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AUTHOR Sanchez, Karen; And Others
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ABSTRACT

Many school districts and states are examining parental choice as a means of improving public education. This document identifies various forms of school choice and describes existing programs across the United States. Within the public school system, choice programs fall into two basic categories--intra-district and cross-district. Intra-district programs include alternative schools, magnet schools, and open enrollment. Cross-district programs can be limited or comprehensive. Among the factors that facilitate effective choice programs are a clear statement of goals for all schools; parental information and counseling regarding school selection; fair and equitable admissions procedures; help for all schools to develop distinctive features; opportunities for teachers and principals to create programs; student transportation; requirements that state dollars follow students; and procedures that ensure racial balance. Tensions within the choice movement revolve around the issues of autonomy versus accountability, equity versus excellence, and diversity versus unity. Instead of asking whether or not school choice should be implemented, a more appropriate question would be: Could all constituents be offered more choices than they now have? (LMI)

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Educational Choice

Many school districts and states are examining parental choice as a means of improving public education.

by Karen Sanchez, Gerald Smith, Robert Arnove, and Jeff Kuzmic

President Bush has lauded educational choice as "the single most promising" reform idea of recent years, and declared that "further expansion of public-school choice is a national imperative" ("Perhaps," 1989, p. 24). Bush's Secretary of Education, Lauro Cavazos, is also vigorously promoting choice, calling it "the cornerstone to restructuring elementary and secondary education in this country" ("Cavazos Announces," 1989, p. 1).

Bush and Cavazos are echoing the sentiments of many local and state policymakers around the country, who believe that giving parents the right to choose their children's schools will:

- promote school improvement through free market competition and accountability;
- foster diversity among schools, thus increasing options available to students and teachers;
- provide access to high quality education for poor and wealthy students alike;
- raise academic achievement.

Of course, support for educational choice is not universal. Critics fear that choice plans will:

- promote inequity and resegregate the schools;
- drain resources from the very schools that need them most (particularly inner city schools);
- import the flaws as well as the advantages of the free market (slick but misleading advertising, for example);
- let students and parents choose schools for reasons unrelated to the quality of education (e.g., to play on a better football team, to retaliate against a controversial decision by the local board);
- open the door to voucher plans, culminating in public support for private schools.

Despite these concerns, educational choice is currently one of the primary reform strategies being considered by state and local policymakers, who are asking what kind of choice plans are available and which ones work best.

With few exceptions, existing choice programs do not include private schools. The general consensus is that public school choice is controversial enough without the added constitutional and administrative complications that inclusion of private schools would entail. Therefore, most policymakers are focusing on choice programs within the context of the public school system. These programs fall into two basic categories: *intra-district* programs and *cross-district* programs.

Intra-District Programs

Intra-district programs are those in which parents choose a school for their children within the school district where they live. These programs include alternative schools, magnet schools, and open enrollment.

Alternative Schools

Alternative schools have for some time been a means to provide options for a wide range of students, parents, and even teachers. Providing an alternative school for students who are at risk of dropping out, or who have a history of truancy or discipline problems, has been one way school systems have attempted to meet the needs of more students. Not all alternative schools, however, are "schools of choice." Some are "non-voluntary" alternative programs that have the stigma of being considered "dumping grounds" for problem kids (Viadero, 1987). Thus, alternative schools cannot accurately be considered a means for increasing educational choice unless students are themselves able to choose such a school on the basis of its offering a distinctive curriculum or better educational program.

Magnet Schools

Magnet schools, which offer distinctive curricula (an emphasis on creative arts or computers, for example), are the key component of another intra-district form of choice. Under a magnet program, a district usually offers one or more of these specialty schools that draw students districtwide, while enrollment in the remainder of the schools is

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confined to designated attendance areas. Magnet schools were originally conceived in the 1970s as a way to achieve a racially balanced student enrollment by attracting students of all races and considering racial composition in making admissions decisions. They have generally been credited with encouraging innovative curricular reforms and with providing high quality instruction to the students who attend them.

Main Types of Choice Plans

Magnet school: a school with a distinctive curriculum that draws students district-wide.

Intra-district open enrollment: students may attend any public school within their home district.

Cross-district open enrollment: students may attend a public school outside their home district, often any school in the state.

Ironically, though, some magnet schools have been charged with promoting inequity. If a magnet school receives a higher percentage of available resources than other schools in the district and succeeds in skimming off the best teachers and students, the remaining schools may suffer. Also, some magnet schools screen students on the basis of achievement, without regard for racial balance, and these schools may end up with a disproportionately white, middle class student population (Price & Stern, 1987).

