

Study Documents Impact of Four Minn. Choice Plans

By Lynn Olson

Four of Minnesota's innovative school-choice plans are encouraging students to return to school and raising their aspirations for the future, according to a new study.

But the survey by the state education department and the University of Minnesota's Hubert H. Humphrey Institute of Public Affairs also found that most students participating in the programs had learned about them from friends, rather than through official channels. The report recommends that state officials rethink the way they advertise choice programs so that they can reach more students.

The report is the first comprehensive survey of students in Minnesota's choice programs. It does not include, however, the state's best-known choice option, "open enrollment," under which students ages 5-18 can switch school districts.

That program will be included in a report on choice that is being prepared by state and federal education officials for release later this year.

The study released last month was based on a stratified random sample of 13,000 students who participated in four choice programs during the 1989-90 school year.

The programs were the:

- Postsecondary Enrollment Op-

tions program, which enables high-school juniors and seniors to take college courses for free.

- Area Learning Centers and High-School Graduation Incentives programs, which make it possible for students ages 12 and older who are not succeeding in school to enroll in alternative programs outside their home districts.

- Alternative Schools program, which permits youngsters who have left or are falling behind in school to attend private, nonsectarian schools that operate under contract with a school district.

The study found that a significant percentage of students were using these programs to return to school after having dropped out, including 34 percent of the students in Area Learning Centers, 33 percent of those in the High-School Graduation Incentives programs, and 16 percent of those in private alternative schools.

The majority of students offered academic reasons for their participation in such programs, including "to help me stay in school," "to get more individualized or personalized learning," and, for Postsecondary Options students, "to take courses not available in my school."

Positive Impact Cited

In addition, students who participat-

ed in such programs reported increased educational aspirations, greater satisfaction with school, and greater success in school after transferring.

The proportion of students who reported that they expected to graduate from high school and attend college or a vocational-training program, for example, at least doubled

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after they entered their new schools. In the case of private alternative schools, it increased from 6.2 percent to 41.2 percent.

Similarly, the percentage of students saying they were "satisfied" or "very satisfied" with their schools increased substantially. And students in all but the Postsecondary Options program reported much more success

in school after transferring.

In the Postsecondary Options program, 31 percent of those surveyed said they were more successful after transferring, 57.5 percent said they were about as successful as they were before, and 7 percent said they were more successful before.

Since most of those students were already doing well in school, the study suggests, such findings could be construed as positive.

It advocates that the state continue to expand its array of public-school options, including the creation of "schools within schools." And it notes that some of the programs already have waiting lists.

The study also found that choice programs were attracting a significant number of students from low-income families and those where English is not spoken at home.

Joe Nathan, a senior fellow at the Humphrey Institute and one of the authors of the study, said the findings should be "very encouraging to a number of public-school educators who have created distinctive schools over the last few years."

"These are people who are often viewed very suspiciously by some colleagues in traditional schools," he noted. "And this report seems to provide considerable justification for doing things differently. . . . It does help to affirm something some of us

have said for 20 years, which is there's no one best kind of school for all students or all teachers."

At the national level, he added, the study could be used by people who want to give students more options within the public schools.

Better Outreach Advocated

Minnesota officials also plan to use the study to devise better ways to inform students and families about choice programs.

Students in all three of the programs designed for those who had not succeeded in regular schools said they had learned about them primarily from friends. In the Postsecondary Options program, the main source of information was guidance counselors, followed closely by friends.

The report recommends using young people to inform others about choice, creating parent-information centers and computer programs to help students select among schools, printing information in many languages, and providing more information through area businesses, day-care centers, and other social-service agencies.

The study was supported by a grant from the Chicago-based Joyce Foundation. Copies are available for \$7.50 each from the Betty Radcliffe Center for School Change, Hubert H. Humphrey Institute of Public Affairs, University of Minnesota, 301 19th Ave. South, Minneapolis, Minn. 55455; (612) 485-1834.