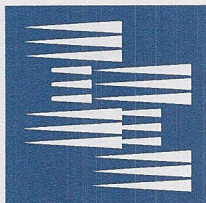


INDEPENDENCE ISSUE PAPER

Issue Paper #14-87

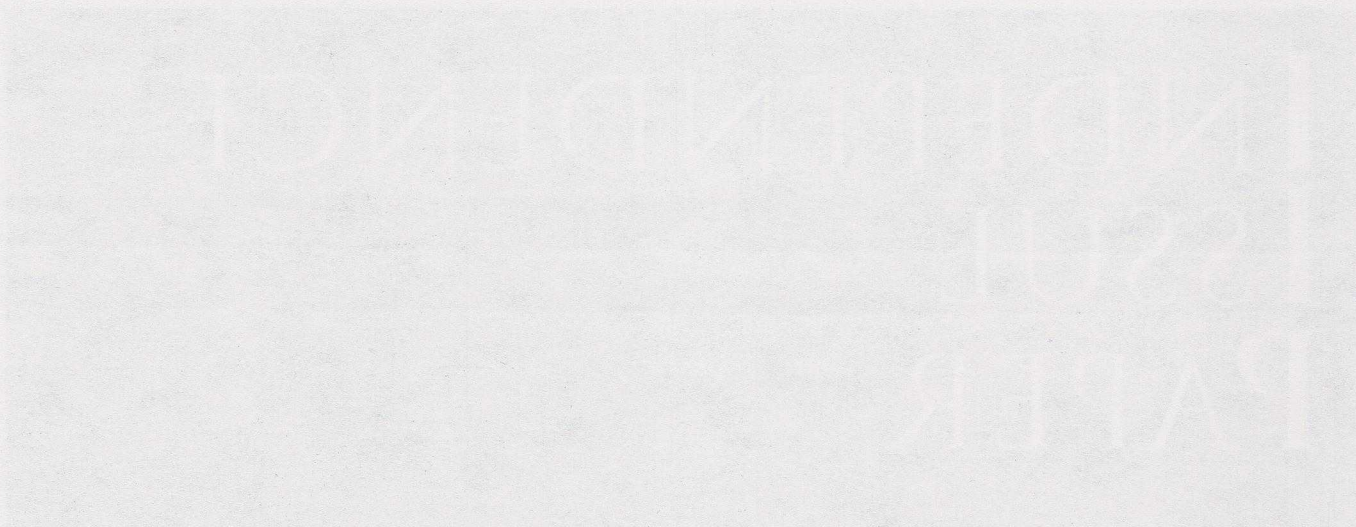
Public Schools of Choice: Key to Colorado Education Reform by Dr. Richard Kraft



INDEPENDENCE INSTITUTE

14142 DENVER WEST PARKWAY, SUITE 185
GOLDEN, COLORADO 80401
(303) 279-6536 FAX (303) 279-4176

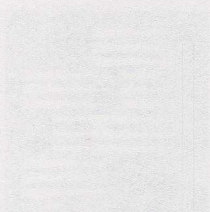
Note: The Independence Issue Papers are published for educational purposes only, and the authors speak for themselves. Nothing written here is to be construed as necessarily representing the views of the Independence Institute, or as an attempt to influence any election or legislative action.



Page 1 of 1

Public Schools of Denver
Key to Colorado's Education System
by the State Board

INDEPENDENCE INSTITUTE
1415 DENVER WEST KAREWAY SUITE 102
DENVER, COLORADO 80202
303.733.6622 FAX 303.733.6623



INDEPENDENCE INSTITUTE
1415 DENVER WEST KAREWAY SUITE 102
DENVER, COLORADO 80202
303.733.6622 FAX 303.733.6623

November 16, 1987

PUBLIC SCHOOLS OF CHOICE: KEY TO COLORADO EDUCATION REFORM

By Dr. Richard Kraft

The release in 1983 of A Nation at Risk galvanized the country into "doing something" about the state of the American educational system. What that "something" ought to be is a question that is still being answered.

Here in Colorado our school systems are not generally in the same crisis condition as those in some other states. Yet great pockets of need do exist in some of our larger districts, and there are wide variations in quality among the state's smaller districts.

The first wave of school reform in Colorado and throughout the nation has been called the period of school improvement. These reforms have concentrated on the comparatively easy "external" aspects of education, such as the length of the school day and year, graduation requirements, merit pay, higher teacher salaries, achievement testing, basic skills tests for teachers, changes in the tenure law, school-university-business partnerships, career ladders, and a host of other substantive and cosmetic changes.

