School Choice Crucible: A Case Study of Boulder Valley

Given the effort and expense it would take to get school choice right — free transportation and concerted efforts to disseminate accessible information are minimum requirements — we would do well to abandon it as a failed school reform idea, the authors conclude. But it is probably too late to stop the bus.

BY KENNETH HOWE, MARGARET EISENHART, AND DAMIAN BETEBENNER

SCHOOL CHOICE is a controversial public education reform — but not as controversial as it should be. Support for choice remains strong in the face of mounting evidence that long-standing controversies are being decided in favor of the critics of choice. Our study of the choice program in the Boulder Valley School District adds to the growing body of research documenting serious flaws in the theory, procedures, and outcomes of school choice.

Advocates of school choice contend that competition gives parents a voice and the power to vote with their feet. Schools that consistently perform poorly will

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lose "clients" and be forced to go "out of business," resulting in overall improvement in both achievement and parental satisfaction. Advocates of choice also contend that school choice can better accommodate a diversity of student interests and needs than the "one-size-fits-all" approach they ascribe to traditional public schools. Finally, they contend that school choice can reduce inequities. School choice is really nothing new, according to them, for parents have long chosen schools by choosing their place of residence. A choice policy that removes attendance boundaries permits students to attend schools independent of the price of houses in the neighborhoods in which they live and of their parents' power to influence school officials. It thus provides all parents with choice and so promises to promote diversity in schools.

Critics respond that competition for enrollment destroys cooperation among teachers, schools, and communities and that it provides no answer to the question of what to do with the students who are being harmed while schools are declining, before they "go out of business." Instead of increasing achievement overall, competition only stratifies school achievement, as certain schools use exclusive admissions procedures or tout the high test scores of their students in order to "skim" the most able students. Regarding student interests and needs, critics contend that genuinely public schools must be open to all students. Choice schools exclude difficult-to-teach students and force other public schools to carry an unfair burden. Finally, critics argue that school choice is much more likely to exacerbate inequity than to mitigate it. Without free transportation and adequate information, which public choice plans typically fail to provide, many parents will be unable to exercise choice. Schools will also be subjected to unfair comparisons, for they will be judged in terms of the same criteria, especially test scores, with no regard for the kinds of students they enroll or the resources they can garner.

These claims and counterclaims — about competition, meeting student needs, and equity — provided the general framework that we brought to bear on our study of the Boulder Valley School District's "open enrollment" system. We revisit them below in some detail.

SETTING FOR THE STUDY

Boulder Valley School District (BVSD) is centered in Boulder, Colorado. Boulder has a population of 96,000. It is home to the main campus of the University of Colorado and is ringed by high-tech corporations such as IBM, Sun Microsystems, Ball Aerospace, and Storage Tek. The median household income in Boulder is $51,000, and the city's residents are highly educated. Nearly 30% of the adult population holds graduate or professional degrees. Boulder is noted for its left-leaning politics in an otherwise conservative state, so much so that it has been nicknamed "The People's Republic."

Boulder Valley School District reaches well beyond the confines of the city of Boulder. In the western reaches of the district are the sparsely populated foothills of the Rocky Mountains. The vast majority of students from this region are white. In the eastern reaches, particularly in the town of Lafayette, the largest concentration of minorities is located; they are predominantly Latino. Within the city of Boulder, the northern section is older and has a relatively high proportion of minorities, also predominantly Latino. The southern section is newer and has few minorities. Central Boulder is relatively old, like North Boulder, but the demographics of the public school students more closely resemble those of South Boulder.

School choice has existed in the BVSD since 1961. However, it did not become a significant practice and source of controversy until the mid-1990s. Spurred by parents who were unhappy with the district's implementation of the "middle school philosophy" or who complained about a perceived lack of emphasis on academics in BVSD more generally, various choice options began to proliferate. Coincident with these developments, a new school board sympathetic to choice was elected, and the superintendent responsible for the middle school philosophy was pressured to resign. This was also a time when the school choice move-

Illustration by Fred Smith

ment began accelerating at both the state and national levels.

As open enrollment expanded in BVSD, four choice options were added to the traditional option of enrolling in any neighborhood school on a space-available basis: 1) *focus schools*, which offer a particular curricular focus; 2) *neighborhood focus schools*, which give priority to students from within the neighborhood attendance area; 3) *strand schools*, which offer the standard BVSD curriculum alongside a different curricular strand; and 4) *charter schools*, whose accountability to BVSD is specified in a contract.

