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Choice to the  
Nation's Largest  
School System: A  
Community-Based  
Strategy

*By Raymond Domanico*



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# Bringing School Choice To the Nation's Largest School System: A Community-Based Strategy

By Raymond Domanico

The Center for Educational Innovation is an operating unit of the Manhattan Institute, a non-profit, non-partisan policy research organization with offices in New York and Washington. The Institute started the Center for Educational Innovation in mid-1989 with the purpose of improving America's educational system through parental choice. When we started the Center, parental choice of public schools was a cresting issue on the national scene. The Bush Administration had broken somewhat with the Reagan Administration's advocacy of school vouchers or tax credits for private school tuition, and was aggressively advocating public school choice. The switch in approach had been signaled in the last week of the Reagan Administration at a White House conference on school choice. At the same time, the adoption of public school choice by state legislatures was gaining momentum; Minnesota had led the way in 1988, and eventually a dozen states would adopt public school choice laws.

With political momentum building for choice, many think tanks suddenly embraced the concept of choice in education as a theme of their efforts. I believe that almost every conservative state-level policy research organization published the same monograph by Chubb and Moe summarizing their research on effective schooling, which advocated choice as a panacea. We did a little bit of this ourselves, publishing our own monographs and holding our own conferences to make the intellectual case for choice. My first projects as director of the Center for Educational Innovation were to write and publish a study which summarized all of the available information on the East Harlem school district's program of school choice and a second study which proposed a public school choice plan for the entire New York City School System, the nation's largest public school system.

Our emphasis on East Harlem was not an accident. This school district was in our own backyard and had pioneered choice long before the concept became a national issue. The fact that it had made the most improvement of any New York City school district over a ten-year period and that it was an entirely minority district made it a natural point of advocacy for choice. The genesis of the Center for Educational Innovation was a series of meetings between one of the leaders of the East Harlem district, Sy Fliegel, and the Manhattan Institute's officers and trustees. Sy had left the school system in 1988 and, when a decision was made to establish the Center for Educational Innovation, Sy joined the Institute as a Senior Fellow.

So here we were, Sy Fliegel, the most successful creative non-complier in the New York City school system and me, a former researcher and policy analyst in the largest school bureaucracy in the country—the New York City Board of Education. We chose to pursue a unique path for a policy research organization. We felt that the concepts that had worked in East Harlem could work in an advocacy project and that we could bring about systemic change best by working in

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He spoke at The Heritage Foundation on April 22, 1993, as part of the W.H. Brady Lecture Series on Defining Conservatism.

ISSN 0272-1155. ©1993 by The Heritage Foundation.

individual schools and districts to create an increasing number of examples of school choice in action. Our efforts would be based upon the following principles, culled from Sy's experience in East Harlem:

**Schools must be small, autonomous, and diverse.** Smaller schools allow every adult to know every child. An African proverb says it best: "It takes a village to raise a child." In some urban communities the school must help to create that village. Autonomy from bureaucratic influence allows the people in the school to chart their own course and to develop a sense of communal identity. Inevitably, autonomy for schools will lead to diversity across schools. We believe this to be good. There is no one best way to learn and no one best school.

**Schools should empower parents.** By offering parents the choice among educational programs, one empowers them to chart their children's destiny. If an educational program does not attract an adequate number of parents and students, the school will be forced to either change or go out of business. Choice, therefore, affords poor parents the same opportunities that wealthy parents already enjoy—the power to select the best schools for their children.

**Teachers must have school ownership.** By empowering parents to choose, and teachers to be creative, we help teachers and school-level professionals become entrepreneurs. In all of our projects, teachers contribute to the design and continual modification of schools, hiring of staff, and development of equitable school admissions policies.

**All schools must place learning first.** Although the schools that we work in often create an identity for themselves through the use of a particular theme, they all adopt a standard course of study which places academic achievement at the center of their efforts.

In our first year in operation, we engaged an entire school district, on Manhattan's Upper West Side, in a process of developing a local choice policy and putting in place a procedure whereby educators could come forward with their ideas and be empowered to start small, thematically focussed alternative schools. To us starting a school does not mean constructing a building. Starting a school involves getting two or three teachers who share a vision of schooling and allowing them to recruit forty to sixty students in one grade to get going. If the school succeeds and is popular, it grows each year. If it's not working, or can't attract a clientele, it goes out of business. Today, parents on the Upper West Side of Manhattan have full choice at the middle school level; there are currently 24 choices available to them, with more coming on line each year.