Open Enrollment

In intra-district open enrollment plans, students have more options than with magnet programs because *each* public school within the district is allowed to draw from the district as a whole. Among the many school districts that have developed plans for providing school choice within their boundaries, Cambridge, Massachusetts, Harlem Community District No. 4 in New York City, Seattle, and East Baton Rouge, Louisiana have received considerable notice.

Cambridge. In Cambridge, all 13 of the district's K–8 schools are in essence considered magnet schools, and there are no attendance boundaries within the district. Parents can list up to four schools as their preferred choices, and these choices are honored according to the availability of space and the enrollment impact on racial balance. Lotteries are held to assign students to oversubscribed schools. If none of a student's choices can be honored, the student is assigned to a school by school officials. During the 1982–1986 period, 73% of all pupils new to the school district enrolled in their first-choice schools, and 18% enrolled in their second or third choices. In 1986, 58% of all Cambridge students were enrolled in schools that were not their neighborhood schools.

Harlem. Harlem has sparked interest because of the dramatic increase in student achievement that has accompanied its efforts. The district started providing more options in 1974 by opening three small "alternative concept schools." By 1982 all junior high school students in the district were allowed to select the school of their choice. From 1974 to 1982 the percentage of students reading at or above grade level jumped from 15.3% to 48.5%, and by 1987 62.6% of the students in the district were reading at or above their grade level (Fliegel, 1989).

The former deputy superintendent of the district emphasizes the gradual development of the district's choice plan:

> Our development was organic. We did not have a grand plan that envisioned forty-nine different schools in twenty buildings. . . . It will do no one any good if all that a choice system allows is parents and students to select one inadequate school over another. Quality takes time to develop. It is much better to have, at first, a few schools that are oversubscribed because of the quality and diversity they offer than to have poor choices for everyone. (Fliegel, 1989, p. 108)

Seattle. The Seattle plan has been described by Michael Alves, a desegregation specialist with the Massachusetts Department of Education, as "the most carefully designed choice plan" he has ever worked with.

According to the plan, the Seattle school district will be divided into three zones. These zones are subdivided into eight clusters. In each cluster parents have the choice of from 6 to 10 elementary schools, two middle schools and two high schools. In addition, within each zone will be a number of "specialty schools" open to students within the zone, and several such schools will also be open on a district-wide basis. The Seattle plan will be fully implemented this year.

East Baton Rouge. The East Baton Rouge Parish School System is combining school-based management with parental choice. In the pilot program, which began in 1988–89, each school established a local advisory council of parents, members of the community, teachers, other staff members, and students (in the case of junior and senior high schools) to work with the principal. "Audit teams" composed of advisory council members from other schools mediate any disputes arising between the principal and the advisory council. The district's goal is to have all of its schools locally managed and open to any of the district's students within four years.

The Baton Rouge plan is intended to meet a court-ordered desegregation requirement without the present mandatory busing. Open enrollment is also viewed as a means to school improvement by developing a kind of

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"entrepreneurial spirit" in the district. In the words of district superintendent Bernard J. Weiss:

> One can't presume to oversee the operation of a hundred schools and do so cogently from a few offices located in one place in the city. If we're going to save our public education system, it's got to happen at the school level. (Snider, 1988, p. 24)

Colorado and Ohio. In addition to selected districts across the nation with open enrollment programs, two states—Colorado and Ohio—have passed legislation requiring every district in the state to adopt an intra-district open enrollment program. School districts in Colorado already had the option of allowing open enrollment; starting in Fall 1990 it will be mandatory. In Ohio the deadline is 1993.

Cross-District Programs

Both Colorado and Ohio are also experimenting with cross-district open enrollment programs, that is, programs in which students can attend a school outside their home district. Three districts in Colorado will be selected to pilot-test cross-district enrollment, and all school districts in Ohio must decide by 1993 whether or not to participate in a program allowing enrollment across adjacent districts. According to a survey of state programs published in July 1989 (Nathan, 1989c), Arizona, California, and Washington also permit some form of limited cross-district enrollment. Limitations include: allowing local districts the option of establishing "covenants" to prohibit transfers (Arizona); limiting enrollment of students to districts where their parents live or work (California); limiting cross-district movement to students who have dropped out or are "experiencing major difficulties" in school (Washington).

Arkansas, Iowa, and Minnesota have gone a step further and mandated comprehensive cross-district open enrollment plans, under which parents may send their children to virtually any school district in the state, subject only to minor restrictions on the movement of students. For example, each of these plans stipulates that cross-district movement should not have a negative impact on desegregation. Also, there must be space available in the receiving district.

