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AUTHOR Nasstrom, Roy
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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the impact on small rural school districts of school choice programs available in Minnesota. An opening section traces the history of school choice in Minnesota since 1983, focusing on two programs enacted in 1990: enrollment options (EO), which allows students to attend any public school without cost, and postsecondary enrollment options (PSEO), which allows academically qualified 11th- and 12th-graders to enroll full- or part-time in state public or private postsecondary institutions. In both programs, state aid follows the student to the institution selected. Program impact was investigated in 17 contiguous small rural districts in southern Minnesota. Data consisted of interviews with superintendents and principals, financial and enrollment figures, information from postsecondary institutions, and local newspaper articles. In 1990-91, the 17 districts had enrollments of 271-958 students. Student participation was not high in either plan. Under PSEO, 3.7 percent of eligible students participated, compared to 5 percent statewide. District participation ranged from 0 to 18 students and was related to proximity to a postsecondary institution. EO participation of districts involved 0-45 entering students and 0-45 departing students. Most administrators had doubts about choice programs but only four had a completely negative attitude. For districts losing students, the threat of school closure and consolidation was a great concern. Also discussed are parents' and students' apparent reasons for participation in the programs, interdistrict tensions due to competition and "advertising," and shifts in power relations between parents and professional educators. Contains 67 references. (SV)

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ED 414 151

COMPETITION AND QUALITY: A RURAL STUDY

Roy Nasstrom

Winona State University

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

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Minnesota has implemented choice programs extensively. This study reports an investigation of the impact on several rural districts in the state of two of these programs. One program allows students to choose among public schools in any district in the state. The other allows high school students to choose public or private institutions of higher education to satisfy their high school requirements and provide them with credits for college.

Educational choice in rural districts has received little attention. Yet an understanding of the consequences of any structural reform in education requires investigation of all geographic areas involved. Several years ago Nachtigal (1982) commented that many statewide reforms affecting rural schools may have reflected attempts to apply urban patterns to rural districts without regard to the widely different conditions separating rural from urban areas. Studies of reforms often display the same predisposition as the reforms themselves; many reports on choice programs in the United States generalize findings, revealing little regard for the differential geographic impact of programs. In this study, however, rural areas receive specific attention, with investigation focusing on a five-county region, encompassing eighteen school districts, all with an average daily membership of fewer than 1,150 students. Districts of this size enroll little more than 20 percent of students in the state, but they constitute 69 percent of all districts.

Choice

Opportunities for individual choice of services by citizens have existed since the founding of the United States. Within constraints—often powerful—imposed by income and geography, parents have always had the right to choose between public and private schools. The concept of individual exercise of choice of public services in general has received attention from economists for several years. People tend to cluster in an area to receive particular services they value and can afford (Tiebout, 1956). Schooling opportunities often constitute a major element in residential choice (Kutner, Sherman, & Williams, 1986). Moreover, within both districts and individual schools, parents and students often exercise significant choices in selecting programs and particular courses.

Governmental action in school choice, however, did not receive much attention until the late 1950s. The voucher system, as presented by Friedman (1962), began the long and vitriolic contemporary debate over the relation of choice to American education and to American society. Friedman's ideas, involving private and public schools in pure competition, reflect a pure market concept of choice. Later advocates have often approached choice from different angles. Coons and Sugarman (1978), for example, gave particular attention to meeting the needs of the poor in their proposals. Numerous choice plans now compete for attention, probably the most prominent being that of Chubb and Moe (1990), whose plans call for nondiscriminatory, "governmentally chartered" schools, public and private, that could be chosen by students freely, limited only by the need for equitable treatment of minorities.

Choice plans have spawned an enormous amount of literature, most of it polemical, theoretical, or speculative. The differences in descriptions and prescriptions rest on such disparate philosophical, political, economic, demographic, and empirical bases that any comparison among arguments requires many qualifications. Works dealing with the advantages and disadvantages of choice in varying forms include collections edited by Clune and Witte (1990), Levy (1986), Boyd and Kerchner (1988), and Boyd and Walberg(1990). In addition to the previously cited works, pieces by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (1990), Clune (1990), Raywid (1989), Pearson (1989a, 1989b), and Nathan (1989, 1990) provide a variety of views shedding light on particular purposes, perspectives and problems of choice plans.

The issue of competition underlies argument over choice. Proponents of choice almost always argue for the benefits of competition. Schools would have to meet the attractiveness of other schools to secure students. Choice, they claim, would eliminate the monopolistic control that limits

independence and innovation. Autonomy would prevail with only minimal governmental restraint, chiefly concerning civil rights and minimum standards. At the same time schools would be more accountable because parents could remove their children if the schools were not meeting the parents' wishes. Students could fit their education to their real needs, however defined.

Although most writers have mentioned academic needs as the prime purpose of choice, several others have expressed the view that choice will meet various other needs related to parental and student comfort, such as physical safety, friendship patterns, and consonance between the child's family and the school. For many parents, indeed, academic standards do not comprise the sole or even most important criterion in selecting schools for their children. In an empirical study of students in parental choice primary schools in England, Boulton and Coldron (1989) indicated that "happiness of the child" constituted the initial consideration of the parent in sending the child to a particular school, and not the academic opportunities. The authors asserted that schools had to convince parents of the physical and mental security of their children. Proximity to home and the existence of caring teachers surpassed academic standards as a basis for choice. In his study of tuitioning plans in New England, Maddaus (1990, p. 289) indicated that parents often have a more holistic view than educational planners of schools, giving great importance to moral, social and emotional factors. In the Alum Rock, California, demonstration program, many parents showed that travel time to and from school could be as important a factor as any (Levin, 1990, pp. 306-308). Many parents have accorded more attention to time spent traveling.

Opponents of choice have charged that it may cause the destruction of some schools, depriving students, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, of an adequate education. These critics have asserted that parents do not know what they need or could not find enough information to allow them to make an intelligent choice. With respect to public services in general, Hirschman (1986) has noted that choice is not adequate if differences in preferences are not equally right, citizens are not knowledgeable about quality of services, people cannot move freely and suppliers cannot learn from experience, and there are not many competing providers. In choosing schools, opponents of choice plans often argue, lower class people would be at a disadvantage (Levin, 1990, p. 268-271) because of their ignorance of available options and their not having access to the necessary information available on the type schooling that may be beneficial for their children. This view reflects indirectly the common argument that choice unrelated to academic issues is a travesty. From a societal perspective, Levin (1990, p. 270) has noted that choice unrelated to academics might destroy the transmission of a common value, a major function of public schools in contemporary society. Furthermore, when choice involved private as well as public schools, Levin reflected the concerns of many critics in asserting that such a market system could be counterproductive to the concept of real choice by requiring a large bureaucratic superstructure to ensure than certain regulations were met.

Choice in Minnesota

Led by a Democratic governor, Minnesota plunged into choice plans as a vehicle for improving the quality of education (Mazzoni, 1988; Mazzoni and Sullivan, 1990). Several years ago the state foreshadowed its choice programs by establishing a plan, declared constitutional in 1983 (Mueller v. Allen, 1983), allowing parents to receive tax credits for certain costs of students in parochial schools. Since then, the state has provided many opportunities for parents and students to choose education outside the traditional public school context. Special program options include area learning centers that provide alternative approaches to high school diplomas, special year-round learning sites, public alternative secondary programs and private alternative secondary programs. Numerous statutory provisions allow transfer among districts for various reasons (Minnesota State Department of Education, 1991a).

