

DISCUSSION PAPER
CHOICE AMONG PUBLIC SCHOOLS

One of the hardest concepts for dedicated public school advocates to accept is that parents, students, and teachers should be able to choose their schools. The "neighborhood" school had an exclusive attendance zone until the advent of "alternative" and "magnet" schools, (although specialized or "exam" high schools have a long history at the secondary level). Parents' ability to "choose" which elementary school their children attended was limited by their willingness to move their residence or to pay for private schooling. One result: as economic and racial segregation in housing has grown, so has the economic and racial segregation of neighborhood-based schools. Further, since a neighborhood school has a guaranteed population, it has little incentive to change to attract more students. This works especially to the disadvantage of poorer families, since they have the least ability to move out or to pay for private schooling.

It is important to change this tradition. First, choice in itself is an important component of our lives and gives those who have choice a sense of control over their decisions that leads to taking more responsibility for themselves and their families. All major players in education should have choice among public schools: parents, students, and teachers. Choosing where to teach or learn involves making a commitment to the school chosen, leading to a different kind and level of involvement by students, parents and teachers. It is one of the most effective first steps in increasing "parental involvement" in a child's education.

Secondly, it is important to introduce some competition among public schools, so there will be incentives for school staff to improve their programs to attract students. The charter school proposal attacks the monopoly that local boards of education have over deciding who can offer publicly-funded education (the supply side), and parental choice among public schools attacks the monopoly that each local school has in its geographic neighborhood (the demand side).

Third, education leaders have the responsibility to provide a wide variety of educational opportunities for many different kinds of students. Standardized school offerings do not respond to the varying needs and preferences of city residents today, who include many foreign-language native students, students with special health needs, learning-disabled children, and adults with literacy problems and limited job skills. Public education has for too long served many of these students poorly or not at all. If public education is to offer programs to meet this variety of needs, parents and students must be able to choose the programs they need and/or prefer.

For teachers also, choice as to where they wish to teach is crucial. If teachers are to be responsible for experimenting, for taking risks in developing new

programs, and for patiently implementing long-term changes in curricula and teaching techniques, they must be committed to their work. Choice is a major component in any professional's commitment to his/her work.

Current Choice within DCPS.

DCPS now has several elements of "choice" by parents and students. "Open enrollment" at the high school level was introduced in 1980. Unfortunately, not nearly enough students take advantage of it, because it is poorly implemented by school counselors. Adequate information on the various high school options is rarely made available in a timely fashion to students who must plan ahead if they wish to meet the prerequisites and/or application deadlines for special programs. Too often, high schools do not circulate brochures describing these options. There are few "school fairs" or "open houses" for informing and recruiting students.

In elementary and junior high schools, there is much *de facto* choice, reflected in the 10,000 plus students attending a school other than their neighborhood school. While more requests for out-of-boundary transfers are received each year by the DCPS Special Permission Office than can be approved, some principals control some out-of-boundary admissions directly and secretly. An unfair situation has emerged over the years, with some parents lying about their address to obtain entrance to their preferred school, and some parents negotiating directly with principals. Parents also suffer from lack of information. In spite of several years of effort, DCPS still has no comprehensive listing of the options and special programs with the prerequisites and/or application procedures required by them. The lack of reliable information on out-of-boundary enrollments also makes it difficult to plan how to use school space more efficiently.

Controlled Choice in Cambridge, Massachusetts

A system of "managed choice" has enabled the city of Cambridge to integrate its schools without court-ordered busing, while also improving the educational achievement of its students. Cambridge attempts to balance each school by race, ethnicity, native language, and gender. The "Parent Information Center" energetically searches out new children, especially at the Kindergarten level, provides information, reaches out to and counsels parents, sets the yearly schedule for parents to list the top five schools they prefer for each child, and makes the assignments. Hardship appeals are possible and mid-year or emergency transfers are handled diplomatically. (Source: "The Cambridge Controlled Choice School Desegregation Plan," Cambridge Public School Department, April 1991; interviews with the Director of the Parent Information Center.)

