

School Choice Works in Minnesota

By JOE NATHAN

MINNEAPOLIS—Will President Clinton follow through on his support for public school and chartered public school choice? His proposed package to Congress, announced yesterday, contained modest support for these ideas, permitting states to spend money on them. But the president's central role in education is to speak directly to the public. There is plenty of good news he could share about public school choice and charter schools, despite the intense effort by the education establishment to discredit choice in general, and Minnesota's programs in particular.

First, parent, teacher and legislative interest is growing. National and statewide polls find that more than 60% of parents want the power to select among various public schools. The 1989 Arkansas Legislature followed then-Gov. Clinton's recommendations to adopt cross-district public school choice. Other state legislatures have expanded families' school choices in California, Colorado, Florida, Georgia, Idaho, Iowa, Massachusetts, Minnesota, New Mexico, Ohio, Utah, Washington and Wisconsin. Many laws are based on Minnesota's widely discussed, rarely understood programs.

A 1992 statewide poll conducted by major education groups found that 76% of Minnesotans endorsed our public school choice laws. More than 10,000 high school dropouts have returned to school because of the state's programs. But choice opponents have promoted five major myths. Mr. Clinton should help refute them.

More Options

• *Myth One: Minnesota's school choice plans haven't had much impact.* A recently released study of 126 Minnesota school principals concluded that choice "stimulated improvements to school curricula, promoted greater parent and teacher involvement in planning and decision-making and increased ethnic diversity of schools." More than 150 new magnet schools and "schools within schools" have been created in the past five years. Minneapolis and St. Paul more than doubled their options over the past seven years, often attracting suburban as well as inner-city youngsters.

Choice also helped produce several of the nation's first rural magnet schools, such as the Cyrus math-science magnet elementary school, which is run by a committee of teachers. Redbook recently named it one of the nation's 51 best public elementary schools. Teachers established other new schools in Delavan, Miltona, Randall, Nerstrand, Blackduck, Fairmont, Morris and Virginia. These rural schools, along with recently developed suburban and inner-city options, give several hundred thousand students true choices within their own districts.

A recent report on school choice by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching insisted that less than 4% of Minnesotans are using the state's choice program. Carnegie ignored "within district" choice programs, which have exploded over the past five years.

Minnesota's Post-Secondary Options law allows public-school 11th- and 12th-graders to attend universities, with tax funds following the students. More than 50,000 students have used this law since it began in 1985. Critics predicted that most

high-schoolers would be lost at college. But at many post-secondary institutions, such as the University of Minnesota, high school students have earned a higher grade-point average than the freshman class.

What about the wider impact? The state's high schools responded by doubling the number of Advanced Placement courses offered since the program started. Post-Secondary Options also helped convince 46 high schools to work with the University of Minnesota to offer joint courses granting both college and high school credit. Carnegie said that there was little growth in Advanced Placement. But it compared changes in the past three years, not since the Post-Secondary program began in 1985.

• *Myth Two: Choice plans help rich students more than poor ones.* More than 10,000 young Minnesotans used the state's Second Chance cross-district choice laws to re-enter school after dropping out.

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Youngsters from low-income families and minority groups are well represented in these programs. There's been a dramatic increase in aspiration levels among Second Chance students. The percentage of these students who reported that they planned to graduate and continue their formal education more than doubled after they transferred to another public school. Among teenagers using Second Chance to attend private nonsectarian, nonexclusive schools, such as the (Minneapolis) Urban League's Street Academy, the percentages increased to 41% from 6%. This experience shows that private, nonsectarian schools can play a valuable role in the education of inner-city children.

• *Myth Three: Parents don't choose schools for "good reasons."* Several carefully done studies show Minnesota parents' primary reason for choosing a school in another district is "academics." Those studies have been ignored. Critics say that too many parents prefer "convenience." Should public schools be inconvenient?

The Carnegie Report, for example, doesn't explain that before Minnesota's then-Gov. Rudy Perpich proposed open enrollment, one suburban district required youngsters to go 14 miles to the nearest school in their district, rather than walk one to two blocks to the nearest school just across district lines.

• *Myth Four: Choice is being presented as a panacea.* Not in Minnesota, or the 13 other states in which it was adopted, with bipartisan support. Mr. Clinton knew it was no panacea when he proposed it.

So do growing numbers of teachers. In a 1988 survey conducted by Minnesota's largest teacher union, more than 60% of its members supported cross-district pub-

lic school choice. Choice expands opportunities for teachers to act like entrepreneurs. It is central to the "teachers as professionals" movement, even if unions often do not recognize that fact.

Award-winning educator Deborah Meier has noted that "[public school] choice was the prerequisite" for her work in East Harlem—"schools with a focus, with staffs brought together around common ideas, free to shape a whole set of school parameters in accord with those ideas." Many terrific teachers recognize there's no one best kind of school for all students.

The best choice plans are accompanied by efforts to equalize funding among districts; help educators create new programs so that there are choices, not just choice; help parents make thoughtful decisions; prohibit school admissions tests; and provide transportation.

Minnesotans understand what many business groups have forgotten: that school choice and site management go together. Businesses grow by giving their employees more decision-making power. But employees know customers have options. If families don't have choices, how effective will site-management be? How effective would it be in your company, if employees had guaranteed customers?

• *Myth Five: Chartered public schools offer little to reform programs.* Both Mr. Clinton and Education Secretary Richard Riley have endorsed charter schools, which enable certified teachers to create new schools of choice with accountability for student results, rather than for following thousands of rules. Chartered public schools may not use admissions tests. Minnesota passed a limited version of chartered schools in 1991. California, Georgia and New Mexico are also experimenting with the idea.

A Powerful Tool

More than 25 groups of Minnesota educators in urban, suburban and rural areas tried starting such schools in just the first year of the law's operation. Most have been frustrated by the law's provision that a local school board must approve the charter. This is like allowing the New York Times to decide whether The Wall Street Journal can be sold in Manhattan.

Choice is a powerful tool, like electricity, which must be handled carefully. Some choice programs, including some public school plans, create more problems than they solve. Minnesota's plan isn't right for every state.

Mr. Clinton should repeat his frequently voiced presidential campaign recommendation that every state should provide options for families and educators. He could help Americans understand what Chris Wilcox, one of Minnesota's earliest school choice participants, told the nation's governors three years ago: "Choice not only gave me a chance to personalize my education, but it also gave me the confidence that I can make something of myself and control my destiny."

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