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ABSTRACT

Initial studies of school choice in Massachusetts have concentrated on the mechanics of the program, but this report examines why parents choose school choice. A survey of Massachusetts families participating in school choice was completed by 826 families (return rate of 41.8%), representing 987 choice students, or about 23.5% of the estimated school choice population of Massachusetts in the 1993-94 school year. Over 42% of respondents indicated that academics were the most important reasons for choice. Just over 50% of respondents said that a lack of resources in their home districts was one of the reasons for school choice, and about 20% called that the primary reason. Only 15% of the respondents indicated that convenience was the primary reason for arranging a choice transfer. Safety was the most commonly cited nonacademic reason, and it was especially important in urban districts. Parents generally expressed a high degree of satisfaction with the new school, and approximately 71% said that they had seen improvement in their children's academic performances as a result of school choice. Transportation remained the most difficult aspect of the program for many parents in all areas. The report also gives a history of the Massachusetts choice law and a discussion of issues facing the program. Four appendixes present the questionnaire and statistics about participating districts. (Contains one map and five charts.) (SLD)

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School Choice in Massachusetts

Why Parents Choose Choice

William F. Weld, Governor
Paul Cellucci, Lt. Governor

The Executive Office of Education
Piedad F. Robertson, Secretary

Executive Summary

March of 1994 marked the third anniversary of the creation of the School Choice program in Massachusetts. Since its passage, the debate over school choice has focused primarily on the mechanics of the program, its financing provisions and issues of accessibility for students and parents.

With the release of this report, a fourth and perhaps even more important issue is being addressed for the first time. The central focus of this study is to ask – and offer an answer to the question – Why do parents choose choice?

While the evidence presented here is specific to the school choice program in Massachusetts, the conclusions have ramifications for the wider national debate over choice programs in general.

Many people believe parents opt into choice programs to further the educational interests of their children. To many observers, such a conclusion is intuitive simply because it is the way they expect parents to act.

Many school choice advocates have made this argument, but unfortunately there has been little concrete evidence to support their view – at least until now.

In fact, opponents of school choice have suggested that educational concerns are usually not at the center of a parental decision to participate in a choice program. Other factors like convenience, social concerns or easy access to day care are often cited anecdotally as evidence that parental choices are not educationally driven.

The results of this study overwhelmingly reject that conclusion.

So why do parents choose choice? The simple answer is that they want to serve the best interests of their child. Perhaps more importantly for the purposes of the debate over parental motivation, educational factors overwhelmingly dominate the decision making process for these parents. Not only do choice parents want to do what is best for their child, as all parents should, but these parents specifically seek out a strong educational environment as the means toward that end.

This conclusion is based on information obtained through a survey of families participating in Massachusetts' school choice program. The survey was conducted during the Summer and Fall of 1993 and over 23% of the students participating in the program were represented among the responses. An analysis of the questionnaires found:

- Academic concerns were the primary reason for participating in school choice. Sixty-three percent of the respondents said that academics were among the reasons they opted for school choice, and over 42% said it was the most important factor in their decision. More than two-thirds of those who identified academics as an issue said it was the most important issue.
- Just over 50% of the respondents said a lack of resources in their home districts was one of the reasons they opted for school choice, and about 20% said resources were the number one reason for participating.
- In contrast to the overwhelming importance of academics, only 15% of the respondents cited convenience as one of the reasons they chose to participate. About 6% said it was the most important factor in their decision, and only 1% said it was the only factor.
- School safety, not convenience, was the most commonly cited non-academic reason for participating. Overall, safety was the third most frequently cited reason after academics and resources. Concerns over the safety of the sending district were identified by 26% of the respondents.
- Rounding out the list of reasons for participating: class size was a concern for 22%; personal reasons were cited by 19%; school size was a concern for 17%; athletics and extra curricular activities were each identified by 17%; greater diversity was sought by 13%; and 4% wanted less diversity.
- Most respondents had more than one reason for participating in the school choice program. On average, respondents identified three separate reasons for participating.
- Parents generally expressed a high degree of satisfaction with their child's new choice school. Over 90% of the respondents indicated that they were either "very satisfied" or "most satisfied" with their new school.
- Approximately 71 percent of the respondents indicated they had seen improvement in their children's academic performances as a direct result of school choice.
- Transportation remains the most difficult aspect of the program for many parents. Fifty-seven percent cited transportation as a way to improve the program.

In addition to the results of the survey of school choice participants, the report provides a history of the school choice law, an explanation of its current form and a discussion of some of the issues facing school choice in the future.

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Introduction

Educational choice has been among the most controversial public policy issues of the 1990s. It is an issue which has cut across traditional political and demographic boundaries, and, as with any controversial policy, strong opinions are held on both sides.

One reason controversy surrounds school choice is that choice confronts the traditional notion of how educational services should be delivered, not only in Massachusetts, but across the nation. School choice challenges the idea, implicit in our current system, that the local public school should have monopoly access to the local education consumers, the parents and students in that town or neighborhood. Parents have long been accustomed to sending their children to the neighborhood school, no matter how well that school does or does not perform, and the schools are certainly accustomed to having exclusive access to a ready supply of customers.

In addition, the debate about school choice is occurring at a time when the critical need for overall educational improvement is widely recognized. The role of education as a way to establish economic leadership in the world is unchallenged. Educators, policy makers and the private sector are all searching for ways to improve the current system, and to many of them, choice offers an attractive option.

According to a report released in July of 1993 by the Morrison Institute for Public Policy at Arizona State University, 14 states currently offer their residents some form of school choice. Many others are considering choice proposals. A high-profile ballot initiative in California last Fall heightened national awareness of this issue.

The debate in Massachusetts has focused primarily on the public, inter-district school choice program created three years ago. Public, inter-district school choice, also referred to as "open enrollment," allows students to attend public schools outside of their own communities. The school district the student leaves is referred to as the "sending district," while the one the student goes to is called the "receiving district."

First implemented during the 1991-1992 school year, the Massachusetts choice program allows any public school student to attend any public school district in the Commonwealth, as long as the receiv-

ing district's school committee agrees to accept out-of-town students. Receiving districts may determine how many students they will accept, and in what grades, but a nondiscriminatory process must be used to determine which students will actually be admitted.

Receiving districts are paid tuition for each choice student they accept. Although the state actually pays the tuition, conceptually, the sending district is responsible for the cost, since the tuition amount is deducted from the sending district's state local aid allocation. A state funded reimbursement program limits the financial loss experienced by the sending community.

Financially and administratively the program is complex, but philosophically it is simple and straightforward. Proponents of school choice generally make two fundamental arguments in favor of the concept.

One argument is that school choice promotes parental involvement in a child's education, and creates opportunities for a better educational experience where options are limited or inadequate. A new school literally can turn a child's educational opportunities around overnight. For a child stuck in an unresponsive or under-performing school, the value of that opportunity is immeasurable.

The other favorable argument is that choice fosters competition among school districts and makes them more responsive to the needs of the parents and students who are, after all, the consumers of education. Schools that want to retain and attract students, and the public funding that goes with them, will perform well. In the long run, this competition, and the responsiveness it creates, will result in systemic school improvements for all children.

The common thread in both arguments is the belief that, given the opportunity, parents will seek out educational quality.

In contrast to the largely philosophical posture of many choice advocates, critics often avoid discussing the theoretical merit of school choice, favoring instead arguments centered on the particular aspects of specific choice programs. In fact, many critics will concede the philosophical appeal of school choice as a vehicle for promoting educational improvement. But the transition from theory to practice results in too many unintended consequences and practical problems.

Overall, choice opponents tend to focus on the impact of particular programs. Critics maintain that some funding mechanisms can cripple sending districts. Many sending districts are already financially and programmatically weak. When motivated children leave those districts, when involved parents begin to look elsewhere, and when funding is lost on top of that, sending schools can be devastated. The loss of funding in these cases makes it impossible for these schools to improve and they spiral into a hopeless Catch-22 situation.

Critics also say that only middle-class and wealthy families - those who can already afford to move to a community with quality schools - can spend the time and money needed to drive their children to new districts. Low-income families cannot afford to move or to drive their

children to new districts, and if this population is not served, access to choice, and the quality schools it makes available, will be undermined.

Many of these criticisms have struck a chord in Massachusetts. Since its initial passage in 1991, the school choice program has undergone a number of changes, many of them in direct response to criticisms of various aspects of the program. Considerable attention has been paid to the issues of finance and accessibility in particular.

In spite of the attention school choice has enjoyed in Massachusetts, however, little effort has been made to assess the program's impact on its consumers - those families and students who actually participate in the program.

The primary purpose of this report is to address that issue, using information obtained through a survey of school choice participants conducted during the Summer and Fall of 1993. The report also contains basic information about school choice, including a history of the program and an overview of the current law, and it provides a discussion of some of the ongoing issues concerning the future of school choice in Massachusetts.

The report offers a comprehensive review of the first three years of the school choice program for the purpose of increasing public awareness and understanding of school choice, and providing some common ground for future dialogue among educators, parents and policy makers.

School Choice: Past and Present

It is difficult to make an informed judgement about any public policy without first understanding how it was developed and how it works. School choice is no exception.

Just as parents and students need information about school districts to help them choose an appropriate educational environment, policy makers and opinion leaders need information about school choice to accurately judge its effectiveness. An understanding of the program's origins, the various changes it has undergone, and its current form are all essential to this process.

The History of School Choice in Massachusetts

Some researchers point to Milton Friedman's Economics and the Public Interest, written in 1955, as the precursor to the contemporary national debate about school choice. Others have traced the concept of educational choice as far back as Adam Smith's Wealth of Nations and Thomas Paine's The Rights of Man, both written in the late 1700s.

Parental choice certainly has long been a part of the educational system in Massachusetts, home to many high-quality private schools. Indeed, the Commonwealth's Constitutional prohibition against public aid to private schools, adopted in the 1800s, suggests that the debate about the broadly defined concept of educational choice goes back well before the emergence of the current school choice program.

Within the past few decades, choice in general has become a part of our educational system through the presence of magnet schools, the METCO program and intra-district choice programs in a number of urban school districts. While these programs have provided important opportunities for some children, they have not led to the kind of systemic change advocated by many choice proponents. They have generally been limited in their scope, student participation, and geography, and unlike the inter-district school choice program, competition has been a small factor.

The specific debate about the issue of inter-district, public school choice is much more recent, and it has also been more controversial.

The First Year: 1991-1992

In March of 1991, Governor William F. Weld signed Chapter 6 of the Acts of 1991. Chapter 6 was actually a fiscal recovery act which amended the Fiscal Year 1991 budget. But sections 23 and 85 created a new inter-district school choice program.

These two sections amended Chapter 76B of the General Laws by adding a new provision that allowed school districts to accept students from out-of-town and, in turn, receive a publicly funded tuition payment for those students. The receiving district's school committee had to vote to accept students, and could do so only on a nondiscriminatory basis. Sending districts could not prevent a student from leaving. All districts were prohibited under the new law from charging tuition directly to parents or students, although students attending a school under such an arrangement prior to the passage of school choice were allowed to continue doing so.

This initial language established the tuition rate at 100 percent of the per-pupil cost in the receiving district. Tuition was determined using the cost associated with a particular student's grade and program. For example, if a district spent \$6,000 annually to educate each of its own high school students, that district would receive a tuition payment equal to \$6,000 for each high school student it accepted under choice. If the student was in a special needs program, the tuition would reflect those additional costs. The tuition amount was prorated according to the amount of time the student stayed in the receiving district. For example, if the high school student transferred to the receiving district halfway through the school year, the tuition payment would be only \$3,000, half of the annualized tuition rate.

The state made the initial tuition payments, and then deducted those payments from the local aid it otherwise would have given to the sending community under the Chapter 70 formula. In effect, the sending community paid the tuition because they lost state aid for every student who transferred.

Chapter 6 was followed in July of 1991 by Chapters 138 and 145 of the Acts of 1991, the Fiscal Year 1992 budget and the Fiscal Year 1991 year-end deficiency budget, respectively. Section 304 of Chapter 138 and Section 14 of Chapter 145 further clarified the operation of the school choice program by outlining the timetable and reporting mechanism for tuition payments.

School choice began the following September, when 28 of the state's 361 school districts voted to accept students at the beginning of the 1991-1992 school year. Four more would do so by the end of the school year, bringing to 32 the total number of receiving districts participating. Another 116 districts were involved as sending districts. Approximately 1,000 students participated in school choice that first year. Tuition payments totaled approximately \$4.8 million statewide.

Halfway through that first year, in December of 1991, passage of Chapter 493 of the Acts of 1991 initiated the school choice reimburse-

ment program. Chapter 493 was a supplemental budget which created for Fiscal Year 1992 a new state appropriation of \$2.7 million, to partially reimburse those cities and towns that had lost money in tuition payments.

Communities that lost students were able to apply for a reimbursement equal to 50 percent of their losses. Those communities that lost more than 2 percent of their school budget were eligible for a larger reimbursement equal to 75 percent of their lost aid. The reimbursement line-item also paid tuition for choice students whose home communities did not receive any Chapter 70 aid, which normally would have covered tuition.

A supplemental appropriation increased the state's total reimbursement amount to \$2.9 million by the end of the fiscal year. Through this reimbursement program, the Commonwealth on the average paid 60 percent of the cost of school choice during the 1991-1992 school year.

The Second Year: 1992-1993

In direct response to criticisms of school choice, major changes occurred in program funding during July of 1992, when the Fiscal Year 1993 budget was signed. Through language in one section of that budget, the tuition rate paid to receiving districts was lowered to 75 percent of the per pupil cost in the receiving district. The budget also established a tuition cap of \$5,000 per pupil.

Tuition for special education students remained at 100 percent of the per-pupil cost in the receiving district, with no cap.

This reimbursement program was continued for fiscal year 1993, and the appropriation increased to \$4.5 million.