In 1999-2000, 21 of 57 BVSD schools had incorporated one of the types of choice options described above: one of two K-8 schools, 11 of 33 elementary schools, five of 13 middle schools, and four of nine high schools. To put this in historical perspective, prior to the 1994-95 school year, there were five articulated choice options in BVSD, all emphasizing diversity, experiential learning, integrated learning, or bilingual education, sometimes in combination. Between 1994-95 and 1999-2000, 16 new articulated choice options were added, half of which adopted the "new mission" of an explicit emphasis on academic rigor and college preparation. Core Knowledge was most prominent among the new options provided; five schools adopted it.

More than 20% of students now take advantage of open enrollment to attend BVSD schools other than those assigned to them by attendance area — an unusually high percentage.[1] And whereas the effects of school choice are typically hard to pin down,[2] BVSD is a relatively closed system. Thus it provides the opportunity to examine the gains *and* losses among schools when all must compete for enrollment from the same pool of students. It is a school choice crucible.

THE STUDY DATA

We collected data from five sources: 1) surveys of parents and educators in BVSD schools; 2) focus group discussions with this same group; 3) a follow-up survey of principals; 4) a random telephone survey of BVSD parents; and 5) statistical records on open enrollment, test scores, demographics, funding, and fund-raising.

The BVSD Department of Research and Evaluation supplied most of the statistical records. Some of these data spanned the school years from 1994-95 to 2000-01, and some were limited to 1998-99 and 1999-2000. Fifty-five of the 57 schools in the school district were included in the analyses based on statistical records.

The parent/educator surveys (hereafter called "school surveys") and focus group discussions were designed to determine what people who are actively involved in BVSD schools believe about choice. The participants were 466 individuals representing 43 "schools" (we consider strands and focus schools sharing sites to be separate schools). All but three choice schools, counting strands, were included. A sample of neighborhood schools was selected geographically to include several from each of the district's eight regions. The overall sample contained 23 neighborhood schools, 16 "choice schools," and four "bilingual choice schools." There were five high schools, 11 middle schools, and 28 elementary schools (K-8 schools were counted as both elementary and middle).

Participants in the school surveys and the focus groups were on the "School Improvement Teams," which typically included the principal, teachers, and parents. The sample was disproportionately white, highly educated, and female, reflecting the characteristics of the people most active in BVSD school communities.

The telephone surveys were designed to elicit the beliefs of district parents who had not participated in choice and were not active in schools. Eighty-five potential respondents from each of eight geographic regions were selected at random. Potential respondents were called until 30 completed surveys were obtained from each region, yielding a total of 240 telephone surveys. This sample was more representative of parents in BVSD than were the school surveys, except for including a disproportionate number of women.

Data from the five sources were combined and analyzed, as appropriate, to address three general issues: parents' and educators' perceptions of open enrollment, patterns associated with open enrollment and the factors contributing to them, and funding and fund-raising.

PARENTS' AND EDUCATORS' PERCEPTIONS OF OPEN ENROLLMENT

In general, BVSD parents, teachers, and staff members believe that their schools should focus primarily on the development of social, citizenship, and academic skills in safe, comfortable environments in which teachers are sensitive to student needs. Most parents said that they chose their children's schools on the basis of their curricula, teachers, and staff and that they found these factors to be the

major strengths of their particular schools. There was very strong, nearly unanimous agreement that school choice is an effective means of responding to the diversity of students' interests and needs.

Agreement was equally strong that inequities exist in the choice system. For example, almost all agreed that lack of transportation and information reduced or eliminated the opportunities for certain parents to participate in choice. But people were divided on the scope, seriousness, and cause of inequities. People in the neighborhood schools, and to a lesser extent in the bilingual choice schools, tended to see the exacerbation of inequities associated with skimming, stratification by race and income ("white flight"), and unequal resources as serious and direct outcomes of the expansion of choice. A number of individuals in this group also voiced complaints about unfair competition between neighborhood and choice schools and about how the requirement to market their schools diverted resources and efforts from the educational missions of their schools.

By contrast, people in the "new mission" choice schools had few concerns about unfair competition or the market imperative. They touted their high parental satisfaction ratings and saw "new mission" schools as raising achievement in the district overall. They also tended to see the claims about skimming and "white flight" as overblown or to attribute those phenomena to causes other than the expansion of choice, such as demographic shifts within the district.

"You have not discovered a new life form. That's your lunch."

