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ABSTRACT

Prior school-choice studies have focused on parents and students who opt to choose, neglecting nonchoosers, or those remaining behind. A study of 37 Minnesota school districts (20 gaining student population and 17 losing student population due to choice options in fiscal year 1995) explores the relationship between school-choice implementation and social stratification in high-impact nonurban/rural districts. Longitudinal data were gathered for 1982-87 (prechoice years), and a time-series analysis was conducted for free/reduced lunch, minorities, and special-education variables. Analysis of lunch programs showed no significant difference between high-loss and low-loss districts. Economic stratification does not necessarily increase due to school choice implementation. However, there is a significant stratification effect along the racial/ethnic dimension. One possible explanation for this is that minorities are not opting for alternative placements to the same degree as nonminority students. For disabilities, results are ambiguous. High-gain districts maintain an almost linear (upward) trend, while high-loss districts show severe, sudden changes. Meeting special-education students' needs within school choice parameters needs more careful scrutiny. The market model may not conform with the reality of school choice policy as implemented in Minnesota. Infusion of a competitive philosophy may be flawed by processes resulting in intended or unintended undesirable consequences. (Contains 23 references.) (MLH)

THE STUDENTS "LEFT BEHIND":
SCHOOL CHOICE AND SOCIAL STRATIFICATION IN NON-URBAN DISTRICTS

By

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Background

National criticism of public schools in America has crescendoed with the advent of the publication of A Nation at Risk in 1983. As a response to this escalating dissatisfaction, stakeholders have joined forces demanding, and often legislating, changes in the institution of public education. Educators, policymakers, business leaders, the public and the government have considered multiple educational initiatives designed to improve quality, to be more fiscally efficient, and to regain a perceived loss of global superiority. Among the many items on the educational reform agenda, school choice is both one of the most popular and most controversial. Though school choice has multiple meanings and forms, the broad concept of school choice allows parental freedom in choosing which school a student may attend. Students' attendance in public schools is not restricted, therefore, to the community in which students live. Open enrollment, charter schools, vouchers, and magnet schools are the main school choice plans existing or being proposed in states across our nation.

Advocates of school choice cite several reasons for believing in the advantages of school choice. They argue that parents *want* to have more say in what educational experiences are most appropriate for their children; that parents have the *right* to choose specific schools for their children; that increasing school choices will provide the best opportunities to meet children's various learning styles; and that opening the door to school placement options will infuse the public educational system with the advantages of market-model competition. This last argument, based on Chubb and Moe's work , Politics, Markets and America's Schools (1990), sees the monopoly of public education as leading to economic inefficiencies, and rigid and immutable bureaucratic structures which limit and restrict positive education reform. Furthermore, school choice advocates believe that the competitive forces will spread throughout the public school system creating pressure and, therefore, incentives for all schools to improve quality. For example, Kolderie (1995) of Minnesota's Center for Policy Studies believes that the establishment of charter schools will not merely create excellent innovative charter schools, but will have "second-order effects" on "mainstream" public schools. That is, he predicts that most public schools will begin to improve as the threat and/or reality of losing students becomes an inducement to make positive changes, and that innovative charter schools will provide models which can be emulated by "mainstream" schools (Kolderie, 1995).

Those opposed to school choice, however, offered dire warnings about the unintended, or intended, by-products of these policies. The main argument of school choice opponents centers upon the fear that choice will not be available and/or used equally among all the student population. They anticipate that some students may be denied access to better schools (eg., children with special needs) or be unable to access these schools (Ysseldyde, Lange, & Algozzine, 1991). Since most school choice plans are legislated without provisions for transportation, opponents are

concerned that many families may not have the resources which allow them to attend schools in communities outside the local area (Glenn, 1990). Other concerns focus on the complexities of applications, deadlines, and of information availability (Moore & Davenport, 1990; Pearson, 1993). Opponents warn that the net impact will probably be a "creaming effect" of removing the most motivated students, the most involved parents, and the highest achieving students from local schools (P. Cookson, personal communication, May 20, 1996). Second order effects, from the opponents' viewpoint is a furthering of inequities. They predict that schools "left behind" will become more concentrated with students of lower socio-economic background, minorities, students with special education and behavior problems, and students of lower academic ability, as advantaged parents seek the best schools. This dismal forecast is aligned with class reproduction theorists like Bowles and Gintis (1976) who have charged that social institutions, such as education, in capitalist societies are often structured to perpetuate class and race differences (for example, Anyon, 1980; Ogbu, 1990). Thus, they question whether school choice is merely one additional institutional policy which will further reproduce inequalities along social, ethnic, and racial lines (Cookson, 1994; Wells & Crain,1992).

