

AN INVITATION TO
BuildingChoice.org

RAISING ACHIEVEMENT THROUGH
PUBLIC SCHOOL CHOICE



U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

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U.S. Department of Education

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December 2005

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FOREWORD

No Child Left Behind requires that parents receive more information—and more choices—than ever before about their children’s education and their community’s schools. In doing so, it empowers our nation’s parents to become successful advocates for their children.

At the same time, the law challenges districts in exciting new ways. In particular, as they strive to assist Title I schools in need of improvement, they also must ensure that students in these schools have additional education options, chiefly, free tutoring or the ability to transfer to another public school.

Many districts that have invested in public school choice as a vehicle to improve teaching and learning have been asking for help in managing their program so parents and children can realize the potential benefits. We are committed to providing that help.

Two years ago, the U.S. Department of Education’s Office of Innovation and Improvement published six *NCLB*-related “innovation guides,” four of which address how districts have been making public school choice programs work effectively. Now, I’m pleased to extend an invitation for you to visit an important new addition to the innovation series: BuildingChoice.org—a Web-based toolkit that shares practical information, examples, and tools from districts across the country that have been leading the way in offering choice.

I hope this booklet will entice you and other district decision-makers to explore this new online resource. The information at BuildingChoice.org will help districts expand education opportunities for families, moving all of us a step closer to making good on the promise to provide every child with a quality education.

Margaret Spellings
U.S. Secretary of Education

NEED HELP WITH YOUR CHOICE PROGRAM? IT'S A CLICK AWAY.

In many places across the country, public school students no longer automatically attend their neighborhood school. Instead, parents may decide that their child's needs are better met elsewhere, for example, at a small alternative school, an arts magnet school, a charter technology high school, or a media academy operating within a larger school. They may choose a school across town or one next door. They might even choose a virtual school, which has no building at all. A growing number of parents have such options thanks to public school choice programs run by school districts across the country.

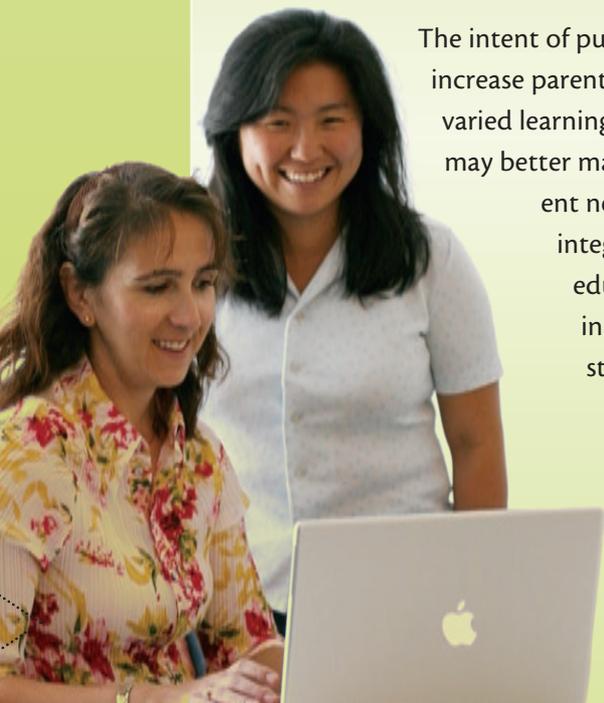
The intent of public school choice is to increase parent involvement, provide varied learning environments that may better match children's different needs, increase school integration, and encourage educators' creativity—all in the service of improved student achievement outcomes.

If you've been thinking about starting a choice program in your

own district, or improving the one you already have, lessons learned from districts that already have choice programs can make your job easier. These districts have already encountered and addressed the kinds of practical challenges that are inevitable in getting a choice program up and running. Now you can learn from their experiences.

This publication is your invitation to learn more about BuildingChoice.org, a new Web-based toolkit brought to you by the U. S. Department of Education's Office of Innovation and Improvement. The online toolkit provides a variety of practical resources drawn from diverse districts across the country that have been identified as having promising practices related to school choice. It is online to help you easily read, learn from, share, adopt, and adapt the resources.

