



THOMAS TOCH

The Case for Mandatory School Choice

It has been nearly three decades since public school reformers embraced “school choice” in earnest. And though the notion of the neighborhood school no longer defines public education, choice hasn’t become the engine of reform that many hoped it would be. The school voucher movement lacks momentum. The Obama Administration is pushing charter schools, but they serve a small percentage of the nation’s students with mixed results. And the public school choice initiative in the federal No Child Left Behind Act has been plagued by low participation rates.

But there’s another, largely untapped, way to harness the power of the marketplace to better serve students’ diverse educational interests and needs and to stimulate improvement through competition for students on a wide scale: making choice mandatory within public school systems.

Each year, New York City, the nation’s largest school district, requires its 81,000 rising 9th graders to rank a dozen schools that they’d like to attend from among hundreds of high school programs scattered throughout Manhattan, Queens, Brooklyn, Staten Island, and the Bronx. And thanks to computer software adapted from match-making in kidney donations, law clerkships, and Internet auctions, the district in recent years has been able to place students in the schools on their lists far more efficiently and fairly than traditional public school choice programs. This past spring, some 63,000 of the city’s new high school students gained a place at one of their top three choices, and over 80,000 students — 99% of the incoming high school class — enrolled in a school they selected.

As a result, the New York choice system has stimulated a new entrepreneurialism among many public educators, improved the percep-

tion of public education among middle-class families, and contributed to higher graduation rates in the city. It’s a model that Secretary of Education Arne Duncan would do well to make part of his urban school reform agenda.

Evolution of Choice in NYC

Past public school choice plans have been hobbled by bureaucratic methods of matching students with schools that have encouraged students and schools to manipulate the selection process, left many students in schools they hadn’t selected, and, as a result, hurt districts’ reputations among parents.

The old New York system, for example, involved three rounds of selection over several months, lengthy waiting lists, multiple offers for thousands of students, and no placements for many more. As late as 2003 the city’s department of education had to find high school seats through “administrative assignment” for nearly 35,000 students. Not surprisingly, low-income students of color — the very students that many choice plans have been designed to help — fared the worst under the New York model and others like it because their families lacked the wherewithal to work the city’s choice system to their advantage.

But in 2003, city education officials hired an expert on matching systems, a Harvard professor of economics and business administration named Al Roth, to help address the problems plaguing New York’s and most other voluntary public school choice systems. Roth had written mathematical formulas to more efficiently and fairly pair medical students with residency programs and had done studies of Internet auctions and other matching markets. By fall 2004, he and a graduate student had a new student-school matching model in place for New York’s rising 9th graders — one that required all students to select their schools, even if they wanted to attend their neighborhood high schools.

Roth eliminated the advantages (and stresses) of trying to game the selection system,

Requiring students to choose a school can be an important catalyst of innovation and improvement in urban education.

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and he greatly increased students' chances of attending schools they'd chosen. Instead of multiple matching rounds, the city's re-programmed computers were able to give the vast majority of students a school of their choosing in a matter of minutes. By 2009, some 95% of students won places at one of their top five high schools, and city officials had to assign only 791 students to schools.

The results have been encouraging. While it goes without saying that a host of factors other than school choice influences student success — including school leadership, teacher quality, funding, and curricula — New York's high school graduation rate, while still strikingly low, has increased substantially since the introduction of the city's mandatory high school choice and matching system — from 41% in 2002 to 56% in 2008. Achievement gaps between the city's white and black and white and Latino students have narrowed during the same period. And there has been a jump in the percentage of students earning state-test-based Regents diplomas in New York City.

Giving students more choices doesn't mean much, of course, unless the choices are meaningful. In New York, the new matching mechanism was combined with the introduction of a much wider range of high school options. While student enrollment has stayed roughly constant in the city over the past two decades, the number of high school options has increased from 261 to 693, with students able to choose from among schools specializing in everything from architecture to engineering, culinary arts, and urban planning.

A healthy education marketplace also requires informed consumers. In New York, some 40,000 students and parents descend every fall on Brooklyn Technical High School to learn about the city's many high school programs at an annual New York City Department of Education-sponsored school fair, where representatives of hundreds of high schools large and small throughout the city's five boroughs sell themselves from behind folding tables that ring the hallways of the eight-story building.

The city also sponsors five borough-wide fairs and nearly three dozen parent workshops during the school selection season. It prints 200,000 copies of the 584-page Directory of the New York City Public High Schools and a separate Specialized High Schools Student Handbook, and it distributes CD-ROMs of


the directory. Students can search for schools at the department's web site, and the department's staff works closely with middle school guidance counselors.

But finding schools isn't very helpful if families don't have a good way to judge them. Some students may be drawn to schools by flashy internships or swimming pools. For some parents, a school's proximity to home or work may trump test scores. But New York has created multiple methods of judging schools. Chancellor Joel Klein, for example, has introduced report cards that grade schools A to F using several measures of school success.

New York's public school choice system has improved the perception of public education among middle-class families and contributed to higher graduation rates in the city.

And New York's mandatory choice system wouldn't work without the city's extensive public transportation system, which allows high school students to travel throughout the five boroughs using publicly funded passes. Mandatory school choice for elementary school students would require a much larger transportation investment in yellow school buses, and mandatory choice isn't a meaningful option at any level in many rural and sprawling exurban school systems.

The challenges of mandatory choice shouldn't be downplayed. Despite New York's extensive information campaigns, a recent study found that "many students lack adequate support in choosing and ranking their schools," a challenge made tougher by the fact that nearly half of New York's 1.1 million students speak a language other than English at home. And another recent study suggests that the city's creation of many new, smaller high schools to enhance students' choices has led to overcrowding and declining attendance and graduation rates at a number of remaining large neighborhood schools.

Still, the New York experience suggests that it's possible to provide choice to public school students on a far wider scale than is done today, and that the mandatory choice model can be an important catalyst of innovation and improvement in urban education. 

File Name and Bibliographic Information

k0911toc.pdf

Thomas Toch, WASHINGTON VIEW: The Case for Mandatory School Choice, Phi Delta Kappan, Vol. 91, No. 3, November 2009, pp. 86-87 (online only).

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