Certainly the most salient choice programs were created by enrollment options and the postsecondary options legislation. The enrollment options program (Minnesota Statutes, 1990,

120.062) allows students to leave their districts of residence to attend any public school they wish without cost. Money from the state, under the state foundation program, simply follows them to the new district, with the district of residence getting nothing further . The postsecondary enrollment options program (Minnesota Statutes, 1990, 123.3514) allows 11th and 12th grade students to enroll full-time or part-time in non-sectarian courses in state institutions of higher education, including "a Minnesota public post-secondary institution or a private, residential, two-year or four-year, liberal arts, degree-granting college located in Minnesota." For practical purposes the student may simultaneously satisfy college and high school requirements, making it possible for full-time students to have completed two years of college by the time they have graduated from high school. As under the enrollment options act, state foundation formula money, prorated according to time spent by the student in higher education courses, follows the student to the institution selected.

Both the postsecondary enrollment options program, hereafter designated PSEO, and the enrollment options program, hereafter designated EO, evoked far more controversy than the many other enrollment reform programs developed during the period. During 1990-1991, the year receiving focus in this study, PSEO had been in operation for five years. EO, allowing students to attend schools in other districts, was in its third year of operation, and its first year in which districts with fewer than 1,000 pupil units were required to participate (Minnesota Statutes 120.062, Subd. 1).

PSEO was designed to provide "vigorous academic pursuits and to provide a wider variety of options to high school pupils" (Minnesota Statutes 123.3514, Subd. 1). According to a state official who served as the Governor's advisor on education when the program was instituted, a third purpose was to create "an element of competition" between high schools and colleges that could "give incentives to high schools to improve" (Jaschik, 1985; see Nathan, 1990). Reimbursement up to the cost of the state aid to the resident school district was given to the student for "tuition, textbooks, materials, and fees directly related to the course taken (Minnesota Statutes 123.3514, Subd. 6). Upon application by parents or guardians, the student's resident district would supply reimbursement and in turn would receive some state aid for the costs of the student's travel to the post-secondary institution. Students would have to meet the academic requirements of the institutions they were entering in terms of test scores and grades and would not have priority for enrollment over regular post-secondary students.

Because of multi-institutional enrollment and changing enrollments from semester to semester, official figures on participation in PSEO are not always accurate under the current system of counting (Minnesota Department of Education, 1991a, p.7). However, the Minnesota Department of Education estimated that at the beginning of the 1990–1991 school year approximately 4,800 students enrolled under PSEO in institutions of higher education. Overall participation in the program at that time by students taking at least one course constituted approximately five percent of juniors and seniors (Archbald, 1990). According to a Department of Education spokesperson, approximately one percent of eligible students attended full-time. A small number of students attended religious institutions, occasioning a suit by the Minnesota Federation of Teachers on the grounds that the inclusion of these institutions violated the separation of church and state. Federal and state courts ruled the inclusion of religious institutions valid (Judge backs open enrollment Law, 1990; Courts say public funds can follow students to parochial schools, 1992).

During the first year of PSEO, 1985–1986, approximately 44 percent of students attended community colleges, 27 percent attended the University of Minnesota and its campuses, 15 percent attended technical colleges, and 10 percent attended one of the universities in the state university system, a group separate from the University of Minnesota(Minnesota Department of Education, 1987). By 1990–1991, three times more female than males took advantage of the program (Minnesota Department of Education, 1991a, pp. 6–7).Courses occasionally were provided on high school campuses, with fees negotiated between the higher education institution and the school

district, always far less than would be involved if the student elected to leave. The University of Minnesota also provided some correspondence courses.

The PSEO program elicited criticism from administrators because it removed state money from the schools and also attracted some students who would have done well in high schools (Zabel, 1990). The basis for criticism centered on the impact on school finance, on scheduling to fit the high school courses into college course times, on the allocation of credits for graduation, and on the duplication of high school courses, particularly those designed for advanced students. As time went on, the criticism subsided somewhat, but it has continued, particularly in several districts that lost a substantial amount of money (Livingston, 1993).

Nevertheless, PSEO proved itself to be relatively popular with the public, and although educational groups had opposed the plan originally, by 1990 the Minnesota Education Association reported that 58 percent of its members gave support (Survey helps define, 1990). The program avoided the large bureaucratic structure predicted by early critics of choice programs that encompassed both public and private institutions. By 1992, it cost the state only 2.2 million dollars.

Three studies of PSEO—those conducted by the Minnesota Department of Education (1987), Archbald (1990), and Nathan and Jennings (1990)—relied on enough specific data to make their conclusions relevant to an understanding of overall impact. The Department of Education focused on students during the first year of the program, in 1985-1986, when 3.2 percent of eligible students took courses and only 7 percent of districts had more than 15 percent of 11th and 12th graders enroll in the program. The vast majority of districts suffered no financial impact—although obviously those with a 15 percent loss of students did—with average revenue reduction per district of .1 percent of total operating revenue, .8 percent of grade 11 and 12 foundation aid. Only 10 percent of principals reported the need to alter schedules to accommodate students in the program. Students at this period were academically oriented, with 74 percent enrolled in academic courses; 95 percent expressed the view that they were "satisfied" or "very satisfied" with PSEO, and 90 percent said they learned more than they would have in high school, a response that cast some doubt on the effectiveness of high schools for the most talented students. Evidence from state universities indicated that these students performed better in the higher education institutions than regular first- and second-year students.

With the intent of discovering whether PSEO was a "good policy" or an "improvement" and how informants perceived stated goals, rationale, purpose and effects, Archbald (1990) used Minnesota Department of Education statistics and conducted interviews with educators and legislators, chiefly in 1986 but with follow-up investigations in 1987 and 1990. He concluded that despite the relatively small number of students, PSEO stimulated competition, making high schools develop more competitive courses and leading technical schools to make courses more accessible. PSEO, he wrote, "has fostered innovation and enhanced the responsiveness of Minnesota's education institutions" (p. 19). He asserted that PSEO met its goals and accommodated a diversity of needs without "serious unanticipated problems and expense to the state." Archbald also stressed the threat PSEO held for the professional authority of school officials. By giving students and their parents the option of choosing an institution other than the K-12 school, he asserted, the program transforms the structure of authority in education.

Nathan and Jennings (1990) gave attention to the operation of PSEO in the context of their study of four different kinds of choice programs in Minnesota during the 1989-90 school year. Their investigation focused on student opinions as measured in a random sample of more than 13,000 students participating students. Although the report focused on student impact rather than district impact, the results clarified various segments of PSEO as it affected the operation of schools.

In many respects, Nathan and Jennings confirmed Department of Education findings. They did not find female dominance in the program as high as the State Department of Education

(1991a) had estimated, but their figures indicated that females dominated the PSEO group—61.3 percent. Students in the program tended to come from families with better education than those attending the other choice programs studied. Although approximately 8 percent of high school students in Minnesota were "students of color" they represented 6.2 percent of PSEO students. Yet students in PSEO were somewhat more likely (7.7 percent) not to have spoken English at home than students in general.

