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ABSTRACT

Throughout the country, a wide range of educational options exist, from neighborhood public schools to cyber-schools. This study focuses on school choice in improving the educational experience in one city, Philadelphia. The study employed interviews with policymakers, teachers, and others; a focus group of middle-school students; a collection of research and policy documents; and firsthand observations of a high-school choice fair and two conferences. The findings show that choice means different things to different people and that numerous and diverse policies exist. Nevertheless, the structure of many policies limits the choices of certain families. Recommendations include the following: increased efforts to increase awareness about choices; formation of an organization to further the sharing of information among educators; adequate funding for charter schools, but not at the expense of the school district; more clarity and consistency in accountability policies; ensuring that traditional and charter-school leaders and staff have the capacity to sustain their programs. From the research evidence, it remains unclear that school-choice programs are achieving their goals. Future research should include evaluations that assess the effects of school-choice programs on equity, educational outcomes, and cost-effectiveness. (Contains 52 references and a list of online resources.) (WFA)

School Choice in Philadelphia

A paper presented at the
American Educational Research Association Annual Meeting

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SECTION 1

Introduction

The appropriate role of government in education in the United States has been the subject of debate and discussion for even longer than there has been a United States. American revolutionary Tom Paine advocated that government should provide parents with an educational voucher and demand that all children receive an education certified by a local minister. In more recent times, choice in education has been described both as a panacea for America's educational ills and as the demon that would tear apart the fabric of our nation. In 1962, economist Milton Friedman revitalized the discussion of choice in education with the publication of *Capitalism and Freedom* and his chapter "The Proper Government Role in Education." Since that time, choice has been a constant factor in educational discourse and has come to mean a wide variety of things to different people.

Choice options have been growing in the past decade. The U.S. Department of Education's *Condition of Education* (2001) states that in 1999, over 23% of students in grades 3-12 attended schools that were "chosen" (either public or private) as opposed to "assigned" (p164). Between 1993 and 1999, this percentage increased by nearly 4 percent. While these data show a movement towards greater choice in education, they underestimate the choices available to families. Henig and Sugarman (1999), using a broader definition of choice, report that "more than half of American families now exercise school choice" (p13). As choice continues to gain popularity across the country, it is important to understand the extent of options available and who, specifically, gets to exercise these options.

Choice in Philadelphia

This report attempts to explore the issue of school choice more deeply by focusing on the experience of Philadelphia. This study is an outgrowth of research conducted in a doctoral seminar on school choice that was developed with support from a mentorship grant from the Spencer Foundation. The goals of the seminar were to explore the theories underlying choice policies, review the research literature on the topic, and then see how such policies actually operate in one city, Philadelphia. Participants in the seminar reviewed the literature and also conducted interviews and discussions with key players in the local school choice arena to gain a better understanding of the different elements of school choice that exist in Philadelphia. Appendix A provides an overview of our methodology.

Our guiding mission was to understand the powers and limitations of school choice in improving the educational experiences of Philadelphia's youth. The seminar participants quickly realized, however, that a more formal and comprehensive evaluation would be necessary to answer such a question. While we believe there would be merit in conducting such an outcomes-based evaluation, we saw merit in first taking a step back to evaluate what choice "means" for families and schools in Philadelphia. Specifically, we sought to understand what options were available; whether or not choice options were equitably available to all families in Philadelphia; what the past, current, and future political climate is for choice in the city; and whether current policies and practices are helping or hindering the provision of choice.

In recent years, financial crises and the continued stagnation of student achievement within the School District of Philadelphia have led many to believe that major structural changes

are necessary. The state has recently taken over the School District of Philadelphia, and a new School Reform Commission has been created to determine the future of the city's schools. One of the recommendations from state-level officials is to enlist the help of private organizations such as Edison Schools, Inc. to manage the poorest performing schools.

While "school choice" is not the main focus of the current debates concerning the future of the district, it is essential for policymakers, practitioners, and community members to understand the complexity of the options that currently exist or may exist in the future. Currently in Philadelphia, parents can choose to send their children to public or private schools, or to home-school their children. If they choose to send their children to public schools, they have the option of having their children attend their neighborhood school, apply for transfer to a different neighborhood school, apply to a public school that accepts students throughout the district, or apply to a charter school.

The remainder of the report will explore 'what choice means' in Philadelphia. Section 2 defines choice, highlights the theoretical rationales for choice programs, presents a summary of the history of different choice efforts in recent decades, and provides contextual information concerning the current policy climate in Philadelphia. Section 3 presents an overview of educational choice mechanisms, and Section 4 highlights the specific choice options available to families in Philadelphia. Section 5 explores the issue of equity and specifies which families are actually taking advantage of their choice options. Section 6 documents other policy barriers to choice in Philadelphia and provides recommendations about how to handle these obstacles. We conclude by summarizing our findings and providing recommendations for improving and enhancing policies both within the city of Philadelphia and across the nation.

SECTION 2

Why School Choice?

The denial of choice, in American rhetoric, traditionally connotes an anti-democratic and un-American situation. In fact, courts have gone to great lengths to insure that American citizens are able to exercise significant choice in their own lives. However, our government denies choices in many areas related to public welfare. Limitations on alcohol, tobacco and narcotics come quickly to mind as examples of instances in which the government curtails individual choice in order to protect both individuals and society. The collision of rhetoric and reality demands that we do further analysis of what choice means and how it can be applied to our educational system.

Rationales for choice

In the realm of education, there are several compelling and unique reasons to discuss choice. In this section, we will briefly highlight five rationales for school choice, presenting arguments put forth by proponents of choice and counterbalancing these with arguments from opponents of choice. The specific rationales for choice that we will discuss are: values, market theories, accommodation of different learning styles, equity, and educational adequacy.

Values

In this country, it is generally agreed that parents should have the primary role in the upbringing of their children. Many believe that parents are the proper locus for the inculcation of standards, morals, values, and religion. Clearly, schools also play an instrumental part in children's development. School choice can assure that the lessons taught at school are consistent with the lessons of the home. Opponents of school choice, however, argue that public schools should instill in children the shared values of our country. Also, some critics state that when children are exposed to only one set of values, they do not have the opportunity to experience and understand the diversity in our culture. Finally, some critics believe that schools should be less focused on values and more focused on academics.

Free markets

Another rationale for encouraging choice in schools is based on the economic model of supply and demand. The capitalist model has taught us that choice and competition in many realms lead to continuous revision and improvement. Proponents of free markets can easily point to great strides and public benefits that have been gained in science, technology and industry as the result of competition between private interests. Milton Friedman was an early advocate for applying market forces to the educational system through the use of vouchers. In *Capitalism and Freedom*, Friedman (1962) outlined a plan whereby students and their families would receive an educational certificate, or voucher, and would thus become the consumers who demand education; while schools become the suppliers. Through these market forces, schools would have incentives to supply effective and efficient educational services. In Friedman's view, a distinction between public and private schools need not exist. Instead, all schools should be expected to vie for the same students. Chubb and Moe revitalized this theory in 1990 when

they published *Politics, Markets and America's Schools.* In this work, the authors criticized public schools for being inefficient, over-bureaucratized institutions that impede effective instruction. Chubb and Moe used the market rationale to advocate school choice, which they believed was a "panacea" to improving education in the country.

