



INNOVATIONS
IN
EDUCATION



CREATING STRONG
District School Choice Programs

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
OFFICE OF INNOVATION AND IMPROVEMENT



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Foreword

In December 2002, I launched the Office of Innovation and Improvement within the U.S. Department of Education. I charged that office, under the leadership of Nina S. Rees, with promoting promising innovations in education and expanding parental options and information. I understood, even in those early days of the historic *No Child Left Behind Act*, that the law had the potential to set in motion a wave of innovation in our public schools, as teachers, principals, administrators, parents, and others worked to close the achievement gap among different groups of students that has plagued our nation for so many years. I suspected that, under the pressure for improvement created by the law, dedicated professionals would develop all kinds of innovative solutions to difficult problems, and I wanted an office to highlight and disseminate those solutions. And I was committed, as I have been my entire career, to ensuring that parents had a real say in the schooling of their young, as their first and most important teachers.

Fewer than 18 months later, I am proud to introduce the *Innovations in Education* series. These publications, to be released over the next six months, identify concrete, real-world examples of innovations flourishing throughout this great land in six important areas: public school choice, supplemental educational services, charter schools, magnet schools, alternative teacher certification, and school leadership.

We start with what might be the most challenging aspect of *No Child Left Behind*, but also an area of great opportunity: implementation of the law's public school choice provisions. For the past two years, some critics have complained that these provisions are impossible to put into place. Others have said that school districts will simply refuse to comply. Yet, this publication shows that superintendents and districts are indeed fulfilling their responsibilities and making public school choice work for their neediest students. It has not been easy, but the experiences of these districts can inform the work of others. By taking lessons from these case studies, districts can avoid starting from scratch.

To be sure, none of these districts is doing everything 100 percent right. And all of them had a head start, since they had adopted some form of public school choice before the federal law was passed. Surely, the requirement to provide such choice, while in line with America's principles and values, can be difficult to implement logistically. As we learn from this booklet, a strong public school choice program must be integrated into a district's overall strategy. Communication to parents, faculty, and the community must be accurate, consistent, and energetic. Transportation and scheduling challenges must be fully addressed. As a former superintendent, I know that this is no walk in the park.

But the message of this publication is loud and clear: *it can be done*. I sincerely hope that the examples and tools in this booklet—and the expanded resources available online at <http://www.ed.gov/nclb/choice>—will help you to make public school choice a reality in your community.

Rod Paige, U.S. Secretary of Education
May 2004





Introduction

Public school choice—letting parents decide which public school is the best place for their child and allowing and enabling the transfer to that school—is a key strategy in current federal legislation aimed at improving educational outcomes. The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) supports choice through multiple grant programs as well as through the law’s key accountability provisions: school districts with Title I schools deemed to be “in need of improvement” must offer parents an opportunity to move their children to schools that are meeting standards, and districts must pay for the transportation to make this move. These requirements are creating new forms of choice and causing many more districts and schools to grapple with how to implement choice effectively.

Public school choice is not itself a new idea, nor is it unique to NCLB. Districts offer parents choices in order to increase parent involvement, provide different types of learning environments that may better match children’s needs, increase integration of schools, and encourage the creativity of educators, all in the service of improved outcomes for students. Harvard University researcher Carolyn Hoxby has documented that competition from choice improves the quality of education provided across a district.¹ Public opinion polling has shown that the public strongly supports choice. In a 1999 poll by Public Agenda, 88 percent agreed with the statement “Parents should have the right to choose the school they want their child to attend.”²

Districts operate choice programs that include a range of options for parents:

» **Open enrollment:** Parents can choose among schools in a district, or even among districts. Thirty-three states have interdistrict open enrollment laws, and 15 require districts to offer open enrollment.³

» **Controlled choice or magnet schools:** Special-focus schools are designed to attract students and integrate schools; some restrictions are made to balance enrollment. More than 1,350 magnet schools were reported in 1999–2000.⁴

» **Alternative schools:** Designed to provide nurturing environments for students at risk of school failure, these schools enroll some 610,000 students.⁵

» **Concurrent enrollment:** High school students attend college classes and receive both high school and postsecondary credit. Twenty-one states have comprehensive dual enrollment programs.⁶

» **Charter schools:** Public charter schools are run by an independent operator under the oversight of a chartering authority, which may be the school district. Some districts seek charter schools as a way to expand the range of options available to students. As of January 2004, the nation had 2,996 charter schools.⁷

Clearly, public school choice is attractive to many districts as well as to parents. This guide is designed to help districts implement choice options more effectively. It

FIGURE 1. Key Actions to Implement Choice

Action	First Steps	Going Deeper
Help Parents Make Informed Choices	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communicate clearly about NCLB choice options. • Provide personalized follow-up. • Get ahead of the deadlines with NCLB information. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop a multifaceted communications strategy. • Partner with community organizations. • Help parents understand their choices more fully.
Build District Infrastructure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assign and coordinate responsibilities. • Determine space and transportation options. • Build information-processing capacity. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Expand space and transportation options. • Start new schools and programs. • Establish new outreach roles. • Increase community involvement.
Support Schools	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communicate to schools about choice. • Prepare schools to communicate with parents. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Make all schools “schools of choice.” • Support receiving schools. • Help schools market their programs to parents.
Improve Programs Over Time	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Track parent choices and school enrollments. • Survey parents about satisfaction and reasons for choices. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Learn from results. • Follow a strategic plan.

draws on the concrete experiences of five districts that already had a history of implementing choice prior to NCLB. It provides ideas that have been implemented in these districts and elsewhere, as well as relevant research and resources.

First Steps

At the most fundamental level, getting started with choice under NCLB will mean deciding who in the district office needs to do what—beginning with getting the message to parents and managing an enrollment process—on timelines constrained by the availability of state test data. These tasks are likely to be first in the minds of districts implementing choice under NCLB. In addition to more long-range options, this guide offers practical suggestions for “first steps” in each of several areas. (See figure 1 as an outline of the key actions, both initial and long-range, described in this guide.)

Some districts and schools are just learning about the NCLB choice provisions (see figure 2). After a school that receives federal Title I funding fails to make “adequate yearly progress” (AYP) for two consecutive years, that school is defined as “in need of improvement” and required actions set in (see figure 3). Parents must have the option of moving their child to a public school that is meeting standards. After three years missing AYP, the Title I school must offer parents an additional choice—supplemental educational services such as tutoring.* Choice remains an option if the school continues to miss AYP and enters the stages of corrective action or restructuring. (Information about federal resources under NCLB is available at <http://www.ed.gov/nclb/choice/>.)

* A forthcoming guide in this series will cover supplemental educational services.

FIGURE 2. NCLB Choice Requirements

Children are eligible for school choice when the Title I school they attend has not made adequate yearly progress in improving student achievement—as defined by the state—for two consecutive years or longer and is therefore identified as needing improvement, corrective action, or restructuring. Any child attending such a school must be offered the option of transferring to a public school in the district—which may be a public charter school—not identified for school improvement, unless such an option is prohibited by state law. The district (subject to a spending cap in the legislation) must provide transportation to students who decide to change schools under this policy. In addition, children are eligible for school choice when they attend any “persistently dangerous school” or have been a victim on school grounds of a “violent” crime, as defined by the individual state.

[Source: *Questions and Answers on No Child Left Behind*, <http://www.ed.gov/nclb/overview/intro/faqs.html>]

Going Deeper

While districts may launch a public school choice program in order to comply with NCLB requirements, many have found that public school choice is a valuable part of a comprehensive district strategy for systemic change. Districts such as the five profiled in this guide, or others with a history of choice, find compelling reasons to encourage parental choice. Seeking fundamentally to improve student achievement, they see that choice creates a number of benefits that contribute to such achievement, including the following⁸:

FIGURE 3. Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) Timeline

School Year 1	Does not make AYP	
School Year 2	Does not make AYP	
School Year 3	1st year of school improvement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Technical assistance • Public school choice
School Year 4	2nd year of school improvement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Technical assistance • Public school choice • Supplemental educational services

- » increased parent satisfaction,
- » greater parent commitment,
- » distinctive learning environments to meet different needs,
- » more creativity among educators,
- » increased economic and racial integration across schools, and
- » increased organizational coherence.

Districts that embrace choice as part of their overall strategy can integrate NCLB choice into a more comprehensive approach—not “layering it on” but making it part of a coherent program. Districts then have the opportunity to implement their programs over time, developing them more fully, and continuously improving them. They are able to set their own parameters: timelines that allow more deliberate decision-making, broad community involvement in program design, and evaluation data to guide local program improvement.

The examples and practical suggestions in this guide are intended to support thoughtful implementation over time. Key actions are described in the chapters that follow in terms of “First Steps,” followed by suggestions for “Going Deeper” (see figure 1). For example, if getting a clear letter to parents informing them of their NCLB choice options is a first step, then going deeper entails a more diversified communication strategy that might include community fairs, marketing, and targeted personal outreach.

Case Study Sites and Methodology

Five districts are profiled in this guide: Cambridge, Mass.; Desert Sands, Calif.; Mesa, Ariz.; Miami-Dade County, Fla.; and Milwaukee, Wis. Basic statistics about these districts appear in figure 4.

These districts were selected because of their experience with choice. Each provided choice options within the district prior to NCLB. Some, but not all, are recipients of grants under the U.S. Department of Education’s Voluntary Public School Choice program and Magnet Schools Assistance program. In addition, they exist in a broader context of choice: in each district, charter schools authorized by entities other than the district are in operation; both Milwaukee and Miami-Dade have state-funded voucher programs that enable parents to send their children to private schools; Mesa and Miami-Dade are in states that give tax credits for donations to scholarship funds for poor students. (For more information about the context of each district and its history with school choice, see appendix A.)

The experiences of operating choice programs and observing the dynamics of a competitive choice system have taught these districts valuable lessons. Their

FIGURE 4. Demographics of Five Profiled School Districts

	Cambridge, Mass.	Desert Sands, Calif.	Mesa, Ariz.	Miami-Dade County, Fla.	Milwaukee, Wis.
Enrollment	6,750	25,714	74,366	370,000	97,293
Enrollment Trend	Down	Up	Down	Down	Down
Number of Schools	13	27	89	340	223
Population Type	Mid-size central city	Collection of small cities/towns	Urban fringe/suburban	Greater metropolitan area	Large central city
Subsidized Meals	48%	58%	40%	62%	72%
English Language Learners	10%	27%	7%	17%	8%
Special Needs	23%	9%	8%	11%	15%

Note: These data were provided by the school districts and were current as of February 2004.

practices have evolved and been tested over time and can serve as a reference point for others thinking through choice implementation. Yet even with a history of choice, these districts often found the requirements and timelines of NCLB choice to be challenging. They had to set up new enrollment periods and communicate to parents about a new set of options. The number of parents taking up the NCLB option to transfer to another school has sometimes been small, whether because of early implementation challenges, delayed timelines, and incomplete communications, which can be expected to be addressed over time; or because there is little pent-up demand for the options available in these districts, where thousands of parents already exercise choice. These districts, like others, need to gear up to fully promote NCLB choice and

reach out to parents. They are not perfect; their choice initiatives are very much works in progress, but their previous experiences and lessons learned can help others along the road.

These five districts were selected from a larger set of possible sites as part of the benchmarking methodology that underlies this study. Twenty-three districts were identified as potential sites because they were mentioned in previous research on choice or suggested by the advisory group. Existing public data and targeted interviews provided preliminary information about these districts that was used to "screen" sites and identify those that appeared to have practices in place in several key operational areas. For example, they had clearly articulated placement plans, communications


strategies that had evolved over time, and local data that they used to guide improvements.

This exploratory, descriptive study is adapted from the four-phase benchmarking process used by the American Productivity and Quality Center (see appendix B for further details). In benchmarking, organizations analyze their own operations and look to promising practice partners for ideas of specific practices that might help them improve. For this study, an advisory group of researchers and practitioners with expertise in choice helped guide the focus of the study. Their input, together with an examination of research literature and an analysis of NCLB requirements, led to the study scope (see appendix B).


Descriptions of the districts' practices were collected through a combination of individual interviews, conference calls, and one-day site visits. The districts arranged contacts with staff and community members knowledgeable about the study topics and also provided copies of artifacts such as sample letters, plans, pamphlets, schedules, and so forth. Individual case

reports summarized practices and lessons learned in each site; a cross-site analysis organized the findings by topic and revealed common patterns. This guide is adapted from the full research report. Individual district results from specific practices, their rationales for what they did, patterns of consistency across districts, and common sense, along with the initial framework, led to the themes and suggested actions in this guide.

