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ABSTRACT
        This study provides a detailed description of the
process by which parents choose schools for their children and the
process by which urban schools adjust to the necessity of convincing
parents to choose them. The Parent Information Center programs in the
Massachusetts communities of Boston, Cambridge, Fall River, Lawrence,
Lowell, and Springfield are described, based upon on-site
observations, reviews of policies and parent information materials,
interviews with 150 parents, and responses to a questionnaire turned
in by nearly 450 parents. The study also reviews research on
motivations for parent choice of schools in the Netherlands,
Scotland, France, and the United States. The findings indicate that:
(1) a high proportion of parents in Boston and other Massachusetts
cities that have adopted universal choice policies are able to send
their child to their first choice school, and virtually all parents
are able to send their child to one of their chosen schools; (2) the
system of parent information and counseling is well organized; (3)
parents appreciate the opportunity to consider more than one school;
(4) a variety of factors, such as location, teachers, programs,
school climate, and principals influence parents' choice of schools;
and (5) informal communication networks are the most important source
of information for many parents. Appendices include survey
instruments and tables of data compiled from the survey. (SM)

# CENTER ON FAMILIES, COMMUNITIES, SCHOOLS & CHILDREN'S LEARNING

# PARENT INFORMATION FOR SCHOOL CHOICE

## The Case of Massachusetts

Charles L. Glenn
Kahris McLaughlin
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# CENTER ON FAMILIES, COMMUNITIES, SCHOOLS & CHILDREN'S LEARNING

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# CENTER ON FAMILIES, COMMUNITIES, SCHOOLS & CHILDREN'S LEARNING

The nation's schools must do more to improve the education of all children, but schools cannot do this alone. More will be accomplished if families and communities work with children, with each other, and with schools to promote successful students.

The mission of this Center is to conduct research, evaluations, policy analyses, and dissemination to produce new and useful knowledge about how families, schools, and communities influence student motivation, learning, and development. A second important goal is to improve the connections between and among these major social institutions.

Two research programs guide the Center's work: the Program on the Early Years of Childhood, covering children aged 0-10 through the elementary grades; and the Program on the Years of Early and Late Adolescence, covering youngsters aged 11-19 through the middle and high school grades.

Research on family, school, and community connections must be conducted to understand more about all children and all families, not just those who are economically and educationally advantaged or already connected to school and community resources. The Center's projects pay particular attention to the diversity of family cultures and backgrounds and to the diversity in family, school, and community practices that support families in helping children succeed across the years of childhood and adolescence. Projects also examine policies at the federal, state, and local levels that produce effective partnerships.

A third program of Institutional Activities includes a wide range of dissemination projects to extend the Center's national leadership. The Center's work will yield new information, practices, and policies to promote partnerships among families, communities, and schools to benefit children's learning.

# Contents

# Preface

The purpose of this multi-year study is to obtain objective information on the process by which urban parents make choices of schools, and the process by which urban schools adjust to the necessity of convincing parents to choose them. While the study is anchored in the specifics of school choice plans in several Massachusetts cities, it also looks broadly at policies and experience in other cities and even in other countries.

During the first year of the study (1990-91), Laura Salganik reviewed the policies and practices under which information is provided to parents in a number of states and communities where school choice plans are in operation. The results of her review have been published in a report available from the Center on Families.

The second year of the study (1991-92) looked in detail at the relationship between inner-city parents and school choice in six Massachusetts cities that are implementing universal controlled choice plans. This report is the result.

The first section, by Charles Glenn of Boston University, provides background on the functioning of choice among public schools in these cities, discussing the reasons for development of the particular model of school choice employed in Massachusetts and the mechanics of the choice process and its documented results.

The second section, also by Charles Glenn, reviews a number of studies conducted in the United States and other nations, on the motivations of parents taking part in the process of choosing schools and the reasons they give for school selections.

The third section, by Kahris McLaughlin of Boston's Freedom House and Charles Glenn, describes how parent information centers function in the six Massachusetts cities. It is based upon in-depth interviews and observations.

The fourth section, by Laura Salganik of Pelavin Associates, reports the results of a telephone survey of 150 parents taking part in the school choice process in three of these cities, and of a questionnaire filled out by nearly 450 parents in four cities.

The fifth section, by Charles Glenn, summarizes the findings and introduces the research that is being carried out in the third year of the study (1992-93).

# 1. Background

The great majority of American schoolchildren are assigned to particular public schools on the basis of where they live -- which often means: where their parents can afford to live. What choice of schools exists (and there is actually a great deal) is largely that exercised by middle-class parents in choosing a neighborhood or suburban community. Thus Darling-Hammond and Kirby found, in a Minnesota study, that 53 percent of public school parents "had considered public school quality as an important factor in determining residential location."[1]

Apart from residential decisions, the possibility of school choice tends to come into play only for children with quite distinctive needs. It is commonly acknowledged by educators that not every school will meet the needs of a child with a particular handicap or learning disability, but somehow it is not considered legitimate to take other educational considerations into account in deciding which school will best challenge and support other children.

While a constant lament of teachers and principals is that parents are not supportive of the work of the school, the same professionals often resist proposals that parents be allowed to select a school that they can support wholeheartedly.

Assigning pupils to schools on the basis of where they live has some practical advantages, but geographically-based assignments also create problems for school systems; as demographic changes increase or decrease the number of school-aged children in a particular area, attendance areas must be redrawn, portable classrooms added, schools closed (usually over fierce local opposition), or the grade-levels assigned to each building reshuffled. The reality of changing urban residential patterns, in particular, is that many pupils cannot attend their neighborhood school. "Neighborhoods" rarely produce just the right number of children at each grade level to fill up schools precisely, even if everyone wanted their neighborhood school -- which they do not.[2]

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[1] Linda Darling-Hammond and Sheila Nataraj Kirby, "Public Policy and Private Choice: The Case of Minnesota," Comparing Public and Private Schools, Volume 1: Institutions and Organizations, Thomas James and Henry M. Levin, editors, New York: The Falmer Press 1988, 248.

[2] One of the benefits of universal choice in Massachusetts cities has been to minimize the impact of neighborhood population changes on local schools. In Fall River, for example, the Wiley School has 258 pupils in its former attendance area, while the Fowler has 90; this would produce an average class size of 43 at the Wiley and 13 at the Fowler if every pupil attended a neighborhood school. As a result of parent choices, each has 25-26 pupils per class. In Holyoke, the Lawrence School has a capacity of 530 but 1,042 pupils in its attendance zone, while the McMahon has a capacity of 300 but only 118 in its attendance zone. Universal parent choice makes it possible to assign the more popular schools to their optimal level, while under-enrolling the schools that fewer parents choose, even if they are located in densely-populated areas.

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No, the opposition to allowing parents to choose the schools their children will attend seems to derive from concerns that have little to do with the practical demands of school management.

On the most obvious level, there is a resistance to encouraging parents to evaluate how well schools and those who work in schools will meet the needs of their children, in order to make a well-founded choice. Educators have been extremely resistant to accountability for performance, even when exercised by professionals above them in the hierarchy of school systems. Many explain away even such objective outcome measures as standardized test scores as reflecting only the family background of children rather than also to a significant extent the skill and effort of teachers, though this would seem to undercut their own contention that formal schooling is of supreme importance.[1]

Thus one of the most common objections to allowing ordinary (non-tuition paying) parents to select schools is that they are incapable of making wise judgments about the quality offered by different schools -- or perhaps not even interested in doing so. This comes curiously from a profession that generally opposes allowing **anyone** (however wise or well-informed) to make judgments that any school or teacher is not doing a good job.

The primary argument used in public debate by opponents of parent choice of schools, however, has been that it will produce new inequities in educational opportunity, "winners and losers."[2] The more sophisticated parents, the more academically-able students will take advantage of a system of school choice to leave their urban neighborhood schools, this argument typically goes, with the inevitable result that those who are left will be as neglected in their educational as (allegedly) in their family life.

While this argument can be shown to be factually wrong, it is in a sense morally correct. It is factually wrong in two ways: the present system of residence-

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[1] This excuse for poor pupil performance is a debased version of research findings reported by Coleman and others in 1966 and by Jencks and others in 1972; research suggesting that how teachers and others perform does make a difference (Rutter and others 1979, Mortimore and others 1988) could be -- but is not -- used to draw the unwelcome conclusion that they should be held accountable for performing effectively, and rewarded or sanctioned accordingly (James S. Coleman and others, Equality of Educational Opportunity, Washington: U. S. Government Printing Office, 1966; Christopher Jencks and others, Inequality: A Reassessment of the Effect of Family and Schooling in America, New York: Harper & Row, 1972; Michael Rutter and others, Fifteen Thousand Hours: Secondary schools and their effects on children, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979; Peter Mortimore and others, School Matters, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988).

[2] In a sample of twenty articles and policy statements critical of parent choice of schools, Glenn found that eighteen stressed "winners and losers," seven, that parents cannot make good choices, six, that segregation might result, and four, that choice policies would divert attention from improving all schools.

based assignments has by no means made winners of urban and minority children,[1] and there is ample evidence that parent choice may but does not necessarily lead to "winners and losers," as we will see when we look at the Massachusetts experience.

The argument is morally correct in the sense that if parent choice is to gain general acceptance as a strategy for fundamental educational reform, it must be shown to have a positive effect on the quality of education available to all students. It is not enough, in arguing for the benefits of choice, tu point to the success of some urban magnet schools, if this is a success of scarcity, won at the expense of other schools and the pupils who must attend them. The challenge for public policy, surely, is to so organize parent choice of schools that, over time, all schools will improve and all pupils benefit.[2]

Opponents of choice frequently charge that it will benefit only those with a high level of sophistication and resources of time, information, and transportation, and thus lead to new inequities. Schools and programs that admit pupils on the basis of choice "represent a major assault on the educational opportunities of the nation's most vulnerable children;" they will be the victims of a "new improved sorting machine."[3]

While some supporters of choice accept such an outcome with a certain complacency,[4] those who have actually implemented reform plans based upon parent choice have taken care to do so in ways that seek to protect equal access and (when relevant) desegregation.

The most consistent such approach is universal "controlled choice," the policy under which the public schools attended by more than 145,000 Massachusetts students now operate. Unlike "winner-take-all, devil-take-the-hindmost" strategies of competition among schools, the Massachusetts system of controlled choice seeks to provide comparable benefits to all pupils and also to increase the effective participation of low-income and minority children and their parents in the process of education, while stimulating every school (not just a few magnet schools) to become more effective.

Controlled choice has drawn attacks from the other flank, from those who argue that establishing any controls in the name of equity does fatal damage to the very

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[1] Nor has it prevented thousands of parents from taking their children out of their neighborhood schools, under open enrollment and other school system policies that are commonly found to have increased racial and class segregation.

[2] This is entirely different from the position of Keith Geiger, President of the National Education Association, that we should make all schools excellent first, and only then allow choice among them. Parent choice can work powerfully to create the conditions for improved school quality, if it is guided by appropriate policies.

[3] Donald R. Moore and Suzanne Davenport, The New Improved Sorting Machine: Concerning School Choice, Chicago: Design for Change, February 1989.

[4] Myron Lieberman, Privatization and Educational Choice, New York: St. Martin's Press, 1989.

principle of the free market, gives a misleading impression that parents have any real options, and prevents fundamental school improvements.[1]

Massachusetts, which in 1965 had been the first state to adopt legislation calling for racial balance in its schools, repealed some of its enforcement provisions in 1974 while substituting a program to encourage the development of magnet schools as a means of desegregating at less political cost. Funded at first at $2 million, the annual appropriation quickly grew to over $5 million, together with 90 percent of the cost of facilities and millions more in transportation necessary to operate magnet schools.

Although magnet schools were generally a considerable success in the cities that adopted them, it began to be clear that they had negative side effects.

Magnets are often exciting schools with highly-committed parents and teachers and a freedom to pilot new ways of learning.[2] Who could object to that?

But successful magnet schools create new problems. While expanding the opportunity of parents to choose, magnet schools also -- precisely to the extent that they are successful in doing so -- increase the number of disappointed applicants and thus the number of children assigned **involuntarily**. Typically they have several times as many applicants as they can accept, so that hopes are raised only to be disappointed. Since magnet schools, limited in their capacity, cannot deliver on the promise of choice for all, parents have sometimes been placed in the position of waiting all night to register their children for a scarce seat in a public school. In Springfield (MA) in 1990-91, only 37 percent of the applicants to magnet schools could be accommodated, while Worcester could accept only 600 of 1,700 applicants to a new citywide magnet school.

By definition intended to be more attractive than other schools, and often given additional resources and a freedom to be distinctive that other schools do not enjoy, magnets drain energetic and motivated staff and parents as well as funding from non-magnet schools. In many communities, though not in Massachusetts, magnet schools are also allowed to screen and select among applicants, and thus leave other schools with the more troublesome and less academically-able students.

In addition, since the focus has been upon achieving a racially-integrated enrollment at the individual magnet school rather than in the system as a whole, the effect may be to make other schools even more segregated. The federal magnet

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[1] As an example of this point of view, Abigail Thernstrom has charged that "Controlled choice is a Massachusetts specialty -- sold to the gullible world of choice advocates as another Massachusetts miracle. In fact, it is a system in which the real choices of many parents cannot be honored" (The Public Interest 101, Fall 1990, 129).

[2] Good examples would be two K-8 schools in Massachusetts, the City School in Lowell, where the various academic competencies are learned through participation in a "micro-society," and the Rafael Hernandez School in Boston, where all pupils learn in Spanish as well as English.

school assistance program continues to operate under policies that, according to critics, forces school systems to "intentionally maintain 100 percent minority schools in order to keep up white enrollment in their federally funded magnets."[1] In Chicago and other large cities that have relied primarily upon magnet schools to meet their desegregation obligations, many schools remain completely segregated.[2]

Milwaukee is often touted by magnet school proponents as an example of the virtues of magnet schools. The burdens of creating these schools, and the benefits of attending them, however, were not distributed fairly between white and minority children. Schools were closed in minority neighborhoods, and others converted to magnet schools with half the seats reserved for white volunteers; the combined effect was that a high proportion of the minority students were forced to bear the burden of moving to another part of the city. A recent report by Charles Willie and others found "disparity in the quality of schools in the Milwaukee Public Schools system; inequity by race, ethnicity and socioeconomic status in opportunities to attend specialty [magnet] schools and specialty programs; continuing racial isolation in a number of schools; a student assignment process which suggests that specialty schools are better than other schools" and other problems.[3]

A study of the characteristics of effective schools as exemplified in Milwaukee provides confirming evidence that "[m]agnet schools may serve their functions of providing some degree of voluntary integration and of keeping middle-class students in the urban system; however, the price is obviously a dual school system."[4] The same charge has been brought against magnet or specialty schools in New York City, Philadelphia, Washington, Boston and other cities.[5]

## Massachusetts: An Alternative Model of School Choice

Controlled choice was developed in Massachusetts in response to a growing ambivalence about magnet schools, a concern that what had worked well for a few thousand urban students be somehow made to work for several hundred thousand, by insisting that all schools become sufficiently safe and effective to attract students on a voluntary basis. Just as nations cannot endure "half slave and half free" and economies cannot successfully combine central control with genuine market forces, so school systems that want to put choice to work for equity and school improvement must be prepared to make it the universal basis for student assignment.

[1]Julie A. Miller, "Districts Call For Flexibility on Magnet-School Rules," Education Week December 12, 1990, 31.

[2]Charles L. Glenn, The Chicago Desegregation Plan: Interim Report, Chicago: Monitoring Commission, November 1982.

[3]Charles V. Willie, Michael J. Alves and David J. Hartmann, Long-Range Educational Equity Plan for Milwaukee Public Schools, February 1990.

[4]John F. Witte and Daniel J. Walsh, "A Systematic Test of the Effective Schools Model," Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis 12, 2, 205.

[5]Moore and Davenport, op. cit..

In recent years, out of concern for a growing gap between magnet and other schools, the Commonwealth's Office of Educational Equity[1] has encouraged Massachusetts cities to expand their provision of magnet schools into "controlled choice" policies -- pioneered in Cambridge -- under which attendance areas for individual schools are abolished and all pupils are enrolled in all schools on the basis of choice.

The Cambridge model grew out of more than a decade of desegregation efforts and in response to pressures from the Massachusetts Department of Education, but without litigation. The first desegregation plan in Cambridge was adopted in 1965; it included construction of three new schools with increased capacities and enlarged attendance areas, and a policy prohibiting any student transfer that would have a negative effect on racial balance. The schools were built, but without appropriate redistricting or the intended results. The state agency, distracted with far more serious segregation in Boston and Springfield, issued periodic warnings without follow-through or technical assistance. State grants after 1974 helped to create four integrated magnet elementary schools appealing chiefly to "counter-cultural" parents, but -- as subsequent investigation found -- these actually contributed to the racial identifiability of other schools.

It was in 1978 that the state insisted that the 1965 commitment to racial balance be kept. An analysis of assignment data showed that nearly 1,100 students (in a system of 4,300) had been allowed to transfer to more desirable schools in violation of the system's own "neighborhood school" and transfer policies, with the effect of actually increasing minority isolation. On the basis of this and other evidence of a relation between school system practices and racial segregation, the state insisted that Cambridge implement a plan meeting the requirements established by Federal courts in Fourteenth Amendment cases rather than the more limited requirements of the Massachusetts Racial Imbalance Law.

In October 1978 the enrollment of elementary (K-8) schools in Cambridge varied from 37 percent white at the Roberts to 93 percent white at the Kennedy. Of sixteen schools, six were at least thirteen percentage points above the system-wide percentage white of 66, and five at least eighteen percentage points below the average.

By the following year effective controls on transfers were in place, and one small school (80 percent white) was closed in response to declining enrollments; magnet schools were somewhat strengthened and were required to become more recruitment- oriented. The transfer controls were moving school enrollments toward integration because Cambridge (covering only six square miles) is less highly segregated residentially than most cities.

It was in September 1980 that the first stage of comprehensive desegregation was implemented, with contiguous redistricting of ten of the fifteen remaining K-8

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1 Glenn was Executive Director of this Office until September 1991.

schools and the relocation of some citywide programs (special education, bilingual education, gifted and talented) to have a positive effect on desegregation. With the maximum feasible redistricting the number of schools with more than 50 percent minority enrollment fell from five in 1978 to one in 1980.

The second stage of desegregation was implemented the following year. This included several conventional measures, including the pairing of two schools with a K-4, 5-8 grade realignment, the closing of another (71 percent white in 1978), and the merging of a successful magnet school with another (43 percent white in 1978) which had not attracted non-minority students.

Far bolder was the implementation, the same year (1981), of a "controlled choice assignment policy." It is this, rather than the conventional desegregation measures, that has attracted national attention. The policy was put in place to prevent the **resegregation** of the Cambridge schools, and to extend the benefits of school choice to all parents rather than allow it to continue to be limited to those who selected one of the magnet schools. Controlled choice was initially seen as a way through which Cambridge could consolidate its past desegregation gains and further desegregate all its schools and programs.

The controlled choice assignment policy abolished the elementary district lines that had just been redrawn the previous year, while guaranteeing that every student could complete grades K-8 in his or her present school unless a transfer was requested. As new students enter the system their parents are required to indicate their school choices in order of preference, and assignments are then made on the basis of a variety of factors including stable desegregation in each school in the system.

A key to making this plan work well has been a sustained effort to reach **every** parent in Cambridge -- especially poor parents and parents whose primary language is not English -- with timely information about the educational options. The State funds a parent information center (see the third section of this report) and a full-time parent liaison in each school.

In most cases, the system is able to accommodate parent choices. In the three years 1982, 1983 and 1984, 75 percent of all new students were assigned to the school ranked first by their parents, 16 percent received the second or third choices, and only 9 percent received an entirely involuntary assignment. By 1990, according to Cambridge officials, the proportion of students receiving involuntary assignments had fallen to less than 2 percent.

The controlled choice policy has also been effective in achieving a very substantial degree of desegregation.

A source of concern over programs of parental choice is that the more attractive schools will become increasingly successful as highly-motivated parents select them, while the less attractive schools will become even less effective in serving those

students whose parents do not "work the system" effectively. The controlled choice policy in Cambridge has gone some way toward meeting this concern.

It remains true that some schools attract more parent choices than other schools. An uneven distribution of choices among schools has the result of forcing a number of mandatory assignments (which may, for some, be to what would have been the "neighborhood school"), for capacity as much as for racial balance reasons. This has the effect, in turn, of creating pressure from parents who have been offered and then denied a choice. While under other circumstances the most vocal parents would be accommodated with a magnet school, a universal system of controlled choice assures that such parents are at least as likely as less aggressive parents to be disappointed.

It comes to be in the interest of everyone, under these circumstances, to minimize disappointment by assuring that every school is approximately equally attractive or at least satisfactory. A moment's reflection will show that even the staff of the most popular schools will have a stake in the existence of acceptable alternatives for parents who, disappointed of their first choice, might otherwise make a nuisance of themselves politically. While a magnet/district dichotomy under a mandatory reassignment plan can lead to increasing polarization of opportunities, a universal system of controlled choice tends to reduce differences among schools.

This has been very much the case in Cambridge. The annual applications have been used as an indicator of which schools require targeted assistance to become more attractive. In several cases, for example, new principals have been appointed to schools to which voluntary applications were lagging.

It should be noted, also, that there has been no displacement of minority students in order to create space for integrated magnet options in inner-city schools, as in Milwaukee and other desegregation plans with voluntary components. This does not mean, however, that minority (or white) parents enjoy a sort of "property right" in their local schools. No child is guaranteed a place in any school, unless she or he is already attending it (though "sibling preference" is generally honored). The Cambridge controlled choice policy treats every school and every section of the city alike, ensuring, as Michael Alves has put it, "genuine proportional access to all schools and programs."

This is not to say that the movement of students was perfectly equitable. As of November 1986, 1594 minority students (64.5 percent) and 1418 white students (52 percent) were attending schools outside of their original attendance districts, though note that most of the students assigned to bilingual education (and thus frequently out-of-district for a program reason) clusters were minority.

Cambridge found, however, that the choices made by minority parents and those made by white parents were remarkably similar. Of the 2,285 choices indicated

for thirteen schools for the 1984-85 school year, for example, the rank indicated by the two groups was almost identical:

## Table 1-1

### Ranked Choices by School for September 1984

| School (K-8) | % of white applicants | % of minority applicants |
|---|---|---|
| Tobin * | 17 | 14 |
| King * | 14 | 17 |
| Peabody | 13 | 11 |
| Agassiz | 12 | 8 |
| Fletcher * | 7 | 8 |
| Harrington | 8 | 6 |
| Roberts * | 5 | 8 |
| Graham/Parks * | 6 | 7 |
| Longfellow | 6 | 6 |
| Morse | 5 | 6 |
| Fitzgerald | 4 | 5 |
| Haggerty | 2 | 2 |
| Kennedy | 1 | 2 |

* schools that were predominantly minority prior to desegregation

There are some indications that the Cambridge policy has had a positive impact upon overall system enrollments. The proportion of all school-aged children living in Cambridge who attend public schools increased from 75 percent in 1980 to 88 percent in January 1986, and the proportion attending private and parochial schools declined correspondingly from 25 percent to 12 percent. In addition, the enrollment declines that Cambridge -- like most Massachusetts communities -- was experiencing before desegregation slowed after implementation of controlled choice assignments.

The "holding power" of a plan incorporating voluntary options is presumably related to the proportion of the choices made that can be honored. This is not to say that the first choice must be granted, but that an acceptable option should be provided. From this perspective, the problem in Boston prior to implementation of controlled choice in 1989 was not an absence of choices -- Boston's magnet schools were in general highly popular -- as a hesitation to expand the number of explicitly-promoted options as the demand for them strengthened. Boston had not added a "magnet school" for nearly a decade, despite the great surplus of applications from all racial/ethnic groups for many of the present magnets. Worcester, by contrast, added one or more new magnets each year to assure that every parent who sought one would find space available.

Boston's Department of [Desegregation] Implementation made, at the author's request, several analyses of the scope and effects of choice in Boston in 1983-84. Of those who made selections of magnet or district schools, 76 percent of black students, 89 percent of white students, and 85 percent of Hispanic and Asian students received first choice assignments. Whether they had been given a first choice assignment had a significant impact on the retention of white students, but not of the other groups. At the elementary level, for example, 84 percent of white students who had received first choice assignments the previous May were still in the system, compared with 66 percent of those who had not. The corresponding figures for black students were 92 percent and 90 percent.

If Boston had promoted educational options more vigorously, and had responded to the evident interest of parents (as indicated by an 83.5 percent return rate for assignment applications) by expanding the spaces available in "schools of choice," there might well have been some slowing in the decline of white enrollment over this period. This hypothesis would be tested, as we will see below, when Boston followed the example of other Massachusetts cities by making school choice universal in the sense that every school was challenged to attract its students.

Controlled choice works like this: automati assignment of pupils to schools on the basis of where they live is abolished, and the parents of children new to the school system or moving to the next level of schooling receive information and (if they wish) counseling about all options before indicating preferences. Assignments are then made that satisfy these preferences so far as is consistent with available capacities and local policies and requirements, which may include desegregation.[1]

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[1] Controlled choice assignments seek to satisfy, so far as possible, the preferences of parents, but various constraints are applied to the actual assignments. For example, pupils living within a specified distance of a school may be given preferential access to the available seats, thus disadvantaging (though not excluding absolutely) those who live at a distance. Similarly, race or gender balance criteria may be applied. These are policy decisions that vary from plan to plan. While it is thus incorrect to say that desegregation is of the essence of controlled choice, it does constitute a powerful means of achieving desegregation when that is required.