Lemann (1991) critiqued Chubb and Moe's argument, stating that choice is a "false panacea." He believed that Chubb and Moe used "Reagan-era" reasoning that "government is the problem" as a faulty rationale for school choice. Lemann believed that studies on the effectiveness of private schools do not necessarily provide clear support for instituting choice policies. Furthermore, he noted that the market rationale may not work if all families are not fully informed and able to utilize all of their options. Lemann specifically highlighted the potential for more financially privileged families to take advantage of a system of option demand, which could lead to even poorer educational experiences for low-income, inner-city students. Similarly, Fuller et al (1999) argue that a danger of providing parents with the power to choose may be that parents will prioritize other factors above educational excellence and thus may not choose the option that would lead to their child's "best" educational experience. Finally, Levin (1998) notes that even under a choice system, public bureaucracies need to exist to maintain the system, which could prove costly.

Equity and racial integration

As an outgrowth of the civil rights movement, policymakers became focused on using school choice as a mechanism for desegregating school districts. Magnet schools and other public schools of choice began to emerge on a widespread basis as a result of court-ordered desegregation plans. Advocates believe that choice allows parents to choose better schools for their children, thus equalizing the educational opportunities of students of different ethnic and economic backgrounds (Blank et al, 1999; Fuller et al, 1999). Choice opponents believe quite the opposite: choice will further distinguish between the "haves" and the "have nots." They believe that only those parents who have a sufficient amount of economic and social capital will be the choosers, others will be "left behind" in failing schools. Thus, schools will become more homogeneous and less equitable under a choice plan (Lee, Croninger and Smith, 1999; Martinez et al, 1999; Myers et al, 2000).

Learning styles

The issue of learning styles is also prevalent in school choice discussions. Because many now believe that children learn in different styles and through different methods (Gardner, 1993), it is hard to expect any one school to serve all children equally well. For this reason, proponents of school choice believe that parents should have the ability to choose a school that can best address the particular needs of their children. Others do not see choice as the method to accommodate different learning styles. Rather, these opponents of school choice believe that adequately funded public schools that employ quality teachers and have small pupil/teacher ratios can amply cater to the diversity of need and learning styles of students (Fuller, Elmore, and Orfield, 1999).

Improving educational outcomes

Some proponents of choice believe that schools are failing, and some kind of drastic alternative must be attempted. These proponents highlight the changes in the economy including the increased demand for skills and the heightened negative consequences for lack of educational

attainment as a rationale for overhauling the system. Chubb and Moe (1990) note that schools are ineffective and will not meet the challenges of this changing society as currently designed. They see no other solution but choice. Many opponents of school choice remain dedicated to the public school system and believe that it is important to work within the system, perhaps incorporating elements of successful private schools into the public school system. Lemann (1991) further cautions that major changes should not be made to the system unless there is a sound rationale, because once we implement such changes, we may never be able to return to our current system.

History of Choice in the United States

These various rationales for school choice have been argued, together and separately, over the course of the past four decades or more. When Friedman published *Capitalism and Freedom* in 1962, the theoretical focus was on free markets and educational efficiency. However, as the civil rights movement progressed, the emphasis of school choice moved towards more of an emphasis on equity. As a result, the school choice policies enacted in the late 1960s and through the 1970s were mostly focused on desegregation through the creation of magnet and alternative public schools.

In the 1980s, the spotlight turned away from equity and more towards issues of efficiency and student outcomes. *A Nation At Risk*, published in 1983, was issued as a wake-up call to the nation about the state of American schools. The report stated that in order to compete globally, the United States would have to ensure that its youth were adequately educated. This movement away from equity-based policies led to a reframing of the school choice debate. Reports by Coleman et al (1982) and Chubb and Moe (1990) suggested that private schools were more effective in educating youth than were public schools. Chubb and Moe then resurrected Friedman's earlier recommendations for more universal choice that blurred the lines between public and private schools. Their guiding principle was that "public authority must be put to use in creating a system that is almost entirely beyond the reach of public authority." (p218) They presented evidence comparing public and private school outcomes to justify their belief that through a market-based choice system that held all schools accountable to parents and to the public, schools would be forced to run efficiently and effectively. Bulman and Kirp (1999) note that although many found the market approach intellectually interesting, a large-scale movement in this direction was not politically feasible. Thus, in the 1990s, the United States experienced more smaller-scale movements towards greater school choice including: experimentation with vouchers, the emergence of charter schools, and continued growth and maintenance of public choice programs that had developed during the era of desegregation efforts.

Research findings on choice

As school choice has become a more popular policy option, researchers have expanded their studies of the effect of school choice on the educational system. A RAND review on school choice (Gill et al, 2001) provides a broad summary of research findings and highlights what is known and what is not yet known concerning the effects of school choice policies. While it is clear from our analysis, as well as from the RAND study, that there is no conclusive evidence that school choice "works" or "does not work," the growing body of evidence concerning the

various kinds of school choice can help us understand, more completely, what continuing or expanding school choice programs can mean for communities.

Specifically, evidence suggesting ***positive*** aspects of school choice includes:

- increased demand for school choice among families (Henig, 1999);
- consistent reports of parental satisfaction with their choices (NCES, 1997; Miron and Nelson, 2000; Witte, 1999; Metcalf, 1999; Peterson et al, 1999);
- signs of instructional innovation and experimentation among some schools of choice (RPP International, 2000; Miron and Nelson, 2000);
- strong attachment to a school mission among schools of choice (RPP International, 2000; Miron and Nelson, 2000);
- modest responses by traditional public schools to innovate and improve upon facing the threat of losing students to schools of choice (Teske et al, 2000; Hess, Maranto, and Milliman, 1999; Greene, 2001);
- a decrease in segregation when choice programs are explicitly designed to achieve this goal (Blank, Levine and Steel,1999); and
- a commitment to shared values at home and in schools of choice (Schneider, Teske and Marschall, 2000; Smith and Meier1995; Thernstrom, 1991).

Negative aspects of school choice, based on the research evidence, include the following:

- some failing schools of choice close, but others may remain open due to lack of strong accountability and enforcement (Center for Education Reform, 2001; Miron, 1999);
- families have unequal access to information concerning choice options (Levin, 1998; Henig, 1999; Cookson, 1997);
- more advantaged families make use of choice options (Myers et al, 2000; Peterson, Myers and Howell, 1999; Witte et al, 1994; Ladd and Fiske, 2001; Thernstrom, 1991; Levin, 1990; Neild, 1999; Fuller, 1995);
- some schools of choice may have an incentive to encourage "creaming" and removing the hardest to educate from their rosters (Thernstrom, 1991; Levin, 1990; Neild, 1999; Fuller, 1995);
- certain choice policies may financially penalize public schools who lose students to schools of choice while not providing them with the capacity to improve (Horn and Miron, 1999; Jimerson, 1998).

The body of evidence also suggest mixed or inconclusive findings concerning the following important issues:

- It is not clear that choice programs will save any money, and they may actually increase costs under certain circumstances (Henig, 1999; Levin, 1998); and

- The effect of choice progams on educational achievement is unclear (Gill et al, 2001).