This descriptive research process suggests promising practices—ways to do things that others have found helpful or lessons they have learned about what not to do—and practical, “how-to” guidance. This is not the kind of experimental research that can yield valid causal claims about what works. Readers should judge for themselves the merits of these practices, based on their understanding of why they should work, how they fit the local context, and what happens when they actually try them. Also, readers should understand that these descriptions are not intended to add any requirements beyond what is already in the NCLB statute and regulations.



Help Parents Make Informed Choices



At its heart, public school choice is about giving parents a choice. Parents can ask themselves which school their child should attend with the expectation that their child can attend the school they choose. Under NCLB, districts are required to allow parents to move their child from a Title I school "in need of improvement" to a school that is meeting standards. In districts with choice programs, parents may regularly have a choice among schools with distinctive instructional programs, either within or outside their neighborhoods.

For choice to be effective, parents need information about the schools that are available to them, the characteristics of those schools, how the enrollment process works, and the transportation available. Ultimately, parents will want to think about which school would be best for their child, given a range of educational and personal considerations.

Districts have a responsibility to communicate with parents clearly and fully about school options and to help them make informed choices.

First Steps

COMMUNICATE CLEARLY ABOUT NCLB CHOICE OPTIONS

Mailing a letter home to parents is the most common way to let them know about public school choice under NCLB. Such a letter is a legal requirement of NCLB, and its purpose is to be user-friendly and help parents consider their options based on clear information. This is easier said than done.

Districts naturally face a conflict in communicating about schools in need of improvement. They want to support the schools to improve; in fact, schools must have improvement plans and tell parents about them. On the other hand, districts need to clearly set out parents' option to transfer their child to a school that is already meeting standards. Direct and specific information should explain what the school is doing to improve and what's available in other schools. In the end, it's up to the parents either to give the current school another chance or to transfer to a school that they believe will better meet their child's needs.

Some districts, like Milwaukee, have learned the advantage of breaking the information up into multiple communications and sequencing their release in digestible, user-friendly parcels (see figure 5). This strategy, recommended for communication with the media, can also support clear communication with parents. Notice how Milwaukee's steps are sequenced:

FIGURE 5. NCLB Communication Steps in Milwaukee

Over the year, the district communicates information about NCLB to parents in a variety of ways, first by being clear about the difference between enrollment for choice options independent of NCLB and enrollment related to NCLB. The district also communicates parents' rights under NCLB and the district's obligation to parents. These communications occasion three separate letters:

1. The superintendent sends a letter out before the end of the school year to all families in the district. The page-and-a-half letter tells about the district's efforts to improve achievement and describes what it means to be a "school identified for improvement" (SIFI). The letter alerts parents that the district will publish a list of schools identified for improvement and that parents should check to see whether their child's school is on it. The letter encourages parents to be active partners, become engaged in their schools, and help make a difference. The letter states the district goal that all children be successful.
2. The district distributes a template letter about NCLB that all schools customize and send to their families. In the letter, schools that have already been identified for improvement outline the steps they are taking to improve.
3. When the final list of SIFI for the year is available, parents who send children to those schools are notified and given the option to transfer to another school. Elimination from the SIFI list requires two years of improvement, so schools that have improved are noted but remain on the list. The district provides parents with four to 16 alternative schools from which they choose three as possible choices for their child to attend.

Source: Information from district interviews.

1. General communication about NCLB and accountability,
2. School communications about improvement plans, and
3. Notification of "needs improvement" status and choice options.

Knowledge about NCLB has begun to spread in districts and communities around the country. Media reports as well as district communiqués and the school report cards required by NCLB itself have all funneled information to parents. But it is a complex law, with new terminology and options for parents, so diligent communication is important. Surveys suggest that parents may not know if their child's school has been identified as "in need of improvement."⁹ And it is low-

income parents, those most targeted to benefit from NCLB's accountability provisions, who most depend on communication from the school or district, along with informal networks.¹⁰ Fortunately, parent-friendly resources about NCLB, along with resources about school choice in general, are increasingly available (see appendix C).

To make it easy for parents to understand their NCLB choice options, Milwaukee, for example, provides a frequently-asked-questions document, "My School & Title I Enrollment Option," in addition to the letter and enrollment form they send to parents whose children attend schools required to provide choice under NCLB (see figures 6 and 7 for excerpts from these documents). Because Milwaukee has a variety of choice options, the

district makes an extra effort to clarify how the NCLB choice options fit with others.

Milwaukee's experience adjusting the language it uses to communicate with parents is also instructive. The first year that the district sent parents a letter describing their NCLB choice options, the letter contained legalistic language. The next year it did not. Milwaukee revised the letter to parents to make it more readable, simplifying the language and increasing the type size. Other districts as well have worked to make their communications more parent-friendly. Many districts translate their communications into multiple languages. Miami-Dade, for example, reaches parents in Spanish, English, and Haitian Creole. In Mesa, the district provides schools with a two-column format: English on the left and Spanish on the right, for parallel communication to parents in both groups.

In these letters, one feature that might be emphasized clearly is which schools are eligible as receiving schools. Milwaukee found that parents frequently made invalid choices (selection of a private school, a school outside the transportation zone, or a school itself in need of improvement). Similarly, the Massachusetts survey found that parents expressed interest in a variety of public and private schools and that "a remarkably high percentage" selected other underperforming schools, which were higher-achieving than their own school and more demographically balanced but also in need of improvement.¹¹

Other key features that might be included are details about the application process itself and the deadline by which applications must be received. A survey of 41 districts that belong to the Council of the Great City Schools indicates that parents generally are given at least three weeks to respond, often four or more.¹²

This was true for the five districts in this study as well. Liberal deadlines anticipate possible delays in parents receiving the information and the logistics of providing the help they may need in making a decision.

Many districts take extra steps to be sure that parents get the basic NCLB choice information they need. They send repeat mailings from the district or individual school site, and they give students follow-up notes to take home. Automated phone calls are another option districts have used to communicate with parents directly. Additional common communication tools include parent meetings, Web sites, and advertisements. (Other tools for reaching parents are described in the section on developing a multifaceted communications strategy, page 12.)

PROVIDE PERSONALIZED FOLLOW-UP

Even in the initial stages of reaching parents, the districts in this study added a personal component, having learned as Milwaukee did that "personal contact is the most effective means of communication."

Several of the five districts took advantage of existing parent outreach centers. In Cambridge, parents who wanted to pursue choice were asked to call the Family Resource Center so the liaison could talk directly with them and explain their options more fully. Miami-Dade asked parents to come in to one of the six regional parent access offices.

Districts also reached out proactively. In Milwaukee, Parent Center representatives called or visited those parents who made choices that were not valid or who submitted incomplete forms. Parents were appreciative of the calls and visits, and the district's proactive approach generated greater parent involvement and buy-in.

FIGURE 6. Excerpt from Milwaukee Frequently Asked Questions

My School and the Title I Enrollment Option Questions and Answers 2002–2003

The highest priority for the Milwaukee Public Schools (MPS) and your child's school is to improve student achievement. We have a firm belief that all children can learn and will achieve. The school district is currently engaged in special efforts to improve performance in a group of federally funded Title I schools. Principals, teachers, parents, and staff are working hard to make Improvement for next year and to institute additional educational services and programs in these schools. If your child is enrolled in one of the schools identified for improvement by the state, you have the option of keeping your child enrolled in the current school or seeking enrollment in another public school for the 2002–2003 school year.

MILWAUKEE PUBLIC SCHOOLS

What is my child's current school doing to improve?

MPS has invested significant resources in your child's present school to help improve its academic programs and services. The programs and services now being offered at your child's present school are included in a letter sent to you from the principal.

What is the Title I Enrollment Option, and what does it mean for me?

The Title I Enrollment Option is designed to comply with a provision of a new federal law, entitled the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001. The law provides parents in certain federally funded Title I schools with the option of either keeping their children enrolled in their present school or seeking enrollment in other public schools. This option is only available where the child's present school has been identified as a school in need of improvement by the state, which means that the school has not demonstrated two consecutive years of adequate progress in student academic performance. Almost all MPS schools are Title I funded schools.

Will my child's current school always be in this program?

Not necessarily. The principal, teacher, parents, and staff at your child's school are working hard to improve the academic performance of students. If the school demonstrates that its students are making adequate academic progress for two consecutive years, then it will be removed from the program.

How were we identified for this program?

The Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction identified certain federally funded Title I schools on the basis of lack of adequate progress in student academic achievement, as evidenced by student scores on the Wisconsin Student Assessment System.

How do I apply to enroll my child in another school?

To request that your child be enrolled in another school, parents must complete a Title I Enrollment Option Request Form, which was recently mailed to parents. Additional copies are available at your child's current school. Forms must be completed and returned to the Division of Student Services by September 27, 2002. Please note that no applications will be accepted after September 27, 2002.

If I complete the form, what school would my child attend?

Depending on space availability, even if you request to enroll your child in another school, your child may stay at the current school in the 2002-2003 school year. If you make a request and your request is granted, your child will attend a school in your transportation zone that has space available. You were sent a list of schools that may be available in your child's transportation zone. If you request a transfer, there is no assurance that your child will be selected to attend one of these schools. This is the group of schools from which MPS will attempt to make seats available to meet transfer requests from your child's current school.

FIGURE 7. Milwaukee Parent Letter and NCLB Transfer Request Form

Believe it ~ Achieve it!
MILWAUKEE PUBLIC SCHOOLS



Dear Parent/Guardian:

July 11, 2003

Your child's school has been designated by the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction as a *School Identified for Improvement*. This designation alone does not indicate a failing school, but provides a focus on areas for school improvement by principals, teachers, and parents. Identified schools then become eligible for additional support from the district and state as they work to improve teaching and learning, attendance, graduation, or participation in testing.

Under the federal No Child Behind Act of 2001, when a school is designated as a *School Identified for Improvement* by the state, parents have the options of:

- remaining at the school and actively participating in the school improvement process,
- remaining at the school and applying for after-school supplemental services, or
- seeking enrollment in one of the designated schools listed below.

Based on your child's current grade level and address, the following are schools that may be available in your child's transportation area. While all parents will have the opportunity to indicate whether they want their children transported to other schools, there is no guarantee that all children will be able to attend other schools. Furthermore, if a school has entrance requirements, enrollment will be dependent on your child meeting these requirements. If you would like more information about any of these schools, you are encouraged to contact the principal at your child's current school, the Division of Student Services at 475-8448, or the Division of Teaching and Learning at 475-8346.

Holmes Elementary, 2643 North Buffum Street, 267-1300
Keefe Avenue Elementary, 1618 West Keefe Avenue, 267-4400
LaFollette Elementary, 3239 North Ninth Street, 267-5200
Lee Elementary, 921 West Meinecke Avenue, 267-1700
Milwaukee Leadership Training Center, 1501 South Layton Blvd., 384-8081

Northern Star, 8135 West Florist Avenue, 393-6782
Story, 3815 West Kilbourn Avenue, 934-4800
Victory, 2222 West Henry Avenue, 304-6700
Webster, 6850 North 53rd Street, 393-5900
Wings Academy, 1501 South Layton Boulevard, 437-1356

If your child's application to enroll in another school is approved, the school district will provide transportation services based on the district's transportation guidelines.

We have worked very hard to improve the academic achievement of all of our students, and are initiating a variety of changes at the district and school levels to support academic achievement. We have demonstrated that the classroom is the most important place in our district, and we are working hard to support our families, teachers, and principals as they improve teaching and learning for all children.

If you choose to apply for a transfer, detach the bottom portion of this letter and return it to MPS. The address is on the reverse side and postage is included. We must receive your response no later than July 25, 2003. If you need assistance or have questions, please call the Division of Student Services at 475-8448 or the Division of Teaching and Learning at 475-8346.

Sincerely,

Chief of Pupil Services

(SEE REVERSE SIDE FOR MORE INFORMATION)

Detach bottom portion and return to Milwaukee Public Schools. Address is listed on the reverse side. Postage is included.

NO CHILD LEFT BEHIND ACT TRANSFER REQUEST FORM

PLEASE NOTE: There is **no guarantee** that your child will be able to enroll in another school if you submit this form. The number of seats at each receiving school is limited and applications will be approved only if space is available and students meet any entrance requirements that the school may have. Students who have low test scores and low income will have priority. Submitting this form indicates your preference to have your child enrolled in another school. **Your response is due** by July 25, 2003.