But if we are serious about improving educational performance, there must be a second wave of school reform. It will have to be a structural reform, getting inside the schools and classrooms of our state and nation. This is the judgment voiced by educational and political leaders across the country, including many attending the national conference held in Denver last summer by the Education Commission of the States, at which the writer took part. These and other

SUMMARY: HOW TO BRING ABOUT REAL EDUCATION REFORM

- * The first wave of education reform in the 1980s has been largely superficial.
- * To be really effective, the second wave of reform must be structural.
- * A system giving parents their choice among public schools would do much to drive substantive reform -- without involving private schools and the church-state issue.
- * Parents need to be fully rein-volved in the education process and play a primary role in determining their children's education and the character of their schools.
- * Site-based decision making for schools provides real accountability.
- * A choice system will release the creative energies of educators -- and treat them like true professionals.
- * While the procedural problems are formidable, the question ought to be: Can we afford not to reform our education system through choice?

observers argue that the first wave, while not a total failure, hasn't really changed the learning that occurs in the classroom. It has not made a significant difference in lowering the dropout rates from our junior and senior high schools, diminishing the size and impersonality of our large suburban and urban schools, raising test scores, restructuring how teachers and pupils spend their time, improving the authority and prestige of teachers, or accomplishing other tangible improvements in the quality of education. What will make the needed change?

The concept of public schools of choice is increasingly recognized as perhaps the single most important structural reform promised by the second wave.

Public schools of choice would mean, first, empowering parents to play a decisive role in choosing a school for their child within the public system. Geographic attendance areas would be more flexibly defined, particularly above grade 7.

Of equal importance, public schools of choice would mean giving school principals and/or groups of teachers functioning as school leaders the responsibility and authority to adjust personnel and curriculum in response to the "education consumer needs" expressed in the school choices being made by the families in their area.

The concept is of course viewed with suspicion by some professional educators. This makes it all the more important that it not be represented as a panacea -- which it isn't. Yet it has received support from the National Governors Association, the PTA, chambers of commerce, business and industry, and various educational groups.

The 1986 Gallup Poll on education found 68% of parents in favor of having the right to choose the public schools their children attend. The distance between that preferred condition and the present educational reality is only slightly overstated in these words of a leading researcher on educational alternatives, Mary Ann Raywid of Hofstra University:

Parents have no say today regarding which schools their children will attend, which teachers will teach them, what content they will study, when and how they will study it, what values will be emphasized and enforced, which educational goals will be paramount and which goals will receive short shrift. (Emphasis supplied.)

Benefits from Public Schools of Choice

What can be the expected results of implementing a policy of public schools of choice? The expectations have been made in great detail in several documents, including the seminal studies by Coons and Sugarman, Education of Choice; Joe Nathan's Free to Teach; and the June 1987 issue of Phi Delta Kappan. Among the most salient arguments for public schools of choice are the following:

- 1) They make it more likely that teachers will take into consideration the different learning styles and needs of pupils -- recognizing that there is no single "right way" to educate.
- 2) They can lead to a new kind of cooperation between the home and school.
- 3) They tend to recognize differing world views, philosophies, and values, while not crossing the line separating church and state.
- 4) They empower students, parents, and teachers, by providing each a voice in determining the character of their educational institutions.
- 5) Unlike the first wave of educational reform, schools of choice will make it more possible for educators to deal directly with the critical issue of student motivation.
- 6) A choice-based public school system will provide for greater equity in our society. At present, middle class families can move to what they perceive to be a better district, and the rich can send their children to private schools -- while the poor must remain where they are. Public schools of choice would mean wider options for all parents and students.
- 7) Schools of choice can lead to greater economic and racial integration, rather than the current segregation by district.
- 8) They help to reduce dropouts from junior high and high school by encouraging schools and teachers to meet the specific needs of pupils, not the generic needs of the "average" student.
- 9) Schools of choice raise the morale of teachers, who become stakeholders in institutions which they would be helping to create. Such schools attract teachers -- and parents and students -- who share a philosophy and approach to education.