Parameters of this Research Study

Though the number of research studies about school choice has increased, especially over the past few years, several pivotal gaps appear obvious, especially for me as an educator living in the rural state of Vermont. My research questions and methods, therefore, have been shaped by the extent and nature of gaps in the present available research on school choice, and by the context and culture of my own environment. Thus, my specific research question and the method I have chosen for this investigation have been guided by the following four observations about school choice policy and available research.

Focus on Those who do **not** Choose

Most of the school choice research, thus far, concentrates on questions relating to those parents and students who opt to "choose," that is, take advantage of opportunities to change schools through these policies. For example, research literature cites surveys about reasons for parental choice and demographics of students who choose (Henig, 1996). What is missing is a clearer picture of those students who do not choose--or choose to not choose. Thus, this study looks at those students who remain, or who are left, behind.

Need for Longitudinal Analysis

Studying outcomes of school choice necessitates allowing several years after implementation to measure effects. Pressures of competition and results due to competition will not occur immediately. Therefore, there is a need for a longitudinal perspective. This has been recognized by other researchers investigating school choice (Fowler, 1996). Longitudinal research about school choice has been difficult or missing, in part, because choice is a relatively recent

phenomena. With the exception of magnet schools in a few urban areas, and some "limited" voucher plans like those in Vermont and Maine, publicly funded school choice is just now gaining significant momentum.

Non-urban/Rural Responses to School Choice May Be Unique

Most of the school choice research presently available examines programs in large metropolitan cities. Research in non-urban and rural areas is practically nonexistent at this time. For example, in Fuller and Elmore's (1996) recent book on school choice research, almost every cited research study focused on an urban setting.

Fuller and Elmore (1996) concluded from their research synthesis that the cultural and institutional *context* of choice plans has significant implications about implementation and effects. For states like Vermont, therefore, research conducted in Detroit, San Antonio, the Bronx, or St. Louis may not be particularly informative. The contextual dynamics in rural areas may be sufficiently different, so that generalizing from urban research is unwise. For example, families who live in rural areas often do not have easy access to multiple high schools as do many students of urban communities. The lack of public transportation, country roads, and long distances combine to elevate transportation issues to significance in rural states. In addition, in contrast to urban centers, rural areas often do not have the diversity of ethnic and racial groups. The relative lack of diversity in rural areas (or relative homogeneity) may, in fact, be an important factor in how choice is implemented and how districts respond to the policy. Some researchers have noted this and warn against assuming that urban dynamics of school choice policies transpose onto rural settings (Pearson, 1993; Fowler, 1996). For example, Fowler (1996) analyzed enrollment patterns of school choice by district location. Contrary to Pearson (1993), she found that rural areas in Ohio experienced less impact from school choice than suburban and urban settings (Fowler, 1996). Fowler's (1996) explanation was that rural areas are more homogeneous in terms of socioeconomic factors and, therefore, offer less obvious differences between neighboring schools. Thus, there is some indication that research about social stratification in urban settings, may not transfer to non-urban and rural regions.

Use of Outliers

Many schools, in Minnesota and elsewhere at this time, experience very small net in- and out-migration because of school choice. For these districts, any impact from school choice plans, whether financial, academic, morale-related, or demographic (social class) redistribution is therefore minimal. Though only slightly over 3% of students in public schools in Minnesota use one of the available school choice options (as of 1996), the percentage has increased each year. Thus, to try to anticipate the potential impact of wide-spread implementation of school choice, research needs to concentrate on schools or districts which are greatly effected by shifting student population due to choice options. For this reason, this research centered on those districts in

Minnesota, which after eight years of open enrollment (from 1988-1996), experienced significant net in-migration or out-migration of students. These statistically defined "outliers" were compared to examine the effects related to school choice implementation, chart variables longitudinally, and make predictions about potential consequences of more widespread usage of choice plans.

The Research Question

This research addresses the following question: What is the relationship between implementation of school choice and the degree of social stratification in high-impact non-urban/rural districts?

Definitions

High-impact. In this study *high-impact* districts are defined as those districts which have lost or gained a high percent of their student population due to school choice implementation in the fiscal year 1995. The term, *high-impact*, therefore, encompasses two groups: *high-loss* districts and *high-gain* districts. *High-loss* districts are districts which have lost significant percent of student population due to choice options; *high-gain* districts are districts which have gained significant percentage of students due to choice options. These districts were identified statistically as "outliers."