If you have already researched the issue of choice and are committed to implementing it, you may want to jump immediately to the "How" section of this publication, starting on page 11, which introduces you to the toolkit. Those who know less about choice as an education reform strategy may want to begin by getting more background in the "What" and "Why" sections, beginning on page 5. Whichever approach you decide to take, be sure to make time to peruse all of the resources available at BuildingChoice.org. We feel certain you'll find them helpful.



WHAT IS PUBLIC SCHOOL CHOICE?

Public school choice is just that: giving families options within a public school system. Choice comes in a variety of forms called by a variety of names.

While *No Child Left Behind* has underscored the importance of public school choice, the concept of choice is not new. Some rural communities have a history of choice based on necessity. In Maine, for example, the legislature enacted a law in 1903 that guaranteed every child a high school education. But lawmakers recognized that not every small town could support a high school, so the statute required towns that did not operate secondary schools to pay tuition for residents to attend a school elsewhere.¹ There are many such examples of choice initiatives throughout the nation.

ALTERNATIVE SCHOOLS

The most generic term for schools of choice is “alternative.” Educators and parents alike have long recognized that a standard school program does not work for everyone. So over the years, in different places and different fashions, alternative schools have been developed to meet the needs and interests of diverse students. These days, the term is often used for small secondary schools designed to provide a nurturing environment for students considered at risk of school failure; federal statistics show that some 610,000 students are now enrolled in such schools.²

MAGNET SCHOOLS

Choice evolved as a key strategy for voluntary school desegregation in the 1960s and led to the term “magnet schools,” that is, schools intended to attract diverse student populations. Until the early 70’s, federal district courts had routinely issued court-ordered desegregation mandates to school systems, requiring them to racially integrate their schools. The courts discovered from the experience of several districts that more desegregation—and more positive integration—would occur if parents were instead offered an appealing alternative to their neighborhood school. Districts across the country began introducing voluntary school desegregation choice programs. In the mid-70s, the Houston Independent School District described the effect of its Performing and Visual Arts School as working like a “magnet” in attracting students.³ By 1980, most major cities had systems with magnet schools and had admission policies designed to balance the student population, adhering carefully to legal requirements that have evolved over the decades. More than 1,700 magnet schools were reported in 2002–03.⁴

CHARTER SCHOOLS

Charter schools are public schools of choice that may have very traditional education programs or may have the same kind of underlying themes as found at magnet or alternative schools. What makes them distinctive is their exemption from

ONE BUILDING WITH MULTIPLE SCHOOLS

Built in 1923 as an all-girls commercial high school, Julia Richman High School flourished for many decades. But by the 1990s, after years of budget cuts, unsuccessful reorganization, and academic decline, a new approach was needed for this New York City school.

In 1995, the building was redesigned to house several small autonomous learning communities instead of one schoolwide education program. Collectively, the individual programs addressed multiple ages because, as one planner noted, “at the heart of what we were trying to establish was a strong community—a setting that would provide the most natural way for people to learn. Strong communities are multigenerational.” She also pointed out that adolescents look at the world differently when younger children are around: “It softens their way of interacting with each other.”

For these reasons, the creation of the Julia Richman Education Complex called for an infant-toddler center for the children of teen parents, an elementary school, a middle school, four high schools, and a teacher center. The complex is governed by the Building Council. Each school principal, along with the buildingwide program director, sits on the council, which meets at least once a week and is responsible for all decisions regarding the complex.⁵

many local and state regulations that apply to traditional public schools. These exemptions allow parents, teachers, community leaders, education entrepreneurs, and others greater flexibility to innovate, create, and provide students with increased educational options. Charter schools must be sponsored by designated local, state, or other organizations charged with monitoring their quality and integrity while holding them accountable for academic results and fiscal practices.