The Minnesota plan allows parents to transfer their children for any reason. Receiving school districts, however, may stipulate whether students can apply to a specific school in the district or to the district as a whole. According to the Iowa plan, transferring athletes are prohibited from playing interscholastic sports for one year following their transfer. Iowa also permits districts that lose more than 5% of their enrollment in the first year to prevent more students from leaving. Both the Minnesota and Iowa plans are to be fully implemented by September of 1990. Arkansas students will also be able to request transfers to another district in the fall of 1990.

One challenge in drafting cross-district choice plans is to provide a mechanism that takes into account what may be wide differences among district-level spending. Minnesota's plan uses the state's per-pupil dollar figure to set the amount to be transferred to the receiving district. Any extra revenues collected at the district level do not transfer. In Iowa, the major portion of education funding (like Minnesota) comes from the state. Districts receiving students will receive funding according to the average cost per pupil *in that district*; likewise, districts losing students will lose funds according to their average cost per pupil. In effect, the state compensates districts receiving students from poorer districts (Snider, 1989).

In addition to the issue of balancing district per-pupil costs, the issue of transportation costs enters into consideration of cross-district open enrollment plans. If parents are required to bear these costs, low-income families may find that their ability to exercise choice is limited.

State Participation in Open Enrollment Programs

Mandatory Intra-District	Limited Cross-District	Comprehensive Cross-District
Colorado	Arizona	Arkansas
Ohio	California	Iowa
	Colorado	Minnesota
	Ohio	
	Washington	

Factors Contributing to Effective Choice Programs

As the above discussion indicates, there is a wide variety of choice programs. Those who have studied choice emphasize that programs work best when "tailored to an individual community's needs" (Bangley, 1989, p. 4). However, despite this variety, a number of factors have been identified that contribute to a plan's effectiveness. According to Joe Nathan, effective choice plans include:

- A clear statement of the goals that all schools are to meet;
- Information and counseling for parents in selecting among the various programs available to their children;
- Admissions procedures that are fair and equitable—not based on "first come, first served" or on the past achievement or behavior of students;
- Help for all schools to develop distinctive features, rather than simply concentrating resources on a few schools;
- Opportunities for teachers and principals to create programs;

- Transportation for all students within a reasonable geographical area;
- Requirements that state dollars follow students;
- Procedures for ensuring racial balance and promoting integration;
- Oversight and modification of the plan as necessary. (Nathan, 1989a)

Supporters and Opponents of Choice

As mentioned earlier, choice is on the agenda of many local, state, and national policymakers, including the President and the Secretary of Education. In addition, the general public also supports educational choice. A 1987 Gallup Poll revealed that 71% of adults—and 76% of parents of public-school children—thought parents should have the right to choose schools (Jennings, 1989).

71% of adults think parents should have the right to choose their children's school. However, 60% of principals and 68% of superintendents oppose choice.

However, choice has many opponents as well, a good proportion of whom are educators. For example, the National Education Association passed a resolution in July 1989 opposing choice. The resolution read in part, "The National Education Association believes that parental option or choice plans compromise the Association's commitment to free, equitable, universal, and quality public education for every student" ("Choice spurs debate," 1989). In surveys conducted over the last several years, the National Center for Educational Information found that 51% of school board presidents, 60% of principals, and 68% of superintendents opposed choice (Jennings, 1989).

What becomes evident from reviewing the constituencies that have supported educational choice plans in states that have passed legislation is that coalitions have been formed to offset the opposition of state professional education associations. In Minnesota, for example, strong opposition to the open enrollment legislation came from the Minnesota Education Association, the Minnesota Federation of Teachers, the Minnesota School Boards Association, and the Minnesota Association of School Administrators. The development of a coalition of support that included some educators (for example, the state's Elementary and Secondary School Principals) as well as those outside of education was a recognized factor in the passage of the Minnesota legislation (Nathan, 1989c).

Of course, not all educators oppose choice. The American Federation of Teachers (AFT), for example, has passed a general statement in favor of choice, and AFT president Albert Shanker has stated that "we in the teacher union movement ought to support the greatest possible choice among public schools by parents, students, and teachers" (Nathan, 1989d, p. 220). Likewise, Richard Miller (1989), executive director of the American Association of School Administrators, has proposed that "school administrators should learn about the benefits of good [choice] programs to avoid some of the pitfalls and work together with parent groups and state legislative bodies to offer the best possible plans" (p. 30). Still, many educators are leery of enacting choice plans too quickly before all the potential conflicts within the choice movement itself have been sorted out.

Tensions in the Choice Movement

With the many different concepts of choice and the variety of groups that are supporting such concepts, it is not surprising that some of the purposes embodied in various choice plans may seem to be at odds with one another. Three of the main tensions are (a) autonomy vs. accountability, (b) equity vs. excellence, and (c) diversity vs. unity.