Non-urban/rural districts. The designation as a non-urban and/or rural district is used to eliminate all urban districts and suburban districts with high population density.[1]

Social stratification. The following variables were used as indices of social stratification: percent of children on "free and reduced" lunch, percent of minorities in district schools, and percent of children on Special Education IEPs.[2]

Methods

Site

I chose Minnesota as my research site since it meets three criteria. First, other than some long established magnet programs, it has the longest history of school choice plans in the United

[1] Minnesota uses a six point scale to categorize schools districts according to population density. Districts in categories 1 and 2, large cities and more densely populated suburban areas, were eliminated in this research. All other appropriate districts were included. The district with the largest student population in this study had a total of 3045 students spread over fourteen separate schools in FY 95.

[2] Though Special Education is not necessarily a "social class" indicator, I took the liberty of including this in my study. There is research which suggests that children with special needs may not have access to school choice options to the same degree as "regular" education students. In that respect, I believe that special education students may, in fact, delineate a "social" group which also may be segregated from others through school choice policies. That is, membership in this "group" may disadvantage students compared to peers belonging to the majority group.

States, and therefore longitudinal analysis is possible. Second, there are identifiable outliers--districts which have experienced significant population changes due to choice. And last, with the exception of Minneapolis-St. Paul and a few other cities, Minnesota is a rural state and therefore a reasonable site to study effects in non-urban areas.

Subjects

My unit of analysis was districts, since available state-wide data was collated at that level. Computer analysis of state-wide enrollment data for fiscal year 1995 was used to statistically identify "outliers." Two districts were eliminated since they were located on Native-American reservations and greatly skewed the demographic data (i.e., 100% minority). In addition, three districts located in urban areas were eliminated. Thirty seven districts remained: 20 "high-loss" districts and 17 "high-gain" districts, located throughout the state and all in non-urban and rural areas.

Data

I used quantitative methods to answer the research question. I gathered longitudinal data from 1982 to 1995 on these 37 high-impact school districts. The years 1982-1987 provided a baseline as they were "pre-choice" years.

The relevant data was available from the Department of Children, Families, and Learning (formerly the Department of Education) in St. Paul, Minnesota. Collection of data on enrollment numbers, financial issues, and demographics was also possible. Civil Rights reports contained much of the minority group information. In addition, state published district "profiles" and U. S. Census information was used to assess baseline (i.e., pre-choice) levels of the variables studied and assess community demographics. All data was converted to percentage of student population to account for differences in district student enrollment.

Analysis

My analysis of the data essentially was a time-series analysis of the three variables of interest (Free and Reduced Lunch, Minorities, and Special Education) for these two groups of districts (high-loss and high-gain). My statistical procedure looked at the differences between these two groups to determine *if the differences changed from 1982 to 1995 as school choice was implemented.* Thus, I analyzed the data using multiple linear regressions to compare the *slopes* of the two regression lines (high-loss districts compared to high-gain districts) for each variable. An F statistic was obtained using the ratio of the mean square of the "drop" (using a reduced model), to the mean square of the complete model. By comparing the *slopes* of the linear regression lines, I was able to eliminate the statistical effect of any "pre-choice" differences. In addition, the Census data from 1980 and 1990 allowed me to track demographic trends which potentially could explain differences unrelated to school choice implementation.

Results

Economic Stratification: Free and Reduced Lunch

My analysis of the data comparing percent of Free and Reduced Lunch between the two district groups (high-loss and high-gain) indicated that there was no statistical significant difference. Thus, my research does not confirm claims by class reproduction theorists that economic stratification will increase due to school choice policy implementation. The following graph (Figure 1) shows the percent of the district student population in these two groups from FY 83 to FY 95.