Current Politics of Choice

What is the future of school choice in this country? Bulman and Kirp (1999) suggest that over the course of the past quarter-century, the political support for school choice has grown substantially. They highlight the importance of allegiances between different coalitions who advocate for school choice for different reasons. They believe that politically, it is easier to enact legislation that is more focused on the equity-based rationale for choice as opposed to focusing on the market-based conception. The authors conclude that the stronghold of public school bureaucracies will limit the scope and span of choice programs and policies. However, they think that choice will survive through institutionalization of programs such as alternative schools, charter schools, and open enrollment programs. Bulman and Kirp further believe that equity-based vouchers "are most likely to emerge in urban school districts where black activists and conservative politicians and foundations forge an alliance that contests the traditional liberal-labor coalition." (p61) The "wildcard" for private school vouchers, they believe, is whether or not courts will allow public funds to go to religious/parochial schools.

If trends continue, it is likely that school choice programs will continue to grow in popularity. It is therefore imperative that we consider what policies have helped or impeded the process of making choice a viable option for students and families.

SECTION 3

Methods of Choosing Schools

While policymakers often portray school choice as a new and innovative endeavor, it is important to realize that certain types of choice have existed for quite a long time. As mentioned above, our concern is in understanding all of the elements of choice that are available to families in Philadelphia. As such, we define choice quite broadly by considering each of the following methods of school choice: residency decisions, public school choice (including intradistrict, interdistrict, and charter schools), private school choice, and home-schooling/cyber-schooling options. In this section, we will first define each of these choice elements. In Section 4, we will then discuss generally whether and how these choices are available to families in Philadelphia.

Methods of choosing schools

Residency decisions

Families can exercise choice in schooling through their residency decisions. A student who is "assigned" to a local public school may be attending a school that was carefully decided upon by the student's parents when determining where they wanted to live. In fact, research has found that educational quality plays a large role in residency decisions, particularly for families in upper income brackets (Henig and Sugarman, 1999; National Center for Education Statistics, 1997, Hoxby, 1998). Henig and Sugarman (1999) conjecture that 36 percent of schoolchildren in the United States attend schools based upon the intentional residency decisions made by their parents.

Public school choice

Choice within the public school sector can occur within school districts (intradistrict), across school districts (interdistrict), and/or through charter school attendance. Models of **intradistrict** choice include *controlled choice,* where students are provided options to attend a school within their school district that is not their "neighborhood" school[1]. *Magnet schools, alternative schools, and vocational schools* exist largely within urban areas, specialize in a particular program of study or method of instruction, and are open to students throughout a school district.[2]

[1] In addition to Philadelphia, notable large-scale intradistrict choice programs exist in Cambridge, MA, Montclair, NJ, and New York City's District 4.

[2] Blank, Levine and Steel (1999) summarize findings from the 1991 National Magnet School Study. They find that the number of magnet schools in operation has significantly increased. Programmatically, magnet schools often attempt to attract students through specific curricular themes and instructional methodologies. Not all magnet schools are "havens" for high achieving students in urban areas. Instead, many magnet schools enroll based upon lottery. Only one-third of magnets admit based upon specific selection criteria. Amy Wells (1993) estimates that between 3,000 and 6,000 public alternative schools exist.

Interdistrict choice programs are widespread across the nation, but serve a relatively small number of students.[3] Henig and Sugarman (1999) note that the most important aspect of recent interdistrict school choice policies implemented across many states is that students can now leave their schools without getting permission from their home school district. The National Center for Education Statistics reported that as of the 1993-94 school year, over 47% of districts in the West, 42% of districts in the Midwest, 30% of districts in the South, and 13% of districts in the Northeast had choice programs, either interdistrict or intradistrict (NCES, 1997). This study also found that interdistrict choice was the "most widely available" choice program, but it served a small number of students, less than 2% of the student population in these districts. By contrast, in districts with intradistrict policies nearly 33% of students participated.[4]

Charter schools are the most recently implemented method of public school choice within and across school districts. Charter schools are public schools in their funding structure and in their accountability to the public; however, they are independently operated and freed from many state or district restrictions. These schools operate under a charter between the school founders (e.g., parents, teachers, educational management companies) and the sponsors of the charter (e.g., state or local school boards). Charter schools are an outgrowth of the movement towards greater choice in the 1990s. Minnesota was the first state to enact charter school legislation in 1993. Over the course of the past decade, the number of states with charter school laws and the accompanying number of students who attend charter schools nationwide has grown rapidly. As of the 2000-2001 school year, there were 37 charter school state laws in the United States, and more than 2,000 charter schools were serving over 500,000 students.

Private school choice

In 1925 (Pierce v. Society of Sisters), the Supreme Court ruled that families have the constitutional right to send their children to private schools, provided that the schools meet minimal regulatory standards set forth by the state. NCES (1999) reports that as of the 1997-1998 school year, 5 million students were enrolled in 27,402 private schools throughout the country, representing 10 percent of the total elementary and secondary students in the United States. Seventy-eight percent of all private schools are religiously affiliated, 38 percent of which are Catholic schools. While most parents who send their children to private schools pay tuition, others receive funding to send their children to private schools through privately funded *scholarship programs* or publicly-funded *vouchers*.

Voucher programs are highly publicized and contested in this country. There are only a few voucher programs currently in existence. In 1990, the Milwaukee legislature enacted a modest voucher program for low-income students. At first, it included only nonsectarian schools, but in 1995, private religious schools were added to participating schools. Cleveland, Ohio began its voucher program in 1996, and in 1999 the state of Florida introduced vouchers for students in failing schools, the only statewide program in the nation. Privately funded scholarship programs now operate in many cities. Outside of the United States, Chile and New Zealand have operated government-run, nationwide voucher systems since 1980 and 1989, respectively.

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[3] Minnesota's open enrollment program is the most ambitious interdistrict choice program. Under Minnesota's plan, any student can attend a school within the state as long as space is available in the receiving school.

[4] This 33% is largely due to the fact that some districts, particularly in the northeast, require all students to choose their school. For these districts (e.g., Cambridge, MA, Montclair, NJ, and East Harlem, NY), the participation rate in a choice program would approach 100% and bring up the total average.

Home-schooling and Cyber-Schools

Another school choice option that is available to families is homeschooling, also known as home education. The homeschooling movement – in which one or more parents choose to teach their own children – began to emerge in the 1960's and 1970's. Educator John Holt's 1964 book *How Children Fail,* and the 1977 establishment of his magazine, *Growing Without School,* helped nurture and sustain this movement. The decreasing, but still existent, difficulty in tracking homeschoolers has led to widely varying estimates of the total homeschooling population. In 1999, the number of students in the United States who were being homeschooled was estimated to be between 1.2 and 1.8 million (Archer, 1999). This is a dramatic increase from only about 15,000 students in 1986, and the number continues to grow as parents across the country choose to homeschool their children at a steadily increasing rate (Lines, 1999).