**The goal has been to extend the benefits of choice -- amply demonstrated by the magnet schools -- to all schools and all pupils.**

Universal choice policies, often called "controlled choice" to distinguish them from open enrollment schemes, are intended to accomplish four objectives:

(1) to give all pupils in a community (or in a geographical section of a larger city) equal access to every public school, not limited by where their families can afford to live;

(2) to involve all parents (not just the most sophisticated) in making informed decisions about where their children will go to school;

(3) to create pressure for the improvement, over time, of every school through eliminating guaranteed enrollment on the basis of residence; and

(4) **where necessary,** to achieve racial desegregation of every school with as few mandatory assignments as possible.

The adoption of universal controlled choice has raised the stakes for former magnet and non-magnet schools alike. The former magnet schools, which had become rather complacent, no longer have a monopoly on choice, and some are proving distinctly less popular than other schools that are licensed to compete for students for the first time.

The non-magnet schools could in theory have sought to hold "their" students, but in reality there was little encouragement to find out what would satisfy parents and to become more effective educationally. Each school was guaranteed an enrollment from its assigned residential district as a result of the limited number of seats in magnet schools. Now they must hustle to assure themselves of a decent market share.

Universal choice removes all enrollment guarantees while (properly run) providing support for program development so that schools initially unpopular will have a chance to go through significant changes.

Ten Massachusetts cities are implementing assignment plans based upon universal controlled choice:

Table 1-2

| City | magnet schools | universal choice |
|------|----------------|------------------|
| Boston | 1969 | 1989 |
| Cambridge | 1975 | 1981 |
| Chelsea | | 1990 |
| Fall River | | 1988 |
| Holyoke | 1984 | 1990 |
| Lawrence | | 1988 |
| Lowell | 1982 | 1987 |
| Northampton | | 1990 |
| Salem | | 1990 |
| Springfield | 1975 | 1991 |

Together, these ten school systems enroll over 145,000 pupils, 18 percent of Massachusetts's public school population.

Six other Massachusetts cities (Lynn, Medford, Methuen, New Bedford, Revere and Worcester) have chosen to retain assignment plans driven by geography as well as by parent choice, and to seek to achieve desegregation by moving programs around and by magnet schools. That 38 percent of the newly-enrolling elementary pupils in Worcester are in non-neighborhood schools suggests that choice is a major factor in school assignments in these communities as well.

As a result of state concerns about the fairness and effectiveness of magnet schools unless placed within a system-wide policy framework, Lynn, New Bedford and Worcester have adopted an important element of universal choice as implemented

elsewhere in Massachusetts: centralized enrollment of all new pupils, including parent information and counseling about the options available.[1]

These six school systems operating magnet schools and other forms of parent choice, while maintaining residential attendance zones, enroll more than 60,000 students, 7 percent of the Massachusetts total. There are thus over 200,000 students altogether (25 percent of the state's public school enrollment) attending schools in communities that are actively encouraging parent choice. To these could be added the town of Acton, which quite independently adopted its own form of controlled choice a decade ago,[2] and the 39 suburban communities that have, for more than twenty years, enrolled urban minority students under a voluntary program with nearly 4,000 participants.

Experience in Massachusetts has made clear that parent choice does not function by itself to produce the benefits frequently claimed. The "invisible hand" is not enough. A well-designed strategy for putting choice to work for educational reform should include three elements:

(a) procedures to assure equal access unlimited by race, wealth or influence, to maintain confidence in the fairness of the admission process, and (where required by law or sought as a matter of policy) to promote the racial integration of each school;

(b) effective outreach and individual counseling to assure that as high a proportion as possible of parents make conscious, informed decisions about the schools that will serve their children well; and

(c) measures to assure that there are real educational choices available, including (1) removal of bureaucratic requirements that limit new approaches desired by parents and teachers, (2) help to schools that are not able to attract applications, (3) leadership and other changes if such schools do not change over time, and (4) opportunities for groups of teachers, parents, or others to initiate additional alternatives within or outside existing structures.

But is the choice process manipulated to give a misleading impression that parents are really able to make decisions about the schools their children will attend?

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[1] These plans could in fact be described as a variation on controlled choice (since all parents are systematically invited to consider all available options and a substantial proportion take advantage of this opportunity), with a guarantee of the "neighborhood school" for those who select it that is only different in degree from the neighborhood preference built into controlled choice plans. The guarantee does provide a sort of protective tariff behind which schools can find shelter from the pressure to become more effective in response to parent demand. Recent (1992-93) experience in Lynn demonstrates that insistance upon the sanctity of residential attendance zones creates serious administrative problems as population shifts occur.

[2] Gary G. Baker, "Open Enrollment and Curriculum Centralization in Acton, Massachusetts," Educational Leadership, December 1990/January 1991; there is also a doctoral dissertation on choice in Acton by Francesca Galluccio-Steele of Beverly, Massachusetts.

"Many will be 'counseled' to list as their top 'choices' schools that they would never freely select," complains Thernstrom in her critique of controlled choice. "If the parent information staff does its job properly, families will list only those schools in which there is room for children of their race. If the families comply, the state comes out ahead, since it can report that a large percentage of parents get one of their desired schools."[1]

This charge is based upon a common misunderstanding of how a well-designed system of parent choice functions. Just as high school guidance counselors commonly recommend that students apply to more than one college and include some less-competitive selections, to assure that they get in somewhere, so information center staff encourage parents to distribute their preferences sensibly among schools that they find acceptable.

The process of making assignments does not discourage parents from selecting a very popular school as their first choice. Here's how it worked in Boston in 1992: The applications of students eligible to apply for ninth grade, for example, were assigned random numbers, and each was dealt with in turn. Those with low numbers were assured of assignment to their first-choice schools, unless the places available had been filled by applicants with even lower random numbers. If an applicant's first-choice school had been filled, the assignment program checked whether space was available in the second-choice school, and so on through the options indicated. There was thus no advantage to **not** selecting a popular school as first or second choice, since that will not affect chances of getting into a third-choice school: each applicant was dealt with in turn until the attempt had been made to make an assignment based upon all of her/his preferences indicated on the application.

Perhaps one student in five did not receive an assignment in the first round; none received an involuntary assignment. An applicant with a high random number who had selected only the more popular schools might receive no assignment in the first round, in April. The parents were contacted and encouraged to make a new selection of schools, since those they had requested were now full. They could request to be placed on the waiting list for one or two of the original choices, but they were also counseled about which schools still had space available.

During the summer months, after the initial rounds of assignments in which all applicants during the registration period were treated as though coming at the same time, the parent information centers were able to issue assignments on the spot to parents who selected a school with space remaining. If a parent did not eventually select a school with space available, the student would be assigned to the school nearest where he or she lived that did have space.

It was a temporary weakness of the parent information effort in 1989-90 in Boston, the first year of the new method of assignments in that city, that those

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[1] Abigail Thernstrom, "Is Choice a Necessity?" The Public Interest 101, Fall 1990, 129.

counseling parents had not been informed by the central assignment office which schools had no space available after the first round of assignments, and thus many parents wasted their efforts by requesting schools that were already full. For example, more than half of those requesting sixth grade seats applied to the four most popular schools out of 22, already virtually full. "This represents an unacceptably high proportion of disappointed applicants," I wrote at the time, "as a result of the failure or inability of the parent information staff to counsel parents away from choices which they should have known could not be honored...."[1]

After all, the whole point of offering a second chance to apply is so that parents will take a closer look at schools that might not be familiar to them -- and perhaps discover some unexpected merits. There is no special virtue in disappointing parents repeatedly, unless it is to make a point for the critics of school choice. On the other hand, the Boston staff member who helps to train parent information center staff takes a different position, commenting recently that

> the long term goal of the choice plan is really to show the system what parents like and believe to be the best for their children and then to replicate those programs. I would never tell a parent to skip his or her 1st choice because I consider every choice a vote for improving education. We tell parents "Put down what you really want, and then let's look where the seats are that you have a realistic chance of getting now [for your second or third choice]. You will go on the waiting list for your first choice."[2]

To what extent do parents get the schools they want under school choice plans? Are their choices limited significantly by desegregation requirements? Does the school selection process manipulate their preferences in order to give a misleading impression that the school choice system is a success?

The results of school assignments in Boston for the 1991-92 school year, made before the start of school in Sep·ember 1991, were analyzed as a basis for answering these questions.[3] There were 38,700 pupils who were "assignable" to grades 1-12 as of March 1991, not including pupils entering or continuing in kindergarte·, nor (obviously) pupils in grade twelve about to graduate, nor pupils in other grades who entered the Boston schools for the first time in the 1991-92 school year, nor pupils who received a "programmatic" assignment to a substantially-separate special or bilingual education program.

All parents/guardians of pupils already in the schools (with the exceptions noted) were given an opportunity to request a school assignment for September 1991. Pupils for whom no application was returned were automatically reassigned to their

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[1] Charles L. Glenn, Controlled Choice in Boston: The First Year, Massachusetts Department of Education, April 1990, 32.

[2] Letter to the author from Maureen Lumley, April 13th 1993.

[3] A version of this section appeared as an article by Charles Glenn in Equity and Choice 9, 1 (Fall) 1992, 47-49.

current schools, unless in a "transition grade" (completing fifth grade or eighth grade or completing kindergarten withou' .n assured space in the same school for first grade). The school system assumes that, in such a case, remaining in the present school is the "first choice" of the parent.

Eighty-eight percent of "assignable" elementary, 86 percent of intermediate, and 91 percent of high school pupils received their first choice assignments, with very small numbers receiving second or lower preferences. Parents are **not** counseled out of expressing a first preference for a popular school, but they **are** encouraged to rank order a number of schools in case their children are not given places in over-subscribed schools. As the figures show, "safety" schools are not needed in the great majority of cases for pupils whose parents return applications in time for the first round of assignments.

There were 2,069, or 5.35 percent, of "assignable" pupils who did not receive any assignment in the first round. The great majority of the unassigned were pupils who could not continue in the same school because of completing the grades available in that school and for whom no application was returned; **less than 400 or 1 percent of the assignable pupils did apply for one or more schools but were not given an assignment to one of the schools requested.**

Why did these pupils not receive the requested schools? The data do not tell us, but review of the data on individual schools shows that in most cases the parents applied only to the most popular schools, at which not enough space was available to accommodate all the applicants. This is comparable to a high school senior applying only to Harvard or Williams without a "safety" college.

In these cases a random selection is made (by the assignment unit, not by the school); this is weighted to favor applicants with siblings in the same school and applicants living within walking distance of the school. In less than half the cases was the **race** of the applicant the decisive factor; popular schools tend to be over-subscribed by all racial/ethnic groups. Race is thus a minor factor in school assignments.

The second round of assignments occurred in late April. In the intervening period, the School Department and especially its four parent information centers attempted to reach parents of pupils for whom no assignment had been made in the first round. This included (a) parents who did not return applications, (b) parents who returned applications that could not be honored, and (c) parents with children new to the school system since the first round.

The "assignable pool" in the second round was naturally much smaller, only 5,121 pupils (not counting applicants to kindergarten). The choice available to them is also smaller, since the most popular schools are filled at that point. Parents are informed of the status of each school in which they express an interest, including the

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waiting list for each grade, by parent information center staff with the information available through a computer display.

They are then free to request any school, including those with no space available; since many do so, and many others still do not submit applications, 40 percent of the second round "pool" remained unassigned (many on waiting lists) in the second round. The unassigned group (2,037 pupils in grades 1-12) is scarcely smaller than that at the end of the first round (2,069), despite assignment of 3,084 pupils in the second round; this is the result of "new to Boston" pupils.

The proportion of pupils receiving first-choice assignments was much lower in the second round, for two reasons: (a) the most popular schools are already filled, but (b) many parents disappointed in the first round did not make a different choice of a school with space available, since their children were on waiting lists and they hoped that a seat would open up in the preferred school through natural attrition.

As noted, parents are free to apply for the first time or to continue to apply to a popular school, even if it is filled, as their first choice, while indicating other, lower-preference choices. Their children are then given an assignment to the lower-preference school, though they remain on the waiting list for the first-preference school in case an opening becomes available through a pupil withdrawing or the addition of a class at the appropriate grade level.

As the assignment system is set up, there is no reason to give first preference to a school that is not the real first preference. No possible advantage accrues to the parent who seeks in that way to assure a place in a less-desired school: the chance of an assignment to that school is the same whether it is listed as the first or the fourth choice, because the computer program used to make assignments exhausts all of the preferences of an applicant before going on to the next applicant in the random-number sequence.

The third round of assignments was made in June, when the pupils who have still not received a school for which their parents expressed a choice (including those for whom no application was received) are given an "administrative" assignment to the nearest school with space available.

The proportion of pupils receiving their first-choice school was even lower than in the second round, for the reasons given above.

As of the end of the third round, 43,432 pupils had been assigned to grades 1-12, or nearly 5,000 more than had been available for assignment in the first round, because of pupils new to Boston.

Of these, 3.8 percent were assigned "administratively" to a school for which their parents had not expressed a preference, either (a) because their parents, despite repeated efforts to reach them, had not returned an application, or (b) because their

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parents had continued to apply only to schools in which no space was available. The proportion of administrative assignments was somewhat higher at the elementary (4.2 percent) and intermediate (4.8 percent) levels.

Over the three rounds of assignments, 88.6 percent of the pupils entering grades 1-12 were assigned to their first-choice schools: 88.4 percent of the elementary, 85.3 percent of the intermediate, and 91 percent of the high school pupils. A total of 7.7 percent of the pupils were assigned to schools for which their parents expressed a preference but not a first choice.

This analysis does not include pupils entering or continuing in kindergarten, but it should be noted that at the conclusion of the third round of assignments, there were 711 unassigned kindergartners. This is because the Department of Implementation, which makes school assignments, interpreted the court-ordered assignment plan to require that pupils at this level whose parents have not requested a school in which space is available not be given an "administrative" assignment to another school, since kindergarten attendance is not mandatory. It might be more appropriate to assign these pupils to the nearest school with space available and allow their parents to decide whether to accept the assignment and send their children.

What is the impact of the desegregation requirements which are an integral aspect of the school choice plan in Boston? Is it true, as alleged by Abigail Thernstrom in her critique of programs in Massachusetts, that "even a cursory look at existing 'controlled choice' programs shows that controls for purposes of racial balance seriously compromise choice"?[1]

Given desegregation mandates, one could reply, the question is not whether choice is "compromised" but whether it is made available to a larger proportion of parents than under any other method of achieving the same result. An inevitable cost of freedom is to experience any remaining constraint as galling. So long as children are simply assigned to schools involuntarily on the basis of where they live, of course, the issue of disappointment does not arise, but it is unavoidable when parents are given the opportunity to indicate other preferences and when no school is guaranteed a captive clientele.

Nor do magnet schools resolve this problem of disappointment and involuntary assignments. Under Boston's previous desegregation plan, approximately 25 percent of the system's pupils attended magnet schools on the basis of choice, while the remainder -- many unsuccessful applicants to magnet schools -- were assigned without choice on the basis of where they lived. By contrast, the entry-level grades assigned under controlled choice during the 1989-90 and 1990-91 school years were more desegregated than was the case before, and the great majority of these pupils were assigned to schools that their parents had indicated were acceptable: 85 percent of the first graders, 87 percent of the sixth graders, and 91

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[1]Thernstrom, 129.

percent of the ninth graders in Boston were assigned to schools that had been selected by their parents, and in most cases to their first choices.

Other Boston pupils, it is true, were assigned involuntarily. A closer look at the figures reveals, however, that this was not primarily attributable to the requirements of desegregation.

Of Boston's fifteen high schools, six had no freshmen assigned involuntarily in 1990-91, while in some cases having many disappointed applicants. On the other hand, seven other Boston high schools did not attract enough applicants of any racial/ethnic category to fill their available places in the ninth grade voluntarily, even if race were not a consideration in making assignments.

These mandatory assignments were necessary because, after increasing the assignable capacity of the more popular schools in order to accommodate as many students as possible, there remained hundreds without school places. Desegregation considerations did not "compromise choice;" choice was unfortunately denied to some without regard to race, creed, or color and they were assigned to schools they had not chosen because of space limitations elsewhere in the system.

There was only one Boston high school out of fifteen to which freshmen of one racial/ethnic category were assigned involuntarily while those of another who had made it their first choice were denied admission, in order to meet desegregation requirements.

The fact that students of all racial/ethnic categories must be assigned involuntarily because of an insufficient supply of places in acceptable schools is deplorable. Keep in mind, however, that Boston, like other school systems, has **always** assigned students to these same schools. Choice has not changed that reality; it has simply brought it into a sharp focus that creates pressure both to improve or close those schools and also to allow other entrants into the educational marketplace.

Even if desegregation were not a concern -- as it must be in Boston because of a past history of intentional segregation -- it is difficult to conceive of circumstances under which all pupils could be assigned to their parents' first choice, unless enrollment declines and budget surpluses had led to ample slack capacity in the more popular schools. Some schools will always, for a variety of reasons, attract more applicants than they are able to accommodate; this is a problem in Great Britain as well, though official policies encouraging parent choice are not subject to desegregation requirements.

A wise assignment policy will use every bit of space in the schools that parents want while leaving the schools they do not want under-enrolled so far as possible; over several years the more attractive options are replicated and the less attractive are improved, closed or converted unless, of course, they are already educating effectively and merely need help in presenting themselves to parents.

Altogether, only 1.7 percent of the students assigned to the entry levels of Boston schools in the Fall of 1990 (238 of 14,041 first, sixth and ninth graders) were either denied a place or assigned involuntarily to a place that another student was denied in order to meet the requirements of desegregation.

Controlled choice is a method of assuring that choice functions in a way that is fair to all applicants; whether desegregation is one of the constraints under which it operates depends upon what is required in a particular situation. Controlled choice would function perfectly well to assure fairness and to create pressure for every school to improve in a community where race desegregation was not at issue. Controls would still be needed: there must be some fair basis for deciding who will be admitted to a school with too many applicants and who -- pending creation of new space or new options -- will be assigned involuntarily.

The following questions were raised at the beginning of this analysis: To what extent do parents get the schools they want under school choice plans? Are their choices limited significantly by desegregation requirements? Does the school selection process manipulate their preferences in order to give a misleading impression that the school choice system is a success?

The great majority of parents of pupils entering grades 1-12 (88.6 percent) received their first-choice school or -- in the case of no application -- the current school. Over 96 percent received one of the schools selected and less than 4 percent received an assignment for which no request had been made, many or most of them parents who did not return applications.

There are no grounds for asserting that assignments to grades 1-12 were limited to a significant extent by desegregation controls. The capacity of Boston schools located in minority-resident areas is not sufficient to accommodate all of the pupils living in those areas, and -- even if access by white pupils to those schools were denied -- it would not be possible to decrease significantly the number of minority pupils attending schools in other areas. The pattern of applications in fact makes it clear that many minority parents want their children to attend schools outside of the neighborhoods where they live; last year more than half of all applications were to non-neighborhood schools.

There is no evidence (nor has any ever been provided) that parents are manipulated during the school choice process to select schools that they do not really want. Recommending that parents make more than one choice, including some of the less-popular schools, is the only responsible course given the impossibility of admitting all applicants to the most popular schools -- and in fact few (7.7 percent) pupils are assigned to lower-preference schools. The process is thus an honorable one, though all involved are concerned to make counseling more effective and information more accurate and complete.

This is not to claim that these plans have achieved perfection; indeed one of the advantages of this approach to school assignments is that constant modification and improvement is possible without disruption, as each new cohort of pupils is assigned. The authors of the 1989 Boston controlled choice assignment plan, Charles Willie and Michael Alves, prepared a report and recommended modifications in its administration in 1993, calling for simplification of procedures which, in their view, had become overly cumbersome and, although admitting the great majority of pupils to their preferred schools, yet could be made even more flexible. On the other hand, they recommended giving initial assignments even to pupils who could not be accommodated in their selected schools, while placing them on a waiting for available vacancies. These changes were approved by the Boston School Committee for assignments for the 1993-94 school year.

The consultants prepared an analysis of assignments made under these modified procedures during the week of February 8, 1993 for the following September. They found that 85 percent of the students in transition grades (and thus necessarily starting a new school) made timely and complete applications, which indicates that the exercise of choice is becoming routinized despite the fears of some academics that urban parents are incapable of "getting their act together" sufficiently to participate in the process.

This initial analysis reported on

nearly 7,500 regular education students who were assigned during the recent "initial assignment period" for entering Grades 1, 6, and 9 in the system's elementary schools, middle schools, and non-exam high schools. . . . 96 percent of the entry-grade students were assigned to a school of choice, including 85 percent who were assigned to their first-choice school and 94 percent who were assigned to either their first- or second-choice schools.

Contrary to the fears of some that minority parents would be unable to participate on equal terms, the consultants found that 81 percent of white applicants but 85 percent of those from African-American and other racial groups were assigned to their first-choice schools. Ten percent of white, 3 percent of African-American, and 2 percent of Asian, Hispanic and other applicants were assigned to schools that were not among their preferences.

In the interest of linking the choice process more firmly to school improvement, "the report also identified 27 schools that were 'over' chosen by all three racial groups and seven schools that were unable to attract a racially diverse student population."[1]

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[1]Charles V. Willie and Michael J. Alves, "A Report on the Implementation of the Revised Boston 'Controlled Choice' Plan," March 3, 1993, 4.

## Responsible and Irresponsible Forms of School Choice

If the student assignment plans in Boston, Cambridge and other cities have been carefully designed to provide at least a measure of equal access and to create pressure for the improvement of schools that parents do not find appealing, the same cannot be said for the inter-district choice legislation that was enacted in early 1991 and implemented that September.

Under this program, school systems may offer an excess seat to a pupil living in another community, with full state funding of the local per-pupil expenditure, even though in fact the marginal cost of enrolling a few additional pupils on a space-available basis is minimal. The state then recovers this amount (not the state per-pupil funding alone but local funds as well) from the community where the pupil lives, even if that community is spending substantially less on its own pupils.

A community hit particularly hard by this program was the economically-depressed city of Brockton, some of whose pupils transferred to the affluent suburb Avon. Parental decisions to transfer children from Brockton to Avon were by no means unjustified. Avon spent $10,239 on each high school pupil in 1990-91, contrasted with Brockton's expenditure of $4,780, a figure which the city was forced to cut severely in 1991-92. Class sizes in Brockton rose to 35 or 40, while Avon promised that no class would have more than 20 pupils. Avon had been an active recruiter of out-of-district high school pupils for several years, charging them only $1,500 in 1990-91 compared with $10,239 charged to Brockton for each Brockton-resident high school pupil enrolled in Avon in 1991-92. The state's inter-district choice program meant a loss of $933,563 from Brockton's state aid, or the salaries of 45 teachers.

The Massachusetts experiment with unregulated inter-district choice -- in contrast with the controlled choice programs described above -- has in no sense been a fair test of the potential of choice to drive school reform or to increase opportunities for urban children, those whose parents are most eager for expanded choice.

The inter-district program serves only a highly self-selected group of families; nearly half of the pupils were already attending schools other than those of their community of residence. This contrasts with the progr.. ns in sixteen Massachusetts cities, where all parents are involved in the choice process and all schools seek to attract and retain pupils through the quality and distinctiveness of their educational offerings.

The inter-district program does nothing to collect or provide information about what schools can provide or the distinctive ways in which they challenge and support pupils. This contrasts with the programs in sixteen Massachusetts cities, where -- as we will see in the third section of this report -- all parents receive information in a systematic way (and in several languages) and have the opportunity for counseling about the educational options available.

Finally, the Massachusetts inter-district choice program rewards the schools and communities which are already perceived as more desirable, and reduces the resources available to improve the schools that most poor and minority children attend. Thus it **does nothing to stimulate the supply side of education through encouraging and supporting development of new educational models.**

This contrasts with the controlled choice programs in sixteen Massachusetts cities, where **all** schools are challenged to become distinctively effective because no school has a guaranteed enrollment based upon residential attendance areas.

Not that these urban school systems have yet succeeded in bringing the full power of choice to bear for fundamental educational reform. Crowded facilities, the result of new Hispanic and Asian immigration, make it necessary to assign pupils even to schools that few request. Bureaucratic structures remain in place, and -- as in any monopoly system -- there are strong pressures to protect weaker participants from the consequences of their incompetence.

As I wrote in The Public Interest, "[i]n the final analysis, controlled choice as implemented in Massachusetts may simply not go far enough to shake up the culture of mediocrity and the low expectations that dominate so many schools. To be sure, Massachusetts schools are getting better, becoming more purposeful and responsive as a result of parental choice. But the pace of change may be too slow to benefit thousands of children whose education has been neglected. And the education system's resistance to change may reassert itself; ways may be found to accommodate the pressures of parent choice, resulting in the failure of yet another reform initiative."[1]

For school choice to have its full impact, it must break out of the confines of school system boundaries and monopoly arrangements. Inter-district choice is thus a necessary next step -- geography should not be destiny, where a family can afford to live should not determine the quality of education its children can receive -- but, like other forms of school choice, it must be planned and organized carefully to be effective and equitable.

Controlled choice provides a framework -- and a powerful incentive -- for bringing together these elements in a powerful combination with school-based management and pedagogical reform. Supplemented by charter school and other provisions for new educational options, it could provide the essential framework for accountability and fairness in educational choice.[2]

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[1]Charles L. Glenn, "Controlled Choice in Massachusetts Public Schools," The Public Interest 103 (Spring) 1991, 103.
[2]Charles L. Glenn, The Boston/Chelsea Urban Team: After One Year, Quincy, MA: Massachusetts Department of Education, October 1990.

## 2. Evidence on Whether and Why Parents Choose Schools

The power of parent choice as an impetus for school reform is the belief that schools cannot remain seriously inadequate, so long as parents are given accurate information and honest counseling, and make choices based upon the best interests of their children.

Critics of this hope for school improvement through choice often charge that poor parents really don't want to choose for their children or are incapable of making wise and informed choices among educational options. This, they say, will result in further class distinctions in American education, as middle class parents get what they want and their children need by abandoning the inferior schools to working-class parents who lack the sophistication to make effective use of school choice. These inferior schools, the argument goes, will have no reason to improve because they are serving families that are content with proximity and have no awareness of educational considerations in school selection.