The weight of the evidence from our study is not on the side of proponents of "new mission" schools. Although market competition seems to be "working" in the sense that the schools with the highest test scores are most in demand and are those with which parents are most satisfied, concerns about the inequities associated with skimming, stratification, unfair competition, and unequal resources proved well founded.

PATTERNS ASSOCIATED WITH OPEN ENROLLMENT

Our study looked at a number of patterns that emerged in the open enrollment system and tried to determine the factors that contributed to them.

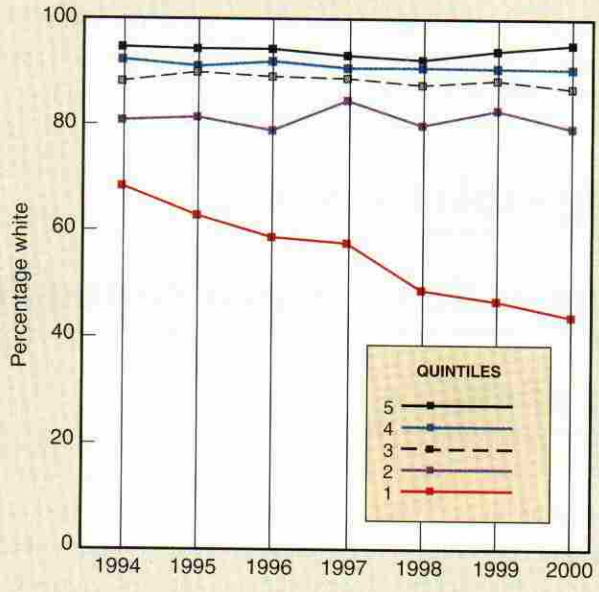
Demand for BVSD schools. Two factors were most strongly associated with "demand" (the number of open enrollment requests for a school corrected for its size): test scores and parental satisfaction. Latinos, however, were less motivated by test scores and satisfaction ratings than were whites, or they were willing to overlook those factors in electing bilingual programs.

Based on annual BVSD surveys, parents were more satisfied with choice schools than with neighborhood schools, and they were most satisfied with "new mission" schools. It is reasonable to infer that giving parents a greater voice in the operation of schools and the power to choose the curricula and methods of instruction they deem best for their children can explain much of this attitude. On the other hand, this is not the whole explanation, for parental satisfaction was highly associated with test scores, and the test scores of choice schools tended to be the highest.

Skimming. The emphasis on test scores was reflected in the pools of students who requested open enrollment for sixth and ninth grades, the entry grades for middle school and high school. In general, the students requesting open enrollment had higher test scores than their BVSD cohorts and applied disproportionately to schools with higher test scores. Thus "skimming" occurred at both the middle and high school levels — that is, some schools were drawing a disproportionate number of students from the high-scoring pool (in the case of certain schools, all of their students), whereas other schools were losing a disproportionate number of these students.

Skimming had its most demonstrable impact on middle schools.[3] In general, the students requesting open enrollment for sixth grade had higher scores on the fourth-grade Colorado Student Assessment Program (CSAP), tak-

FIGURE 1.
Quintile Medians of Percentage of White Students in BVSD Elementary, Middle, and K-8 Schools, Fall 1994 to Fall 2000



en in the previous year, than students in BVSD overall. Furthermore, although many middle schools were holding their own in terms of the CSAP scores of students open-enrolling in, versus those open-enrolling out, several others were significantly gaining or losing. For example, in the 1998-99 open enrollment year (for enrollment in 1999-2000), Eastern open-enrolled only one student, but lost approximately 40 through open enrollment. (All school names are pseudonyms.) Seventy-four percent of the students lost by Eastern were "proficient or advanced" on the CSAP, slightly higher than the overall BVSD proficient or advanced rate of 70%. MLK open-enrolled 10 students and also lost approximately 40. The students it gained were at the districtwide rate of 70% proficient or advanced; the students it lost, however, were well above it at 89% proficient or advanced. By contrast, Pinnacle open-enrolled 58 students with a proficient or advanced rate of 91%, also well above the BVSD rate. Because Pinnacle is a charter school, it lost no students through open enrollment. (Eastern and MLK, by the way, had the highest minority enrollments among BVSD middle schools, at 33% and 53%, most of whom were Latinos; Pinnacle had among the lowest minority enrollments, 11%, most of whom were Asians.)

