

Interdistrict School Choice: A Win-Win

By Robert R. Zywicki, Director of Curriculum and Instruction,
High Point Regional School District

The School Choice movement grew passionately in the mid-1990s with advocates spurred on by the formation of national choice lobbying groups advocating for charter schools and voucher programs. In 2001, the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) contained provisions for intradistrict school choice allowing parents to remove students from schools that did not meet adequate yearly progress. Following NCLB, several states established interdistrict school choice programs, which further expanded the school choice options available to families. NCLB revived criticisms that public schools are monopolies and that education should be “marketized” to allow for choice (Reback, 2008). According to research conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics, 15 percent of students across the nation attended some form of choice school between 1993 and 2007. (Grady and Aud, 2010). School choice advocates’ efforts combined with the provisions of NCLB advanced the concept of Choice to include publicly funded options.

Beyond Charters

There are four publicly funded school choice options. Each of these options creates market alternatives to the schools administered by the local education authority (Chubb and Moe, 1990; Peterson, 2001; and Levin, 2011). The first choice is charter schools, which are locally organized schools that are granted authorization to administer schools with public funds by the state department of education. The second option is vouchers. Vouchers are payments for students to attend school at private or parochial institutions. The third option is intradistrict school choice in which students can move amongst the same grade level schools within a district. Lastly, interdistrict school choice offers flexibility for parents to select a public school outside of their local school district that best meets the needs of their individual student.

Interdistrict School Choice in New Jersey

The Interdistrict Public School Choice Program (Choice) was created by the New Jersey Legislature in January 2000 as a five-year pilot program designed to create viable options for New Jersey students and their families by offering flexibility in selecting a public school program. This Choice program is entirely separate and distinct from New Jersey’s Charter School Program that was established in 1995 (Doria, 2001). The original pilot afforded each county the ability to designate a single school as a choice school. From the expiration of the pilot in 2005 until 2010 the New Jersey Department of Education (NJDOE) maintained the size and scope of the original pilot program. Once considered an impossibility in New Jersey (Dunay, 1999), the legislature established a permanent program

via the “Interdistrict Public School Choice Program Act.” The Choice program offers a permanent system for parents to elect to send their children to a public school program that they think best meets the needs of their individual student.

How Choice Works in New Jersey

Under the Choice program, interested New Jersey school districts apply to the NJDOE to become designated as Choice districts. This permits the district to open seats for which they will accept non-resident students at the expense of the state. A school’s decision to participate in the program is made by the local board of education. Once a district’s application is approved by NJDOE, the choice school sets the number of openings in each grade level. If there are more students requesting a seat in the Choice district than there are available openings, the school must



conduct a lottery. Any school-age student who is a resident of New Jersey is eligible to take advantage of the Choice program. Additionally, Choice students are eligible for transportation for up to 20 miles at the expense of their local district. Parents of Choice students are eligible for reimbursement of \$884 annually if they choose to transport their children themselves to the Choice school.

There is a three-step process for parents seeking to send their student to a Choice school. First, the parents must submit a written notice of intent to participate in the school Choice program to the superintendent's office in their local district. Second, the local district must provide written notification to the parent that the student is eligible to participate in the Choice Program. Eligibility is established by verification that the student is a resident of the local district and that the student is eligible to attend the local district's public schools during the current school year. Lastly, the parent must submit an application to the Choice district, including the written eligibility notification from their local district.

Why Parents 'Choose' Choice

New Jersey's Choice program is in its infancy when compared to the interdistrict choice programs of Minnesota, Massachusetts, and New York (Nathan, 1989; Daring, 1995; Finnegan et. al., 2009). Research on similar programs in other states concludes that parents elect to utilize choice programs based on a school's perceived academic reputation, extra-curricular offerings, and specialized programs (Schneider and Buckley, 2002). To date, substantial research does not exist on the factors that influence specifically why New Jersey parents elect to participate in the Choice program. The school report card provisions of NCLB enhanced parents' knowledge of how their local schools performed and enabled them to act as more informed consumers.

Why Districts 'Choose' Choice

New Jersey districts with open seats can bolster their budgets by accepting Choice students. Districts that accept Choice students receive additional direct state aid to cover the annual fair share cost of the students' education. There are

currently 136 approved Choice districts for the 2013–2014 school year—the largest concentration of which are in Hunterdon County with 22 of the Choice schools. The NJDOE provides tips for prospective Choice districts to market their open seats. Choice districts incur the administrative costs of the application process and procedures.

A Win-Win?

The Choice program provides mutually beneficial options for parents, students, and districts. Beyond budgets and chasing better academic offerings, there are intangible benefits to interdistrict school choice. Increased diversity and more accepting school climates have been attributed to interdistrict school choice programs (Stewart, 2011; Finnigan and Scarbrough, 2013). New Jersey's commitment to the Choice program received a major vote of confidence with more than \$4M in increased funding in Governor Christie's most recently proposed budget. For families and districts that 'choose' Choice, it can be a "win-win" situation.

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About the Author



Robert R. Zywicki is the Director of Curriculum and Instruction of the High Point Regional School District. He is completing his Ed.D. at Saint Peter's University. His dissertation is about the New Jersey Interdistrict School Choice Program. You can follow Robert on Twitter at @ZywickiR.