Some dismiss the charge that poor and working-class parents do not want to make decisions about schools out-of-hand, as when Massachusetts Senate President Bulger insists that "everyone supports school choice -- for his own children!" Previous research suggests that he is correct with respect to urban parents in Massachusetts. State-funded parent surveys conducted, during the 1980s, in Massachusetts cities implementing s¬hool choice consistently show ten- or twenty-to-one support for being able to choose among schools, as do surveys in other nations.[1]

Similarly, a 1982 survey in France found that 95 percent of parents wanted to be able to choose the school their children would attend, even though most were reasonably satisfied and had no intention of making immediate use of the right to request a transfer. A French survey in 1988 found that 11 percent of parents with children entering college (intermediate school) were seeking a non-district school; "most families don't expect their child to attend a school other than that for their district, but they want to have the regularized possibility to do otherwise, if they judge it necessary."[2]

But does the desire of parents to make choices have anything to do with the improvement of schools? After all, some critics insist, "academic excellence is seldom what parents chiefly value in a school. A convenient location, a particular social atmosphere, good sports facilities: these are the sorts of considerations that

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[1] Such surveys were conducted each year in the mid- to late- 1980s in up to sixteen cities as part of the state-mandated evaluation of programs receiving funds form the Office of Educational Equity, Massachusetts Department of Education, of which the author was executive director.
[2] Robert Ballion, La bonne école: évaluation et choix du lycée, Paris: Hatier 1991, 167.

govern."[1]  Gary Orfield's evaluation of the functioning of choice in the San Francisco schools found that some parents selected schools that, by objective standards, were inferior in quality to the schools that their children already attended.[2]

Others counter that such choice factors should not be dismissed as inappropriate.  As Jencks and his associates concluded in their celebrated study of Inequality, "society as a whole rarely has a compelling interest in limiting the range of educational choices open to parents and students.  Likewise, since professional educators do not seem to understand the long-term effects of schooling any better than parents do, there is no compelling reason why the profession should be empowered to rule out alternatives that appeal to parents, even if they seem educationally 'unsound.'"[3]

This is not to say that what is known objectively about particular schools and about the needs of particular children should not be communicated to parents in an effective way, with whatever else may help them to make the best choices possible.

> Doubtless the professional's own knowledge is in certain dimensions wholly superior.  He "knows" about children in general -- the pathologies that sometimes bind them and the therapies that can loose them.  There are unfortunately narrow limits to this kind of science and striking dissensus among the professionals.   Still no one doubts its potential importance. Insofar as this kind of knowledge is reliable, however, its conclusion can usually be shared effectively with parents in various ways during the decision making process whether the subject be medicine, discipline or education.   The parent's knowledge, by contrast, is less subject to communication;  it is too immediate, too immanent.  It is often literally unspeakable.  It follows, curiously, that in an important sense parents can be the more knowledgeable deciders, for they can combine the conclusions of the professionals with their own incommunicable insights.  This, of course, assumes a relation in which parents not only control the final decision but have access to professionals (of varying opinions).[4]

But what are the motivations of parents in choosing schools?  To what extent do these choices take into account educational considerations?  Do parents take a wider view of what is educationally desirable for their children than the school factors that can readily be measured by resource indicators:  experience of faculty, age of facilities, quality of curriculum and materials, number of books in the school library?

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[1]Abigail Thernstrom, "Is Choice a Necessity," The Public Interest 101, Fall 1990, 127.

[2]Gary Orfield, "School Choice Under Desegregation Plans," a presentation to the Harvard School Choice and Family Policy Seminar, March 1st 1993.

[3]Christopher Jencks and others, Inequality:  A Reassessment of the Effect of Family and Schooling in America, New York: Harper & Row 1972, 256.

[4]John E. Coons, "Intellectual Liberty and the Schools," Journal of Law, Ethics & Public Policy 1 (495-533), 1985, 509-510.

Various studies have been made of why parents make the choices that they do. Much of this research has taken place in Western Europe, where parent choice among schools operated by government and by other sponsors is a routine aspect of the organization of schooling. We will review some of these studies, before considering the research on choice factors in the United States.

In **Scotland**, as an important stage in the implementation of 1981 legislation expanding the right of parents to choose the schools their children would attend, each school was required to develop a handbook giving basic facts and, to some extent, information about educational goals. Preparation of these handbooks is reported to have helped school staff to clarify what was distinctive about their approach to education, but the researchers who reviewed them were struck with the impersonal tone and use of wordy jargon seemingly designed to keep parents in their place: ("If a pupil has special dietary requirements provision can be ensured as long as the school is informed timeously").[1]

The number of requests for out-of-district assignments doubled from 10,456 in 1981-2 to 20,795 in 1984-5, more than half of them for elementary schools. During this period 97.4 percent of the requests for elementary schools were granted at some stage in the process, as were 93.8 percent of those for secondary schools. Most of the requests (55.2 percent of elementary and 68.7 percent of secondary) were for the entry-level class, but the balance were for transfers at stages when students would not normally be entering an elementary or secondary school.

The rate of requests was significantly higher in urban areas, where more choices were available, than in rural areas, while the request rate was very low in the Highlands and the Shetland and Orkney Islands.

Two research projects have found that school requests were made by parents of all social classes.[2] Macbeth, Strachan and Macaulay found that, in one sample,

> even in the suburban area manual workers were relatively more represented among those making placing requests (37%) than their presence in the population (20%) would lead us to expect.[3]

Parents surveyed were well informed of their rights; this included 86 percent of those who did not request a specific assignment.

The primary reason (60 percent) given by parents requesting an elementary level assignment was avoidance of their local school, often because of the perceived roughness of its students, and preference of another for safety and school climate

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[1]Alastair Macbeth, David Strachan and Caithlin Macaulay, Parental Choice of School in Scotland, Department of Education, University of Glasgow 1986, 89-105.

[2]Michael Adler, Alison Petch and Jack Tweedie, "The Origin and Impact of the Parents' Charter," Scottish Government Yearbook 1987, 309.

[3]Macbeth, Stachan and Macauley, 302; see also 334.

reasons.  The educational program offered was to some extent a secondary consideration.[1]

At the secondary level 70 percent of the requests were motivated by desire to avoid the assigned school and diffuse perceptions that the child would be happier at the school selected.  Educational or school-based reasons were given by nearly half of the parents of secondary students (43 percent at the elementary level).

Elements associated with 'traditional' schools (discipline, uniform, streaming, 'the basics', not open-plan, traditional methods and ethos) when aggregated accounted for 10.1% of reasons given.  By contrast, an aggregation of opposites to these, sometimes associated with 'progressive education' (relaxed discipline, no uniform, 'modern' methods and ethos, open plan, mixed ability classes) represented only 1.1% of school-based reasons. . . . a structured environment, academic emphasis and firm discipline are sought by many parents, especially at secondary level . ..[2]

For parents included in this study, "the [local] school was not seen as providing an adequate counter-attack to peer group culture."[3]  In another, the researchers concluded

that the majority of parents have in mind a broad general agenda in selecting a secondary school for their child and are as much if not more concerned with social considerations than with educational ones.[4]

This emphasis on issues of school climate rather than of pedagogy does not mean, according to the researchers, that those headteachers are correct who asserted that parents were not well-enough informed to make sound choices among schools. Indeed,

many parents seemed to have quite clear pictures of the working ethos of a school.  Parents repeatedly saw both the happiness and the educational success of the child as being related to the stability and atmosphere of the school, though they varied in the extent to which they saw the nature of the school's intake [of students] or the actions taken by staff to be the main determinant of that working environment.  In some instances parents had access to information (e.g. about bullying and attitudes of local peer groups) which may have led some parents to have been better informed than some teachers.[5]

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[1]Macbeth, Stachan and Macauley, 299.
[2]Macbeth, Stachan and Macauley, 306.
[3]Macbeth, Strachan & Macaulay, 279.
[4]Adler, Petch & Tweedie, 309-310; see also Macbeth, Strachan & Macaulay, 133.
[5]Macbeth, Strachan & Macaulay, 124.

Although some headteachers reported that motivations of class and social snobbery affected parents in requesting to leave their schools, the responses from parents did not support this view. The researchers speculate that "it may be that they were articulating reasons which they and their staff hoped were predominant," and that possibly "what were believed by staff to be reasons of snobbery were seen by parents as protective, indeed educational reasons."[1]

It might be expected from this analysis (and from common sense), that most of the movement in urban areas would be from schools in lower-income areas to schools in adjacent middle-income areas. This pattern did show itself to some extent in Edinburgh, though in Dundee "the pattern of movements is almost entirely within areas that are homogeneous with respect to housing tenure and social class." The exception that conforms to the original expectation are those transfers between non-contiguous schools. In Edinburgh 83 percent of the requests and in Dundee 85 percent were to contiguous schools.[2]

In Dundee and Edinburgh certain schools experienced sharp gains or losses in enrollment: two out of 38 elementary schools in Dundee lost more than half their attendance area population, while seven gained more than half of their entering class from outside their attendance areas. There were very few pairs of schools between which students moved in both directions. The viability of some schools with heavy losses is now in question.

> Overall, the advantages for some children of attending larger secondary
> schools with more balanced intakes and higher staying-on rates appear to
> have imposed substantial costs on other children whose curricular choices
> and wider educational opportunities have been further restricted.

In other words, an unrestricted system of choice provides advantages to those who make choices and disadvantages to those who do not. It is difficult to judge this from an equity perspective. One line of argument would stress that at least some students are saved from a bad education by the opportunity to choose a school in a middle-class area; as Scottish Education Minister Alex Fletcher argued in launching the choice program in Scotland,

> Some schools in deprived areas are battling against the odds despite all the
> public money that was poured into their area, and the effect on the children
> is that it locks them into the one social strata

while mandatory assignment based on strict attendance districts "effectively confines disadvantaged children to the deprived areas in which they live."[3]

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[1]Macbeth, Strachan & Macaulay, 130.

[2]Gillian M. Raab and Michael Adler, "A Tale of Two Cities: the impact of parental choice on admissions to primary schools in Edinburgh and Dundee," Research Papers in Education 2, 3, 1987, 164-71.

[3]quoted in Macbeth, Strachan & Macaulay, 31-2.

The opponents of the present **Dutch** system, under which parents are constitutionally guaranteed the right to select a school corresponding to their own religious or philosophical convictions, with the full cost paid by public funds, seek to demonstrate with parent surveys that there is far more confessional[1] education available in the Netherlands than parents actually want. The argument is made that the momentum of existing forms of schooling has continued despite the widespread secularization of Dutch society.

A considerable amount of survey research has been conducted around this issue; it is relevant to American policy debates because of the concern that the supply side of an educational "market" will prove insufficiently elastic, even under optimal conditions, to respond to real demand.

Unfortunately for the case of those who wish to reduce the scope of confessional schooling in the Netherlands, the data that they provide seem to show a fairly close correspondence of supply and demand, at least at the elementary level, particularly if those parents who do not select one of the four major options are left out of account.

Table 2-1

| Preference and enrollment, 1980 | Pre-school | | elementary | | secondary | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | prefer | enroll | prefer | enroll | prefer | enroll |
| Public | 34.2 | 30.1 | 33.6 | 31.4 | 36.3 | 20.7 |
| Protestant | 25.6 | 28.3 | 25.7 | 28.1 | 25.0 | 24.8 |
| Catholic | 31.7 | 36.3 | 32.2 | 37.9 | 26.6 | 36.8 |
| Other Private or Public/Private | 8.4 | 5.3 | 8.5 | 2.6 | 13.2 | 17.7 |

This study, conducted in 1981, asked nearly nine hundred parents with children under 21 which factors were most important in their choice of a school. Parents who preferred public schools were somewhat more likely than parents who preferred confessional schools to place a high value on extra-curricular activities and on the development of creativity, but even higher on these factors were parents who preferred neutral private schools. This is understandable, given that these generally present themselves as offering a distinctively 'progressive' pedagogy.

Parents who prefer public schools were slightly more likely (15 percent versus 14 percent) to have obtained higher education themselves, and were distinctly more likely (31.3 percent versus 17.4 percent) to vote for the Labor Party (PvdA).

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[1] We might say "denominational," but the Dutch word richting includes the connotation of non-religious convictions and world-views.

Conversely, they were less likely (6 percent versus 27.2 percent) to vote for the Christian Democrats (CDA: a merger of the Calvinist and Catholic parties).[1]

An extensive study of the reasons for parent choice has been published in three stages over the last several years by researchers working in the Utrecht area.[2] The conclusions drawn by the researchers reflect their own agreement that there is an over-supply of religious schooling, but the data would support a contrary position equally well. As so often in such cases, everything depends upon the questions asked and the way responses are grouped.

Parents were asked about their primary reason for selecting an elementary school. Of 666 sets of parents who responded to the written inquiry, the researchers reported, 70 percent stated that school quality was the most important consideration, and for only 22 percent was richting the most important. A conclusion that there is a serious over-supply of religious schooling in the Netherlands would be misleading, however. Many parents who value schooling shaped by a particular religious tradition would nevertheless put quality even higher; indeed, it is striking that as many as 30 percent of the parents were willing to give quality the second place to another school characteristic. A more satisfactory analysis of the strength of motivation would ask what proportion of parents would accept a school at some distance from their home. Considered in this way, the figures suggest a rather different picture: 54 percent of the parents regarded the richting of the school as more important than the distance from home to school. It is fair to conclude, then, that for something more than half of the parents the religious or ideological characteristics of the school was an important consideration in making a selection. For 27 percent of the parents, richting was more important than quality, while for 44 percent richting was the least important consideration.

Another interesting result of this study is the opportunity to compare the proportion of parents who characterized themselves as having religious convictions with the proportion with a preference for particular school choices. Of the total sample, 35 percent identified themselves as 'confessing' Protestants, Catholics, or 'other' (mostly conservative Protestants); 50 percent expressed a preference for a Protestant or Catholic school, and 32 percent for a public school. If this sample is representative of the Netherlands as a whole, there is an almost exact correspondence between the proportion wanting public schools and the proportion of total elementary enrollment in such schools. These results do not suggest the kind of mismatch between parent wishes and the availability of public education claimed by opponents of the present arrangements.

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[1] S. Boef-van der Meulen, "Ouders en het openbaar onderwijs," Opstellen over openbaar onderwijs, Fons van Schoten and Hans Wansink, editors, Groningen: Wolters-Noordhoff 1985, 88.

[2] M. van Eck, W. M. J. M. Groot Antink and P. W. V. Veraart, Gewenst basisonderwijs in de tweede helft van de jaren 80 in de provincie Utrecht, Utrecht: Tangram, 1986.

A final point from the study is that parents in the Utrecht area were almost exactly divided (30 to 37 percent) between those who preferred a traditional or a 'renewed' pedagogy. Asked about aspects of pedagogy, 52 percent preferred what the researchers characterized as a 'repressive' classroom -- perhaps better described in American terms as 'structured' -- while 25 percent preferred a 'permissive' atmosphere. Again 52 percent wanted the content of education to be central, while 31 percent wanted the child to be central. By contrast, only 23 percent preferred a teacher who was authoritarian compared with 59 percent who wanted a more supportive teacher for their children; this should not be startling, since these were parents of kindergarten and elementary school children.

In the early seventies a study was made of the reasons that parents chose Protestant schools. For 77 percent of the parents the Christian character of the instruction was an important consideration, and 69 percent wanted a school that would shield children from "worldly ideas." A third important motive had to do with the atmosphere of the school: the Protestant school was seen as more concerned with the happiness and personal development of the child and less with worldly success, and teachers were seen as more approachable.

The researchers categorized the degree of motivation of the parents to choose a Protestant school by the number of reasons that they cited. They found that 93 percent of the most highly motivated would make that choice even if it required that the child cross a heavily-traveled road, compared with 48 percent of those who offered no reasons for preferring a Protestant school.

This group of parents placed the primary responsibility for education on parents (69 percent) rather than on the government (21 percent) or the Church (4 percent). When asked how Protestant schools differed from public schools, far more gave answers related to atmosphere and values than to quality as such.[1]

Walstijn found, in his study of the choice motives of Catholic parents, that all elementary and secondary school parents, and all but one of the kindergarten parents, surveyed in Amsterdam and in the north of the country reported that they had real choices. In the heavily-Catholic south of the Netherlands, 20 percent of elementary and 40 percent of kindergarten parents reported that they did not have a real choice; this does not mean, of course, that they were necessarily unhappy with the school available. The study also found that Catholic parents in the south were less likely to volunteer the Catholic richting of a school as a primary reason for choosing it than were those in other areas; this may simply mean that Catholics in areas where they are in the minority must work more consciously at retaining their identity and that of their

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[1]D. J. F. Flaman, J. de Jonge and T. Westra, Waroom naar de Christelijke School? Amsterdam: Instituut voor Toegepast Sociaalwetenschappelijk Onderzoek van de Vrije Universiteit, 1974.

children. Given that, in the south, the only schools nearby may be Catholic, religion may not become a conscious reason for choosing.[1]

Braster found intergenerational differences in the preferences of Dutch parents for public and confessional schooling. The youngest generation was less likely to have a preference for denominational schooling -- or, conversely, for public schooling -- on religious or ideological grounds, but tended also to believe that denominational schools were superior and thus to prefer them more than did the generation of their parents. In other words, denominational schooling was less favored, but denominational schools more favored.[2]

Reasons for parental choice of schools in **France** have been studied by sociologist Robert Ballion. In his first major work on this theme, published in 1982, Ballion found that the existing system, without a formalized and generally understood mechanism for the exercise of parent choice, did indeed largely benefit sophisticated, middle-class parents. Research had shown that working-class parents, contrary to expectation, did not choose only the traditional forms of schooling; they distinguished themselves from middle-class parents not by the nature of the choices made but by a reduced likelihood that they would exercise a choice at all. Another study found that the latter were more likely to seek a change in school or program as soon as a child began to experience difficulties. It was not that middle-class children experience notably fewer early learning difficulties but that they were more likely to receive appropriate help because of the consumer sophistication of their parents: there is a "social inequality in the face of failure."[3]

In a study of parents who made use of an education reference service in Paris, Ballion found that those belonging to the lower middle class tended to see no alternative for their children who were experiencing difficulty than a private school, while those of a higher status were more aware of the possibility of manipulating the public system to the benefit of their children.

Private education in France, Ballion argued, was by no means an elite alternative, although the proportion of students from working-class homes in 1976-77 was 38.2 percent in public but 'only' 21.3 percent in private education as a whole. Children of professionals and higher-level officials represented 9 percent of the students in public and 14.6 percent of those in private education. Stated another way, in 1981 50 percent of the children of businessmen and industrialists, 33 percent of those of professionals and higher-level officials, but only 14 percent of those of

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[1] Wilbert van Walstijn, "Opnieuw: Motieven in het schoolkeuzeproces," The Hague: Centraal Bureau voor het katholiek onderwijs, 1983; also, Walstijn, "Nogmaals: schoolkeuzemotieven, een onderzoeksvoorstel voor het Openbaar Onderwijs," School en Besturen, 5, 2, June, 1985; "Directe meting van verlangd onderwijs," and Walstijn and Margot Boissevain, "Motieven in het schoolkeuze-proces," The Hague: Centraal Bureau voor het katholiek onderwijs, 1981.

[2] J. F. A. Braster, Schoolstruggle, pillarization and the choice of public and private schools in the Netherlands, Rotterdam Institute for Sociological and Public Administration Research 1990.

[3] Robert Ballion, Les consommateurs d'école, Paris: Stock/Laurence Pernoud 1982, 101-108.

workers and 18 percent of those of white-collar employees were in private schools, which enrolled approximately 17 percent of all school-aged children in France.[1]

The most prestigious schools of all, however, are the upper rank of public lycées, like Louis-le-Grand, Ravel and Jules Ferry in Paris. There is, on the other hand, a whole sector of non-Catholic private schools that specialize in giving a second chance to students who have experienced academic failure in public schools. There is another sector that appeals to parents who are seeking a very 'contemporary' education for their children.[2]

Ballion's review of the research led him to the conclusion that "the state school seeks to express a universalism that no longer exists." "The present crisis of the school is a crisis of society, for it is a crisis of consensus." The traditional concept of the goals and methods of education no longer enjoys hegemony, but the more child-centered concepts, though tending to impose themselves as collective values, are in fact held by a minority of parents. "For many years education has been seen, not as a service made available to citizens, but as an institution charged with exercising a -- beneficent -- constraint on that citizen."[3]

This creates serious problems in a free society. While we can consult another doctor or garage mechanic if we lose confidence in the services we are receiving, we are not supposed to seek out another educational setting for our children: "education is the only service for which the user is denied the right of evaluation." Schools should instead be allowed to respond in a differentiated manner to particular groups of parents, who would thereby be encouraged to act to obtain the most appropriate services for their children. After all, the families questioned by parent associations had expressed strong support for "the free choice of schools by parents," with 92 percent making this demand.[4]

In contrast with public education, which defines itself by reference to the idea of a public service, that is of a uniform supply corresponding to a collective need, private education justifies its existence by the existence of individualized demands that a collective supply cannot satisfy. . . . private schools, unlike public schools, don't have 'captive users,' but 'clients,' who choose in total freedom. They are in consequence placed in a competitive relationship that incites them to retain a share of the market by offering a specific service, and thus draws them into a process of differentiation.[5]

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[1]Alain Savary with Catherine Arditti, En toute liberté, Paris: Hachette 1985, 128.
[2]Ballion 1982, 117-8, 277-84.
[3]Ballion 1982, 194, 207, 211.
[4]Ballion 1982, 180.
[5]Ballion 1982, 222-223.

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Quite apart from ideological considerations, Ballion urged,

> private education, in its present forms, is moving in the direction of an improved functioning of our educational system. . . by legitimizing a new attitude toward education, that of the pre-eminence of the consumer, private education places public education more and more on the defensive, entering into competition with it and thus creating a new situation of which no one can predict the consequences.[1]

In his more recent research, Ballion has studied in detail how government policies permitting a measure of parent choice among public intermediate and secondary schools (collèges and lycées) have affected patterns of school attendance. Toward the start of the great expansion of access to secondary education in France, in 1963, attendance districts were established for each school and pupils were required to attend their assigned school. There were ideological and well as practical reasons for this arrangement, which was expected to result in a greater degree of socio-economic integration in each school and thus of eventual social equality. Experience demonstrated, however, that well-off parents who were not satisfied with the assigned school simply made use of private schools, while teachers and others with more sophistication than money found ways to manipulate the public system to obtain the assignment desired.[2]

Faced with growing competition from private schooling, the Socialist Minister of National Education who took office in 1981 resolved to increase the autonomy and thus the distinctiveness of public schools and to set up -- initially on a pilot basis -- a fair and impartial system by which parents could seek other public schools and those transfers would be allowed, subject to maintaining the enrollment of both the sending and receiving schools within ranges that would allow efficient operation. The transfer requests would be acted upon by representative commissions; in cases of over-subscription of a school, the commission would take into account the appropriateness of the reasons given by parents. By 1990, 47 percent of the collèges and 27 percent of the lycées in France were subject to these partially-voluntary assignment provisions.[3]

Recent studies have found that workers are under-represented (though by no means absent) among the parents taking advantage of the possibility of public school choice; so are farmers, though this finding is insignificant since most rural areas do not offer more than one choice at this level. The groups most over-represented among those seeking to transfer are white-collar workers and teachers. It seems likely that these are parents whose incomes do not permit them to live in the neighborhoods whose schools have strong reputations, but who are very much aware of the importance of the "right" education for their children's future success.

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[1]Ballion 1982, 284-5.
[2]Ballion, La bonne école, 163-64.
[3]Ballion, La bonne école, 167-68.

It is the teachers who are the most over-represented. Strongly convinced, and for good reason, of the social, economic and cultural importance of educational capital, not always having a place of residence which offers their children the "good" schools -- that is, middle-class schools -- these parents aspire to an educational benefit which is superior to that provided by their residence. Their inside knowledge of the [educational system] permits them to make discerning comparisons.[1]

Table 2-2

| Occupation of Parents | proportion of total at grade | proportion of transfer requests |
|---|---|---|
| farmers | 1.3 | 0.2 |
| artisans, merchants, managers | 8.2 | 4.8 |
| upper-level professionals | 11.4 | 16.1 |
| mid-level professionals | 18.5 | 17.4 |
| white-collar | 16.7 | 28.2 |
| workers | 37.7 | 22.3 |
| elementary teachers | 2.1 | 3.2 |
| secondary and higher teachers | 4.1 | 7.8 |
| Total | 100 | 100 |

How do French parents obtain information about the secondary schools they select for their children? The three most common sources are informal: "the child had information about the school" (59.7 percent), "talking with parents who know the school" (57.8 percent), and "talking with parents whose children are entering secondary school" (49.4 percent). Informational meetings at the intermediate school come next (44.4 percent), then newspapers (37.2 percent), then information requested from the secondary school (33.4 percent) and brochures and documents from the school (29.7 percent). Twenty percent mentioned meetings at the secondary school and 19.7 percent meetings at an information center.[2]

When asked for their reasons for selecting particular secondary schools, French parents gave the responses shown in Table 2-3.

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[1]Ballion, La bonne école, 187.
[2]Ballion, La bonne école, 227.