- I request that my child be considered for transfer to the following school, based on space availability.

1st Choice: _____

2nd Choice: _____



Milwaukee Public Schools

– If you wish to have your child stay at his/her current school, NO RESPONSE IS NECESSARY. –

Parent/Guardian Name (please print)

Student Name (please print)

Parent/Guardian Signature

Date

Telephone Number

In Desert Sands, the timeline was particularly difficult, as summer notification may have missed parents who left the desert to escape the heat. So, teachers called parents at the end of the summer to be sure they had received and understood the NCLB choice information.

GET AHEAD OF THE DEADLINES WITH NCLB INFORMATION

The timelines for NCLB choice are driven by each state's release of accountability data—often in the summer, sometimes even later.¹³ For their regular choice programs, districts typically have winter or spring enrollment periods for the following fall. NCLB requires districts to set up additional, special enrollment periods later in the year.

As noted, to get ahead of the curve, Milwaukee established a series of communication steps, beginning with general information about NCLB (see figure 5). Cambridge uses a “nuts and bolts” pamphlet created by the Title I Dissemination Project from state information and also provides the U.S. Department of Education publication, *No Child Left Behind: A Parents Guide*.

In Miami-Dade, the district even notifies parents about the *possibility* that a school will miss AYP for two years in a row. The district sends a letter to parents in the spring that prepares them and asks them to make tentative plans for selecting another school. This early notification offers another opportunity to contact and work with parents, and it helps streamline the transfer process should parents want to transfer their child.

Among the districts surveyed by the Council of the Great City Schools, nine informed parents about their options for 2003–04 before the end of the previous school year, and all of them, including Miami-Dade, were districts that had an open enrollment or “controlled choice” plan

in place and made an educated guess about who would be eligible to transfer to a different school.¹⁴

Going Deeper

DEVELOP A MULTIFACETED COMMUNICATIONS STRATEGY

The forms of communication used to spread the word about choice programs have increased over the years. Districts report using all of the following techniques:

- » advertisements in the Yellow Pages of the phone book,
- » articles and ads in local newspapers,
- » ads on billboards and buses,
- » public service announcements on radio and TV,
- » a brochure that profiles the district's schools,
- » individual school newsletters or brochures,
- » a pamphlet that describes the enrollment options,
- » movie theater advertisements,
- » refrigerator magnets,
- » community or townhall meetings,
- » school open houses,
- » booths at local malls,
- » an exposition sponsored by local businesses,
- » a choice fair, and
- » participation in ethnic fairs.

The New York City Department of Education has posted first-class mail and placed automated phone calls in 10 languages, sent flyers home, convened regional information sessions, involved some 20 community-based organizations in reaching parents, provided materials at local PTA meetings, established a hotline, set up a special Web site, and placed ads in community newspapers.¹⁵

Marketing is an important adjunct to the magnet program being implemented in Desert Sands. The district recruits students for its three new magnet schools, paying special attention to achieving racial and economic diversity. The marketing team creates radio

FIGURE 8. Desert Sands Movie Theater Advertisement



spots, movie theater and television commercials, brochures, and other items in both Spanish and English (see figure 8). Every other Saturday during the enrollment period, staff go to malls in the district's primarily Hispanic neighborhood to meet prospective students. Other marketing events include activities at designated receiving schools, school tours, parent-to-parent communication, and sessions at designated sending sites, which help parents understand that the programs offered to their children are free as is the transportation

to attend them. People with the necessary language skills are on hand to respond to parent questions at every event. The marketing team also participates in the area's two business expositions. Business leaders help by communicating about the magnet program to their employees and to the community as a whole.

PARTNER WITH COMMUNITY ORGANIZATIONS

Community-based organizations are essential partners in communicating with parents about the school choices

FIGURE 9. Community-Based Support for NCLB

Several organizations received federal grants to enhance their support of communication about NCLB, especially the choice and supplemental educational services provisions. These and other organizations network to increase information flow:

Black Alliance for Educational Options (BAEO) - <http://www.baeo.org>

Project Clarion, a communications and media campaign, is designed to educate parents about NCLB, especially in cities with high concentrations of low-income black families and schools in need of improvement as identified by the state education agency (Detroit, Philadelphia, Milwaukee, and Dallas).

Hispanic Council for Reform and Educational Options (Hispanic CREO) - <http://www.hcreo.org>

Project CREO is designed to reach out to five urban communities in three states with high concentrations of Hispanic students (Miami; Austin, Dallas, and San Antonio; and Camden, N.J.). The project will establish parent, community, and school resource operations, and will develop Spanish-language communications tools and disseminate the information through Spanish-language communications outlets.

Greater Educational Opportunities Foundation (GEO) - <http://www.geofoundation.org>

GEO assists with parent outreach and communication about NCLB, especially in Colorado and Indiana.

available to them. People often receive and trust information more readily when it comes from their networks and those they know. Faith-based organizations, civic groups, business partners, local education funds, affinity groups, and the like can all help get the word out. Not only district partnerships but also individual school partnerships should be tapped.

In Milwaukee, for example, the Black Alliance for Educational Options (BAEO) sponsored radio ads and operated a telephone hotline when NCLB choice was first introduced. (See figure 9 for more about such community resources.)

In Miami-Dade, a coalition of private companies funded a parent guide about the district's various programs and choice options. Printed in English, Spanish, and Haitian

Creole, 500,000 copies of the 72-page guide have been delivered to almost every household in the district.¹⁶

HELP PARENTS UNDERSTAND THEIR CHOICES MORE FULLY

As challenging as it is to get basic choice information to parents, it's an even greater challenge to help them think through what the choices mean to them and how to evaluate what's best for their child.

As noted, both Cambridge and Miami-Dade ask parents to contact the district resource center if they are interested in exercising their NCLB choice option. The districts reason that if parents can talk over their questions with someone knowledgeable, they will make better choices for their children.

It is important to balance support for more deliberate decision-making with ease of access. If parents have to go somewhere or do something that they see as a burden, then these steps can become a barrier to exercising choice. Districts should work to build parents' familiarity with and trust in these assistance providers and monitor parents' reactions to the resources that are provided. Sometimes a simple and direct approach is most effective.

As part of its regular choice enrollment process, Cambridge goes deeper, and encourages parents to take tours of the schools, observe carefully, and ask questions. For parents of prospective kindergarten students who may not know what to look for, the Family Resource Center has created a checklist of things to observe and questions to ask (see figure 10). These questions are intended to be parent-friendly and are specific to visiting Cambridge kindergarten classes. Other information about school achievement, teacher quality, and the research basis for instructional programs would also be of interest to parents.

Parents considering school options may find help in a booklet from the U.S. Department of Education, *Choosing a School for Your Child*. This planner includes brief descriptions of different types of schools and a checklist of questions to guide the search, school visit, and decision-making process. This booklet will be available

beginning in June 2004 from ED Pubs, the U.S. Department of Education's distribution center. See page ii for contact information.

Educators understand that parents make school choices based on a number of factors. Studies confirm that all parents want an environment in which their children can learn well.¹⁷ They consider academics and then factors like size, safety, location, and the desire to keep siblings together while meeting their individual needs. Many parents prefer to keep their children close by; others may find greater safety in sending them out of a dangerous neighborhood. Parents may be influenced by both their individual experiences with the present school and the choices they are offered. A study of early NCLB choice in Montgomery County, Maryland,¹⁸ found that the number and demographics of receiving schools were important factors.

For some parents, the NCLB remedy of supplemental educational services (SES), such as free tutoring, makes it more attractive to keep their child at a school in need of improvement than to choose a new school. (Given the isolation of some rural schools, SES may be the only feasible option.) [Supplemental educational services is the subject of another forthcoming guide in this series, *Creating Strong Supplemental Educational Services (SES) Programs*.]

SUMMARY FOR Help Parents Make Informed Choices

First Steps

- Communicate clearly about NCLB choice options.
- Provide personalized follow-up.
- Get ahead of the deadlines with NCLB information.

Going Deeper

- Develop a multifaceted communications strategy.
- Partner with community organizations.
- Help parents understand their choices more fully.

FIGURE 10. Cambridge Kindergarten Tour Checklist

What to Look for/ Hear about	Check off if answered
In the classrooms:	<input type="checkbox"/>
Were children engaged in learning activities, discussions with teachers, or each other?	<input type="checkbox"/>
Did you see examples of printed text around the room?	<input type="checkbox"/>
Was artwork displayed in and outside of the classroom?	<input type="checkbox"/>
Were Math manipulatives (blocks, patterns) out for the children to use?	<input type="checkbox"/>
Does the school participate in the Literacy Program?	<input type="checkbox"/>
Did you see evidence of the Workboard and was the concept explained to you?	<input type="checkbox"/>
Were play areas established around the room?	<input type="checkbox"/>
Did you feel the children were happy?	<input type="checkbox"/>
Around the building:	<input type="checkbox"/>
Did you feel welcome in the building?	<input type="checkbox"/>
Before you began the tour, was what you were going to see explained to you?	<input type="checkbox"/>
Did you meet with an administrator?	<input type="checkbox"/>
Did you get all your questions answered, and if not, were you encouraged to call the school?	<input type="checkbox"/>
Did you see the gym, library, art room, auditorium, music room, computer lab, and cafeteria?	<input type="checkbox"/>
Did you hear about the Breakfast/Lunch program?	<input type="checkbox"/>
Were the after school programs discussed and material given to you about them?	<input type="checkbox"/>
Additional questions you may have:	<input type="checkbox"/>
	<input type="checkbox"/>



Build District Infrastructure

Being ready to communicate effectively requires a great deal of behind-the-scenes preparation. Staff across many departments are involved in gathering information and making decisions about space, assignment options, transportation, and the like. Establishing effective procedures and integrating NCLB choice into existing operations come first. Then, as districts expand choice options, new programs and structures may be called for.

First Steps

ASSIGN AND COORDINATE RESPONSIBILITIES

The sheer logistics of NCLB choice can themselves be daunting. In Miami-Dade, for example, 12 different departments coordinate aspects of the district's NCLB plan. The district's plan is more than 40 pages long, with an implementation timeline that takes up four pages alone (see figure 11).

NCLB operations in Miami-Dade are the responsibility of the School Choice and Parental Options (SCPO) unit in the central office. First organized in 1997 by the Miami-Dade County Public School Board as the Division of Schools of Choice, this umbrella office provided oversight and implementation of the various school choice programs. NCLB choice was naturally housed there as well.

Of course, the vast majority of districts do not operate on the same scale as Miami-Dade, and many will be scrambling to find staff who can assume responsibility for NCLB. While there is a risk that a specialized new

division may take on a life of its own, the more common challenge will be to decide how to assign the new responsibilities to current staff. Districts often turn NCLB over to their Title I personnel. Yet if choice, or any other new assignment, is added to a long list of responsibilities, staff may become overloaded. They may manage immediate compliance requirements but then have limited capacity to plan for broader possibilities or to orchestrate new systems that would facilitate going deeper.

Deciding how to assign new responsibilities for NCLB and how to restructure other duties should be predicated upon fully developed plans that identify the tasks that need to be accomplished. It may be a small comfort, but recognizing the trade-offs of different assignment decisions can help administrators and their staffs cope with them.

Wherever NCLB coordination responsibility is housed, it is important to inform all district staff of where that is. Parents may contact the district at different entry points. They need to be directed efficiently to the NCLB authority.