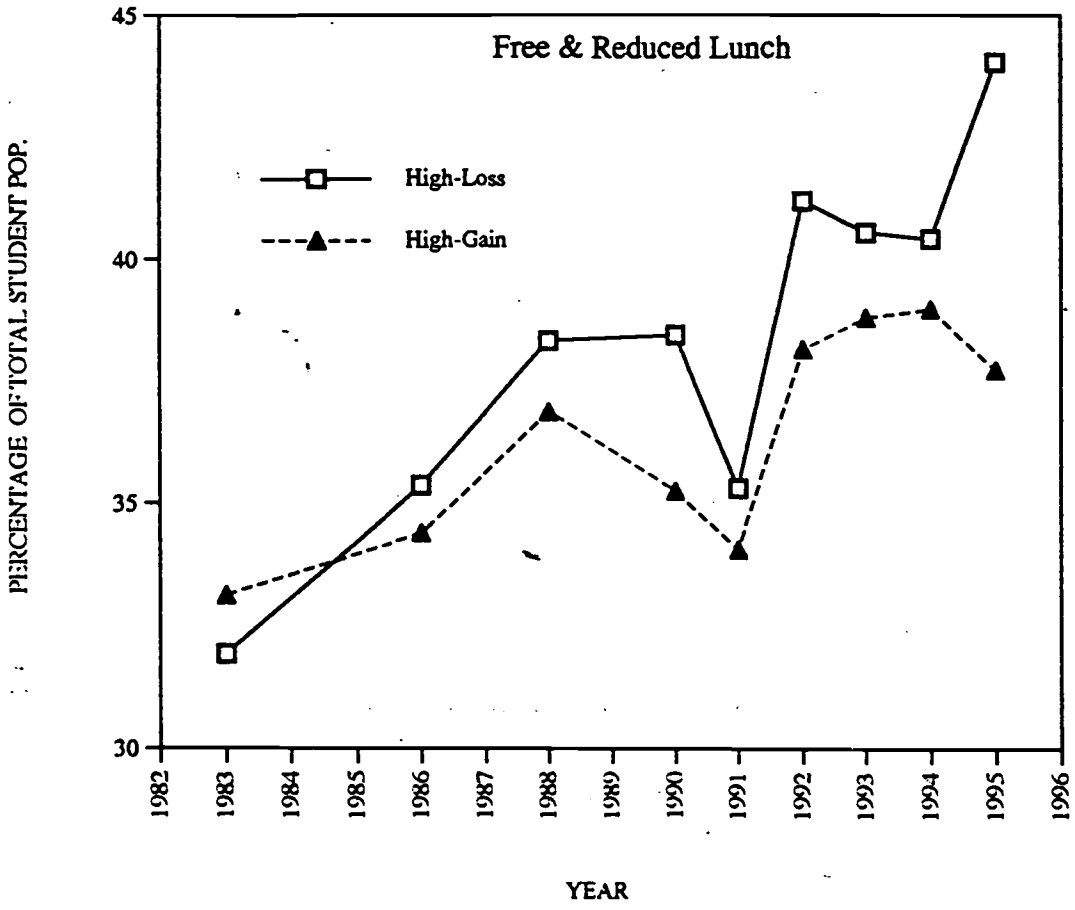

Figure 1. Percent of total student population who were eligible for Free & Reduced Lunch in high-loss and high-gain districts, for the years FY 83 to FY 95.

There are two observations which are relevant to this finding. First, the 1990 Census data portrays these two groups of communities as strikingly similar in terms of economic demographics. There were no significant differences in any of the three measures related to economic status (unemployment rate, median income, percent below poverty level). Even more interesting is that

the percent of students eligible for Free and Reduced Lunch from 1983 to 1994 shows very similar patterns for both groups of districts. From 1983 to 1988 there was a notable rise in this variable. In 1991, the means for both groups dropped, to rise again in 1992. Most likely similar economic factors caused similar fluctuations for these groups. Closing of local mills, the federal herd buy-out, and shifting population from rural to suburban and urban areas were economic factors which were mentioned by superintendents.

This relative homogeneity of socioeconomic conditions in rural areas was discussed by Fowler (1996) as a possible explanation for her observations that school choice in Ohio, after one year, had minimal impact on rural districts. Though my study contradicts her conclusions about the impact on rural districts, it may be that her reasoning may explain the failure in this study of finding stratification by the socioeconomic variable, Free and Reduced Lunch. Fowler (1996) believes that parents in rural areas may not be able to perceive "marked distinctions between the 'images' of area schools" (p. 22), thus rendering the choices less suspectable to class differentiation. In this study, the means for Free and Reduced Lunch for both groups in all the years reveal a consistent and homogeneous picture of rural poverty. The means range from 32% to 44%, for high-loss groups, and from 33% to 39%, for high-gain groups. It could be that in these districts, perceived differences along the poverty-wealth continuum is not visible enough to create a stratification effect.

As a complicating caveat, however, I believe that a closer examination of my data does warrant attention. Given the conspicuous similarity of trends from 1983 to 1994, what is perhaps worth highlighting is the 1995 data for this variable. The *difference* between these two groups from 1983 through 1994 never exceeded 3 percentage points. However, in FY 95, the mean for the high-loss districts was 6.3 percentage points higher than in high-gain districts. Whether this is a transient anomaly, or the beginning of a trend towards socioeconomic stratification is uncertain at this time. However, this variable should be investigated further in future years. If this widening trend continues in future years, it may be that school choice as a policy has a delayed reaction in this area, and even the six year history of school choice implementation of this study is not long enough to identify some consequences.