In addition to the financial changes made to the law, the Executive Office of Education was directed to develop a Parent Information Center, to collect and disseminate comparative information about school districts to the public.

Shortly after the 1992-1993 school year began, the Massachusetts school choice program came under sharp criticism. An October press release about a forthcoming report by The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching stated that the report, which surveyed school choice programs throughout the country, was highly critical of Massachusetts' inter-district program. The report called the school choice program "among the nation's most punitive."

Funding disparities between districts, a lack of transportation and the absence of information for parents were cited as key problems. However, it is critical to note, as the Carnegie Foundation did briefly in its report, that the original study was conducted before Massachusetts initiated its reimbursement program, reduced tuition rates and imposed a tuition cap. The Carnegie report also neglected to recognize the creation of the Parent Information Center.

Meanwhile, the implementation of school choice coincided during

these first two years with efforts by the Weld Administration and legislative leaders to craft a comprehensive K-12 education reform proposal. After months of negotiations, Governor Weld filed an education reform proposal with the Legislature in June of 1992. The proposal did not make any changes to the school choice program.

Following several more months of intensive discussions, the House of Representatives approved a revised education reform proposal in January of 1993. House Bill 1000 proposed a moratorium on the school choice program. Under the House proposal, students already participating in choice were allowed to continue attending their choice schools, but any expansion of school choice was prohibited pending a study of the program's effectiveness.

In March of 1993, the Senate approved its own version of education reform. Senate Bill 1551 mandated that all districts in the Commonwealth participate in choice on a space-available basis. Transportation

School Choice in Massachusetts - A Brief History -

March 1991	Sections 23 & 85 of Chapter six of the Acts of 1991 create the school choice program. Tuition is set at 100% of the receiving district's per pupil cost.
July 1991	Section 304 of Chapter 138 & Section 14 of Chapter 145 of the Acts of 1991 further amend the law.
September 1991	The first year of school choice begins. 32 districts and 1,000 students participate.
December 1991	The reimbursement program is created by Chapter 493 to offset the financial losses suffered by sending districts.
July 1992	The FY93 budget caps school choice tuition at \$5,000 per student and tuition is lowered to 75% of the receiving district's per pupil cost.
September 1992	The second year of school choice begins. 64 districts and about 3,200 students participate.
June 1993	The Education Reform Act of 1993 is signed by Governor Weld. The law includes major changes to the school choice program, including a cap on student enrollment, transportation provisions and a new reimbursement system.

was proposed for low-income students, and spending on reimbursements was increased.

A conference committee on education reform was appointed to reconcile the differences between the two legislative branches. School choice emerged as one of the major points of disagreement.

In April of 1993, with the Conference Committee still at work on education reform, both the House and the Senate approved, in a supplemental budget, an additional \$2.5 million for choice reimbursement. This supplemental appropriation increased total state expenditures for the program to \$7 million for Fiscal Year 1993. As in the first year, the state paid for approximately 60 percent of the cost of school choice tuition statewide.

Also in April, school choice enrollments were updated. Total participation had reached more than 3,200 students statewide for 1992-1993, an increase of more than 300 percent since the previous school year. The number of districts receiving students had increased to 64, while the number of sending communities was up to 187. Tuition paid for school choice students totaled approximately \$12 million.

In June of 1993, the Conference Committee emerged with a compromise on education reform, which was signed into law by Governor Weld. The final document included new school choice language. By December 1993, school choice enrollments had reached more than 4,200 students in 71 receiving districts.

A Summary of the Current School Choice Law

The Education Reform Act, Chapter 71 of the Acts of 1993, was signed into law by Governor Weld on June 18, 1993. Section 61 of the Education Reform Act makes significant changes to the school choice law. Among other things, education reform establishes new district participation requirements, a cap on statewide student enrollments, a transportation provision and a re-configuration of the reimbursement program.

District Participation

According to the former school choice law, a school committee had to pro-actively vote to participate in school choice.

Beginning with the 1994-1995 academic year, all school districts will be required to accept out-of-town students on a space-available basis, unless the school committee votes before June 1 not to participate during the following school year. In other words, a district is automatically enrolled unless it chooses otherwise. A vote not to participate is effective for only the school year following the vote, and must be renewed each year the district chooses not to participate.

As with the original school choice law, sending districts still cannot prevent students from leaving.

Student Participation

The most significant factor limiting a student's ability to choose a new school is the establishment of a statewide student participation cap.

Under the new law, not more than 2 percent of the total statewide student population may participate in the program. According to current enrollment figures, this amounts to approximately 17,000 to 18,000 students. This cap will be phased-in over a period of four years.

For the 1993-1994 school year the limit is 1 percent. The cap increases to 1.5 percent during the 1994-1995 school year; 1.75 percent in academic year 1995-1996; and, finally, to 2 percent during 1996-1997 and beyond.

School districts are still required to establish a nondiscriminatory admissions process.

Admissions Policy

The original school choice law allowed districts to establish their own admission policies, provided those policies complied with the non-discriminatory requirements set forth in the statute. While the non-discrimination requirement has not changed, the method of compliance has.

Under the former law, virtually all receiving districts adopted either a first-come-first-served policy, or used a lottery to admit students. The new law requires that, beginning with the 1994-1995 school year, receiving districts with more applicants than available spaces must use a lottery system.

Students already attending a district under choice must be allowed to remain in that district until they graduate or otherwise leave voluntarily.

Transportation

The Education Reform Act of 1993 directs the Board of Education to develop a transportation program for low-income children for the 1994-1995 school year. Students who are eligible for free or reduced-cost lunches under Federal guidelines, and who live in towns contiguous to those they attend under school choice, will have access to publicly-funded transportation.

Reimbursements for transporting these students will be provided by the state, under regulations to be established by the Board of Education. The law allows the state to reimburse the sending or receiving district, or the choice student's family.

Parent Information

Chapter 71 of the Acts of 1993 also directs the Board of Education to collect and disseminate comparative information about school districts to the public.

Although the law does not require this service until the 1994-1995 school year, a Parent Information Center has already been established at the Executive Office of Education. More than 5,000 people already have requested and received more than 20,000 school district profiles from the Parent Information Center.

Profiles are currently available for 329 academic school districts in the Commonwealth. Profiles for vocational districts are being developed, and Parent Information Center officials are planning profiles of individual schools for 1994. Regional Profile Books will also be compiled, to provide parents with a source of comparative information about school districts in their areas.

The Parent Information Center has established a toll-free number (1-800-297-0002), and profiles are provided to the public free of charge.

Tuition Payments

Tuition payments are still calculated according to the cost of education in the receiving district. Tuition is equal to 75 percent of the average per-pupil cost in that receiving district, capped at \$5,000 per pupil, and it is still calculated by grade and program. Special education remains the exception, with tuition set at 100 percent of the average program cost, with no cap.

Also, tuition is still deducted from the sending district's Chapter 70 local aid payments. Local aid deductions under the old law could be made against only the sending city or town, not the regional school district. Within the new law, however, the sending district that loses local aid can be a city, town or regional school district.

All school districts will receive some money under the new Chapter 70 formula established within education reform. However, if a sending district does not receive enough Chapter 70 aid to cover its tuition liability, some other categories of local aid sent to that sending district will be used to pay tuition to the receiving district. If other local aid accounts do not contain enough funding to cover tuition, the Commonwealth is responsible for the payments.

The Reimbursement Program

Education reform completely changes the reimbursement mechanism for districts that lose money due to school choice. Under the new law, reimbursements are provided through three separate mechanisms.

Two of these mechanisms apply only to those districts spending less than the foundation budget established for them within the Education Reform Act. The third applies to districts spending more than

their foundation budget.

The first mechanism for below-foundation districts is a prospective payment made at the beginning of each fiscal year through the new Chapter 70 formula. The amount of this first payment is equal to 100 percent of what the district is expected to lose in school choice tuition for the coming school year. For example, a district that expects to lose one student at a tuition cost of \$5,000 will receive \$5,000 - on top of any other monies for which it is eligible under the new Chapter 70 formula.

In addition to this prospective payment, a second, retroactive source of reimbursement money is made available to these below-foundation districts during the course of the fiscal year. This second payment is based on the difference between the tuition amount the district actually pays, and the amount that sending district would have paid to educate the student themselves. For example, if a district loses \$5,000 in tuition for one student and the amount they would have spent on that student in their own school is \$4,500, the district would receive \$500 as a retroactive reimbursement.

The prospective payment is automatic for eligible districts, those that spend below their foundation budget. Districts must apply to and be approved by the Department of Education for the retroactive payment.

For above-foundation districts, the reimbursement program remains similar to that of the former law. A district spending more than its foundation requirement may apply for a retroactive reimbursement equal to half of its net losses. Under the former law, the Executive Office of Education approved these applications. The new law requires that the Department of Education review and approve reimbursement applications.

Under the new law, the net loss to an above-foundation district is the difference between the amount the district pays in tuition and any tuition payments it receives due to students transferring into the district. For example, if a district loses \$10,000 in tuition payments, but also is earning \$8,000 in tuition receipts, the district is eligible for a reimbursement based only on the net loss of \$2,000, or the difference between tuition paid and received. The reimbursement in this case would be \$1,000, or 50 percent of the district's net loss.

The reimbursement to above-foundation communities is phased out over two years. These payments are reduced from 50 percent in the first year to 25 percent in the second year, and to 0 after that. Above-foundation districts that lose students for the first time after fiscal year 1994 will be eligible for this reimbursement for the two years following the initial loss of students.

The Survey of School Choice Participants

The Executive Office of Education (EOE) in August of 1993 initiated a survey of parents whose children are participating in the Commonwealth's school choice program. A questionnaire was developed to determine why parents and students opt into the school choice program.

Respondents were also asked to answer questions regarding: their satisfaction with their old school and their new choice school; their child's performance in both the sending and receiving schools; the sources of information they used in learning about school choice; and the areas of the choice program they felt were most problematic or in need of improvement.

With the assistance of a number of receiving districts, EOE mailed 2,000 questionnaires to families participating in the school choice program. The mailings took place between August and October of 1993.

By December, EOE had received 826 responses, a return rate of 41.8 percent. A number of those responses came from families with more than one child participating in choice. As a result, 987 choice students were represented among the survey responses. With the October 1, 1993 school choice census at approximately 4,200 students, the responses account for about 23.5 percent of the estimated school choice population for the 1993-1994 school year.

Families from 114 different sending districts returned responses. The number of receiving districts represented was 28, or a little less than 40 percent of the 71 districts that received choice students during the Fall of 1993.

Survey responses also reflected the geographic distribution of participating districts. Areas of the state with heavy school choice participation were well represented among the respondents. Of the major receiving districts, only Manchester-by-the-Sea and Avon were not represented in the survey.

While the main goal of the survey was to quantify information about why parents participate in school choice, the raw numbers provide only part of the story. Anecdotal information is very important as well, and comments from survey respondents were both candid and numerous.

Parents' personal observations about the program provide thoughtful insight into the problems and promise of school choice. For that reason, parents are quoted extensively in this report.

The Reasons Parents Opt for School Choice

Why do parents want their children to participate in choice? The answer is a point of controversy in the analysis of not only Massachusetts' school choice program, but many other such programs throughout the country.

Critics often say parents transfer their children due to noneducational motives. If education is not the primary motivator, critics maintain, choice will not result in academic or programmatic improvement. The common charge is that participation often is simply a matter of parental convenience. In fact, the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, in its 1993 report on school choice, highlighted its conclusion that, "...most parents who do decide to send their children to another school appear to do so for nonacademic reasons."

While the Carnegie conclusion was a general one regarding the wide range of choice programs covered by its study, many critics of the school choice program in Massachusetts have echoed that concern. State Senator Arthur Chase (R-Worcester) has been one such vocal critic of the Commonwealth's school choice program in particular.

Senator Chase has used funding inequities and the lack of transportation as the focal points for his criticisms, but he also has argued that choice participants do not always benefit from improved academic programs.

In a November 13, 1991 letter to Governor Weld, Senator Chase wrote, "The conventional wisdom that school choice is solely linked to school improvement is challenged by the evidence of students transferring to school systems that are equal to the ones they have left." He went on to cite the example of students leaving the Harvard Public Schools to attend Acton-Boxborough Regional High School, even though, in Senator Chase's words, "both Acton-Boxborough and Harvard are fine school systems."

This argument is not incidental to the debate over school choice. As noted in the Introduction, the fundamental underpinning of school choice as a vehicle for reform assumes that parents will choose schools to obtain better educational programs. If parents choose schools for other reasons, school choice's appeal as a reform tool is diminished significantly.

But not all observers reach the conclusion offered by Senator Chase and others. In a doctoral thesis at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, Richard Fossi, after extensive interviews with participating parents and students, concluded that, "In Massachusetts at least, it would be a mistake to dismiss inter-district school choice as a phenomenon driven by family convenience. Enrollment patterns in districts where significant numbers of transfers occurred ...show a strong

unmistakable trend ...[toward] districts with higher indicators of student performance and higher socioeconomic status than the districts they left."

Because of these disparities of opinion, and the lack of anything but anecdotal evidence to support either view, the central purpose of the School Choice Questionnaire was to find out why students and their parents participate in school choice.

Respondents were asked to select their answer to this question from among the following factors:

- (1) the desire for an improved or different academic program;
- (2) a lack of funding or resources at their former school;
- (3) concerns about safety and school violence at their former school;
- (4) the desire for an improved or different athletic program;
- (5) dissatisfaction with class sizes in their former school;
- (6) personal reasons or a need to start over in a new school;
- (7) the desire for an improved or different extracurricular program;
- (8) parental convenience;
- (9) dissatisfaction with the size of their former school;
- (10) the desire to stay in a school despite a change of residence;
- (11) the desire to stay in a school where they had paid private tuition prior to school choice;
- (12) a desire for a less diverse student body;
- (13) the desire for a more diverse student population; and
- (14) age eligibility for certain programs.

