

SNG-Nowlan-Choice all the rage in ed reform—10-1-12

Choice is all the rage in education reform

By Jim Nowlan

When I was going to my rural Illinois high school decades ago, students took the limited curriculum offered, no questions asked. If you acted up too much, you were kicked out into the cold, cruel world.

Today, in more and more states, students and parents are offered a smorgasbord of choices outside the local public school: vouchers to attend private schools; public charter schools; the right to choose another public school inside or outside your local district, and the option of attending the area community college for courses.

Gov. Mitch Daniels of neighboring Indiana went to the head of the class last year, if you will, in terms of ambitious reforms in which state money follows the student to any of several options that may seem best for the student and his parents.

The Daniels plan will soon make vouchers of money available to any student from low and low-middle income status to go to private non-profit, religious and for-profit schools. For high school students, there is no limit on the tuition that the government will spend so long as the student meets the means-testing.

Thousands of students are on waiting lists for Indiana's 60 public charter schools (Illinois has about 100 charters, mostly in Chicago). Daniels will make it easier for parents to convert failing schools into charters.

And Indiana students can apply to public schools outside their neighborhood and district, and their school funding will follow them.

Daniels goes further than choice options. His new program, enacted by a friendly Republican legislature, limits educator bargaining to wages and benefits, ends tenure for new teachers, and establishes merit rather than seniority as the basis for pay increases.

In Illinois, money follows the student only to charter schools, where they exist. The legislature has recently made it possible for the state board of education to approve new charters, effectively overriding local school boards that may be resisting.

Other options have been developing in Illinois. Juniors and seniors in my local school district in Stark County, southeast of the Quad Cities, are attending a Black Hawk College branch nearby for both vocational and college prep courses.

Students earn both high school and college credits, and for some students it amounts to almost a year of college credits while in high school. This makes it possible for students to graduate from college in three years.

[And then there is home schooling, which embraces about 40,000 youngsters in Illinois. Nobody knows the number for certain as parents are only required to register their students with regional offices of education, and no one is certain if all do so.]

To my south in Peoria County, regional schools superintendent Gerry Brookhart has established an alternative high school in a former state park for 60 students from his county who for various reasons could not handle the regular high schools.

The students weren't violent or major problems, but square pegs who couldn't fit into the round holes at the regular high schools. As a result, they were not attending or were failing.

Students are referred to the school in the park by guidance counselors.

The Peoria Regional High School at Wildlife Prairie Park has three full-time and two part-time teachers who work in five classrooms in close quarters that overlook the buffalo and deer out the windows.

Each student has, in effect, an Individual Education Plan, because their high school records include lots of deficits; the plan focuses on math, science and language arts. Some students take courses such as French on line.

This past year, 21 students received their high school diplomas. Students who probably wouldn't have made it otherwise.

So where will all this choice take us in American education? The evidence on charter school achievement is mixed. Some studies show that charter schools achieve less well on tests than regular public school students. Other studies identify some charter schools that perform much better than the regular schools.

Of course, low performing charters can easily be shuttered and high performing ones replicated.

Choice policies will certainly be a battleground in education in the years to come. Teacher unions charge that choice is aimed at destroying the public school tradition.

We have been trying to reform American schools since the 1980s, when national reports showed we were falling far behind competitor nations on achievement. And we haven't seen much progress since.

So I am all for more choices, which should spur competition and innovation. We can always ratchet back on those options that don't perform well.