Instead of trying to judge rates of satisfaction, as the earlier Minnesota Department of Education study did, Nathan and Jennings attempted to ascertain student performance in school by asking students about perceptions of success. Under PSEO, 31 percent of students replied that they were more successful now, 57.5 percent indicated they were "about as successful as they were before," and 7 percent said that they were more successful than they were before (p. 9). The authors did not explore these results, suggesting further study would be useful, and asserting that the responses possibly indicated that the students were doing reasonably well in their high school and were also doing reasonably well in a postsecondary institution . Of course other interpretations are also possible. For example, are recent students less likely to be the most academically able or the most strongly motivated? In any case, the most frequently cited reasons for transferring involved academics, with 71 percent of the students responding that they wished to take courses not available in their high school. More than 35 percent cited a desire to change to a more individualized or personalized learning and almost 32 percent chose to leave high school to avoid "being bored." Although Nathan and Jennings did not elaborate on the results, it seems clear that if a significant number of students left schools, the schools could face a serious problem in sustaining the type of courses such students would use.

EO, enrollment options, first implemented in 1987-1988, elicited even more controversy than PSEO. The program was designed to "enable any pupil to attend a school or program in a district in which the pupil does not reside" (Minnesota Statutes 120.062). Originally excluding small districts from mandatory participation, the legislation required participation by all districts by 1990-1991. A school board could by resolution prohibit the entry of nonresident students. Only one board availed itself of this right, drawing considerable unfavorable publicity (Edina won't take students under open enrollment, 1988). Moreover, boards could refuse students for reasons of capacity of a building or particular rooms, class size policies, and grade level policies. A board could not refuse permission to a student wanting to move out of a district unless the district had a desegregation plan in effect (Minnesota Statutes 120.062, Subd. 5), a situation operative in three city districts. Only one district invoked the prohibition, preventing certain Caucasian students from moving (Smetenka, 1989). Acceptance or rejection of students could not be based on academic achievement, athletic or other extracurricular talents, proficiency in the English language, or previous disciplinary proceedings.

Upon request of a parent, the nonresident district would provide transportation within its own borders. Originally, to get to the border the nonresident parent would have to take responsibility, although if the family income fell below the poverty level, the state would reimburse the costs. Virtually none of this money was requested (Blass, 1990). From 1990-1991, districts received authority to pick up students in other districts without permission. Originally, this transportation could be provided only with permission of the district of residence, which was not always secured, although appeals, usually successful, could be made to the State Department of Education (Hotakainen, 1990).

As of 1989-1990, approximately 3,218 students participated in the program, less than .5 percent of students in the state (Urahn, 1990), and by 1990-1991, the figure had risen to only 5,940, still fewer than one percent of the state's students (Minnesota Department of Education, 1991a; Few students use specialty program, 1991). Enrollment was almost evenly divided among males (2,958) and females (2, 982) (Urahn, 1990), a significantly different distribution than that existing under PSEO. Of the operating and autonomously funded districts in Minnesota, 22

percent participated in 1987-1988 and 80 percent in 1989-1990 (Urahn, 1990). Of the 345 districts that were required to participate in 1989-09—not until the next year did all districts have to participate—all but 13 had students transferring in or out.

Despite low overall student involvement, a few major student movements did occur. In one district an unpopular decision to close a school resulted in the exodus of 15 percent of the students, with the consequent gain of 15.5 percent in another (Blass, 1989a, Blass, 1989b). Warnings of disintegrating districts were common in 1988 and 1989, and one newspaper report proclaimed an "epidemic" of switching schools (Fermoyle, 1989). Charges of unethical recruiting were often made. A principal in a rural northern district said that some small districts were spending as much as $10,000 a year "in advertising promotions" to recruit students. The chairman of the Minnesota House Education Committee expressed shock at seeing advertising in his rural area and charged that the lack of restrictions on advertising "may generate cut-throat competition among districts" (McEachern, 1989). Because of the perception of "illegal recruiting," the administrator of one small district tried to exclude from his area the buses of an adjacent district. (Open enrollment used in 32 districts; students transported from other districts, 1990).

Critics attacked the program both for the motivations of students and the low numbers participating. Some foes of the program charged that students transferred for reasons unrelated to academics, and contended that athletics were a major cause of transfer (Fermoyle, 1989; Orwall, 1989; Wilkenson, 1988). A few superintendents, pointing out that some students would be helped at the expense of others, charged elitism. Paradoxically, critics also attacked the program as meaningless, a waste of money, because of the small numbers of students enrolled.

Supporters of the program denied that the low enrollment lessened its value, claiming that the benefit for participants constituted the real measure of success. To the charge of elitism, defenders argued that widening opportunities for all restricted elitism. With respect to transfer for reasons irrelevant to academics, they responded that the attacks were basically anecdotal, often rested on one or two examples, and in any case did not take into account the importance of all reasons leading to the choice of particular schools. As for athletics specifically, Commissioner of Education asserted that the charges were exaggerated and in any case failed to account for the fact that athletics produced leadership and cooperative values that enhanced the educational experience, thereby fitting into the basic purpose of the plan (Randall, 1988). She asserted that it would not be fair to discriminate against academically talented athletes when students in other extracurricular activities, such as theater and band, could transfer. Several attempts to exclude athletes from the program or at least limit their ability to be involved in sports for a year after transfer, had been defeated.

Under the supervision of Susan Urahn (1990, 1991a, 1991b), the Research Department of the Minnesota House of Representatives made a formal study of EO in the 1989–1990 school year, one year before the program became mandatory for all districts in the state. All superintendents in the state received a survey form consisting of questions on the impact of the program. Accompanying the survey form was a list of student open enrollment applications which the superintendents checked for accuracy, subtracting or adding names as necessary (Urahn, 1990, pp. 22-23). Eighty percent of all districts in the state participated, enrolling 3,218 students, approximately 13 percent in kindergarten, 60 percent in grades 1 through 8, and 37 percent in grades 9 through 12. Virtually all non-participating districts during the period were rural.

The study confirmed the limited extent of enrollment under the program and showed that most school districts had not experienced a significant change in enrollment (Urahn, 1990). Data revealed that 257 of the 343 participating districts lost less than 1 percent of students. Twelve districts, almost all of them rural, did lose more than 5 percent. Those districts whose enrollment changed considerably revealed, according to the author, that students and parents now had "the

ability to affect school district decisions by 'voting with their feet'" (Urahn, 1990, p. 2; see also pp. 17-18).

Responses to the survey indicated several motives for transfers. Convenience led all others. This category included geographic proximity (approximately 17 percent, about equally divided among secondary and elementary students), daycare/latchkey purposes, parents who worked in districts other than those of residence, and parents who planned to move into or out of a district. Excepting geographic proximity, the reasons applied primarily to elementary level students. Almost 19 percent of students, almost two-thirds of them secondary, simply continued a prior agreement, almost always based on convenience, that had been arranged between districts before the open enrollment plans went into effect. Academic reasons, given far more often by secondary than by elementary students, accounted for 20 percent of responses. Extracurricular activities, social and athletic, provided only 6 percent of responses.

Few differences separated the school districts in the Minneapolis-St. Paul metropolitan region from those in the non-metropolitan areas. Most differences concerned parents' place of work, much more important to the geographically dispersed non-metropolitan students and parents, and daycare/latchkey, used far more often by (and far more available to) metropolitan families. Moreover, Urahn found that students in the non-metropolitan areas appeared to be twice as likely twice as likely as their metropolitan counterparts to choose athletic/social reasons for transfer.

According to Urahn (1991a), more districts benefited than suffered from open enrollment, with 19 percent of metropolitan districts and 23 percent of non-metropolitan districts reporting benefits in contrast to 9 percent and 16 percent reporting harm. Twenty-eight percent of metropolitan districts and 16 percent of non-metropolitan districts reported both benefits and harm and 45 percent of each reported no impact. Loss of revenue was the harmful affect most often mentioned. A small number of respondents also noted reduced programs for remaining students, lack of stability in planning, and loss of "good students and good athletes."