Convenience

Despite Carnegie's claim to the contrary, only 15 percent of those who responded to the EOE questionnaire cited convenience as one of their reasons for participating in the program. Just under 6.2 percent indicated that convenience was their most important reason for participating in school choice. And only 10 of the 826 respondents, or 1.2 percent, indicated that convenience was their only reason for participating.

For some parents, convenience was important. Praising the convenience of school choice, one parent wrote, "I think this program is great. I am a single mother and my parents watch my daughter during the day. I live in the next town and if I had to get a baby-sitter it would cost me a fortune, but with school choice I can just drop her off at my parents in [the choice community] and they can just bring her to school."

Such examples were uncommon, however. In fact, in many cases it was clear that parents decided to participate despite the inconvenience of doing so. "Regarding convenience," one parent said, "It was inconvenient for our son to wait for transportation, yet he never complained and the success he has achieved more than makes up for any inconve-

nience."

Another wrote in the margin, "Despite the fact that the local school is 2 miles away, we travel close to 20 miles each way. It is well worth the trip."

Academics

In contrast to convenience, a majority of participating parents cited the desire for a different or improved academic program as a reason for choosing a new school. A total of 521, 63 percent of the 826 respondents, said academic concerns influenced their decision.

In addition to being the most commonly cited reason for participating, academic concerns were also cited as the most important factor in the school choice decision. A total of 352 respondents, or 42.6 percent identified academics as their number one reason for choice participation. More than 67 percent of those who identified academics as an issue said it was the most important issue.

"My daughter," one parent wrote, "was always an excellent student, and I felt that she was not challenged by the programs offered in our local schools."

Another said, "Our son is a lazy student who needs a school where teachers keep the academic pressure on – he also does better when school and home stay in close contact – [our local school] does not have a reputation for doing either of these things well."

"School choice," a third parent noted, "was a difficult decision. It was taking my son out of familiar surroundings, but he was in agreement that he wanted to try a new school with expanded programs."

Another parent wrote, "Our major reason for the change was academic. Our son had reading and comprehension problems in [our town] that the school system wasn't willing to address. He still has some problems in this area, but at least the [choice school] system is working to improve them."

Some families sought very specific academic improvements. As one wrote, "The reason our son changed schools was academics. His previous school had a very weak math department – even with many meetings between teachers, administration and parents the teachers still taught horribly."

Lack of Resources

Other educational and programmatic indicators figured high on the list of reasons for participating in school choice. A lack of resources, books, facilities, staff or equipment in the sending districts was the second most frequently cited reason for participation. Of the 826 completed surveys, 415 parents, or 50.2 percent of all respondents, said a lack of resources in their home district directed them toward choosing a new school.

While resources were not far behind academics as a reason for opting into choice, it was not nearly as important a reason. The number of respondents indicating that resources were the most important reason for participating was 166, or 20.1 percent, less than half of those citing academics as their main motivating factor.

"We moved [our son] to [the choice school] in his Freshman year because [our town] had made large budget cuts for the three years preceding and the high school was dramatically effected," one parent wrote.

Another wrote that their son's "English class had no reading books until Christmas," and "band, chorus, industrial metal working [and] cooking classes [were] all eliminated, as were the upper level grouping by ability classes."

One parent wrote, "Our own impoverished school system is too small to be able to economically offer advanced-paced classes."

"My 'choice,'" another wrote, "was not to send my children out of town, away from their friends and community and, if all things were equal and per-pupil spending were equal, my 'choice' would be for my children to [go] to school where they live. That 'choice' was not an option. [Our school system] is horribly underfunded, and I'm grateful to have had an alternative."

School Safety

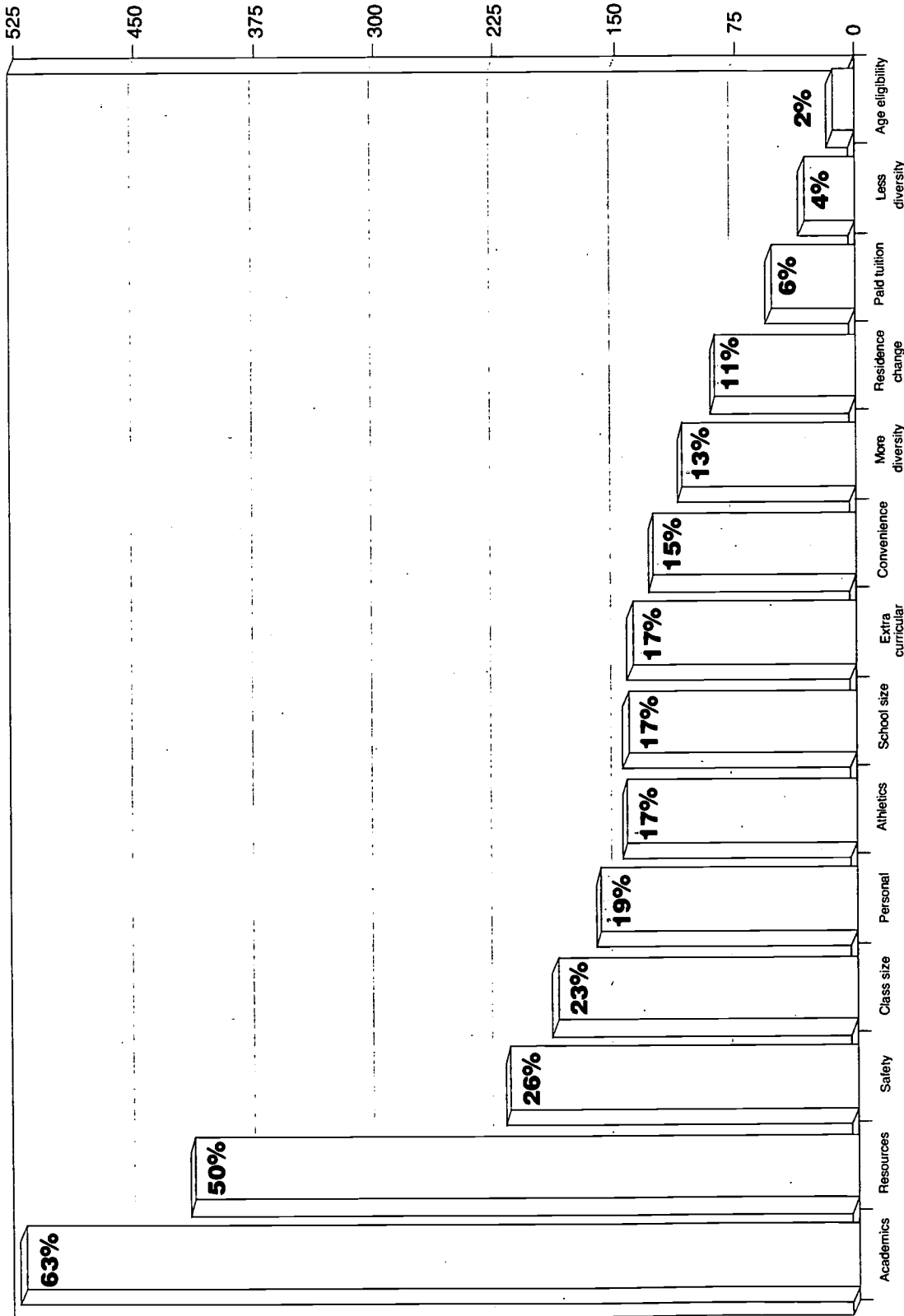
While academics and resources clearly focused on educational and programmatic concerns, the third most frequent concern cited by choice parents centered around a much more basic and fundamental issue: safety. A lack of school safety in the sending district was identified by 217 respondents, or 26.3 percent, as a reason for participating in school choice.

One Voice...

What Parents Say About School Choice

It is now the end of October and we couldn't be more pleased with our daughter's transition into her new school and our decision to send her there through school choice. She is academically challenged and has easily assimilated into the social mainstream of the school. She has always been an exemplary student and citizen and we have been very proud of her and she has easily made this transition and we are pleased with her new circle of friends as well. She was elected by her new peers to represent them in student council. I believe she will be an asset to her new school as well as reaping the benefits of what they have to offer her. [She] has been especially impressed with the high level of discipline and respect at HW regional. She also finds the general school spirit and pride exciting.

Chart 1. Ten Reasons Why Parents Choose School Choice



While the desire for a safe environment was identified less often than resources as a reason for choosing a new school, it seemed to be a more important factor to those who considered it. More than half of those who mentioned school safety as an issue, 112 of the 217, or 51 percent, indicated that it was the most important issue to them. About 40 percent of those who cited resources indicated that it was the most important factor.

One mother noted that her son, a junior high school student, "had some stress problems resulting from some serious attacks he witnessed both to his teacher and other students."

"Being a single parent with enough concerns," another said, "I didn't want [my daughter] to be afraid on top of all the other issues adolescents have. That was her main concern when we were deciding - that 'she wanted to be safe.'"

Still another mother wrote, "Our children left [our town's] schools because of safety issues that administrators refused to deal with. Changing school systems has changed my children. They feel safe, and have found that their new school offers more in the areas where their interests are."

School safety was a particular concern among parents from urban areas. For example, of the 109 surveys from parents transferring their children from Springfield, 84, or approximately 77 percent, included safety as one of their reasons for doing so. And 53, almost half, said safety was the most crucial consideration.

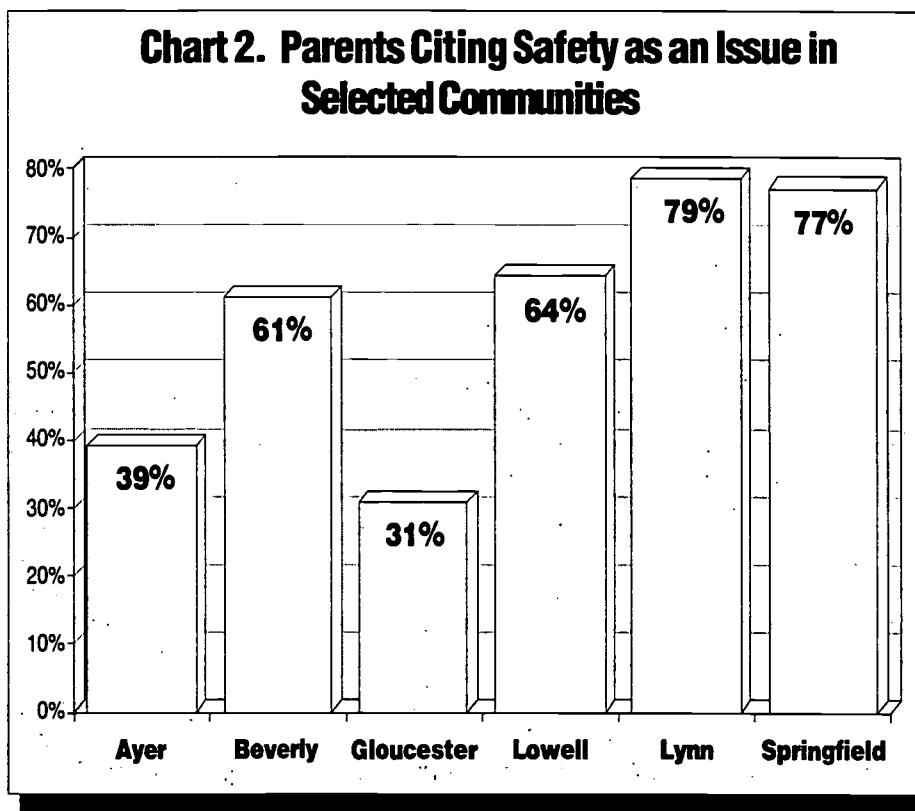
Holyoke, Lawrence, Lowell, Boston, Haverhill, Beverly, Gloucester, Lynn, Fitchburg, Peabody, Revere, Marlborough, Ayer, Springfield, Leominster and Methuen were among the communities where safety was a concern for parents whose children participate in choice.

In several of these communities, however, the number of participating students was too small to provide a significant sample. For example, 100 percent of the respondents from Boston cited safety as an issue, and 83 percent of the respondents from Lawrence did so, but there were only six respondents from each city.

Although the sample size for some urban districts was too small to be conclusive, overall, the responses indicated a consistently high level of concern about safety among urban parents. One urban parent said of her son, "I was very nervous about him attending in [our city] because of the crime and violence."

The mother of a middle school student in the same city wrote, "My son was assaulted by a student in the beginning of the eighth grade. [He left our city's] schools for his own protection."

The contrast between urban and suburban communities on this issue was striking. In Maynard, for example, only one of the 68 respondents even mentioned safety. Similarly, only two of the 47 respondents from Hopkinton cited safety as an issue.



Class and School Sizes

Class size followed academics and resources as an educational concern to participants, and it was fourth, behind school safety, overall.

Class size was identified by 187 respondents, or 22.6 percent, as a reason for participating in school choice. School size was identified by 143 respondents, or 17.3 percent. While 300 respondents mentioned either school size or class size as a factor, only 74 of them, or 9 percent, indicated that one or the other was the primary motivator.

Interestingly, not all of those concerned about class sizes were looking for schools with smaller classes. "It probably sounds strange to complain that a school or class is too small," one parent wrote, "but when you go to every class with the same 8-10 students I just don't think there is enough exposure to people with various strengths and weaknesses."

Most comments were similar to the following, from the parent of an elementary school student. "My younger child needed smaller classes and stronger academics. She has improved because of the new smaller class size. Our home district went through a large building program and still ended up with overcrowded classes and cuts in programs."

Comments regarding school sizes were more evenly divided. Some parents expressed interest in smaller programs. One wrote, "The school my son would have attended in [our town] was overcrowded."

