



The purpose of this Learning Policy Center brief is to provide guidance on the key structural and cultural conditions necessary to implement choices within traditional public school districts based on lessons from non-traditional settings.

MAJOR FINDINGS

Uncommon practices implemented in choice schools include looping, extended days, a technology focus, and partnerships with universities and businesses.

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Key school conditions that support these practices: a clearly defined and shared mission, non-traditional staffing practices, localized governance, and customer service orientation.

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If those in traditional public school settings expect to undertake quality implementation of practices used in choice settings, they must attend to the conditions that support these practices.

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Making Real Choices Happen in Traditional Public Schools: Lessons to be Learned from Non-traditional Choice Settings

by William. E. Bickel and Jennifer E. Iriti

There is a growing body of knowledge about what works and what doesn't in non-traditional, "outside" school choice settings such as charter schools. As more traditional school systems consider creating "inside" choices within a district, their development can benefit from an examination of the experiences of the outside choice sector – what works, what doesn't and why. **In this brief, we seek to bridge the knowledge gap between outside and inside choice sectors by describing our recent research on a set of non-traditional schools – the uncommon practices being tested there and the structural and policy conditions that seem necessary to create those practices and support their potential efficacy.** The fundamental lessons to be learned: there are interesting and potentially valuable practices being tested in outside choice settings; and, it takes significant "experimental space" to support their implementation. Creating this experimental space means challenging traditional school structures and cultures. To attempt the practices without changing structures and culture risks creating choice in name rather than in substance.

School choice has been a contested policy issue for decades. While vouchers and charter schools have been in the forefront of debates, other variations – such as access to alternative, faith-based, and private schools – are part of the increasingly rich choice landscape in US basic education (Betts and Loveless, 2005; Hadderman, 2002; Hill, 2005; Lips and Feinberg, 2006; Stern, 2008). In simplest form, choice advocates argue that traditional public school settings do not adequately serve all students and parents, especially those from low income and minority communities. Choice settings, the argument goes, offer the possibility that, unburdened from bureaucratic controls, and with a market orientation, schools in the choice sector can be more innovative and responsive to student needs, and thereby ultimately be more effective in attaining valued student outcomes. Further, choice proponents suggest that pressure from choice options external to the system will serve as a market force that can shape traditional public school practice. Opponents of the outside choice strategy contend that school choice approaches damage existing systems – draining the more talented students and district budgets along with them, and are often in actuality not very different from traditional schools in programs or outcomes. Choice is seen as a false concept that, often under the guise of market economics, offers educationally unsophisti-



cated parents promises, without delivering on substance (Campbell, DeArmond, Guin, and Warnock, 2006; Betts and Loveless, 2005).

As traditional systems turn to the choice option, they often are going down paths trod by outside choice entities attempting to implement similar innovative approaches... it is strategically smart for education leaders considering inside-choice innovations to tap the knowledge that has been generated.

School choice as a policy issue has taken a new and important turn in recent years that is likely to have increasing impact on traditional school settings, especially in regions experiencing declining student enrollment. Competition for students has led a growing number of districts to begin to offer “choice” within traditional systems. At its core, the emergent policy seeks to create options for parents and students to choose where to enroll, beyond geographically bounded feeder-school patterns. These inside choices can take a myriad of different forms – special focus schools (e.g., science/math, international baccalaureate, or language academies), opportunities for dual enrollment courses, schools with various types of community partnerships, and unusual daily and yearly schedules or grade configurations, among many others.

The rationale for public schools developing these inside choices is twofold: 1. by offering school choice, parents and students are ostensibly provided program and resource options that they otherwise would not have within their traditional assigned public school; 2. inside choice options act as a market counter weight to externally developed choice options (e.g., charter, independent, private, and alternative schools). By offering inside-the-system choices, public school leaders seek to develop legitimate school reforms while stemming the flow of students to other choice settings and the budget losses that follow.

