

EDUCATION CHOICE PLANS GAIN MOMENTUM IN THE STATES

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George Bush has declared his support for greater parental choice in education, arguing correctly that choice improves student performance dramatically. During the "Education Summit" held in Charlottesville, Virginia, this week, he also stressed his objective of mobilizing states to develop strategies to boost the standard of American education. He can help reach these goals if he highlights the trend toward choice plans in some states and boosts campaigns to introduce them in others. Under a choice plan, parents are able to send their child to one of several schools, with school funding linked in some way to the number of students each school attracts. This competition forces schools to improve their quality.

Already hundreds of communities in half the states either permit some form of choice or are considering measures to do so. Moreover, a statewide choice of public school is available in Arkansas, Iowa, Minnesota, Nebraska, and Ohio.

Ohio this June adopted a sweeping education reform package, including a provision to allow parents to choose any school for their child in the state's 560 school districts. The plan also includes an alternative teaching certification provision that would open classrooms to qualified individuals not trained specifically as teachers. Ohio is considered a key victory for choice proponents, since it is the most populous state so far to adopt a choice plan.

"Open enrollment" is the most common form of parental choice. This allows a child to cross normal school boundaries and attend a school anywhere in the state. State funding typically "follows" the child to the school of choice. In this way schools are forced through competition to make their schools more attractive to their primary consumers — the parents.

Open enrollment now is a standard feature of schools in several major cities. For example, so many cities in Massachusetts feature open enrollment for at-risk or disadvantaged students that a majority of these students in the state now attend school systems in which choice is available; and nearly 70,000 students in fourteen towns actually attend alternative schools. In Boston, an open-enrollment plan will go into effect this fall, affecting 20 elementary and six middle schools. The plan was adopted to speed desegregation.

Magnet school systems are another mechanism used to enhance choice. These schools offer special educational programs, such as a concentration in math and science or the arts, and are intended to reduce school segregation by attracting minority children from outside the normal catchment area. Magnet schools are credited with improving the quality of education for minority children.

PENDING INITIATIVES

Parents may soon gain the right to choose in more states if current proposals are adopted, as expected, by state legislatures in California, Louisiana, and South Dakota. And still other states have moved closer to greater flexibility and choice for parents and schools.

South Dakota. Republican Governor George Mickelson has endorsed the choice concept and will be introducing a plan in the opening session of the legislature in January.

Louisiana. Superintendent of Education Wilmer Cody, recommended in late August giving parents a choice of public schools. The State Board of education rejected the notion, but the issue is far from dead. A call-in poll sponsored by a Louisiana radio station revealed that 82 percent of respondents favored choice over public or private schools. Popular support coupled with the pressure of the business community may prove successful for choice in this state.

Michigan. Two important efforts are under way. The Michigan Senate last spring approved a bill to require school districts to hold referenda on choice if more than 25 percent of electors sign a petition calling for a vote. And in Detroit, where voters last year ousted school board members tainted by corruption, parents are campaigning to remove district school assignments so that they will have a far greater choice of schools.

Illinois and New Jersey. In both these populous states the governors have appointed task forces to study the choice concept and make recommendations for a pilot project in a few school districts.

California. State assembly proposals given a good chance of passage include making choice an option for school districts. State officials and private sector organizations are hoping to have a plan in place by the start of the next school year.

CHOICE SETBACKS

In some other states, proponents of choice are regrouping after setbacks. Choice proponents often blame these defeats on a lack of understanding of choice proposals within the state. Among the setbacks:

Texas. The State House of Representatives approved legislation in May allowing students to transfer to any school within their district if space is available. The bill was defeated in the Senate, because of special interest pressure on Republican lawmakers. Several legislative proposals have been introduced to provide parents with choice among both public and private schools. Although these proposals have stalled, the legislature has agreed to explore expanded choice options when they resume their work the following year. The Texas system is biennial

and committees designed to facilitate legislation consider proposals and submit them for legislative consideration when they meet.

Arizona. Although the State Senate approved an open enrollment plan this year, the bill was defeated by the House education committee.

Colorado. Choice has been defeated in the Colorado legislature for the second year in a row, thanks in large part to heavy campaigning by public education unions, which apparently fear choice because it would threaten their less competent members.

New Mexico and Oklahoma. Here, parental choice legislation failed to make it out of the Senate committees.



Taking the Lead. The political momentum is with proponents of choice at the state level. To win, more parents must be mobilized in states where initiatives have failed. Private efforts are still the key. Local businesses must understand that they should support choice if they are to have a better skilled work force. Companies thus need to take the lead in campaigns for choice.

And the Bush Administration can help state initiatives. Visits to key states to endorse choice legislation, and declarations of strong support by the President and Secretary of Education Lauro Cavazos would have great impact. The Department of Education has made some progress in this area through the appointment of a choice "czar" and upgrading the information available. If George Bush really intends to succeed as Education President, he should announce as his goal the introduction of educational choice in all fifty states.

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