The effect of this pattern of open enrollment gains and losses on subsequent test scores was stark. At 91%, Pinnacle had the highest proficient or advanced rate on seventh-grade CSAPs in the district. Eastern and MLK had the lowest, 53% and 29% respectively. The overall rate for seventh-grade CSAPs in BVSD was 73%.[4]

Stratification by race and income. Race/ethnicity was a prominent feature of open enrollment patterns, both regionally and with respect to individual schools. Students were leaving several regions that had higher percentages of minorities, located in the eastern and northern portions of the district, for regions with lower percentages, located in the southern and southeastern portions of the district. This migration was also from regions with lower enrollments relative to their capacities to regions with higher enrollments relative to their capacities. Furthermore, whites were leaving high-minority schools through open enrollment at a disproportionate rate. At MLK whites were leaving at a rate nearly double their proportion of the school's population.

The repetition of these patterns over recent years has led BVSD schools to become significantly more stratified with respect to race/ethnicity since the mid-1990s. If we place the schools in quintiles according to the percentage of white students enrolled, with the first quintile being the schools with the lowest percentage of white students and the fifth being those with the highest percentage, we find that the top four quintiles (or 80%) of BVSD elementary, middle, and K-8 schools have remained relatively stable in terms of racial makeup since 1994 (see Figure 1).[5] The second quintile closely tracks the percentage of white students in the district overall, at roughly 80%; the three highest quintiles (or 60%) have each consistently had a higher percentage of white students than the district overall.

By contrast, a significant change occurred in the first quintile (the 20% of schools with the lowest percentage of white students enrolled). The percentage of white students in those schools dropped precipitously, from a median of 68% in 1994 to 44% in 2000.

This pattern is explained much more by whites open-enrolling out of BVSD schools than by minorities open-enrolling in, for schools with the sharpest drops in white enrollment also tend to have sharp drops in enrollment overall. This pattern closely resembles one observed in New Zealand, where schools that were relatively high in minority enrollment saw an increase in their percentages of minority students when a choice system was implemented.[6]

Stratification of BVSD schools with respect to socioeconomic status has also increased since the mid-1990s, and the pattern is remarkably similar to that associated with race/ethnicity. Moreover, the association between socioeconomic status and minority enrollment, strong to begin with, became even stronger.[7]

Stratification by special needs. There was no discernible increase over time in stratification of special education students. But stratification no doubt exists beneath the radar of global statistics. For instance, there is evidence of stratification between "new mission" schools and other kinds of choice schools. In 2000-01, three choice schools — a middle school emphasizing social responsibility, a high school emphasizing vocational education, and a high school serving adjudicated youth — had the highest percentages of special education students in the district (save for one school dedicated exclusively to students with severe disabilities): 23.3%, 25.9%, and 27.3% respectively, compared to 12.1% for the district overall.[8] At the other extreme, the three "new mission" schools most notorious for "elitism" had the three lowest special education percentages: 3.6%, 4.3%, and 5.4%.

Masked stratification is also quite likely with respect to BVSD's four Core Knowledge "strands" (schools within schools), for which only school-level data were available. The percentage of special education students enrolled by Colorado's Core Knowledge charter schools (the most popular kind by a wide margin) is roughly half that of the districts in which they are located.[9]

Stratification and parent motivation. The differences in demand for BVSD schools were more strongly associated with test scores and parental satisfaction ratings than they were with demographic makeup. Thus the leading explanation of stratification is that it is an unfortunate side effect of choice.

A significant group of Boulder critics eschews this explanation, contending that stratification among BVSD schools is evidence of "white flight" and is the direct result of racism, classism, and elitism. They believe that certain parents regard the demographic makeup of a school — the number of brown faces they see on a visit, for example, or the statistics reported in the newspaper — as a marker to determine its quality and whether it is the kind of school in which they would be comfortable enrolling their children.

Another explanation of the observed patterns is that parents get caught in the *draft* choice creates.[10] That is, they might not have thought much about the merits of school choice or might even be opposed to it, but they are motivated to participate out of the fear that, if they don't, their children will be the losers. We heard remarks in this vein from a number of participants in the Boulder study. Most dramatically, a distraught parent called one day and asked, "Have I made a mistake? Should I be open-enrolling my daughter in . . . ?" She was worried about the wisdom of keeping her child in her assigned neighborhood school in light of the fact that its enrollment and test scores were dropping while its proportions of minorities, students qualifying for free and reduced-price lunches, and students learning English as a second language were increasing. She was, by the way, a vociferous critic of the choice system.

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Are BVSD parents motivated to choose schools by test scores and satisfaction ratings? By demographic characteristics? By fear? No doubt, each motivates some parents, singly or in combination. There are additional motivations as well, such as the proximity of schools to parents' workplaces. But whatever the motives driving individual parents, increased stratification is the undeniable outcome of their aggregated choices.