One Voice... What Parents Say About School Choice

I am a public school teacher, so I have a great interest in the school choice program as well as other educational reforms. The first year of school choice was punitive to sending schools, but otherwise the whole program is going in the right direction. School choice makes each school take notice of educational improvements that nearby schools make, lest it lose students to those other schools. My high school, Hamilton-Wenham, is one of the best on the North Shore, but when a nearby high school implemented advanced placement our principal asked each department to review our policy on AP. We don't want to lose students to that district. . . . School choice is improving the quality of education in Massachusetts, in my opinion. The students who came to my school came by their own choice or the choice of their parents. Some students come over twenty miles to school. They are trying to take advantage of their opportunities. Instead of bemoaning those who are left behind, we should be looking for ways to give them opportunities to choose also.

Another said, "We are very happy with school choice. [Our daughters] like the smaller schools."

Other parents indicated they were looking for a larger school with more program offerings. "It is wonderful to have a greater number of students to belong to. ...We feel the larger school is so much better for our daughter," one parent wrote.

One high school student also answered this question. "I started off in an inadequate, insufficient public high school with poor athletics and academics that was too small to meet my specific academic needs. ...[The choice school] provides enough classes [for me] to be in an honors English class and an average math class at the same time, which [my old school] failed to do," the student said.

Personal Reasons

Respondents cited personal reasons or the need for a new start 160 times, or 19.4 percent, making personal reasons the fifth most frequent motivator for program participation. Approximately 7.5 percent of the respondents, 62 in all, indicated that personal considerations were the most important factor in their decision.

According to one father, "My son ...was attending [our local school]. He had gone through K-2. In his second grade he had experienced discrimination by his school mate. I had a discussion with the principal. Nothing was done. We decided to participate in the school choice program."

Another parent said, "My son was doing very poorly in our district

school. He has above average intelligence ...however, his teachers had a very negative attitude toward him. With each day he became more and more depressed. By the end of the eighth grade I was very worried about his well being, not his academic performance. School choice gave him a fresh start, new friends and opportunities to participate in sports, (and) social and academic programs he was unable to take advantage of."

One couple wrote, "Being foster parents of teenage boys with a variety of emotional and behavioral problems, we feel that school choice can at times be just the change needed to give a child a new start. We also feel (as in our present case) that the ability to allow a child to continue in a familiar setting when it seems like the rest of the world is toppling down around them is indeed important."

Athletic/Extracurricular Programs

Interest in an improved or different athletic or extracurricular program appeared on 17.4 percent and 16.9 percent of the surveys, respectively. Of the 826 responses, 144 included athletics as a reason for participating, and 140 discussed extracurricular activities. Overall, athletics were the fifth most compelling reason for choice, barely ahead of school sizes and just behind personal reasons. Extracurricular activities rated seventh, behind school size.

"We appreciate the opportunity for our son to participate in school of choice," one father wrote. "Because of a childhood interest in a hockey association, he looked forward to being part of a high school team. When we moved to a community without a high school program, this opportunity was closed. School of choice gave him the option of attending a high school with hockey. He is grateful for this and we believe his academics have remained above average as a result."

Both hockey and football were mentioned regularly, although not

One Voice...

What Parents Say About School Choice

As a teacher in the Uxbridge school system which has been a "pioneer" in school choice in this area, I have observed that many of those who have chosen "school choice" have done so to escape problems. For the most part it isn't the hard working students nor the involved parents who school shop, but the kids who have broken rules and the parents who blame the teachers for everything. There is also movement for athletics and for lower standards for graduation. It hasn't been in effect long enough to see the improvements that competition can bring about. In the Blackstone valley where some schools had financial problems, the school choice policy has created animosity and distrust between neighboring schools. I think the good will eventually outweigh the negative aspects which occur with any kind of change.

exclusively, among those interested in certain sports. Soccer, swimming, skiing, tennis and lacrosse all were mentioned as well.

For example, one parent wrote, “[Our school district] did not offer a soccer program for girls. I did not want her on a mixed (boys & girls) team. ...She excels at soccer and would not have had a chance for any recognition on a mixed team, so we enrolled her at [the choice school]. She has played on varsity – and she has a very good potential for a soccer scholarship.”

Drama, band and after-school enrichment programs, such as math and debate clubs or tutoring, were among the extracurricular activities identified by respondents as important to their decision. Several parents mentioned the lack of a band, orchestra or choral program at their former school as a reason for choice participation. Drama and other arts programs also were mentioned more than once.

One parent noted that, due to choice, “My son will have studio art classes each day of his high school years.”

Another parent incorporated athletics, extracurricular activities and academics all into one choice. Her daughter's new school, she said, “has provided her with a highly, top-rated education, superior music program (she's in chorus), varsity girls soccer and varsity swim team. She thoroughly enjoys these and has been socially accepted by all.”

One Voice... What Parents Say About School Choice

In our community (Shirley) there can already be seen a tendency for the school committee to more readily recommend a reduction in class sizes (i.e. having new teacher considered. Prior to “choice” this was not considered.) Also - discussion of programs occasionally supersedes that of the new janitor's hours or the cost of toilet tissue. The threat of further losses of students to choice has definitely given this very political group a nudge in a new direction. For us, “choice” was the only viable option. Parochial school always represented a participation in religion as well as academics for our children; a trade off we accepted but found less than satisfactory. To attempt to move (geographical) now would represent a financial loss to us, as well as being undesirable to our family because we are very happy in our home. But the school here is simply not acceptable to us. My son (entering 7th grade) has been energized by a splendid math teacher. The entire faculty & the educational philosophy of the school department is one of innovation, academic dedication and the support of their community is 100%, where in Shirley, we're lucky to see 35%. We are adamantly in support of the continuation, enhancement and expansion of school choice in Massachusetts.

**One Voice...
What Parents Say About School Choice**

Last year I drove my son 13 miles to school each way.. 26 miles in the morning and 26 miles over and back to pick him up: That totaled 260 miles of driving a week. My point is that I feel his education in school choice is far superior than if he stayed in his school district. The faculty and students gave an "outsider" a warm welcome and were there to help with any problem. The teachers are always ready to stay and help the kids whether with school work or just to talk. I am pleased with the decision to go with school choice. My daughter is now a freshman involved with school choice.. She has made many new friends, loves her school work and is having a happy school year.

Diversity

The desire for a more diverse student body was cited by 109 respondents, or 13.2 percent. Those seeking less diversity amounted to only 32, or 3.9 percent. Many of those interested in a less diverse student population indicated that their decision was driven by the desire for a more homogenous academic grouping, rather than by racial or ethnic considerations. Similarly, many of those seeking greater diversity indicated a desire for a larger school with more opportunities for their children to make different friends, rather than an interest in a particular racial or ethnic balance.

There were exceptions, however.

One parent, citing the need for greater diversity, noted that, "There were very few Asians in [our home district]."

Another parent observed that "blacks, Asians, etc., create a more interesting student body," and indicated an interest in "a school where kids were more accepting of diversity."

Tracking, or academic grouping, was important to some who sought less diversity. A number of those parents opted for choice because academic grouping had been eliminated or was unavailable in their home districts. One parent, for example, wanted "ability grouping in the new school (honors)." Another wanted a school with more "college bound" students.

It is important to note that the survey did not ask respondents to identify their racial or cultural background. Nor did the questionnaire ask for socioeconomic indicators such as income or educational attainment. As a result, the ability to analyze whether choice exacerbates "white flight" from urban centers is limited.

However, a few respondents from urban areas did say they wanted less diversity due to ethnic, racial or cultural considerations. One parent said the family "didn't want to be in the minority." Another said the

family wanted less diversity to escape "gang violence."

One parent explained, "I wanted my daughter in a school where being 'white' doesn't mean you're threatened or beat up by Hispanics on a regular basis (this was the case in [our home district]). No child can learn in a hostile environment. There is a definite discrimination against 'white' students in [our home district] and it's not being addressed."

One urban parent addressed the issue of "white flight" directly, saying, "It seems that, to satisfy parents who want quality education for their children, the 'choice' program is a necessary evil. It is not a good program for the 'sending school' of the district because major amounts of funding are lost. Thus programs decline, 'white flight' is reinforced in a city already losing its heterogeneity, and teachers are demoralized."

Other Issues

Respondents also identified two other factors. First, choice allowed some parents to enroll their children in school at an earlier age, due to a lower age requirement in the receiving district. This almost exclusively affected kindergarten students. Second, choice allowed some students to stay in districts from which their families recently had moved, or to which they previously paid private tuition.

Only 14 families were affected by the former category, with about 1.7 percent of the respondents indicating that age eligibility convinced them to opt for choice.

"My daughter has benefited greatly from the school choice program," one parent wrote. "She had attended 2 years of nursery school and a third year would not have benefited her. [Our town] would not test her because of her birth date. In [the choice school] she excelled and grew emotionally."

Slightly more than 10 percent, or 88 respondents, said they opted

One Voice... What Parents Say About School Choice

Holliston is a wonderful school system the teachers are excellent and dedicated. My son has never been happier in school and is kept challenged in all areas of study. The principal and vice principal encourage all students to be actively involved in their school and truly care about each and every student. I am hoping my second son will be able to attend kindergarten in Holliston next year. School choice has provided us with a great alternative to our town's school system.

for choice so their children could stay in districts from which they had moved. Another 53 respondents, or 6.4 percent, said they previously had paid private tuition to attend the choice districts.

One parent wrote, "I was a teacher in the system the children went to. For us school choice allowed the children to stay at the same, out of town district schools they were in. We were very dissatisfied with our local school and administration, and saw no changes in the near future, so we left that system early on."

Another said, "I was forced for economic reasons to sell the residence in [the receiving district] and move somewhere cheaper. The existence of the choice program gave me a much broader choice while leaving [my son] with his friends."

Summary

As a group, choice consumers clearly are taking advantage of the program for a wide variety of reasons. More often than not individuals used multiple criteria to make their decisions. The 826 respondents who returned a questionnaire cited a combined 2,350 different reasons for participating in school choice – just fewer than three reasons per respondent.

Despite this variety, there was one very important common denominator apparent both in the responses and the comments provided by parents. Almost without exception, the decision to choose a new school was motivated by the best interests of the children and their families.

For most families this meant considering educational factors such as academics, available resources, class sizes, school sizes or extra-curricular programs. These five major items accounted for 1,406, or approximately 60 percent, of the 2,350 considerations identified.

Even noneducational decisions, such as those made for safety or personal reasons, suggest an underlying desire to give the student access to a better or more stable educational environment.

One respondent offered the best summation of why parents opt into the school choice program. "The idea of school choice is very good in that it enables a parent to seek out a more suitable public school system for his child. All of us want the best for our children in the hopes that he or she will have the tools to succeed in this world."

Customer Satisfaction with School Choice

In addition to determining why families participate in the school choice program, the survey was designed to measure consumer's satisfaction with their new choice school. For comparative purposes, the survey also asked respondents to identify their level of satisfaction with their former school.

Respondents were asked two questions: "How satisfied have you been with your new school?" and "How satisfied were you with your

previous school?" Parents could identify themselves as: "most satisfied," "very satisfied," "satisfied," "not very satisfied" and "dissatisfied."

Generally, choice participants indicated a high level of satisfaction with their new school, and a correspondingly lower level of satisfaction with their former school.

Not all of the respondents addressed this question. Of the 826 survey respondents, 794 discussed satisfaction with their new schools, and 727 rated their satisfaction with the former schools.

Some said they did not respond to the question about their former schools because their children had attended private or parochial schools prior to choice. A few others indicated they could not answer the questions because their children would be participating in choice for the first time during the Fall of 1993. Others said their children began choice in kindergarten.

Receiving Districts

More than 60 percent of those who responded indicated the highest level of satisfaction with their choice school. Of the 794 respondents, 487, or 61.3%, indicated they were "most satisfied" with their new school. Another 244 parents, or almost 31 percent, said they were "very satisfied." Another 7.5 percent, 59 respondents, said they were at least "satisfied" with their choice school. Only four respondents said they were "not very satisfied." And none were completely "dissatisfied."

Altogether, more than 90 percent of the respondents said they were either "very satisfied" or "most satisfied" with their new, choice school.

Although virtually all respondents were pleased with the opportunity to choose, and expressed satisfaction with their new schools, not all were comfortable with the concept of the program.

"Although we participate in the school choice program," one parent wrote, "we would prefer not to. Choice in itself will not contribute to the improvement of schools statewide, and penalizes poorer school districts. School reform is what is really needed."

Another respondent noted that "...it would be easier to improve existing schools rather than put money towards a program which makes people go elsewhere - outside their community for education."

Negative reactions to the program were the exception, however. The following comments are more typical of choice participants:

"We have been very pleased with the school of choice program;"

"I could not thank the Governor enough for this choice program;"

"School choice is working well for us;"

"We are pleased our children had the opportunity to participate in this program;"

"We have been very happy there is school choice;"

"[Our new] school district has been a Godsend for us;"

"We were so thankful to have the option to send our child to another school;"

"It's the best thing for education Massachusetts ever did."

In addition to being grateful for the chance to access a new school for their own children, many parents also said that the competition choice fosters has encouraged their former school district to change and improve.

"I think school choice does force towns and their schools to abandon complacency and improve. It wasn't just money, it was poor administration and planning," one parent wrote.

Another noted, "School choice introduces the concepts of 'accountability' and 'competition' to the school administrators; heretofore foreign concepts to many of them."

Some parents actually observed systemic changes in their home districts after school choice was implemented. According to one, "In our own community the high school has tried harder and improved due to the competition school choice provides."

Another wrote that, in her home community, the "schools are finally trying to change and update programs to keep the students from going choice. It appears this will be the first year in the last four that the voters gave the school enough money to prevent more cuts and all because of choice!"