Implementation of charter schools began with legislation in Minnesota in 1991, and 40 states now have charter laws. As of April 2005, the nation had approximately 3,400 charter schools, 450 of them new in the 2004–05 school year.⁶ The vast majority of charter schools are authorized by a local school district.⁷

SCHOOLS WITHIN SCHOOLS

“Schools within schools” are autonomous subunits within large public schools. Placing autonomous new schools within existing structures has several advantages, including more efficient use of space and access to some shared programming.⁸ Districts seeking to meet the requirements of *No Child Left Behind* with limited facilities funding are among those turning to the school-within-school model.

Any school within a school is a legally separate entity, administering its own budget and planning its own programs. However, some elements, such as school safety and building operation, may remain vested with the principal of the larger school facility, and use of shared space is then negotiated.⁹ Administrators have devised a variety of plans in accordance with the special circumstances and resources of their districts.¹⁰ For an example of multiple co-located schools in New York City, see “One Building for Multiple Schools” (to the left).

VIRTUAL SCHOOLS

Virtual schools are made possible by technology advances. Instead of taking classes in a school building, students can

receive their education using a computer. Virtual schools have an organized curriculum. Depending on the state and district, students can take the full curriculum or individual classes. Some school districts use these online schools to offer classes that help students learn at their own pace. This type of instruction also is known as “distance learning.” Approximately 40,000 to 50,000 students in 37 states are participating in online courses through approximately 2,400 publicly funded Internet-based charter schools and state and district virtual schools.¹¹

Virtual schools and distance learning initiatives, such as the Illinois, Kentucky, and Michigan virtual high schools, are primarily funded by individual states and designed to meet each state’s education needs. Arkansas is launching a statewide virtual school under the federal Voluntary Public School Choice grant program. Regional initiatives, like those in the Clovis Unified School District in California and the Jeffco Net Academy in Colorado, are examples of home-grown programs in which regions have pooled teaching and technology resources to meet community needs.¹²

OPEN ENROLLMENT

Open enrollment is a form of choice in which parents can ask to have their child attend any school in the district or, even, in a different district entirely, through “inter-district choice.” An open-enrollment district may offer

charter schools or other nontraditional options in the mix of parental choices along with more traditional options like “neighborhood” schools. State law often requires or encourages open enrollment; 33 states have interdistrict open-enrollment laws, and 15 require districts to offer open enrollment.¹³ Some districts use open enrollment as their main vehicle for choice. See “Open Enrollment in Seattle,” for example.

OPEN ENROLLMENT IN SEATTLE

The Seattle School District, with an enrollment of 48,000, offers one of the most comprehensive open-enrollment plans in the country. Parents are encouraged to consider any public schools that interest them for their children. The district advises them to identify their three top choices, and over 90 percent of students are assigned to one of those three.

The process for secondary schools differs from that for middle and elementary schools. Provided there is space, Seattle’s high schools are open to students from anywhere in the district. In contrast, the district’s elementary and middle schools are clustered by geographic region (with at least one alternative school in each region). Students at these grade levels are then assigned to a corresponding “reference area” based on home address. They are given priority and transportation to schools within their region. Although they may choose from beyond their region, they receive no priority and transportation is not provided unless their attendance benefits integration. When there are more applicants than spaces at a particular school, “tiebreaker” factors are considered, such as sibling preference, distance from school, and factors that contribute to diversity. Lotteries also are used.

Enrollment centers throughout the district provide basic information about schools and answer questions about enrollment procedures. Parents have the right to appeal school assignment.¹³

WHY IS CHOICE IMPORTANT?

For parents, the appeal of choice is obvious: They get to pick a school that's a good match for their child rather than having to send their student to a particular school *just* because it's closest to where they live. But what does choice offer to you as a district? Putting an effective choice program in place is no easy feat. So why bother?

The biggest potential payoff of having an effective school choice program is improved student learning. Yet many districts first look to choice for other reasons. For example, some seek to reverse an enrollment decline caused by dissatisfied parents who send their children to parochial or

independent schools or move to a different district entirely. In similar fashion, some districts adopt choice to improve *student* satisfaction, thereby reducing absences and raising average-daily-attendance revenue. Other districts turn to choice to meet *No Child Left Behind's* requirement that students be allowed to transfer to another school if their own has consistently failed to meet achievement targets. Choice has something to offer in all these areas but it's as a lever for raising student achievement that a public school choice program really earns its keep.