Racial/Ethnic Stratification: Percent of minorities

The F-ratio calculation shows a significant difference ($p < .05$) between the slopes of the regression lines fitting the mean percent of minorities. Thus, the statistical analysis does indicate a stratification effect along the racial/ethnic dimension. Again a visual presentation of the means for this variable is informative (see Figure 2).

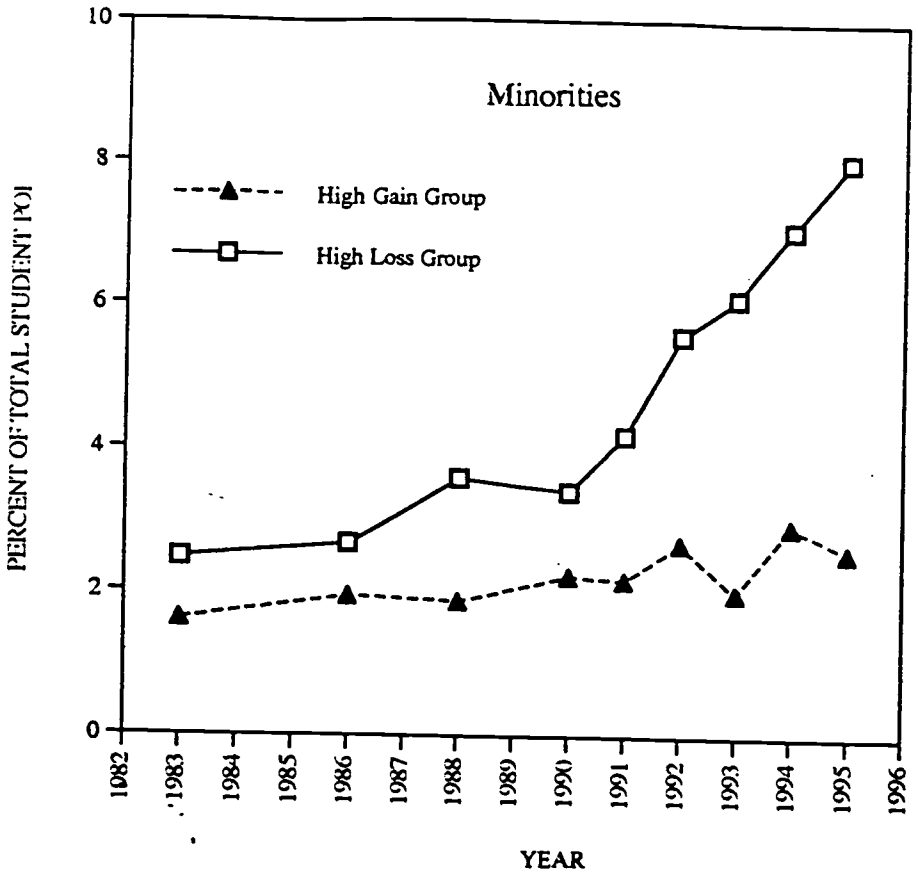

Figure 2. Percent of minorities in total student population in high-loss and high-gain districts for years FY 83 to FY 95.

The *difference* in the mean percentages for these two groups varies from .73% in FY 87 to 5.5% in FY 95. This divergence in mean percentage of minorities develops incrementally beginning in FY 91 and continuing through FY 95. This time period corresponds to the course of implementation of school choice in Minnesota. The conclusion here is that minority groups are more highly concentrated in high-loss districts. This concentration appears to be related to the degree of school choice implementation and is unrelated to community demographics.

As a researcher I found this result particularly humbling. During my initial data collection and first cursory glance at the percents, I almost ignored this variable. The percentage of minority residents and minority students in rural Minnesota is very low. Noting that the 1990 Census indicates 2.1 % minorities for the high-loss districts and 1.1% for the high-gain districts, I statistically analyzed this variable not anticipating any differences. Given the low percent of minority members in these districts, the increase in high-loss districts is quite unexpected. And disturbing.

There are several explanations which are possible here. First, it is possible that minorities are utilizing school choice options but not at the same rates as non-minority students. That is, perhaps they are not being simply "left behind." It may be that shifting of student population has merely caused some students to leave, and others to enter, but that the results of this population shift happen to increase the percent of minorities in high-loss districts. Another interpretation is that there is a "white flight" in high-loss districts, where non-minority students are leaving those districts, leaving a heavier concentration of minorities in these schools. Fowler's (1996) discussion about perceptions of "marked distinctions" may be useful here. Though poverty may not be so "noticeable" in areas where many families are poor, racial distinctions are usually very visible. Thus, the results of this finding may reinforce the segregative potential of school choice along the lines of the most obvious and visible dimensions of racial differences.