Recommended Phase-In of Public School Choice in DC

First, it is important that there be a citywide system of choice through which all parents will choose the schools they prefer for their children; thus, no families

get "left out," and the most energetic parents do not get preferential access to special programs. Independently-managed "Parent Information Centers" would have information available on all schools and programs; there would be school fairs and open houses; the rules for choice and admissions would be clear and fairly applied to all. A "Choice Office" would coordinate the preferences for all students and make assignments, with the goal of giving all students one of their top three choices.

Because many parents, particularly at the elementary level, prefer a school that is nearby, enrollment options should include both nearby and more distant choices for each family. Each child should be guaranteed admission to at least two of the schools physically nearest* his/her home. The purpose of this provision is to make sure that all families choose between at least two schools, so that no child is "left behind" in a non-competitive school. (*Nearest would mean any school within a circle based on a one-mile radius from the student's home, or, if no school were located in that area, the two nearest schools geographically to the student's home.)

From November to February each year, families would visit schools, attend "school fairs," and receive assistance from Parent Information Centers about their options. At sign-up time in March, a parent/caregiver would list about 5 choices, in order of preference, for each child. If any of the preferred schools had special admission requirements or application forms, the parent and/or student must have submitted those forms as required. Each student's list would have to include at least one "nearby" school, in case the student is not admitted to any of the citywide programs he/she applied to.

The Choice Office would work with schools to try to have each student admitted to one of his/her preferred schools. By mid-April, parents would receive each student's assignment. The Choice Office would work out instances where a parent or student was not satisfied with the assignment, and an appeals procedure would be established. Exceptions to the general choice policy would be made if necessary, for example, in cases of certain Special Education students, placements for suspended youths and adjudicated youths, and for other at-risk students. In such cases, the Choice Office would collaborate with the appropriate DCPS and DC Government offices and the parent/caregiver to ensure the most appropriate placement.

Once a student enrolled in a particular program, it would be expected that the student would finish all the grades offered by that program, as long as s/he continued to meet the academic and social standards of the program. Transfers during the school year would be worked out through the Choice Office. If a student wished to transfer to another program at the beginning of the next school year, s/he would go through the choice process again, although frequent transfers among programs would be discouraged.

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PUBLIC "CONTRACT" SCHOOLS

Contracts can be used to provide new education programs quickly. Contracts can create programs targeted to students with special needs, those entangled in judicial proceedings, at-risk of dropping out of traditional schools, or persistently disruptive children. Contracts can also be used to widen the options open to ordinary children, by contracting with groups which offer special educational approaches such as Montessori, Waldorf, etc. "Contract" schools offer important flexibility for meeting the varying needs Washington's children.

The concept of "contract schools" includes schools run by not-for-profit organizations as well as by profit-making firms. A local example of a not-for-profit organization managing a school is the "Options School" for at-risk junior high students operated by the Children's Museum under a contract with DCPS. In this case, students are referred or assigned to this alternative school in an effort to provide special opportunities to children in danger of dropping out. In the future, students and/or parents might be able to choose among several alternative schools offering appropriate programs. If a profit-making firm is offering a regular education program, parents should be able to choose whether or not their child attends the school, so that for-profit firms will have to compete for their students just as traditional public schools and new public charter schools will have to compete for students.

Management of public schools by for-profit firms has been called "privitization." Some groups in D.C. oppose this particular version of "contract schools," fearing that profit-making firms will cut corners and provide less-than-adequate education programs. There are two important ways to encourage private companies to provide high-quality education. First, all such contracts should be put out for competitive bids. Secondly, parents should be able to choose to send their children to such schools. That way, parents will be able to compare the quality of education offered by them with the other options available among public schools. Privately-managed schools would have to compete for students and will go out of business if not enough students choose to attend them.

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Most public education reform advocates agree that allowing individual schools to have more decision-making authority should produce both more efficient use of dollars and education more responsive to needs of children and parents. The first efforts in this direction included "site-based management," then "schools-within-schools," and then "charter" schools, which were designed to have the greatest local autonomy. Site-based management experiments have been tried for over 20 years and have resulted in very few public schools receiving significant autonomy from their central administrations; this top-down delegating process allows for almost endless delay in the actual transfer of authority.