What changes occurred because of the costs of EO? Among those reported most often were class size (19 percent of metro and 17 percent of non-metro areas) and changed curricula (9 % of districts, usually by expansion). Fifteen percent of metro and 5 percent of non-metro districts hired additional teachers; 4 percent of metro and 6 percent of non-metro districts reported laying off teachers. The enrollment change did lead many districts—20 percent— to initiate some type of cooperation agreement with other districts. This cooperation, not reported in any detail, included tuition agreements, trading grades, joining an education district (which provides funding for cooperative programs), joining an interactive TV cooperative, and sharing athletic activities. Some districts reported more competition and strained relationships. Internally, reduced staff seemed to be a consequence—or feared consequence—for a small number of districts.

Virtually all districts disseminated information to people who requested it, and about 60 percent of districts in metro and non-metro areas published information in newspapers. Yet very few districts "systematically provided non-residents with information" (Urahn, 1991a, p. 10). Many districts were uneasy about providing unrequested information to students outside the district. Many viewed recruitment as unethical. As the criticism of the program suggests, however, some districts did take action to attract students, although as carefully as possible.

Urahn (1991b) noted some specific policy implications of EO. The first was that most open enrollment students chose districts "as healthy" or "healthier" than their own, that is, were larger, richer, were not losing enrollment and had more experienced teachers. The second was that most participants used the program to optimize the curriculum available to them (more courses, better laboratory facilities, for example), evidently even if academics did constitute only 20 percent of the reasons for moving to a different school. Finally, because open enrollment continued to give

students the opportunity to "vote with their feet" in response to school board decisions, boards had to "factor students' actual and potential use of open enrollment into their decision-making."

Questions

The legislation creating the postsecondary options and open enrollment programs never explicitly defined "quality," but inherent in the plan was the idea that competition gave parents and students choices that ultimately would satisfy their needs better than the current public schools system would. These needs certainly encompassed academic concerns, but they appeared also to encompass a wider function for schools, including not only improved learning, but a more pleasant school ambiance.

For individual school districts thrown into the competition created by the programs, the most appropriate definition of quality is the success with which the districts met student needs. In this paper, exploration is made of the impact of the programs on contiguous rural districts in southern Minnesota. Certain questions guided the study. The first deals with student choice itself. Did parents choose schools they wished? Studies have suggested that some did, although the number is small. The rural setting of this study suggested further investigation of the constraints of geography and other situational factors in determining choice. Exploration of reasons suggests how the impact on certain districts might differ from that on others.

What of the impact on districts? Did the choices made by students lead to changes in the schools? Did the loss of students and funds, or the fear of losing them, lead to changes in the curriculum or in scheduling patterns or in the general relationships of schools with other schools? Information from statewide newspaper reports and the Urahn study suggest, too, the possibility of competitive marketing. Did it occur in this rural area? And did loss indicate potential danger to a district's existence?

Finally, as Archbald suggested in his statewide study, did the plans lessen the influence of professional authorities? In effect, when students "voted with their feet," as Urahn (1990) has described parental and student action, did they automatically reduce the control and indeed the professional status based on expertise of the administration? Was board and administrative control lessened? Or were purely rural areas exempt in part at least from this phenomenon as a result of geographic and social factors? This question, whose answers depend on a complex of information on other issues, will be dealt with ion the basis of exploration of the other questions noted.

Clearly, none of these questions can be answered definitively. But in attempting to ascertain them, I hope that I can contribute to improvement of understanding of choice, particularly as it applies to rural areas.

Method

The study involved investigation within a five-county area of southern Minnesota of all the rural districts that had average daily enrollment memberships of less than 1,150 (a number reflecting a certain standard enrollment size category, as designated in state reports) and whose boundaries lay more than ten miles from any city with a population of more than 20,000. Seventeen districts in the five-county area fitted the criterion. I selected the districts because they comprised a solid bloc in a defined and relatively homogeneous area. All of them participated in EO. One district did not participate in PSEO. It operated under a pairing agreement with a district outside the five county area It administered grades 1K through 8 while the other district administered the high school. Although the criterion for selection did omit some rural schools located very near cities, it ensured a rural base.

To find the impact on districts, I interviewed district superintendents and those principals who had responsibility for one or the other of the programs. Originally, I had planned to use names of individuals and districts, since many of the problems of districts had already received attention in local newspapers. Although most administrators did not object, two preferred anonymity, so I made clear to all respondents that names and districts would not be disclosed. Interrogation covered the enrollment during the first semester of the 1990-1991 school year. By concentrating on one semester the research was able to avoid the duplication problems inherent in calculating enrollment of PSEO students. During a year, they often moved in and out of schools. Although this focus limited somewhat the value of comparing these PSEO students with those in the early study of the Minnesota Department of Education (1987), it avoided the serious problems of accurate reporting because of multiple enrollments and program confusion that the Department of Education encountered (Minnesota State Department of Education, 1991b, p. 7). Moreover, it allowed comparison with the Department of Education report for 1990-1991 (Minnesota Department of Education, 1991b). Finally, the one semester limit portrayed closely the yearlong activities of EO students, since their transfers covered the school year.

The exploratory nature of the study dictated use of semistructured interviews, usually with one person, but sometimes with two and twice with three, depending upon the district's distribution of responsibilities for the choice programs. I employed the general techniques of elite interviewing (Dexter, 1970). The interviews were designed to elicit responses to questions dealing with specific aspects of the impact of these programs, including enrollment, curricular, personnel, financial and administrative. Although focusing on areas of impact of the programs, the questions were open-ended to allow certain nuances to emerge. Often, issues emerged that otherwise would have remained hidden. The open-ended questions avoided an inadequate response in subjects in which numerous types of responses might be given, allowing respondents to indicate how they defined a complex issue. Not only because of the multiple impacts of the programs, but also because of the numerous options available to students in Minnesota, respondents could easily mistake one program for another. Consequently flexibility was needed in questioning. In fact, pilot interviews in other counties had revealed that even in responding to the Minnesota Department of Education, some school districts had inadvertently supplied wrong responses—for example confusing particular interdistrict agreements with open enrollment or similar programs. Although open questions, with some probing, could not eliminate such errors, they could limit them.

I secured information on finance, state programs, and especially enrollment from material, published and unpublished, from the Minnesota Department of Education and from staff members. Administrators in the two large districts in the counties in which the rural districts were situated supplied valuable data. I also acquired general information on postsecondary applicants' performance from staff members of a public university, a private college, campuses of another university, community colleges, and technical colleges. Additional information came from local newspapers, which gave close attention to district activities. I always sought to confirm newspaper information on activities in this area with the individuals involved.

The Plans

The districts under investigation ranged in size from an average daily membership in 1990-91 of 271 students to 958 students. Table 1 reveals district participation in the postsecondary enrollment options plan (PSEO) and the enrollment options plan (EO) during the first semester of 1990-1991. In order to indicate involvement according to district size, the districts are categorized according to ranges in student average daily membership (ADM) as distributed under the size group classifications of the Minnesota Department of Education (1991c). No district was small enough to be in Group 1, covering districts with resident ADM of 0-199, although a district that belonged to that group in 1989-1990 had consolidated with a district that for 1990-1991 belonged to one of the higher groups. Included in Group 2, districts with an ADM of 200 to 284, was one district; in Group 3, ADM of 285 to 369, no district; Group 4, ADM of 370 to 464, four districts;

Group 5, ADM of 465 to 609, four districts; Group 6, ADM of 610 to 819, three districts; and Group 7, ADM of 820 to 1149, five districts.