Table 2-3

| Reasons for selecting school, in order of importance | |
|---|---|
| the quality of instruction | 92.2% |
| relationship of teachers and students | 73.1 |
| presence or absence of drugs | 71.9 |
| seriousness about discipline | 56.3 |
| help for students in difficulty | 54.4 |
| level of success on examinations | 47.5 |
| relationship among students | 47.5 |
| quality of equipment | 47.2 |
| condition of facilities | 27.5 |
| existence of clubs | 13.4 |
| history of the school | 5.9 |
| social origin of students | 4.4 |
| presence of foreign students | 3.4 |

It seems very likely, from other evidence presented by Ballion, that the last three motivations for school choice are much more important than parents admitted. Schools acquire a "global" reputation, he argues, that is based heavily upon a very few indicators: "like paleontologists, parents use a couple of bones to build a dinosaur." The character of the area where a school is located, the social status of the students enrolled, and results on national examinations at the end of schooling (which of course also reflect heavily the social class of the students taking the examinations) are the primary forms of information available to parents. One of the results is that schools tend, even in the absence of policies to permit parent choice, to specialize in serving a particular type of student. Whether this is desirable or not, he notes, is a question that can be answered only by value-judgments about the role of education in society.[1]

Support for school choice in principle and parent motivations for choosing schools have also been studied extensively in the United States. Most frequently cited are the results of survey research. For example, the annual Gallup/Phi Delta Kappa poll on attitudes toward public education frequently includes questions about

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[1]Ballion, La bonne école, 239.

choice. The 1991 survey shows no significant differences among white, black and Hispanic respondents with respect to the factors important in choosing a school:

Table 2-4[1]

| very or fairly important factors | % agree |
|---|---|
| quality of teaching staff | 96 |
| maintenance of school discipline | 96 |
| curriculum/courses offered | 95 |
| size of classes | 88 |
| grades/test scores of students | 88 |
| close proximity to home | 74 |
| extracurricular activities | 68 |
| athletic program | 53 |
| racial or ethnic composition | 32 |

Asked whether they had enough information about the different public schools in their communities to make the best choice for their child, 51 percent of the public school parents said "yes", and 39 percent "no."

On the more general question about whether school choice is a good idea, the latest Gallup survey found a continuing pattern of support for choice, especially among urban and minority parents:

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[1]"Survey of the Public's Attitudes Toward the Public School," Phi Delta Kappan, September 1991.

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## Table 2-5[1]

| Do you favor or oppose allowing students and parents to choose which public schools in this community the students attend, regardless of where they live? | % support | % oppose |
|---|---|---|
| total | 62 | 33 |
| white | 60 | 35 |
| black | 70 | 24 |
| Hispanic | 66 | 25 |
| inner-city | 70 | 24 |
| suburbs | 57 | 38 |
| 18-29 | 71 | 26 |
| 30-49 | 66 | 30 |
| 50+ | 50 | 42 |
| public school parents | 66 | 31 |
| non-public school parents | 72 | 28 |
| no children | 59 | 34 |
| Independents | 63 | 33 |
| Democrats | 64 | 31 |
| Republicans | 57 | 39 |

Similarly, a survey of Wisconsin residents, in early 1992, found especially strong support for school choice among urban and black respondents. To the question "Do you think that parents in your area should or should not have the right to choose which local schools their children attend?", 87 percent of Milwaukee residents and 93 percent of black respondents replied that they should. Support for choice, as in the Gallup survey, was strongest among the younger respondents, and among women.[2]

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[1]"Survey of the Public's Attitudes Toward the Public School," Phi Delta Kappan, September 1991.

[2]"Survey of Wisconsin Residents on Educational Choice," Wisconsin Policy Research Institute/Gordon S. Black Corp., January 1992.

The age difference was even more striking in a Michigan poll, in which 85 percent of the respondents aged 18 to 24 but only 38 percent of those over 65 supported choice among local public schools, and an Indiana poll in which 90 percent of those aged 18 to 34 but 74 percent of those over 55 supported public school choice. Illinois respondents aged 18 to 34 supported choice among public schools by 53 to 36 percent, while those over 61 opposed it by 47 to 37 percent. Among Georgia voters surveyed in 1991, those aged 18 to 25 supported vouchers for non-public as well as public schooling by 71 to 21 percent, while support among those over 65 was 45 to 39 percent.[1] This is consistent with the Dutch research by Braster, cited above, which found the older generation more ideologically attached to the common public school and less supportive of parent choice.

Some studies look more closely at the nature of interest in school choice. A nationwide survey of a random sample of approximately 1,200 households with school-aged children was carried out in 1982 for the federal Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI) as part of a congressionally-mandated study of school finance. Parents with the necessary resources tended to report a connection between schools and the choice of a residence.

> Just over half of the public school households said the public schools their children would attend influenced their choice of a place to live, and for 18 percent it was the most important factor in their choice. . . . Others more likely to consider the public schools in their choice of residence included higher income and better educated parents, and households in the suburbs. Blacks were less likely to consider schools in their choice of residence than other groups.[2]

The OERI study inquired after the reasons for choice of various types of schools, and concluded that

> Public school parents who had not considered other schools mentioned transportation, convenience, and the assignment of the student to the school as reasons for selecting that school. Public school parents who had considered other options and private school parents tended to cite many similar reasons for choice such as discipline, quality of staff, academic standards and courses, and civic-moral values. The major difference between these two groups was that the public school parents were far more likely to cite cost and convenience as decision factors while private school parents often cited religious instruction. Among private school parents,

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[1]Michigan Department of Education survey by Public Sector Consultants, Inc., December 1991; Indiana Policy Review Foundation/Gordon S. Black Corp, November 1991; Center for Governmental Studies, Northern Illinois University, November 1990; Georgia Public Policy Foundation/Fabrizio-McLaughlin Associates, August 1991.

[2]Sherman, Joel D. and others, Congressionally Mandated Study of School Finance, Volume 2: Private Elementary and Secondary Education, Washington: Office of Educational Research and Improvement 1983, 50.

different factors influenced the choice of different types of private school. Academic considerations were almost the only choice factors mentioned by parents of children in independent schools while values and religious instruction were cited in addition to academic factors by parents of children in both Catholic and other religious schools. The latter type of school, however, appears to be chosen primarily because of its religious orientation.[1]

Table 2-6

| Very Important Factor | Public School Parents who considered more than one school | Private School Parents |
|---|---|---|
| academic standards | 83.4% | 84% |
| discipline | 85.6 | 87.1 |
| staff | 88.4 | 87.7 |
| civic/moral values | 65.7 | 75.1 |
| courses | 68.7 | 62.4 |
| finances | 54.0 | 16.7 |
| religious instruction | 29.5 | 61.5 |
| mix of student backgrounds | 37.3 | 22.3 |
| desegregation | 21.9 | 12.9 |
| convenience | 43.7 | 25.0 |
| child's wishes | 42.5 | 33.7 |

A 1984 Minnesota study by Darling-Hammond and Kirby disproved the common assumption that most parents simply accept whatever local public school is available; the researchers found that 62 percent of public school parents reported being 'active choosers' as compared to only 53 percent of private school parents. Although less likely than private school parents to have considered other schools at the time of current school choice (26 percent as opposed to 34 percent of private school parents),

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[1]Sherman and others, 53.

most of them had considered public school quality as an important factor in determining residential location.[1]

As a result of this mediation of choice through residential selection, "higher income parents have more options available to them at each stage of tne search process; they can purchase high-priced homes in 'good' school districts, and they can purchase private education."

The explanation of the relatively low proportion of private school parents who are 'active choosers' seems to be that many are Catholics for whom the local parochial school is simply a part of the parish affiliation, and others have a family tradition of using a particular private school. The study found that middle-income families were the most likely to use non-public school, since those below them in income were less able to pay tuitions, and those above them more able to live in areas with the best public schools.

An earlier Minnesota study, carried out in 1975 among the parents of public elementary students in the North Area of Minneapolis, found substantial interest in the educational options that were just then being made available. Note that these parents were responding to hypotheticals, not to alternative schools that had already been in operation.

> Twenty-two percent of the parents strongly agreed and 52% agreed that providing a choice of alternative educational programs within the North Area is important to them. . . . Twenty-nine percent of the parents said they would be willing to have their child transported to any school in the North Area to get the program of their choice, while 44% said no further than the school whose attendance area is next to their child's present school. Twenty-seven percent of the parents said they would choose the nearest available school regardless of the program offered.[2]

Three instructional emphases were offered. Fifty-five percent of the parents responding selected the self-contained classroom familiar from standard school practice, while 38 percent selected a "continuous progress" program and 8 percent an "open" program with a substantial degree of self-direction by the students.

A parallel study at the same time in the West Area of Minneapolis found that 38 percent of the elementary school parents were willing to have their children transported to any school in the West Area for an alternative program, 43 percent no further than the next nearest school, and 19 percent wanted the nearest school without regard to program. Thirty-one percent strongly agreed and 49 percent agreed with the statement

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[1]Darling-Hammond and Kirby, 247-8.

[2]Farnam, Jeffrey R., Lary Johnson and Maurice W. Britts, A Survey of Parent Opinions About Educational Alternatives in Minneapolis North Area Elementary Schools, Minneapolis Public Schools 1975, np.

"providing alternative education programs within the West Area is important to me," while 24 percent strongly agreed and 41 percent agreed that "it is important to me that alternative educational programs be planned to encourage a socio-economic and racial balance of students in the West Area."[1]

James Tenbusch organized a telephone survey of a carefully-selected sample of Minnesota parents to gauge their reactions to the inter-district open enrollment program adopted in Minnesota in 1987 and extended in subsequent years. His unpublished study reports that all groups of parents were generally aware of the open enrollment program, though not necessarily of other choice options in Minnesota. Parents who choose a school other than that to which their children would be assigned based upon place of residence do so, he found, because they are very dissatisfied with the educational services or the administration of the residential school, but not in order to avoid racial integration.[2]

Although Tenbusch found that white parents were generally more aware of the various enrollment options and used more sources of information about them than did nonwhite parents, the latter "expressed a greater interest than white parents in receiving assistance (counseling) in making their enrollment decisions," and were generally more unhappy than white parents with the schools to which their children would be assigned on the basis of residence. It is therefore not surprising that "nonwhite subjects were consistently more likely than white subjects to favor unrestricted school choice."

Confirming the study by Darling-Hammond and Kirby, Tenbusch found that white parents who did not choose to participate in the enrollment options "were two to three times more likely than participating white parents to report they had moved to their community of residence partly because of the quality of schools available," while this difference was even more marked among nonwhite parents; thus "most parents had already chosen with their feet regarding schooling for their children by moving to communities believed to have good schools."

Critics of the idea of school choice has sometimes expressed concern that parents enrolling their children in school syste- where they are not residents and voters would be effectively disenfranchised and thus not be able to intervene on behalf of their children. This prediction was not borne out by the Tenbusch study. Parents participating in the enrollment options also "reported that they had substantially more influence with the school staff at the nonresident school than with the staff at their resident school, particularly in negotiations for the provision of specific educational services." In summary:

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[1]Lary Johnson, Preferences for Educational Alternatives Expressed by Parents in Minneapolis West Area Schools," Minneapolis Public Schools 1975.

[2]James P. Tenbusch, "Parent Choice Behavior Under Minnesota's Open Enrollment Program," presentation at the American Education Research Association Annual Meeting in Atlanta, April 1993.

A major finding of this study is that when parents are given an opportunity to choose the school for their children, they do choose. Virtually all of the parents surveyed reported that they preferred making the enrollment decision for their learners, rather than having this decision based on residency factors. This affirmation of school choice was not dependent on open enrollment participatory status, race, or parent level of education.

Similar results were obtained in Rochester, New York when, as part of a broad survey of views about the need for and approaches to school reform, respondents were asked their view on school choice. The responses were strongly affirmative:

Table 2-7[1]

| "If it could be done without upsetting racial balance in the schools, do you think parents and children should be able to choose the public school a child will go to?" | % yes | % no |
|---|---|---|
| parents | 88 | 10 |
| non-parents | 78 | 20 |
| men | 78 | 20 |
| women | 83 | 16 |
| white | 77 | 21 |
| black | 89 | 10 |
| Hispanic | 93 | 7 |

Tenbusch found that Minnesota parents with more education were more aware of the various enrollment options, and most discussion of school choice has assumed that this would be the case. There is some evidence, however, that this effect may fade over time (the Minnesota program was quite new when the survey was conducted), especially with effective efforts to provide information. Patricia Lines has recently reassessed the data provided in reports by the Rand Corporation on the voucher experiment in Alum Rock in the early 1970s, and found that the information advantage of the better-educated and higher-income parents had largely faded after several years.[2] Similarly, Goldring and Bauch cite a 1978 study by Bridge that found that "lower-income families eventually receive information similar to that of higher-

[1]"The Mandate for Reform in Rochester Public Schools," New York: Louis Harris and Associates 1989, 74.

[2]Patricia Lines, presentation at the American Education Research Association Annual Meeting in Atlanta, April 1993.

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income families indicating that socioeconomic status may not play a decisive role in determining how and why parents make school choices."[1]

The unpublished study by Goldring and Bauch conducted in several cities found that academic reasons were most important in the school selection decisions of all groups of parents, but that income had a significant impact upon the importance of reasons related to discipline: lower-income families were more likely than others to choose based upon discipline policies and safety considerations.

Surveys have been carried out in several Massachusetts cities involved in desegregation to determine which educational options would persuade parents to attend a desegregated public school.

A 1985 study commissioned by the Citywide Educational Coalition surveyed 544 Boston residents with at least one child in a public (77% of the sample) or non-public (23%) elementary school. The respondents were asked which factors would be most important to them in choosing a public or non-public school; the results are presented in Table 2-8.

Not unexpectedly, "quality" is a very important consideration, as are discipline, small classes, a stress on the basics, and a full-day program. It seems likely that this last includes responses to two distinct concerns: full-day (as contrasted with half-day) kindergarten, and an extended day beyond regular school hours (also listed as "day care"). The so-called neighborhood school, identified by "walking distance" and also by "only neighborhood children," seems of only moderate importance to the respondents.

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[1] Ellen B. Goldring and Patricia A. Bauch, "Parent Involvement and School Responsiveness: Facilitating the Home-School Connection in Schools of Choice," paper presented at the American Education Research Association Annual Meeting in Atlanta, April 1993.

## Table 2-8[1]

| Factors affecting public and non-public school parents | essential | very important | somewhat important | not so important |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| lowest possible tuition | 11% | 31% | 22% | 30% |
| full-day kindergarten | 22 | 53 | 15 | 7 |
| two-way language | 10 | 42 | 23 | 24 |
| small class sizes | 24 | 49 | 17 | 9 |
| walking distance | 17 | 43 | 15 | 22 |
| strong discipline | 25 | 51 | 16 | 5 |
| religious training | 7 | 27 | 23 | 41 |
| only neighborhood children | 3 | 11 | 17 | 68 |
| "back-to-basics" | 21 | 47 | 19 | 9 |
| day care after school | 9 | 35 | 16 | 36 |
| highest quality | 40 | 54 | 4 | 1 |
| attended by child's friends | 6 | 21 | 31 | 41 |

This is confirmed by the data in Table 2-9. Public school parents were asked: "If you had a choice between sending your child to a public school nearby or, by bus, to one a few miles away, and the racial makeup of both was equally integrated, how would each of the following features of the distant school influence your decision?"

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[1]Survey by Martilla & Kiley, Inc., for Citywide Educational Coalition, Boston, January 1985.

Table 2-9[1]

| Considerations influencing public school parents | send to distant | consider distant | send to nearby | not sure |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| full-day kindergarten | 35% | 11% | 47% | 7% |
| no more than 20 per class | 52 | 17 | 26 | 6 |
| special magnet program | 62 | 16 | 18 | 4 |
| excellent reputation | 65 | 18 | 22 | 4 |
| second language program | 55 | 18 | 22 | 4 |

This survey was conducted as part of a campaign to promote the idea that every school in Boston should become a "school of choice." After this led to adoption of a universal controlled choice plan, effective September 1989, the school system's Research and Development Office conducted a study of parents with children entering first and sixth grades. One of the primary purposes of this study was to assess the effectiveness of the newly-established parent information centers (PICs). The data in Table 2.10 show the sources that these parents considered most helpful in providing information about schools.

Another primary purpose was to determine what proportion of parents were actively engaged in making school choices. In order to obtain information about the engagement of parents in the choice process, they were asked "Did you seriously consider registering your child in a school other than a Boston public school?" Of the parents of children entering first grade, 26.5 percent reported that they had considered taking their child out of the local school system, as did 25.2 percent of the parents of children entering middle school in the sixth grade.

[1]Survey by Martilla & Kiley, Inc., for Citywide Educational Coalition, Boston, January 1985.

## Table 2-10

### 1990 Survey of Boston Public School Parents[1]

| Two most helpful sources | Grade 1 | Grade 6 |
|---|---|---|
| school visit | 37.2 | 33.5 |
| school fact sheet | 23.8 | 39 |
| sibling in same school | 23.7 | 15.8 |
| talking with principal/teacher | 26 | 25.8 |
| discussion with PIC staff | 5.6 | 5.9 |
| friends/neighbors | 33.3 | 27.3 |
| media (TV, newspapers, radio) | 3.2 | 6.1 |
| other | 12.2 | 10.7 |

Several surveys of public school parents have been carried out as part of magnet school planning in Worcester, Massachusetts. In a March 1982 survey 35 percent of the respondents said they would definitely and another 30 percent that they might agree to have their children transported to an out-of-neighborhood school if given their choice of educational program or instructional mode. The most popular programs among those indicating willingness to have their children transported were science/technology and gifted and talented, while the most popular instructional mode was "continuous progress." Thirty-four percent of the parents who indicated a preference for "continuous progress" were willing to have their children transported to such a school. Parents for whom a "fundamental" instructional mode was preferred were somewhat less likely (25 percent) to indicate a willingness to have their children transported, perhaps because that was essentially what their local schools offered.

A survey the following year in another section of Worcester found that 40 percent of respondents were definitely willing to have their children transported to the school of their choice, and another 37 percent said they would consider it.

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[1]Ru-Ing Hwang, Controlled Choice Student Assignment Process -- Phase I: Parent Survey, Boston: Office of Research and Development, Boston Public Schools, February 1990, 53.

# Discussion

The surveys of attitudes toward school choice and the reasons given by parents for selecting schools are limited in their usefulness because they do not look in detail at the context within which these attitudes and judgments are formed. Generalized support for school choice does not mean that a parent is seeking actively to enroll her child in a different school. That parents put academic quality high among the desired characteristics of a school does not tell us very much; what parent would not? And survey data can never take the place of in-depth interviewing and of observing the actual decisions that parents make.

Nevertheless, the survey research does tell us several things. One is that the genie is out of the bottle with respect to school choice: the majority of Americans (and of Europeans) now expect to be able to make school choices, and this is especially evident among the younger generation. The policy question is not whether but how school choice should be permitted and organized.

Another is that parents take a broad view of the functions of schooling in making decisions about schools for their children. Academic excellence is not the only aspect of education that matters; parents (including professional educators) may care as much or more about character, about creativity, about social skills. Society has a right to demand that schools -- and students -- be adequate, that they meet proficiency standards, but whether to seek excellence is surely a matter of personal decision. Surveys and the choices that parents make suggest, however, that parents **do** care about the quality of schooling, however they may define it. They may not have a clear understanding of the specific theme of a school, or know how it rates on test scores, but they respond to their perceptions of quality.[1]

Location is important; other things being equal, most studies have found, parents will generally choose a school near home. If they perceive educational advantages to another school farther away, however, most parents say that they prefer that school, and they back this up with their actions. The pattern of school applications in cities implementing choice by no means supports the assumption that parents only want neighborhood schools. In Fall River, for example, 39 percent of the kindergarten parents in 1990 gave first preference to non-neighborhood schools, despite the fact that transportation is not provided by the school system. In Worcester, 38 percent of the newly-enrolling elementary students the same year (1,744 out of 4,603) enrolled voluntarily in non-neighborhood schools. In Lynn, 26 percent of the

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[1] A 1989 study by a national organization helping relocating corporate employees to select schools in their new communities found that 53 percent wanted "a school system or private school in the second highest range (from the 60th percentile to the 80th percentile) on composite scores on scholastic examinations. . . . Less than one-third say they want their child in a top-scoring . . . school system or private school. . . . It is more important to parents that their children be successful than that the school earn the highest marks." William L. Bainbridge, "Helping Families Cope With School Choices," Westerville, OH: School Match, 1990, 4.

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first graders (331 out of 1,297) enrolled in non-neighborhood schools. The majority (57 percent) of parents of children entering first grade in Boston requested non-neighborhood schools, as did 52 percent of parents of children entering sixth grade.

This is true even when race is at issue. Among seven middle schools in Boston's East Zone, 26 percent of white pupils entering sixth grade in 1990 chose the Gavin School in largely-white South Boston, but 39 percent chose the McCormack in largely-black Columbia Point. In the West Zone, 44 percent of white applicants chose the Irving School, in racially-mixed Roslindale; only 17 percent chose the Shaw in suburban West Roxbury and 18 percent the Timilty in the heart of predominantly-black Roxbury.[1]

The schools selected by minority parents followed the same pattern. In Boston's North Zone, for example, 31 percent of black applicants chose the Barnes in East Boston, an area where few black families live, while only 10 percent chose the Dearborn, in a heavily-minority part of the city.

As a parent counselor in Boston wrote to the author, "The first question asked by most students and parents is, 'Is it a good school?' when we make suggestions. Location does make a difference to many but it is only occasionally that a convenient location is requested, but mostly a 'safe' location, and considering what is going on in Boston, we expect this to be a prominent concern."[2]

But do parents always make wise choices? Of course not, nor should that be the test of whether they should be **allowed** to choose, any more than it is with the choice of how much TV their children will watch or what food they will eat. After all, if there are schools the choice of which would be positively harmful to children, why are we now assigning children to those schools involuntarily? It is an appropriate task of public policy to **assure that there are no truly bad choices** through some form of public licensing and oversight, but not to substitute the judgment of an official for that of a parent simply because the parent does not take into account every nuance of school quality. It is not as though educators themselves were in agreement about the characteristics of a good school.

On the other hand, it is surely relevant to the policy-making process to learn more about how parents go about obtaining information on the basis of which to select schools for their children, and what factors influence them in these decisions. This was the primary focus of our second year's research for the Center on Families, Communities, Schools and Children's Learning.

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[1] Contra the conclusion of Christine Rossell, that controlled choice will not work in most cities because "[t]here is no evidence that whites will willingly transfer their children out of a neighborhood school and into a minority school across town without some incentives" such as those provided by a magnet school. She also reports, inaccurately, that 40 percent of white parents in Boston did not get their first choice (The Carrot or the Stick for School Desegregation Policy, Philadelphia: Temple University Press 1990, 198, 200).

[2] Letter from Jeanne Lewis to Charles Glenn, December 6th 1990.

So long as the organization of school attendance is premised upon most parents passively accepting -- perhaps with little reflection -- a school assignment based upon where they live, it is difficult to assess to what extent the "average" parent can be helped to become an effective "consumer" -- Ballion's term -- or decision-maker on behalf of the education of her children.

The school systems selected for this study, by contrast, have made choice the universal means of school assignment (not, of course, that every parent can be guaranteed the school of first choice), and have established a parent information and counseling function at the gateway through which each parent or guardian must pass to obtain a school assignment. While, as we will see, the functioning of this system is far from perfect or unaffected by social class and language, it may without exaggeration be said to come as close as any method of organizing attendance in inner-city schools to making choice universal and informed.

Above all, it is a system that places confidence in parents, even and especially those inner-city parents who are not commonly, by academics and policy makers, thought of as capable of careful, responsible decisions. Unlike most practices of urban school systems, it treats parents -- and thus their children -- as worthy of respect and trust. Quite apart from any contentions that "market forces" will bring about educational reform, it seems desirable as a matter of public policy to structure school systems on the presumption, once but no longer fundamental, "of the soundness of parental judgment in making educational decisions pertaining to their children."[1]

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[1]Ralph D. Mawdsley and Daniel Drake, "Involving Parents in the Public Schools: Legal and Policy Issues," West's Education Law Quarterly 2, 1 (January) 1993, 3.

# 3. The Study of Parent Information Centers

The first parent information center (PIC) under a school choice policy in Massachusetts -- perhaps in the nation -- was established in Cambridge in 1981. Its role was to provide educational information to parents, particularly in the selection process of schools for their children, and also to work closely with the school system's assignment officer in processing applications for schools.

Under the Cambridge desegregation plan (described in the first section of this report) it was no longer mandatory that children attend neighborhood schools; in fact, in many cases some were unable to enroll in the traditional neighborhood school because of the school system's racial balance policy. The process of school choice could present problems for parents who were accustomed to leaving such decisions in the hands of school officials. The role of the PIC was to give parents enough information about schools and their programs that they could make informed decisions.

The Cambridge PIC was funded entirely by state desegregation funds from the Office of Educational Equity (OEE), setting a precedent that was followed as fifteen other cities implemented school choice plans over the next eight years. One or more centers modeled on that in Cambridge were established in each of these cities, all supported with state funds. Staff of more than twenty Massachusetts PICs have continued to meet on a regular basis to share strategies, and the more experienced centers played a major part in the organization of new ones. In several cases PIC staff from one city actually helped in the registration process of another city as a new choice plan was implemented. OEE staff worked closely with all of the centers, and visited them frequently.

Our Center on Families research project made this network of PICs a major focus in 1991-92, and extensive interviews were conducted on-site at centers in six cities: Boston, Cambridge, Fall River, Lawrence, Lowell and Springfield. These interviews were supplemented by several forms of data-collection from parents, discussed in a subsequent section of this report.

## Research Questions and Strategies

Several questions about the process of school selection shaped the data collection, observations, and interviews:

What information is necessary to choose the school that will best fit a child's needs?

What part do life's realities play in school choice, especially in the areas of child care, transportation, and work responsibilities? Do concerns about crime and violence make it difficult to attract parents to certain schools?

How does a parent judge the staff and the administration of the school if his/her oldest child is just entering kindergarten or is a new child to the system?

What part might political savvy play in gaining admission to favored settings such as magnet schools?

Are parents confused by the concept of non-guaranteed choice?

How do parents find out about the parent information centers? What is the process of information sharing now and how might it improve? What efforts have been made to contact parents whose native language is not English? Parents who lack stable housing or who have problems with documentation or legal residency?

What had proved to be the most effective ways of sharing information with urban parents and students? How are parents received at the PIC, and what takes place in counseling/informational interviews? What information is available on individual schools and programs and what factors substantially influence the school selection process?