Dealing with the Objections

Advocating public schools of choice involves the responsibility of facing a number of obvious questions and concerns that would be raised by this far-reaching structural reform. Here are some of the most frequent objections, with a very brief response for each:

- 1) How can one maintain educational pluralism if schools are geared towards specific goals and/or populations? Schools of choice will advance pluralism, as they replace the dinosaur of the generic high school -- where the assumption has been that virtually all students can be funneled through basically the same program. It will be up to the legislature and the state board of education to establish the fundamental commonalities of curriculum and opportunity.
- 2) Can appropriate statewide or districtwide standards be maintained when individual schools are preparing students in possibly radically different ways? Again, it will be up to the appropriate entity to set and enforce such standards, but to do so in such a way that needlessly narrow constraints are not put upon schools. This may become less of a concern as the public begins to sense the general improvement being worked in the school system by choice.
- 3) How can the goals of racial integration be maintained and extended in a choice plan? Statutes and mechanisms must be in place to assure that schools of choice do not become segregated academies. There is reason to think that vivid choice could further integration by presenting alternatives so attractive that the impulse to stick to one's own kind would be overridden in some families. This is borne out by the Bronx schools of choice which are attracting white students from outside their neighborhoods.
- 4) Given the complexity of modern education, can we be sure that parents are capable of making appropriate choices for their children's schooling? The elitist assumption buried in this question is disturbing. Certainly most parents know more about how an effective elementary or secondary classroom ought to function than they do about their car's engines or even their own bodies. Yet no one is directing them to mechanics or physicians. Of course any public school choice system would necessarily have a large parental and community information and education program, to assist parents, students, and teachers in the selection of the appropriate learning environments.
- 5) How can a choice program be designed so that a range of administrative problems such as school size, admission policies, fair selection procedures, movement between schools, and expulsion rules don't result in inequity? Many larger Colorado school districts have already dealt with these issues, and there are numerous successful models from around the country.
- 6) Since schools of choice almost inevitably increase the distance certain students will travel to school, can an equitable and affordable transportation plan be designed and put in place prior to the system being set up? Once the logistics are worked out, the answer here is money.

If the people and their representatives recognize that choice will improve quality, and make dollars already being spent go further -- the money for transportation will be there.

- 7) Can teacher concerns about issues such as contracts, salary schedules, and tenure which would arise under a choice system be dealt with -- especially since it is teachers who will ultimately carry out the programs? Indeed, a choice system will ask more of teachers than any other group. Yet it offers them a way out of their current, untenable position, where their ability to act as professionals -- and be accorded that status -- is severely limited by bureaucratic and legislative mandates. Choice in fact returns the teachers to primacy in the educational process -- where they belong. Plus it offers the better teachers an opportunity to earn a salary commensurate with their worth.
- 8) Particularly in a state like Colorado, can meaningful choice be made available in small rural districts? The experience of Minnesota suggests that in fact rural districts may take as much interest in schools of choice as urban and suburban districts. Also, the use of technology and other innovations may reduce this concern.

Greater Accountability through Market Forces

Local control and parental determination of the education of the young is an American ideal. In rural America of the past, and in even rural Colorado today, the reality could approach that ideal. But it is largely gone. As control has become increasingly centralized and bureaucratized in our large urban and suburban districts, parents have come to see themselves as essentially powerless.

Many education policy changes currently being proposed at the state and national level would further centralize and bureaucratize school systems, giving ever greater power to the state. New powers to declare under-performing schools or entire districts educationally "bankrupt" in states like New Jersey and California, the growing requirements for statewide testing, and many of the other reforms in the first wave also tend to take more control away from parents and the school itself. Yet there is little evidence that these changes make a positive difference in the lives and learning of children.

The stated motive for these reforms -- certainly laudable -- is to move away from the undue accumulation of power in the school bureaucracy and professional organizations. But this may not give parents any more power. The mandated career ladders, tenure changes, merit pay, and the like may lead only to more centralized state control.

Public schools of choice, in contrast, would make for a better balance of power among the various competing interest groups in the educational process: the state legislature, the state board of education, the educational bureaucracy, local boards of education, the professional teacher and administrator groups -- and the parents. A choice-based system maintains the structure of local district control. However, since it could involve inter-district transfers of students and funds, state involvement would be needed to the extent of passing an enabling law and then setting procedural rules and regulations.

Colorado's accountability law, which establishes citizen accountability committees to oversee school boards and districts, has brought more parents into contact with the schools over the past 15 years. It has also led to better reporting of what is happening in the schools.

It cannot be credibly claimed, however, that it has brought about a significantly wider range of alternatives from which parents can choose. With most alternative education programs in the state having long waiting lists, and with parents limited to choosing schools within their district, there is not much to indicate that the current law has spawned the range of choices being experimented with elsewhere or even those requested by Colorado parents.