As Table 1 indicates, the number of students taking part in the choice plans varied from district to district. Student participation in neither PSEO nor EO was high. Under PSEO, 3.7 percent of the eligible 11th and 12th graders left, in comparison with the 5 percent state figure. Considering that 72 percent of students in PSEO enrolled part-time, the full time equivalent eligible student loss for the districts was 2.3 percent. Three districts, however, showed a greater loss of eligible students than the state mean: 6.9 percent (4.2 percent FTE), 13.8 percent (8.2 percent FTE), and 15.25 percent (8.9 percent FTE), respectively.

Students in the region at the time of the study differed from statewide students in their selection of postsecondary institutions, with 34 percent choosing a community college (44 percent statewide in 1986), 32 percent choosing a state university unaffiliated with the University of Minnesota (10 percent statewide), 25 percent choosing a technical college (15 percent statewide), 6 percent choosing a private college, and 4 percent choosing a campus of the University of Minnesota (27 percent statewide). The different patterns of choice between PSEO students in the region and those statewide seem to be more a function of availability than anything else. More students in the region than statewide (10 percent) seemed to select a state university because one was located reasonably close to many districts, thus deflecting them from community colleges they otherwise might have chosen. Similarly, the two technical colleges in the region under study appeared to be closer to potential students than were many other colleges in the state as a whole, although vocational interests might have been more common among rural students in any case. The limited choice of the University of Minnesota among these students, as compared to those statewide reflected the 100-mile distance of the closest four-year branch campus from any district.

In the more recently established EO, for which all students were eligible, higher percentage of students participated than in the state as a whole. Approximately 2.6 percent of the districts' students participated in EO. This figure included several students who shifted to other schools in the district, however, and the rate of participation of individual students approximated 1.8 percent, a figure still higher than the reported statewide involvement. Two districts had more than two percent of students entering under the policy—10.7 percent in a small district and 3.3 percent in a larger district. Two districts had more than two percent leaving: 2.7 percent and 4.5 percent.

Measures of teachers per student, minority enrollment, and financial status of district (Minnesota Department of Education, 1991b) revealed no significant difference among districts according to student entry or exit. Pupil-staff ratios showed no relationship. Nor did percentage of minorities in a district. These districts in the region had few minority students; the district mean was 1.54 percent compared to Minnesota's mean of 9.2 percent. The district with the largest number of minorities, chiefly people of southeast Asian background, showed a 0 net gain-loss through open enrollment and had two students taking advantage of postsecondary options, indicating no notable choice difference from its neighboring districts.

Neither equalized tax capacity, in all cases lower than the state median, nor distribution of funds according to federal, state, and local sources (local ranged from 17 percent to 31 percent, compared to 44 percent statewide) showed a relationship to entry or exit patterns. Nevertheless, both districts receiving at least 30 percent of funds from local sources did not suffer any loss of students. One had a 0 gain-loss from EO and had no students in PSEO. The other district had a large gain from entering EO students and had only 2 students go to colleges under PSEO.

Table 1

Participation in Choice Plans & Net Gain/Loss by ADM Group of District

District Group 2 (200-284 ADM)

District A : 0 students in PSEO; +3, -3 in EO.

District Group 4 (370-464 ADM)

District B: 0 students in PSEO; +5, -0 in EO.
District C: 0 students in PSEO; +1, -1 in EO.
District D: 4 (2 part-time) students in PSEO; +1, -10 in EO.
District E: 2 (full-time) students in PSEO; +45, -4 in EO.

District Group 5 (465-609 ADM)

District F: 2 (full-time) students in PSEO; +5, -5 in EO.
District G: 2 (1 part-, 1 full-time) in PSEO; +4, -5 in EO.
District H: 0 in PSEO; +2, -3 in EO (+2, -3)
District I: 5 (1 full-, 4 part-time) in PSEO; +4, -2 in EO.

District Group 6 (610-819 ADM)

District J: 0 students in PSEO; +11, -12 in EO.
District K: 18 (3 full- & 15 part-time) in PSEO; +32, -7 in EO.
District L: 16 (3 full- & 13 Part-time) in PSEO; +10, -45 in EO.

District Group 7 (820-1149 ADM)

District M: 2 (full-time) students in PSEO; +6, -6 in EO.
District N: 0 in PSEO; -6 in EO.
District O: 2 (1 full- & 1 part-time) in PSEO; +15, -3 in EO.
District P: 4 (part-time) in PSEO; +8, -8 in EO.
District Q: 0 in PSEO; +1, -1 in EO.

Distance from institutions of higher education did differentiate districts. The closer students lived to a city with a population of 20,000 or more—those places in the region where two-year and four year colleges were located—the more likely they would take advantage of PSEO. Of the 9 districts of residence for students in the PSEO, both the mean and the median distance from the location of high schools in the districts to the city with a college was 22 miles. Of the seven districts of residence without any students in PSEO during the period under study, the mean distance was more than 40 miles and the median was 36 miles. Those students farthest away from higher education campuses revealed a greater likelihood of being full-time students.

Under EO, Entry and exit presented a similar picture for some districts. Most of these districts placed their schools in one central location, and distance was measured from this focal point. But when districts had elementary schools some miles apart from each other, distance was determined on the basis of the mean mileage of the schools from the receiving or supplying school. The schools in those districts with the highest percentage of students going to other districts under

EO, 2.7 percent and 4.36 percent, were located 20 and 22 miles, respectively, from a city of more than 20,000, and most of their exiting students did go to the large city schools. Nevertheless, of the two districts with the highest net influx of students from other districts, one, at 14 miles the closest of all districts to a city, received more students from the city than it lost to it.

In general, insofar as district administrators could determine, students selecting EO almost always chose adjacent districts, the only exceptions—nine children from four families in three districts—being among elementary students whose parents worked elsewhere and/or arranged for daycare. Administrators mentioning this cause represented districts relatively close to cities. In the rural districts farthest from cities the lack of facilities appeared to reduce the importance of daycare. Movement to nonadjacent districts also occurred in three of the districts. The moves involved five high school students whose parents had moved from a district in which the students wished to stay.

Among PSEO participants in the region, 30 percent of students were 11th graders and 70 percent were 12th graders, compared to the statewide percentages of 26 and 73 percent (Nathan and Jennings, 1990, Appendix, p. 1). In this region, as in the state as a whole, girls were far more likely than boys to participate in the program: 60 percent, as compared to 40 percent.

Under EO, 12 percent of the children entering or leaving a district were kindergartners, 33 percent were from the first through the sixth grade, 15 percent were from the seventh and eighth grades, and 40 percent were from grades nine through twelve. Statewide figures, as reported by Urahn (1990) were, respectively, 13 percent, 36 percent, 14 percent, and 37 percent., respectively. Because these figures, reported by administrators, cover entry by one district and loss by another, duplication exists except for these students going out of the area, as for example those going to the city schools. Yet this method of reporting is the most useful in looking at the impact on particular districts. Like the state as a whole the region indicated a basically equal representation of girls and boys under EO: 49 percent and 51 percent, respectively.