FIGURE 11. Miami-Dade NCLB Implementation Timeline (page 1 of 4)

Miami-Dade County Public Schools NO CHILD LEFT BEHIND IMPLEMENTATION TIMELINE			
Timeline (on or about)	Task/ Assignment	Responsible Office	Contact Person
First Week of December	Identify personnel to monitor and implement NCLB as needed.	• Education	Ms. Toural
		• Information Technology Services (ITS)	Ms. Karcher
First Week of February	Identify new issues to be addressed in the district's NCLB Implementation Plan and incorporate these changes into the NCLB Implementation Timeline	• Instructional Operations	Dr. Koonce
		• SCPO	Mr. Bell & Mrs. Zarraluqui
First Week of February	Update schools (elementary, middle, and senior high) that will be assigned to each NCLB geographic zone.	• School Board Attorney	Mr. Brown
		• Instructional Operations	Ms. Bass
Mid February	Conduct an analysis of the NCLB zones and make any adjustments as warranted.	• SCPO	Mr. Bell & Mrs. Zarraluqui
		• School Board Attorney	Dr. Koonce
First Week of March	Seek appropriate approval of any adjustments to the NCLB geographic zones.	• Instructional Operations	Mr. Brown
		• SCPO	Ms. Bass
First Week of April	Update plan to distribute NCLB information to potential eligible parents and other community stakeholders.	• Instructional Operations	Dr. Koonce
		• SCPO	Mr. Bell & Mrs. Zarraluqui
First Week of April	Revise NCLB student application/admission process as needed. Include criteria for student assignment.	• Prepare parent letter and postcard	Mr. Villafaña
		• Prepare purchase order for printing and mailing	Ms. Karcher
First Week of April	Revise NCLB student application/admission process as needed. Include criteria for student assignment.	• Prepare press packet	Dr. Koonce
		• Prepare mailing data disks	Dr. Koonce
First Week of April	Revise NCLB student application/admission process as needed. Include criteria for student assignment.	• Notify affected ACCESS Center Superintendents and Principals	Dr. Koonce
		• Attendance Services	Dr. Leyva
First Week of April	Revise NCLB student application/admission process as needed. Include criteria for student assignment.	• Instructional Operations	Dr. Koonce
		• Instructional Operations	Dr. Koonce

DETERMINE SPACE AND TRANSPORTATION OPTIONS

Where to put the children eligible to move is a major question for everyone involved in a transfer. While some of the districts studied have space because of declining enrollments, others have growing enrollment or are already crowded. And the most desirable schools are most often at capacity.

Lack of capacity at the district level can't be used as a reason to deny transfers. Every student enrolled in a Title I school in need of improvement, corrective action, or restructuring who wishes to transfer to a school meeting standards must have that opportunity. Districts have to establish for each family two or more choices that have enough capacity overall to handle the anticipated transfers.¹⁹

The inability to move children into the highest-achieving schools because of facilities limitations has been a challenge for Milwaukee Public Schools. In order to create options and communicate them accurately to parents, the district created a team that involves facilities and maintenance staff; administrative specialists (who evaluate principals and are knowledgeable about how schools run); the database supervisor; and the administrator responsible for staffing, enrollment, and strategic planning related to school capacity. The team spent two months determining exactly how many students each school could take.

Several of the districts give priority within their existing choice arrangements to students transferring under NCLB choice, either in initial placement decisions or on waiting lists.

Decisions about which school choices to offer to which students depend not only on space but also on

transportation. Several of the districts have established transportation zones to facilitate shorter bus routes and provide choices within the zones. During the last few years, for example, Milwaukee has divided the city into three regions (north, central, and south) for the programs for which they provide transportation: Chapter 220 and citywide specialty schools. The intent is to reduce costs by limiting the distance students travel. The district transports students only to contiguous zones, so students in the north and south zones can choose schools within their own zones and the central zone, and students in the central zone can choose from all three zones.

Miami-Dade has six transportation zones, but the district created a new set of three larger zones for NCLB choice. Several factors were considered in defining zones that would provide a complementary set of schools (see figure 12).

Other transportation strategies were also reported by the study districts:

- » compensation to parents for transportation when their child is geographically isolated, has special needs, or may be the only student transferring to a specific school,
- » tokens for students using city or county buses,
- » small vans in addition to larger buses, and
- » staggered start times for schools.

In some districts, students choose to travel to a more distant school if the bus stop is closer to their home than is the bus stop of the nearest school, or if walking to school takes students through what parents consider an unsafe neighborhood.

FIGURE 12. Miami-Dade NCLB Transfer Factors and Zones (page 1 of 4)

I. NO CHILD LEFT BEHIND - TRANSFERS

Students have the inherent right to be afforded equal access to quality educational experiences, regardless of socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds. Therefore, as part of the district's plan, three geographic zones have been established. The map delineating the No Child Left Behind choice zones is included as Appendix B. In the development of the three zones, the following factors were taken into consideration:

1. proximity of schools that have met Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) objectives;
2. length of student transportation times;
3. sufficient numbers of alternate public school choices with available space;
4. feeder pattern integrity; and
5. diverse demographics.

For purposes of the No Child Left Behind Public School Choice Implementation Plan, schools within each zone will participate in the transfer process based on their AYP status and their capacity. That is, students from designated Title I schools that fail to meet AYP for two consecutive years will be provided the opportunity to transfer to public schools within their zone that have met AYP objectives and have a percentage of utilization of permanent and relocatable capacity of 115% or less.

A. No Child Left Behind Choice Zones are:

- North Choice Zone
- Central Choice Zone
- South Choice Zone

The following table reflects the socioeconomic student distribution by No Child Left Behind Choice Zone as of June 2003:

Choice Zones	Free/Reduced Lunch
North	71%
Central	71%
South	55%

MIAMI-DADE COUNTY PUBLIC SCHOOLS

BUILD INFORMATION-PROCESSING CAPACITY

In Desert Sands, the district has recently moved to build its capacity to manage student records and track student progress. In addition to having developed a sophisticated database of student demographics and test scores, the district is working to improve its ability to monitor the progress of students who transfer into and out of the district's magnet programs.

An integrated student database that includes charter schools affords Miami-Dade the opportunity to closely track its students and use patterns and trends in student movement to inform charter-authorizing and program-creation decisions. Transfers are also facilitated by having an integrated system; when a student is registered at a charter school, he or she is immediately dropped from the roll of the traditional school.

Going Deeper

EXPAND SPACE AND TRANSPORTATION OPTIONS

With time, districts need to take up the challenge to find more space for popular programs or to use space differently. According to NCLB, lack of capacity can't be used to deny choice, but beyond this requirement, maximizing the use of space is a logical response to what parents value and seek for their children. For example, high-demand schools may re-purpose some of their rooms or get more portable classrooms.

Miami-Dade has made extensive use of portables. Denver created seven additional classrooms for incoming students in its two most-chosen schools by opening teacher lounges and resource rooms as classrooms.

Districts also continue to explore effective transportation strategies. The transportation patterns described

earlier often evolve over time to better accommodate the districtwide choice and enrollment patterns.

Desert Sands, for example, continues to explore transportation solutions to its problem of major congestion because only two major thoroughfares serve the cities in its valley. The district recently purchased two vans to supplement its yellow buses. Federal funds can be used for this purpose. To develop additional solutions, the district is studying transportation strategies adopted by Hillsborough County (Tampa, Fla.) and is considering other options.

Currently, Desert Sands accommodates student transfers on an individual basis, which results in some busing routes that are not cost-effective. The district would like to move to a system of districtwide pick-up points, as Hillsborough does. Discussions are under way to determine the best way to implement this change, including parent notification of the new policy, for the 2004–05 school year.

As they work through transportation challenges, districts recognize that it is worth the effort since the result is to enable parents to take advantage of the choices that have been carefully crafted for them.

START NEW SCHOOLS AND PROGRAMS

NCLB choice patterns are but one source of information about parent preferences that can drive the creation of new schools or programs. Ultimately, a district can create a diverse set of schools to address different needs and interests, making each school a "school of choice." District-authorized charter schools, magnet schools, specialized schools within a school, alternative schools, or new community schools all offer an opportunity to increase the supply of quality schools and

the options available to parents. Charter schools that operate independently from the district can also help increase capacity.

Mesa is one district that has responded to parent preferences and created new schools, in part due to pressure from local charter schools. An initial Benjamin Franklin back-to-basics school, itself created because of parent interest, was so popular that over time three more were established. Natural indicators, like the number of requests or the size of a waiting list, and special measures, like a parent survey, are used to gauge areas of interest.

Miami-Dade is concentrating on bringing successful programs to schools with low enrollment through its federal Voluntary Public School Choice program grant. The underenrolled status of some of its schools gives the district an opportunity to address facility needs. In addition to refurbishing schools to make them more attractive to parents, the district will be able to change existing facilities into new and innovative centers of learning. For example, district curriculum supervisors will be assigned to schools designated as professional development laboratory schools, providing targeted, on-site expertise for teachers and students, while at the same time easing space demands in the crowded administration building.

When a new Miami-Dade school became available in 2003, it was projected to be severely underenrolled. At the same time it had a potentially attractive location just west of the downtown business corridor. The district gave the school an international education theme, attractive to many families in this cosmopolitan community, and eliminated attendance boundaries. Parents drop students off on their way to work, and students

from outside the district are also welcome to attend Miami-Dade's first "commuter school."

ESTABLISH NEW OUTREACH ROLES

The earlier sections on helping parents make informed decisions emphasized the importance of the personal element in outreach efforts. The local school is important in the communication process because parents often trust most their children's teachers, the staff they know personally. In addition, districts found it helpful to establish new roles or even new units that focused specifically on outreach.

The Cambridge district's Family Resource Center is the hub of all district communication with parents. In addition to providing school-related outreach and assistance, the center helps families with a range of social services (see figure 13). In Mesa, where students speak 59 different languages, district liaisons visit new families in their homes to help them transition into the school system.

Milwaukee has three parent resource centers, two funded from the district's Title I allocation and one from the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) allocation. Staff in these Title I parent centers help parents resolve complaints and concerns, linking them to appropriate district departments or to the school principals, as needed. The parent centers are also a resource for parents seeking school-choice or tutoring information. Last summer the centers mobilized to call, meet with, and advise all parents who mailed in inappropriate choice requests.

Miami-Dade recently transformed its six regional offices from administrative operational offices to public access centers. Each center has an advocacy director, whose job is to be responsive to student needs and act

FIGURE 13. Cambridge Family Resource Center

The Family Resource Center in Cambridge, Mass., is the hub of district communication with families. With a districtwide choice program, the center helps parents choose schools and make NCLB transfers. In addition, principals refer families to the center if they need housing assistance or help accessing social programs. Center staff take a holistic view of district families and assess their needs accordingly.

Everyone who registers for school comes through the doors of the resource center. Originally, it was simply a registration center, where students were assigned schools, but its mandate has grown. It serves at least 700 new families per year and provides information and support for those already enrolled. It facilitates all transfers, and staff counsel parents regarding their choice options. Center staff encourage parents to visit schools and provide them with printed guidelines to help them evaluate their school visits. Also, a brochure explaining NCLB is available at the center. To increase the number of parents who take advantage of the center, its director goes into the community and makes presentations. Targeting kindergarten admissions, the director visits Head Start programs and other day-care facilities, providing details about the different programs at different schools and informing parents about the choices available to them.

Source: Interviews with district staff.

as an information clearinghouse. The regional offices also serve as a resource on school choice and transfers. The parent notification letters for NCLB choice direct parents to contact the public access centers.

Desert Sands locates its outreach role at individual school sites. Other districts also have school staff with responsibility for outreach, as will be discussed later.

INCREASE COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT

Districts in this study have formalized ways for parents to be actively involved in community planning and direction-setting.

Desert Sands involves stakeholders in district planning through surveys and by inviting them to serve on two

types of committees. The district's strategic planning committee draws about a third of its 35 members from the local business community. Schools' education specifications committees are responsible for developing programs and writing curricula. One such committee is already planning for the new pre-medical/pre-law high school the district will open in 2006. It was information gathered in a parent survey along with community dialogue, for example, that revealed interest in this specialized program.

For 20 years, the Miami-Dade school-board-sanctioned Schools of Choice Advisory Committee has supported the district. The committee plays a key role in promoting greater understanding of the district's goals for magnet

programs and schools, encourages community involvement, analyzes special program needs, ensures equity and quality of education for all sectors of the diverse Miami-Dade community, and makes recommendations for program expansion to the superintendent. Recently, the committee's mandate was revised to incorporate a broader definition of "choice," one that includes charter schools and other initiatives.

Members of the advisory committee include representatives of the school board, the PTA, choice school

principals, satellite learning center representatives, exceptional student education representatives, the teachers' union, colleges and universities, and a group that addresses biracial and tri-ethnic issues.

The advisory committee usually meets monthly and discusses a range of topics concerning choice in Miami-Dade, such as how the district is sharing best practices, the status of upcoming magnet fairs, and how to increase representation of Hispanic students in the magnet program.

SUMMARY FOR Build District Infrastructure	
First Steps	Going Deeper
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Assign and coordinate responsibilities.• Determine space and transportation options.• Build information-processing capacity.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Expand space and transportation options.• Start new schools and programs.• Establish new outreach roles.• Increase community involvement.



Support Schools



While choice is administered as a district program, parents experience it at the school level. Districts create the conditions so that all schools can meet standards and so that all students attend good schools that work for them. In any choice program, it is important to focus on what schools need to know and do. Under NCLB, this means two things: bringing schools into the communication loop and helping schools respond to accountability demands.