In our next year of operation, we began to not only engage local districts in the development of choice programs, we began to invest our time and resources in individual school projects that seemed unique and promising—we wanted to help plant the seeds of entrepreneurship in the school system. Our best example of this approach was the Mohegan Elementary School which became the first urban school in the country to adopt a curriculum based on the work of E.D. Hirsch, known for his best-seller, *Cultural Literacy*. To some of our supporters, this type of effort seemed to be a pretty far stretch for a think tank. It was. But we were betting that if we could get enough interesting things going at the ground level, and begin to give them visibility, we could begin to change the culture of the system.

Our approach was questioned by some early on and, at times, it seemed to put us in conflict with policy research organizations with which we actually shared a common goal. We often heard the criticism that our approach would take too long to bring about real change and that we would end up being co-opted by the establishment. Our feelings were quite to the contrary. We thought that the quickest route to reform was to co-opt the establishment, and we believed that we could do it.

What was controversial about our approach?

**First**, we chose to ignore much of what was being said and done in Washington. Education is quintessentially a local function and we held a solid libertarian distrust of the federal government's efforts. Viewing the Education Department's attempts to sell choice through a series of "town meetings" across the country was enough to convince us that we could risk little by staying outside of the Beltway.

**Second**, we also chose to ignore much of the state-level debate about school choice legislation. We did this for two reasons. Politically, choice was not on the agenda in our home state. So it was clear that, at home at least, we would have to engage the debate in a forum other than the state legislature. However, we were also concerned with the substance of much of the state school choice legislation that had been passed. To us, it only addressed one side of the choice equation—demand-side, or parental choice. In East Harlem, choice had been successful because it included supply-side choice—autonomy for educators, the freedom to innovate. To our understanding of markets, demand-side choice would not do much to change schools as long as the bureaucracy held monopoly control over the supply of schools.

This brings me to the **third** area of controversy in our work, and one that I've had to spend a great deal of time explaining in the past three years. Soon after we started the Center for Educational Innovation, with a focus on public school choice, Polly Williams achieved her outstanding breakthrough in Milwaukee—getting a public-private voucher scheme adopted on a limited basis. Within a year, the terms of the debate changed—vouchers were now "do-able" and public school choice was seen as too mild an approach. Many of the policy research organizations moved to advocate vouchers and the Bush Administration changed its position from supporting public school choice to supporting voucher approaches. Although most public school parents in the country have no school choice, some in the work community set up a false dichotomy between public choice and vouchers, and we seemed to be on the wrong side of that debate.

Although we stood fast in our pursuit of public school choice, we chose to avoid the voucher debate whenever possible. We had enough battles to fight to get our own agenda across without engaging in a second front battle with people and groups with whom we agreed more than we disagreed. Every time a voucher initiative was placed on the ballot we were challenged: Had we miscalculated? Why weren't we advocating vouchers? We went about our work and were wise enough not to comment when the initiatives failed—by two-to-one margins in Oregon and Colorado—and when legislative attempts failed to get out of low-level committees.

Now, we are by no means hostile to private schools. We simply differ with voucher proponents on tactics. We have always believed, and we are beginning to see evidence which bears this out, that policies that open up the public school system to parental choice and autonomy and entrepreneurship would begin to yield some school initiatives which challenged the conventional distinctions between the public and private sectors. We helped put two such projects into place in New York City

## **East Brooklyn Congregations High Schools**

The East Brooklyn Congregations is a community-based organization formed by sixty parishes and congregations in Bushwick and East New York. For years, the residents of these communities had been displeased by the abysmal state of their neighborhood high schools. The EBC's efforts to remedy this situation were stymied until, in conjunction with the Center for Educational Innovation, they developed a plan to open two alternative public high schools in their communities. The Center helped the EBC through the process of negotiating with the school system for approval of their plan. Having secured that approval, we are now designing the school programs for the EBC. These new schools will be opening in September 1993.

