

'Schools of Choice' would benefit both students and families

By Douglas A. Shafer

Last November at my neighborhood school, when I first heard Tacoma Schools Deputy Superintendent Mary Nebgen describe the proposed development of a plan called "Schools of Choice," I objected strenuously to it. I felt strongly that young elementary children should attend schools in their own neighborhoods. I agreed, though, that offering more educational choices for older children sounded like a good idea.

Viewpoint

I volunteered for the "Schools of Choice" action team, intending to constructively shape the action plan to a form I would find acceptable. I particularly wanted to ensure that no parent would feel compelled to transfer a child from the neighborhood school in order to obtain a sound, basic education.

Upon learning of my appointment, I began spending time at the public library, ex-

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pecting readily to find magazine and journal articles supporting my views. While the Tacoma library system has an excellent microfilm periodicals collection and computerized index system, I was unable to find articles proclaiming the virtues of traditional neighborhood schools. Instead, I kept finding articles proclaiming the virtues of systems which allow parents, students and teachers a variety of choices.

The action team met almost weekly from mid-December through mid-March. There were some other parents, but most of the members were teachers and administrators (though many of them also are parents and often spoke from that perspective). All, I felt, were sincere in their desire to find ways to improve the quality and responsiveness of the educational system.

The discussions were open, and comments often based on personal experiences. I recall one evening claiming that children not attending their neighborhood school would not get to know their neighborhood's children and would be effectively unable to participate in many youth programs such as scouting.

My claim was promptly refuted by other parents whose children were enrolled in

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schools other than their neighborhood school, yet had abundant neighborhood playmates and did participate in such youth programs.

Much of the action team's work occurred in committees. I chose the research committee and continued, using resources available through the district, efforts to locate, obtain and review relevant articles, studies and reports about "choice" programs. Items of particular relevance were shared with the entire team.

During the course of this research, I learned that "choice" programs are being implemented throughout the nation. In 1986, the National Governors' Association recommended, to further student achievement and reduce dropouts, that there be more choice and alternatives within the public school system.

A 1988 report states that at least 23 states have adopted or are considering state programs to promote choice within the public schools. A 1988 article reported a Gallup poll as showing that 71 percent of Americans think that parents should be able to choose which school their children attend.

Business leaders and others advocate competition and choice among public schools, letting "free-market" forces determine which schools fail and which flourish.

Programs implemented elsewhere offering alternative school choices are credited with:

- Increasing student achievement and appreciation of learning.
- Improving parental involvement and satisfaction.
- Reducing dropouts.
- Encouraging racial and economic in-

tegration.

■ Providing extra challenges for students dissatisfied with the conventional program; and

■ Raising the morale of teachers who were allowed to create distinctive programs from which families can choose.

These "choice" programs involve more than just "open enrollment" among similar schools; their schools are intentionally dissimilar. The literature indicates that differences among elementary schools tend mostly to be in the teaching methods employed and in extracurricular programs; differences among upper-level schools tend mostly to be in curriculum content.

Often while reading accounts of successful "choice" schools, I found myself wishing that I could send my children to such a school. I also welcomed the idea of information centers where families could learn about the programs, personnel and performance records of the different schools before choosing one.

Still, I continued to fear adverse developmental consequences of sending young elementary children beyond the bounds of

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their neighborhood. I asked a friend who is a clinical psychologist to check the child development literature to see if my concern was well founded. He did, and advised me that it was not. Another research committee member checked with the school district's psychologist, who reported the same finding. It appears that children in this country for at least half a century have been transported miles from their homes to attend schools without adverse developmental consequences.

While I came to recognize that many parents might thoughtfully choose to send their children to a school beyond their own neighborhood, I continued to believe that children at each and every school should receive a sound, basic education. All members of the action team readily agreed that a central element of our district's "Schools of Choice" plan would be to define the basic core curriculum and ensure that it is presented in each school.

As action team members began to share the vision of families choosing their school from a diverse array of unique, innovative, and responsive schools throughout the district, the reality hit. Both the literature and common sense indicated that unless public transportation were provided, choice would not really be available to a great portion of the

population without the means of provide it privately. Further, the cost of a public transportation network which would permit any child to attend any school in the district would be prohibitive.

The solution we arrived at was the concept of dividing the district into several geographic clusters. Public transportation would be provided to students within the clusters to any of its schools, and each of the most popular types of school programs and orientations would be offered within each cluster.

School programs addressing special needs or desires of students too few in number to support an offering in each cluster would be offered at two or three district-wide "magnet" schools. Transportation would also be provided to the magnet schools, but families choosing neither a school within their cluster nor a magnet school would have to arrange their own transportation.

The action team, itself a racially diverse and socially enlightened group, recognized as a "given" that the plan should promote racial and ethnic diversity within each school. No one needed persuading that children educated in schools whose populations reflect the diversity of the real world become better equipped to cope and lead well-adjusted, socially responsible lives in that world.

The obvious means recognized to do this was to accept transfers into each school not subject just to the limits of the building's capacity, but

to quotas which would ensure the desired ethnic balance within the school. Also, the clusters would be drawn to reflect the desired diversity.

The logical target was a ratio in each school which mirrors the district as a whole. With the belief that transfers would be particularly widespread during the phase-in years, as many families would choose new schools to suit their preferences, the target was presumed to be achievable as long as the schools would sufficiently distinguish themselves to generate widespread choice.

I recall no discussion within the action team of denying anyone admission to their neighborhood school, because I think we all thought the regulation of voluntary transfers would be a sufficient means to produce the desired racial balance.

In my view, the primary reason to implement the "Schools of Choice" plan is that it appears such a program will make the schools more responsive to the diverse needs and desires of the students and families in our community, will enhance the morale and motivation of our educators, and will generally improve the quality of education we provide to our children.

The secondary, but still very important, reason is that it will facilitate racial and ethnic balance within our schools and better prepare our children to live in our heterogeneous society.

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