A new entry into the 'choice' equation are cyber-schools – on-line schools that students can attend from home and access through the Internet. In some cases, non-profit and for-profit organizations have adapted what were originally correspondence courses and transformed them into Internet-based curricula (Trotter, 1999). Former U.S. Secretary of Education William Bennett recently joined with the Virginia-based corporation Knowledge Universe to develop online curricula with the goal of opening online charter schools (Walsh, 2001). Most cyber-schools currently operate as charter schools, and may draw significantly from within the homeschooling population.

SECTION 4

School Choice Methods Available in Philadelphia

While it is difficult to derive an exact number of families in Philadelphia who are explicitly making choices concerning their children's school of attendance, it is possible to get a general sense of the specific choice options available. Here we will discuss each of the choice methods mentioned in the prior section and highlight the policies that currently exist in Philadelphia that allow families to choose their children's schools. Table 1 provides a general overview of current public and private school enrollments in the city of Philadelphia.

Table 1
2000-2001 Philadelphia Enrollments

	% of *all* school-aged students	% of *elementary* aged students	% of *secondary* aged students
Total public school enrollment	77.1%	69.6%	86.4%
Neighborhood schools	62.4%	64.5%	59.8%
Citywide schools	10.8%	1.1%	22.9%
Charter schools	3.9%	4.1%	3.7%
Total private school enrollment	22.7%	30.2%	13.4%
Catholic schools	16.8%	23.1%	8.9%
Other private schools	5.9%	7.0%	4.4%
Home-schooling	0.2%	0.2%	0.2%
School-aged population	293,406	163,300	130,106

Notes:

Data for this table were compiled from multiple sources including: Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE), 2000, "Public, Private and Nonpublic Schools: Enrollments 2000-01"; PDE individual school enrollment data, 2000-01; PDE Charter School enrollment, 2000-01; PDE "Home Education Students by School District and Age Group1999-00"; and Philadelphia School District's Office of Student Placement data on elementary student "placement requests and approvals" and on the number and specifics of citiwide and magnet programs.

Table 1 shows that as of the 2000-2001 school year, nearly 40% of students were attending some form of "choice" school such as a public magnet or citywide school, a charter school, a private school, or home-school. It is important to note that while the school-aged population has remained fairly stable over the past decade, the proportion of students attending various schools of choice has changed. Newer policies such as the emergence of charter schools and expanded high school choice options have increased the numbers of students participating in choice. It is also interesting to note the difference in the choice options used by families of elementary school-aged students versus secondary school-aged students.

Residency decisions

What is masked in Table 1 is the fact that a portion of the 62% of students who attend neighborhood schools in Philadelphia may have, in effect, chosen their schools when their parents determined where they wanted to live. It is quite likely, however, that the number of choosers based on residency decisions is much smaller in Philadelphia as compared to the national average of families who exercise choice through their residency decisions. Studies have found that in low-income, urban areas such as many neighborhoods in Philadelphia, families have less flexibility to move and thus have considerably less freedom to exercise this method of choice (National Center for Education Statistics, 1997). If anything, the declining number of higher income residents within the city of Philadelphia over the past decade suggests that families with adequate resources have already chosen to leave the city in favor of areas where they believe superior schools exist.

Intradistrict choice in Philadelphia

Public school choice initially arose in Philadelphia in 1978 as a remedy for the unlawful segregation of black and white students. Since that time, Philadelphia has used the public school choice program to address challenges of desegregation and student motivation.

Intradistrict choice at the elementary and middle school levels is somewhat limited in the city. As of the 2000-2001 school year, 99 of the 197 public elementary and middle schools were open to transfers of students living outside the catchment area. This included three selective magnet schools. Parents are able to select from among elementary programs if they initiate the choice process through a school counselor or the district's Office of Student Placement at any point during their child's elementary or middle school years. Based on documents from the Office of Student Placement, in the fall of 2000, 15,360 students requested elementary and/or middle school transfers in 171 different schools, and 1,780 student transfers were granted admission. In other words, only 11% of all elementary and middle school families who attempted to exercise intradistrict choice were approved. In reality, elementary and middle school choice in Philadelphia is what Elmore (1990) has called "option demand." That is, only the parents who demand choice have an option. The choice program is publicized very little though parents who contact the school counselor or central office are typically given a book describing all of the various choices and provided with an application to transfer. There is a six-week window in the fall in which applications may be submitted.

While the elementary program is little-known by most students and parents, the high school choice program can be considered what Elmore (1990) describes as a "universal choice"

program since all high school students are required to complete an application providing them with the potential to choose. As of the 2000-2001 school year, Philadelphia had 143 distinct high school programs. We use the word "programs" and not schools because many of these entities are actually small learning communities (SLCs) or schools within schools. All of Philadelphia's large comprehensive high schools have been broken up into small learning communities which have varying academic or vocational foci, course offerings and requirements, admission standards, and leadership teams. Of the high school programs in the city, 85 are neighborhood based programs which accept students only from within a specific geographic boundary. All students within this boundary are guaranteed admission to one of these programs. These programs have no other admission requirements. Thirty-three of the high school programs have particular grade, behavior, test and attendance criteria for admission and will accept students from across the city that meet those standards. Twelve programs have no particular admission requirements (like the neighborhood schools) but are open to students from throughout the city. Finally, 13 of the programs are magnet and vocational-technical high schools which have additional admissions requirements such as interviews, writing samples, portfolios, auditions or higher grade and test standards.

The intradistrict choice program in Philadelphia has been designed to meet a wide variety of needs. Programs cater to particular career interests, academic disciplines and achievement levels. Regardless of their choices, all students entering high school are required to complete an application. The counselor we spoke with asked students to apply to the maximum number of high schools permitted (10), in the hopes that at least one would accept the student. Applying to non-criteria-based programs requires nothing more than completing a computerized form. Other high schools and SLCs, as mentioned above, may require writing samples, auditions, essays or interviews. It is difficult to obtain information concerning the numbers of students who apply to different schools and the numbers that are accepted. However, as will be mentioned in the next section, there is research evidence that students from certain backgrounds are more likely to be accepted to selective options than others (Neild, 1999).

Interdistrict choice

Our search did not uncover any specific interdistrict choice policies available to families in Philadelphia.

Charter schools

Philadelphia's choice options were expanded in 1997 when the Pennsylvania state legislature passed Act 22, the state's charter school law. In Pennsylvania, local school boards possess the authority to grant charters. Charters are granted for terms of three to five years and are renewable for five years. A charter school may be forced to close by its sponsoring entity if it fails to meet the accountability goals set forth in the charter. A charter school is also accountable to parents, since parents may remove their children from the school if they are dissatisfied with the school.

As of July 2000, 67 charters schools were in operation throughout the state. Thirty-four of these existed within Philadelphia. Sixty-six percent of charter school students in Pennsylvania attend Philadelphia charter schools. Miron and Nelson (2000) offer convincing reasons for the

high concentration of charter schools in Philadelphia. First, they note that Philadelphia has a large "supply" of potential charter school students. While the median Pennsylvania school district enrolls 2,045 students, Philadelphia public schools enroll 226,149 elementary and secondary students during the 2000 school year.[5] Second, Philadelphia has an abundance of risk factors that may lead parents to seek alternatives for their children. Eighty-three percent of students are eligible for free or reduced lunch, and many perform poorly on the state achievement test, the PSSA. Third, Philadelphia has a relatively dense network of nonprofit community, church, and ethnic associations.