Impact on Districts

Impact on districts receives attention in the context of motives of students. Exact information on why students or their parents made decisions tends to elude observers, since purported reasons may be colored by various factors, including perceptions of what is socially acceptable or personally palatable to people whom respondents wish avoid hurting. Yet there is no reason to believe that most participants in choice programs did not give honest answers, and the reasons students and parents gave to administrators when the students left and entered deserve attention. In order to ground some of these statements situationally, the researcher asked administrators about the issue in the context of impact on finances, curriculum, school activities and the basic organization of the school districts.

Postsecondary Enrollment Options

Administrators' statements indicated that academic reasons predominated with respect to PSEO. Four respondents expressed regret that they lost student "peer group leaders" or "best students" to the program. But even among administrators who expressed regret over the departure of particular students, some acknowledged that the courses desired by the students could not have been supplied locally. As one said of a student, "She had completed all our math courses, including pre-calculus [the highest level mathematics course in the district] by the time she began 12th grade. It was better for her to go elsewhere." Another remarked of a student: "She was simply ready to go to college." Some administrators tended to believe that the predominance of girls in PSEO indicated their greater maturity and definite aspirations.

More than 75 percent of administrators whose districts had PSEO students mentioned that several students electing to go to higher education institutions did so despite their lacking the

maturity to socialize with older students and to accept the independence allowed in taking college courses. Most administrators who mentioned this issue gave one or two examples, often from experience during the past three years. The choice of institutions for social reasons did seem to explain the choice of some students, perhaps 15%, less in technical schools or the state university than in community colleges, although specific location of institutions in relation to the students' residence may have skewed choices here. The party-atmosphere and the older students of the postsecondary institutions did capture some students. Nevertheless, most administrators felt the majority of students did handle the different social situation well. In general, administrators admitted, most of the students who left under PSEO, whether part-time or full-time, proved to be successful.

Several administrators recognized that postsecondary institutions met the needs of vocationally-oriented students better than did high schools. They noted that students found special programs—for example, certain types of mechanical and dental assistant training—that simply could not be given at local schools. Many administrators, noting the expense of certain vocational programs and the difficulty of keeping technologically current, expressed the hope than most vocational preparation in general could be move to postsecondary institutions. A definite attitude toward vocational students seemed to determine the response of some administrators. Three expressed relief over the departure of students to technical colleges, since it meant getting rid of "remedial" students. Manifesting anger rather than relief, another administrator remarked that he wished that both community colleges and technical colleges left "remedial" work to the high schools.

All administrators in districts with students enrolled in PSEO mentioned the desire of students and families to save money. They noted the reduction in college expenses for students who took the opportunity of PSEO. Often, they asserted, parents encouraged students to use college for this reason, usually when students had demonstrated the ability to gain from such education, but sometimes even when they did not.

In this fifth year of PSEO, some administrators expressed the view that while in the early days the academically talented predominated—evidence from universities in the state confirmed this, indicating PSEO students did better in terms of grades than other freshmen or sophomores—more of the less academically talented were now choosing programs. Interviews with instructors in English and mathematics classes in four-year college campuses suggested a similar phenomenon. Yet no objective data are available, and, as noted, most students who have opted to take advantage of the program performed satisfactorily.

For most administrators, PSEO did not have a major detrimental impact on the organization or programs. But from the perspective of district viability, those administrators whose districts had more than 6 percent of their students participating in PSEO complained that the loss of capable students had an impact on the climate (the "life," as one said) of the school. The loss of money also concerned the administrators, although PSEO alone did not cause any district to reduce its staff.

Only one district actually faced a serious problem because of PSEO alone, however. This district experienced the exodus to the nearby university of twenty students, seven of whom were in a science class whose instructor had dissatisfied them. Although this district more than counterbalanced the loss through a large gain of EO students, its teachers and administrators were especially concerned because the students included a large segment of the most academically able juniors and seniors, whose departure would endanger not only not only the science course they objected to, but also other college preparatory courses.

The district reacted quickly, however, and immediately instituted Advance Placement courses for students whose interests and talents extended beyond standard courses. The action did not stem

the loss for a semester, with some 2.4 percent of its students taking courses at the university, but only .7 percent of the students attended full-time, not a large figure given the 14 mile distance of the school from a university. The following year, with expanded Advance Placement opportunities, the numbers of the most academically talented students going to the university for courses declined by three. The response of the school to the loss of students proved to be successful.

Larger and more affluent high schools can sometimes compete with institutions of higher education effectively, but small districts face almost insurmountable hurdles unless they are a substantial distance from colleges. At least 12 districts did not have the capability of establishing Advance Placement. Moreover, because of their size, they could not set up college courses to be taught by qualified teachers approved by a college. In these districts, not only the relatively small number of students involved, but also the difficulty in finding teachers who could meet university standards, generally based on substantial graduate training in a subject, rendered such an option impossible to take in 1990-1991. As administrators explained, the myriad duties required of rural teachers, often involving the teaching of courses in various areas as well as coaching athletic teams, made the hiring of academic specialists dysfunctional to the districts' basic purpose of meeting the needs of all their students.

The problem of scheduling for part-time students proved especially troublesome. Although in most cases districts eventually solved the problem of class articulation, often coordination between high schools and colleges for part-time students was virtually impossible. In fact in one district, five students interested in attending a technical college part-time had to withdraw after the district administration and the technical college administration, both of whom favored the students' attendance, failed to develop a plan that could have operated without overlapping other required programs.

Certain technical problems irritated administrators. Four administrators mentioned the problem of reintegrating into schools students who had failed at colleges. Although state law made reintegration necessary, it required considerable effort. Grading constituted another problem. Five administrators commented on the time and effort involved in translating grades and credit hours from institutions of higher education to high schools. In one case, a district translated all "A" grades at a nearby university into "A-" grades on the high school transcripts on the grounds that since the university did not give minus or plus scores the district could be fair to all students only by giving the lower grade. Only after conferences among college officials, a professor involved, and parents, and a threat of appeal to the State Department of Education, did the district accept college grades as full letter grades if appropriate work was confirmed by the college.

Other irritating problems arose. Two administrators mentioned the unwillingness of PSEO students who returned for high school social affairs, including the prom, to accept disciplinary warnings from the staff. One administrator mentioned a student who had achieved a 4.0 average at his community college and came back to the high school and wished to be valedictorian since his grade surpassed that of any student at the high school. The principal refused, and the student did not pursue the issue, but if he had appealed to the Department of Education under the rules governing the program, the principal had no choice but to acquiesce.

As noted, for most districts the number of students choosing to take advantage of PSEO was small enough to preclude major financial problems, but the potential danger of losing state support was noted by administrators representing 13 districts, including all districts with a PSEO arrangement. Two administrators, one from a district with a loss of 9.5 FTE students under PSEO and an additional net loss of 35 under EO and the other from a district with a loss of 4 (2 FTE) students under PSEO, did complain of the actual loss of funds. In the district losing a total 44.5 FTE students for both programs, the board reduced staff positions the following year in art and music. In 1990-1991, however, among all the districts in the region, this was the only district in which the loss of money immediately caused staff reductions. EO carried more responsibility for

the loss than PSEO. In general, administrators tried to keep academic programs from being cut, since most believed such courses not only contributed to the schools' attractiveness, but could protect the districts from pressures to consolidate. Virtually all administrators, even those in districts with no current PSEO students, realized that the departure of PSEO students would inevitably affect college-oriented academic programs much more than the departure of students under EO, whose curricular interests extended to all areas. The threat of losing programs as a result of both plans led seven districts to increase activities involving sharing classes with other district. Three other districts studied the use of interactive television courses.