CHOICE ALONE IS NOT ENOUGH

Adopting choice doesn't automatically yield higher student achievement, of course. *School Choice: Doing It The Right Way Makes a Difference*, a 2003 report by the Brookings Institute's National Working Commission on Choice in K–12 Education, emphasizes this point.¹⁴

Choice is not a teacher, a classroom, or an instructional resource. If choice affects what students learn, it works indirectly, by leading to changes in what students experience, read, and hear. The same is true about other possible outcomes of choice. Choice forms only part of an institutional framework in which particular events can occur (p. 10).

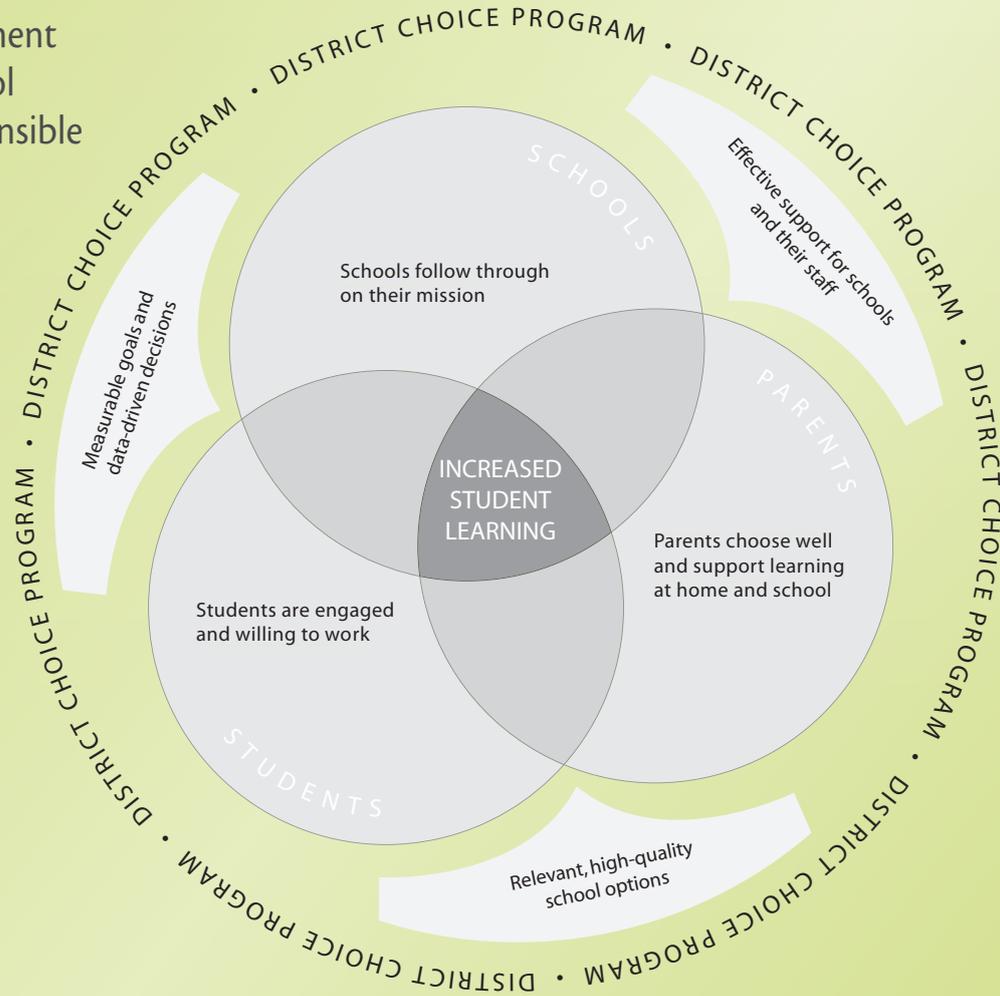
The theory is that for choice to lead to achievement, multiple players must carry out their respective responsibilities, as illustrated in figure 1. The district must start by offering