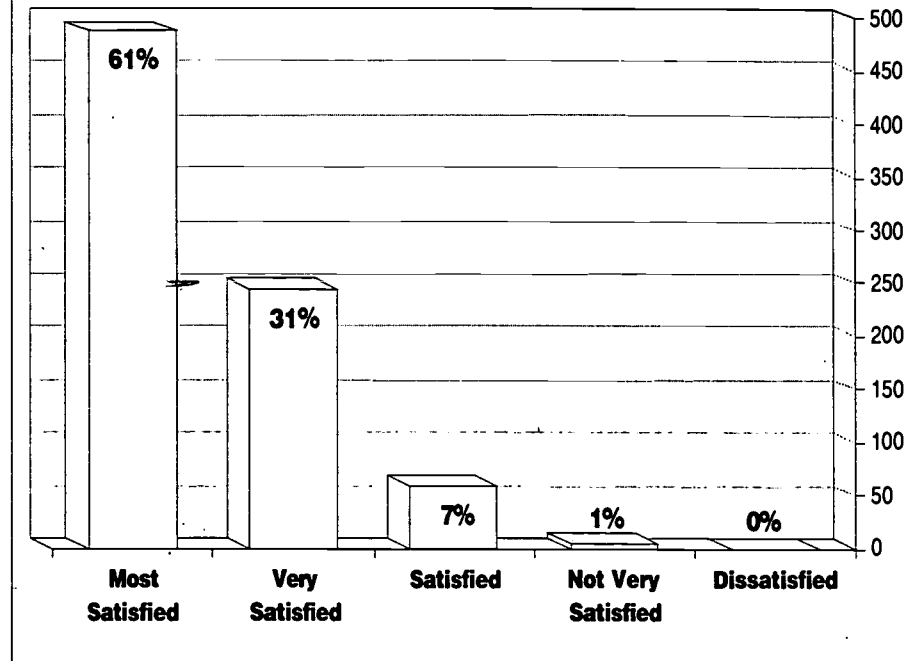
Another parent shared some firsthand knowledge. "As a former School Committee member I can say that school choice has had a significant impact on the [sending district]. It has caused major administrative and organizational changes that were long overdue. Competition for students is a tremendous motivating factor."

Sending Districts

The contrast between satisfaction with the former school and the new choice school is dramatic. While almost every respondent indicated a measure of satisfaction with the new school, the percentage of parents satisfied with their former school was much smaller. Only 6.3 percent, or 46 of the 727 respondents who answered this question, described themselves as "most satisfied" with their former school. Another 58 respondents, or 8 percent, said they were "very satisfied."

Interestingly, a number of those who expressed some satisfaction with their old school did so in reference to a private or parochial school they had been attending prior to school choice. As one parent explained, "the questions concerning the previous school will be answered using the parochial school as a basis for the answer."

A larger number, 19.5 percent, or 142 respondents, said they were "satisfied" with their former school. But the majority, just over two-thirds, indicated that they had been either "not very satisfied" or downright "dissatisfied" with their former school. Of the 727 responses, 231, or 31.8 percent, said they were "not very satisfied." And 250 parents,

Chart 3. Parental Satisfaction with the New School

34.4 percent, said they were "dissatisfied."

The comments echoed the overall dissatisfaction illustrated by the raw numbers. One mother wrote, "We bought our first home two years ago. After three months in my daughter's new school I was very upset with her education. ...I thought my only alternative was to sell our new home and move. ...Then school choice opened up in my area and we were saved."

Another parent said, "I would like the school choice program to continue because I don't hold much hope for our local schools and I have another student to consider."

"After attending grammar school in [our town]," one couple wrote, "we were not happy with the public education offered. We enrolled both our children in parochial school in a nearby city. We were hoping that the high school would be stable enough for them to attend - but after several interviews we found ourselves forced to find an alternative versus a private high school."

Student Performance Under School Choice

As well as determining whether consumers are satisfied with their choices, the survey sought information about whether those choices actually had resulted in improved student performance.

Choice provides parents with an opportunity to make individual-

ized decisions about their child's educational environment. That opportunity is important in and of itself, and it probably contributes significantly to the high level of satisfaction expressed by parents. However, some have suggested that, if choice is to be considered a successful policy, it should help improve a child's academic performance as well.

If the earlier evidence that parents make choices based upon academic criteria is to be supported, then improved student performance should be a characteristic of the school choice program. In fact, the survey supports that conclusion.

The survey asked parents, "How has your new school affected your child's academic performance?" Respondents were given four choices: "most improved," "very improved," "no change," "declined" and "declined greatly." Of the 826 surveys returned to the Executive Office of Education, 709 respondents answered this question.

Approximately 71 percent said they observed at least some improvement in their child's performance after participating in school choice. About 27 percent, 190 respondents, said their child's performance was "most improved" through choice, and just over 44 percent, or 315 respondents, indicated that academic performance was "very improved."

According to one parent, "The Principal took a risk on our son and gave him a clean slate and a new start last year. One year later our son is doing better academically, participating in sports and feels much better about himself."

According to another, "Our daughter is working harder, happier, more invested and talking about college options."

**One Voice...
What Parents Say About School Choice**

We are thrilled with the school choice program! It has allowed our children access to a top public school without the expense of moving to a wealthy town or paying exorbitant tuition. Because we were freed from the \$20,000 a year tuition I (mom) have been able to return to grad. school to further my own education for a long desired career change. As upper middle class people, the one source we never thought would do anything to ever help us was the government. This is the first time I ever felt the government helped me since our college loans in the 1960's. Some may charge elitism. However, I am the granddaughter of illiterate peasant immigrants. Everything we have we got through the educational opportunities which the government gave us in the form of 3% national defense student loans. We highly value and honor education in our family and go to every end we can to try to get the best education for our children. Thank you for helping with this - it helped the whole family by reducing financial and emotional stress.

A third parent wrote, "This program has been wonderful for our 12-year-old son. His grades have risen significantly and so has his self-esteem."

One parent, a teacher in the receiving district, wrote, "My son's performance in all areas of school life has improved dramatically. He has been on the honor roll for four quarters in a row. Since I teach at the receiving district, I knew the demands that would be placed on him both academically and athletically would cause him to extend himself to reach his full potential."

And still another parent wrote, "My son's grades have improved tremendously. His attitude and outlook regarding school is fantastic: he looks forward to attending class. I've noticed he has a lot more projects, homework, etc., however this only seems to make him a more driven person."

Approximately 26 percent, 182 respondents, said they noticed no change in their child's academic performance. Only 3 percent, 22 respondents, indicated that their child's performance actually had declined, although at least one respondent suggested that the decline was due to the challenging academic atmosphere of the receiving school in contrast to the lack of preparation and poor academics at the sending school.

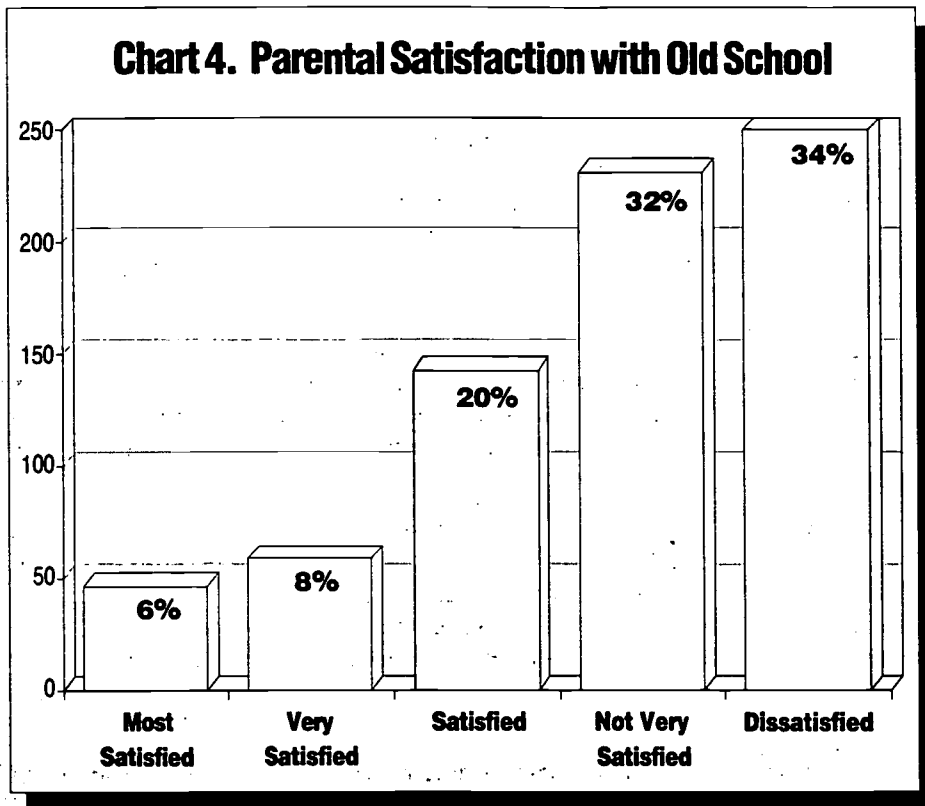
For example, a parent whose son experienced a performance decline wrote, "Academically the transition between the school systems is extremely difficult especially at the Jr. high level. Our son who in [our town] was honor roll academically, once in [the new school] grades fell dramatically and maintaining passing grades is a challenge. ...We did send him to summer school this past summer which so far seems to have helped with this year's new classes."

One parent indicated that, while academic performance had not improved, academic programs at the new school were more challenging. "Our child was a consistent A+ student in our home district. ...She is still getting straight A's for grades, but she is being challenged and

One Voice...

What Parents Say About School Choice

I believe school choice to be an empowering program for families. Our children are now afforded a superior education due to this legislation. As strong proponents of public education, we were fortunate to have the "choice" of an extremely high-powered public system, Harvard, next to our decaying system, Lancaster. But everyday I drive by the Lancaster elementary school, I feel guilty. School choice is a bitter ethical pill to swallow, and I am sad that my tax dollars are leaving town and hurting the children who remain. I wish the formula for reimbursement was less penalizing to the sending school.



better prepared for the future.”

Some parents who had not noticed any improvement academically said they had seen improvements in their child’s attitude toward school.

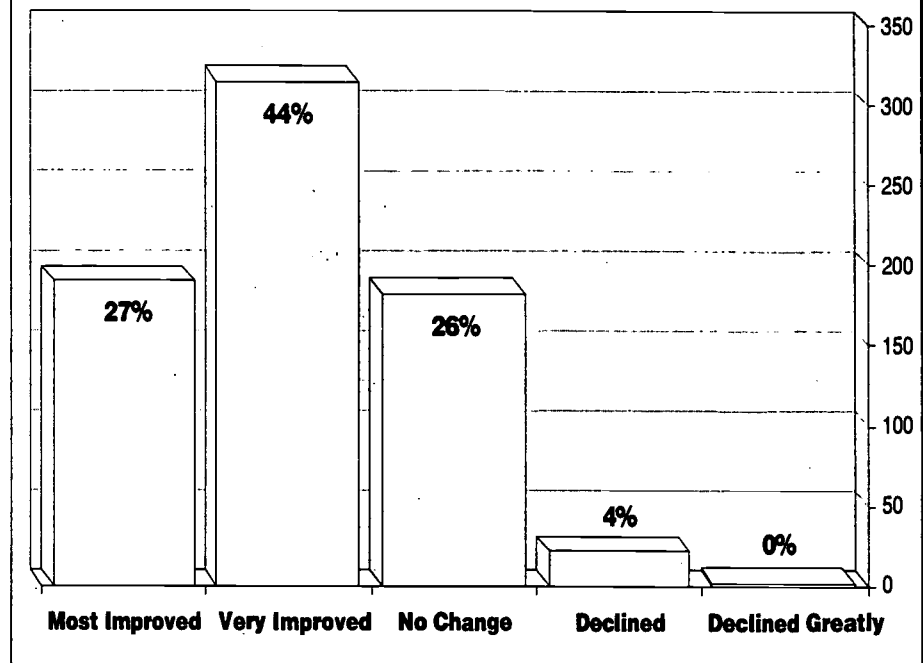
Comparing her children’s performances in the sending and receiving districts, one mother explained, “Our children soared at [the new school] and sunk [at the old one]. They became a lot more motivated and competitive, studied and became very conscientious about their school work.”

Another parent wrote, “Our child’s performance was not at issue. The school’s performance was. At her new school she is being challenged and she has continued to perform well.”

Sources of Information for Parents

Although school choice has been available for three years, its existence has never been formally articulated to parents and students. There have been no mass mailings, workshops, forums or newsletters, yet the program has grown exponentially.

The expansion of school choice has taken place with little fanfare at the state level, and with minimal effort by participating districts. One of EOE’s objectives was to determine just how parents and students learned about the program.

Chart 5. Student Performance Under School Choice

Parents were asked whether they learned about choice from friends or relatives, school publications, school visits, newspaper articles, or advertisements initiated by a receiving district.

Newspaper articles were the number one source of information about the school choice program. Approximately 58 percent of the respondents, or 480, indicated that newspaper coverage provided at least some of their information about school choice.

Another 34 percent, 327 families, said they learned about the program from friends or relatives. Of the remainder, 74 learned about choice through school visits, 52 from school publications and 30 through advertisements initiated by receiving school districts.

A number of respondents became aware of the program through involvement with their home school. In one case, a choice participant served on her home district's school committee prior to opting for choice. In another case, the respondent taught in the sending district. One parent wrote, "I have been aware of school choice since its inception through local government."

Most of those who knew about school choice due to other sources were educators who learned about the program through their own district. Others heard about choice from friends or relatives who were educators. A few others said they heard about the program through radio or television news.

One parent complained about the lack of formal communication

from the state. "I found when I heard mention of school choice becoming an option - few if any of my friends had heard about it. Many of us listened to numerous speakers and stressed the need to educate the public of this upcoming and important event taking place. Nothing changed, no fliers, no phone calls, no public announcements! Choice began and those few of us that were already concerned and deeply involved took advantage of the program. It was unfair and I still admit it is unfair."

How to Improve School Choice

The last survey question was designed to identify parental opinions about how the school choice program should be changed or improved. Seven possible changes were suggested. Respondents were asked to identify those they thought would improve the program, although the Education Reform Act already has incorporated some of these suggestions into the school choice law.

