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CONSUMING PASSION

THE DYNAMICS OF SCHOOL CHOICE

By Tessalie Schulte and Sheryl Welte

With one in four American households having school age children, and about 90% of children attending public schools, most families have an understandable interest in the quality of public education. From the emergence of the American public education system in the mid 19th century through current times, concern has persisted that our public schools are not adequately educating our students. The popular belief that public schools are “failing” pressures many parents into looking for options to ensure that their children receive a quality education.

On the macro level, school choice is under the umbrella of larger educational issues such as funding (e.g., vouchers, constitutional separation of church and state, equitable funding for all schools), mandated high-stakes testing, and the political tug-of-war over privatization of public schools. On the micro level, school choice is about parents’ search to find the best school. As a consumer society we have an abundance of options open to us, including education. In an increasingly individualistic society, parents want, and often expect, educators to attend to each child’s unique learning style. There is great demand for higher educational attainment. Today, many traditional careers require more technological education and training; the days of living wage jobs requiring little to no education and training are fading.

A Look at the Legislation

The issue of school choice is rooted in a history dating back to the creation of public school itself. The question of supporting public schools for the common good of society, then known as “common schools”—or of maintaining the existing educational system of private schools and privately funded free schools for the needy—was at the center of public debates in the mid 1800s. The population booms of the 1900s increased support and demand for public education. The debate shifted to the purpose of public education since the majority of students attending public schools in urban areas were immigrant children. Industry leaders pushed for schools to prepare students for industrial jobs. In a 1906 report, for example, the Massachusetts Commission on Industrial and Technical Education argued that schools were too exclusively literary. During the same period, the emergence of IQ testing seemingly resolved the issue of who should receive a college bound (literary) education versus who would be better served by more practical job train-

ing in industry. While some scholars, such as Harlan C. Hines, criticized the testing practices of the time, by 1947 the Education Testing Service was in full swing. In the 1950s the concept of a voucher system was introduced by Milton Friedman's *Capitalism and Freedom*, and the debate shifted back to school choice. The next two decades brought the school choice debate to the Supreme Court, which repeatedly ruled that state funding for parochial schools and religious materials violated the First Amendment. The 1965 Elementary and Secondary School Act (ESEA) provided funding to address the special educational needs of low-income families. At the same time, urban schools saw a decline in enrollment of white middle-class stu-



Photograph by Mike Emch

dents (now known as white flight); this decline continued through the 1960s and 1970's. However, during this time of reform, known as the post-Sputnik reform and back to basics movement, the school choice debates were common, and we began to see the emergence of alternative schools, dropout prevention programs, magnet school, and eventually charter schools in 1980.

In 1983, the National Commission on Excellence in Education presented an open letter to the American people, entitled *A Nation at Risk*, which addressed the largely ignored problems with the

As a first-year teacher, I was looking for a school that would have a full-day kindergarten program. My son has had two years of preschool and would benefit from remaining in a classroom environment, rather than a daycare. However, I was also looking for a school that had onsite daycare before and after school hours. I wanted the school to have a strong connection to the community and connect the classroom to the outside world. It was important to me that his teacher focused on preparing my son to meet the state standards and benchmarks, by utilizing curriculum and practices planned with this end in mind. I was concerned about the lack of availability of what is now considered "the extras": music, art, physical education, library studies, and computer literacy. Most of all, I wanted to find a school that felt supportive of students and families.

My first step in the consideration of sending my son to Maplewood was attending the kindergarten round-up. On a Thursday afternoon in late January I walked into the school and was greeted and directed to the library where the meeting would take place. The walls were filled with student art work; this was a good sign. I was one of the first people to show up, so I made small talk with some familiar faces. I asked another parent if this was her neighborhood school. This question started an unexpected conversation about school choice. She was in fact shopping for the best school to start her daughter in. Her neighborhood school is close to Maplewood, but she was not convinced it would be right for her daughter. She considered Maplewood because it has a reputation for having strong parent involvement, and she was interested in the full-day kindergarten option it offered. The library filled quickly with neighborhood and other parents considering Maplewood Elementary as an option for their child. Maplewood is a K-5 school located in Portland School District 1 on SW 52nd Avenue with enrollment of approximately 319. I was amazed at the turnout. By the time Principal John Blanck started his presentation, there was standing room only, and parents were lined up in the hall. The principal gave some basic information about the school and the half-day and full-day options. The parents were ready with questions about class size, curriculum, educational philosophy, enrichment classes, and much more. The principal addressed some questions, and then the teachers gave a presentation that focused on their philosophy, how they approach the standard curriculum, and other important developmental issues.

