updating...

Educational Choice from page 1

Legislation may also make school district participation optional, such as Ohio's, which went into effect this year. Districts there must adopt a written policy by 1993 stating whether or not they will admit students from contiguous or adjacent districts. According to Assistant State Superintendent John Goff, no districts have taken that option yet. Ohio's law also mandates intra-district choice, which many districts have implemented, often because they had allowed it prior to the mandate.

Whether or not the legislature in any state sets specific implementation criteria, the local board of education will have to deal with how to make choice programs work. Decisions on transportation costs, application deadlines, admissions decisions, and levels of school-based decision-making will require attention.

Consumer information

Consumer information is necessary for parents and students when choosing a school. As local board members, you will have to decide on the type and amount of information to provide. This will require reviewing what sources of information are available to parents and whether they really meet parents' needs.

Obviously, you will want to let people know about the grades served, hours of operation, name of principal or contact person, total enrollment, class size, number of teachers, curriculum, additional programs, and services provided. In **The School Book: A Comprehensive Guide to Elementary Schools in the Twin Cities**, 1990-91, published by the Citizens League of Minnesota, information was given for each elementary school about the following:

- accreditation
- curriculum
- teaching methods
- nearest metropolitan transit stop
- building and facilities
  - year built
  - year remodeled
  - air conditioning
  - laboratories
  - special rooms
- extra-curricular programs
- equipment/technology
- grading system
- parent communication
  - parent organizations
  - conferences
  - report cards
  - newsletter
  - handbook
- services
  - AM latchkey
  - PM latchkey
  - breakfast
  - attempt to honor parent choice of teacher

Each elementary school also has a 150-word statement about its mission or intentions for the next three years. The book encourages parents to think about "what you already know about your child and yourself." For instance, the parents should "think about what your child likes to do and how your child likes to learn." Parents are reminded that their values and feelings will help determine the decisions they make. On the whole, however, the book is more a collection of data than an interpretation. Many parents want to know more about the ambience or climate of schools than just the facts on resources and services provided.

According to on-going surveys conducted by SchoolMatch, a data-based information and counseling service in Columbus, Ohio, few parents want their children in the most academically rigorous school or one with the highest test scores. Many school officials incorrectly equate "best" with "most competitive," according to William Bainbridge and Steven Sundre, two principals who participate in SchoolMatch. Instead, they want their children in an environment that allows each child to excel. (**The American School Board Journal**, May 1990)

The Citizens League encourages parents to visit schools to determine the ones they might choose for their children and suggests parents look for the following things when visiting an elementary school:

- The classrooms are rich with materials for children.
- Materials and equipment are within children's reach and appear to be in frequent use.
- All children are expected to learn.
- The school staff respects childhood and recognizes the dignity of children as learners.
- Classroom activities are organized to respect the differences among children.
- The school is a happy and comfortable place for learning and visiting.
- The school respects the skills of teachers and encourages them to learn and grow.
- The school is a place where my child could learn and grow.
- The school staff values parents.
- The school staff values other people and institutions within the community.
- The principal is important to the climate and success of the school.
- Teachers and administrators recognize their responsibility to know what the children are learning.
- The school appears to be true to the words of its own mission and philosophy.

In addition to the Citizens' League publication in the Twin Cities of Minnesota, a for-profit magazine called **Schoolhouse Magazine** provides information about elementary and secondary schools, both public and private. It gives data on over 40 criteria for each school, provided by that institution. **Schoolhouse** has been in production for many years; it was widely used by realtors and others prior to any public policy on parental choice.

Children's growth

Open enrollment provides an added opportunity for parents to gain understanding of their children's growth and development. In choosing pre-primary schools, parents often are able to choose among a number of options, such as a religion-based program, Montessori, or a private home with very few children. In choosing post-secondary programs, parents and students again have great latitude among large, small, liberal arts-oriented, tech-

continued on page 3

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Educational Choice from page 2

nical, and myriad other schools. Between the ages of 5 and 18, however, parents have had less choice until open enrollment appeared on the scene.