As traditional systems turn to the choice option, they often are going down paths trod by outside choice entities – attempting to implement similar innovative approaches. Research on the outside choice schools offers important understandings about the promises and pitfalls associated with implementing choice. We do not make the assumption that external choice schools have all the answers, or are uniformly effective. The evidence makes it clear that there are successful and unsuccessful outside choice schools (Center for Research on Education Outcomes, 2009; Hill & Harvey, 2006). This brief is not about taking sides on school choice generally, or on the inside/outside choice debate. Instead it is about exchanging lessons learned between outside and inside choice providers-- entities that are of-

ten seen as direct competitors and who in many locales have tepid relations at best. We make the assumption that it is strategically smart for educational leaders considering inside choice innovations to tap the knowledge that has been generated.

The ideas in this brief are based upon research conducted by the Evaluation for Learning (EFL) project at the University of Pittsburgh.¹ This research was conducted as one component of a recently completed retrospective strategic evaluation of a private regional foundation’s multi-year, 15 million dollar investment in four approaches to school choice (charter, alternative, and faith-based schools, and a scholarship program). In documenting the foundation’s choice strategy evolution and effects, the EFL identified a number of uncommon practices that some of the sites were implementing, as well as key conditions that are central to the schools’ implementation of them. The study design is described in a separate “Research Methods” box on page 4. In the following sections we briefly list some of the uncommon practices we found in the outside choice schools. We follow this with a discussion of the key conditions that were necessary to carve out the experimental space to implement the practices.

Uncommon Practices

Our research supports the idea that the outside choice settings studied do indeed offer a potentially rich context in



which to examine uncommon educational practice.ⁱⁱ A sampling of the specific practices identified in particular choice schools includes:

- Extended school day and year;
- Extensive career development and workplace experiences involving internships, simulations;
- A focus on technology and its integration into the educational process at every level and one-on-one computing;
- Extensive systems for supporting post-secondary planning;
- Performance-based employment practices;
- Looping across grades; and,
- Intensive partnerships with universities or businesses aimed at providing students with authentic workplace experiences and possible placements after graduation.

One interesting finding in our research concerned the fact that similar uncommon practices were implemented in quite different ways in several of the case sites. Such instances offer the possibility of distilling important lessons about the impact of specific implementation and context variables as they relate to operationalizing a given practice. Below, we provide one brief

Case of Learning from Uncommon Practices in Outside Choice Settings: High School “A” Implements Looping

What is looping?

Practice of having a set of teachers stay with a cohort of student across several grades. In this instance, high school faculty worked with the same students from the 9th grade through graduation. Each succeeding, entering ninth grade cohort was assigned its own faculty to follow it through the 12th grade. In the traditional public sector, looping is fairly uncommon though there are a number of instances of looping in the elementary grades. Looping is very uncommon in high school.

What were some of the reported benefits of looping?

- Trust was enhanced between teachers and students
- Ramp up efficiencies in the 10th-12th grades were accrued, with time saved not having to learn new classroom routines
- Teachers developed deep knowledge of individual students—emotionally, academically – enabling the them to better tailor instruction, and to set challenging but reasonable expectations
- Teachers reported being better positioned to help adolescents develop – the practice insures that teachers are focused on the students as well as the content
- Teachers had an unusual investment in and ownership of students’ progress since they would have them for four years
- The power of other school practices was intensified (e.g., workforce preparation, learning of 21st Century skills)

What were some of the reported challenges in implementing looping?

- Teachers and students that do not develop a good working relationship risk the danger of conflict, that if allowed to continue, could transfer across the entire high school experience
- The management of team expertise can be challenging. For example, the school’s initial implementation of looping was done with founding (and senior) staff -- as the school grew each year and added new 9th grade cohorts, management had to find ways to redistribute senior personnel in order to permit experienced and expert teachers to be present on each cohort team
- The teaching of certain advanced subject matters needed to be planned in ways that permitted each student cohort to have appropriate access. This required new staffing patterns and/or significant professional education for staff.



illustration of the type of insights to be gleaned from an outside-choice school implementing uncommon practices. Our example is of one school's use of looping at the high school level. We offer this example as illustrative of the potential knowledge base about a variety of uncommon practices that policy makers might access by examining research on the outside choice sector.

Message for policy communities:

Choice environments are important settings for the implementation and testing of uncommon practices. They can be significant sources of intelligence (what works, what doesn't, and why) on practices that are of interest to policy makers intending to implement similar reforms.

What conditions must exist to implement uncommon practices?