Charter school programs are quite diverse in terms of the programs that they offer (e.g., multicultural, bilingual, science and technology, school-to-career, connecting with community, constructivist, child-centered, college preparatory, direct instruction, rigorous academics, African-centered). Charter schools also vary widely in the age groups that they serve. Unlike the elementary and high school intradistrict choice programs where families must apply in the fall of the prior school year, families apply to charter schools in the spring. If there are more applicants than there are available slots, then the charter school must conduct a lottery to determine who will be chosen to attend the school in the fall.

Private school options

There are a multitude of private school options available to families who live in the Philadelphia region. There are almost 300 private schools in Philadelphia serving more than 70,000 students. The vast majority of private schools in Philadelphia (77%) have a religious affiliation – in most cases Christian. Private schools in Philadelphia also have a markedly higher proportion of white students than public schools.

Currently, there are no publicly funded vouchers in Philadelphia or Pennsylvania although in the past decade there have been various unsuccessful efforts to implement vouchers in the state. When Republican Tom Ridge became the governor of Pennsylvania in 1995, he expressed a great interest in instituting a voucher program for the state. In spite of Governor Ridge's efforts, however, vouchers have failed to get enough votes in the Pennsylvania House and Senate.[6] Although he was never able to garner the support to pass such legislation, the

[5] Philadelphia enrollment figures are from the Philadelphia School District website: http://www.phila.k12.pa.us

[6] The Governor introduced school choice legislation in 1995 and again in 1998. In 1995, House Bill 38 included everything the Governor wanted to increase educational choices for the students of Pennsylvania. This included an open enrollment system in which every student could choose to attend any public school, if space and an appropriate program were available, as well as "educational opportunity grants" which would have been offered to students based on their families' taxable incomes. The income requirement would start at $15,000 and then rise to $75,000 by year five of the program. For full-day kindergarten through grade 12, these grants would have been for $700 or 90% of the tuition to be paid, whichever was less. When it reached maturity, this voucher program would have cost the state government a quarter billion dollars per year (Kowell interview, 2001). House Bill 38 reached the floor, was partially voted upon, and lost votes as it progressed.

> In November 1998, as the legislative session drew to a close, Governor Ridge's office again introduced a proposal for vouchers, calling for a five-year trial voucher program in 15 counties, including Philadelphia. Parents would receive $350 to $1000 per K-12 child to use in any private religious or non-sectarian school. The income requirements were the same as in 1995. The plan also allowed students to attend public schools outside their home districts. Yet as in 1995, this voucher legislation also failed to gain approval.

debates and issues surrounding choice that emerged may have led to stronger support for charter schools. Support for choice also spurred the recent passage of tax credit legislation that aims to assist in providing private school opportunities to a broader array of families. Voucher advocates have viewed this legislation as a victory and a movement towards expanding private school choice options to more students through more scholarship opportunities (Mezzacappa, 2001)

In spite of the failure of state legislation to introduce educational vouchers, a small number of Philadelphia students receive privately funded vouchers to attend the private school of their choice. In 1999, the Children's Scholarship Fund (CSF) awarded 40,000 four-year partial scholarships to K-8 students nationwide. There were 1.25 million applicants across the nation, a ratio of 30 applicants for every one scholarship (Children's Scholarship Fund press release, 1999). In Philadelphia, 41,054 students applied for a scholarship, representing 34% of the eligible population. As of January 2001, 1,176 students in Philadelphia were using CSF scholarships (Palardy, 2001). In the 2000-2001 school year, the students attended 214 participating private schools, most of which are located within the city. Some of the students who used scholarships the first year did not continue the second year. Although CSF does not keep statistics on the reasons, some general reasons noted were the inability to pay the remaining tuition, the inability of the school to address the child's needs, transportation difficulties, lack of an appropriate school, and expulsion for a small number of students.

Eligibility for the CSF scholarships is generally determined to be those families with an income not exceeding 270% of the poverty level. The scholarships awarded to the students in Philadelphia averaged $909 with an average family contribution to tuition of $1,109, but each scholarship differs based on the cost of the student's tuition, the family income, and the number of members in the household. The maximum amount of a scholarship is 75% of tuition, with a cap of $1,400 for elementary schools and a minimum family payment of $500. As some of the scholarship recipients move into high school, the cap for high school students is being raised to $2,200. (Palardy, 2001, Toomey, 2001)

Home schooling and cyber-schools

Because many parents are employed full-time outside the home, home schooling and cyber-schooling are not viable options for many Philadelphia families. However, there is increased interest in these methods of schooling throughout the state of Pennsylvania. As of the 1999-2000 school year, there were 589 children who were being home-schooled in Philadelphia. While this is a relatively small number, it should be noted that this number has grown over the past decade across Pennsylvania.

Recently, cyber-schools have been of great interest to the Pennsylvania state legislature. Pennsylvania has the largest number of operating cyber-charter schools in the country. Currently, there are six active cyber-charter schools and one slated to open. These schools serve 622 students across a variety of counties and school districts. State policymakers have been considering whether or not to fund such programs as if they are charter schools (KPMG Consulting, 2001).

Governor Ridge has made his support for vouchers very clear. Tim Reeves, the governors' spokesman, stated in 1998, "Anytime [the Governor] felt he had the votes, he would be there with a bill the next day" (Kirsch, 1998).

Summary of choice options

As this section has shown, there are a variety of choice options available to families in Philadelphia. Families can choose where they want to live. Students can attempt to transfer from their assigned neighborhood school to a different public school within the district. Parents can choose to send their children to a charter school. If parents can afford the tuition, they can choose to send their child to a private school or if they lack the funds, they can attempt to get tuition scholarships. Finally, parents can choose to keep their children at home and either home school them or have them learn through a cyber-school.

However, even though a multitude of choice policies exist, the options families take advantage of are much more limited. It is therefore important to get a better idea of who gets to take advantage of these choice options. In the next section, we will argue that the ways many of these policies are structured may hamper the ability of certain families to make the choices they believe are best for their children.

SECTION 5:

Who Chooses in Philadelphia?

Studies on school choice conducted throughout the nation have found that certain families are more likely than others to be aware of, and to take advantage of, their choice options. Barriers to families include both lack of access to information and lack of knowledge and resources to take advantage of choice options. There is growing evidence from assorted studies that different families access varying amounts of information. For example, in the Alum Rock public school voucher experiment in San Jose, California in the 1970s, there was evidence that Mexican American families and parents with less formal education were less aware of the voucher options (Henig, 1999). In this program, information was disseminated in multi-lingual school bulletins, newspapers, mailings, radio announcements, neighborhood meetings, and by free information counselors. After the program began, 25% of eligible parents said that they were totally unaware that they had a choice of schools for their children. Only about 50% to 60% of parents knew that if their children needed bus transportation to school it would be free. Family income and parental education level were positively correlated with level of awareness about the choice program. Additionally, Anglos were more likely than people of color to know about the program (Levin, 1990). In this discussion, we will first discuss issues concerning access to information, and then focus on how this relates to actual utilization of choice in Philadelphia.