Schools of choice move beyond the rhetoric of accountability. They make the schools actually accountable to parents. Parents for the first time have the real possibility of choosing a public school for their children, and thereby ultimately influencing the make-up of the schools. Teachers, who for years have sought -- with mixed results -- professional status, would be able cooperatively to structure institutions which better meet the needs of the students and the communities in which they live.

Schools of choice respond to the recognition that not all students in all settings have the same needs, same learning style, same motivations, or same aspirations. Student motivation and achievement in such institutions has been shown to be greatly enhanced. Coleman and Hoffer make this case persuasively in relation to achievement in their recent book, Public and Private High Schools (1987). Hedin and Conrad documented the affective and motivational part of the puzzle in their 1977 research on experiential learning.

Options for Increasing Parental Choice

The principle of choice is already being applied in some parts of our state. Applications on a larger scale are spreading fast in other states. Here are the main items on the list:

Within-District Magnet Schools: With this model, students would be able to choose between magnet schools within the district. This option is already available in many larger Colorado school districts, but both the range of programs and the number of student spaces within a given school or program are limited, so that the large majority of students and parents effectively have no options. In the small, rural districts, no options exist at all. There is currently little impetus for Colorado school districts to provide options for their students, except those with a large number of dropouts. A variation of this has been developed in California, where a new provision requires school districts to establish educational alternatives upon petition by a specified number of persons.

Inter-District Schools of Choice: Again, this option already exists in the Colorado Second Chance program and the Washington and California educational clinics program, albeit in each case in restricted form -- limited to school dropouts. Such a program could be expanded to include:

- * Students enrolling in a neighboring district (Minnesota)
- * Students enrolling in the district where their parent(s) work (California)
- * Students enrolling in urban magnet schools to promote integration (Missouri, Wisconsin, and New York)
- * The creation of special statewide magnet schools for the gifted, offering high-powered science, mathematics, or arts programs (North Carolina, Alaska, Louisiana, and Virginia).

In this formulation, though, every school becomes a school of choice -- and thus the magnet school distinction is no longer in effect. It is obvious that children and parents in metropolitan areas will have greater choice than residents of rural areas. But the Minnesota experience suggests that rural districts may take as much interest in schools of choice as among urban and suburban districts. The use of technology and other innovations may help with this concern.

Public/Private Voucher: Giving each parent a voucher to choose a public or private school is the most extreme of the various choice options. This approach provides the greatest flexibility and empowerment for parents and students, and fits in with the competitive ethos of American society. However, many feel such a system would cross the line of separation between church and state, and might lead to the development of a two-tiered system in which the public schools become increasingly minority or "pauper" schools. Plus there is the view that this approach implies that education is simply for private benefit and not the public good, which many believe could lead to a diminution of general support for education. It could also lead to the destruction of local school boards as state-controlled vouchers become the norm.

Early College Enrollment: In this model, students ready for higher education, but not of college age, have the option of early enrollment in a public or private higher education institution, taking all or some of their ARB (Annual Revenue Base, the state's per student dollar allotment for schooling) with them. These institutions include four year colleges, universities, community colleges, and vocational/technical centers (current law in Minnesota, Arizona, Florida, and California).

State Funding for Alternatives: Rather than alter the governance and finance of schooling directly, some states are providing financial incentives to districts to structure alternative programs (California, Massachusetts, and New York).

State Board Mandates: Iowa is experimenting with a new law that permits families to appeal to the state board of education if they believe that their children are not receiving an "appropriate education." If the state board agrees, it can order the local board to pay the tuition for a student to attend a neighboring district.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Public schools of choice is an idea whose time has come. This is underscored by the fact that many who have vehemently resisted any such experiment in the past are now willing to consider it. There is growing agreement that the urgency of the need to turn around our educational system is such that what the education establishment once called unthinkable radical proposals, now seem to carry the force of necessity.

Limited, but promising, prototypes are already being tested in our own state of Colorado, with an encouraging preliminary track record. Unquestionably, the model should be expanded. The only question is how.

The best option at this time would appear to be legislation promoting inter-district schools of choice, with supporting rules and regulations from the state board of education.