Because schools are critical to effective communication with parents, districts want to be sure that school staff can represent NCLB clearly. To parents, the face of the education system is the teacher or principal they know. New immigrant parents, who constitute an important part of the parent group that NCLB choice needs to reach, may have very little knowledge of the school district and understand only their child's school building and the people they see there. Even with the kinds of district outreach roles described earlier, the school is an essential communication link.

First Steps

COMMUNICATE TO SCHOOLS ABOUT CHOICE

To assist with NCLB communication, schools first need to know about NCLB and their and the district's role in it. Many districts implemented communication plans to inform principals and faculty about their roles and responsibilities under the NCLB act. One district held a full-day, in-service meeting with the principals to explain the law, how their schools were affected, issues they should focus on in formulating required site improvement plans, and talking points they should use to communicate with others.

Milwaukee makes sure teachers are educated about school choice. Communication paths lead to schools and to teachers directly. Teachers learn about NCLB in a variety of ways:

- » **Through the principal.** The primary vehicle for communication from the district office to the schools is a weekly administrators' bulletin. The district also communicates with principals during monthly meetings.
- » **Through literacy coaches.** In each school, these school staff members lead the school's learning teams. District administrators communicate with the literacy coaches during their twice-a-month training at the district level. The literacy coaches are able to supplement the NCLB information provided by principals.
- » **Through meetings.** Communication about NCLB is included in teacher meetings.
- » **Through workgroups.** Teachers are members of workgroups that address specific reform issues requiring focused attention. Workgroup topics have included attracting highly qualified teachers, report cards, school transfers, parental involvement, and school safety. Workgroups meet periodically to discuss best practices, to understand

how to follow state and federal laws, and to address compliance issues.

PREPARE SCHOOLS TO COMMUNICATE WITH PARENTS

Many of the districts prepare sample letters for the schools to send to parents, both about their school improvement efforts and about choice options.

In Milwaukee, each school on the "schools identified for improvement" list handled itself differently. The district worked with the schools to help them reach out to parents and include parents in the reform process. Improvement schools were notified two days before they were identified in a state press release, and in some of these schools teachers organized a telephone chain to notify parents about the designation before they read it in the newspaper.

A particularly difficult issue is helping schools provide balanced information to parents, as discussed earlier. Of course, school staff want to communicate to parents about the positive steps they are taking to make the school better, and they should do so. That's an important part of the school improvement process that NCLB is promoting. At the same time, parents may naturally turn to the familiar school site for information about their options to transfer, and schools need to be evenhanded in providing this information. Districts should equip schools with clear and specific information and encourage them to help parents understand their choice options.

In Mesa, school staff understand that choosing a school is an emotional as well as an academic decision. As part of their ongoing choice program, principals and teachers are trained to help parents decide which program would be right for a child. For example, they are

knowledgeable about which schools provide the most structure, and they can describe schools that feature programs that allow students to spend two years with the same teacher.

Going Deeper

MAKE ALL SCHOOLS "SCHOOLS OF CHOICE"

The superintendent of a mainstream school district once commented that each of his schools needed to be a "school of choice"—a school that parents wanted their child to attend. Rather than bemoan competition or hold parents at arms length with "professional expertise," he saw the value of proactive communication from each school about its strengths and distinctive programs. The reporting requirements of NCLB further encourage communicating this kind of comprehensive and meaningful information.

The districts in this study have developed an array of options, including alternative schools, magnet schools, and charter schools. Miami-Dade, for example, has 31 charter schools and 71 different magnet programs or schools, which have special emphases in careers and professions, communications and humanities, international education, math/science/technology, visual and performing arts, and Montessori methods. The district makes these choices available within *each* of six transportation zones.

Earlier sections of this guide provide additional examples and suggestions about expanding school choices.

SUPPORT RECEIVING SCHOOLS

Schools that take in students transferred under NCLB may need support to deal with associated responsibilities. Often, the students they receive, especially

students from high-poverty environments, need extra help that their new schools will have to provide. Receiving schools worry that their own test scores, high enough to meet AYP, will be brought down by lower-performing students. Both moral support and strategic assistance from the district are called for.

Desert Sands, with its magnet program, provides an example of how to support schools that take on a new student base. Principals in high-achieving schools, the Voluntary Public School Choice schools, felt threatened by school choice because they received students who they thought would bring test scores down. When the students arrived, attitudes changed. Principals saw educating these new students as a challenge, and they hired tutors. The schools' test scores did not decrease but have actually increased over the last four years.

The full-time site coordinators in Desert Sands magnet schools are key to their progress. Site coordinators, who are often teachers who have switched into the role, follow up with transfer students at regular intervals to make sure they are transitioning smoothly and adjusting to their new schools. Site coordinators are also responsible for related budgeting and administration, and for peer coaching. Some report feeling underprepared for such a range of roles, even though the district provides training and professional development.

HELP SCHOOLS MARKET THEIR PROGRAMS TO PARENTS

For many school administrators, marketing their programs to parents is a new challenge. This is another area where the district can provide assistance.

The Cambridge district's *Schools at a Glance* publication, a slick 20-page brochure that can also be found on the

district Web site [<http://www.cpsd.us/>], has a feature on each school and also clearly outlines registration requirements and choice options, along with district policies for transportation and food services.

Recent school consolidation in Cambridge has delayed plans to hire a marketing professional to work with underchosen schools, but in at least one instance, parents themselves have become active in marketing the school. When the school made program changes, some parents were upset and left the school, but others remained involved and helpful. In 2002, parent volunteers created a brochure to attract prospective students. Also, a school psychologist and a third-grade teacher started an international parent group. And a parent liaison meets with prospective parents to provide tours of the school and introduce parents to the principal. Parents have also created a school Web site to promote the school's vision and activities.

Desert Sands has also worked on marketing. In 1996, when the district first considered magnet schools, some teachers and principals were concerned about how competition might affect schools in low-income areas. The first magnet school was not built in a low-income neighborhood, but marketing for the school targeted high-achieving, low-income students. The principal of a primarily low-income school worried that the loss of these high-achieving children would ruin his school. In response, the district, including the marketing team, worked with his school to create a program that increased its attractiveness to affluent, high-achieving students. According to a district representative, competition has been good, raising the bar for everyone—including the district administration.

SUMMARY FOR Support Schools

First Steps

- Communicate to schools about choice.
- Prepare schools to communicate with parents.

Going Deeper

- Make all schools “schools of choice.”
- Support receiving schools.
- Help schools market their programs to parents.



Improve Programs Over Time

Districts with strong choice programs have invariably worked hard over time to perfect them. Several of the districts in this study began to implement choice decades ago. An earlier study of districts that won a national award for model professional development found the same thing—the districts took years to move from early versions of choice to more evolved and comprehensive ones.²⁰

Time alone is not enough, of course. Nor does change necessarily follow a steady developmental course. Buffeted by changing policies and pressures, modern school districts may find themselves changing simply to be responsive and to do *something* (Frederick Hess's "policy churn"²¹). They don't have the luxury of constancy; but neither do they improve in steady and deliberate ways.

Progress is possible, however. A strong sense of purpose and vision, and stakeholder involvement in a well-managed change process, can pay off in improvement over time, not only for schools but also for programs and districts as a whole. A key is looking at data to gauge progress and guide successive steps.

First Steps

TRACK PARENT CHOICES AND SCHOOL ENROLLMENTS

In the area of choice programs, the data that matter most have to do with parental preferences, the choices they make, and the reasons for those choices. The innovative choice sites use quantitative data (i.e., parent

requests for transfer, student persistence, teacher turnover, student achievement data, and student demographics) in order to make decisions about their school choice programs. They typically have in place, or are planning for, a secure centralized database system that houses individual student records so that district and school administrators, along with community advisory committees, can make informed decisions.

The Cambridge Public School District has a process to identify the most- and least-chosen schools. The district then works with principals of underenrolled schools to create recruitment plans. The district also intends to implement a database system to disaggregate student achievement data, within and across schools. Better data will support better decision-making and help the district address achievement gaps. The database system will be essential for teachers who are measuring their students' achievement more frequently.

As noted earlier, an integrated student database affords Miami-Dade the opportunity to closely track its students and ascertain patterns and trends in student

movement from the district to local charter schools. All charter schools in Miami-Dade are linked to the district's mainframe computer system, so they are able to simply register the students rather than transfer them. When a student is registered at a charter school, he or she is immediately dropped from the roll of the traditional school. This key registration data informs the district's authorizing and program-creation decisions.

With data about districtwide student movement in Miami-Dade, the school choice advisory committee is able to create transportation zones that reduce district costs of transporting students from one school to another and also reduce the time students spend commuting.

SURVEY PARENTS ABOUT SATISFACTION AND REASONS FOR CHOICES

To get a fuller understanding of choice patterns, districts go beyond analysis of the numbers and ask parents and students questions: How satisfied are they? What features do they value? What do they think about their school's programs and services?

Miami-Dade surveyed charter school parents informally about why they left the traditional schools. Parents listed the following factors as influencing their decision: Reduced class size, small schools, a safe learning environment, and convenience. With "I Choose!" and other initiatives, the district is trying to reproduce these qualities in new programs and schools.

Local surveys are important to understanding the knowledge and preferences of local parents. When a district conducts surveys regularly, the surveys can also contribute to a better general understanding of parents as choosers, how they access information, and the

priorities they weigh in making decisions. Two recent studies of parents as choosers²² both conclude that low-income parents look first and foremost for a solid academic program, just as do more advantaged parents, but they have less information on which to base their decisions.

According to Miami-Dade survey results, parents leave a school for two reasons: they are attracted to another school, or they are unhappy with their current school. The district believes that it is a mistake to concentrate solely on providing wonderful options that attract students without focusing on the root causes of attrition in schools that are losing students. The Miami-Dade district takes a hard look when a school has a high attrition rate.

Desert Sands and Mesa routinely survey parents, students, and staff. Desert Sands, for example, annually distributes a parent survey, a student survey, and a teacher survey. The district gathers the answers and an outside evaluator analyzes the results. The survey does not have any open-ended questions, but respondents have taken to adding comments in the margins. Both districts report increased parent satisfaction as a result of choice. Parents and students especially value and take pride in distinctive schools that they have chosen, such as the Benjamin Franklin schools in Mesa.

In Mesa, during the spring of each year, the district sends a parent survey home with every student and collects survey information from selected fifth-graders and secondary school students (see figure 14). Mesa also administers an annual employee quality service survey. The district tracks the data for five years and shares the results with members of the public who are interested.

FIGURE 14. Sample Mesa School Survey Report

Mesa Public Schools Quality Service Survey		Quality Service Ratings 2003						
Parents		Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Not Observed	Valid # of Responses
1. I feel welcome at my child's school.		90%	9	1	-	-	-	172
2. This school is preparing my child for the future.		85	14	1	-	-	-	173
3. The staff has my child's best interests at heart.		82	16	3	-	-	-	174
4. The school staff treats my child with respect.		78	21	1	-	-	-	173
5. This school provides a positive learning environment.		83	14	2	-	-	-	169
6. The staff listens to the issues or concerns I raise.		74	20	4	-	-	2	163
7. The school encourages my child to learn.		89	9	2	-	-	-	173
		A	B	C	D	F		
8. Please grade the overall quality of your child's school:		91%	9	1	-	-		173
5th Grade Students		Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree		Valid # of Responses
1. I'm proud of my school.		52%	36	10	-	2		42
2. My teachers care about me.		80	15	-	-	4		46
3. My principal cares about me.		76	20	2	-	2		46
4. Office staff is helpful.		67	15	7	-	11		46
5. I'm getting a good education at this school.		89	7	2	2	-		46
		A	B	C	D	F		
6. In general, what kind of grade would you give your school?		72%	24	4	-	-		46

5 Year Historical Report (1999–2003)

Parents		Overall Grade			Sum of A's & B's	# Returned vs. Enrollment			
Overall Grade	A	B	C	D	F	50%	70%	90%	
Spring 2003	91%	9	1	-	-	99%			
Spring 2002	85	15	-	-	-	100%			
Spring 2001	90	9	-	0	-	100%			
Spring 2000	87	13	-	-	-	100%			
Spring 1999	-	-	-	-	-	-			
5th Grade Students		Overall Grade			Sum of A's & B's	Composite			
Overall Grade	A	B	C	D	F	50%	70%	90%	
Spring 2003	72%	24	4	-	-	96%	98%		
Spring 2002	47	33	14	3	3	81%	94%		
Spring 2001	51	31	10	3	5	82%	95%		
Spring 2000	50	40	3	8	-	90%	97%		
Spring 1999	-	-	-	-	-	-			

The Mesa survey asks parents to give the school an overall grade, reflecting their satisfaction with their child's achievement. It also asks parents whether they feel welcome at the school, how well the school is preparing their child for the future, whether the staff has the best interest of their child at heart, whether the staff treats their child with respect, whether the school provides a positive learning environment, whether the staff listens to concerns, and whether the school encourages their child to learn.