Neither of these interpretations explain the *reasons* for minorities not opting for alternative placements to the same degree as non-minority students. It is possible that minority students *are* actively choosing--but choosing to remain in local school districts. It is possible that these schools represent familiar territory. For example in their study of racial segregation in magnet schools, Wells and Crain (1992) noted that Black students often left "white" suburban magnet schools because they were unable to feel accepted and included in the dominant culture. In this study, transferring to alternative schools with less minority population, may increase feelings of isolation among minority students. This area has not been adequately explored in the research. The dynamics of why students *do not choose* demands further investigation.

Another potential explanation may be that transportation difficulties are really the critical factor here. Many of these rural schools are geographically far apart. Though some high-gain districts send buses into neighboring communities, they often limited their routes to the center of towns. Since many of the minorities in rural Minnesota live on Native-American Reservations, it may be that they are unable to take advantage of this available service, or that the combination of time and distance is too great. The extent to which districts are sending buses into other districts is not investigated in this study. Certainly, as Smrekar (1996) indicated, without transportation, a family is dependent upon resources of disposable time and money (and functioning vehicles) to have access to schools of choice. This is another issue which needs further scrutiny from researchers.

A third possible interpretation of the racial stratification is more aligned with arguments concerning cultural capital. For these minority students, differences in cultural capital may impede their freedom of choice. At least in the northern areas of rural Minnesota, Native-Americans are the most obvious minority group. Many of these families live on or near designated Indian reservations. It may be that the culture of these more insulated communities deviates enough from "main-stream" rural Minnesota life, that these students lack the required cultural capital to take

freely take part in choice options. Information access, requirements of applications and deadlines, and details about program offerings may require a knowledge and comfort with dominant cultural conventions which disadvantage Native-Americans in rural Minnesota. Again further research in needed to clarify these possibilities.

Disability Stratification: Percent of students on special education IEPs

The results of social stratification due to disabilities (i.e., special education) in this research, I believe, is ambiguous. The statistical analysis indicates that there are differences between the high-loss and high-gain groups, but the statistical significance is less than traditional conventions accept (the significance level of this F ratio was $p < .10$). Not only are these results ambiguous, but an examination of the trends indicate an extremely erratic pattern for the high-loss districts. The high-gain districts maintain an almost linear trend. The high-loss groups show severe and sudden changes. This is especially evident in FY 95 when the percent of students jumped from 11.8 % in FY 94 to 19.9% in FY 95. This unusual situation was not clarified by obtaining the following year's data. Data from FY 96[3] reveals yet additional, unexplained irregularity, as the mean for high-loss districts drops to 14.9%. This is a dramatic change from both the previous high-loss year, and an unexplained difference from the high-gain districts. Again a visual inspection of the graph of this variable is informative (Figure 3).

[3] In response to the apparent anomaly in FY 95, I requested and obtained the special education data for FY 96. I had hoped that the following year data would define a more consistent trend. Unfortunately, this was not the obvious case. The FY 96 data indicated that high-loss districts had much lower percent (14.96 %) of special education students compared to FY 95 (19.90 %). However, this was still strikingly higher than the high-loss means for the previous years. An analysis of FY 96 was further complicated since of the twenty high-loss districts, *seven* had consolidated with other districts within the previous 12 months, and no data was available for one other district. Since I was unable to disaggregate the consolidated data, I only had comparable information on 12 of the original twenty high-loss districts. Using this additional information, however, I again calculated the F-ratio. Again, the F-ratio of 3.444, with $df_1 = 1$ and $df_2 = 312$, was significant at the $p < .10$ level. This is quite similar to the results obtained without FY 96.