A 1987 Minnesota law permits the voluntary participation of school districts in such a between-district program. Ninety-four of the state's 400-plus districts are participating, ranging from metropolitan Minneapolis-St. Paul to many smaller rural districts. Suburban districts appear to be hesitant to join in the voluntary program. Minnesota found that discussion of vouchers, schools of choice, magnet schools, and other options led to generally very positive response from the non-educational groups within the state, but split both political parties, due probably to general opposition from the various sectors of the educational community.

Here in our state, it is neither politically unrealistic, educationally irresponsible, nor administratively unworkable to aim at putting a similar system into operation on a trial basis by the fall of 1988. The State Board of Education could make its formal recommendation to the General Assembly by the end of December, then the legislation could be adopted and signed by March, leaving six months for the school implementation and parental information and phase. A three-year sunset could be specified, so that the program would lapse in mid-1991 unless specifically extended by the legislature.

Hypothetically, the key legislative provision might read simply as follows:

Any public school or school district in Colorado, wishing to participate in a voluntary school of choice program, shall maintain open enrollment in grades 7-12 for all students otherwise qualified for those grades, regardless of the student's place of residence within the state. Thirty days' advance registration with the principal, prior to the opening of a semester, shall be required for any student desiring to attend a school outside his or her district of residence. State aid and inter-district reimbursement shall be determined according to a pupil count taken in each school once per semester on a specified date.

Utopia will not be reached through public schools of choice. But given our failure to make a dent in the major problems facing public education during the first wave of educational reform, it becomes imperative that the State of Colorado seriously consider its options in this direction. Schools of choice are neither Republican nor Democratic; neither liberal nor conservative; neither focused on majority nor minority issues. Rather, they are one critical piece of bringing parents back into partnership with the schools, motivating students to learn in the most appropriate environment, and helping teachers to gain or regain their status as the professional educators and decision-makers in the schools.

- - - - - Copyright © 1987 - Independence Institute - - - - -

THE INDEPENDENCE INSTITUTE is a Colorado nonprofit corporation. It is governed by a bipartisan board of trustees and holds a 501(c)(3) tax exemption from the IRS. Its public policy research focuses on state-level issues, education reform, and the moral dimension of U.S. foreign policy.

PERMISSION TO REPRINT this paper in whole or in part is hereby granted, provided full credit is given to the Independence Institute.

DR. RICHARD KRAFT is Professor of Education at the University of Colorado at Boulder, and is vice-chairman of the Colorado Board of Education.

DAVID S. D'EVELYN, Vice President of the Independence Institute, served as editor for this issue paper and will head the Institute's working group on public schools of choice.

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

Coleman, James and Thomas Hoffer. Public and Private High Schools: The Impact of Communities. New York: Basic Books, 1987.

Conrad, Dan and Diane Hedin. "National Assessment of Experiential Education: Summary and Implications." in Richard J. Kraft and James Kielsmeier, Experiential Education and the Schools, Boulder: AEE, 1987. pp. 229-243.

Coons, John E. and Stephen D. Sugarman. Education By Choice: The Case for Family Control. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978.

Coons, John E. and Stephen D. Sugarman. Family Choice in Education: A Model State System for Vouchers. California in Law Review, Vol. 59, Number 2, March 1971. pp. 321-438.

Gallup, Alec M. "18th Annual Gallup Poll of the Public's Attitudes Toward the Public Schools," Phi Delta Kappan, September 1986. pp. 43-59

Glenn, Charles. Practical Problems Involved in Implementing Choice Plans in Education. Sacramento: Sequoia Institute. Forthcoming.

Glenn, Charles. "Putting Choice to Work for Public Education," in Family Choice and Public Schools: A Report to the State Board of Education.

Quincy, Massachusetts: Massachusetts Department of Education, January 1986.

Jencks, Christopher et.al. Education Vouchers: A Report on Financing Elementary Education by Grants to Parents. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Center for the Study of Public Policy, 1970.

McCurdy, Jack. Choices in Schools: What's Ahead and What to Do. Arlington, Virginia: National School Public Relations Association, 1985.

Minnesota Department of Education. Post Secondary Enrollment Options Program, Final Report. St. Paul: Minnesota Department of Education, January 1987.

Nathan, Joe. Free to Teach. Minneapolis: Winston Press, 1983.

National Governor's Association. Time for Results: The Governor's 1991 Report on Education. Washington, D.C.: 1986.

Raywid, Mary Anne. "Public Choice, Yes; Vouchers, No!" Phi Delta Kappan, June 1987. pp. 762-769.

State of California, Assembly Bill 1425, March 1987; allows for citizen petition for education alternatives.