The issue of marketing under PSEO did not appear significant. Institutions of higher education in the area revealed little interest in advertising for students, although at schools' requests, they did send material out. The technical colleges did not overtly advertise, but they did in many cases let schools know what they had to offer by sending brochures and syllabi. Most administrators did not find objectionable the activities of institutions of higher education, even when they felt that the institutions competed unfairly with them by giving duplicate courses, and although relations were sometimes cool, especially when schools lost a large number of students to institutions, there developed only one case in which charges reached the press: a local legislator employed by a school district stated that colleges claimed to offer better instruction but used the same texts as high schools.

Enrollment Options

As indicated by the data on distance of students from schools they elected to attend, under EO in the five-county area convenience played a major role. On the basis of student reports to the districts, convenience motivated the transfer of more than 55 percent of the students. Attendance boundaries were in many respects inappropriate for certain students. Virtually all administrators whose districts experienced student enrollment change noted the impact of the proximity of student residence to the location of a particular school. For elementary school students, the proximity of parents' workplace to daycare facilities also contributed strongly to a specific choice. Parents with children in daycare facilities or schools near their work clearly believed they would save time and worry by keeping children as near to their workplace as possible. One large nearby city gained several elementary school students because of its locus as a workplace as well as its plentiful daycare facilities. In general, however, the students in the area under study did not utilize daycare facilities as much as their metropolitan counterparts, largely because facilities were not readily available for those whose work did not take them to more populated areas.

The academic aspect of transfer was difficult to ascertain precisely, with administrators often declaring its importance or deprecating it on the basis of whether their own districts gained or lost students. According to students' statements given to school districts for entering or leaving, academic interests comprised approximately 22 percent. Academic opportunities as reasons for leaving districts did not assume the importance they had under PSEO. They disturbed administrators whose districts lost students more than did other reasons, essentially because of the curricular implications for the future.

Although one district lost several students to a city district, including special education students and gifted and talented students, two districts gained from cities elementary students whose parents believed that the rural districts offered smaller class size and more personal attention. The families lived close to the district boundaries. Parents moving children into these small districts displayed considerable attention to district quality, visiting the district two or three times and asking about both curricular and cocurricular opportunities before enrolling their children.

Academic opportunities did not always mean more rigorous requirements. The one district in this area whose schools were accredited by the North Central Association experienced a loss through EO, with 10 students leaving and 4 entering. The resident families that moved their

children, however, lived closer to the schools to which they chose to send their children. In four districts, administrators mentioned that students left one area to go to another because fewer units were required for graduation. For example, a high school in one district required 15 units to graduate while another required 17.5 units. Although certain state-mandated requirements would eventually change the disparity, it did play a minor part in transfers during the time under study.

Other reasons for leaving reflected various sources of discontent. Some reflected students' attitude toward certain teachers. Some students had more friends in another district's schools. The issue of extracurricular and athletic reasons did not appear to be major, although sometimes it was combined with other reasons related to the general climate and opportunities of particular schools. Three districts had a few students move in from larger districts, including the city districts, in part because parents and students believed that their children would have a greater opportunity to participate in these activities including band, orchestra, wrestling, basketball, track, and football. Some of the people choosing to move, however, also gave more general reasons, such as the desire for children to be in a smaller school, where they could receive more individual attention and secure recognition for attainments that could not as secure in a large district with much heavier competition. For a few students, athletics did constitute the only reason. For example, two students attended another district because they could not get along with their football coach. The movement of a basketball coach to an adjacent district caused four prospective athletes to follow. Overall, however, at least as far as administrators could determine from statements of people moving in, the athletic incentive appeared to be essentially minor and not reflective of the major shifts reported in the northern portion of the state, particularly with respect to hockey, a sport not as popular in these southern districts.

Regardless of cause of choice, both enrollment change and potential change appeared to affect the operation of school districts in many ways. Unlike PSEO, EO impacted all districts in the region and participation constituted a higher proportion than statewide. Nevertheless, for many administrators its impact was minimal. As noted previously with respect to overall enrollment patterns, most districts achieved a rough balance between entering students and departing students.

Some administrators found choice to be beneficial. Understandably, its popularity was especially high in two districts that increased enrollment significantly. One of these districts, losing students under PSEO, turned a potential loss of funds into an increase as a result of the influx of students under EO. The administrators of both districts attributed their gains to both quality and academic opportunities. Both these districts had more extensive course opportunities than adjacent rural districts. But geographic proximity, combined with reaction to a bitter consolidation battle in an adjacent area, contributed to their success on gaining students. The increase in students helped in planning future expansion. Nevertheless, in one of the districts it did not avoid the failure of a bond issue for the expansion of buildings. When students bring state aid, they do not bring parents who provide automatic support.

Even administrators whose districts did not gain students under EO expressed some positive views. Three suggested that in the future more aggressive tactics to gain and retain students would have to be employed. Four administrators initiated altered curricular offerings. Sometimes changes seemed questionable, such as the establishment of a year-long French course in an elementary school when no high schools or middle schools in the district or in adjacent districts provided French. Still, the changes appeared to meet the desires of some students and parents. Several administrators gave further attention to involvement in the pairing and sharing agreements, in which one district would take certain grades and another would take others, or certain courses would be held in one district and others in others, with students traveling. These opportunities had already been in existence, but open enrollment, sometimes in conjunction with PSEO, gave strong impetus to increased use.

Negative reactions concentrated more on expected than current problems. Two administrators involved in sharing plans resented the work, but felt that the future of the district required it. One district openly attempted to keep a large district's buses out of its area, even though legally, on the basis of State Department of Education decisions (Hotakainen, 1990), it had no grounds and simply had to depend during the period of this study on the other district's attempts to retain good will. Underlying almost all negative comments, even among supporters of open enrollment, was a major concern: consolidation. Administrators representing 53 percent of the districts brought up the issue of the state using EO (and perhaps, indirectly, PSEO) as part of an agenda to eliminate small districts. The view appeared to one discussed often in interdistrict meetings since the assertion emerged often, always with the assertion of a "secret agenda" by the state.

The Minnesota State Department of Education had presented—and then had withdrawn amid a political uproar—a plan to the public to consolidate virtually all rural districts (Orwall, 1991a; Orwall, 1991b; Halbur, 1991). As first presented by the Commissioner of Education, the plan called for the consolidation by 1994 of all districts with fewer than 1,300 students—in effect including all the districts in this five-county area. Although the governor, retreating from rural wrath, very quickly dissociated himself from the plan, he did declare that for an efficient educational system, consolidations must be expected. Many citizens feared for their districts and by extension their towns. Certainly, pairing, sharing classes, sharing a superintendent, as well as the fielding of athletic teams representing two and sometimes three rural districts had been a means of escaping the need to consolidate. But with state curricular mandates becoming more stringent, and with the surfacing of various plans for easing the implementation of consolidation, many people believed these responses to be holding actions rather than long-term protective strategies.

One district in this study operated under a pairing plan with another district in another county, but the future of the district was questionable, with likely consolidation ahead. For a few parents the combination of this fear, under which their children would be bussed some distance, and the relative proximity of a large city district with numerous curricular choices led to an exodus of 2.7 percent of students. The enrollment reduction led to plans for consolidation sooner than boards and administrators had anticipated.