By providing a thematic focus on public life and by taking advantage of the plethora of opportunities available to the city, the Center and EBC hope to provide a rigorous academic, college preparatory high school curriculum for the children of East Brooklyn. In addition, the school will strive to prepare a generation of young adults who will understand and value the importance of community, public service, and the common good. We envision a school program with a community service component as a required part of the curriculum.

The high schools for public life will expect their graduates to be effective, analytical thinkers, able to communicate their ideas effectively. They will be able to conduct research independently and successfully. They will not only be academically prepared for higher education, but also have a developed sense of self-worth and dignity.

## **The Wildcat Academy High School**

The New York City School System has announced a plan to create alternative academies for disruptive students. The first of these such academies accepted its first group of students in late October 1992. This school is unique among New York City's high schools, as it is being operated by a private, non-profit organization under contract to the Board of Education. That organization, Wildcat Services, Inc., asked the Center for Educational Innovation to help it design an appropriate educational program for these youngsters. All of the parties involved with this effort are dedicated to seeing that the new school not be a mere dumping ground for troublesome students. We believe that these children can be reached with a program that combines a strong academic component with hands-on job preparation. Wildcat Services has a very admirable track record of providing skills and job training to ex-offenders and ex-addicts, and we believe that they are well-suited to serve this particular population of students.

The fact that the Wildcat Academy is being operated by a private organization is allowing us to put one of our core concepts to the test—that public schools can and should be governed by community and private organizations in a non-bureaucratic manner. The Wildcat Academy takes the concept of private management one step beyond what we have designed elsewhere, and we think that it will provide meaningful lessons to the rest of the public school enterprise.

## **Turning These Individual Efforts Into Systemic Change**

Our efforts have been successful not only in creating individual examples of effective alternative schools, but also in creating an environment in which this type of change can now occur across the city and, in the process, transform the New York City Public School System into a more entrepreneurial, responsive, and effective institution.

When we started our efforts in 1989, the leadership of the school system and the more well-established advocacy groups around it were hostile to the types of changes that we were proposing. The system had new leadership, imported from out of town, and hopes were high for the new administration's initiatives. Without engaging in an unnecessary debate with those who would have attempted to improve the system through the traditional means, we set out to put our ideas into practice in a number of communities and schools around the city. Our efforts have paid off.

After we helped six school districts in New York adopt and implement public school choice policies in a number of forms, the central Board of Education adopted a policy of city-wide parental choice of public schools. Under this policy, parents will be free to enroll their child in a community school district other than their own if space is available for the child. The adoption of this policy has set in place the groundwork for choice to spread throughout the city. Local media already have begun providing parents with the information necessary to make meaningful choices for their children. *New York Newsday* has published a series of articles displaying demographic and achievement data for each of the city's schools. *The New York Times* is preparing its own rankings of the city's schools so that parents may compare the performance of public schools before they choose. It is anticipated that these efforts will create a build-up in demand for quality schools and place community school districts in a position of either responding to that demand by creating the types of schools that parents desire or risk losing their students to more responsive districts.

After we began to help a community-based organization, the East Brooklyn Congregations, petition the Chancellor for the right to create, and have a role in governing, two new alternative public high schools in their community, the system adopted this approach on a wide-scale basis and put in place the break-up of the monopoly power that the central bureaucracy held on the design and governance of high schools. Due to our efforts, two new high schools will open in Bushwick and East New York in September 1993, as will four high schools developed by community school districts that we have been assisting. Though we pioneered this effort, it has grown beyond our own scope; the system plans to open 31 additional alternative high schools across the city in September 1993.

After we began to question the centralized nature of the school system through our research and advocacy efforts, a consensus for breaking up the system into smaller, more responsive units has begun to take hold. The events surrounding the downfall of the current Chancellor of the system were foretold in a *City Journal* article written by two of our senior staff. The response of many important individuals to the current leadership crisis in the system has also followed the precepts laid out in that article. Five borough presidents of the City of New York, as well as important advocacy groups, have signalled their approval of legislation which would replace the centralized school system with between 32 and 55 autonomous community school districts in the city.

Where the system was once cool to our efforts, we now find that our rhetoric has been adopted in large part. Having established the framework for change in the nation's largest school system, and having helped to create an environment which favors our approach, we see a great opportunity to now accelerate the pace of change and to transform the entire system—and in the process, to frame the national debate about school choice.