A format was developed to gather consistent data across the six centers that agreed to participate in the study. Although the research plan called for study of only three centers, the enthusiastic response led to doubling the number actually participating in the study. Structured interviews were conducted with center directors and other staff, and they were given an opportunity to review and amplify or correct the written record of these interviews.

Visits to the various centers provided an opportunity to observe to what extent an atmosphere had been developed that could make parents comfortable in the process of selecting a school, parents for whom school system offices are ordinarily uninviting and intimidating. These visits also included inspection of the printed and other materials available to present the programs of each school and to explain the assignment process.

Observations were also tested against the parent interview and survey results reported in the fourth section of this report, for Fall River, Lawrence, Lowell and Springfield and, for the two Boston parent information centers included in the study,

against an excellent evaluation report prepared by the school system's Department of Program Evaluation.[1]

## General Description of the Parent Information Centers

Each of the more than twenty PICs in Massachusetts consists of one or more offices, housed in a location convenient to public transportation. Some are in converted school space with a somewhat institutional character, while others occupy storefront space in heavily-traveled business areas. The typical center has three or four staff on duty at a time, each with a desk and space to talk with a parent, as well as shelves or racks of materials about the local public schools and a map showing the location of each. Most PICs make heavy use of computer workstations to access information on the available seats in each school.

Parents are encouraged to wander around to look at various visual exhibits and to read the brochures describing each school at their leisure. Material is available for each school level and in each of the languages strongly represented in the area served by each of the centers. The staff of each center is multiculturally representative, and in each case there are bilingual staff assigned to the PIC. Some are part-time; one center, for example, has a Greek-speaking staff member one day a week, and parents who need help in Greek are encouraged to come on that day. A number of school systems have in addition deliberately housed the administrative and outreach staff of their bilingual education programs adjacent to the PIC in order to provide language support as well as to carry out home language assessments as children are registered.

Considerable thought has been given to helping parents to navigate the bureaucratic maze that accompanies registering a child for school: proof of residence, immunizations, assessment of special needs of various kinds, selection of a school and of alternative schools in case that one is over-subscribed. There are, however, limitations that are clearly defined. Center staff insist that they are careful not to select schools for parents, and may at times as a result give less advice than would be desired by the parents. There is no information provided on school staff and administrative skills; such information must be obtained directly from each school. Parents who are not confident about approaching school staff may leave with gaps in information because of uncertainty about what questions to ask.

Many schools define their academic success on the basis of standardized testing results of their students. Even college-educated parents can find it difficult to translate the significance of stanines, grade equivalents and percentiles in relationship to their child's ability. For less-educated parents, this process poses substantial problems. They often do not have a clear concept of achievement testing. Test results, when published, are typically not provided in a format that most

[1]Melodye Wehrung, "Evaluation Report: Boston Public Schools Parent Information Centers, School Year 1991-1992, "Office of Research & Development, Boston Public Schools, August 1992.

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parents understand. Information that is unclear may simply be unusable for parents in the selection process.

> We do not include test results in our zone newspapers or in the individual school fliers . . .. We have been trained in interpreting these figures by Research and Development staff, and get updates when necessary from them. When a parent asks for these numbers, we explain them one-on-one.[1]

While there is information on support services provided by each school, centers are not typically funded to provide workshops that prepare parents who have previously had little contact with schools to evaluate its appropriateness for their children.

Although parents receive guidance around choice within the local school system, most centers do nothing to encourage or facilitate the selection of schools in other school systems, either under the state-funded urban/suburban Metco Program or under the inter-district transfer policy implemented in parts of Massachusetts in 1991. Parents who inquire about enrollment in other districts are referred to the receiving system. Parents who are not comfortable moving in less familiar territory may find the process both frightening and intimidating.

In addition, older children may be denied educationally-significant choices because of previous course selection which makes them ineligible for some programs and even schools at the secondary level. This is most notably the case with the examination schools in Boston (Boston Latin, Latin Academy, Boston Technical) which require a competitive score on a standardized test which must be taken in the sixth or eighth grade. In this as in other ways, the choices available to a parent may be limited because of an earlier lack of information.

Another limitation on the choices available is that some schools are filled during the first round of assignments (see the first section of this report); parents who make three choices of the most popular schools may find none of them available if they register late or are unlucky in the lottery process that ensures fairness.

The goal of a choice plan cannot realistically be to assign every student to the first preference school, but universal choice will not function as it should unless every student can be assigned to an acceptable school. This can only happen over time, as the natural pressure of choice combines with outside support to strengthen the weaker schools or -- if they cannot be strengthened -- to change staff or close them down.

Boston's controlled choice plan, adopted in 1989, provided explicitly for a three-year period during which the schools that attracted fewer applicants would be

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[1]Letter to the Author from Maureen Lumley, Boston Public Schools, April 13th 1993.

helped to change their programs and how they are perceived ... or else. The first year, several schools with low numbers of applications were closed, and one middle school converted to elementary use.

In the first year of the new assignment process, the parent information centers were to conduct inquiries on why certain schools were not attracting applicants, and these schools were expected to take remedial measures. With the strong encouragement of the Commonwealth's Office of Educational Equity, the Zone Superintendents selected 22 schools for an intensive restructuring effort. The Zones assessed each under-subscribed school and made specific recommendations for improvements, "including a review of the school's educational leadership" with "appropriate recommendations for possible changes." Subsequently, the Zone Superintendent and Planning Council "may take whatever measures necessary to make the [still undersubscribed] school more attractive including changing the school's educational leader and major restructuring of the school's educational mission."[1]

Even with such concerted efforts to identify and improve the weaker schools, children in Boston and other cities attend schools that are of uneven quality; that is an unfortunate given, and always has been; it has been created not by the choice of parents but by neglect and complacency on the part of educators and public officials. Unfortunately, it is not yet clear whether school authorities in Boston, at least, are using the signals provided by parent choices in a systematic and powerful way to require schools to change.[2]

*Outreach: Making Contact*

The parent information process is complicated by the informal grapevine that functions in each community in the effort to share knowledge about schools. The different ways that people of color and recent immigrants access information is apparent in the prevalent use of storefront or church meetings, neighborhood gatherings or the ever-present ex-officio "community educators" centered in the various housing projects. Through conversations with various PIC Directors, it was apparent that each neighborhood has such informal leaders, most often a matriarch, who has a knowledge of how to maneuver within the system and shares that expertise with her neighbors. Similar people can be found, within church groups and community agencies, who through trial and error have educated their own children and know how to make choices that both make sense and get results. There are also parents who have had good or bad relationships with certain schools or personnel and share that information so that other parents can either enjoy the benefits or avoid

[1]Charles Willie and Michael Alves, A Controlled Choice Assignment Plan for the Boston Public Schools, Boston: The School Committee of the City of Boston, February 1989, 56-58; see Charles L. Glenn, Controlled Choice in Boston: The First Year, Quincy: Massachusetts Department of Education, April 1990.
[2]This is the primary focus of research for this Center on milies project in 1993.

heartache. The neighborhood grapevine is most effective, at least for those who can tap into it!

Parent information centers, by contrast, have developed more formalized channels of communication used throughout the community, such as direct mailings, informational meetings, school fairs and tours of the school system. They have also creatively gained access to previously hard-to-reach populations through direct contact with area shelters, cable television and radio announcements through ethnic stations that serve culturally different communities.

Ethnically representative outreach workers provide access to parents who typically are hesitant or ignorant of the process of educating their children, either because their own educational experience within America's public school system may have been less than adequate or because they have recently moved to an entirely new setting with habits and mores that are substantially different from the country of origin. The outreach workers are able to explain to parents, in familiar terms, the process of school choice. In this setting, parents are encouraged to question extensively and have their fears allayed about what decisions need to be made around the education of their children. This outreach also enables parents to make their decisions in a timely manner, decreasing the need for last minute registration.

Each PIC seeks to create a non-threatening atmosphere conducive to exposing parents (and at times students) to educational choices available within the school system. The centers provide for the needs of parents with young children through play areas near the counseling area. In addition, workers will make home visits in the attempt to reach clients wherever they are. Staff constantly seek to find ways to make the documentation process easier for immigrant parents; when particular needs keep reoccurring among specific populations, the staff discuss among themselves and at statewide meetings how to serve the newcomers more efficiently.

Most of the clients of the Massachusetts PICs are poor and belong to racial or ethnic minority groups. The centers must address the difficulties of parents who are new to various communities, who may not speak or write standard English and are not certain how to make the decision of which school will best serve their child's academic needs.

Parents learn about the PICs in many ways. There are formal routes of information, such as advertisements on cable television and local radio stations, local and neighborhood newspapers and mailings from the school system. Various PICs communicate with community agencies such as churches, housing offices, cultural agencies, Head Start and day-care centers, non-public school systems, pediatricians and homeless shelters. Home visits are sometimes made when necessary, and several PICs have set up vans and tables at shopping centers on Saturdays. These varied communications are, when possible, made in the home language of language minority parents in an attempt to register their children as early as possible and thus to plan programs to meet their needs.

The Boston evaluation was based upon surveys in ten languages: Khmer, Chinese, Greek, Haitian Kreyol, Portuguese, Spanish, Vietnamese and Laotian as well as English. Almost all of the parents (96 percent) reported that they were able to talk with someone at the PIC in their own language.[1]

The Fall River PIC described its information sharing process to reach the parents of kindergartners this way:

Throughout the year, radio and television announcements are given by the Portuguese [radio] stations in the area, as are announcements in the neighborhood newspaper. All children who were born in 1987 [thus four years old in 1991, when the interview was conducted] are documented and these parents receive a direct mailing or telephone call from the office. Notices are systematically sent to those parents of older siblings who have a child entering kindergarten the following year through both the school and Parent Teacher Organizations. Information is also provided in the monthly newsletters for parent, entitled "The Magnet Memo" and "Parents Make The Difference."

Community activities include direct contact with the housing project and bilingual preschool programs, Portuguese Youth Cultural Association and Portuguese Businessman's Association. Other neighborhood contact takes place with area adult ESL classes that take place at Bristol Community College. Notices are personally given to clubs and churches of various faiths. Special care is spent in contacting the homeless to make certain that these children are identified early on in order to provide them with a stable experience outside of a less than stable home environment.

Springfield approaches the issue of homeless parents and children in a similar manner:

We've adjusted our choice plan to place homeless children in one K-8 school. This school becomes the one stable force in their lives. Our parent information center is located at Springfield Technical Community College, which is near one of the major motel residences for the homeless. A staff member in our School Volunteers Department does specific outreach to the shelters. There is also a tutoring program with which this person is affiliated that gains us access to this population.

More elusive are the informal ways of information sharing that occur between parents and the process of school selection, particularly in neighborhoods that are increasingly economically and socially disadvantaged. Different modes of communication apparently work better with certain ethnic groups: Anglos and Asians seem to respond particularly well to written correspondence, while some Black and many non-English-speaking parents are best reached by personal outreach to

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[1]Wehrung, 10.

preschools, churches and neighborhoods, seconded by media efforts and word of mouth information.

The Boston evaluation obtained responses from 3,254 parents to a survey about their use of parent information centers; those of parents with children entering kindergarten are especially interesting:

## Table 3-1

## Sources of Information about Boston Parent Information Centers[1]

| Parents of children entering kindergarten | responses | percent |
|---|---|---|
| schools | 849 | 44 |
| newspaper | 206 | 19 |
| radio | 54 | 2 |
| friends | 747 | 33 |
| school info telephone number | 375 | 17 |
| school system central office | 286 | 13 |
| total responses | 2250 | |

The fact that schools themselves are a major source of such information for parents whose children have not yet enrolled in school may of course reflect the presence of older siblings in those schools, but it may also indicate that a substantial number of parents make initial contact with a school which they assume their children will attend, before being directed into a process that will offer a variety of options. More striking is the fact that "friends," rather than formal entities, were the primary source of information for one third of the parents.

Information may be conveyed most effectively to some parents through personal relationships or by stories shared at the corner store or laundromat, which poses challenges for school systems unaccustomed to penetrating such networks. For disadvantaged families, the location of the PIC, its welcoming atmosphere, and the participation of its staff in community life play an important role in whether they will make effective use of the information available.

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[1]Wehrung, 11.

When Boston parents were asked where they obtained the information that most influenced their choice of schools, informal sources remained very important, suggesting that a strategy that relied exclusively upon providing formal information -- test scores, expenditures, program availability -- would miss elusive aspects of school reputation that in fact weigh heavily with parents. It should be stressed that such reputational and non-quantifiable factors influence school decisions by highly educated parents as well, although their channels of information may be quite different.

## Table 3-2

### Sources of Information about Boston Schools[1]

| Parents of pupils entering all grades | responses | percent |
|---|---|---|
| word of mouth | 868 | 29 |
| school system publication | 804 | 26 |
| teacher/principal | 786 | 26 |
| parent info center staff | 582 | 19 |
| child | 503 | 17 |
| radio or television | 110 | 4 |
| other | 324 | 11 |
| total responses | 3036 | |

PICs across the state have made many positive changes in order to get school selection information to parents earlier and to make them more aware of the process of choosing the right school for their child. In the past, low-income and especially language-minority parents characteristically did not register their children until the first week of school. This caused several days of chaos in inner-city schools, and often required last-minute adjustments of staff and program assignments. With the adoption of school choice policies, the parents who registered late were further penalized by being least likely to obtain assignments to the most popular schools.

There has therefore been a major effort to reach out to these parents in particular, and to encourage them to register their children the Spring before they would start school. This effort has been quite successful, as indicated by registration statistics. In Fall River, for example, the proportion of kindergartners who were not

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[1]Wehrung, 12.

registered until school started dropped from 21 percent in 1988 to 7 percent in 1989 and 2 percent in 1991. Low-income parents who move from city to city within Massachusetts, as many do each year, are increasingly aware that PICs exist and what service they offer, and make a point of seeking them out in their new communities.

The Lawrence PIC explains change in their process in the following statement:

> We still have long lines in August and the beginning of September, but we believe they are not as long as in years past. It is apparent that the kindergarten and grade 1 parents are most aware of the early registration. Grades 2-8 must become more aware of how important it is to register early.

This is a clear example of the results of expanded community outreach, particularly in the positive results of the incoming Kindergarten classes. There is a high mobility rate at other grades as well, however, and outreach efforts have been necessary to reach students new to each school system. The Boston high school parent/student information office uses television as part of its outreach:

> This particular center has for the last year had an on-going television program with a high school focus. This is our basic outreach mechanism. In addition to an eighth-grade orientation process that we begin in November, we set appointments for January and February classroom visits [in middle schools]. This is our second year of that mode; and schools are becoming more receptive to letting in the PIC. . . Basically we need to continue to educate the schools that we are here to work with them so that they will begin to refer parents and students more frequently to the centers.

PICs have added temporary sites to increase accessibility at the busiest times, have included bus tours of schools before the registration period and added direct contact with housing agencies and shelters to reach parents unaware of the process of enrolling children in school.

The racial, ethnic, and language diversity of PIC staff has played a key role in making centers accessible t ） parents early in the school selection process. PICs are working diligently to increase this focus; some centers provide service in as many as nine different languages, but insufficient funding thwarts their desire to provide multi-lingual services such as translation of materials and assistance with non-school problems to the extent that is needed in communities with a high rate of immigration. Lawrence, one of the most-heavily impacted, provides information and extensive assistance in Spanish but increasingly confronts the problem of insufficient services in other languages:

> One area which must be addressed this year is the lack of materials and information for Cambodian and Vietnamese families. The new kindergarten

registration process that we are currently implementing asks that the parent complete the form at home. This process, with no Vietnamese or Khmer translation, has proved to be very difficult for some.


### How Parents Are Received at the PIC

Center staff told us that it was their objective that parents be greeted by a staff person in a welcoming atmosphere, as different as possible from that of many public institutions with which poor people must deal. Our observations suggest that this has generally been achieved to an impressive extent. Boston East Zone describes their setting as one conducive to the sharing of information:

> Parents are greeted in a warm and welcoming atmosphere with large doses of sensitivity. Coffee is served in the winter months. There are take-home materials and fun activities for the children, such as books (to read) and coloring books. Educational materials for all parents are available in many languages. A children's corner is set up to keep them occupied during the parents' interview.

The Springfield PIC explains its process in this way:

> We have a clerical aide or a home-school liaison person to greet clients. They inquire how they may be of assistance. We provide written information and answer any questions. If a parent is illiterate, we would walk them through the procedure. Actually, everyone is walked through. We spend at least one half-hour with each client. The registration sheet is filled out by one of our own employees.

There is no pre-screening process for parents at PICs, but typically a greeter will ask what the particular need is and ask the parent to sign in on the appropriate form (this is done gently, often staff realize illiteracy of client at this point). Materials are placed on bulletin boards and displays, in order of zones, educational program and home language. Many parents are walked through the process to avoid feelings of embarrassment and/or inadequacy caused by the lack of understanding of the printed material. The languages most frequently provided for in most centers include: English and Spanish, Cape Verdean Criolo and Haitian Kreyol. Other languages for which significant demand exists include Portuguese, Greek, Vietnamese, Khmer, and Lao.

All centers can obtain translation services to aid speakers of languages not represented among the staff of the PIC. Those that do not have these services within their system often access community agencies (e.g. refugee center personnel, Language Assessment Center) that will provide translation upon request. Oftentimes, parents will arrive with a neighbor or family member that can speak English. If there are no services available, PIC staff utilize body, sign and hand language in order to

communicate. Some centers, like that in Boston's West Zone, publicize a regular weekly schedule of when translators will be available for the less commonly-demanded languages.

All PIC staff interviewed agreed that parents can move more smoothly through the school selection process if armed with prior knowledge of what documentation is necessary: birth certificate, copy of immunization record, proof of address and previous school record. Parents new to communities may have particular issues that make this documentation difficult, such as lost documents, financial difficulties, immunization problems, arrival of school records in a timely manner from Russia or other countries. In these cases, PICs do whatever they can to help parents in this transitional position and at times overlook or substitute information such as baptismal records in place of birth certificates, or an irregular proof of address when the parent is living illegally with another family because of financial difficulties.

As staff of Boston's High School Zone PIC put it, "We have to defer to the state law that says if a student knocks at your door, you have a responsibility to educate them."

*The Assignment Process*

Special care is taken to explain the assignment process, the impossibility of guaranteeing a particular choice during the initial registration period, and the appeals process if a parent is dissatisfied with the assignment. In Fall River's version of the choice process:

> Each school has an individual brochure, and parents select the brochures for schools that interest them for any reason. The staff member then answers parent questions and seeks to respond to concerns, providing information on particular programs and services available. Parent workers are non-judgmental; they make an effort not to influence school selection. Parents are urged to visit a school or program so that principals can provide direct information on programs and services within each school.

The High School Zone PIC in Boston operates differently because it frequently deals with students rather than parents:

> In a high school PIC, we normally try to get from the student what their interest is -- perhaps they want to do cosmetology or are just trying to complete high school. At times, we have students who are returning after a two year absence, who may have been educated in a DYS [Division of Youth Services] facility. Students like these might be directed to a small school setting in order to realize academic success. For instance, if we know that Dorchester High School has a small, compact program, we might want to direct a student there. If it's a student who has just reentered the

school system, he might be directed to an adult education or external diploma program.

If a parent becomes abusive or upset at any point during the school selection process because of the unavailability of space in a program or for other reasons, PIC staff respond immediately and attempt to let the parent know that they are actively listening to their concerns. They may ask the parent whether there is someone with whom they want to speak. Suggestions are made about process; the chain of decision-making authority and the appeal process are explained and subsequent meetings may be scheduled with the school or with other system staff to seek a solution to the problem.

The Boston East Zone sheds light on how it deals with the unhappy parent:

> We are active listeners, eye to eye contact is crucial. A private space is sometimes necessary, a room is cleared for privacy, other office staff may intervene because of a previously formed relationship or [a shared] racial background. We try to make a parent comfortable by utilizing cross cultural communication. We will say that "higher up" will deal with their issues; we inform them of the chain of command and accountability. We always identify ourselves by name and are available for further consultation. Issues of discipline are handled in another office and we will escort a parent to the area where they will receive additional support and information.

The Lawrence PIC comments about conflictual situations,

> We attempt to remove the person from the situation. We have a conference room in the back of the office. We try to calm the individual down. We have had relatively few abusive face-to-face confrontations over the years. Some have taken place over the telephone. If it occurs over the telephone, we try our best to be polite; if to no avail, we discontinue the conversation. We have had a number of tearful parents upset with school placements, lack of transportation, or other things occurring in the schools. In these instances we arrange meetings with principals, teachers or begin the process for an appeal hearing.

Springfield points to the need of quick response to parental concerns:

> When people come with a problem or complaint, we try to act very quickly. Phone calls are made (or our number is given) to facilitate immediate access. They may also give us a number for a neighbor, a cousin, etc. Calls are returned week-long, after work hours and during the weekends.

Most PICs have a separate office area where parents can be given privacy while sorting out issues. If these methods fail, the parent is asked to leave (or in the case of telephone conversation, the call may be terminated).

In the counseling interview, a staff person welcomes the parent and determines the parent's need. Staff will then inquire about the child's educational background. They try to get information about the previous year and preschool experience, the home language, and the three school choices. Staff will discuss the written information concerning the choice process in lay terms to avoid confusion. When available, videos may be shown. The staff explains what factors complicate the realization of choice (for example, they will explain that "controlled choice" is subject to racial balance considerations) and the policies giving priority to siblings or to those living within walking distance of a school. The program of magnet schools and zone information is given. Parents are then encouraged to visit the schools they have chosen.

As the Lawrence PIC describes the procedure:

> First we ask how we may help the parent and depending upon the response we act. For example, someone may come in to register their child for fifth grade. We ask the student's educational background, including a language survey for each year of the student's life, including preschool. We immediately put the information into the computer. We ask the parent for three choices of schools. If the parent does not know the school system and the schools available we discuss them with the parent at this point.

Based on information available at the center, the PIC staff attempts to describe the various school programs and informs the parent of the correlation between appropriate program and academic success. This information is of course only as good as the ability and motivation of school staff to provide an accurate description of what their schools can provide and for which pupils their programs will be especially appropriate. It requires also that parents be helped to become aware of what they should be looking for in a school.

Boston survey results (See Table 3.3) suggest that parent motivations in selecting a school are quite diverse, though it would be important to learn more precisely what parents understand by "academic program" or "school reputation." The importance given to the location of a school does not necessarily connote, in the context of urban life, a preference for a school located nearby; the primary considerations of location, at least for a middle and high school pupils, are probably the perception of the safety of the area in which a school is located, and the availability of transportation, not the physical distance of the school from the place of residence.

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## Table 3-3

### Important in Selecting Boston Schools[1]

| Parents of pupils entering | Gr 6 | % | Gr 9 | % |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| academic program | 80 | 57 | 124 | 55 |
| school location | 61 | 43 | 94 | 42 |
| school reputation | 57 | 40 | 86 | 38 |
| discipline procedures | 41 | 29 | 48 | 21 |
| teachers/principals | 36 | 26 | 43 | 19 |
| parent involvement | 28 | 20 | 40 | 18 |
| school climate | 22 | 16 | 36 | 16 |
| before/after school programs | 18 | 13 | 35 | 16 |
| other reason | 7 | 5 | 12 | 5 |
| total responses | 141 | | 224 | |

Special education placement presents various problems when documentation is lacking. If a need is perceived, staff may ask parents if the child ever received extra help in math or reading, or spent a significant time out of the regular classroom. If there is reason to believe that a child has a physical or emotional disability, the staff will make the appropriate referral.

If the family uses a language other than English at home, the PIC arranges for a language assessment to determine the dominant language of the child and whether he or she should initially be assigned to a bilingual program.

Parents may also be given information about options outside of the local school system, but there is no formal process to do so in the various PICs. Often this information is given only if requested. Centers may give also information about after-school programs, day care, private education (reported by one center), and the Metco Program under which urban minority pupils from Boston and Springfield may enroll in suburban schools.

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[1]Wehrung, 12.

Much time is spent explaining the realities of the choice system, that there is no guarantee of the first or second choice.[1]   Each center must deal with the assignment limitations set by racial imbalance policies, by programmatic offerings, transportation, sibling placement, class and school size and seat availability.   Boston parents responding to a survey question agreed overwhelmingly (93 percent) that they understood the process of choosing schools as explained by PIC staff, and 94 percent reported that they were satisfied with the help provided, against 2 percent who were not satisfied.[2]

Our interviews determined that staff were well-prepared to give these sometimes technical and delicate explanations.  The Lowell PIC staff is very familiar with the voluntary desegregation plan and the educational improvement plan which clearly delineates the school choice and assignment process. Fall River closely correlates written information with the verbal explanation.   Springfield explains the point system used to allocate seats in over-subscribed schools, weighing space availability, race and gender balance, proximity to home, and sibling preference if there is an older child in the school.

PIC staff typically report that they avoid suggesting what is best for a particular child; however, gentle hints may be given when parents are obviously confused or factors clearly dictate that one choice may serve a child more appropriately than another.   The Lawrence PIC gives the example of matching a child with a school which may fulfill his/her social and academic needs:

> Sometimes, for example, when a parent tells us that their child is shy or needs extra help we will try to suggest a school with the lowest number of students enrolled.   We remember the case of a young child from Puerto Rico who was traumatized with the move to Massachusetts.   We were able to place the child in a school with a counselor in order to best help the child adjust to life here.

Lowell has similarly made suggestions based on parent and child need:

> We do make suggestions based on what the parents have told us about the child's needs.  If parent wants a particular setting based on size, a cafeteria or a school yard, sometimes particular programs are suggested.  We will guide a parent in this decision making process. . .. However, there is no attempt to make suggestions based on the needs of an individual school for more students.  The only needs that we can take into account are those of the family.

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[1] The proportion of those indicating choices who receive their first choice is very high, however, as described in the first section of this report.

[2] Wehrung, 13.