Fear of lower enrollments also caused a move away from consolidation. Potential consolidation involving two districts in this study had led a group of parents representing 22 children in the smaller district to threaten to send their children to another district under EO if the board of their district of residence did not postpone for further study its plans to consolidate with an adjacent district. The board and the parents were aware of a precipitous enrollment loss under EO that forced a nearby district to consolidate. The threat achieved its purpose, with the board concerned that if the parents actually did carry out the threat, a consolidation under much less favorable circumstances could occur.

The consolidation that caused anxiety, involving a district with fewer than 200 students, occurred the previous year. The district had faced serious financial problems throughout the 1980s, but the board believed it could stay solvent when in 1988 the community voted to approve a levy increase of almost $60,000. The board's plan for the district had not anticipated the loss under EO of 18 students to a district whose schools were 16 miles away. The greater number of exiting students created a fiscal condition that could not be solved. Conversations with government officials, teachers, and citizens in general, as well as with the administrators, indicated that the exiting students represented families that had opposed the levy increase strongly. According to some small district administrators, the students were also influenced by advertising and strong campaigning by an adjacent district. Educators and citizens of the campaigning district allegedly described the small district as a place that would not exist much longer in any case, and pointed out that their own district provided more extensive programs, curricular and extracurricular, than other districts in the area. Two administrators in the small district believed that the profiting district's

recruitment of a highly successful basketball coach could have been an additional factor in attracting students.

Although in desperation the small district attempted certain types of pairing plans, with some students attending other districts for certain grades and subjects, it became clear that consolidation constituted the only solution. Consequently the district consolidated with a much larger adjacent district—not the one that attracted so many of its students. For reasons rooted far in the past, this larger district had been considered anathema to many of the people in the small district. Although the small district did have in its town the new middle school after consolidation, it lost to the central town of the larger district its elementary and high schools. The consequence of the consolidation was that, not only the district that had attracted students initially, but also another bordering district, some 19 miles away from the small district's school complex, increased its entrants dramatically as students chose to avoid the newly consolidated district. Proportionally, the overall loss of students residing in the newly consolidated district during the year of the study, the first year following the consolidation, was more than that of any other district in the region.

As a means of both gaining students and protecting their current enrollment, some schools in the region did attempt to market themselves, although not to the extent found elsewhere in the state, as reported by the press and described by legislators (Dermoyle, 1989; McEachern, 1989; Orwall, 1989). Under the law, districts had been allowed to develop brochures indicating what they had to offer. All were expected to respond to parents' queries, which appeared to occur most often when parents in the city districts wished their children to attend smaller districts because of smaller class sizes and better social opportunities. The city districts in the counties of the districts under study also received many queries and readily sent out brochures.

Some problems arose. Even in districts without significant losses under EO, district spokespersons sometimes charged that other districts exaggerated the worth of their programs. Although several districts did have brochures, only two appeared to have sent them to public locations in other districts, in one case to a the barber shop. Two districts sent brochures to parents in bordering areas. One district's alumni resident in other districts talked about the advantages of the schools from which they graduated. One district administrator accused another district of having meetings in "his" district to encourage parents to go to the school outside the district. He said they were "recruiting" meetings which emphasized the academic advantages of the recruiting district. The spokesperson for the accused district responded that the meetings were purely informational.

Analysis and Conclusion

Despite the dissatisfaction and fear that EO and PSEO created in some educators and boards, the programs concerned activities of only a small number of students. As is evident in the consolidation issues, however, in rural areas even a small number of students can affect the life of schools. Consequently, for those districts losing students, concern was understandable. Although a majority of administrators indicated doubts about choice programs, only four manifested a completely negative attitude. Those expressing doubt invariably did so in the context of potential consolidation and the loss of the advantages that characterized their schools, including close teacher-pupil relationships and students' opportunity for socialization. Yet although many administrators feared loss of students and funds and the possibility of consolidation, some 38 percent, not all in districts that gained students, felt the programs provided an opportunity to serve students better.

Central to an understanding of the impact of the two plans in the area investigated is an understanding of whether parents and students selected the educational institutions they wished and whether the institutions met their needs. Only a relatively small number of parents and students were dissatisfied enough with the services of their districts of residence to take advantage of the programs. For them, however, the programs do evidently mean quality education, even if, especially

in EO, the quality relates more to the general satisfaction of students and families than to the academic advantages gained.

Reasons for participation in the programs differ considerably. For most of the PSEO students, academic advantages appear to be the prime motivating factor, although the financial advantages of the program and the social opportunities for some students obviously played a part. EO students often appear to have subordinated purely academic interests to family convenience, as in the state as a whole. But even within districts under EO, parents may not have considered academics as important as other services of schools, including schools' consideration of children, safety, good peer relationships, the general climate of the school, and minimal travel time between school and home. For many such parents and children a school might meet academic needs but be dysfunctional otherwise. A move elsewhere may improve the quality of life considerably. For such parents and children, the quality of schools per se may have no meaning outside the context of the overall quality of life.

Competition leading to improved education was clearly a goal of the programs discussed. Because the issue of consolidation is intrinsic to the responses to the choice plans in the area studied, specific influence of EO and PSEO programs on organizational and curricular changes is difficult to ascertain in many cases . Yet the plans in which districts share teachers and courses with other districts did reflect responses to a perceived competitive situation, as did attention to the preservation of academic curricula, the consideration of interactive television, and the development of new courses. Among the very small districts, separated from other districts by great distances, competition may be a double-edged sword. Although residents of the district are not as likely to go elsewhere simply because of the distance involved, the districts themselves cannot improve their programs as easily as large districts, as manifested by the barriers preventing both the hiring of teachers with enough specialization in a subject to teach advanced courses.

Relations between the districts and institutions of higher education remained relatively peaceful under PSEO, but under EO the relations between districts themselves occasionally deteriorated. Although marketing techniques were not used extensively—not nearly as much as that reported at the state level—some districts did use advertising to such an extent that it irritated neighbors who believed it was influential in attracting "their" students. The attitude of administrators in districts that did advertise suggests that advertising will persist, continuing to be viewed as an opportunity by some districts and an unwelcome intrusion by others.

Advertising or not, a loss of several students that would have no impact on a large district could have a disastrous impact on a small district. At the very least, districts losing money and students would have to reduce courses, making their services less attractive and leading to further losses. In any case, when one district—or for that matter higher education institutions—draws a large number of students from another district the losing district may have to expect eventually the end of its independent existence. The consolidation that follows a district's loss of students may result in more curricular opportunities for students—although this is not always clear—but it also results in considerable community distress and conceivably a complete loss of identity for the smaller community. For the larger community that may dominate a consolidated district, consolidation may have many advantages, however, which explains the different attitudes toward the choice programs. At the district level, as at the personal level, quality from one perspective may not be quality from another.

Archbald (1990) noted the impact of choice plans on professional authority within the educational structure. Despite the relatively small number of people involved in the choice plans, it seems apparent that the plans do give people additional power over school professionals. Sarason (1990) has contended that true school reform cannot come until students and parents develop power in relation to school authorities. Regardless of the validity of the view in reference to reform, it does seem evident that even the existence of options for students and parents—the ability to "vote with

their feet"—forces school authorities to give more attention to parents and students. As suggested in the cases involving threatened and actual shifts of students, citizens voting or even threatening to vote with their feet in a small rural area, far more than in heavily populated urban or suburban areas, can make a large impact on educational policy.

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***

Roy Nasstrom is Professor of Educational Leadership and Coordinator of Advanced Graduate Programs, Winona State University, Winona, Minnesopta 55987.

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