

School Choice Commentary

A success from every side

The little guy finally won! With these words I heralded the recently passed school choice law. Last summer, school choice burst on the public scene promising change and creating conflict. For this space I wrote that school choice was a victory for working class people who could not afford the cost of private education. Others wrote that school choice would hurt already weak school systems. They argued that the rich would prosper and the weak suffer in a reverse Robin Hood scenario.

From the perspective of one academic year, some issues have been settled, others remain to be. After but one academic year, and a mere 10 months since school choice became law, 47 school districts have adopted school choice with the number growing every day. The takeoff for the creation of school choice is the belief that public education in America is in crisis. It is no secret. Test scores and SAT scores have fallen steadily for more than a decade.

In Massachusetts the advent of Proposition 2½ placed cities and towns in an impossible fiscal situation. While the cost of living has increased an average of 5 percent, the tax rate of cities and towns can only rise by 2½ percent. Tremendous stress has been placed on municipalities to provide services that have traditionally been considered essential. Without overrides, Proposition 2½ has forced cities and towns to make choices and set priorities.

In regards to schools, Proposition 2½ has been nothing short of a catastrophe. While everyone in a city and town benefits from police and fire protection, trash pickup, plowing and sanding of streets, children are the most direct beneficiaries of quality education. All too often, it is only the parents of children in the public school systems who perceive the danger of a community unwilling to prioritize education.

Thus communities made choices. Some understood that our future rests with our children and supported and prioritized education. Unfortunately, most did not. To children born to a working-class family in a city or town that relegated education down the list of priorities, there were no options. When cuts needed to be made it was easy to look to the school budget. Children don't vote and in every community parents of

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children in public education are at best 25 percent of the electorate.

Those who had the means escaped to private schools or paid tuition at other public schools. Those without means were trapped. Then came school choice. Suddenly doors were open for all children irrespective of income. The educational bureaucracy was shaken to its roots. Communities that had for years watched unconcerned as ridiculously high percentages of students left for other and better opportunities, suddenly were outraged when the children of working-class people began to leave. Of course, it was not the children that concerned them, but now dollars were leaving following those children. They, of course, cloaked themselves with concern for the children that were left behind. Communities that adopted school choice were branded as lecherous and worse. It is human nature to blame others for our failures. It is clear when children leave a school system in significant numbers there is a real problem with that system. It is always easier to point the finger than to look in the mirror. For a time that is what occurred.

The purposes of school choice are many. Obviously the creation of educational options is one. There are other goals, however. Those communities that have supported public education would receive a financial boost. Also, for communities such as Manchester with low enrollment, choice brings a healthy diversity of students. Clearly, receiving communities such as Manchester benefit as greatly as the students they accept.

What of the sending communities? Has school choice benefitted these school systems? When 69 students left Gloucester for the Manchester school system, Gloucester faced a loss of \$400,000 in aid. In light of the fact that school choice was made law just 45 days prior to the start of the school year, this sudden loss of funding seemed a bit much to accept. While certain legislators filed showboat bills that had the effect of raising hopes with no chance of passage, other individuals moved to convince the Senate and House leadership that the very purposes of school choice would be frustrated by such a punitive result.

The result was a \$300,000 (75 percent reimbursement) state aid payout to Gloucester and other similarly affected communities. Thus, Gloucester paid \$100,000 to Manchester to educate 69 students, or less than \$1,500 per student. It is also clear that this 75 percent reimbursement will continue to be available to all such sending communities that make a real effort to improve the quality of education offered. So financially, school choice has not hurt Gloucester or other sending communities. But has it helped?

In the 10 months since the adoption of school choice, parents, faculty and other concerned citizens have used the light of school choice to make a case for a commitment to quality education. The Gloucester Times has called for placing education as priority one. Two weeks ago 400 concerned citizens marched in support of public education. Would these events have occurred without school choice? Perhaps, but it had never happened before. School choice has helped focus every community on education.

What are the psychological effects of school choice on sending communities? The effect on morale is more subtle but no less important. On this issue there is some evidence but not conclusions. A number of Gloucester school teachers have made it clear to me that they are hard working, dedicated teachers. The fact is that neither teachers nor the students have failed. In many cases, teachers are doing incredible work with no support in crumbling buildings without adequate supplies. Children are learning, much to their credit. The issue centers not around teacher dedication but ineffective leadership and a failure of so many communities to make education priority one.

While there is much to do, school choice has proven to be a success from every perspective. Most importantly public education is now focused on students and their education. Those who do not get the message that our nation's future rides with our children will see those children leave to seek quality where it is offered. This is as it should be.

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