

Britain's Brand of Choice

By JILL SMOLOWE

George Bush's ideas about school choice bear a strong resemblance to portions of former British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher's 1988 Education Reform Act. Under this plan, England's education standards were unified under a national curriculum. District lines within the public system were eased to allow open enrollment at any of the 23,000 primary and secondary schools, and schools are assuming greater control over their own budgets, without interference from district authorities. Most pointedly, the government pledged that state money, an average of \$2,550 per student annually, would follow pupils to their public school of choice.

The Thatcher plan also offers a radical choice for which there is, as yet, no U.S. equivalent. Individual public schools may "opt out" of local school systems and instead receive funding directly from the national government. With this declaration of independence, a school's headmaster and a governing body that includes parents become responsible for most decisions, from hiring teachers to spending priorities. Because opt-outs do not lose a portion of their budgets to district-authority overhead, they often have money for more books, new facilities and additional teachers.

To opt out, a school must first secure the consent of a majority of its students' parents. In the two years since Thatcher's plan went into effect, 102 schools have cut their ties; 11 are on the verge of final action; 88 more await government approval. They are the first patches in a quilt of autonomous schools—which are tax supported and tuition free but in effect can operate as if they were privately run—that the country's Conservative government hopes will blanket the country.

Do opt-outs live up to the Thatcherite vision of efficiency and competitive excellence? Two years ago, Hendon, a public secondary school in north London, faced dissolution and the merger of its dwindling student population into a nearby school. Today, as an institution that opted out, Hendon, with 850 students, gets two applications for every available place. (Students with hearing problems and learning disabilities are given priority.) Since it changed status in 1989, Hendon has doubled spend-

ing on books and teaching materials and quadrupled its payout for classroom equipment and furniture. Money that once disappeared into bureaucratic coffers has hired more support staff and refurbished a computer lab. Parents have also been galvanized: they are painting the school's walls for free in order to save money for books and other educational tools.

Foes of the program warn that successes like Hendon do not reflect the real impact of the program. Schools that opt out disrupt county planning efforts and drain from districts money that traditionally has been applied to a wide range of services, including the provision of child psychologists, substitute teachers and special-

education instructors. Says Margaret Maden, the chief education officer of Warwickshire: "Opting out takes money from the system as a whole and affects the schools that are left."

Many educators also warn that opting out may mean sliding back into the class-based system of education that divided England into elite schools for the Oxbridge bound and lesser places for everyone else. "Better schools get better; worse schools risk terminal decline," says Tony Edwards, an education professor at the University of Newcastle. But for those who try it, Britain's version of Choice seems to deliver considerable rewards.

—Reported by Anne Corviale/London



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