Stratification and open enrollment procedures and practices. BVSD procedures and practices are a potentially important factor in the patterns of stratification. First, the practice of prominently displaying test scores in the local newspaper's annual open-enrollment insert, as well as on district and school Web pages, helps explain the prominence of test scores in the demand for BVSD schools. Second, requiring parents to obtain their own information on open enrollment, providing most information in English only, requiring parents to visit schools in which they wish to open-enroll their children, and requiring them to provide their own transportation help explain why choice has a stratifying effect. This system favors parents with savvy, time,

and resources. It also favors parents who are connected to the parent information network, the importance of which was shown by how prominent word of mouth was as a student recruitment method.[11]

Certain schools (all charter or focus) give special enrollment preferences or set requirements that also contribute to stratification. These include 1) *legacies*, preferences afforded to certain groups, such as siblings of graduates, children of teachers and staff members; 2) *ability to pay*, preferences for students previously enrolled in a tuition-based preschool program; 3) *screening*, additional application requirements, such as interviews and supplementary forms to fill out; and 4) *sweat equity contracts*, additional expectations for parental participation, formalized in written agreements.

In the case of special education, BVSD policy requires that a special-needs student must, after receiving "conditional acceptance" for enrollment at a school, "have a staffing which finds that the open enrollment placement is appropriate before a change in attendance can occur."[12] This policy provides a means of steering special-needs students away.[13] Once a student is flagged as having special needs, he or she may be denied enrollment via the staffing because of "lack of fit."

FUNDING AND FUND-RAISING

In distributing its general fund dollars, the Boulder Valley School District makes no special provisions for the proportion of low-income students in a school, despite the fact that the district receives an additional allocation for low-income students in accordance with the Colorado State Finance Act. Certain schools do receive additional money for low-income students through Federal Title I funding. In most qualifying schools, however, fewer than a third of low-income students are supported by Title I funds. BVSD also provides auxiliary funds to needier schools for dropout prevention and family resource centers, for instance. But such funds generally are not designated for core instructional programs or reductions in class size — the kinds of things that render schools attractive to many parents taking advantage of choice.

All BVSD schools generate additional funds in various ways, ranging from selling grocery store coupons, wrapping paper, and candy to soliciting parents to donate stocks. These fund-raising dollars are used to pay for library and classroom books, curriculum materials, computers, art supplies, physical education equipment, adjunct faculty, guest speakers, field trips, building improvements, staff development for teachers, and stipends for teachers to attend out-of-state professional meetings.

Because charter schools have wide discretion, they can use fund-raising dollars for additional purposes, such as increasing teacher salaries. And because charter schools do not fall under the normal budgeting processes of the district, they also have more discretion in the use of district funding. Thus the district funding that charter schools receive is like a voucher that they can supplement with fund-raising, apparently without limit.

Our study found that, as a school's percentage of low-income students increased, its ability to raise funds decreased, and vice versa. A low percentage of students qualifying for free and reduced-price lunches did not guarantee a high fund-raising amount, but those schools that raised the most had relatively low percentages of those students. On the other hand, high percentages of students qualifying for free and reduced-price lunches pretty much guaranteed low per-pupil fund-raising amounts. For example, the most successful of the elementary schools with a high percentage of students qualifying for free and reduced-price lunches raised $75 per pupil, whereas the most successful of the elementary schools with a low percentage of such students raised $278 per pupil.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE BROADER SCHOOL CHOICE CONTROVERSY

We now return to the three general categories of controversy about school choice policy that we sketched early on, namely, competition, meeting student needs, and equity. We will compare the perceptions of BVSD parents and educators with what our other findings say — or can't say — about these matters.

Competition. Many BVSD parents and educators see competition as the driving force in obtaining district resources and support. To our knowledge, BVSD has never declared that competition will be the mechanism by which it decides the levels of support to be provided to its schools, but it has adopted this mechanism by default. The resources provided to BVSD schools (and, in the extreme, decisions about whether they will be closed or consolidated) are tied almost exclusively to enrollment, for which all schools must compete.[14]

Test scores loom large in how schools fare in the com-

petition. Test scores are strongly associated with the open enrollment demand for BVSD schools, especially among middle-income whites. As these parents move to high-scoring schools, which are already heavily populated by white middle-income students, they take their various resources with them and further stratify BVSD schools with respect to race/ethnicity and income, in addition to test scores. The schools they depart are left with fewer resources and larger percentages of low-income and minority students. These changes complicate their educational missions, both administratively and in the classroom. The result is a "spiral of decline" for schools losing enrollment: they have relatively low test scores; they lose parental resources; and, due to decreased enrollment, they begin to experience cuts in resources from the district. Their test scores drop further, they lose more parental resources, and so on.[15] All along they scramble to find new programs to attract students, further complicating and intensifying their work.