The Mesa students who are surveyed also give their school an overall grade and report whether they are proud of their school, whether their teachers care about them, whether their principal and office staff are helpful, and whether they think they are receiving a good education.

Going Deeper

LEARN FROM RESULTS

Besides looking at enrollment and satisfaction data, districts need to look at student achievement results. Programs may be popular for a variety of reasons, as suggested above, but do they produce the learning gains that are also required? New programs and individual school improvement plans aim to improve results. Do they? What lessons can districts learn and apply to new challenges?

Desert Sands, for example, uses an automated student information system to measure increases or decreases in student scores as students move from one school to the next. Connected by a student ID number, each student's records include all their test scores. The school board examines the scores for

each magnet program and isolates scores of various groups. It compares how students were performing before entering a program with their performance after entering the program. Desert Sands has determined that test scores in receiving schools increased over the past four years, even though there had been concern that they would decrease.

Desert Sands also benchmarks against other districts. When they want to improve a process, they find out which other districts have promising practices and learn from them. Needing more efficient transportation routes and procedures for students, they benchmarked against other districts and found some especially helpful ideas in Hillsborough, Fla., as described earlier.

The numerous magnet schools in the Miami-Dade district are dependent on grant funding as well as on funding from the district. When outside grants expire, the district examines a magnet's performance in promoting student achievement and attracting enrollment and decides annually whether to continue supporting the school.

FOLLOW A STRATEGIC PLAN

Desert Sands echoes the approach of each of these districts when it cites the importance of a coherent overall plan. The district does not develop any school in isolation; every school is part of a complete K-12 strategy. All of the district grants have targeted kindergarten through grade 12, not a specific level of student. The district does not create a primary years program unless it has a way to support the students through the middle and high school years. It never creates a high school program before planning to prepare students to feed into it.

Mesa emphasizes that a comprehensive approach must address not just choice programs but a broader range of issues. Mesa has developed plans, procedures, guidelines, and steps for practically every situation and considers parent input essential across the board. For example, the district systematically collects feedback from parents and other stakeholders through small focus groups and curriculum review committees. Cross-functional groups come together when needed and disband when their missions are accomplished. The district studies data, listens to parents and others, and then acts to meet the needs of its diverse population.

Using this approach, Mesa has engaged stakeholders in implementing character education and developing the district's mission statement.

In Miami-Dade, the district's current strategic plan will expire at the end of 2004, and a revised version of it will be implemented in 2005. The district is currently conducting community meetings to collect input from key stakeholders on the new plan. Increasing school choice by building capacity and creating additional options is specifically part of the plan.

SUMMARY FOR **Improve Programs Over Time**

First Steps

- Track parent choices and school enrollments.
- Survey parents about satisfaction and reasons for choices.

Going Deeper

- Learn from results.
- Follow a strategic plan.



Key Success Factors

Amid all the details of implementing choice programs, what are the big ideas, the lessons that the five study districts have learned about what is especially important? Each district was asked about key success factors. Clustering their responses, four themes emerge.

Competent Leaders and Staff

Those we interviewed were quick to point out that district success cannot be achieved without dedicated district staff who have time to focus on implementing school choice. Key staff characteristics were cited at all levels of district organizations:

- » a superintendent with "businesslike energy and efficiency," who is "on a mission to close the achievement gap,"
- » a "stable and supportive" school board,
- » "motivated and involved" principals who are "passionate" about the school program,
- » "highly qualified and committed" site coordinators, and
- » "top-notch" teachers.

These responses reflect the inclusive team approach that districts took. No one group can manage choice without the others. These districts were clear that everyone needs to be on board, and in addition to organizing district teams at different levels, they put in place "strong, effective communication among groups."

True Partnership with Parents and the Community

"Seek parent involvement from the beginning," urged one administrator. These districts have learned to bring parents into the process at both the school and district levels, as outlined in previous sections. They view parents as both clients and partners. They have started to "listen more." They also see benefits in "laying out all the facts and being open and honest." In response, they find parents stepping up to become champions for school and district programs, and ambassadors representing them to others.

Accountability and Competition as Positive Factors

While coping with many challenges, these districts also assert the benefits of strong accountability measures and competition. "Competition encourages strength," in the view of one administrator. It makes parents "proactive in finding solutions for children," said another. Similarly, districts report that accountability is "crucial." It brings increased attention to helping schools succeed, and it causes them to "transition through the steps of change quickly." Districts in this study do not shy away from competition and accountability. They take hold of these forces and use them to drive improvements.

A Strong Strategy

No one factor is sufficient. Districts need a complete strategy that invites schools in at every stage and every level. Different forms of choice need to be part of a coordinated strategy. Resource allocation needs to follow district priorities. Strong infrastructure and proac-

tive communication are necessary. "Every classroom must become a quality classroom." Change takes time. These districts are attentive to the change process. They support and "stand beside" their schools, while schools and the district alike keep at the hard work of becoming increasingly focused and effective organizations.

Acknowledgments

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WestEd is a nonprofit research, development, and service agency committed to improving learning at all stages of life, both in school and out. WestEd has offices across the United States and also serves as one of the nation's 10 regional educational laboratories.

Edvance, a nonprofit organization created by the American Productivity and Quality Center, is a resource for process and performance improvement with a focus on benchmarking, knowledge management, performance measurement, and quality improvement initiatives in education.

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Appendix A: District Profiles

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Cambridge Public School District

DISTRICT DEMOGRAPHICS						
Enrollment	Enrollment Trend	Number of Schools	Population Type	Subsidized Meals	English Learners	Special Needs
6,750	Down	13	Mid-size central city	48%	10%	23%

In Massachusetts, certainly, and in much of the country, if you say “Cambridge,” the automatic association is “Harvard.” For some, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) and Radcliffe will also come to mind. This image of ivy walls, privilege, and academic achievement does not carry over to the city’s one high school and 12 K–8 schools, however. Instead, the Cambridge Public School District serves a bifurcated student population, half affluent and half impoverished. While many students have family ties to the academic core of the community or live in private homes with an average value of over a million dollars, many others qualify for subsidized meals, live in public housing projects, or are homeless.

Although district administrators concede that the local housing pattern has largely eliminated the middle class, diversity has been actively sought in Cambridge schools since 1980, when the district voluntarily instituted school choice. Currently, the district’s struggle is to maximize options that encourage students to stay in the district and to excel. Cambridge faces fierce competition for its students from private schools, a growing number of independent charter schools, and Catholic high schools.

A controlled choice plan was implemented in 1980 to create racial diversity in all of the district’s schools. The plan worked to an extent, but all children were not receiving the same educational experience. Therefore, the district reviewed the plan in 2000 by asking a cross-functional team that included the superintendent to examine education research, relevant case law, and

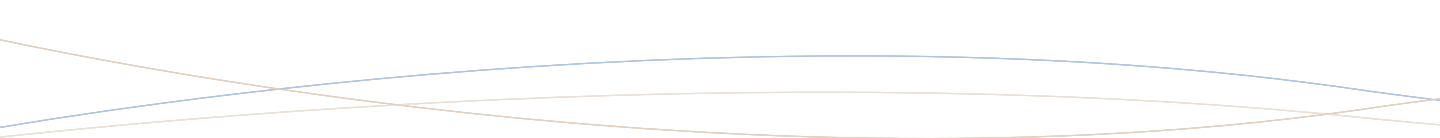
data from the district. The purpose of the study was to determine:

- » the effectiveness of the strategies used to recruit students to various schools,
- » which schools were overchosen and which were underchosen, and
- » why a school was consistently underchosen.

The team recommended that the district try to eliminate high concentrations of poverty in specific schools through changes in the controlled choice plan. Beginning with the 2002–03 school year, Cambridge enhanced its strategies to recruit students to schools, implemented improvement processes for the schools that were not meeting student achievement goals or drawing diverse student populations, and instituted socioeconomic status as a factor in assigning students to schools.

The district is working to improve its communication with parents about optimal school placements. For example, the district is increasing the role of its Family Resource Center, which, in addition to referring families to a wide range of social services, helps with school registration, logistics, counseling, after-school placements, and transition programs for students needing extra academic support.

The district also sponsors an annual kindergarten tour, encouraging parents of prospective kindergartners to



visit any number of schools, observe, ask questions, and consider the benefits of different placements for their children. To increase the number of low-income parents who take advantage of the tour, the district now sends the director of the Family Resource Center to local Head Start facilities to inform parents about their school choice options and to recruit them for the kindergarten tour.

The district's "junior kindergarten" pilot program at two schools, designed in collaboration with the Harvard Graduate School of Education, is another initiative to increase the number of low-income students attending high-achieving and predominantly high-income schools. The purpose of the program is to give an academic boost to children who might otherwise enter kindergarten unprepared for elementary school work; low-income parents may enroll their four- and five-year-olds no matter where in the district they reside. The only stipulation is that parents keep their children at the school for their subsequent year of regular kindergarten. The hope, of course, is that these children will feel comfortable, competent, and welcome at the school and will stay on through the elementary grades.

In parallel with efforts to motivate the enrollment of low-income students more evenly across the district, Cambridge is working to improve the appeal of its underselected, low-income schools, hoping to attract high-income students to choose them and further contribute to income diversification across the district.

One of the district schools avoided by upper-income parents is the Tobin School, which, with a population three times the district average, has also failed to meet AYP standards. Tobin has established a volunteer relationship with MIT and Harvard, has a strong parent-mentor group in technology and science fields, and has won a grant to create a science and technology magnet program at the school. The principal reports that although affluent parents are not yet choosing Tobin, the emphasis on science has made Tobin a better school, and students' achievement scores have improved.

Cambridge has identified its particular challenges and is now moving forward with increased focus, new programs, and districtwide goals to leave no child behind.

Desert Sands Unified School District

DISTRICT DEMOGRAPHICS						
Enrollment	Enrollment Trend	Number of Schools	Population Type	Subsidized Meals	English Learners	Special Needs
25,714	Up	27	Collection of small cities/towns	58%	27%	9%

The Desert Sands district, on the outskirts of the resort city of Palm Springs, Calif., has been growing at a rate of 4 percent a year for the last 10 years. The district currently has 10 new schools on the drawing boards. In considering whether to make these neighborhood schools or magnet schools, the school board listened to stakeholders and evaluated its recent experience developing school choice options.

Of the district's 27 current schools, eight are magnets and one is a district charter school of long standing. The magnet schools were developed to address disparities in student achievement between schools located in the district's mostly Hispanic and low-income town of Indio and schools located in the district's five other, mostly white and more affluent towns. Desert Sands draws its students from migrant camps as well as from middle-class towns and wealthy enclaves surrounded by private country clubs.

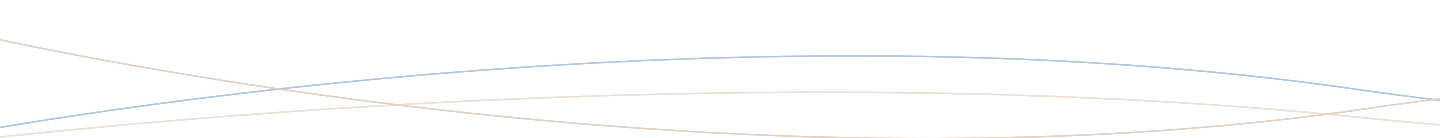
In 2000, the district decided to create a K-12 International Baccalaureate Organization (IBO) program for its first set of magnet schools (an elementary, a middle, and a high school). It located the schools in the geographic and socioeconomic center of the district and marketed them to high-achieving students in Indio. The result has been that these magnet schools are the district's most economically and culturally diverse, as well as its highest achieving.

The decision to draw the highest-achieving students out of the Indio schools did not go unnoticed there.