Learning about intradistrict choice options

Since the public high school choice process is universal for students in Philadelphia, we will focus our attention on that level. The high school selection process for students works as follows: All eighth graders are given a book in October that describes the available high school programs. Usually, school counselors distribute these books to groups of students and introduce them to the idea that they will have to choose a high school to attend. In our student focus group of seventh and eighth graders, few admitted to considering their high school choices prior to the start of the eighth grade. The book distributed by counselors, entitled "High School Resource Book: A Guide for September 2002 Admissions" provides names, locations and brief descriptions for all 143 programs and describes their admission requirements. Some school counselors arrange for information fairs at the school or have popular programs come to make presentations to 8th grade students. The district also organizes eight larger fairs held in the evenings and on weekends. These fairs include representatives from many of the high schools in the city along with printed information and audio-visual presentations. Students are then required to complete and submit an application form listing up to ten high school choices (and supporting materials if required) to their school counselors before Thanksgiving.

The School District's Office of Student Placement is the primary source of information concerning the variety of choice options available to students who reside within the city. This office was originally called the "Office of Desegregation," and was created to focus primarily on executing the desegregation plan and providing access to information concerning choices to families. Currently, the office's formal responsibilities include: "maintaining the Modified Desegregation Program, implementation of initiatives related to school placement, and

promoting elementary and secondary school options." (School District website) The office's website and publications provide families with the tools that they would need to seek transfers within the school district. In addition, the office also operates a 24-hour hotline regarding transfers and placements, manages the pupil lottery, and provides educational counseling regarding placement.

The information that is readily available in printed form is frequently under-publicized and under-utilized. The elementary choice program receives very little public attention. The high school choice program, though familiar to all eighth graders, is not given extensive public notice. For example, the seventh graders that we spoke with had little idea that their current year grades would play a significant role in determining their high school options. Though parent/guardian signatures are required on the application form, parents are involved in the process only at the discretion of their children. Much of the available information is printed only in English. Students and parents outside of the school district have little idea of the wide range of choices that are available to them. For example, charter schools are not included in the high school fairs or publications offered by the District. Similarly, private schools and scholarship programs are not mentioned.

Finally, there is little attention given to individual students and their potential choices. The counselor we spoke with was in charge of facilitating the application process for 250 eighth graders. Given the limited period of time between the dissemination of information and the due date for applications, it is impossible for the counselor to meet with more than a handful of students and parents. This leads to miscommunication and confusion for many students. For example, the counselor told us that she was trying to provide the most information about programs in close physical proximity to the middle school. In conversations with students at that same school, none of them expressed a concern about travelling significant distances to schools that might be of more personal interest. Additionally, many programs advertise very specific foci or career paths. Few of the students had a sufficient understanding of these careers to make informed decisions. For example, one student who wished to be a veterinarian believed that by going to the high school that focuses on agricultural sciences she could begin practicing veterinary medicine upon graduation from high school. Given the lack of individualized attention and the highly specific nature of many of the programs, it seems likely that lack of information contributes to mismatches between students and schools.

Learning about charter school options

Charter schools also provide an example of the barriers to information for certain families in Philadelphia. At the time of the study, the only way to obtain information concerning charter schools was to call individual charters school directly. The School District of Philadelphia website simply provides the names and contact information for each of the schools. Each charter school is responsible for marketing and recruiting students. While Foundations, Inc. – a non-profit organization affiliated with Drexel University that supports the growth of charter schools - is working to centralize information about Philadelphia charter schools through the development of a CD-ROM that contains information on each school, organization leaders admit that it would take a savvy parent to navigate through this information. However, when we asked a current charter school leader about information barriers and access, he did not consider this to be a major barrier to families. He expressed a strong belief in informational networks that exist throughout Philadelphia communities and through mechanisms such as churches. However, as noted above,

prior studies have shown that such informal networks may not be sufficient to disseminate necessary information. It is therefore reasonable to be concerned that some families will not have adequate information regarding their choice options.

Who is using choice?

Does inequitable distribution of information translate into inequitable access and usage of choice options? While we have not conducted a formal study of this question, the evidence collected on this issue suggests that certain families in Philadelphia are more likely to use choice than others.

Neild (1999) studied the public school choice options of 1,500 randomly selected high school students in Philadelphia and found that although theoretically all students get to choose the high school that they would like to attend "about 60% of the applicants actually were able to choose as a result of being accepted to one of the schools to which they applied." Furthermore, Neild found that "high achieving students and white students were the most likely to have any choice in the system." (p. vi)

Generally, students who can afford to attend private schools in Philadelphia are likely to be more economically advantaged than those who attend public schools. Even those with private school scholarship funds must contribute additional resources for transportation, school supplies, and perhaps additional tuition. Evidence from studies on vouchers in other cities have shown that families with more education and resources are more likely to use a voucher than less advantaged families who are offered a voucher. (Myers et al, 2000). The same situation would arise for families who home-school or are thinking about cyber schooling. These two choice options would require adult presence in the home during the school day, which may make such options impossible for many lower-income or working-class families in Philadelphia.

The experience of charter schools is somewhat different from these other choice methods and may suggest that not all methods of choice cater to the most advantaged students. Miron and Nelson (2000) found that in Pennsylvania similar levels of low-income students enroll in charter schools as compared to the host school district. The authors also found that a greater proportion of students of color enroll in Pennsylvania charter schools than their host districts. It is important to note that there may be clear differences between charter users verus non-users. For example, Miron and Nelson also note that families who choose charter schools tend to have active parents who are aware of the school's mission.

Summary and recommendations regarding information dissemination

The evidence and data provided in this chapter suggest that there is variation in the information that families receive concerning their choice options. This variation translates into disparate utilization of choice options. If choice is to be used as a tool to improve equality of educational opportunity for students in Philadelphia, then the issues of information access and its relationship to use of choice must be addressed. Currently, families must go to a variety of different sources to gain access to information concerning their choice options.

Thus, while the Office of Student Placement is carrying out the responsibilities to which it is charged, it is also important to understand that this office is not a centralized hub of information concerning the variety of choice options available to families in Philadelphia. As Cookson (1997) notes, this situation can present some districts (such as Philadelphia) with a

conflict of interest as they are bound to lose some funding should parents elect to send their children to a school outside of the district. We recommend rethinking the way that families learn about their choice options. Perhaps an organization not directly attached with the school district should act as a bridge between public and private schools, and between traditional and non-traditional public schools. By coordinating the services and information of groups such as the Office of Student Placement, the Archdiocese, and other charter and non-public schools, a Parent Information Center similar to the one proposed by Chubb and Moe could provide families with the resources that they need to make informed decisions. Rather than being advocates for one set of schools over another, such a group could be an information resource that benefits families.