Autonomy vs. Accountability

As the choice plans in Baton Rouge and Harlem illustrate, a key component to developing distinctive programs and curricula at the school level is to allow school-level autonomy. Indeed, many proponents of choice claim that "school-based management" programs and choice are necessary complements to each other. Within choice programs, individual schools must be allowed to manage themselves if distinctive programs are to be developed. By the same token, school-based management without choice may lock disgruntled parents into a program with which they are not satisfied (Nathan, 1989b).

The move toward greater school-site autonomy may sometimes conflict, however, with the drive toward greater accountability represented by state programs such as competency testing of teachers and students, increased graduation requirements, and so forth. As Charles Glenn (1989b), executive director of the Office of Educational Equity, Massachusetts Department of Education, points out, the challenge is to make room for diversity at the school level within the context of "across-the-board expectation." The key, he believes, is to have "high require-

Choice is based "on two pillars of the American system: equal opportunity and open market competition." But in the view of some, these two pillars are leaning in opposite directions.

ments for what students will learn, but not with top-down specifications of how they will learn it" (p. 150).

Equity vs. Excellence

Adam Urbanski (1989), president of the Rochester, New York Teachers Association, notes that choice is predicated on "two pillars of the American system: equal opportunity and open market competition" (p. 230). But in the view of some, these two pillars are leaning in opposite directions. For example, Scott Thomson (1989), executive director of the National Association of Secondary School Principals, argues that "schools are the one place in society where every child has a chance for an equal start. Admittedly, some starts now are more equal than others, but a choice system will simply aggravate the unevenness" (p. 32).

Fears such as these are grounded in concerns that schools of choice would still exercise selection criteria (Moore & Davenport, 1988). Also, if parental choice is limited by lack of information or lack of affordable transportation, inequities could continue to exist (Riddle & Stedman, 1989). Nathan argues that choice *should* increase opportunities for all students, but he cautions that the crucial factor determining the availability of equal opportunity is the design of the individual district plan. He points to districts such as New York's East Harlem and Cambridge, Massachusetts, which have seen substantial gains in achievement and motivation for black and Hispanic students from low-income families. The choice plans of these two districts have three elements in common: (a) Both have made every school at certain levels an option, (b) both provide parent information and counseling, and (c) both provide transportation to schools (Nathan, 1989b). Willingness to take on these additional costs may be the primary factor that determines the success of a particular choice plan in promoting equal educational opportunity.

Diversity vs. Unity

A major concern voiced by professional educational organizations is that choice plans would undercut the very bedrock assumption of American public education, namely that we should provide a common public education to all students. By encouraging diversity, choice is viewed by some as a threat to the very idea of common public education for all.

Proponents of choice plans acknowledge that we should not abandon the notion that education is of public concern and that the state should set expectations for the education of children. Proponents argue, however, that public schools can maintain a common set of standards without mandating how those standards are to be met. Charles Glenn (1989a), for example, agrees that the state can justifiably require certain "qualities of character and civic virtue as well as facts and intellectual skills" to be part of the education of all children. But he contends that it is not the State's function to "dictate the process by which those goals are achieved," and he believes that "a system of choice among public schools, if centrally organized and monitored in the interest of equity, can permit diverse responses to the concerns and goals of parents, different ways of achieving excellence, without losing its common purpose" (pp. 43–44).

Indeed, educational goals and the methods used to achieve those goals are not necessarily linked, although it may be found that some methods are more effective than others. At present, we cannot claim consensus as to what specific means should be used to achieve the goals of education for a democratic society. Allowing choice in the public schools might enhance the schools' ability to meet the diverse needs of students, and thus ensure that all students are treated in a more equitable fashion. This combination of diversity and fairness would seem to be a major goal of education in a democratic society.

Conclusion

As Adam Urbanski (1989) notes, the issue of choice in public education does not have to be framed as an either-or position. Instead of asking "Should we have choice or no choice," we might ask the more appropriate question, "Could we offer to all our constituents *more* choices than they now have?" (p. 236). If policymakers consider educational choice from this perspective, it may be possible to promote the kind of gradual growth of choice within a system (whether it be at the state or the district level) that has been shown to be effective in districts such as Harlem's District 4.

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About the authors: Karen Sanchez is an assistant professor of education at Millersville University, Millersville, PA; Gerald Smith is the chair of the department of curriculum and teacher education, Indiana University; Robert Arnove is a professor of education, Indiana University; and Jeff Kuzmic is a graduate student in education, Indiana University.

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Indiana Education Policy Center
Bloomington Office
Smith Center for Research in Education, Suite 170
Indiana University
Bloomington, IN 47405
(812) 855-1240

Barry Bull, Co-director
Gayle Hall, Associate Director

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Bloomington Office
Smith Center for Research in Education, Suite 170
Indiana University
Bloomington, IN 47405