Proponents of competition contend that it works to boost achievement overall, even if some schools may decline. This must be classified as conjecture in the case of BVSD. The fact that some BVSD choice schools, particularly "new mission" schools, have high — remarkably high — test scores does not prove that competition has stimulated increased achievement in BVSD schools overall. To confirm this claim would require longitudinal data spanning the mid-1990s, when choice burgeoned, and such data are not available.

The evidence that is available provides little reason to believe that an overall improvement in achievement has been an outcome of choice. On the contrary, it indicates that choice is more likely a zero-sum game with respect to achievement — a situation in which some schools do better only at the expense of others that do worse. There is suggestive evidence at the high school level and strong evidence at the middle school level that certain schools are disproportionately gaining high-scoring students and others are disproportionately losing them and that these gains and losses best explain the test scores that schools produced.

Focus and charter schools embraced competition, for the most part. This is consistent with the fact that these schools were born competing for students and with a commitment largely limited to their own programs. Moreover, competing for students has served them well. But a significant portion of BVSD's other schools — schools that have had to take on competing for enrollment as a new activity — perceive the competition for students as having mainly negative effects on them. Parents and educators in these schools see themselves as being required to divert time and resources away from curriculum and instruction and toward keeping their enrollments up, a demanding task that increases their total effort. They also believe that competition for students has engendered a breakdown of collegiality, as individual schools are forced to look after their own interests and to place them above those of the district as a whole.

Meeting student needs. By and large, BVSD parents are satisfied with the schools to which they send their children, and those who send their children to focus or charter schools are the most satisfied. This applies across BVSD's array of choice schools: to predominantly white, "new mission" schools, emphasizing academics; to largely Latino schools, emphasizing diversity and bilingualism; and to various kinds of alternative schools, emphasizing student participation or vocational education. Increased parental satisfaction is one of the claims made on behalf of school choice, and this is an apparent benefit of BVSD's choice system.

But this claim faces the same difficulty as the parallel claim about achievement. Parental satisfaction is a factor in judging the effects of choice on BVSD schools, but overall satisfaction is what should be at issue. If some parents are more satisfied only at the expense of others' being less so, then choice is a zero-sum game. Tackling this question, again, requires longitudinal data that span the period when open enrollment burgeoned, and again, such data are unavailable. Thus the claim that choice has resulted in an *overall* increase in parental satisfaction is also conjecture.

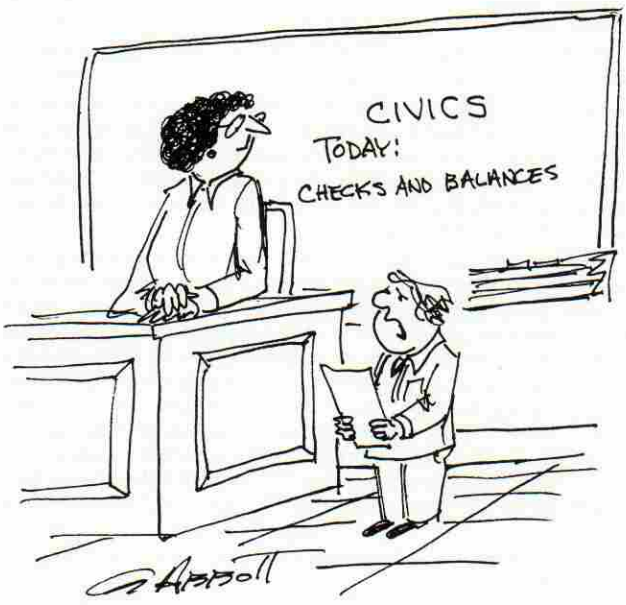
Significantly obscured by questions about how well needs are being met (as measured by parental satisfaction) is the prior question of how to think about and identify student needs in the first place. Traditionally, the focus has been on "special needs" that require additional resources, efforts, and methods to meet — for example, the needs of special education students, of those with limited proficiency in English, or of at-risk populations in general. But in BVSD (and elsewhere, to be sure), the idea of student needs has been stretched to include the need for a rigorous academic/college-preparatory education.