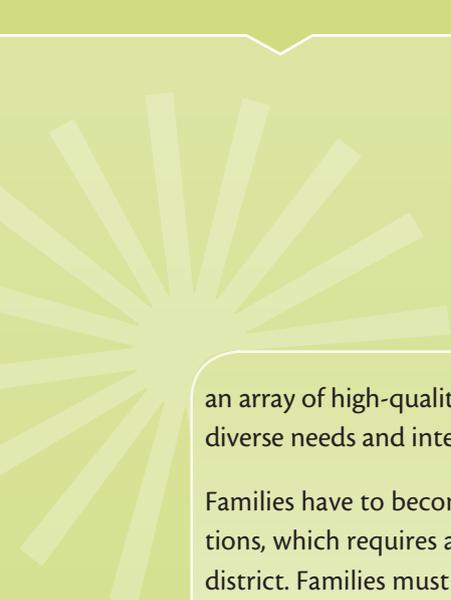
DISTRICTS TURN TO CHOICE FOR MULTIPLE REASONS:

- * Improving student learning and education equity
- * Increasing community involvement and commitment
- * Decreasing racial isolation and improving school integration
- * Improving student attendance as a result of students and parents choosing the school
- * Increasing district budgets because of increasing student population and average daily attendance
- * Increasing parent support and involvement in schools
- * Providing alternative types of learning environments that may better match children's needs
- * Encouraging the creativity of educators
- * Promoting focused, cohesive school programs
- * Spurring school improvement through competition

FIGURE 1.

Generating Achievement through Public School Choice: Who's Responsible





an array of high-quality schooling options that address the diverse needs and interests of constituent families.

Families have to become knowledgeable about these options, which requires a joint effort between families and the district. Families must then make the right choice for their children. They must opt for a school not necessarily because it's closest to home or because it's where a child's friends are going (although those factors may warrant consideration), but because when *all* factors are considered—chief among them, the education program—a particular school looks like the best match for a child. But this is not enough.

In fact, choice stimulates parental involvement. No matter what school they attend, students are likely to have better academic outcomes if the adults at home are supportive of their efforts and their school. A choice program seeds and nurtures that support by encouraging parents and guardians to carefully consider all the schooling options and to pick the one that seems most promising for their children. Those whose children are admitted to a school that has engendered the family's interest and enthusiasm are more likely to stay closely involved as their children progress through school. They also become the school's best allies in doing what it takes to ensure that all of its students get the best education possible. Choice works best in districts with vibrant parent involvement strategies. But even this doesn't suffice for higher achievement.

Students must be engaged in their education, contributing to their own success by working hard. Attending a school that is a good match for them helps this happen.

Finally, for higher achievement to result, the school of choice must deliver on its promises. When teachers, parents, and other stakeholders come together to improve an existing school so as to make it more appealing in a choice system or to develop a new school from scratch, those involved commit to a shared vision. They must then carry through and effectively implement their mission-driven education program. Only then can the rich potential of a school of choice be fully realized.

The power of choice as one strategy to strengthen public education extends beyond the walls of individual schools of choice. Having such schools also can prompt improvements in other district schools. Faced with the possibility of losing enrollment when choice becomes available, many neighborhood schools check out the competition and examine their own program to see how to make themselves more attractive. One superintendent whose district has a choice program says the drive to show that “our school is as good as yours” has had a “ripple effect across the district,” with traditional schools pushing themselves harder and all working to continuously improve. Thus, many districts that begin a choice program for a specific purpose come to see it as part of a larger systemic improvement effort.

HOW CAN I MAKE CHOICE HAPPEN?

Developing a public school choice program can seem daunting. But the good news is you don't need to reinvent the wheel. Choice is already thriving in hundreds of diverse districts across the country, and much can be learned from their experiences. Their efforts have yielded stories and examples that offer ideas and insights, as well as tools and artifacts that can be adapted or used as models. Such resources are now available at BuildingChoice.org.