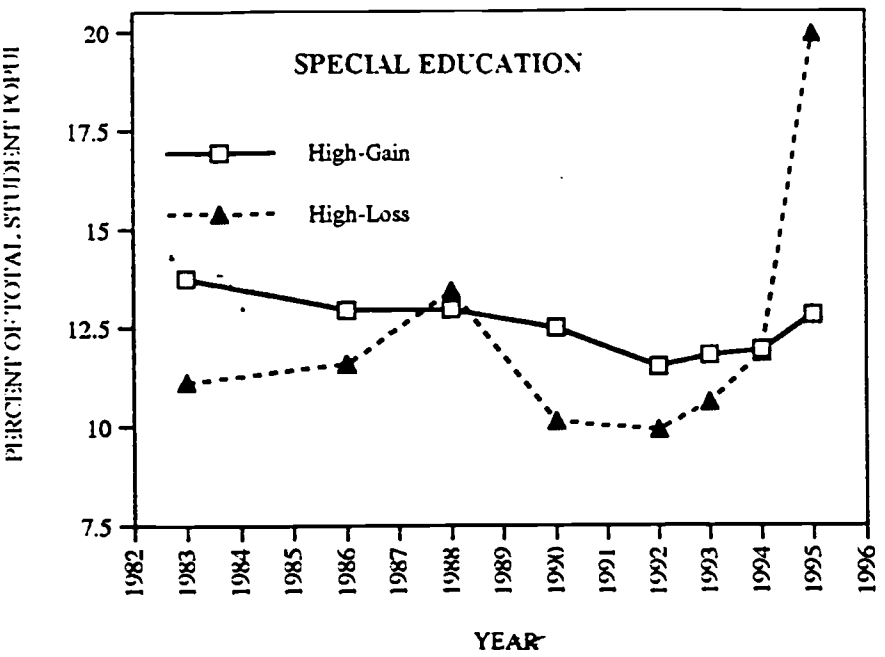

Figure 3. Percent of total student population who were on Special Education IEPs in high-loss and high-gain districts for years FY 83 to FY 95.

Unfortunately, my efforts to interpret this confusing situation have lead to a dead end. I wonder whether children with special education needs are encountering mixed messages from both sending and receiving schools and are transferring around seeking the best educational environment. I also believe that the unpredictable percentages of children with special education IEPs represents the "messy" nature of the present funding and accountability aspects of special education in the Minnesota school choice policy. As revealed in a related qualitative study (Jimerson, 1997), the average special education expenditures per-special education student is significantly higher for high-loss districts than for high-gain districts. This was not explained by historical trends. This dramatically higher expenditure is particularly worrisome given the context of the bill-back provisions of the current school choice policy in Minnesota. One apparent explanation is that special education students are being accepted by receiving districts and then provided with expensive services with the costs billed back to resident districts (which have no voice in their programs). Another possible interpretation of my results may be that students with the most severe disabilities, and associated high costs, are those who are most likely to be "left behind."

It is impossible without much more detailed analysis to sort out the special education numbers and money and make sense of the impact of school choice. What clearly is demonstrated,

however, is the potential for serious problems due to school choice policy in areas of special education financing and services, accountability mechanisms, and segregation because of disability. Because of the alarming data for FY 95 and even FY 96, this research serves to alert stakeholders and other researchers to conceivable intricate educational and policy problems. Meeting the needs of special education students within school choice parameters needs much more careful scrutiny.

Implications of the Results: The Theoretical Ideal and the Implementation Reality

The success of the market-model as an educational reform may depend on the extent to which this model can be translated from a privately-owned capitalistic system--into the public arena. The results of this research illuminate at least one way in which the market-model may not conform with the reality of school choice policy as implemented in Minnesota. Instead, the infusion of a competitive system via school choice policy may be flawed by processes which result in intended or unintended undesirable consequences.

Friedman (1962), and others (Chubb & Moe, 1990; Henderson,1993) are explicit about the ingredients necessary for a *voluntary free exchange system*, Friedman's descriptive label for the market-model. These same elements are also believed to be essential for school choice. These requirements are that (a) exchanges are voluntary; (b) that enterprises are privately owned; and (c) that natural selection be allowed to occur (Friedman, 1962; Chubb and Moe, 1990; Henderson, 1993). This study challenges one of the underlying assumptions of the first requirement in the implementation of school choice policies, the voluntary nature of free exchange.

The Voluntary Requirement of the Market-Model

Friedman (1962, 1979) and other market enthusiasts believe that this requirement is a key to unleashing the positive power of the competitive system. If consumers are free to enter into "exchanges," and free to leave exchanges, then they will be able to control exchanges. The threat of losing customers (i.e., the demand-side of the market equation), it is believed, will force a level of responsiveness from the supply side of the exchange. Producers of goods and services will need to be accountable to the needs and desires of the consumers. Furthermore, Friedman (1962, 1979) emphasizes that this voluntary requirement, which is essentially the freedom to choose, is protection from coercion by government. Indeed, Friedman (1962) believed that freedom of choice, economic freedom, is absolutely essential for political freedom.