England has introduced a concept similar to site-based management called Local Management of Schools, (LMS), as well as "grant-maintained" schools, which are similar to US charter schools. Grant-maintained schools are local government schools which have opted out of being managed by their Local Education Agency and which receive direct grants from the national Department of Education. Considerable effort has been made by the national government to encourage schools to try LMS and/or to become grant-maintained schools, and much support has been made available to fledgling grant-maintained schools. ("What Can U.S. Charter Schools Learn from England's Grant-Maintained Schools?" Priscilla Wohlstetter and Lesley Anderson, *Phi Delta Kappan*, February 1994, pp. 486-491.) There are now over 700 grant-maintained schools funded from the national level; they receive preferential treatment in certain ways, such as increased allocations of capital funds for renovations, as part of the national policy to promote systemic change in education by encouraging more and more schools to achieve grant-maintained status.

"Charter Schools" have been proposed in the US in particular by Ted Kolderie of Minnesota, and represent an attempt to meld the public education ideals of free, universally-available education, with the private sector advantages of competition among schools and minimal government regulation of the delivery of education. Two key ingredients are, first, the legal independence of charter schools, which operate under a contract from a public institution, but which have their own boards of directors; and second, the ability of parents and students to choose the school, with public funds following the student.

Introducing charter schools in Washington, D.C., has been proposed by the City Council. The draft legislation needs to be refined in order to maximize the freedom of charter schools to develop and implement high quality education programs targeted to many different kinds of children. Each public charter school would operate under contract with a public education organization. Both existing

teachers and new groups could found charter schools; an existing public school could convert to charter status if a majority of the parents and teachers so voted; an existing private school could convert to charter status as long as it became "public" and agreed not to discriminate in admissions and to have a secular curriculum. A charter school could be a non-profit organization or a cooperative. Each would have a Board of Directors empowered to hire and fire staff, set curriculum, and manage the budget. Public funds would be transferred on the basis of a designated amount per student, with federal funds following students qualified under the various federal programs.

It is recommended that the application process be simple: groups would complete a standard application form and attach required information describing the educational focus of the proposed school, the site, the curriculum, staffing, estimated budget, student assessment practices, by-laws, etc. The approving agency would have 30 days to review and recommend approval or disapproval; if disapproved, the agency would have to give specific reasons and consider a revised submission. If rejected twice, an organization would have a right of appeal to another agency. Contracts with charter schools would be for 5 year renewable periods, and could be revoked for serious cause, such as violation of health or safety standards, fiscal mismanagement, or persistent inability to meet the education goals outlined in the charter. Charter schools could also go out of existence due to lack of students, if not enough students choose to attend a particular school.

The introduction of public charter schools in Washington has the potential to quickly and dramatically expand the range of education options available to our families and teachers. Teachers, parents and community members would be able to realize their dreams and to start new schools, choosing special themes or approaches that they preferred to expand the required core curriculum. Groups that wished to start a school that, for example, would be for girls only or for boys only, would have to start a private school, as would a group that wished to have a religious-based curriculum. The remarkable thing about public charter schools is that they introduce creative competition among public schools which are free and available to all students.

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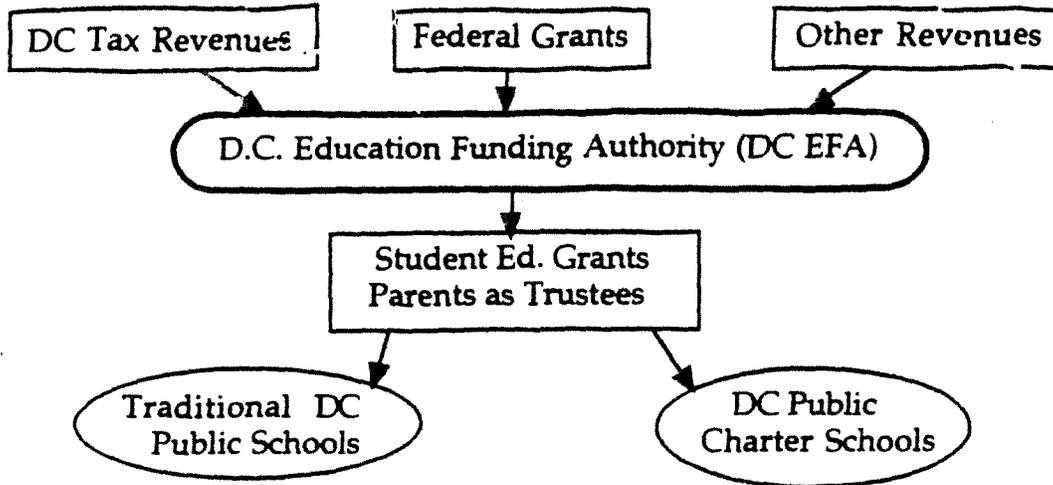
"Education Allotments:"
A New Strategy for Funding Education in the
District of Columbia