The screenshot shows the BuildingChoice.org homepage. At the top, there is a navigation bar with links for Home, Tools, Links, Profiled Districts, and Glossary, along with a search box and an 'Adv. Search' button. Below the navigation bar is the BuildingChoice.org logo and a horizontal menu with categories: Background, Create a Vision, Communicate with Parents, Manage Operations, Support Schools, and Evaluate the Program. The main content area features a featured article titled 'Raising achievement through public school choice' with a photo of a woman. To the right of the article is a 'Find Resources' search box with dropdown menus for 'Any Topic' and 'Any Type', and a 'FIND' button. Below the article are sections for 'Welcome', 'What and Why?', 'Hot Topics', and 'Profiled Districts'. The 'Hot Topics' section lists links for 'NCLB', 'Hard-to-reach parents', and 'Funding'. The 'Profiled Districts' section has a dropdown menu for 'Profiled Districts'.

To the right is a screen shot of the BuildingChoice.org homepage. Note the easy access to hot topics, profiled districts, and tools.

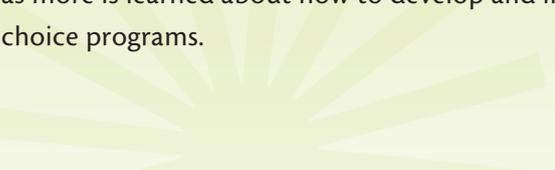




Don't expect to find a universal action plan or a step-wise checklist. When it comes to choice, districts start at different points, have different needs and resources, and operate in different contexts. BuildingChoice.org was conceived with this variability in mind. Its offerings are compiled from a range of districts, some like yours, some not. The point isn't to identify the districts most similar to yours, but to look across all the practices and choose those that are most workable for your circumstances or that can serve as a model for tailoring something more suitable to your needs. So keep an open mind.

In this initial stage, the Web site includes materials drawn primarily from districts studied in 2004 for a series of U.S.

Department of Education guides about promising practices in American public education. Four of the guides highlight innovative programs for increasing parents' public school options: *Creating Strong District Choice Programs*, *Creating Successful Magnet School Programs*, *Creating Strong Supplemental Educational Services Programs*, and *Creating Successful Charter Schools*.¹⁶ In addition, the Web site highlights emerging practices from sites funded under the federal Voluntary Public School Choice program.¹⁷ The site will be expanded over time as more is learned about how to develop and improve choice programs.



RESOURCES FOR BUILDING YOUR CHOICE PROGRAM

BuildingChoice.org offers several types of resources:

- * **Promising practice vignettes** describing how an existing choice district has handled some aspect of developing or operating its program
- * **Sample materials** such as forms, brochures, and meeting agendas that a district has created and used as part of a promising practice
- * **Tools**, such as templates and processes developed specifically for the toolkit for your use in creating or managing a choice program
- * **Links** that direct you to other helpful Web sites, articles, and organizations
- * **Profiles** of districts experienced with public school choice

Home Tools Links Profiled Districts Glossary Search Go Adv. Search

BUILDING CHOICE.ORG

Background Create a Vision **Communicate with Parents** Manage Operations Support Schools Evaluate the Program

Communicate with Parents Print Email

“School choice is part of the strategy to give every child an excellent education. It is amazing what can happen when parents get involved. School choice gives you more opportunities to achieve your expectations from your child.”

Margaret Spellings, Secretary, U.S. Department of Education



Choice isn't really choice if you don't know you have it or don't know how to exercise it. And if information about school choice only reaches or is understood by a portion of eligible families, then the system is inherently inequitable. Thus, any district embarking on or expanding a choice program must put careful thought into how to reach and successfully communicate the options to its target audience. In deciding what strategies to pursue, it is important to assess the communication needs of local families and consider the available time and budget. Then, use that data to guide communications decisions.

Build Awareness
Districts must develop an effective communication campaign to inform parents of the choice options in the district. This includes assessing community communication needs, determining the budget for communication, and creating parent-friendly materials.

Assist Parents
Districts with successful school choice programs understand that they must help parents make decisions for their children's education. Districts have created help lines, resource centers, and school kiosks to provide parents with detailed information to aid their decisionmaking.