If a rigorous academic/college-preparatory education is a need, it is certainly of a different order from the needs described above. There is nothing special about it that war-

rants schools specifically devoted to it. Although there are differences among groups of BVSD parents and educators on the question of how single-mindedly they can or should pursue the goal of increased academic achievement, each group places academic achievement at or near the top of the list of things that schools ought to accomplish. Culling academic achievement out as a special need that may be used to define the mission of certain BVSD schools has resulted in tracking writ large — tracking *between* schools rather than *within* them. And tracking brings with it racial/ethnic and income stratification.

The idea that schools should promote social/citizenship skills was also high on every group's list. But if social/citizenship skills include the ability to appreciate and interact with a diversity of people — and it is difficult to see how this could not be the case — then students who are separated off into homogeneous, predominantly white schools will not acquire essential skills. From this perspective, their education is impoverished.

Equity. One of the complaints frequently lodged against the choice system is that it is inequitable because it sets up unfair competition among BVSD schools. One solution is to level the playing field — for example, by permitting neighborhood schools to compete under the same set of rules as focus and charter schools. Although this would be an improvement, it implicitly concedes that competition is the principle that ought to determine which schools thrive and which are judged "good." (Test scores are currently the major determinant of both.) More fundamental concerns about the principle of competition exist, concerns grounded in equity.



"These days, it seems, the political process runs to more checks and bigger balances."

Letting things shake out through competition does not ensure equity because it does nothing to address the problem of the inequity experienced by students and educators languishing in schools caught in or threatened by the spiral of decline. Addressing this problem requires invoking another principle: ensuring that all students receive a good education, on equitable terms.

Letting things shake out through competition does not ensure equity even for those schools that manage to keep their enrollments up. Consider BVSD's bilingual schools. That Latino families are getting their choice of bilingual schools and that these schools are maintaining their enrollments does not mean that Latinos are getting the same kind of benefits as whites who are enrolling their children in homogeneous, high-achieving schools. Unlike the bilingual schools, which face a complex set of challenges, these high-achieving schools can be single-minded in their pursuit of achievement because they have a homogeneous set of students who predictably do well. Despite the relatively easier task they have to perform in comparison to bilingual schools, these schools get the same per-pupil funding from the district. They typically also have more additional resources at their disposal through fund-raising. Again, the uses to which such funds are put — books, computers, staff development, and, in some cases, teacher salaries — are anything but marginal to the quality of education that schools can provide.

In addition to the fact that there is inequality in the costs and benefits associated with the school choices that BVSD parents make, there is inequality in the opportunities for parents to choose at all. Lack of transportation, time, and information eliminate or diminish the opportunities of many parents to participate.

CONCLUSION: ON THE BUS FROM THE MOVIE *SPEED*

"We're on the bus from the movie *Speed*" is how one middle school principal described Boulder's open enrollment system, adding, "There's no mission, just more choices." Choice is "smoke and mirrors," he went on to say.

These remarks could just as aptly be applied to the na-

tional scene. The school choice bus continues to gain momentum and to pull politicians, policy makers, parents, and educators into its draft. This is so despite the fact that the research evidence is mixed at best, negative at worst. The research on vouchers, for example, has failed to show any but the most modest and equivocal gains for participating students.[16] The research on charter schools is increasingly showing that they encourage stratification by race, income, and special needs and that they fall short on the criterion of innovation.[17]

Not to oversimplify, the charter school movement — unlike vouchers — originally involved a strong commitment to what might be called an *experimentalist* rationale. The idea was that freeing a limited number of schools from bureaucratic rules would lead to experimentation and the improvement of public education overall. This rationale typically emphasized serving at-risk students, creating genuine innovations, and disseminating successful innovations to the larger public education system. But the experimentalist rationale always existed in tension with the market rationale underlying vouchers. As the market faithful wound up in the driver's seat, the various principles and restrictions associated with the experimentalist rationale went by the boards.[18] Under the market rationale, the idea of *public education* has become indistinguishable from the idea of *publicly funded education.*

Given the effort and expense it would take to get school choice right — free transportation and concerted efforts to disseminate accessible information are minimum requirements — we would do well to abandon it as a failed school reform idea. At most, it should be viewed as but a relatively minor addition to the much more sweeping changes that are required. But it is probably too late to stop the bus. The best that can be hoped for now is to get it under better control.[19]

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1. Arizona, for instance, the state with the largest charter school movement by far, has a mere 4% of its students enrolled in charter schools. See *The State of Charter Schools 2000, Fourth-Year Report* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Education, 2000), available at http://www.ed.gov/pubs/charter4thyear/.