*I was impressed by the principal's response to a question about class size. When a parent asked if they would allow more students into the full-day program because the demand was high, he responded by saying that both he and the teachers felt that allowing more students in to the class would conflict with the goals and ethics of the kindergarten program. He added that they were committed to the 25 student cap. I was further impressed with the teachers' approach to teaching and learning; they not only had a clear understanding of curriculum standards and benchmarks, but also focused on developmentally appropriate practices. For example, when explaining how they teach math, they talked about the adopted curriculum (*Investigations*) and how the hands-on activities using manipulatives help students learn mathematical concepts without being too abstract. As slides of books Maplewood kindergarteners published were presented, parents had the opportunity to see the range of literacy and how varied this age group can be in their development. Some students created illustrations that were accompanied by letters that represented words describing their story, while others were writing short sentences. It was clear that each of these stages of literary development were honored as real accomplishments. The teachers talked about how they worked together to integrate the curriculum to cover all content areas and to create a context for student learning. The kindergarten teachers collaborate not only with each other, but also with first grade teachers to ensure the readiness of the students to successfully transition to the academic environment of first grade. The kindergarten students at Maplewood also have scheduled time with specialists. The kindergarten program includes specialists in music, physical education, computer, and library. After a quick peak into the classroom my son would attend in the fall, I walked away very confident that Maplewood was the choice for us.*

Before making my final decision, I brought my son on a school tour given by the principal. My son told me he was nervous as we approached the school, and I reassured him that we were just looking at this school to make sure it was the right place for him to go to kindergarten. With a squeeze of the hand and a smile we entered the building. It just happened to be "wear your pajamas to school day" for the kindergarteners, and his prospective teacher walked by sparring her pajamas, big bear slippers and pigtails. I told my son that she was going to be his teacher next year. His face lit up with excitement. The school was full of life; student work was displayed everywhere, there were lingering sounds of music, and, of course, the kindergarteners parading through the upper grade classrooms in their pajamas. After the tour we were both sold on Maplewood, and feeling fortunate to have such a wonderful neighborhood school. — Tessalie Schulte



Photograph by Nathan Meszarnos

American public education system. The Commission stated their concerns by writing, "The educational foundations of our society are presently being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a nation and a people." The federal government responded to A Nation at Risk with Goals 2000: Educate America Act. The specific purposes of the Act were: "To improve learning and teaching by providing a national frame-

comes in the form of consequences, starting with allowing students who attend schools that do not meet the standards to transfer to other schools, and potentially state imposed change in the management of individual schools. Advocates and supporters of NCLB suggest it provides parents with more choices. NCLB, however, does not include the option of an excellent quality neighborhood school, the overwhelming choice of parents when available.

The Problem of Defining School Choice

Parents may define school choice as the process of choosing a school for their child to attend, or as the options available to them. School choice, however, is difficult to define; it is a multifaceted issue. This parental branch of the school choice tree is important for examining not only the "shopping" done by parents while choosing a school, but also the difficult task of locating schools with resources and expertise to meet the exceptional needs of some students. A principal of a school may define school choice as the choices and freedom his/her school has in its daily operations. Clearly, there are historical components of the school choice issue that point to the social implication of school choice. From this political perspective many definitions arise creating a messy spectrum of school choice issues. Schools are viewed as businesses with students, and parents, as shoppers. Schools that do not perform well lose customers and ultimately go out of business. On the other end of the spectrum, Samuel Henry, Professor of Education at Portland State University, helps us to explore the extremely political nature of school choice. "School choice should be a class/race/socio-economic status neutral set of possibilities," he says. "After all, we are a pluralist society with multiple mirror images in our schools as we charge them to transmit knowledge, skills and sensitivities. What could seem more democratic than school choice on the face of it? But access to knowledge is always about power and the debate on school choice is a straw man debate on how schools should function best for the affluent. There should be a multitude of options for becoming educated in this society, but the school choice issue is largely a sham."

What are the educational options for children in the metrocape? No parent wants a child's school to be failing; no parent wants to send a child to a failing school. In response to the existence of failing schools and the concerns of parents and communities, school choice now includes the following: alternative schools serve students whose needs are not met in the traditional classroom setting; magnet programs, which are federally funded, provide diverse programs for children with special interests and tal-

PARENTS WANT AND OFTEN EXPECT EDUCATORS TO ATTEND TO EACH CHILD'S UNIQUE LEARNING STYLE

work for education reform; to promote the research, consensus building, and systemic changes needed to ensure equitable educational opportunities and high levels of educational achievement for all students; to provide a framework for reauthorization of all Federal education programs; to promote the development and adoption of a voluntary national system of skill standards and certifications; and for other purposes." Many local reform legislative pieces came after Goals 2000, such as the Oregon Educational Act for the 21st Century, Educational Improvement and Reform, and The Elementary and Secondary Educational Act in Washington. The local educational acts included the creation and implementation of content area benchmarks and standards, and statewide testing to measure how well schools were meeting the new standards.

The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), the reauthorization of the 1965 ESEA, is a complicated piece of legislation designed to hold schools accountable for the federal dollars that are invested in the local educational system. NCLB requires districts to test 95% of all students using state standards. States are required to make test scores public and to meet goals of Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP). According to the National Education Association, "AYP refers to the minimum level of improvement that states, school districts and schools must achieve each year as they progress toward the ESEA goal of having all students reaching the proficient level on state tests by 2014." Schools not meeting AYP will be defined as failing schools, and parents will receive a letter informing them that their child is attending a failing school and therefore has the opportunity to attend another school. The accountability standard