The seven possible improvements were:

- (1) mandatory participation by all school districts;
- (2) a provision for state-funded transportation;
- (3) establishment of a Parent Information Center, to act as a source of information about all schools;
- (4) an increase in the amount of tuition paid to receiving districts;
- (5) a decrease in the amount of tuition paid to receiving districts;

One Voice...

What Parents Say About School Choice

My feelings about the school choice program have evolved over the past two years that we have participated in the program. I believe that parents and young people should have flexibility to move out of their district if necessary, but i have come to believe that young people are best educated in their own communities and that those communities should receive the support and guidance necessary to promote quality educational programs. I wonder whether school choice achieves that goal in all situations. In the town of hopkinton school choice did have a positive effect in the sense that such large numbers of students left the town's educational institutions that people were forced to sit up and take notice. This seemed to galvanize the community and resulted in positive changes in terms of funding and a more widespread commitment to building a quality school system. Likewise, the change was good for our daughter who has found her new school community to be challenging academically and welcoming socially. She has never looked back, but I have. There are several issues which were harder to deal with than we expected or which we didn't anticipate and, as a result, I would be much more reluctant to move our other children to a different community.

- (6) an increase in the amount of reimbursement provided to sending districts; and
- (7) a decrease in the amount of reimbursement provided to sending districts.

Transportation

Transportation was, by far, the biggest concern of school choice parents. The comments on this issue highlighted the lack of transportation as the largest obstacle to an equitable program. Of the 826 respondents, 471, or 57 percent, said transportation is a major problem confronting choice.

"We are very happy with the choice program. The only aspect that is a problem is transportation," one parent said.

Another parent noted, "With the price of gas on the increase, transportation is an important issue."

One parent actually indicated that the lack of transportation had forced her child to stop participating in choice. "We are going back to our city school because of transportation."

Even parents who did not experience transportation problems noted the need for a choice transportation provision. As one parent wrote, "I am in a unique position in that we live as close to the out-of-town school as to the school in our city of residence. So, transportation is not an issue for us. It is for most however."

Another wrote, "I know of 8 families in [our town] that would participate in school choice if transportation was provided. It is sad to think that a child is stuck in a system because of transportation."

One couple said, "School choice works for us because we have 2 cars and flexible schedules. It would be an equal opportunity program if there were transportation."

A few respondents, however, indicated a concern about the potential cost of providing transportation. "Transportation would be nice to have," one wrote, "but may cause more problems than it would solve."

"I do not feel transportation should be funded," one parent wrote. "Like private school parents should be responsible. I have developed

One Voice... What Parents Say About School Choice

We have been extremely pleased with the high standards at Masconomet. It is a shame that Masco now has to have a lottery for school choice because there are so many parents who are dissatisfied with their previous school. It is the best thing we as parents feel we have done for our son. We feel very, very lucky to have been able to place him there in 7th grade.

car pools for all of my children with friends and neighbors and it entails some work but it is working. All of the above suggestions will cost more money, create more bureaucracy and do little good."

Another parent agreed. "This would be tremendously costly. Given the existence of schools with inadequate funding, for the system to spend such a large amount of money on busing, would be irresponsible at best."

Parent Information Center

A large number of parents also supported the need for a Parent Information Center. A total of 306 respondents, or 37 percent, said such a center would greatly improve the school choice program.

As one respondent explained, "A parent information center would be great. We went to five different schools before we made a decision. It would be nice to have some of the info on hand before you go to see the school."

Another parent said of the Parent Information Center, "This would be excellent. I would like to see a catalog containing pertinent facts for each school system statewide, i.e., class size, extracurricular activities, after school programs, curriculum, college acceptance statistics, etc. This publication should include both private and public schools."

One Voice...

What Parents Say About School Choice

I am grateful for the opportunity this survey provides to address the "school choice" issue. The program has been wonderful for our son and we deeply appreciate the commitment the Wilbraham and Hampden Wilbraham school committees have made to it. . . . At no point have we or our child ever been considered "outsiders" – in fact, our opinions have been solicited and we have been encouraged towards even more active involvement. Our son has benefited from being in an environment where education is the focus of school, and social issues are incorporated into that philosophy. In the past he frequently found himself in situations where that philosophy was reversed. . . . Choice has also given us the opportunity to learn how "keeping the lines of communication open" can be of such importance in parents and students realizing they have a role in decision-making. Simply stated, we are routinely kept informed of school related issues by our son's school and so not have to "track down" information. Calendars, newsletters, pamphlets, etc. Keep us informed and involved, and seem like such a basic solution to what was a large problem in the past. . . . We firmly believe in the school choice program and know personally that it is working for us and our son. I hope that the goal of choice – to promote better schools throughout the commonwealth can be realized.

A third parent wrote, "Parents of students in middle school need to be given information concerning choice and concerning neighborhood schools. In Texas profiles of each school are made available and contain statistics about each school. Then an intelligent decision is made from facts, mingled in with stories about the schools."

Mandatory Participation

Requiring mandatory participation by all districts was the third most frequent suggestion, with 255 respondents identifying mandatory participation as a way to improve choice.

"We have been very pleased with the school of choice program," one parent wrote. "However, we do have one problem. As [our son] enters his second year in the program our daughter who will be entering Kindergarten will not be allowed to join the program. We look forward to mandatory participation by all public schools!"

This comment also illustrates another issue, which was not addressed by the survey, but which was cited as a problem by a number of parents – the inability of the siblings of choice students to participate. One parent noted this problem and wrote, "My daughter is in the program now and loves it and for the year 1994-1995 I'll be having our next daughter going to Kindergarten and who knows if she'll be able to attend – then I'll have to deal with two school systems and I'm sure it will be difficult to be totally involved."

Another agreed and said, "The most important area for improvement would be to require school districts to accept siblings of choice students, if choice parents desired to send their other children there. It would foster family harmony and promote more family allegiance to the choice school and might as a result increase choice parents desire to participate more in the choice school. The ambiguity of choice siblings creates a lot of anxiety for choice parents."

Some parents thought mandatory participation would be counter-productive. As one parent pointed out, "I would think a school that does not want children from other communities would do a poor job of welcoming them and creating a unified school community."

One Voice...

What Parents Say About School Choice

The best thing has already been done: school choice. Now let nature take its course. You'll see parents get involved as their school fails. Parents will get involved as their children's school excels. My husband has taken an active interest in their choice school. I had to pull him to events at their home school. Why? He can't explain it. I say quality creates interest.

**One Voice...
What Parents Say About School Choice**

We are grateful that the school choice program exists at all – it has definitely been of great benefit to our child. We feel the continuance of this program is important to all children and their parents because regardless of economic status real choices can be made about each individual child's educational needs and these needs can be met. It also forces all school systems to strive hard to provide quality education – to really care about what they offer our young people.

Funding Issues

Fewer respondents seemed interested in financial aspects of the school choice program. Those who were interested, however, generally wanted to send more money to either the sending or receiving districts.

Those who wanted to increase the reimbursement amount had a slight edge, with 136 choosing that option, while 115 said the state should increase the tuition amount sent to receiving districts. Only 23 respondents wanted to see tuition decreased, while twice as many, 48, thought the reimbursement should be decreased.

The school choice funding discussion also exposed mixed feelings about the program's fairness. One parent wrote, "I feel very strongly that the existing formula penalizes 'losing schools' too heavily. By penalizing these schools, our neighbors' children are negatively impacted. We found that our 'choice' was to choose either what was best for our children and what was good for our town. We lose either way."

Another saw things differently. "The loss of friends and students from [our town] has forced the school and town to fund improvements in facilities. This came even after predications of doom. The lesson is to keep state pressure on academic excellence by sending all funding with student to school of choice."

Survey Conclusions

Based on responses in the 826 surveys analyzed, and on parents' comments, some general conclusions are apparent:

- (1) Contrary to claims by some choice critics, academic concerns are at the top of the list of reasons parents and students participate in the school choice program.
- (2) Among nonacademic reasons for participating in school choice, school safety is the primary concern, not parental convenience.
- (3) Parental satisfaction with their child's new choice school is generally very high, even among those who have reservations about some

aspects of the school choice program.

(4) Students do seem to benefit academically from school choice. Many students also seem to experience improvements in attitude and self-esteem.

(5) News reports, friends and relatives are the primary sources of information families use to learn about the school choice program.

(6) Transportation is by far the number one concern among families who participate.

The Future of School Choice

The Education Reform Act, and earlier amendments to the school choice law, have already addressed many of the issues confronting the immediate future of school choice in Massachusetts.

Education reform includes a transportation provision. Reimbursements for sending districts have increased substantially. The Parent Information Center now has permanent status. And the foundation budget formula will help districts compete for students on a more level financial playing field.

Even with passage of Education Reform though, some of these issues have yet to be fully addressed. Still others may need further attention in future years.

Transportation

While the education reform law includes a transportation provision, it is unclear right now how transportation will be funded, and who will be responsible for delivering that service. The Board of Education, according to education reform, must determine how to provide transportation to low-income students.

Current transportation arrangements vary widely for choice students. Many Brockton residents who attend Avon High School, for example, may take public transportation to and from classes each day at a minimal cost. In Lynn choice parents pooled their resources and hired a van to take their children to and from Masconomet Regional High School in Topsfield. In other districts, car pools have been organized. Most choice districts allow out-of-town students to use the receiving district's existing school transportation system, provided those students can get to a regularly scheduled bus stop.

As with many programs, the funding for school choice transportation is subject to legislative appropriation. The new law establishes a \$20 million transportation spending limit but, because there are no estimates available for the number of choice students who might be eligible for transportation, cost estimates have been difficult to develop.

The limited number of eligible students suggests that choice transportation costs will not be prohibitive. Even using wildly high assumptions about eligibility and transportation reimbursement costs, it is unlikely that \$20 million will be needed.

In August 1992 a report was prepared for the Commissioner of Education which suggested an extremely high cost of \$1500 per pupil for school choice transportation. If 20% of all choice students are eligible for transportation, which approximates the percentage of low income students statewide, and if \$1500 per student is paid for transportation, which is over 400% of the state average cost per pupil for transportation services, the total bill would be only \$5.4 million when the 2% student participation cap has been reached. Using the same assumptions for the 4,200 students participating this year, transportation would amount to only \$1.2 million.

Although only a limited number of students will qualify for transportation, the cost to operate a bus is the same whether that bus transports two or 20 children. The small number of eligible students, combined with the nature of school transportation costs, makes it likely that, in most districts, economies of scale will not be realized for school choice transportation. The state could pay considerably more than established norms for transportation services without going over the \$20 million limit, but without the volume of passengers required for cost-effective service, it is unlikely that even a very high reimbursement rate will cover the actual cost of transportation services.

One solution to this problem would be to provide a smaller transportation payment to districts, perhaps closer to \$500 than \$1,500, but at the same time allow districts, at their discretion, to transport and be paid for more students. The cost of buses would be the same, more students would be served, and the district could realize some efficiency in providing the service.

Expanding eligibility for transportation has the potential to increase costs, but even if districts received \$500 per student and served 18,000 students, the maximum possible under the 2% participation cap, the total cost would be only \$9 million - still well below the \$20 million spending limit.

Under the current law, the Board of Education may provide transportation payments to the sending or receiving districts, or directly to the parents of choice students. It would make the most sense for school districts, which already have transportation networks, to be responsible for transporting choice students. Giving money directly to parents would be administratively difficult, and it is unclear whether low-income parents could afford to pay for transportation costs up front and then wait for a reimbursement.

Increased Participation

Although the Education Reform Act requires all districts to participate in the school choice program by accepting students on a space

available basis, it also allows districts to opt out of this requirement by voting not to participate in any given year. In light of this provision, it is unclear how much the school choice program will expand in the future.

There is also considerable uncertainty surrounding the newly imposed student participation caps, which may have the potential to endanger any significant expansion of the program in future years. Given current participation levels however, two conclusions are readily apparent.

First, there are a large number of communities already affected by the choice program. This is even more striking considering the program is in only its third year.

At least 222 communities - over 62% of all the cities and towns in Massachusetts - will be affected this year through either the gain or loss of a student under the school choice program, or as a member of a regional school district affected by the program. Among the 222 communities impacted by school choice, there are 71 school districts receiving students, although almost all of these districts will experience both gains and losses. These figures will increase over time, although the likely extent of that increase is difficult to gauge.

The second conclusion is that choice has had a domino effect in certain areas of the state. In the program's early stages, when one or two districts in a given area opted into the program, the loss of students to these school choice pioneers created fiscal pressure on the surrounding, nonparticipating districts. These sending districts often tried to recoup some of their financial losses by receiving students themselves.

This domino effect has created geographic clusters of receiving districts around the state. At the moment, there are four of these major school choice clusters around the state. Each has more than 10 contiguous communities accepting choice students.