To facilitate this choice Board members might want to help parents better understand the growth of their children so they can choose the school which best fits their child. The information provided to parents about schools might explain which types of programs are geared for different learning styles and personalities. Boards might choose to disseminate information in a number of ways. In South St. Paul, Minnesota, a commercial quality booklet gives extensive information about the South St. Paul school system and was paid for by the Veterans of Foreign Wars in that city. Schools might publish their own brochures or devote an issue of their own newspaper to providing the kind of data needed and wanted by parents. One-way communication may be adequate for some parents; others may need two-way communication — opportunities for parents to ask questions and become comfortable with their choices.

Certainly the school, school district, and state have a responsibility to see that *all* parents have access to consumer information. If only a few parents are able to make informed decisions, the premise of choice will not be realized, nor is it fair and equitable if all parents do not know they can make a choice or what those choices might be. History indicates that parents with higher socioeconomic status know how to bring about change in the school system. In Minnesota, like other areas of the country, minority groups often felt they did not have the clout needed to effect change in schools.

Choice plans can "empower" these parents in two ways. First, if boards open their arms to all parents by providing information and forums for discussion on choice, more parents will be equipped to participate. Second, all parents, regardless of their financial resources, will now have the powerful option to change schools (see story, page 4). In low-income areas of a school district, schools may communicate through individuals representing ministerial alliances or churches, community health services, human services staff, or other agencies which serve the parents and students who live there.

Covering costs

Costs of providing information may increase, but school districts can limit costs by modifying the newspapers, brochures, and handouts which have been in use. Announcements and other information can be given at Parent Teacher Association meetings and at other parent organization meetings, at booster club events, and the like. In other words, the communication system which is in place at a school or district may entail some cost, but service organizations in a town, city, or county may be willing to underwrite such costs.

The issue of costs related to open enrollment brings about yet another new, or heightened, role for school board members: lobbying for state funds to follow students to their new schools and to cover overhead costs of choice, such as consumer information. The Nebraska Association of School Boards, for example, convened a task force of board members and superintendents to make recommended changes to the choice legislation, all of which were adopted. Funding issues topped their list; many districts had opted out of participation because they couldn't afford choice.

Recruiting policy

Awareness of the difference between providing information to parents and recruiting students needs to be made. Board policies should reflect the district's stance on both. State law may be specific about providing consumer information so that parents can choose wisely and well.

Recruiting of students is another matter. Ordinarily one thinks of promising a recruited student something such as a position on a team, a part in a play, a chair in the orchestra or the like. State law, in Minnesota for example, prohibits districts from recruiting students, but not from providing information so that students and their parents can make informed choices.

Providing diversity

In offering parents a choice among schools, they will begin asking how one school differs from the next. Schools can be distinguished by subtle characteristics like educational climate or by more explicit differences like those between magnet schools, alternative schools, area learning centers, specialty schools, and the like.

School site management — where teachers, parents, students, and the principal make decisions about the resources of dollars, people, space, and time — allows enormous potential for creating new learning environments. Board of education members have a new role when delegating these responsibilities to the school site. Boards may decide to take responsibility for ensuring that district-wide excellence is maintained, that policy is conducive to taking risks, that schools are provided with support and guidance, that accountability mechanisms are in place, and that parents are informed.

Teachers and parents know the children best of all and, working together, can create the optimum learning environment. The teachers have knowledge and expertise about curriculum, instruction, and assessment, about human growth and development, and about interpersonal relations. With autonomy provided them by the board of education and superintendent, the possibilities for diversity at the school site are enormous.

Boards may also set policy which would make every school in the district a magnet school. In Minnesota, the Cyrus Elementary School, located in a rural part of the state, became a science-mathematics-technology magnet. The Public School Academy in Minneapolis changed instructional strategies. Teachers at the Academy enjoy a student:teacher ratio of 14 to 1, but determined they would have no special teachers or support staff. Students get intensive help from their teachers.

Area Learning Centers, a collaborative learning environment, brings students together from several districts in Minnesota for an alternative education. Key to the success of the Area Learning Centers is the individualized instruction based on each student's needs. ■