Boston's High School Zone PIC makes suggestions in the manner of informing parents of available programs that may not be well-advertised. Boston's East Zone PIC recommends sites that will serve a particular child's needs through available seating and programmatic offerings. The Boston survey of parents found that 67 percent of the 2,974 who responded to the question whether PIC staff had encouraged them to consider more than one schools reported that they had.[1]

Fall River staff reported that they would actively suggest a setting that provides day care, extended day programs or access for handicapped children whose educational experience will be enhanced by inclusion.

Most centers try not to make suggestions based on a school's need for applicants, in most cases the assignment officer is located in a different office. PICs try to let parents know about worthy programs which are undersubscribed, or are perceived as undesirable because of location. Other suggestions may be based on location, whether a school is based near to home or the caretaker, the safety of the neighborhood, sibling placement and access to transportation.

Lowell and Fall River will not ask a parent to reconsider their options if the school desired is not available because all available spaces have already been taken. PIC staff in Boston's East Zone, Boston's High School Zone, and Springfield reported that they encourage disappointed parents to visit other schools, review their options, look carefully at a child's academic needs and consider the program offerings still available.

*Parent Information Materials*

Materials that can be found in the various PICs are developed through a collaboration of the PIC staff, school staff, parent advocates, the business and university partners of many schools, department heads and administration. These same groups, through feedback, determine what connotes a fair description of each school. The PIC staff has the final say on what will be utilized within a particular center. Most materials are written; there is limited audio and visual material.

Parents are polled concerning material acceptability and usefulness at the conclusion of the registration process in some centers through exit surveys; in other cases, the citywide parent councils set up under the school choice policy review the materials. The information about each school will include academic program details and expectations, physical features, educational theme, photographs, children's drawing and sample schoolwork, etc. There may also be letters from parents with children presently in the school.

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[1]Wehrung, 13.

Support services are part of the information package. The PIC does not generally have information on discipline policy; however; some centers maintain copies of school policies.

There are specific areas that are not presently included in the PIC's domain, but could perhaps be addressed successfully through the empathy and understanding the PICs show in their interaction with parents, if time and resources permitted. Parents of disadvantaged backgrounds need workshops to help them learn the process of inclusion within the school system. They also need clear instruction on how to avoid low-level tracking of their children, and it cannot be assumed that parents automatically have this knowledge.

### Parent Involvement

Most PICs address the issue of parent involvement on an informal basis. Parents are given information on parent advisory councils. Boston East Zone, Lowell and Fall River provide workshops on effective parenting. Efforts are not standard from center to center. However, parent support is encouraged as demonstrated by the following statement by Springfield PIC staff:

> We provide support for parent councils. One of our community outreach counselors is assigned to help them disseminate information and also serves as a link to the school department. Also, we are in the process of hiring an additional home school liaison person who will work with the parent advisory councils.

The Boston High School Zone PIC informs parents that:

> There are already established groups at the school level that they can become part of. We emphasize that it is very important to become involved in a teenager's life, that a consistent involvement with the school is necessary.

Most centers have limited access to crisis intervention. Some do, however, provide limited mediation between parents and the schools; conferences are at times scheduled with principals, guidance counselors, teachers or outside agencies.

PICs have collaborative relationships with community agencies. The Boston PICs has post-secondary partnerships with the University of Massachusetts and Boston College. Community linkages include the Boston Housing Authority and Boston Partners in Education.

Fall River has relationships with the Head Start program, all area pre-schools, the Housing Authority, the City Census Bureau, the local anti-poverty program, area pediatricians and child care centers. Staff of the Boston PICs visit every Head Start

program each year for an informational session with parents, and then return to most for on-site registration.

In Lawrence, schools are very fortunate to have a great deal of support from the businesses and colleges in the area. Many businesses have adopted schools and helped financially as well as with volunteer readers and painters. For example, the James F. Leonard Magnet School is partnered with Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Phillips Academy, Lawrence General Hospital, and AT&T. These institutions provide health career information, tutoring and other valuable math, science and life skills.

The Lowell PIC reports extensive support from the University of Lowell, Middlesex Community College and the Citywide Parents Council, while the Boston schools have hundreds of partnerships with higher education, cultural institutions, and businesses.

Through the school volunteers program, Springfield has developed a successful program with the community. Some businesses have literally adopted schools which has led to mentoring students, sharing of facilities and donations of educational materials and computers.

Despite extensive use of community institutions and resources, however, we did not gain the impression that PICs were as instrumental in forming positive linkages with the world beyond the school system as some of their staff would like. In general, they seem overwhelmed with the challenges that walk through their doors each day and lack the resources or the clear mandate to attempt to meet all of the needs of parents or to provide on-going support for the relationship among families, communities and schools.

This should not be taken as a criticism of the staff themselves; they are stretched too thin to meet all of the needs that present themselves. Boston PIC staff, for example, counseled over thirty thousand parents during the 1991-92 school year, and the numbers are up in 1992-93, through four centers with from 3 to 6 staff members (some part-time) each. The development of family centers in a number of Boston, Lowell, Springfield and other schools (some affiliated with the League of Schools Reaching Out) and the increasing emphasis of the Chapter 1 program in these cities upon parent support activities, will supplement the work of parent information centers, as will the new Whole Village Project to develop family/community partnerships and influence public policy in support of such partnerships.[1] These efforts should be coordinated effectively to overcome the fragmentation of services and of communities so characteristic of urban life.

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[1]The League of Schools Reaching Out and the Whole Village Project are activities of the Institute for Responsive Education, one of the participants in the Center on Families, Communities, Schools and Children's Learning.

In addition to responding to the questions included in the interview format, PIC staff took the opportunity of the study to raise other concerns that they judged important to an effective parent information and counseling effort as part of a school choice process.

(1)  There is a need to fund transportation adequately if school choice is to be real for all parents.   Several cities have had to cut back or eliminate such transportation as a result of a fiscal crisis in 1990-91.   Although choice exists, the result is less than realistic if a parent cannot transport the child personally.   As a PIC staff member in Lawrence told us,

> I would like to add that true school choice can only be achieved with
> money for transportation.  More parents would select a school outside
> of their neighborhood if transportation were provided.

(2)   There is also some concern about PIC legitimacy.   Some staff expressed concern that PICs are neither fully a part of the school systems which they serve -- helping parents to make effective decisions for their children is somehow not perceived as being part of the "real work" of schools -- nor fully independent.

At times there is a struggle to work with the various schools, and incorporation within the system or a closer working relationship might enhance the working process of the PIC.   Funded almost 100 percent with "soft" state funds, PICs may not be a priority for their school systems.   As one PIC staff member put it,

> I hope that this survey will be beneficial in realizing PIC legitimacy so that
> we can add to our services and staff in order to benefit the school
> population.  One of the things that annoy me, in this particular office, is that
> there are far too many part-time people.  Our offices need to be open from
> eight in the morning until eight at night in order to serve the community
> properly.  Issues of funding are paramount:  additional staff, particularly
> bilingual staff, are desperately needed to make contact within the
> community.  Positions need to be full-time, centers need longer operating
> hours.  There is not sufficient time to communicate with parents who must
> work during the operating hours of most centers.

On the other hand, PIC staff are aware that some perceive them as insufficiently independent of their school systems to be able to give impartial information.   While resenting the suggestion that they ever seek to manipulate parents into making particular choices, PIC staff concede that they are not in a position to give negative assessments of schools; at most, they can "damn with faint praise."

Center staff were asked to identify any accomplishments of which they were particularly proud; this is what they told us:

> We are most proud of our reputation. We have served over 10,000 parents in less than a calendar year without one official complaint. . . Parents plus information equals success. [Boston East Zone]

> I am most proud of my staff's awareness of the community and its needs, our creating a caring environment in which a parent can come and ask a question about anything and receive an answer. We actually make a difference. There is nothing like the feeling experienced when you help a parent solve a problem or see their expression when they receive the school of choice. [Lawrence]

> I am really very proud of the fact that the center has served as a focus for beginning parental involvement in the schools. I am proud of the fact that when you talk about the PIC that people no longer become belligerent, angry and upset. Most know at this point that they are treated with dignity and respect. [Lowell]

> The participation of the schools, staff, and the community is tremendous. I am proud of our caring Parent Information Center Staff who have given beyond the normal work day to make this endeavor a success. [Springfield]

> I am most proud that parents feel comfortable enough to revisit our center. Through our television work, we have been able to promote the use of all centers. It is our hope that the same sort of focus that is sometimes spent on negative aspects of the school system might be refocussed on our positive activities. [Boston High School Zone]

> We are most proud of extending the principles of equity and equal access to all parents and students entering the system. [Fall River]

## Summing Up

The parent information centers have provided a setting where parents can feel free to question and articulate their concerns around choosing a school for their child. They have also provided the outreach necessary to contact parents who typically do not feel comfortable corresponding with school officials around the issue of educational access because of past experience or a belief that the system will not work to their benefit. Most parent information center staff are themselves parents or grandparents of children in the local school system, and serve as models of

knowledgeable participation. PIC directors are in general either local parents or teachers -- or both!

Parent information center staff cannot actually choose the school for the parent or students. Center staff consciously make a great effort not to guide the decision making process of the parent. There are standard reasons for this: the right to make a choice is a defined freedom and parents who perceive that an inadequate selection has been made for them can react angrily. However, parents who truly have no concept of the system they are entering might benefit from some direct, gentle counseling. A truly informed choice might involve direct assistance from staff when parents are making decisions that may hurt their child academically or socially.

A more extensive use of workshops structured around the school selection process, showing parents how to make informed choices and to later become involved in the school, would provide uninformed parents with skills and information that would benefit their children.

Despite decreased funding and overwhelming workloads, the parent information center continues to provide information to parents in a non-threatening, positive manner. Parents are encouraged to ask questions, to discuss their fears and apprehension, to feel that there is a friend in a sometimes alien environment. Staff workers make every attempt to see that parents actually understand the selection they make, gently guiding parents who are unable to read and write without embarrassment.

Increased neighborhood efforts and non-traditional ways of spreading information have enhanced the process for parents that are typically hard to reach. Each center works closely with local housing authorities, churches, and homeless shelters in the necessary languages so that children can be registered for school in a timely manner. There is also the attempt to make the school a stabilizing force for children who move frequently; children will stay in the same school regardless of address.

Parents are given help in securing documentation; problem patterns are discerned and provisions made for their relief when possible. PICs are sensitive to the realities of living accommodations, they realize that many immigrants are living illegally with families and do not jeopardize their status by requesting documentation such as rent receipts that might put them or their host at risk.

PICs are making attempts to coordinate services with other community agencies, such as clinics, notary publics, and pre-schools, in order to facilitate the process for newly arrived immigrants. Springfield envisions the location of a medical center next door, so that as problems with immunization arise, parents and children can be served quickly.

Most PICs are centrally located, convenient to public transportation. They are currently operating between the hours of 9 and 5, which all agree are not adequate. All centers spoke of the frustration with current schedules: Many working parents cannot come to the centers during these times and it creates a hardship. However, the limitations of funding are real; there is no money to increase the work day or extend the time through the weekend.

Before PICs existed, many parents who were not aware of early registration practices did not register until the first week of school. This has drastically improved across the state, most late registrants are parents who are new to the country or those who come from communities that do not have PICS. Because most PICs are located in cities and tend to attract the same population, many people who transfer have been introduced to the concept and actively look for a PIC.

PICs form a port of entry for incoming students and parents, and the warm atmosphere that they seek to create doubtless contributes to a perception that the schools themselves will be an accepting and welcoming. PIC staff are trained to give support and understanding not only in the actual selection of schools, but in mediating areas of concern between the parent and school. Parents are given advice on how to proceed when experiencing difficulty.

PICs make parents knowledgeable of the process to use when they are unhappy with school selection results. They are informed early on about the appeal process if a first or second choice has not been realized. When parents do not receive one of their three choices, some PICs make a point of telephoning them to convey the information personally to soften the feelings of disappointment and to suggest alternatives.

School systems should consider expanding PICs to include those services that include parents in the decision-making hierarchy of the schools. This effort requires real training, which the staff at the PIC is able to give. At present it is not possible for center staff to follow up on what happens once the child is in the school.

If parent information centers were in a position to support parents throughout their dealings with the schooling of their children, more students might experience academic success. At present, inner-city parents experience difficulty when choosing academic subjects for their children (if they are even aware that such choices are being made), when negotiating with teachers and administrators, and when becoming involved in the life and work of the school. Teachers frequently complain that parents are not sufficiently "involved," but most urban school systems have no effective support system for such involvement.

We should not be too quick to accept that "ordinary" parents cannot make sound choices among the schools available, nor to dismiss the possibility that the

process of doing so -- with appropriate support -- will in fact strengthen them as parents.[1]

Nor should we take lightly the human significance of being allowed and encouraged to take responsibility for decisions about education. As John Coons points out,

> [t]he right to form families and to determine the scope of their children's practical liberty is for most men and women the primary occasion for choice and responsibility. One does not have to be rich or well placed to experience the family. The opportunity over a span of fifteen or twenty years to attempt the transmission of one's deepest values to a beloved child provides a unique arena for the creative impulse. Here is the communication of ideas in its most elemental mode. Parental expression, for all its invisibility to the media, is an activity with profound First Amendment implications.[2]

If, as some argue, there are "drugged parents who won't and probably can't make informed choices for their children,"[3] that is all the more reason to create systems of universal choice that create pressure to improve all schools, not just offer magnet schools to satisfy middle class parents and keep their children in the school system. After all, what is the superior merit of an assignment, for the children of neglectful parents, based upon neighborhood residence alone?

No, the risk that a few parents will make ill-informed choices or fail to choose altogether should not carry much weight. While society is not always successful in protecting the children of neglectful parents, the adequacy of schooling -- since it is inherently public even if in a non-governmental school -- is relatively simple to oversee. We should perhaps be more concerned about the children who suffer today from neglectful public schools, in systems in which placement decisions are made by lines on a map.

The experience of parent information centers in Massachusetts, imperfect as it undoubtedly is and as its staff themselves would insist, demonstrates that it is possible to create responsible structures within which parents can obtain information in a supportive atmosphere and -- perhaps most important -- sit down with someone not altogether unlike themselves for a discussion of what will best meet the needs of their children. That is in itself no small accomplishment.

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[1]Charles L. Glenn, "Letting Poor Parents Act Responsibly," The Journal of Family and Culture II, 3, 1987.

[2]John E. Coons, "Intellectual Liberty and the Schools," Journal of Law, Ethics & Public Policy 1, 1985, 511.

[3]Abigail Thernstrom, "Is Choice a Necessity?" The Public Interest 101, Fall 1990, 130.

# 4. What Parents Told Us About Making School Choices[1]

Two surveys were used to supplement the information obtained from personal interviews and learn more about parents' perspectives on the school choice process, particularly in the area of sources of information. Both surveys were administered during the spring of 1992 exclusively to parents registering students for kindergarten.

The first was a telephone survey, with interviews conducted by researchers and Parent Information Center (PIC) staff trained by the researchers. Non-English speaking parents were interviewed by PIC staff in their own language. Parents were asked how many times they had visited the PIC, what activities they had participated in at the PIC, how sure they were of their first choice school before their first PIC visit, whether they had visited or had information about achievement test scores for the schools they requested, and their reasons for choosing the schools they requested.

An open-ended format was used for some questions (e.g., to ask those who had a first choice before visiting the PIC how they had selected the school). Appendix A contains a sample of the survey form. With a target of interviewing 50 parents in each of three cities -- Fall River, Springfield, and Lowell -- interviewers made calls from lists of kindergarten parents until they had reached the desired number.

The second was a one-page written survey, distributed by PIC staff and completed by the parents. It was only available in English, although in some cases, PIC staff may have helped non-English speaking parents supply responses. After asking parents for brief information about themselves (e.g., whether they were enrolling their oldest child, their home language, how long they had lived in the city), parents were asked to rate the importance of eleven sources of information. They were also asked to rank the importance of their top three reasons for selecting their first choice school. Appendix B contains a sample of the survey form.

Surveys were submitted from Fall River (262 responses), Lowell (100 responses), Springfield (56 responses), and Lawrence (30 responses). Because of the large differences among cities in the number of responses and the variation among cities in responses, these responses are examined separately by city.

It is important to note that for both surveys, no attempt was made to obtain a random sample of parents. In both cases, the nature of the survey was exploratory and the results should be interpreted in that context. The tables in Appendix C (telephone interviews) and Appendix D (written survey) contain the results separately by city and combined for all respondents.

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# Telephone Interviews

The parents reached by the telephone interviewers were about evenly divided with respect to whether they were enrolling their oldest child in kindergarten. Overall, 57 percent had completed high school and 58 percent were interviewed in English. A higher proportion in Springfield and Fall River, and a lower proportion in Lowell, had completed high school and were interviewed in English. (See Table C-1.)

## Activities at the PIC

About 60 percent of the respondents from Lowell and Fall River and 36 percent from Springfield had visited the PIC more than once. Overall, about half the respondents had visited the PIC more than once. In addition, parents interviewed in languages other than English were more likely than those interviewed in English to have visited the PIC more than once. (See Table C-2.)

Parents were asked to report which activities they participated in when they visited the PIC. The highest percentage (58 percent) said they had discussed the choice process and slightly more than half (52 percent) had discussed particular schools. Parents enrolling their oldest child and those who had not graduated from high school were more likely to report both of these activities, and those interviewed in Spanish were more likely to have discussed the choice process (See Figure 1). (Interviews were also conducted in Portuguese, Khmer, and Vietnamese, but not in sufficient numbers to report the results separately.)

Forty-one percent of the parents had looked at materials about schools at the PIC. Only 13 percent said they learned about other sources of information at the PIC. (See Tables C-3 and C-4.)

## Other aspects of the choice process

Three quarters of the parents said that they were "pretty sure" of their first choice request before they visited the PIC for the first time. The proportion was slightly larger for those not registering their oldest child, for those who had completed high school, and for those interviewed in English. In contrast, only about half of those parents interviewed in Spanish were pretty sure of their first choice before visiting the PIC. (See Tables C-5 and C-6.)

An open-ended format was used to ask parents who were pretty sure about their first choice school before they visited the PIC how they learned about the school. The vast majority (about 80 percent) of these responses mentioned either a sibling attending the school; friends, neighbors, and relatives; or proximity to home. A few parents mentioned receiving information and recommendations from education

76

83

# Figure 1: Discussion Topics at Parent Information Center

## The Choice Process



## Particular Schools

84
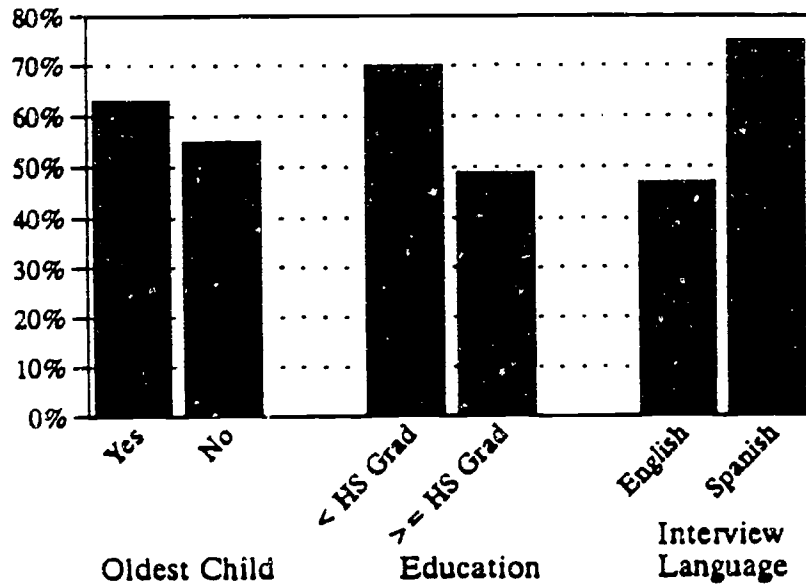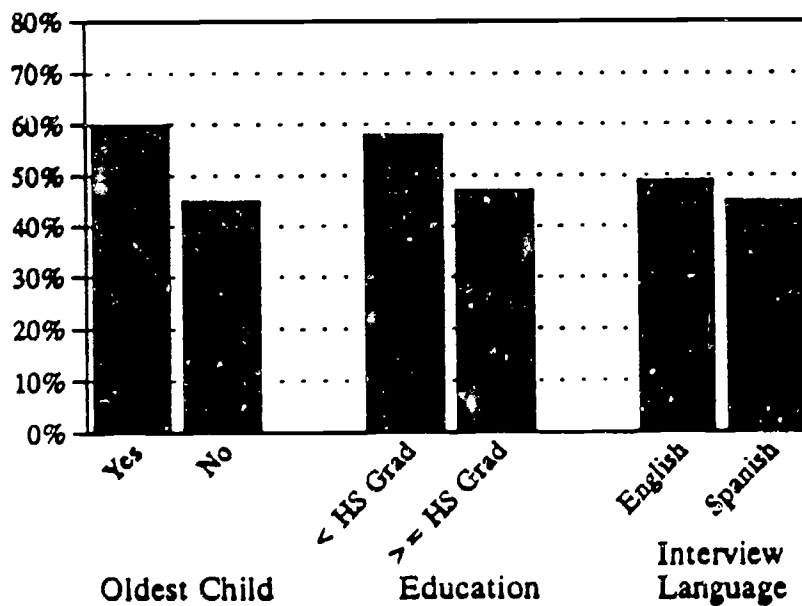
professionals such as a teacher or principal, or staff at pre-school programs; a few mentioned school visits.

Forty-two percent of the parents visited their first choice school during the selection process. However, among parents interviewed in Spanish -- those least likely to know their choice before visiting the PIC -- 59 percent visited their first choice school. Fewer than a quarter of the parents visited other schools that they eventually requested. (See Tables C-7 and C-8.)

Fewer than a quarter of the parents had information about achievement test scores for their first choice school. Again, parents interviewed in Spanish were more likely to have achievement test information (43 percent). Almost none had such information for other schools they requested. (See Tables C-9 and C-10.)

## Reasons for school requests

Half of the parents said that they selected their first choice school on the basis of the teachers, and 57 percent said they selected the school for the program offered. Forty-two percent said that they chose the school for the principal. Parents not enrolling their oldest child and those who had completed high school were more likely to respond that they selected because of the principal. Smaller percentages reported community service, parent involvement, and special needs as reasons for selecting their first choice school. (See Tables C-11 and C-12.)

A wide variety of special needs was mentioned, including need for special help with hearing and speech problems, shyness, special education, bilingual education, Chapter 1 math, enrichment, individual attention, and the child's desire to go to the school.

However, it is important to note that the options of nearness to home and other child attending the school were not explicitly offered during the interview. When asked what else was important for their decision, many of the parents mentioned closeness to home, siblings attending the school, and recommendations of others.

A few of these parents elaborated their responses, by adding that -- in addition to being close to home, recommended by others, or the schoc. their other child attends -- the school is well-organized; there is a small ratio of children to teachers and a close-knit atmosphere; staff encourage the children; a bilingual education program is available; there are two kindergarten classes; and the child wants to attend the school.

Other responses included: good environment, order and discipline, security guards and bilingual staff, bilingual program, and a new building with many services.

# Written Survey

Overall, about a third of the respondents to the survey were registering their oldest child in kindergarten. About half had lived in the city where the PIC is located for more than ten years, and two thirds of the respondents were white. Table D-1 shows the characteristics of survey respondents for each city separately.

## Importance of Information Sources

Three sources of information -- neighbors, friends, and relatives; school visits; and sibling experiences at the school -- were among the four most frequently cited as "very important" in each of the cities participating in the survey.

In Lawrence, Springfield, and Fall River, other sources frequently cited as very important were PIC staff, school profiles, brochures and flyers, and principal or staff presentations.

Relatively fewer parents reported media advertisements, newspaper articles, and informational meetings to be very important sources of information, although these may have led them to other sources that were very important. It is clear from Table D-2 that      question was interpreted differently in Lowell than in the other three cities, with few parents reporting more than one source as very important.

Although the overall pattern is similar, there were variations in the responses by city, as shown in Figure 2. For example, the PIC staff and school profiles were cited as very important by a larger percentage of parents in Lawrence; brochures were less important in Fall River. (Lowell is not included because the different interpretation, discussed above, suggests that Lowell's results are not comparable to those from the other cities.)

Tables D-3 through D-5 provide results on the importance of the more widely used sources of information broken down according to whether parents were registering their oldest child, home language, and whether or not they cited proximity to home or attendance by siblings as reasons for their first choice selection. This last breakdown was included because of the possibility that parents who did not select these reasons would be more likely to take advantage of more organized opportunities for information.

In most cases, there was little difference in the importance of different sources of information related to home language and reason for school choice.