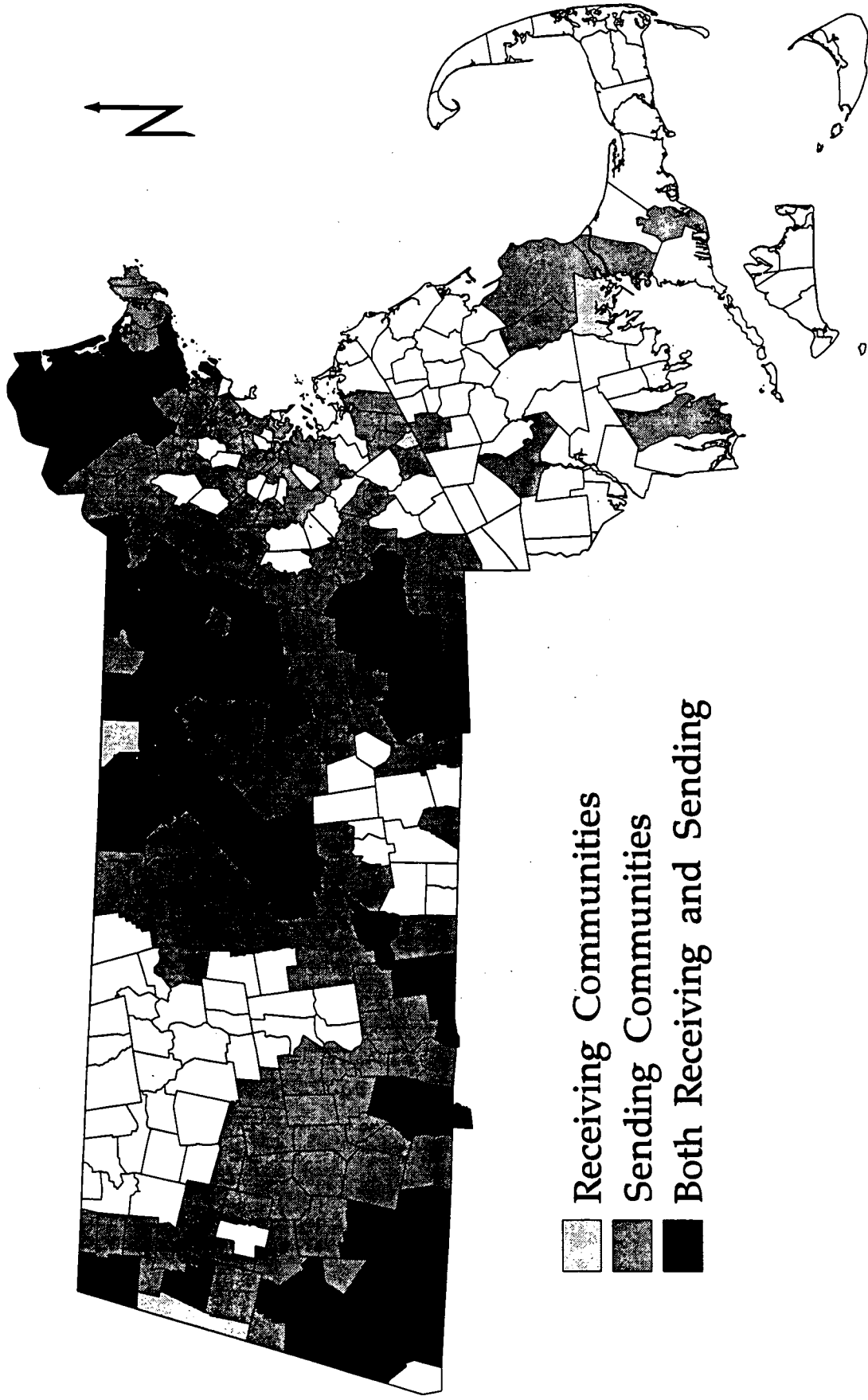
The clusters are: Essex County; north Middlesex County and north Worcester County; south Middlesex County and south Worcester County; and southern Berkshire County. A fifth cluster is developing in the Springfield and Hampden County area. Small pockets of school choice are located in Worcester and northern Berkshire counties as well.

The only areas of the Commonwealth untouched by school choice are some parts of Western Massachusetts, particularly Hampshire and Franklin counties, and most of the South Shore and Cape Cod. The lack of receiving districts in the Greater Boston/Route 128 area is notable as well.

Reasons for the lack of participation in these areas differ, and the current evidence is largely anecdotal.

On the South Shore and the Cape, for example, the lack of school choice participation seems to stem from two factors: philosophical op-

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position to choice among some superintendents; and a lack of space in most area school systems, preventing even those who might wish to participate from doing so.

Wareham has just become the first community in its region to receive choice students. If the domino theory holds true, other districts in the region will follow suit. However, the generosity of the new reimbursement formula may eliminate the pressure to do so.

In Western Massachusetts available space and philosophy are probably key issues as well. In addition, it seems likely that, in those sparsely populated regions, distance between communities and the lack of transportation are important issues.

Despite the large number of communities involved in the program, there still is considerable room for choice expansion, for both districts and students. The lack of receiving districts in the Greater Boston area alone probably limits the program to a fraction of its potential student participation.

For example, Brookline, Newton and Weston now accept more than 200 students whose private tuition agreements were negotiated prior to choice implementation, and therefore grandfathered under the school choice law. None of these communities currently participate in school choice. The choice law, however, stipulates that they cannot contract private tuition agreements with any new out-of-town students.

As their current tuition-paying students graduate, these and other communities like them, which serve a total of 2,600 private tuition students statewide, will be faced with some hard choices.

Such communities will have three options to offset the revenues lost as private-tuition students leave their systems: program reductions or other budget cuts; increased community contributions, such as Proposition 2 1/2 overrides or local revenue increases; or school choice.

Due to this dynamic, and despite the limitations created by space availability and enrollment increases, it seems likely that the Commonwealth will continue to see at least modest growth in the choice program during the next few years.

Certainly, the demand for choice is present. Between the 2,600 students currently paying their own tuitions, the 4,200 students in the school choice program and the hundreds on choice waiting lists, the 3,400 in METCO and the 2,000 students on the METCO waiting list, there is ample evidence that families are looking for alternatives. Space constraints eventually will force choice enrollments to level off, for the immediate future, modest growth seems inevitable.

Funding Issues

The cost of school choice is an area of concern, especially for the state, which will pay approximately 80 percent of the price tag through the newly re-configured reimbursement program.

Since above foundation reimbursements are phased-out over two years, theoretically, the bulk of these payments will decrease over time as districts begin to reach their foundation budget level. Since communities are not expected to achieve their foundation level until the year 2000, however, reimbursement costs will continue to escalate in direct proportion to school choice enrollment increases for the immediate future as school choice enrollments go up.

For Fiscal Year 1995, based on the current school choice enrollment of 4,200 students, tuition statewide will be approximately \$16 million. The Commonwealth will be responsible for about \$13 million of that, a 33 percent increase over this year.

While spending growth of that magnitude is cause for concern by itself, there is another potential problem. It is possible that reimbursement costs, which are primarily funded out of the total Chapter 70 educational spending allotment, will impede the state's ability to pay for its share of the foundation budget program over time.

Under the Education Reform Act, the state has committed a fixed amount of money to help every school district reach a foundation level of spending by the year 2000. The distribution of these funds is determined by Chapter 70. To the extent that any of this money is directed to pay for school choice reimbursements, the state's ability to fully fund the foundation budget will be compromised.

For example, the \$13 million spent on school choice reimbursements next year is money that would normally go toward helping communities reach the foundation budget. Under the new reimbursement program it is being diverted to pay for school choice instead. The \$13 million in reimbursement for next year represents 7 percent of the total amount of new state education aid scheduled to be disbursed to communities during Fiscal Year 1995.

With maximum student participation at 2 percent of the total public school population, tuition costs, using current rates, would be approximately \$70 million. Corresponding reimbursements for that figure, assuming the Commonwealth still is paying 80 percent of the cost, would be \$56 million. That represents approximately 30 percent of the new education aid scheduled for school districts in any given year under education reform.

In addition to overall program costs, the tuition cap is likely to become a problem over time. At the moment, the \$5,000 cap accurately reflects the statewide per-pupil spending average. However, in five years, when the statewide average is closer to \$5,500, the cap will remain statutorily fixed at \$5,000 per student.

The erosion of tuition rates is inevitable without an adjustment in the cap to account for inflation and enrollment growth over time. Indexing the cap to a statewide spending average or to the foundation budget, rather than to a fixed dollar amount, would maintain the incentive provided by current tuition rates. Ideally, school choice tuition should be indexed to the sending community's foundation budget, since the state has identified that amount as necessary and appropriate to

educate the students who live there.

A number of receiving districts, particularly vocational schools, have argued that the tuition cap unfairly ignores varying program costs. Officials from some receiving districts suggest that the cap should be eliminated altogether, or at least pegged at different levels for different programs.

While linking the cap to program costs makes some sense, eliminating the cap altogether does not. The tuition cap protects sending districts from large spending discrepancies between communities. This is particularly important in the absence of a fully funded foundation budget in all districts.

The cap protects against the exorbitant tuition rates that would result in some districts. For example, very small school districts are inherently inefficient from a financial perspective because they require extremely high expenditures on a per pupil basis in order to provide a full array of high-quality programs, particularly at the high school level. Paying tuition based on these higher levels of spending simply rewards the inefficiency created by extremely small districts. The existence of a tuition cap can help insulate a sending district from the unreasonably expensive educational policy of its neighbor.

Summary

While the Education Reform Act of 1993 addresses major issues facing school choice in Massachusetts, the program will continue to face controversy around the issues of transportation, increased participation and funding.

Some general conclusions regarding these issues seem apparent:

- (1) Transportation will continue to be a problem for many school choice participants, unless program eligibility is expanded.
- (2) The cost of the current transportation plan, even using extreme estimates, is unlikely to approach the statutorily established \$20 million limit.
- (3) Student and district participation is likely to continue increasing moderately for the next few years, with new regions of choice participation developing throughout the Commonwealth.
- (4) Reimbursement costs will continue to rise as participation increases. These increases will moderate as more school districts reach their foundation budget, but at the same time reimbursement spending has the potential to impede efforts to reach the foundation.
- (5) The tuition cap is an important aspect of the funding mechanism, but the existing \$5,000 cap will not reflect actual spending over time. The cap should be pegged to some moving indicator, such as the average per pupil expenditure or the foundation budget.

Conclusion

Unfortunately, school choice has become a divisive and politically polarizing issue, particularly in those communities directly impacted by the program. At the local level, where schools intrinsically reflect the health and stability of their community, parents who choose another district's schools can find themselves alienated from their own neighbors. On a statewide level, the topic has sparked heated debate over the quality, equity and access present in our current educational system. On both levels, school choice is an issue that seemingly offers very little common ground for advocates and opponents.

But perhaps a shared vision can be identified.

Certainly the desire to do what is best for children is sincerely shared on both sides of the debate. Furthermore, it must be acknowledged that critics have helped improve the Commonwealth's school choice program.

Critics cited the lack of transportation as a major barrier for students to effectively avail themselves of the opportunity to choose. And they were right. Transportation is paramount, particularly for children from low-income homes. Under the new Education Reform Act, transportation now can be provided to those most in need. Transportation is still not available for middle-income families, and this shortcoming is a continuing weakness in the program.

Critics also noted a lack of objective, easily accessible information upon which parents may base their choices. Again they were right. All parents - including those who do not take part in school choice - have a right to information about their schools. Access to comparative information is imperative if parents are to judge the progress of their schools, develop meaningful dialogue on school committees and school councils, and participate in the overall improvement of their schools.

Every parent needs to make informed decisions about the education of their children, and the state has a wealth of information about everything from per-pupil spending to dropout rates. Until now, those resources have not been readily available to parents in a cohesive easily accessible format. The establishment of the Parent Information Center gives parents access to school profiles that offer educational information in an easy-to-read format, making accurate district-by-district

comparisons possible for every family.

Critics have also argued that choice can exacerbate the financial inequity of our current system. Again the critics were right. Indeed, parents in the survey cited "resources" and "class sizes" among the prominent reasons they opted for school choice. Although money alone will not improve our schools, and the correlation between spending and achievement is dubious at best, the state has recognized that the current disparity of resources between some of our school districts is unacceptable. Steps have been taken to minimize this inequity.

Education reform commits the Commonwealth to a foundation level of spending, providing adequate resources for every child no matter where they go to school. Until the foundation is reached in all districts, the state will continue to subsidize school choice through the reimbursement program.

Transportation, information, and equitable funding all are crucial elements for a successful statewide school choice program, and the current school choice law has addressed each of these elements. While there may be other important issues facing the choice program in the future, the most flawed aspects of the program's first years have been largely remedied.

Despite these changes and the positive aspects of the current law, the school choice program in Massachusetts should not be viewed as the panacea for all that ails public education. Choice can have an impact on all schools only when: (1) there are more models of truly successful schools; (2) more districts participate in choice; and (3) a significant number of children attain mobility between districts. These are the elements that make competition possible. They will force sending districts to take a hard, honest look at their educational programs, and begin to initiate serious systemic changes.

School choice by itself will not provide systemic reform, but it is an essential ingredient to any meaningful statewide reform effort. If the idea that every child should have the opportunity to learn to the best of his or her ability is to have meaning, then a choice of schools is essential to that opportunity.

Meanwhile, since few districts within Route 128 or on the South Shore are opening their doors to choice, there effectively is no opportunity for a large number of students to choose. If a significant number of students do not transfer from a district, that district will have little reason to change. If there is no opportunity to choose, then the status quo prevails.

The experience in Massachusetts suggests that in order for choice to produce systemic change in a district, the number of students choosing to go elsewhere must reach a critical mass. The dynamic behind the serious, community-wide resolve to improve schools in Maynard, which has lost more than ten percent of its student population to other districts, is far different from the dialogue in Boston, which has lost less than .001 percent of its students to school choice.

The creation under the Education Reform Act of better reporting mechanisms for school performance, and greater accountability for results, coupled with the opening of "break-the-mold" charter schools during the 1995-1996 school year, will help parents, educators and policy makers identify more truly successful public school models.

For those parents who cannot wait for these changes to take hold, school choice offers the single best opportunity to immediately access those educational programs in the public schools that best meet the needs of their children. A child goes through the second grade only once, and for those parents who feel their child's education should not be compromised waiting for adults to change and improve the system, school choice offers an immediate solution.

The best of all worlds would be for every school to have an element of innovation, of high achievement and academic excellence, of identity and community, and of commitment to each student who attends that school. The Education Reform Act of 1993 clearly seeks to generate and promote such schools across the Commonwealth. The passage of education reform is also a tacit admission that such schools are not universally available in Massachusetts today.

Some choice critics have charged that parents are not seeking new schools for academic reasons, but rather for convenience or other non-educational factors. The fundamental argument in favor of educational choice - that parents seek quality schools for their children, and, in doing so, provide the impetus for change that is needed in public education today - is flawed if the critics are right on this point.

