

Choosing Choice

Parents are demanding more educational choices and more say in their children's schooling. How can you offer choice in your district so you don't lose parents to charters and vouchers?

Parents love choices. Proliferating brands, color palettes, communication media, and electronic options are only a few of the manifestations of our collective desire to be in charge of our choices. Not surprisingly, board members now face a significant increase in demands for school choice. Some of this increase in demand is fueled by federal funding incentives for charter schools; the recent \$4 billion Race to the Top program gave preference to states with the least restrictive charter school legislation. A growing number

of states permit parents to choose schools outside traditional attendance boundaries, and a few are permitting vouchers.

However, charters and vouchers are not the only ways for school systems to provide choices to stakeholders. This is important, because the demand for choice is propelled not just by political trends but by human nature. Parents often like expressing their choices of teachers, curriculum, assessment methods, homework, textbooks, and extracurricular activities,

to name a few areas with increasing parental involvement.

While not every school system permits these choices, a growing number of schools are using choice to better engage parents and students. Board members and other education leaders should consider making the point that it is possible for parents to have meaningful choices without losing students to charter schools or private schools supported by publicly funded vouchers.

Funding moves, costs remain

The challenge that many choice programs present to public school systems is that funding moves with the students to their new school, but many of the costs remain at the public school. It costs the same to deliver heat, electricity, and a teacher to 28 students as it does to 30.

Public high schools are creating theme-oriented academics, with students choosing focus areas such as law, medicine, communication, and engineering. Two students who exercised their choice through a charter or voucher decision could cost the district about \$20,000, assuming per-pupil funding of \$10,000. Magnify this pattern across many classrooms, and the costs to the losing districts can be staggering. Rather than oppose choice, however, districts should embrace it in a way that is fair to parents, students, and the districts. Here are some examples of choice strategies boards should consider:

■ **The portfolio approach.** One recent study suggested that school systems should create a portfolio of different educational options, includ-



ing charter schools. Rather than wait for organizers to start independently governed charter schools, school systems can create charter schools with specific curriculum focus areas, such as fine arts, technology, and world languages. While public charters have a degree of autonomy in staff and curriculum decisions, their financial and academic accountability remains within the purview of the public school system.

■ **Academies within schools.** While students pursue core academic subjects, the context of science, math, and literature classes are oriented to the theme of the academy.

■ **Cooperative campuses.** On some campuses, students have the ability to take college or technical school classes that earn both high school and college credit. In other cases, high school campuses are located adjacent to community colleges and universities so that students can enjoy a much broader array of curriculum options. One interesting case study of this approach was documented in an earlier column, “The

P-20 Connection” (June 2011).

Curriculum choices

Although most curriculum choices are governed by state academic content standards—and soon, for some states, the Common Core State Standards—there remain choices in the curriculum emphasis that schools and districts can offer. For example, the Core Curriculum championed by author and professor E.D. Hirsch provides strong content knowledge and skills for students and offers a strong record of academic achievement for students.

A growing number of districts are creating their own curricula, including Web-based textbooks, in an effort to improve the relevance of their content and the intellectual engagement of students and teachers. While the content of the curriculum is certainly important, research suggests that the rigor, expectations, reading comprehension, and writing requirements of the curriculum may be more important than whether the curriculum is focused on a particular cultural perspective.

School systems can embrace academic standards without becoming standardized commodities. By engaging the intellectual energy of teachers, administrators, students, and parents, schools can develop alternative academic themes within and among schools, providing a vibrant academic environment and meaningful choices for parents.

Reframing the debate

Educational debates can sometimes be framed in terms of extremes—you are either for choice or against choice. Board members can, however, offer a more nuanced approach that provides fair choice—alternatives in structure, governance, and curriculum—without inflicting unnecessary financial damage on the public school system. ■

Douglas B. Reeves (dreeves@leadandlearn.com) is an author and founder of The Leadership and Learning Center, which provides professional development services, research, and solutions for educators and school leaders who serve students from prekindergarten through college.