The uncommon practices noted above reflect hard work and a variety of factors that either supported or had to be overcome in their implementation. The research team asked choice sector leaders about such factors: What were the key conditions for enacting their missions and associated uncommon practices?

Four key conditions emerged:

- A clearly defined mission and shared understanding of that mission;
- Non-traditional staffing practices;
- Localized governance; and,
- Cultures with a "customer service" orientation

We briefly describe what our research

told us about each.

Mission

The most successful choice entities stressed the value of having a core mission that served as a touchstone for key school practices. Recruitment of and communication with parents and stu-

dents, recruitment of faculty and curriculum development were all explicitly shaped by a school's sense of its mission. Each school, in effect, had established a market niche for itself, and mission was central to this. Mission also played a significant role in engaging faculties' passion -- heightening

Research Methods

- The study employed a mixed-method, modified case study design to examine a set of 15 educational choice entities that are or were former grantees of the Foundation.
- A total of 21 semi-structured interviews were conducted with leaders of each choice entity, representatives of the traditional public school system, others engaged in providing some type of educational choice but not a Foundation grantee, and leaders in educational advocacy and policy organizations in education in the region.
- Foundation records regarding the fifteen choice grantees were accessed, (including grant applications, grant reports, and financial records), as well as publicly available materials (e.g., organization websites, newspaper stories, student performance data).
- The qualitative data for each choice entity were analyzed thematically against a constant frame of market segment and feeder pattern, mission, educational innovation, targeted outcomes and performance data, funding sources, political context, accountability mechanisms, who makes the choice to enroll, key levers for enacting the vision, and key organizational challenges.
- Quantitative data (demographic and enrollment patterns, performance data provided by the schools) were analyzed using descriptive statistics. Individual profiles for each entity were prepared and these were the basis for synthesis and analysis by choice sector and in cross-sector comparisons that identified similarities and differences in patterns of driver effects (Iriti, Bickel, 2009). The fact that the various choice models were operating within the same regional policy and political contexts strengthens the researchers' ability to compare and contrast within sector patterns.
- Multiple research reports were prepared for the foundation and educational research audiences (Iriti, Bickel, and Nelson, 2009).



their identification with the school and their commitment to its goals. Mission typically drove programming and curriculum with significant allocations of time in the day to accomplish core objectives such as deep and systematic workforce experience. Mission typically was a deciding factor in the determination of use of human and material resources. For example, in one school where the mission was clearly oriented to career and workforce, a “transition coordinator” position was established to monitor and support student preparations for the transition from high school to post secondary education or the workforce. When this level of staffing was seen as powerful but not meeting demands, a second position was added.

Staffing

A range of flexible and non-bureaucratic staffing policies were uncovered in choice entities. The schools can recruit and hire according to the underlying principles of the school and deploy their human resources as needed. This gives the school the ability to set work rules, establish the desired professional culture, and set school-specific performance expectations. Most teachers were “at will employees” with merit-based rather than tenure-based pay structures. Evaluation was linked to performance, which in turn was connected to goals and mission. Poor performance can result in loss of position. Assignments were driven by mission and student needs, not seniority.

The redistribution of senior teachers in the instance of looping described in the previous section is a good example of how educational needs trump traditional work rules. In some cases performance incentives were in place, tied directly to a school’s mission. In one school where a number of students were falling behind academically, teachers were offered extra pay to develop and implement specialized after-school tutoring projects. In another, significant incentives were in place to encourage individual teachers to apply for “Master Teacher” status on the faculty. The process was performance-based, using explicit criteria, extending over a year’s time and employing a variety of authentic assessment strategies of the teachers’ capacities, with a final decision based upon review by a master teacher panel and school instructional leaders. Master teachers earn more money but have additional responsibilities in the school that go beyond classroom instruction (for example, participation in school-wide policy decisions, and formal faculty development role with less experienced teachers).

Governance

Boards in the choice entities investigated generally confined themselves to broad issues of policy and finance. Few instances of Board micro management were reported by school personnel. Operational (including significant financial) decision making was mission and school driven, and “close to

the action.” This meant that decision making was flexible and responsive to emergent needs. In some cases faculty were deeply involved in both problem identification and problem solving. An example of this occurred in one school early in its development where the faculty recognized that a significant number of ninth graders were failing. Meetings were called across grade levels and the problem was revealed to be students’ accumulations of “zeros” or missing assignments rather than a lack of mastery of the content. Within a month the school faculty with technical outside assistance (paid for by the school) developed an “early warning system” that identified students who were on track to fail due to missing assignments and triggered teacher intervention before it was “too late.” This became a school-wide practice immediately and significantly reduced the problem of student failure based on incomplete work.