In fact, the critics are wrong. The overwhelming evidence is that parents are choosing schools for all the right reasons: to access better academic opportunities for their children; to foster high expectations of achievement; to seek out quality teachers; and to become more involved in their children's education.

Appendices

APPENDIX A:

RECEIVING DISTRICTS AS OF SEPTEMBER 1993

<i>Acton</i>	<i>(508)264-4700</i>	<i>Stow</i>	<i>(508)897-8832</i>
<i>Amesbury</i>	<i>(508)388-0507</i>	<i>Sutton</i>	<i>(508)865-9270</i>
<i>Ashland</i>	<i>(508)881-0150</i>	<i>Tyngsborough</i>	<i>(508)649-7488</i>
<i>Avon</i>	<i>(508)588-0230</i>	<i>Uxbridge</i>	<i>(508)278-8648</i>
<i>Ayer</i>	<i>(508)772-3468</i>	<i>Wareham</i>	<i>(508)291-3500</i>
<i>Berlin</i>	<i>(508)869-2837</i>	<i>West Boylston</i>	<i>(508)835-2917</i>
<i>Beverly</i>	<i>(508)921-6100</i>	<i>Westfield</i>	<i>(413)572-6403</i>
<i>Bolton</i>	<i>(508)779-2821</i>	<i>Westford</i>	<i>(508)692-5560</i>
<i>Clinton</i>	<i>(508)365-4200</i>	<i>West Newbury</i>	<i>(508)363-2280</i>
<i>Douglas</i>	<i>(508)476-7901</i>	<i>Wilbraham</i>	<i>(413)596-3884</i>
<i>East Longmeadow</i>	<i>(413)525-5450</i>	<i>Williamstown</i>	<i>(413)458-5707</i>
<i>Fitchburg</i>	<i>(508)345-3200</i>	<i>Winchendon</i>	<i>(508)297-0031</i>
<i>Gardner</i>	<i>(508)632-1000</i>	<i>Acton-Boxborough</i>	<i>(508)264-4700</i>
<i>Georgetown</i>	<i>(508)352-5777</i>	<i>Ashburnham-Westminster</i>	<i>(508)874-1501</i>
<i>Hancock</i>	<i>(413)442-2229</i>	<i>Berkshire Hills</i>	<i>(413)298-3711</i>
<i>Harvard</i>	<i>(508)456-4140</i>	<i>Berlin-Boylston</i>	<i>(508)869-2837</i>
<i>Holliston</i>	<i>(508)429-0654</i>	<i>Farmington River</i>	<i>(413)269-7105</i>
<i>Hopedale</i>	<i>(508)634-2220</i>	<i>Groton-Dunstable</i>	<i>(508)448-5505</i>
<i>Hopkinton</i>	<i>(508)435-4511</i>	<i>Hamilton-Wenham</i>	<i>(508)468-5310</i>
<i>Hudson</i>	<i>(508)568-8535</i>	<i>Hampden-Wilbraham</i>	<i>(413)596-3884</i>
<i>Ipswich</i>	<i>(508)356-2935</i>	<i>Masconomet</i>	<i>(508)887-2323</i>
<i>Lanesborough</i>	<i>(413)442-2229</i>	<i>Mendon-Upton</i>	<i>(508)529-7729</i>
<i>Lee</i>	<i>(413)243-0276</i>	<i>Minuteman</i>	<i>(617)861-6500</i>
<i>Lenox</i>	<i>(413)637-5550</i>	<i>Nashoba</i>	<i>(508)779-2257</i>
<i>Littleton</i>	<i>(508)486-8951</i>	<i>North Middlesex</i>	<i>(508)597-8713</i>
<i>Longmeadow</i>	<i>(413)567-3351</i>	<i>North Shore</i>	<i>(508)762-0001</i>
<i>Lunenburg</i>	<i>(508)582-4100</i>	<i>Pathfinder</i>	<i>(413)283-9701</i>
<i>Manchester</i>	<i>(508)526-4919</i>	<i>Pentucket</i>	<i>(508)363-2280</i>
<i>Maynard</i>	<i>(508)897-2222</i>	<i>Quabbin</i>	<i>(508)355-4668</i>
<i>Medway</i>	<i>(508)533-8151</i>	<i>Southern Berkshire</i>	<i>(413)229-8778</i>
<i>Milford</i>	<i>(508)478-1100</i>	<i>Southwick-Tolland</i>	<i>(413)569-5391</i>
<i>Millis</i>	<i>(508)376-7000</i>	<i>Triton</i>	<i>(508)465-2476</i>
<i>Newburyport</i>	<i>(508)465-4457</i>	<i>Whittier</i>	<i>(508)373-4101</i>
<i>Northbridge</i>	<i>(508)234-8156</i>		
<i>Palmer</i>	<i>(413)283-2650</i>		
<i>Rowley</i>	<i>(508)465-2476</i>		
<i>Salisbury</i>	<i>(508)465-2476</i>		
<i>Shirley</i>	<i>(508)425-9337</i>		

APPENDIX B:

School Choice Questionnaire

1. Please check that line which best describes you.

- Parent or Guardian of a K-8th Grade Student.
 Parent or Guardian of a High School Student.

2. How many children do you have participating in choice? _____

3. School District of Residence _____

4. School District Attending _____

5. School Attending _____

6. Grade _____

7. Number of years of participation in school choice program _____

8. Does your child participate in one of the following programs:

- Bilingual Vocational/Technical Special Educational

9. Why did you decide to participate in school choice? Please rank any appropriate responses among items a-j in order of importance and check the appropriate box where necessary (1 -most important).

a. _____ Student wished to continue in previous school

- Our residence has recently changed.
 We previously paid tuition to attend a school outside our district, we now remain there under choice.

b. _____ Student was in search of particular/ improved program. (Please explain.)

- Academic. _____
 Athletic. _____
 Extra-Curricular. _____

c. _____ Choice was more convenient to me/us as parents/guardians.

d. _____ I/We were concerned with safety issues.

e. _____ Personal Reasons. Needed a new start in school.

f. _____ Demographics; I/We were interested in a varied/more diverse student body.

- More diverse. _____
 Less diverse / More homogeneous. _____
 Other (Please specify). _____

g. _____ Age eligibility (Kindergarten age eligibility differs from district to district).

h. _____ Our previous school lacked resources; funds, facilities, faculty, books.

i. _____ I/We were dissatisfied with size of school or individual classes.

- Size of school. _____
- Size of individual classes. _____
- j. _____ Other _____

ADDITIONAL COMMENTS: _____

10. How did you learn of the school choice program?

- Friends and/or relatives.
- Publications from the school.
- A school visit.
- Newspaper articles.
- School advertisement.
- Other (please be specific). _____

11. How satisfied have you been with your new school? (Check one)

- Most satisfied
- Very satisfied
- Satisfied
- Not very satisfied
- Dissatisfied

12. How satisfied were you with your previous school? (Check one)

- Most satisfied
- Very satisfied
- Satisfied
- Not very satisfied
- Dissatisfied

13. How has your new school affected your child's academic performance? (Check one)

- Most improved
- Very improved
- No change
- Declined
- Declined greatly

14. Do you presently participate in any of the following?

- Parent Teacher Association (PTA)
- School Improvement Council
- Booster's Club
- School Volunteer
- School Committee
- Other _____

15. Did you participate in any of the following at your previous district?

- Parent Teacher Association (PTA)
- School Improvement Council
- Booster's Club
- School Volunteer
- School Committee
- Other _____

16. Do you regularly attend Parent Teacher Conferences? Yes No

17. How regularly do you monitor your child's schoolwork?

- Daily
- Weekly
- Monthly
- Rarely

18. How often do you ask your child about his/her schoolwork?

19. Has your child had difficulty interacting with students in his/her new school?

- Much difficulty Some difficulty None at all Unsure

20. Has your child had difficulty interacting with children in your home community, who are not participating in school choice?

- Much difficulty Some difficulty None at all Unsure

21. What would most improve the school choice program?

- Mandatory participation by all public schools.
- A provision for state funded transportation.
- A resource for information regarding each school; Parent Information Center (PIC).
- An increase in the amount of money given to the receiving school by the sending school.
- A decrease in the amount of money given to the receiving school by the sending school.
- An increase in the amount of reimbursement given to the sending school by the state.
- A decrease in the amount of reimbursement given to the sending school by the state.

Please use the remaining space for further comments. Attach additional pages if needed.

If you would be willing to further discuss your experience with School Choice, please include the following information and you may be contacted.

Name _____ Address _____

City _____ Zip Code _____ Phone Number () _____

We would be happy to answer any questions that you may have regarding this survey or any related subjects. Please call or write.

Executive Office of Education

Room 1401, McCormack Building

One Ashburton Place

Boston, Massachusetts 02108

(617)727-1313

Please return your completed survey in the enclosed self-addressed, stamped envelope by November 1.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

APPENDIX C:

SENDING DISTRICTS REPRESENTED IN THE SURVEY

(WITH NUMBER OF STUDENTS)

<i>Acton Boxborough</i>	5	<i>Hampden Wilbraham</i>	1	<i>North Reading</i>	3
<i>Agawam</i>	5	<i>Harvard</i>	4	<i>Northampton</i>	1
<i>Amesbury</i>	1	<i>Haverhill</i>	1	<i>Northborough Southborough</i>	3
<i>Ashland</i>	12	<i>Holyoke</i>	2	<i>Northbridge</i>	27
<i>Ayer</i>	34	<i>Hopedale</i>	8	<i>Peabody</i>	6
<i>Becket</i>	3	<i>Hopkinton</i>	57	<i>Pentucket</i>	3
<i>Belchertown</i>	5	<i>Hudson</i>	11	<i>Pepperell</i>	3
<i>Bellingham</i>	3	<i>Ipswich</i>	16	<i>Pittsfield</i>	7
<i>Berkshire Hills</i>	1	<i>King Phillip</i>	3	<i>Reading</i>	1
<i>Berlin</i>	4	<i>Lancaster</i>	15	<i>Revere</i>	3
<i>Beverly</i>	19	<i>Lawrence</i>	10	<i>Rockport</i>	1
<i>Billerica</i>	2	<i>Lee</i>	7	<i>Salem</i>	8
<i>Blackstone Millville</i>	5	<i>Lenox</i>	4	<i>Salisbury</i>	5
<i>Bolton</i>	1	<i>Leominster</i>	14	<i>Sherborn</i>	2
<i>Boston</i>	6	<i>Lincoln</i>	1	<i>Shirley</i>	18
<i>Cambridge</i>	1	<i>Littleton</i>	29	<i>Southborough</i>	1
<i>Central Berkshire</i>	1	<i>Longmeadow</i>	1	<i>Southern Berkshire</i>	22
<i>Chelmsford</i>	1	<i>Lowell</i>	17	<i>Southwick Tolland</i>	5
<i>Chicopee</i>	3	<i>Ludlow</i>	3	<i>Springfield</i>	124
<i>Clinton</i>	4	<i>Lynn</i>	15	<i>Sterling</i>	2
<i>Concord</i>	1	<i>Malden</i>	1	<i>Stow</i>	16
<i>Danvers</i>	8	<i>Manchester</i>	3	<i>Sutton</i>	5
<i>Douglas</i>	17	<i>Marlboro</i>	4	<i>Tantasqua</i>	1
<i>Dracut</i>	13	<i>Marlborough</i>	6	<i>Tewksbury</i>	7
<i>East Longmeadow</i>	5	<i>Maynard</i>	83	<i>Triton</i>	22
<i>Easthampton</i>	1	<i>Medway</i>	11	<i>Tyngsboro</i>	1
<i>Essex</i>	2	<i>Melrose</i>	1	<i>Uxbridge</i>	8
<i>Farmington River</i>	1	<i>Mendon Upton</i>	30	<i>Wachusett</i>	4
<i>Fitchburg</i>	5	<i>Merrimac</i>	2	<i>Wales</i>	1
<i>Framingham</i>	7	<i>Methuen</i>	4	<i>Ware</i>	6
<i>Franklin</i>	1	<i>Milford</i>	12	<i>Webster</i>	1
<i>Gateway Regional</i>	6	<i>Millis</i>	20	<i>Wesford</i>	2
<i>Georgetown</i>	16	<i>Monson</i>	1	<i>West Springfield</i>	1
<i>Gloucester</i>	14	<i>Nashoba</i>	3	<i>Westfield</i>	1
<i>Granville</i>	1	<i>Newbury</i>	2	<i>Westford</i>	8
<i>Groton Dunstable</i>	13	<i>Newburyport</i>	2	<i>Westminster</i>	1
<i>Hamilton Wenham</i>	1	<i>North Andover</i>	5	<i>Worcester</i>	2
<i>Hampden</i>	1	<i>North Middlesex</i>	5	<i>Wrentham</i>	1

APPENDIX D:
RECEIVING DISTRICTS REPRESENTED IN THE SURVEY
(WITH NUMBER OF STUDENTS)

<i>Acton</i>	47
<i>Acton Boxborough</i>	132
<i>Amesbury</i>	17
<i>Becket</i>	3
<i>Berkshire Hills</i>	36
<i>Berlin Boylston</i>	9
<i>Clinton</i>	2
<i>East Longmeadow</i>	30
<i>Hamilton Wenham</i>	79
<i>Hampden Wilbraham</i>	32
<i>Hancock</i>	3
<i>Harvard</i>	88
<i>Holliston</i>	174
<i>Lee</i>	5
<i>Littleton</i>	39
<i>Longmeadow</i>	40
<i>Masconomet</i>	69
<i>Maynard</i>	8
<i>Mendon Upton</i>	12
<i>Northbridge</i>	9
<i>Palmer</i>	13
<i>Topsfield</i>	2
<i>Tyngsboro</i>	2
<i>Uxbridge</i>	43
<i>Westfield</i>	9
<i>Westford</i>	32
<i>Wilbraham</i>	51

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April 1994

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U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
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