# Figure 2: Percent of Respondents Citing Information Sources as Very Important

## Springfield
### n=56



Information Sources

## Fall River
### n=262



Information Sources
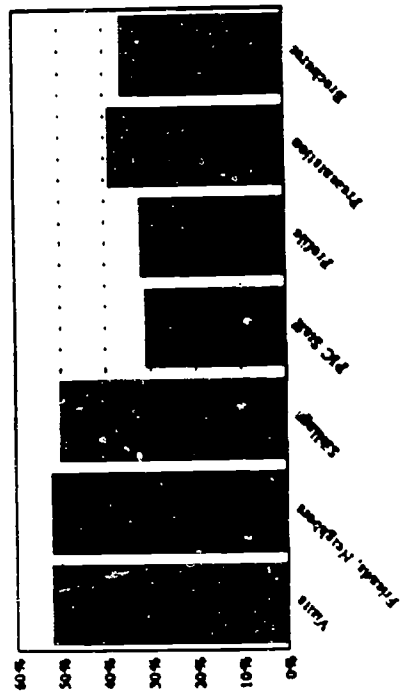
## Lawrence
### n=30
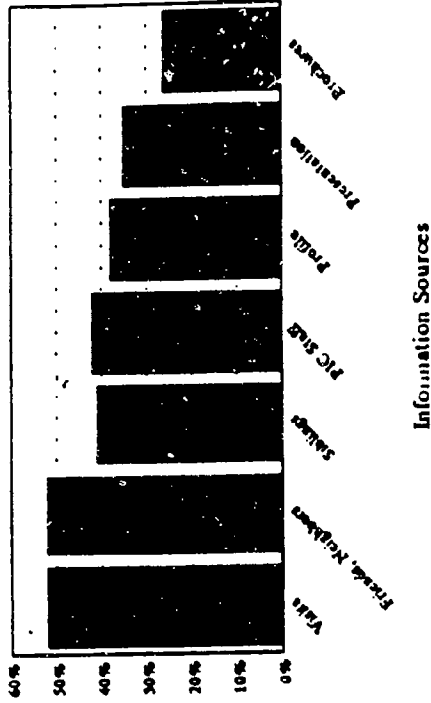


Information Sources
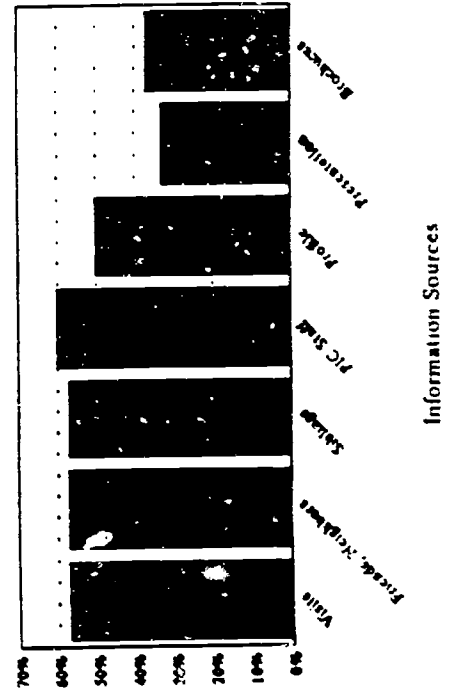
Figure 3 shows the importance of different sources of information for parents in Fall River broken down according to whether they were registering their oldest child. Parents registering their oldest child are more likely to report activities not taking place in schools -- friends and neighbors, the PIC staff, school profiles, and brochures -- as very important.

In contrast, those not registering their oldest are more likely to cite siblings, and activities taking place in schools -- visits and presentations -- as very important. However, with the exception of sibling experiences (where responses of those registering an oldest child must be interpreted as inconsistent data), these differences are not dramatic.

The largest difference is for the importance of friends and neighbors, with 61 percent of those registering their oldest child and 45 percent of the others citing friends and neighbors as a very important source of information. There were not enough parents registering an oldest child in the other cities to report these results.

## Reasons for school requests

Parents were asked on the survey to rank their top three reasons for selecting their first choice school. In many cases, however, the respondents indicated three reasons but did not rank them. For this reason, we have reported the percent of parents who selected each of the reasons, regardless of their rank.

Not surprisingly, the largest percentage of parents in each city cited proximity to home as a reason for selecting their first choice school. For all cities, the second most frequently cited reason was having another child in the school; third in importance were the schools' educational program and reputation.

None of the other options, which are shown in Table D-6, were cited by as many as 20 percent of the parents in any city. As Table D-7 shows, Fall River parents enrolling their oldest child were equally likely to cite nearness to home, and slightly more likely to cite the school's educational program and reputation than other parents.

# Figure 3: Percent Citing Information Sources as "Very Important"
## Fall River
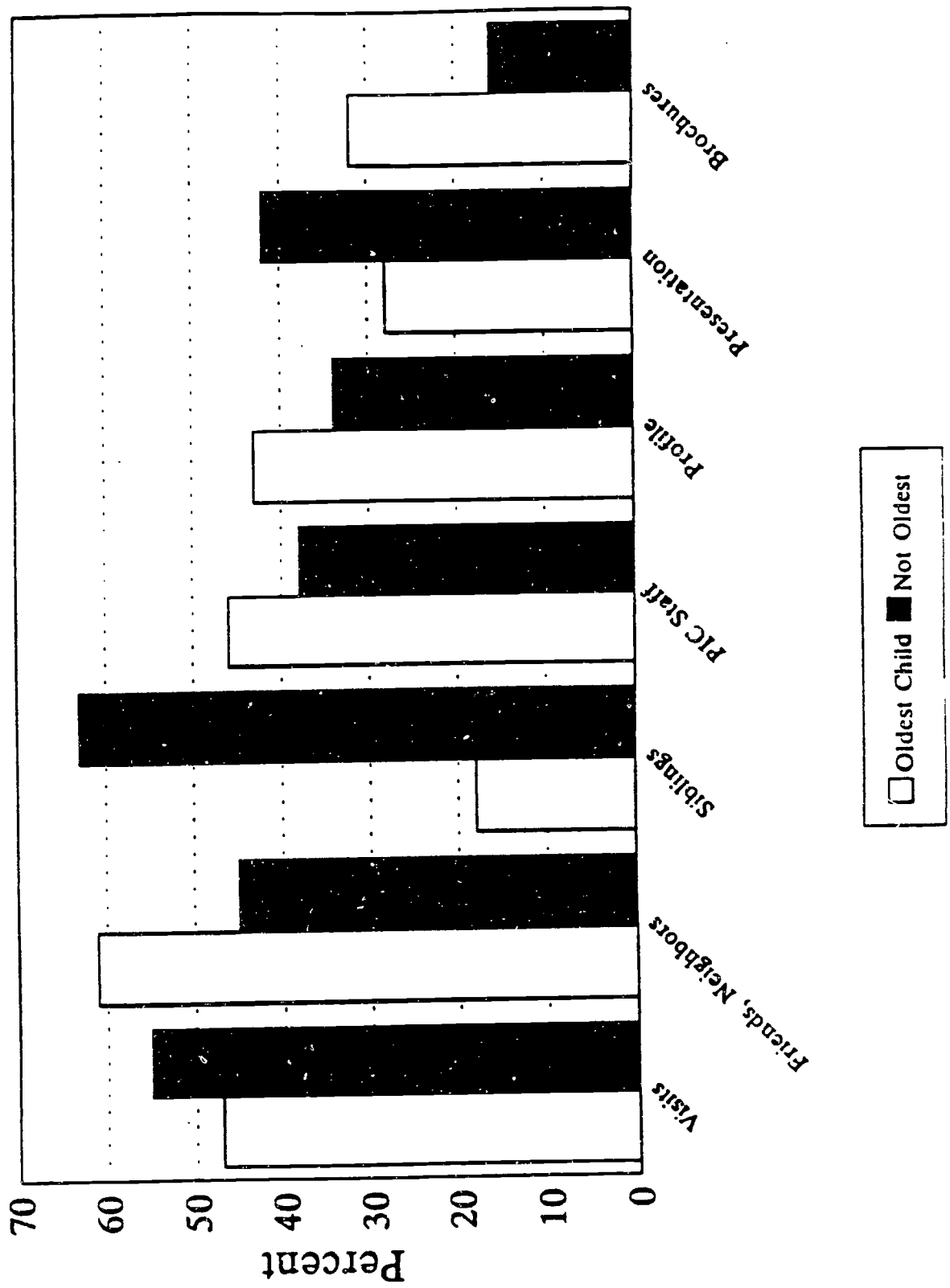
# Discussion

Results from both surveys point to the importance of both informal and organized sources of information about schools. Although it is clear that recommendations of friends, neighbors, and relatives -- as well as experience with one's own children -- are very important sources of information about schools, the findings also show that for large proportions of parents, school visits, PIC staff, presentations, and printed materials are also very important.

Providing information has often been cited as a key element of school choice plans by OERI and by the National Committee for Citizens in Education, and most recently by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. Particularly if school choice is to promote equity in education successfully, good information about schools must be available to all, not only to the more privileged parents.[1]

In Massachusetts, a concerted effort is being made through the PIC to provide information about school choice to disadvantaged and minority parents. Survey responses reported here suggest that the PICs are successful at accomplishing this goal.

Respondents who had not graduated from high school and those interviewed in Spanish were in fact more likely than others to learn about the choice process and discuss particular schools at the PICs. The same is true for parents enrolling their oldest children.

Although this work did not focus on the reasons why parents request particular schools, responses related to this topic suggest an interesting area for further study. As expected, sibling attendance and proximity to home were the most frequently cited reasons when they were included on a list of options. These reasons are often interpreted as reflecting the importance of convenience and other considerations that are not primarily educational.

However, responses to open-ended questions suggest that in many cases parents do not view these reasons in isolation from education-related factors that also contribute to their preference for the school.

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[1]Bamber, C., Berla, N., Henderson, A., and Rioux, W., Public School Choice: An Equal Chance for All? C·lumbia, Maryland: National Committee for Citizens in Education, 1990; The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, School Choice, Princeton, New Jersey, 1992; Office of Educational Research and Improvement, U.S. Department of Education, Getting Started: How Choice Can Renew Your Public Schools, Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1992.

Some parents who cited proximity to home or school attendance by another child as reasons for requesting schools supplemented their responses with education-related reasons, such as the school staff or atmosphere. These factors apparently work in combination with convenience to lead parents to request the school another child attends or the school closest to home.

# 5. Concluding Remarks

In the first section of this report, we presented evidence that parent choice of schools can be organized in a way that is fair to low-income families -- at least relative to school assignments on the basis of segregated neighborhoods -- and that reduces racial and economic segregation. We discussed the power of choice to improve the quality of all schools over time, and provided evidence to support the growing support for "harnessing the power of parental choice, competition and innovation to radically restructure our schools, while retaining their essentially public character."[1]

These positive effects, we argued, can be achieved only if choice is organized carefully to assure fairness, integration, and school improvement. Thus we do **not** concur with those who believe that unregulated choice will, of and by itself, lead to better education for all. As Osborne and Gaebler put it, "structuring the market to achieve a public purpose is in fact the opposite of leaving matters to the 'free market' -- it is a form of intervention in the market."[2]

> By setting the rules, governments can structure the marketplace so it meets public needs. But because public agencies give up direct control over service producers, load shedding reduces government's ability to hold firms accountable. If customers do not have the information or leverage necessary to hold them accountable -- principally by threatening to switch to a competitor -- load shedding can leave them vulnerable.[3]

We described the key aspects of such a responsible system of parent choice of schools, as illustrated by experience in urban school systems in Massachusetts.

In the second section of the report, we reviewed the results of earlier research on public attitudes toward school choice, and on the motivations of parents in selecting schools. Studies were described from Scotland, the Netherlands, and France as well as from various American states and cities, including some in Massachusetts.

These studies show strong support for allowing parents to choose the schools their children will attend. Significantly, the support is stronger among parents than non-parents, among women than among men, among younger respondents than among older respondents, among black and Hispanic respondents than among white

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[1]Ted Kolderie, Robert Leman, and Charles Moskos, "Educating America: A New Compact for Opportunity and Citizenship," in Mandate for Change, edited by Will Marshall and Martin Schram, New York: Berkley Books 1993, 132

[2]David Osborne and Ted Gaebler, Reinventing Government, Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley 1992, 283.

[3]Osborne and Gaebler, 86.

respondents, and among city-dwellers than among suburbanites. This might suggest that the closer the respondent is to the actual experience of children in schools, and particularly in city schools, the more likely she or he is to support policies allowing school choice.

The studies of the reasons for selection of particular schools indicate that parents choose for a complex of reasons, among which educational quality (however assessed) is by no means insignificant but does not have the paramount importance that might be assigned to it by policy theorists. Ballion's concept of the "global" impression of a school is helpful, and suggests that parents may take a more realistic view of education as comprising many experiences that cannot readily be measured by research and evaluation. For example, an urban parent who chooses a school with inferior test scores because she is convinced that her child will find it a safe environment is not necessarily making an unwise or inappropriate decision. Similarly, a parent who weighs heavily the extracurricular activities provided may be taking a broader -- and wiser -- view of what is important in a school and how the education of adolescents really works than do many policy-makers and researchers.[1]

The third section of the report describes how six parent information centers in Massachusetts cities function. We contend that an effective system of parent information, including individual counseling, is essential in an urban environment.

Parents need reliable information about the quality of each school, and particular efforts must be made to get that information to low-income, poorly-educated parents.[2]

The key to the effectiveness of parent information centers in Massachusetts cities implementing parental choice of schools is that they are tied directly into the process of registering for school and receiving an assignment. As an integral part of the process by which the parents of each student seek and obtain admission to a school, they are in a position to function in a hands-on manner through counseling and support at the point of decision.

It is for this reason, certainly, that some critics have questioned whether the information provided can possibly be objective, and whether the PICs seek to manipulate parents to make decisions that are not in the best interest of their children. We believe that the account provided, above, about the counseling provided by the PICs that took part in this study, and the design of the assignment process itself, suggest that parents make decisions that are at least reasonably well informed, and that they are not manipulated as they make these decisions.

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[1]See the discussion in Edward A. Wynne and Kevin Ryan, Reclaiming Our Schools, New York: Merril 1993.
[2]Osborne and Gaebler, 102.

On the other hand, it remains a weakness of the parent information process in these cities that PIC staff are not in a position to offer critical judgments or damaging information about the various schools; at most, they can damn with faint praise. A more objective source of information, external to the school system, responsible for developing or overseeing the development of school information materials that would then be used by parent information centers and community groups, would have advantages in making the process more effective in holding schools accountable to those they are intended to serve.

Another weakness of the overall choice system is that the PICs offer a choice among limited options; there is nothing in the present system of school choice in Boston and other Massachusetts cities that facilitates the establishment of n:w schools that would compete with failing schools within the public system. There is thus an effective monopoly of publicly-funded schooling, a monopoly that the two state programs under which inter-district choice is possible are able to challenge in only a marginal way.

If an educational system were in place that made it easier for groups of teachers or others to start new schools -- as in the charter school components of the Massachusetts education reform bills[1] -- and for parents to select from a broader range of educational options, a parent information, counseling and assignment process with a broader and thus more independent scope would be needed. The parent information centers already in operation in sixteen Massachusetts cities would serve as models upon which more extensive efforts could be built. It is not difficult to imagine that a consortium of education providers in a geographical area, under varied sponsorship, could support a center for parent outreach, counseling and assignment on behalf of them all.

In the fourth section of the report we present the results of two surveys of parents who are clients of the parent information centers and have taken part in the process of selecting schools for their children.

Results from the surveys point to the importance of both informal and organized sources of information about schools. Although it is clear that recommendations of friends, neighbors, and relatives -- as well as experience with one's own children -- are very important sources of information about schools, the findings also show that for large proportions of parents, school visits, PIC staff, presentations, and printed materials are also very important.

The parent information centers, the surveys indicated, were especially important for the very groups that they had been set up to serve, those who do not by

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[1]Charter school legislation has been enacted in Minnesota, California, Georgia, and even in the Russian Federation.

other means have access to inside information on how the educational system functions. Respondents who had not graduated from high school and those interviewed in Spanish were more likely than others to learn about the choice process and discuss particular schools at the PICs. The same is true for parents enrolling their oldest children.

Although this work did not focus on the reasons why parents request particular schools, responses related to this topic suggest an interesting area for further study. As expected, sibling attendance and proximity to home were the most frequently cited as reasons when they were included on a list of options. These reasons are often interpreted as reflecting the importance of convenience and other considerations that are not primarily educational.

However, responses to open-ended questions suggest that in many cases parents do not view these reasons in isolation from education-related factors that also contribute to their preference for the school.

Some parents who cited proximity to home or school attendance by another child as reasons for requesting schools supplemented their responses with education-related reasons, such as the school staff or atmosphere. These factors apparently work in combination with convenience to lead parents to request the school another child attends or the school closest to home.


## The Next Stage

We are now engaged, in the third year of this five-year study of parent choice of schools, in carrying out two quite different projects that grow out of the work accomplished in the second year, and described above.

The first project is to look in some detail at how four public middle schools -- and perhaps one non-public school -- in Boston have responded to the choice process.

Principals have been asked:

*Have you any theory about why your school had difficulty, in the past, attracting parent applications?*

*What has been your strategy to change this? Has it required changes in the school? Have there been academic changes? Changes affecting the social support and climate of the school? Changes in relations with parents? Other changes?*

*Have you also made efforts to change how parents perceive the school?*

*Has outreach to elementary schools been an aspect of these efforts? Working with parent information centers? Do parents with children already in the school help?*

*What do you tell parents about how the school will help their children adjust to a middle school?*

*Are there any ideas along these lines that you would like to implement in the future?*

Other members of the staff have been asked:

*The principal has explained that the school has been making efforts to convince parents of the value of what the school offers. Could you talk a little bit about your own role in this process?*

*Have you seen results in the way the school works for its pupils?*

*What kind of feedback have you received from parents about the school?*

Parents of sixth grade (newly-admitted) pupils have been asked:

*What factors influenced the choices you made in selecting schools for the sixth grade?*

*What other information would have been helpful as you made a chool choice?*

*Has your perception of the school changed since your child started sixth grade?*

*What would you tell another parent who asked you about the school?*

These parents were asked to allow their sixth grade children to be interviewed. On a subsequent occasion, those pupils for whom informed consent forms were obtained were interviewed as a group, at the school. They were asked:

*What did you hear about the school before you came here? Did you help to choose the school? In what ways was the school what you expected, and in what ways different? What would you tell a fifth grader about choosing a middle school?*

The purpose of this study is to determine to what extent schools go through positive changes in order to respond to the "educational marketplace." Despite an enormous recent literature supporting or opposing choice as a way to bring pressure to

bear for school improvement, there is remarkably little evidence on what actually happens inside the schools when choice policies are implemented.

The second project in year 3 is a comparative study of the framework of regulation and deregulation within which "schools of choice" function in a number of American states and cities. The purpose of this study is to determine to what extent real school-level autonomy exists and thus in what ways schools can change in response to parental demand and to the professional insights of the school staff.

The questions asked by this study are, *How do state and school-system standards limit or encourage school diversity and choice, and how in turn do school diversity and choice affect the implementation of standards? How does the relationship between the two affect the education provided to low-income and racial/ethnic minority pupils?*

We will be seeking to provide answers to these important policy questions in our third-year report.

# APPENDIX A
## Telephone Survey

Hi, My name is _____. I would like to
speak to _____.

    IF NOT PRESENT (When is a good time for me to reach her or him?)
    Day _____        Time_____

IF PRESENT, THEN CONTINUE

I am calling from the Parent Information Center about your recent experience registering your
child for kindergarten. I am working with the Center on Families, Communities, Schools, and
Children's Learning and we are interested in finding out how you decided what schools to
request. I have a few questions about the process you went through to make your choice and
the type of information you used. This should take about 10 minutes. Do you have a few
minutes now?

    IF NOT (When is a good time for me to call back?)
    Day _____        Time_____


IF YES,


1.  About how many times have you visited the PIC since last September?

    _____ once

    _____ two to four times

    _____ more than four times


2.  Did you do any of the following at the PIC in addition to registering your child for
    kindergarten? (List each one separately by saying - Did you?)

        ____    Speak to PIC staff about the choice process

        ____    Speak to PIC staff about particular schools

        ____    Look at materials about particular schools

        ____    Learn about other ways to find out about schools

        ____    Anything else _____

        ____    (Person did not do any of the above)


A-1

3. Did you know which schools you wanted to request before you visited the PIC for the first time? (List each one separately by saying - Would you say you?)

_____ were pretty sure but I wanted to find out a little more.

_____ had some ideas but I wanted to find out a lot more.

_____ had no idea which schools to request when I first visited the PIC.

4. If you knew which school you wanted for your first choice, how did you learn about it?

_____

_____

_____

5. Before you made your requests, (list each one separately )

did you go to visit the school you requested as your first choice? In other words, did you go inside and talk to someone?

_____ yes     _____ no

did you visit the school you requested as your second choice?

_____ yes     _____ no

did you visit the school you requested as your third choice?

_____ yes     _____ no

did you visit any schools that you did not request?

_____ yes   how many? _____

_____ no

6. Did you have any information about how students performed on achievement tests at (list each one separately)

the school you requested as your first choice?

_____ yes        _____ no

the school you requested as your second choice?

_____ yes        _____ no

the school you requested as your third choice?

_____ yes        _____ no

7. Now I would like to know what you were thinking about when you decided which school to request as your first choice. Were any of the following things important for your decision? (list each one separately)

_____    particular teachers

_____    the school's program

_____    the school's principal

_____    community services available through the school

_____    parent involvement in the school

_____    special needs of your child

         what needs _____

_____    anything else _____

8. Is there anything about the schools you requested that you don't know and would like to know?

_____

_____

_____

A-3

9.  Is the child you just registered for kindergarten your oldest child?

____ yes       ____ no

10. IF PERSON HAS OLDER CHILD, THEN ASK,

How old are your older children?

___5     ___9        ___13         ___16 and over

___6     ___10       ___14

___7     ___11       ___15

___8     ___12       ___16

Do any of your other children go to the school you requested as your first choice right now.

___yes    ___no

THIS QUESTION IS FOR EVERYONE

11. How far in school did you go?

_____ no high school

_____ some high school

_____ high school graduate

_____ some college

_____ college graduate

_____ some other training

We would like to thank you for the time you contributed to this phone survey. The information you gave will help us to understand how parents choose schools. It will also help the parent information center serve families better. I want to thank you for taking out time to talk with me.

# APPENDIX B
## Written Survey

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05

05

# Kindergarten Registration Survey

1. Is the child you are currently registering for kindergarten your oldest child? _____yes _____no

2. How many children do you have in this school system? _____

3. How long have you lived in this city? _____

4. What is your race/ethnic group? (Circle the correct letter)

   a. Native American
   b. Asian
   c. Black/African American
   d. Hispanic
   e. White/Caucasian
   f. Other

5. Is there a language other than English spoken at home? (Circle the correct letter)

   a. No
   b. Spanish
   c. Portuguese
   d. Haitan Creole
   e. Other(pleasespecify)_____

   f. Vietnamese
   g. Khmer
   h. Cape Verdean

6. How important was information from the following sources for influencing your choice of a school? Check one answer of each line.

| | Very Important | Somewhat Important | Not Very Important | No Information From This Source |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| a. Brochure/Flyers | | | | |
| b. Parent Information Center (PIC) staff | | | | |
| c. Advertisements in the media | | | | |
| d. Newspaper articles | | | | |
| e. School profiles | | | | |
| f. Informational meetings (PTA, Church, Other Organization, etc.) | | | | |
| g. Neighbors, friends, and relatives | | | | |
| h. School visits | | | | |
| i. Sibling experience at school | | | | |
| j. My spouse's or my own experience at school | | | | |
| k. Presentation by principal or other school staff | | | | |
| l. Other _____ | | | | |

7. What are your reasons for choosing your first choice school? Please rank in order of importance. Choose up to 3 reasons, with 1 indicating the most important and 3 the least important.

   ___ near my home
   ___ near my job
   ___ near child care
   ___ like the school's neighborhood
   ___ the educational program
   ___ the school atmosphere
   ___ special needs services
   ___ transportation issues

   ___ hours of operation
   ___ educational style or philosophy
   ___ the principal
   ___ particular teachers
   ___ condition of building/facilities
   ___ another child in the school
   ___ language services

   ___ reputation of school
   ___ size of school
   ___ racial mix
   ___ discipline
   ___ child's friend in school
   ___ other (specify)_____

# APPENDIX C

## Table C-1: Characteristics of Survey Respondents by City

| Characteristic | | City | | | |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| | | SPR n=56 | LOW n=54 | FR n=50 | ALL n=160 |
| Oldest Child | Yes | 50% | 41% | 47% | 46% |
| | No | 50 | 59 | 53 | 54 |
| | Total | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 |
| Educational Attainment | <HS Grad | 36 | 61 | 32 | 43 |
| | >=HS Grad | 64 | 39 | 68 | 57 |
| | Total | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 |
| Interview Language | Engl | 63 | 37 | 74 | 58 |
| | Span | 38 | 43 | 0 | 28 |
| | Other* | 0 | 20 | 26 | 15 |
| | Total | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 |
| Visits to PIC | Once | 64 | 39 | 40 | 48 |
| | >Once | 36 | 61 | 60 | 52 |
| | Total | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 |

* In Fall River, all "Other" were interviewed in Portuguese. In Lowell, eight of eleven were done in Khmer and three were Vietnamese.