Most critical, however, is the assertion by market theorists that *all* potential consumers will be free to enter or leave a transaction (Friedman, 1962). True freedom of choice is established only when all customers have the ability to take advantage of choice options. The prediction of class reproduction theories is, however, that students belonging to disadvantaged classes will not have unrestricted freedom of choice, at least as compared to peers with greater resources (Kozol,1992;

Moore & Davenport, 1990; Fuller & Elmore, 1996). They fear that freedom of choice will be unequally distributed. The results of this study validate these fears. At least within this context, minority parents do not participate in school choice options in equal proportions, compared to non-minorities.

There are two possible explanations for this. First, minority parents may be choosing to keep their students in local districts to a higher degree than non-minority parents. Second, it is possible that minority parents are "disadvantaged" in some way from utilizing available choices. If the first explanation is true, then the "voluntary" requirement of the market-model is met (Friedman, 1962). However, if the processes necessary for accessing and utilizing choice alternatives restricts some social classes more than others, class reproduction theorists may be justified in fearing the stratification impact of school choice.

A combination of my research results and the literature indicates that stratification effects, therefore, are a real concern. Even in rural Minnesota, where minority students are few, school choice apparently concentrates minorities in high-loss districts, relative to community demographics and relative to high-gain districts. Researchers have identified potential reasons to explain this. Admission procedures, deadlines, information access, and transportation needs often require disposable time, money, and cultural capital which may impose real restrictions on disadvantaged families (Lareau, 1987; Smrekar, 1996; Bourdieu, 1977; Moore and Davenport, 1990). All choices imply a certain degree of active parental energy and involvement. Some members of disadvantaged social classes may lack the resources necessary to sustain the required level of parental involvement necessary for utilization of school choice policies. Thus, freedom to enter and leave exchanges on a voluntary basis may exist on a theoretical level, but the implementation picture indicates a different reality.

Conclusions: In Whose Interest?

This research raises many unanswered questions about the actual impact of school choice policies. In this study, *why* are minority students apparently under-represented in utilizing choice options? Are there specific obstacles which need to be addressed on a policy level to make choice accessible to all? Are minority students actively choosing to stay in local schools, or are they powerless to leave? How can these results be reconciled with newly released research findings that charter schools mirror the ethnic composition of their communities? Is this study an anomaly of rural Minnesota, or are charter schools an unique situation? Also, the confusing and ambiguous results for disability and economic stratification suggest the need to re-examine these potential areas in the future. Will stratification increase in future years? Will economic segregation occur in localities with more distinct differences?

It is not unreasonable to observe the results of this research and ask "so what?" In these

high-loss districts where percent of minorities increased from 2.4 percent to 7.1 percent over this time, some might question, what's the problem? Hardly a ghettoization here. Some may in fact speculate that increasing the percent of minorities in these rural schools may be positive, perhaps empowering. But I find the results alarming.

This study represented half of a much larger research effort. The other half explored the school districts left "behind" with a qualitative lens. To understand the impact of school choice in these districts, I followed up with a qualitative examination of eight districts (Jimerson, 1997). Using interviews, site visits, document review and descriptive data analysis, I was able to more fully investigate schools and programs in high-impact districts. Unfortunately, it is using this knowledge and within this context, that I raise the red flag. The students "left behind" are left behind in schools with greatly diminished resources. High-loss districts have suffered greatly from loss of financial revenue from exiting students and the associated state aid. Programs have been slashed and eliminated. Class sizes have gone up. Facilities have deteriorated (Jimerson, 1997). Thus, the combined picture is one of increasing minority representation concentrated in struggling schools. Certainly, unwarranted extrapolation and over-generalization need to be avoided. However, this research highlights and validates concerns of choice opponents. In some contexts, school choice policies do have the ability to increase racial and ethnic segregation.

Does this imply that school choice policy is ill-advised? Perhaps. School choice has apparently been successful in improving the programs and resources in some districts, and for those children who have the ability, resources, and desire to transfer into these winning districts. However, as a social policy, the dilemma presented by policy analysts such as Stone (1988), provides the critical lens for final evaluation. Is this a policy designed to provide benefits for some children, at the expense of others? Is this a policy where the individual rights of a few may negatively impact the outcomes of many? Maybe.

This research, finally, underscores the complexity of school choice policies. School choice has intricate reverberations. The tentacles of the policy stretch into the social, as well as educational, fabric of our society. These complexities call for thoughtful scrutiny on the part of policy-makers. I believe that legislators instituting school choice policy need to separate themselves from the intense pressure of passionate advocates, and carefully consider and evaluate the potential long range consequences.

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