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## The Case for Student Choice

**T**he three fundamental premises underlying the choice idea are that 1) there is no one best school for everyone, 2) it is necessary to provide diversity in school structure and programs in order to accommodate all students and to enable them to succeed, and 3) students will perform better and accomplish more in learning environments they have freely chosen than in those to which they are simply assigned. All three of these basic premises have gathered empirical support over the last several years.

The need for diversity in order to accommodate the full range of students' requirements and dispositions is strongly suggested in the nation's dropout and failure rates. Dropout figures as high as 75% have been reported in some urban areas for some populations. Yet, documentation of real reversals or turn-arounds by previously unsuccessful and disaffected learners shows that many failures simply need not happen. A number of studies have shown remarkable improvement by low achievers when placed in new and different learning environments – improvement in attitudes toward school and learning, in attendance, in behavior patterns, and in achievement (Foley and McConaughy 1982). Such students have frequently turned from chronic truancy to regular attendance. And they have sometimes achieved multi-year achievement gains, as measured by standardized tests, within a matter of months (Konrad 1979).

An analysis of dropout patterns in Portland, Oregon, showed clearly that the school attended has more to do with whether a student drops out than does the student's economic circumstances or race (Sexton 1985). The data also revealed that students who attend a school of choice have much lower dropout rates than do students assigned to a school. Broadening the opportunity for choice, concludes Sexton, could do much to prevent dropping out. A team studying at-risk students in Chicago reached the same conclusion (Kyle et al. 1986).

For many, the different learning environment appears to be the key. Poignant testimony to this effect comes from the dramatic improvements some youngsters make in an alternative environment, only to revert to their earlier problem behavior patterns on returning to their former school (McCann and Landi 1986). This regression pattern is common in districts that operate short-term alternative programs and assume that, after special remediation, students will function adequately in the "regular" program. Such an assumption leads to classifying students as remediation failures, when actually what has failed is the assumption that we can elicit adequate performance from all in a single environment. What many of these students need is simply a different learning environment. Moreover, it seems clear that having only one alternative to the conventional program does not suffice. The needs of youngsters vary sufficiently that a *variety* of learning environments is necessary if all are to succeed (Ghory 1978; Sinclair and Ghory 1987).

Conventional schools adequately serve students with particular cognitive and personal orientations. They place a premium on the ability to sit still and to learn by listening to the teacher. But such schools do not serve all students well. Perhaps this explains why some school districts have officially classified up to 30% of their boys as "hyperactive" and as many as 35% as learning disabled or brain-damaged (McGuinness 1986). It seems more plausible that many of these students are simply "active learners" described in the literature on learning styles (Reckinger 1987).

As a result of his research on varied learning environments, Robert Fizzell concludes that the very traits enabling students to succeed in one environment would probably result in low performance in another. One type of student has the ability and disposition to work largely independently with minimal interaction and external support along the way (Fizzell 1975). Another type has considerable skill in collaborative activity (Fizzell 1987). Still another achieves best with active learning approaches (Fizzell 1979). Fizzell's findings make a one-best-way approach to schooling, with its uniformity and standardization, both arbitrary and morally questionable. The evidence suggests that if given a choice among a variety of school environments, many more students could succeed.

What researchers have discovered about the power of choice, as well as about learning styles, strongly suggests that students are likely to be more productive in learning environments they choose. The power of choice is confirmed by a series of studies by Barry Fraser. One examined learning outcomes in 116 junior high school classes, with some featuring environments preferred by the students enrolled and others presenting different kinds of environments. This study showed that matching students to preferred learning environments enhances both cognitive and affective outcomes. Fraser goes on to suggest that the person-environment fit eventually may be shown to be just as important to positive learning outcomes as the adequacy of an environment (Fraser 1983).

Stern (1970) hypothesized some years ago that when environmental "press" or demands complement personal needs, student outcomes will be enhanced. Several investigations of schools of choice have since used Stern's work to show the importance of person-environment congruence (Corda 1987; Gluckstern 1974). These and other studies confirm the importance of the particular fit between the individual student and the learning environment.

More direct empirical support for the value of school choice is accumulating. The classic study by Richard Nault (1975) found major

differences in the school commitments of adolescents who had chosen their school compared to those whose parents had done the choosing. His findings have since been replicated by Gary F. Hartman (1980). Robert B. Kottkamp (1979) studied the effects of choice on students who selected the public mini-school they attended compared to others in the same school who did not select it. He also found stronger commitment and higher achievement on the part of the choosers. A number of studies have found student satisfaction levels higher in schools of choice compared to satisfaction levels of students attending schools to which they have been assigned (Livingston 1982; Nicholson 1980).

These several lines of research, then, support the conclusion that there is no single best approach to learning for all youngsters. Therefore, a strong case exists for a diversity of school environments with programs that are aligned with student needs and interests. This underscores the importance of *student* choice.