Specific recommendations that we believe would improve information dissemination concerning choice options include:

- A campaign of public information could be undertaken to increase awareness among children and parents about the choice process and the range of choices available, much as the District has done in order to prepare students for annual state and citywide assessments. Such campaigns improve knowledge and participation.
- Counselors should be provided with more information and support in guiding students through the process. A counselor/student ratio of 250-to-1, as was reported, allows a counselor to do little more than shuffle papers. We found through our discussions with one middle school counselor that while counselors had been trained in completing forms, they had little information about high schools beyond that distributed to students. We also recommend improved technology to reduce or eliminate the tens of hours that counselors currently spend separating, collating, and processing application forms. Counselor support can play an instrumental role in helping students to make successful matches and in alerting students early enough in their school careers to help serve as a motivator.
- Increased awareness of the choices available to students in the elementary grades. While a catalog of District choices exists, it has not been recently updated, is only available through the central office, and does not include charter school options.
- With regard to choosing public high schools, we recommend providing families with additional information about the numbers of students applying to each high school program and/or school, the percentages accepted and the demographic and achievement data of that school or program. In this way, students and parents would be able to make more informed decisions when completing their high school applications.

Section 6:

What other barriers to choice exist in Philadelphia?

Information alone will not ensure that families are equitably treated in a choice environment. In our discussions with state and city policymakers, researchers, and practitioners, other issues came to the fore as factors limiting the power of choice. These include policy barriers (including politics, finance, and accountability) and implementation hardships (including issues of capacity and turnover).

Political barriers

When "school choice" is discussed in the political arena, it is often synonymous with vouchers and private schools. However, as discussed throughout this paper, there are a multitude of choice options available to families in Philadelphia. The concept of choice, however, tends to stratify groups into "believers" and "non-believers." This sets up a situation where instead of looking for opportunities for information sharing and cost-saving, educators and politicians work hard to protect themselves.

The way that the current system of choice exists in Philadelphia makes it difficult for schools (whether they be private schools, charter schools, or traditional public schools) to cooperate and communicate with one another. Choice policies inherently provide incentives for schools to compete with each other for students. From a theoretical perspective, this may provide schools with incentives to improve. However, this does not provide schools with incentives to share with their fellow educational practitioners the "best practices" that arise from their successes and caution school leaders of their failures. Instead, the current system discourages cross-school communication. We suggest that communication can be improved if incentives are created to share and communicate with one another.

> **Recommendation:** We recommend the creation of an impartial organization or body to help improve communication about school choice options in Philadelphia. Meister and Schuh (2000) recommend establishing a Policy Forum, which would bring together representatives from charter schools, the district, and local and state policymakers to examine the charter school laws and regulations and agree on modifications. They also recommend creation an Exchange for Public Education, which would bring together school district and charter school educators to learn from one another. We concur with these recommendations and also encourage policymakers to consider creating explicit incentives to share information.

Financial barriers

When it comes to charter schools, financial constraints and political animosity often go hand in hand. While it may be argued that the School District saves money by no longer having to educate students who attend charter schools, the savings are not equivalent to the per-pupil expenditures that they must pay to the charter schools. Thus, one of the great points of conflict between the Philadelphia Public Schools and the charter schools concerns funding. Meister and

Schuh (2000), in their evaluation of the Philadelphia charter schools, found that most stakeholders in Philadelphia cite that the "ten greatest barriers to successful charter school implementation" were almost all linked to lack of adequate funding.[7] School District officials, on the other hand, have argued that the District is losing more than its fair share of funds to charter schools. As the School District of Philadelphia states on its website, "In fact, the School District lost almost $39 million last year as a result of payments made to the 25 charter schools operating in Philadelphia."[8]

Recommendations: Charter schools should be provided with an adequate amount of funding, but not at the expense of the school district. We recommend that state and local policymakers consider the following options:

- Create an equitable transition fund so that the district has adequate time to adjust spending based on enrollment losses and so the district does not lose funding for students who are entering charter schools from private schools/home schooled.
- Ensure that charter schools have adequate funding for operations and facilities. Lack of adequate funding for facilities is one of the biggest concerns of start-up schools. Charter leaders find it difficult to get financial backing from lending institutions who fear a premature demise of schools that are awarded charters for only three to five years. Meister and Schuh (2000) recommend establishing two funds to increase the capital for charter schools: 1) a Public Charter School Loan Fund that would help make short and long-term loans available to charters for facilities; and 2) a Charter School Venture Fund that would provide grants for experimentation within charter schools and to offset excess costs the school district currently incurs as the result of charter schools.
- Link state funding to changes in district enrollment. The "foundation" plan in Pennsylvania has not recently been operating as was intended. As a result, large increases or decreases in enrollment in a district do not substantially affect the state subsidy for education. With regard to charter schools, the state needs to take into account the increase in enrollment due to the movement of previously home-schooled or private schooled students into the public system.
- The School District of Philadelphia may have the potential to recoup some of their losses to the charter schools by providing services to the charter schools. Because it benefits from economies of scale, it might more effectively provide certain services (e.g., health and benefits management, food services) to charter schools for a fee.

[7] These barriers included: inadequate per-pupil allotment; difficulty accessing funding; unclear policies regarding charters; difficulty in recruiting certified staff; delayed renovations; uneven cash flow; lack of adequate space for mission; lack of affordable space; lack of access to Intermediate Unit services; and lack of awareness of grants.

[8] The three major reasons why they believe that they are losing money include: 1) since the district loses students across classrooms and schools, the district cannot decrease the number of teachers and support staff or diminish their overhead based on the savings of individual student; 2) the district has to pay the majority of the bill for students who have transferred into the charter schools from private schools; and 3) there are no limitations on the numbers of special education students that can be served by charter schools, while the state imposes limitations on special education funding to the district.

Issues concerning accountability and oversight

Expanding choice raises issues of accountability and oversight. Many choice advocates believe, however, that the government is not necessarily the actor to which schools should be held primarily accountable. Instead, parents should be invested in their choices and should hold schools accountable. One charter school leader with whom we spoke stated that parents should be given the opportunity to "explore [the available options] for themselves," and should be empowered to make the right and wrong decisions and voice their opinions freely. As he states, "if they don't like it, you'll hear it, and you'll know it." **(citation???)**

Despite such calls for greater freedoms, experience with charter schools provides a cautionary tale concerning the level of freedom that new (and old) schools should be given. For example, a recent report from the Pennsylvania Auditor General noted that charter schools have not been hiring the required number of certified teachers. Furthermore, reports from other states such as Michigan point to the negative ramifications of not specifying clear criteria for maintaining charters, which has hindered the process of closing ineffective schools (Miron, 1999).

> **Recommendation:** The State and the District should maintain a balance between autonomy and oversight. Officials must carefully consider and determine who should be holding schools accountable (e.g., state, city, families) and be explicit about accountability measures. In addition, schools of choice must have a clear understanding of what they are being held accountable for, and must consistently be held to these requirements. It is important, however, to understand the limits and potential negative effects of accountability measures. One charter school leader relayed his concern that test score accountability to the district/state puts charter schools in a "pressure cooker" that forces schools to focus their attention on outcomes at the expense of focusing on process. While we recommend more clarity and consistency in accountability policies, we suggest that governmental bodies be cautious and pragmatic about implementation, as well.

Leadership capacity limitations

One key policy of the Children Achieving reform in Philadelphia was to break larger high schools into smaller learning communities (SLCs). These SLCs now provide students in Philadelphia with a wide array of choices concerning their planned program of study. A more intimate learning environment combined with curricular interest sounds, on the surface, to be a quite attractive reform. However, it is also important to consider the issue of capacity. The autonomy of such programs dictates that more school leaders must have the knowledge and resources to run their own programs. Without the proper training and professional development of teachers and school leaders, there is the potential that students will not be adequately served.