Principals felt vulnerable that they would be losing their best students. The district is now creating a second set of K-12 magnet schools, this time in Indio. When surveys of parents and the community indicated a growing need for medical and legal professionals, the district decided to feature pre-medical and pre-law curricula at the new schools. The district hopes this focus will attract affluent students as well as boost opportunities for Indio residents.

In 2001, the district secured a Voluntary Public School Choice program grant to create five magnet schools with an environmental science, mathematics, and technology focus. This program has been very popular at the district's charter school, and the community is fortunate to have the participation of scientists from the nearby Living Desert park and the Joshua Tree National Monument in designing the magnet schools' curricula. These high-achieving schools are located in the district's affluent Palm Desert community. The district markets them in Indio, again to provide school choice options to students whose current schools are low-achieving.

Principals at the receiving schools were initially concerned that the low-income transferring students, including students making NCLB transfers, would bring down the schools' test scores. But this has not happened. In fact, scores at the schools have increased. At each of the magnet schools a site coordinator meets new parents as soon as their children enroll and



regularly thereafter. The coordinator follows each child's progress, and if a student needs a tutor, the coordinator provides one. The role of the site coordinators, and their individual efforts to see each student as an opportunity, has been crucial to turning attitudes around at the receiving schools. As the assistant superintendent explains, "We do not want students to go back to their old schools because they do not feel connected or because the parents do not know anyone."

The district credits communication among the magnet schools as another critical factor in their success. Site coordinators meet monthly with the magnet grant administrator to share experiences and seek input for ongoing problems. During each meeting, the group reviews the goals of the magnet project to be sure they are being met and identifies additional resources that may be needed.

Desert Sands is proud of its choice program and markets it heavily, especially to English learners and low-income students. A marketing team creates radio spots, movie

theater ads, and television commercials in Spanish and English and goes to malls in Indio during the enrollment period to meet prospective students. The district makes a big effort to enroll kindergarten students in its choice program and created a refrigerator magnet for Head Start parents that has a "to do" list that includes "learn more about voluntary school choice," "review the magnet school program," and "enroll my child in public kindergarten."

The district is intent on continuing to develop its choice program, as well as its neighborhood schools. The district feels optimistic that it has accomplished the hard work of winning employees and stakeholders over to the benefits of choice, and it plans to create magnet programs at each of its new schools. These will accept neighborhood students first, reserve seats for 1 percent of the students in the other attendance areas, and fill any remaining seats by lottery. In Desert Sands, the goal is to create a range of schools that parents will want their children to attend.

Mesa Public Schools

DISTRICT DEMOGRAPHICS						
Enrollment	Enrollment Trend	Number of Schools	Population Type	Subsidized Meals	English Learners	Special Needs
74,366	Down	89	Urban fringe/ suburban	40%	7%	8%

Parents in Mesa, located in the Greater Phoenix area of Arizona, experience many forms of choice in a state that was rated first of 50 on the Manhattan Institute for Policy Research 2001 Education Freedom Index. With a strong charter school law enacted in 1994, Arizona had 492 charter schools by fall 2003, sponsored by either the state or a local school district. Low-income students may apply for privately funded scholarships supported by the state's education tax credit. Both intradistrict and interdistrict open enrollment are mandatory.

In this environment, Mesa Public Schools actively seeks input from its stakeholders and pays close attention to what it learns. The open enrollment program allows parents to choose a variety of specialty, magnet, or alternative schools, with about 5 percent of students choosing schools outside their neighborhood. Specialized schools include the district's alternative schools and the East Valley Academy, which draws on strong community partnerships to prepare students who plan to become health care workers, attend technical school or community college, or enter the military.

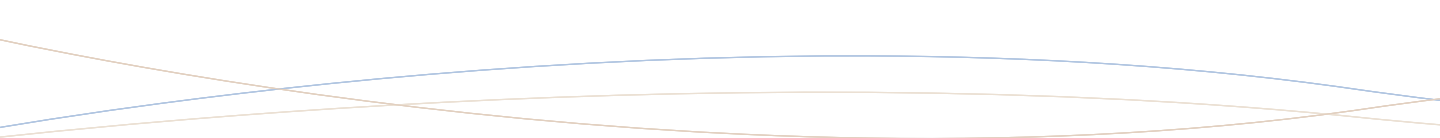
Especially popular are the four Benjamin Franklin campuses that provide highly structured, traditional education. An initial Benjamin Franklin school, established in 1978 through the efforts of parents who wanted a more traditional program, drew such long waiting lines for registration that the district moved to set up three more campuses in other parts of the city. To compete with similar charter schools, the district added regular bus service to the Benjamin

Franklin schools. Now, both parents and students at these schools give especially high satisfaction ratings on the annual district surveys.

More recently, an International Baccalaureate program was established at a high school with a decreasing population, to better support student learning and to draw students from across the district to fill the campus.

These examples illustrate Mesa's deliberate approach to planning. The district studies data, listens to parents, and acts to meet the needs of the diverse population. When 19 of the district's 89 schools failed to meet AYP in 2002, the district stepped up its efforts to improve the programs in these schools, in keeping with NCLB requirements. District staff met with principals and provided resources, curriculum specialists developed improved instructional programs, and faculties developed action plans for individual students. The superintendent also hired an analyst to identify promising practices in successful schools that could be shared across the district. Only two schools failed to make AYP the following year.

The district also actively helped schools in need of improvement communicate with parents about NCLB and the choice options. A newsletter template in English and Spanish was provided to staff at all the schools, who then customized it with their own content. This newsletter explained the school's status, improvement efforts, and parents' option to transfer their child to a school that was already making AYP.



Achievement data are regularly used to guide district planning and the creation of school programs. Principals receive a "data book" and meet with research and evaluation staff during the summer to review their data. With NCLB, the district is conducting additional analyses to determine which students are achieving, and also sharing data more fully with teachers and helping them understand how to use data to guide instruction.

Parents are recognized as an important resource. At each school they are encouraged to become ambassadors to other parents and to act as advisers to the district. For example, Mesa's universal homework standards are the result of parent activism.

Regular parent and student surveys make parent feedback a formal, quantitative element of the data book

used to guide planning. During the spring of each year, the district sends a survey home with every student and collects survey information from selected fifth-graders and secondary school students. Five-year trend data on these measures show both areas of progress and areas for improvement.

According to these critical audiences, Mesa schools are on the right track. Since 1999, parent and student satisfaction with Mesa elementary schools has increased steadily, to a composite of 93 percent. Parents feel welcome and believe their children are respected and challenged. Students feel proud of their school, feel they are getting a good education, and believe that their teachers and principal care about them.

Miami-Dade County Public Schools

DISTRICT DEMOGRAPHICS						
Enrollment	Enrollment Trend	Number of Schools	Population Type	Subsidized Meals	English Learners	Special Needs
370,000	Down	340	Greater metropolitan area	62%	17%	11%

Miami is often referred to as the capital of Latin America, and its huge school district has long welcomed immigrants from the Caribbean and points south. Of the district's 370,000 students, 58 percent have a Hispanic heritage. Students of Haitian background, whose home language is typically Creole, are a significant language minority. African American students make up 30 percent of the school population, and white students have dwindled to 10 percent.

It was a 1971 school desegregation order that first led Miami-Dade County Public Schools to institute school choice—in the form of magnet schools designed to compensate for the district's highly segregated housing patterns. Today, Miami-Dade offers a wide array of school choice options, designed to increase student diversity, diminish concentrations of low-income students, and improve student achievement.

Among the district's school choice options are 71 magnet programs, 31 charter schools, 16 controlled choice schools, two satellite schools hosted by large employers on their sites, and a "commuter" school for the convenience of parents who work in downtown Miami and drop their children off nearby. A new program, funded by a Voluntary Public School Choice program grant, is the "I Choose!" initiative. Plans are to create as many as eight "choice zones" in which schools will be modeled on successful magnet and charter schools—designed to reverse declining enrollment in designated areas. Currently, nine "I Choose!" schools are in the process of

improving the appeal of their facilities, designing new school programs, and participating in professional development aligned with their program goals. Another option for parents comes from the state of Florida's "Opportunity Scholarships Program," which overlaps with NCLB accountability measures. The program allows children to transfer out of schools designated as failing, and it provides a voucher of about \$4,000, which can be used at a private school. Florida also offers scholarships to its disabled students through the McKay program and tax credits for donations to private school choice programs. Currently 13,000 students in Florida participate in the tax-credit program.

Not surprisingly, the complexity of the district's school choice program calls for an administrative division for school choice. In addition, Miami-Dade has created a cross-district "schools of choice" advisory committee to promote greater understanding of the district's goals for magnets, analyze special program needs, make recommendations for program expansion, and encourage community engagement with the district's choice program. It is the role of the advisory committee, for example, to make recommendations for increasing the participation of Hispanic students in the district magnet schools.

Until 2001, the district was still under court order to address racial segregation in its schools. An extensive transportation program was part of the remedy. The district's new, voluntary desegregation plan has rede-

defined diversity to better reflect Miami's changing demographics. Students' transportation options have also been redefined. Budget constraints have caused the district to reorganize into tighter transportation zones and to call on parents to take more responsibility for transporting children.

The Miami-Dade area also has a rapidly increasing number of independent charter schools. Currently the district's 31 charters enroll about 12,000 students. By 2006, 103 charter schools will enroll 56,000 students. These schools average 300 to 500 students, in comparison with the district average of 1,100. Until recently, a state cap on the number of schools within a district made it possible for Miami-Dade to negotiate with charter applicants, so that new schools would be located in areas where district schools were most crowded. Now, without a cap, charter applicants are competing more directly with the district.

Charter schools are attractive to parents, and the district is intent on reproducing the qualities that make charters so popular. In an informal survey of charter school parents, the district learned that parents left traditional schools in part because of the feeling of comfort and security offered by charter schools. The schools themselves were smaller, classes were smaller, the learning environment felt safe, and the schools selected were convenient.

As Miami-Dade continues to roll out its "I Choose!" program and to develop its other school choice options, it will be paying close attention to better serving its constituents. District administrators believe that the Florida decision to encourage competition between charter schools and traditional schools is having its intended effect: to improve both types of schools. Parents, they say, are driving the interest in choice and accelerating the district's responsiveness to the needs of its students.

Milwaukee Public Schools

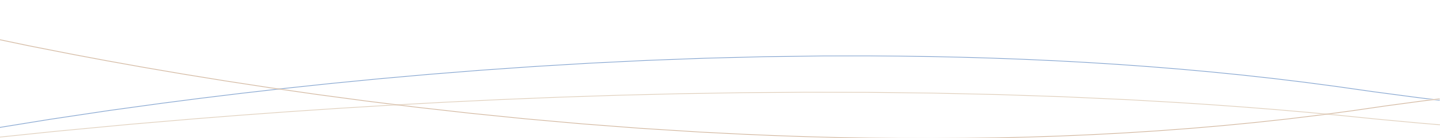
DISTRICT DEMOGRAPHICS						
Enrollment	Enrollment Trend	Number of Schools	Population Type	Subsidized Meals	English Learners	Special Needs
97,293	Down	223	Large central city	72%	8%	15%

As part of a court-ordered desegregation plan in 1977, Milwaukee Public Schools created well-endowed magnet schools and a voluntary exchange program with 23 neighboring suburban districts. The initial result, however, was more-segregated, not less-segregated schools. White students left the district, and the suburban schools in the exchange program, which came to be known as Chapter 220, did not actively recruit Milwaukee's African American students.

Today, open enrollment is available to all Wisconsin students, and Chapter 220 districts have set enrollment goals to increase cross-district transfers. This school year, 6,410 Milwaukee students took advantage of open enrollment, and participation in Chapter 220 open enrollment has been increasing over time. The district also offers 20 charter schools, with specialties ranging from music to Montessori to language immersion. There are also 10 charters authorized by other agencies. Perhaps the most significant form of choice might be the city's voucher program. Instituted in 1990 as an alternative for low-income students, the program allows students with a family income of 1.5 percent times the national poverty level to use vouchers to attend private schools. In 2003–04, more than 13,000 Milwaukee voucher students enrolled in 107 private schools—both sectarian and non-sectarian. Voucher use has increased to more than 13 percent of the school population and is approaching the state-legislated 15 percent cap.