Culture of Customer Service

A theme that was common to the choice schools was a recognition that their existence depended upon ongoing student and parent support. The school’s life rested on how well it was perceived to serve its market. Numerous references were made to the notion of being customer oriented. This took various forms. The educational experience of students was personalized. Significant efforts were made to monitor student progress and to keep parents (and students) informed. Some



schools frequently engaged in data collection to gauge satisfaction with various aspects of the school and its programming, including but not limited to student and parent surveys. This culture of customer service also manifests in the way students are treated. Teachers and administrators know all too well that students don't have to attend their school and it translates into a different affect in the way they talk to and interact with students. Although perhaps subtle, the absence of a "captive audience" changes the nature of the relationships in the school.

Message for policy communities:

Getting the most out of a choice context in terms of uncommon practices requires serious "experimental space." This means being willing to break with traditional approaches to school practices. Inside choice options will require similar freedoms of action; otherwise the options offered risk being "choice light."

We are not naive about the political tension likely to attend any suggestion that traditional systems have something to learn from outside choice settings as traditional systems try to develop their own choice landscape. Our research on a regional foundation's investments underscores a sense that uncommon practices are being tried in the outside choice sector. An equally crucial message is that attempting these practices requires essential conditions that support the necessary experimental space.

The practices alone are not likely to be sustainable without these conditions. Whether fully successful or not -- and the record is certainly mixed -- the grounded experience of the outside choice sector represents a potentially significant body of knowledge that can inform policy makers turning to the choice option inside traditional school systems. Connecting to the research on outside choice can lead those developing inside choice to target appropriate practices and conditions to increase the chances that the goals of the inside choice endeavors are realized.

Endnotes

ⁱ See <http://www.lrdc.pitt.edu/projects/project-lab.php?id=32>

ⁱⁱ The idea that choice settings and charter schools in particular can be contexts for innovative practice is supported by a number of national research studies. See for example, Merseth, 2009; CRPE, January 2007; and Lake, 2007.

ⁱⁱⁱ It is worth noting that substantial efforts have been made in the past few years to enhance the rigor, quality, and relevance of research on choice reforms. The work being promulgated under the auspices of the National Charter School Research Project at the Center on Reinventing Public Education, University of Washington is a good case in point. See for example Betts & Tang's review of value added and experimental studies of charter effects on student achievement (December, 2008). These and other examples that could be named are aimed at informing current policy debates.

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Summary Recommendations for the Policy Community

- Outside choice environments can produce innovative/effective practices. There is fertile ground for traditional systems to learn from these environments. It behooves those who would create inside choice options to consult this growing body of knowledge. Visit outside choice settings. Talk to choice leaders. Read the new research that explicitly addresses the promise and challenges seen in choice settings with policy maker audiences in mind.ⁱⁱⁱ
- Understand that creating genuine choice options and developing and testing innovative practices requires reexamining traditional structures and cultural values in order to establish the needed experimental space. Don't take up the choice mantle without committing to such reexamination of one's standard operating procedures and values.

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The mission of the **Learning Policy Center** is to foster high quality learning environments for both students and professionals in public schools. Toward that end, we aim to infuse into policy decisions high quality, timely research on effective teaching and learning and on school, district, and policy conditions that support their improvement. **The Learning Policy Center** utilizes the rich talent pool of the University of Pittsburgh School of Education, the Learning Research and Development Center, the Institute for Learning and other regional assets to connect high quality learning research with education policy decision-makers.

William Bickel is a Professor of Administrative and Policy Studies and a Senior Scientist at the Learning Research and Development Center. You can contact him at bickel@pitt.edu.

Jennifer Iriti is a Research Associate at the Learning Research and Development Center. You can contact her at iriti@pitt.edu.

The Editorial Board for this brief included Mary Kay Stein, Lindsay Clare Matsumura, Nancy Israel, and Julia Kaufman.