Added to this issue is the increase in the number of charter schools being run by organizations that have little experience managing schools. While these organizations are eager to throw their hats into the educational arena, it is not clear that they have the capacity to do so. In addition, charter schools tend to hire younger and less experienced teachers who often must fulfill both teaching and administrative capacities. If charters are to be expanded as a choice, it

is important to ensure that teachers and leaders in charter schools gain the skills needed to manage schools effectively.

> **Recommendation:** Ensure that future and present charter and "traditional" school leaders and staff have the capacity to create and sustain their programs. Community organizations and/or groups of citizens could be given planning grants and professional support to build their capacity. In addition, existing charter schools and traditional schools need to build capacity within their own leadership and staff to ensure their sustenance.

SECTION 7

Summary and Conclusion

The future of choice in Philadelphia

The School District of Philadelphia has undergone significant changes since our research was conducted in the spring of 2001. Most importantly, in December of 2001, the State of Pennsylvania official "took over" responsibility for running the city's schools. It is still not entirely clear what the ramifications of this state takeover will be. A School Reform Commission has been constructed that consists of appointees from both the governor and the mayor. This commission replaced Philadelphia's school board, and is now responsible for the operation and maintenance of the School District. During the winter of 2002, the School Reform Commission requested proposals from organizations wishing to provide services to manage specific aspects of the city's public school system. These applicants range from educational management firms, groups of teachers, local community agencies, and members of local universities (Snyder, 2002). The Commission has reported that they envision up to 100 of Philadelphia's poorest performing schools being managed by outside contractors who partner with community groups. In addition, the commission hopes to contract a "lead provider" to manage the majority of the schools (Snyder, 2002). While the state is pressing forward and hopes to make final selections by the middle of April, other groups continue to challenge the legality of the state takeover. Recently, a coalition of community members consisting of parents, activists, and politicians requested a preliminary injunction against the Commision's signing of any contracts (Brennan, 2002).

Clearly, there is potential for drastic change in the city's schools in the coming years. The effects of the state takeover on current methods of school choice are much less clear. Under the School Reform Commission's tentative plan, nearly one third of the city's schools could be run by private management companies, creating a network of "charter-like" schools. However, the status of any future charter schools within the city is unclear as the Commission has temporarily suspended consideration of new charter applications. Furthermore, if high schools are taken over by management companies, then the intradistrict choice system of small learning communities may be modified or changed. Most likely, the privatization of the city's schools will likely place the voucher debate on the back burner.

The city's political experiences are not the only factors that will affect choice in Philadelphia. Federal and state policies may have a major affect on the choice options available. For example, the recent passage of the federal "No Child Left Behind Act" revises the federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) and adds provisions to support public school choice. According to the provisions of the act, schools that fail to make adequate progress for two consecutive years will be required to provide families with public school choice (Education Week, 2002). The revised ESEA also provides additional support for charter schools. The federal Supreme Court is taking on the issue of school choice in their review of the constitutionality of the Cleveland voucher program. The outcome of this court ruling will determine whether or not public money can be used for families to send their children to religious schools. Thus, this ruling may have serious implications concerning the future of publicly-funded voucher programs across the country.

Lessons for going forward

While the future of school choice in Philadelphia is unclear, we saw merit in taking a step back to understand what choice options exist in Philadelphia and what the strengths and limitations of the choice policies are. What we have learned from this exercise is that a variety of choice options have arisen in the city at different points in time. As a result, a disjointed system of choice exists that varies in goals and expectations.

As cities like Philadelphia move forward towards refining and expanding systems of school choice, it is important to acknowledge that choice means different things to different people. For some, choice is a tool for improving educational outcomes. For others, choice is used to ensure equity. Still for others, school choice is used as a method for schools to help instill specific values that are congruent with the values instilled in the home. Regardless of the motivation for school choice, none of these motivations will be successful unless families have accurate information concerning what their choice options are and which programs are successful in meeting stated goals. Furthermore, we need to learn more about both the powers and limitations of school choice. Specifically, we must acknowledge that the research evidence concerning the effect of school choice programs in achieving their goals is unclear. For these reasons, as a next research step we recommend conducting quality evaluations that assess the impacts of various choice programs on equity, educational outcomes and cost effectiveness.

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APPENDIX A:

Research Methodology

This study originated as part of a seminar developed and implemented with the help of the Spencer Mentorship program. The seminar was designed to give doctoral students an opportunity not only to learn about a particular policy (school choice), but also to see how such policies manifest themselves in the real world. The seminar was also designed to be flexible so that doctoral students could frame the research questions and methods jointly as a research team. Thus, it was up to the seminar participants to determine how they wanted to define school choice and examine its manifestation.

During the early weeks of the seminar, we learned about the various rationales for choice and choice policy options. We also investigated research findings on the various methods of choice. We came to realize that much of the research on choice focused on very specific choice options, and very infrequently did researchers attempt to consider all of the various choice options together as a "system of choice." We therefore saw merit in undertaking the task of understanding how school choice, defined broadly, can operate in one city, Philadelphia.

Throughout the course of the Spring of 2001, seminar participants worked together and individually to gather information concerning the school choice in Philadelphia. Data collection methods included: interviews, a focus group, data and document collection, and observations.

Interviews were conducted with state and local policymakers, charter school leaders and teachers, a middle school counselor, and technical assistance providers.

A *focus group* of 7th and 8th grade middle school students was conducted to get a better idea of how these students are experiencing the high school choice process.

A variety of *data and documents* were collected to support the findings in our study including: national and state research reports; a variety of newspaper clippings; school district data and publications; and internet documents.

Finally, members of our seminar conducted the following *observations*: attendance at a high school choice fair; attendance at a Philadelphia conference on the prospect of vouchers; and a state charter school conference.

APPENDIX B:

Information Sources Concerning Choice Options in Philadelphia

Office of Student Placement: http://www.phila.k12.pa.us/ao/fss/studentplacement/

This Philadelphia School District office provides useful information concerning the elementary and secondary intra-district choice options available.

Charter School information:

www.pde.psu.edu/charter (Pennsylvania State Department of Education, charter school website)

www.uscharterschools.org (National website concerning charter schools, provides summaries of Pennsylvania charter school laws)

www.phila.k12.pa.us/charter_schools (Philadelphia School District's website concerning charter schools)

http://www.foundations-inc.org/drexel/index.cfm (Drexel University/FOUNDATIONS Technical Assistance Center for Charter Schools – A CD-ROM is available that provides profiles of Philadelphia's charter schools)

Private school options:

Archdiocese of Philadelphia: http://www.catholicschools-phl.org/

Other private school options in Philadelphia vicinity:
http://www.nais.org/schools/school_search.cfm

Home-schooling:

Pennsylvania State Department of Education, home schooling web page:
http://www.pde.psu.edu/homeed/homeedfaq.html

Cyber-schooling:

Pennsylvania State Department of Education, cyber charter profiles:
http://www.pde.state.pa.us/charter_schools/lib/charter_schools/profiles.pdf

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