

No Longer the Only Game in Town: *Helping Traditional Public Schools Compete*

How school districts can help traditional public schools cope with the challenges of choice and competition

School choice is a growing part of the public school landscape. From charter schools to intra-district choice plans, from *No Child Left Behind* to vouchers, families have more choices than ever before. What all of this means for traditional public schools is a subject of great debate. Some people think choice is good for students and schools, while others worry that it will leave traditional public schools drained of essential resources and increasingly segregated.

What is often lost in these debates, however, is that the effects of choice on students and schools are not predetermined. Whether or not people's hopes and fears materialize depends on many factors, ranging from the rules governing choice schools to a city's school-aged demographics (see figure 1). *No Longer the Only Game in Town* takes a closer look at a key piece of this puzzle: how traditional public schools respond to competition from choice schools. What follows is a summary of the report's implications.

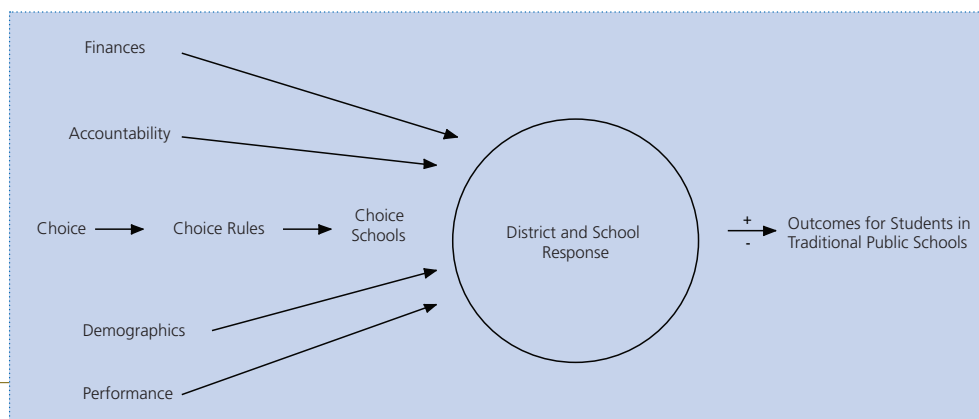
Perhaps the best advice for districts wanting to help traditional public schools compete is simply to bring a renewed sense of

urgency to their efforts to help schools improve in general. At the same time, districts, states, and philanthropies can also help traditional schools compete by rethinking systems for handling information, finance, transportation, and facilities that can make it harder to respond to choice. In particular, when it comes to helping schools compete, the report suggests the following:

DISTRICTS CAN HELP TRADITIONAL SCHOOLS COMPETE BY:

- ✓ **Recognizing they are in a competitive environment:** A top Milwaukee official noted that "the district, as a whole needs to be more conscious that you're operating in a market economy." One of the key things a superintendent can do to help traditional schools compete has to do with an attitude adjustment: acknowledging competition as a fact of life, and helping school leaders understand what it means for their schools.
- ✓ **Using multiple performance indicators to assess schools:** By using a broad set of indicators, districts can make informed judgments about school health, assess where individual schools stand within the market, and diagnose potential problems before they become intractable.
- ✓ **Building relationships with parents:** Getting the word out about what a district or school has to offer is an important part of competing. But school leaders in

Figure 1.
Effects of Choice on Students in Traditional Public Schools Depend on Many Factors



Milwaukee and Dayton realized that they also needed to recommit themselves to building trusting relationships with parents and students.

- ✓ **Answering choice with choice:** When district leaders in Milwaukee and Dayton described the strategies they used to help their schools compete, they pointed to a new range of schooling options they provided to fit different needs.
- ✓ **Taking oversight seriously and having a rational process for making hard choices:** Officials in Milwaukee and Dayton underscored that districts have to make some difficult decisions about intervening in chronically underperforming schools.
- ✓ **Managing facilities and transportation systems with an eye toward flexibility:** Districts with declining enrollment—whether the result of choice or not—quickly realize that having too many resources tied up in fixed costs can get in the way of helping traditional schools compete. Although there are no easy answers, district leaders might rethink the management of these systems and consider alternatives, like lease agreements for facilities or giving families vouchers for alternate transportation options.

STATE POLICYMAKERS CAN HELP TRADITIONAL SCHOOLS COMPETE BY:

- ✓ **Enhancing performance information:** A lack of comparable academic information can contribute to confusion at the district and school level about how to reach out to parents. To help remedy this, states should ensure that there is a range of performance information (including, for example, information on a school's "value added" performance) for students in both traditional and choice schools. Because many districts are already experiencing difficulty financing and maintaining their current systems, states should be prepared to help out with the additional costs of updating and increasing data collection and reporting mechanisms.
- ✓ **Improving financial systems:** Under the current finance systems in Wisconsin and Ohio, schools do not receive additional resources when they accept a student in the middle of the school year. A financial system with more frequent counts and disbursements would do a better job of aligning resources and enrollments in individual schools.
- ✓ **Tackling transportation:** Dealing with transportation costs is not just a local issue. To the degree that states are

involved in funding and regulating school transportation, they may need to rethink how they address the costs and logistics of actually moving children to the schools of their choice.

PHILANTHROPIES CAN HELP TRADITIONAL SCHOOLS COMPETE BY:

- ✓ **Investing in parent information:** Like districts and states, philanthropies can help parents make better comparisons between schools by providing them with more accurate and sophisticated tools to make informed choices. In Dayton, for example, the Fordham Foundation teamed up with the University of Dayton and GreatSchools.net to compile information on school performance and make it more parent friendly.
- ✓ **Investing in data analysis:** Philanthropies can help public schools compete by investing in analytical capacity that focuses on conducting school-by-school analyses of achievement, resource distribution, and current capacity.
- ✓ **Investing in leaders of traditional public schools:** Philanthropies can also invest in training district and school leaders on the skills necessary to compete—for example, on how to use new opportunities, such as site-based hiring and budgeting decisions, or on how to rethink their oversight role and what it demands.

The report suggests that rather than creating wholly new pressures requiring new responses, choice, especially in the broader context of enrollment decline, appears to shine a spotlight on the challenges districts already face and the need to confront them sooner rather than later. By focusing on the basics—monitoring performance, making connections with parents, providing schooling options, taking oversight seriously—and creating support systems that are better equipped to deal with new stresses associated with choice, traditional public schools may increase the odds that they will improve under competition, rather than be brought down by it.

FOR MORE INFORMATION:

No Longer the Only Game in Town was authored by Christine Campbell, Michael DeArmond, Kacey Guin, and Deborah Warnock. This report is the first in a series from *Doing School Choice Right* studies on how the implementation of school choice programs can affect outcomes. This initiative receives funding from the Lynde and Harry Bradley, Annie E. Casey, and Bill and Melinda Gates Foundations. To read the full report, please visit www.crpe.org.