**Table C-2: Percent who Visited PIC More than Once by Characteristics of Respondents**
*For shaded cells, n<20.*

| Characteristic | | Percent Visiting PIC More than Once | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | SPR n=56 | LOW n=54 | FR n=50 | ALL n=160 |
| Oldest Child | Yes | 29% | 68% | 61% | 51% |
| | No | 43% | 56 | 62 | 53 |
| Educational Attainment | <HS Grad | 20 | 70 | 63 | 54 |
| | >=HS Grad | 44 | 48 | 59 | 51 |
| Interview Language | Engl | 29 | 30 | 59 | 41 |
| | Span | 48 | 70 | | 59 |
| | Other | | | | 79 |

**Table C-3: Activities at PIC by City**

| Activity at PIC | City | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | SPR n=56 | LOW n=54 | FR n=50 | ALL n=160 |
| Discussed Process | 57% | 65% | 52% | 58% |
| Discussed Schools | 43 | 61 | 52 | 52 |
| Looked at Materials | 34 | 39 | 52 | 41 |
| Learned about Other Info Sources | 7 | 15 | 16 | 13 |
| None of the Above | 18 | 19 | 14 | 17 |

## Table C-4: Activities at PIC by Characteristics of Survey Respondents and City
### For shaded cells, n<20.

**Percent of Respondents who Listed each Activity**

| Characteristic | | SPR n=56 | | | | | LOW n=54 | | | | | FR n=50 | | | | | ALL n=160 | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | A | B | C | D | E | A | B | C | D | E | A | B | C | D | E | A | B | C | D | E |
| Oldest Child | Yes | 64 | 50 | 36 | 4 | 18 | 68 | 73 | 32 | 23 | 9 | 57 | 61 | 61 | 26 | 4 | 63 | 60 | 42 | 16 | 11 |
| | No | 50 | 36 | 32 | 11 | 18 | 63 | 53 | 44 | 9 | 25 | 50 | 46 | 46 | 8 | 19 | 55 | 45 | 41 | 9 | 21 |
| Educational Attainment | <HS Grad | 70 | 50 | 40 | 5 | 5 | 79 | 64 | 39 | 18 | 9 | 50 | 56 | 50 | 13 | 13 | 70 | 58 | 42 | 13 | 9 |
| | >=HS Grad | 50 | 39 | 31 | 8 | 25 | 43 | 57 | 38 | 10 | 33 | 53 | 50 | 51 | 18 | 15 | 49 | 47 | 41 | 12 | 23 |
| Interview Language | Engl | 54 | 49 | 31 | 11 | 14 | 30 | 50 | 40 | 0 | 40 | 49 | 49 | 51 | 16 | 14 | 47 | 49 | 41 | 11 | 20 |
| | Span | 62 | 33 | 38 | 0 | 24 | 87 | 57 | 48 | 17 | 4 | | | | | | 75 | 45 | 43 | 9 | 14 |
| | Other | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | 71 | 75 | 38 | 25 | 13 |
| Visits to PIC | Once | 69 | 56 | 44 | 8 | 8 | 33 | 38 | 24 | 5 | 43 | 55 | 55 | 65 | 10 | 10 | 56 | 51 | 44 | 8 | 18 |
| | >Once | 35 | 20 | 15 | 5 | 35 | 85 | 76 | 48 | 21 | 3 | 50 | 50 | 43 | 20 | 17 | 60 | 53 | 39 | 17 | 16 |

**KEY**
A=Discussed Choice Process with PIC Staff
B=Discussed Particular Schools with PIC Staff
C=Looked at Materials about Particular Schools
D=Learned about Other Sources of Information
E=None of these

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Table C-5;  Sureness of Choice by City

| Sureness of Choice | City | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | SPR n=56 | LOW n=54 | FR n=50 | ALL n=160 |
| Pretty Sure | 67% | 70% | 90% | 75% |
| Some Idea | 20 | 8 | 2 | 10 |
| No Idea | 13 | 23 | 8 | 15 |

Table C-6: Sureness of Choice by Characteristics of Survey Respondents and City
*For shaded cells, n<20.*

| Characteristic | | Percent of Respondents who were "Pretty Sure" about their School Choices | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | SPK n=56 | LOW n=54 | FR n=50 | ALL n=160 |
| Oldest Child | Yes | 63% | 62% | 78% | 68% |
| | No | 71 | 75 | 100 | 81 |
| Educational Attainment | <HS Grad | 65 | 63 | 94 | 71 |
| | >=HS Grad | 69 | 81 | 88 | 79 |
| Interview Language | Engl | 63 | 95 | 89 | 80 |
| | Span | 75 | 35 | | 53 |
| | Other | | | | 96 |
| Visits to PIC | Once | 69 | 71 | 95 | 77 |
| | >Once | | 69 | 87 | 74 |

Table C-7:  Visits to Schools by City

| School | City | | | |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| | SPR n=56 | LOW n=54 | FR n=50 | ALL n=160 |
| 1st Choice | 54% | 33% | 38% | 42% |
| 2nd Choice | 33 | 20 | 9 | 22 |
| 3rd Choice | 17 | 16 | 9 | 14 |
| Unrequested | 18 | 3 | 6 | 10 |

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Table C-8: School Visits by Characteristics of Survey Respondents and City
*For shaded cells, n<20.*

| Characteristic | | Percent of Respondents who Visited their First-Choice School | | | |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| | | SPR n=56 | LOW n=54 | FR n=50 | ALL n=160 |
| Oldest Child | Yes | 39% | 32% | 39% | 37% |
| | No | 68 | 34 | 38 | 47 |
| Educational Attainment | <HS Grad | 55 | 39 | 25 | 41 |
| | >=HS Grad | 53 | 24 | 44 | 43 |
| Interview Language | Engl | 40 | 20 | 43 | 37 |
| | Span | 76 | 43 | | 59 |
| | Other | | | | 29 |
| Visits to PIC | Once | 50 | 29 | 40 | 42 |
| | >Once | 60 | 36 | 37 | 42 |

Table C-9: Achievement Test Information for Schools by City

| School | Percent of Respondents who had Achievement Test Information for their Schools | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | SPR n=56 | LOW n=54 | FR n=50 | ALL n=160 |
| 1st Choice | 27% | 26% | 12% | 23% |
| 2nd Choice | 6 | 4 | 0 | 4 |
| 3rd Choice | 6 | 4 | 0 | 3 |

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Table C-10: Achievement Test Information for First-Choice Schools
by Characteristics of Survey Respondents and City
*For shaded cells, n<20*

| Characteristic | | Percent of Respondents who had Achievement Test Information about their 1st-Choice School | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | SPR n=56 | LOW n=54 | FR n=50 | ALL n=160 |
| Oldest Child | Yes | 22% | 0% | | 12% |
| | No | 32 | 44 | 60% | 31 |
| Educational Attainment | <HS Grad | 10 | 24 | 8 | 17 |
| | >=HS Grad | 37 | 29 | 14 | 27 |
| Interview Language | Engl | 15 | 25 | 16 | 17 |
| | Span | 48 | 39 | | 43 |
| | Other | | | | 0 |
| Visits to PIC | Once | 25 | 24 | | 24 |
| | >Once | | 27 | 4 | 21 |

Table C-11:   Reasons for Choice by City

| Reasons for Choice | City | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | SPR n=66 | LOW n=54 | FR n=90 | ALL n=160 |
| Teachers | 39% | 41% | 72% | 50% |
| Program | 55 | 48 | 68 | 57 |
| Principal | 50 | 20 | 56 | 42 |
| Community Service | 18 | 11 | 42 | 23 |
| Parent Involvement | 30 | 13 | 64 | 35 |
| Special Needs | 13 | 20 | 32 | 21 |
| Other | 46 | 41 | 34 | 41 |

Table C-12: Reasons for Choice by Characteristics of Survey Respondents

| Characteristic | | Percent of Respondents who Listed each Reason as Important for their Choice ALL n=160 | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | A | B | C | D | E | F | G |
| Oldest Child | Yes | 47% | 53% | 29% | 22% | 30% | 21% | 38% |
| | No | 53 | 59 | 53 | 23 | 38 | 21 | 43 |
| Educational Attainment | <HS Grad | 45 | 52 | 28 | 20 | 26 | 13 | 36 |
| | >=HS Grad | 54 | 60 | 53 | 25 | 42 | 27 | 44 |
| Interview Language | Engl | 53 | 51 | 47 | 25 | 37 | 27 | 62 |
| | Span | 36 | 59 | 34 | 18 | 30 | 7 | 11 |
| | Other | 63 | 75 | 38 | 25 | 38 | 25 | 13 |
| Visits to PIC | Once | 45 | 52 | 47 | 19 | 39 | 22 | 53 |
| | >Once | 54 | 6i | 37 | 27 | 31 | 20 | 29 |

KEY
A=Teachers
B=Program
C=Principal
D=Community Service
E=Parent Involvement
F=Special Needs
G=Other

## Table C-12 (continued): Reasons for Choice by Characteristics of Survey Respondents and City

*For shaded cells, n<20.*

**Percent of Respondents who Listed each Reason as Important for their Choice**

| Characteristic | | SPR n=56 | | | | | | | LOW n=54 | | | | | | | FR n=50 | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | A | B | C | D | E | F | G | A | B | C | D | E | F | G | A | B | C | D | E | F | G |
| Oldest Child | Yes | 36 | 46 | 29 | 25 | 29 | 14 | 50 | 45 | 47 | 14 | 9 | 5 | 18 | 18 | 61 | 69 | 43 | 30 | 57 | 30 | 27 |
| | No | 43 | 64 | 71 | 11 | 32 | 11 | 43 | 38 | 50 | 25 | 13 | 19 | 22 | 56 | 85 | 65 | 69 | 50 | 69 | 31 | 43 |
| Educational Attainment | <HS Grad | 25 | 45 | 40 | 25 | 25 | 5 | 65 | 39 | 48 | 6 | 6 | 9 | 12 | 27 | 81 | 69 | 56 | 44 | 63 | 25 | 19 |
| | >=HS Grad | 47 | 61 | 56 | 14 | 33 | 17 | 36 | 43 | 48 | 43 | 19 | 19 | 33 | 62 | 68 | 68 | 56 | 41 | 65 | 35 | 41 |
| Interview Language | Engl | 34 | 49 | 45 | 14 | 17 | 17 | 63 | 45 | 35 | 40 | 10 | 25 | 30 | 95 | 76 | 62 | 51 | 43 | 62 | 35 | 43 |
| | Span | 48 | 67 | 57 | 24 | 52 | 5 | 19 | 26 | 52 | 13 | 13 | 9 | 9 | 4 | | | | | | | |
| | Other | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Visits to PIC | Once | 28 | 47 | 44 | 14 | 28 | 14 | 53 | 43 | 43 | 38 | 10 | 24 | 24 | 67 | 80 | 70 | 60 | 40 | 75 | 35 | 40 |
| | >Once | 60 | 70 | 60 | 25 | 35 | 10 | 35 | 39 | 52 | 9 | 12 | 6 | 18 | 24 | 67 | 67 | 53 | 43 | 47 | 30 | 30 |

**KEY**
A=Teachers
B=Program
C=Principal
D=Community Service
E=Parent Involvement
F=Special Needs
G=Other

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# APPENDIX D

## Table D-1: Summary Characteristics of Kindergarten Registration Survey Respondents by City

| Characteristic | | City | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | Lawrence n=30 | Springfield n=56 | Lowell n=100 | Fall River n=262 | All n=448 |
| Registering oldest child | | 33% | 34% | n/a | 48% | 34% |
| Language spoken at home | Engl | 40 | 84 | 53 | 68 | 65 |
| | Span | 53 | 13 | 16 | 2 | 10 |
| | Port | 7 | 2 | 22 | 19 | 17 |
| | Other | 0 | 2 | 9 | 11 | 8 |
| | Total | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 |
| Years lived in this city | 0-2 | 10 | 2 | n/a | 8 | 5 |
| | 3-6 | 23 | 13 | n/a | 11 | 9 |
| | 7-10 | 13 | 13 | n/a | 7 | 7 |
| | >10 | 40 | 66 | n/a | 66 | 49 |
| | Total | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 |
| | Mean | 13 yrs | 18 yrs | n/a | 19 yrs | 18 yrs |
| Race-Ethnicity | NatAmer | 0 | 5 | 0 | 10 | 6 |
| | Asian | 7 | 2 | 31 | 1 | 8 |
| | Blk/AfAm | 3 | 36 | 1 | 2 | 6 |
| | Hispanic | 53 | 11 | 16 | 2 | 9 |
| | Wt/Cauc | 37 | 38 | 49 | 78 | 64 |
| | Other | 0 | 7 | 0 | 3 | 3 |
| | Total | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 |

## Table D-2: Importance of Information Sources by City

| Source & Importance | City | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Lawrence n=30 | Springfield n=56 | Lowell n=100 | Fall River n=262 | All Cities n=448 |
| **Brochure/Flyers** | | | | | |
| Very | 37% | 36% | 0% | 26% | 22% |
| Somewhat | 27 | 13 | 0 | 20 | 15 |
| Not that | 3 | 5 | 0 | 13 | 8 |
| Not used | 33 | 46 | 1 | 42 | 55 |
| Total | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 |
| **PIC Staff** | | | | | |
| Very | 60 | 31 | 3 | 42 | 33 |
| Somewhat | 17 | 21 | 3 | 20 | 16 |
| Not that | 0 | 4 | 1 | 8 | 5 |
| Not used | 23 | 45 | 93 | 31 | 46 |
| Total | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 |
| **Media Advertisements** | | | | | |
| Very | 33 | 20 | 6 | 10 | 12 |
| Somewhat | 30 | 7 | 1 | 19 | 15 |
| Not that | 3 | 9 | 0 | 13 | 9 |
| Not used | 33 | 64 | 93 | 58 | 65 |
| Total | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 |
| **Newspaper Articles** | | | | | |
| Very | 43 | 16 | 1 | 12 | 12 |
| Somewhat | 27 | 16 | 0 | 18 | 15 |
| Not that | 3 | 5 | 0 | 11 | 8 |
| Not used | 27 | 63 | 99 | 58 | 66 |
| Total | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 |

## Table D-3: Percent of Respondents Rating Information Sources Very Important
### by Oldest Child and City
*For shaded cells, n<20*

| Info Source | Oldest Child | Cities | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | Lawrence n=30 | Springfield n=56 | Lowell n=100 | Fall River n=262 | All n=448 |
| Visits | Yes | | | | 47% | 46% |
| | No | 70% | 54% | 24% | 55% | 46% |
| Friends, Neighbors, etc. | Yes | | | | 61 | 60 |
| | No | 45 | 38 | 21 | 45 | 36 |
| Siblings | Yes | | | | 18 | 19 |
| | No | 70 | 62 | 40 | 63 | 55 |
| PIC Staff | Yes | | | | 46 | 44 |
| | No | 70 | 30 | 3 | 38 | 27 |
| School Profile | Yes | | | | 43 | 42 |
| | No | 60 | 30 | 5 | 34 | 25 |
| Principal's Presentation | Yes | | | | 28 | 27 |
| | No | 45 | 43 | 5 | 42 | 30 |
| Brochure | Yes | | | | 32 | 33 |
| | No | 40 | 32 | 0 | 20 | 16 |
| Own or Spouse's Experience | Yes | | | | 28 | 27 |
| | No | 30 | 16 | 6 | 27 | 19 |
| Information Meetings | Yes | | | | 16 | 17 |
| | No | 25 | 22 | 0 | 20 | 14 |
| Newspaper | Yes | | | | 10 | 13 |
| | No | 45 | 14 | 1 | 15 | 12 |
| Advertisements | Yes | | | | 6 | 11 |
| | No | 30 | 16 | 6 | 12 | 12 |
| Other | Yes | | | | 7 | 6 |
| | No | 10 | 3 | 22 | 2 | 10 |

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**Table D-4: Percent of Respondents Rating Information Sources Very Important
by Interview Language and City**
*For shaded cells, n<20*

| Info Source | Interview Language | City | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | Lawrence n=30 | Springfield n=56 | Lowell n=100 | Fall River n=262 | All n=448 |
| Visits | English | | 49% | 26% | 51% | 47% |
| | Spanish | | | | | 40 |
| | Portuguese | | | 32 | 55 | 47 |
| | Other | | | | 46 | 42 |
| Friends, Neighbors, etc. | English | | 38 | 21 | 55 | 46 |
| | Spanish | | | | | 30 |
| | Portuguese | | | 32 | 43 | 41 |
| | Other | | | | 61 | 53 |
| Siblings | English | | 55 | 36 | 42 | 44 |
| | Spanish | | | | | 47 |
| | Portuguese | | | 41 | 37 | 37 |
| | Other | | | | 39 | 45 |
| PIC Staff | English | | 26 | 0 | 39 | 30 |
| | Spanish | | | | | 51 |
| | Portuguese | | | 0 | 55 | 38 |
| | Other | | | | 39 | 29 |
| School Profile | English | | 28 | 4 | 39 | 31 |
| | Spanish | | | | | 33 |
| | Portuguese | | | 5 | 41 | 30 |
| | Other | | | | 29 | 26 |
| Principal's Presentation | English | | 43 | 9 | 35 | 32 |
| | Spanish | | | | | 14 |
| | Portuguese | | | 0 | 39 | 26 |
| | Other | | | | 29 | 24 |

| Info Source | Interview Language | City | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | Lawrence n=30 | Springfield n=56 | Lowell n=100 | Fall River n=262 | All n=448 |
| Brochure | English | | 32 | 0 | 23 | 21 |
| | Spanish | | | | | 28 |
| | Portuguese | | | 0 | 31 | 22 |
| | Other | | | | 32 | 26 |
| Own or Spouse's Experience | English | | 17 | 11 | 26 | 22 |
| | Spanish | | | | | 16 |
| | Portuguese | | | 0 | 29 | 20 |
| | Other | | | | 32 | 24 |
| Information Meetings | English | | 19 | 0 | 18 | 15 |
| | Spanish | | | | | 14 |
| | Portuguese | | | 0 | 24 | 18 |
| | Other | | | | 11 | 8 |
| Newspaper | English | | 17 | 2 | 11 | 11 |
| | Spanish | | | | | 19 |
| | Portuguese | | | 0 | 22 | 17 |
| | Other | | | | 79 | 5 |
| Advertisements | English | | 21 | 4 | 7 | 10 |
| | Spanish | | | | | 14 |
| | Portuguese | | | 18 | 18 | 18 |
| | Other | | | | 11 | 8 |
| Other | English | | 4 | 25 | 5 | 8 |
| | Spanish | | | | | 14 |
| | Portuguese | | | 18 | 6 | 5 |
| | Other | | | | 0 | 11 |

**Table D-5: Percent of Respondents Rating Each Source Very Important by City and Whether Neither "Close to Home" nor "Other Kids" was Chosen**

*For shaded cells, n<20*

| Info Source | Neither "Close to Home" nor "Other Kids" Chosen | City | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | Lawrence n=30 | Springfield n=56 | Lowell n=100 | Fall River n=262 | All n=448 |
| Visits | Neither | | 57% | | 49% | 44% |
| | One or Both | 58% | 48 | 29% | 53 | 46 |
| Friends, Neighbors, etc. | Neither | | 43 | | 56 | 53 |
| | One or Both | 50 | 36 | 18 | 50 | 40 |
| Siblings | Neither | | 48 | | 40 | 37 |
| | One or Both | 58 | 52 | 48 | 42 | 46 |
| PIC Staff | Neither | | 30 | | 47 | 40 |
| | One or Both | 62 | 30 | 1 | 39 | 30 |
| School Profile | Neither | | 26 | | 40 | 34 |
| | One or Both | 50 | 36 | 5 | 37 | 29 |
| Principal's Presentation | Neither | | 48 | | 37 | 35 |
| | One or Both | 38 | 33 | 4 | 34 | 26 |
| Brochure | Neither | | 30 | | 25 | 24 |
| | One or Both | 35 | 39 | 0 | 27 | 21 |
| Own or Spouse's Experience | Neither | | 22 | | 30 | 25 |
| | One or Both | 31 | 12 | 7 | 26 | 20 |
| Information Meetings | Neither | | 17 | | 20 | 17 |
| | One or Both | 27 | 21 | 32 | 8 | 18 |
| Newspaper | Neither | | 13 | | 14 | 13 |
| | One or Both | 42 | 18 | 1 | 11 | 12 |
| Advertise- ments | Neither | | 22 | | 13 | 14 |
| | One or Both | 31 | 18 | 7 | 7 | 11 |
| Other | Neither | | 4 | | 5 | 8 |
| | One or Both | 8 | : | 19 | 4 | 9 |

| Source & Importance | City | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Lawrence n=30 | Springfield n=56 | Lowell n=100 | Fall River n=262 | All Cities n=448 |
| **School Profiles** | | | | | |
| Very | 50 | 32 | 5 | 38 | 31 |
| Somewhat | 20 | 21 | 0 | 19 | 15 |
| Not that | 0 | 0 | 1 | 6 | 4 |
| Not used | 30 | 46 | 94 | 37 | 50 |
| Total | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 |
| **Informational Meetings** | | | | | |
| Very | 27 | 20 | 0 | 18 | 15 |
| Somewhat | 30 | 16 | 1 | 16 | 14 |
| Not that | 7 | 5 | 0 | 9 | 7 |
| Not used | 37 | 59 | 99 | 57 | 65 |
| Total | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 |
| **Neighbors, Friends, Relatives** | | | | | |
| Very | 57 | 39 | 21 | 53 | 44 |
| Somewhat | 30 | 27 | 1 | 23 | 19 |
| Not that | 7 | 2 | 3 | 5 | 4 |
| Not used | 7 | 32 | 75 | 19 | 33 |
| Total | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 |
| **School Visits** | | | | | |
| Very | 57 | 52 | 24 | 52 | 46 |
| Somewhat | 23 | 13 | 5 | 16 | 13 |
| Not that | 0 | 2 | 0 | 2 | 1 |
| Not used | 20 | 34 | 71 | 31 | 40 |
| Total | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 |

| Source & Importance | City | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Lawrence ≤30 | Springfield n=56 | Lowell n=100 | Fall River n=262 | All Cities n=448 |
| **Sibling Experience at School** | | | | | |
| Very | 57 | 50 | 40 | 41 | 43 |
| Somewhat | 7 | 9 | 0 | 12 | 9 |
| Not that | 0 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 1 |
| Not used | 37 | 41 | 60 | 45 | 47 |
| Total | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 |
| **Own or Spouse's Experience** | | | | | |
| Very | 30 | 16 | 6 | 27 | 21 |
| Somewhat | 30 | 11 | 0 | 13 | 11 |
| Not that | 10 | 4 | 0 | 6 | 5 |
| Not used | 30 | 70 | 94 | 53 | 63 |
| Total | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 |
| **Principal/Staff Presentation** | | | | | |
| Very | 33 | 39 | 5 | 35 | 29 |
| Somewhat | 27 | 9 | 1 | 15 | 12 |
| Not that | 0 | 0 | 0 | 4 | 2 |
| Not used | 40 | 52 | 94 | 4 | 57 |
| Total | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 |
| **Other** | | | | | |
| Very | 7 | 4 | 22 | 4 | 9 |
| Somewhat | 7 | 4 | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| Not that | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Not used | 87 | 93 | 78 | 95 | 90 |
| Total | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 |

## Table D-6: Percent Selecting Each Reason by City

| Reason | City | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Lawrence n=30 | Springfield n=56 | Lowell n=10 | Fall River n=262 | All Cities n=448 |
| Near Home | 87% | 48% | 63% | 58% | 60% |
| Near Job | 0 | 0 | 1 | 8 | 5 |
| Near Child Care | 10 | 5 | 3 | 9 | 7 |
| Neighborhood | 13 | 21 | 0 | 15 | 12 |
| Educational Program | 23 | 21 | 18 | 19 | 19 |
| Atmoshpere | 7 | 13 | 7 | 9 | 9 |
| Special Needs | 7 | 7 | 4 | 1 | 3 |
| Transportation | 7 | 13 | 1 | 13 | 10 |
| Hours | 10 | 16 | 5 | 1 | 4 |
| Educational Style | 10 | 4 | 0 | 5 | 4 |
| Principal | 10 | 4 | 7 | 6 | 6 |
| Teachers | 10 | 4 | 1 | 6 | 5 |
| Building/Facilities | 0 | 0 | 4 | 3 | 3 |
| Other Kid in School | 37 | 29 | 43 | 22 | 29 |
| Language Services | 7 | 2 | 5 | 1 | 2 |
| Reputation | 20 | 14 | 6 | 19 | 16 |
| Size | 3 | 2 | 0 | 5 | 4 |
| Racial Mix | 0 | 4 | 0 | 1 | 1 |
| Discipline | 3 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Kid's Friend | 13 | 7 | 1 | 8 | 6 |
| Other | 3 | 2 | 10 | 2 | 4 |

## Table D-7: Percent of Respondents Choosing Each Reason
### by Oldest Child and City
*For shaded cells, n<20*

| Reason | Oldest Child | City | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | Lawrence n=30 | Springfield n=56 | Lowell n=100 | Fall River n=262 | All n=448 |
| Near Home | Yes | | | | 57% | 56 |
| | No | 100% | 49% | 63% | 58 | 62 |
| Near Job | Yes | | | | 7 | 6 |
| | No | 0 | 0 | 99 | 9 | 5 |
| Near Child Care | Yes | | | | 11 | 12 |
| | No | 0 | 3 | 3 | 7 | 4 |
| Neighborhood | Yes | | | | 17 | 18 |
| | No | 15 | 16 | 0 | 12 | 9 |
| Educational Program | Yes | | | | 22 | 22 |
| | No | 20 | 24 | 18 | 16 | 18 |
| Atmosphere | Yes | | | | 10 | 8 |
| | No | 10 | 19 | 7 | 8 | 9 |
| Special Needs | Yes | | | | 0 | 1 |
| | No | 5 | 8 | 4 | 2 | 4 |
| Transportation | Yes | | | | 15 | 15 |
| | No | 5 | 11 | 1 | 12 | 7 |
| Hours | Yes | | | | 2 | 3 |
| | No | 10 | 19 | 5 | 0 | 5 |
| Educational Style | Yes | | | | 5 | 5 |
| | No | 10 | 3 | 0 | 4 | 3 |
| Principal | Yes | | | | 4 | 5 |
| | No | 5 | 3 | 7 | 7 | 6 |
| Teachers | Yes | | | | 6 | 5 |
| | No | 10 | 5 | 1 | 7 | 5 |

| Reason | Oldest Child | City | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | Lawrence n=30 | Springfield n=56 | Lowell n=100 | Fall River n=262 | All n=448 |
| Buildings/Facilities | Yes | | | | 3 | 3 |
| | No | 0 | 0 | 4 | 3 | 3 |
| Other Kid in School | Yes | | | | 6 | 5 |
| | No | 55 | 41 | 43 | 37 | 41 |
| Language Services | Yes | | | | 0 | 1 |
| | No | 5 | 3 | 5 | 1 | 3 |
| Reputation | Yes | | | | 24 | 26 |
| | No | 10 | 5 | 6 | 15 | 11 |
| Size | Yes | | | | 7 | 6 |
| | No | 5 | 0 | 0 | 4 | 2 |
| Racial Mix | Yes | | | | 1 | 1 |
| | No | 0 | 3 | 0 | 1 | 1 |
| Discipline | Yes | | | | 0 | 1 |
| | No | 5 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Kid's Friend | Yes | | | | 10 | 10 |
| | No | 5 | 8 | 1 | 6 | 4 |
| Other | Yes | | | | 3 | 3 |
| | No | 5 | 0 | 10 | 1 | 4 |

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