In the face of steadily declining enrollment and funding, Milwaukee is now moving to bolster its 163 neighborhood schools and to encourage parents to make the school “down the street” their primary school of choice. This effort, known as the Neighborhood Schools Initiative (NSI), is in its third year of implementation. To simultaneously fund this new effort and make needed budget cuts, the district took a long look at its \$55 million annual transportation budget. Some of the savings from keeping more buses in the garage are being transferred to refurbishing neighborhood schools. In addition to upgrading physical plants, the district is trying to incorporate other feedback from parents about what they want in a neighborhood school. District priorities include creating more K–8 configurations, adding specialty programs and before- and after-school programs, and increasing neighborhood safety. Additionally, funds are being spent to make sure that if all the students in an attendance area choose their neighborhood school, the school will have enough classrooms to accommodate them.

Parents learn about schools identified for improvement and students' NCLB transfer options in a three-stage communication from the district. First, the superintendent sends a letter to all parents that describes the district's efforts to improve achievement and what it means to be a school identified for improvement. Once improvement schools are determined, each of these schools customizes a district-initiated template letter to let parents know what the school is doing to

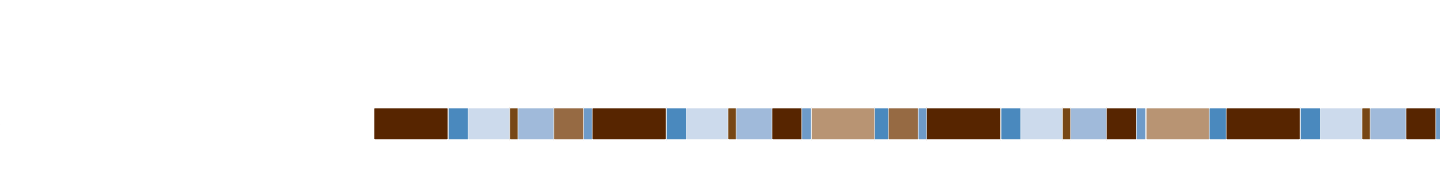


improve. In schools where students have the right to request an NCLB transfer, another letter is sent to parents explaining the transfer process. The district gives NCLB transfers first priority, and staff in two parent centers work personally with parents on NCLB transfers.

The improvement work called for by NCLB and the new work of NSI are being supported by another comprehensive district initiative—a refocusing of its program of teacher professional development. The district now places a literacy coach in every school. These on-site coaches work with colleagues to build capacity that is tightly aligned with school and district learning targets. Not only does each school have on-site literacy expertise, but all members of a faculty are working

toward common professional development goals. Teacher development is also enhanced by the district's involvement in the Milwaukee Partnership Academy. This partnership with local colleges and universities, the Milwaukee Teacher Education Association, and area business groups has the goal of preparing teachers specifically for work in an urban environment.

The Milwaukee district has a long history of facing its challenges by working with parents to make school choice correlate with effective education. As it moves ahead, district personnel have outlined two overriding goals: Lay out all of the facts, and make every classroom a quality classroom.



Appendix B: Research Methodology

The project methodology is an adaptation of the four-phase benchmarking process used by the American Productivity and Quality Center (APQC), including case descriptions of individual districts and a cross-site analysis of key findings. While classic benchmarking looks for best or promising practices, using quantitative measures and comparisons among organizations, the practice of implementing district choice programs is too new to fully support this methodology. A brief description of this project's adapted methodology follows.*

Plan

First, a conceptual framework was developed from an analysis of research on school choice and organizational management as well as an examination of what districts need to do to meet the *No Child Left Behind Act's* public school choice requirements. School choice experts, recruited to serve on an external advisory panel (see page 37), provided feedback to refine this framework and prioritize issues to investigate. The resulting study scope guided all aspects of the study (see figure 15).

Site selection was a multistep process to ensure that the guide would feature an array of practices covering the elements of the framework and would represent a variety of geographic locations and contexts with which district administrators could identify. A list of 23 potential public school choice sites was compiled through primary and secondary research conducted by Edvance, the education non-profit created by APQC, and by WestEd and the expert advisory panel. A screen-

ing template was developed to systematically analyze the weighted criteria for site selection identified by the advisors, including the presence of clearly articulated plans, communication strategies that had evolved over time, and local data that were used to guide improvements. The template was completed for the candidate districts based on public documents such as strategic plans, report cards, and district Web sites, supplemented with targeted phone interviews with district staff. The five districts that were selected had relatively high ratings on the template for preliminary evidence that promising practices were in place. No site was uniformly excellent, but each had developed practices in several areas from which others might learn.

Collect Data

Collecting detailed descriptive information from project participants was key to understanding the district's practices, the outcomes or impact achieved, and lessons learned in implementation of school choice that others could benefit from. The major steps to this phase were finalizing the site visit interview guide, and arranging and conducting site visits to the school choice sites.

* American Productivity and Quality Center. (2001). *Benchmarking in education: Pure and simple*. Houston, TX: Author.

FIGURE 15. Study Scope and Guiding Questions

District Strategic Planning and Resource Allocation

What are the strategic actions undertaken and the organizational infrastructure constructed by a school district to initiate, plan, develop, implement, and monitor a public school choice program?

Communication with Families and Staff

How does the district communicate with parents and students to notify them of their school choice options? How are district employees being informed and involved in the school choice program?

Facilities, Logistics, and Transportation

How is the district logistically managing shifts in student population? What criteria are being used to ensure fair and equal access for all students to enroll in the school of their choice?

Local Context and Managing Change

How is the district accommodating issues of local context, culture, and history in its school choice program?

Monitoring and Evaluation

How is the district determining the impact of school choice options? What criteria and indicators are used to assess school choice implementation effectiveness and student achievement results?

The five sites hosted visits that were facilitated by the project team. Site visits were a combination of conference calls, interviews, and one-day, on-site visits. During the site visits, key personnel were asked questions

from the site visit discussion guide. In addition, artifacts from the sites, such as letters to parents, schedules, or training agendas, were collected to provide concrete examples of district practices. The study team collated the information collected during the site visits and developed a case study for each site.

Analyze and Report

Once all the data were collected, the project team analyzed them to understand the promising practices uncovered throughout the benchmarking project, both within and across sites. Thirteen key findings discussed in the final report emerged from the cross-site analysis.

Two products resulted from this research: a report of the findings and this practitioner's guide. The report provides an analysis of key findings across sites, a detailed description of each site, a collection of artifacts, and key project documents. The practitioner's guide is a summary of the report intended for broad distribution.

Adapt

Ultimately, readers of this guide will need to select, adapt, and implement practices that meet their individual needs and contexts. The guide will be broadly distributed around the country through presentations at national and regional conferences, as well as through national associations and networks. The guide and report are also accessible online at <http://www.ed.gov/nclb/choice>.

Districts coming together in learning communities may continue the study, using the ideas and practices from these sites as a springboard for their own action research. In this way, a pool of promising practices will grow, and districts can support each other in implementation and learning.

Appendix C: Resources

The Web resources listed below that were not developed by the U.S. Department of Education are provided as examples of materials that may be helpful to the reader. The listings should not imply an endorsement by the Department of the resources or the Web sites. There also may be many other useful Web sites on these topics.

NCLB Information for Parents and the Public

The U.S. Department of Education has published *No Child Left Behind: A Parents Guide* (2003) along with other information for parents and educators at <http://www.ed.gov/nclb/>.

The Learning First Alliance has published *A Practical Guide to Talking to Your Community About No Child Left Behind and Schools in Need of Improvement* and provides links to other organizations' materials at <http://www.learningfirst.org/>.

The Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) has an extensive section on communications, including several pieces with tips for communicating effectively that were written by communications professionals at KSA-Plus Communications, at http://www.ccsso.org/federal_programs/NCLB/.

The Education Trust has a collection of materials on NCLB, including the *No Child Left Behind User Guide* and fact sheets for parents and the community. It also publishes *The ABC's of "AYP"* at <http://www2.edtrust.org/edtrust/ESEA/>.

The School Information Partnership is a public-private collaboration designed to empower parents, educators, and policy-makers to use required *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB) data to make informed decisions and improve school results. Standard and Poor's created the Web site, which includes a suite of interactive analytical tools from Standard and Poor's School Evaluation Services and the National Center for Educational Accountability's Just for the Kids. For schools, districts, and states across the nation, the Web site displays available data required to be publicly reported under NCLB. This initiative is funded by The Broad Foundation and the U.S. Department of Education. See the Web site at <http://www.schoolresults.org/>.

School Choice Information

The Center for School Change at the University of Minnesota works with educators, parents, business people, students, policy-makers, and other concerned people throughout the United States in a number of ways: to increase student achievement; raise graduation rates; improve student attitudes toward learning, their schools, and their communities; and strengthen communities through building stronger working relationships among educators, parents, students, and other community members. See the Web site at <http://www.hhh.umn.edu/centers/school-change/>.

The National Governors Association (NGA) operates the NGA Center for Best Practices, an online resource that includes links to promising practices in different aspects of NCLB, including public school choice at <http://www.nga.org/center/>.

The Thomas B. Fordham Foundation provides links to major studies and to around 50 other organizations' Web sites in the areas of charter schools and choice at <http://www.edexcellence.net/>.

The Center for Education Reform provides up-to-date reports on choice and charter school activity around the country. Its Web site links to "fast facts" and resources designed with parents in mind at <http://www.edreform.com/>.

The Office of Innovation and Improvement in the U.S. Department of Education operates the Voluntary Public School Choice grant program and offers other resources at <http://www.ed.gov/programs/choice/>.

The Education Commission of the States maintains an extensive database about NCLB, including detailed information about requirements in different states. The law's choice provisions are tracked as one of several key sub-issues at <http://www.ecs.org/>.

Notes

1. C. Hoxby (ed.). (2003). *The economics of school choice*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
2. Public Agenda Online. (1999). The poll report, *On thin ice: How advocates and opponents could misread the public's views on vouchers and charter schools*, was based on a June 1999 telephone survey of 1,200 members of the general public. Retrieved April 2004 from http://www.publicagenda.org/research/research_reports_details.cfm?list=32.
3. See the Web site of the Education Commission of the States. Retrieved March 2004 from <http://mb2.ecs.org/reports/Report.aspx?id=205>.
4. Magnet schools: Select *No Child Left Behind: Choice: Magnet Schools: Quick Facts*. Retrieved March 2004 from <http://www.ecs.org/ecsmain.asp?page=/html/issue.asp?issueid=19>.
5. See the Web site of the National Center for Education Statistics. Select the *Condition of Education: "Public alternative schools for at-risk students."* Retrieved March 2004 from <http://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/2003/section4/indicator27.asp>.
6. As reported by K. Kafer in *School choice 2003: How states are providing greater opportunity in education* (2003). Washington D.C.: The Heritage Foundation. From a policy brief by the Education Commission of the States, Center for Community College Policy.
7. See the Web site of the Center for Education Reform. Retrieved April 2004 from <http://www.edreform.com>.
8. A good review of important potential outcomes of choice is included in a report from the National Working Commission on Choice in K-12 Education. (2003). *School choice: Doing it the right way*. Washington D.C.: Brown Center on Education Policy at the Brookings Institution.
9. Howell, W. (forthcoming). Parents, choice, and NCLB's future. In C. Finn and F. Hess (eds.), *Leaving no child behind: Options for kids in failing schools*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
10. Schneider, M., Teske, P., and Marschall, M. (2000). *Choosing schools: Consumer choice and the quality of American schools*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press.
11. Howell, op. cit., p. 25.
12. Casserly, M. (forthcoming). *No Child Left Behind: A status report on choice and supplemental services in America's Great City Schools*. In C. Finn and F. Hess (eds.), *Leaving no child behind: Options for kids in failing schools*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
13. For the 2003–04 school year, only six of the 41 districts surveyed by the Council of the Great City Schools received finalized state data before August. Fourteen received finalized data in August, and 21 did not receive finalized data until after the school year had begun. Casserly, op. cit., p. 15.
14. Casserly, op. cit., p. 21.
15. Casserly, op. cit., p. 11.
16. Pinzur, M. (2004, February 3). New schools guide puts parents in the know. *Miami Herald*.
17. Howell, op. cit.; Schneider, op. cit.
18. Reed, D. (forthcoming). Montgomery County, Title I and *No Child Left Behind: Four stories of implementing school choice*. In C. Finn and F. Hess (eds.), *Leaving no child behind: Options for kids in failing schools*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
19. See Reed, op. cit., for analysis of choices offered in Montgomery County, Md., and how parents responded.
20. See WestEd. (2000). *Teachers who learn, kids who achieve*. San Francisco: Author.
21. Hess, F. (1998). *Spinning wheels: The politics of urban school reform*. Washington, D.C.: The Brookings Institution.
22. Howell, op. cit.; Schneider, op. cit.