Washington, D.C., has a "unified" Board of Education which has the powers of both a local education agency (LEA) operating schools, and of a state education agency (SEA), which monitors and inspects itself. As a result, there has been no external organization monitoring the quality of public education since the Board was established in 1968. The Mayor and City Council have had authority only to set the overall amount of the education budget and that has not been an effective tool. Giving the Mayor and City Council more control over education funds (a "line-item veto") is no solution.

For true, long-lasting reform, we need to establish new ways of funding and monitoring education that will: (1) provide for effective external inspection, and (2) provide a funding mechanism that will enable monies to flow to autonomous local schools without undue interference by the Board of Education, the City Council or the Mayor. We can devise such mechanisms if we adopt the principle that funds should follow the child to the school chosen for him or her by parents or other caregivers. That way, each school's budget will result from the aggregation of each child's "education allotment," supplemented by funds from Federal programs for which the child is eligible. The total education budget for the city would then derive from adding up all the individual education allotments.

Each year, the City Council and Mayor would set the value of the allotments, for example, \$5,000 per elementary student, \$8,000 per secondary student, \$10,000 plus for Special Education students depending on level of need.* To fund the necessary coordinating activities, the administrative budget could be set at a maximum of 3-4% of the total funds for the children, (to prevent bureaucratic bloat from creeping in again). Such a process would allow city officials to change the value of allotments in response to changing city revenues, and to approve the details of the administrative budget, but would keep them from interfering with the budgets of individual schools. One suggestion is to establish an "Education Funding Authority," a small group of experts who would manage education funds like a giant escrow account, as shown in the chart, "Flow of Dollars."

The directors of the Education Funding Authority could be appointed by the City Council from among qualified accountants and other professionals. Their task would be to design and implement mechanisms for correctly identifying students, the schools which they attend, and auditing financial reports from the schools. The agency responsible for external monitoring of the quality of education (an "Education Auditor"?) would give the Funding Authority a list of schools eligible to

Chart I. Flow of Dollars.

receive education allotments. For example, to be eligible, all schools might be required to meet the following kinds of minimum conditions:

1. Provide instruction in academic subjects, including reading, writing and mathematics.
2. Agree not to teach violent behavior, racism, or hatred of any person or group.
3. Meet basic health and safety regulations.
4. Agree to an approved mechanism for external monitoring and reporting of academic achievement.

* These per pupil amounts are suggested based on an analysis of current expenditures by DCPS. An average of about \$6,340 was spent per pupil from the FY 95 annual operating budget, (\$510 million divided by 80,450 students), plus another \$911 per pupil from federal and other revenues. Adding in the approximately \$20 million in Capital Budget funds available per year would add another \$249 per pupil, for a total estimated FY 95 expenditure of \$7,500 per pupil. This estimate does not include funds for teachers' pensions (paid from another budget source), or any funds for the depreciation of buildings. If there are significantly fewer students in the public schools than officially claimed, the average per pupil expenditure would increase. If there were only 67,000 students this year, the average per pupil expenditure in FY 95 would be about \$9,000.

(Source: The Board of Education's FY 1995 Operating Budget, December 1993, as revised by City Council in January 1995 for appropriated funds; pp. 5-7 for non-appropriated funds; the capital budget estimate is an average of the past several years.)