2. But see Casey P. Cobb and Gene V Glass, "Ethnic Segregation in Arizona Charter Schools," *Educational Policy Analysis Archives,* January 1999, available at http://epaa.asu.edu/epaa/v7n1.

3. We were unable to investigate skimming in the elementary schools because we had no entering test data (the vast majority of open enrollment in elementary schools occurs at kindergarten). In the case of high schools, we lacked comparable test data. Also, because most high schools are relatively large, open-enrolled students constitute a relatively small proportion of the population, and, because we were limited to school-level data, we could not tease out the special programs (or "tracks") into which they enroll.

4. This discussion is based on scores on reading tests, but the results were the same for writing.

5. This analysis excluded high schools for considerations similar to those discussed in note 3. The total number of elementary, middle, and K-8 schools fluctuated because of the opening of new schools and the closing or consolidation of others. There were 39 in 1994, 40 in 1995, 44 in 1996, 45 in 1997, 45 in 1998, 46 in 1999, and 47 in 2000.

6. Edward Fiske and Helen Ladd, *When Schools Compete: A Cautionary Tale* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 2000).

7. Kenneth Howe and Margaret Eisenhart, "A Study of the Boulder Valley School District's Open Enrollment System," available at http://education.colorado.edu/EPIC (then click on the "Research and Publications" link).

8. Boulder Valley School District, "October Count," November 2000.

9. *The 1998-99 Colorado Charter Schools Evaluation* (Denver: Colorado Department of Education, 2000), available at http://www.cde.state.co.us/cdechart/download/ch99eall.pdf.

10. This kind of motivation has been documented in New Zealand. One official remarked, "Choice is like a neurosis . . . parents are motivated by fear. They feel that they have to look around to make sure they will not destroy their children's futures" (Fiske and Ladd, p. 183).

11. Howe and Eisenhart, op. cit.

12. This requirement is set forth on the district's website: http://www.bvsd.k12.co.us/eduprograms/bv_openenroll.html#special (accessed on 4 February 2001).

13. An analysis of the practice of steering special education students away from choice schools is developed more fully in Kevin Welner and Kenneth Howe, "Steering Toward Separation: The Evidence and Implications of Special Education Students' Exclusion from Choice Schools," in Janelle Scott, ed., *School Choice and Diversity* (New York: Teachers College Press, forthcoming).

14. A controversial school consolidation involving five elementary schools was carried out for the 2000-01 school year. One school with a high percentage of special education students and two schools with ESL programs, high percentages of students qualifying for free and reduced-price lunches, and high percentages of minority students were consolidated into one building and given a new name. The remaining two schools were focus schools with relatively few at-risk students. Each had previously shared a building with one of the three schools that was closed, and both moved into one of the buildings that had become available. Each retained its previous name, curriculum, student body, and separate identity.

15. Hugh Lauder and David Hughs, *Trading in Futures: Why Markets in Education Don't Work* (Philadelphia: Open University Press, 1999).

16. See, for example, Martin Carnoy, "School Choice? Or Is It Privatization?," *Educational Researcher,* October 2000, pp. 15-20. See also the recent exchange in *Education Week* between Alex Molnar and Charles Achilles, "Voucher and Class-Size Reduction Research," 25 October 2000, p. 64; and William Howell et al., "In Defense of Our Voucher Research," 7 February 2001, pp. 52, 32-33.

17. As researchers have moved beyond large-scale surveys (e.g., *The State of Charter Schools 2000*) to more fine-grained analyses of individual states, the stratification by race, income, and special needs and the lack of innovation are being increasingly documented. See, for example, Amy Stuart Wells, *Beyond the Rhetoric of Charter School Reform: A Study of Ten California School Districts* (Los Angeles: University of California at Los Angeles, 1998); David Arsen, David Plank, and Gary Sykes, *School Choice Policies in Michigan: The Rules Matter* (East Lansing: Michigan State University, 2000); Kenneth Howe and Kevin Welner, "The School Choice Movement: Déjà Vu for Children with Disabilities?," *Journal of Remedial and Special Education,* in press; and Cobb and Glass, op. cit.

18. The market rationale also won out in New Zealand. See Fiske and Ladd, op. cit.

19. In this vein, the Boulder Valley School District has taken the step of centralizing open enrollment to help mitigate the inequities. Moreover, fund raising is ongoing, and the district is considering the provision of free transportation and changes in funding. K