Engage Community Organizations
Many districts have learned that parents are more likely to receive and act on information they receive from trusted community sources. Partnering with local churches, the YMCA, and chapters of the NAACP has helped districts expand their reach and communicate with parents about school choice options.

Section Tools

- [NCLB Communication Organizer](#)
- [Non-AYP Notification Letter Template](#)
- [Elementary School Visit Checklist for Parents](#)
- [Parent Organizer Checklist](#)
- [Marketing Planning Template](#)
- [Media Flowchart](#)

BuildingChoice.org is organized around five action areas that are ordered in a general progression from planning through implementation to evaluation for continuous improvement. The second half of this publication introduces these areas:

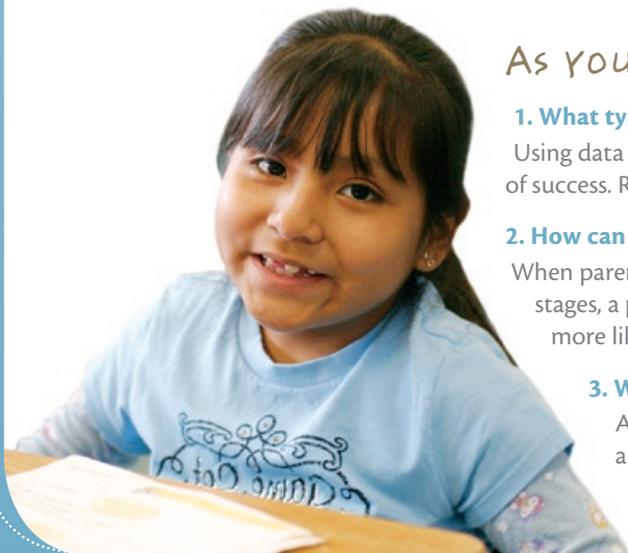
- * Create a vision
- * Communicate with parents
- * Manage operations
- * Support schools
- * Evaluate the program

To give you a flavor of the kinds of help available at BuildingChoice.org, the following sections also include illustrative examples of its Web-based resources.

To the left, to help orient you to the site, is a screen shot of the Communicate with Parents area of BuildingChoice.org. Note that this section of the site is organized by three subtopics: Build Awareness, Assist Parents, and Engage Community Organizations.

CREATE A VISION

Districts with thriving choice programs stress the importance of starting with a shared vision that clarifies the district's purpose in offering choice. When it is based on the needs and interests of the community, a clearly articulated vision can engender the broad stakeholder buy-in necessary for success. With the vision defined, a planning team can then map out the steps for bringing it to fruition—researching, creating timelines, and beginning to identify the innumerable decisions that must be made on the way to a successful program.



AS YOU BEGIN TO FORMULATE A VISION, CONSIDER:

1. What types of data should inform planning?

Using data to construct understanding before making decisions increases the likelihood of success. Reviewing the results of those decisions leads to continuous improvement.

2. How can we involve stakeholders in creating a vision for choice in our district?

When parents and others with an interest in choice are invited into the early planning stages, a program is more likely to reflect community interests, and stakeholders are more likely to champion it.

3. What critical planning activities should we consider?

A strategic plan must work on two levels, identifying goals, objectives, strategies, and tasks that (1) fall within the purview of the central office and (2) are the responsibility of individual schools of choice.

PROMISING PRACTICE vignettes

- * Survey parents on options
- * Create a community council
- * Partner with local businesses
- * Define guiding principles
- * Identify the data that matter (see next page)

SAMPLE materials

- * Growth and diversity report
- * NCLB implementation timeline
- * Community council by-laws
- * Advisory committee meeting minutes
- * Calendar of events

tools

- * Checklist for data analysis
- * Community meeting tips
- * Guidelines for creating a vision
- * Strategic planning template
- * Action planning template

Here's a sample of what the Web site offers.

Below you'll find an example of a **Promising Practice Vignette** from BuildingChoice.org. This vignette describes how one district is using data in planning and implementing its choice program. The blue text represents hyperlinks that in the Web version will take you to related sample material or to another related Web site. Additional related materials found on BuildingChoice.org are listed to the right of the vignette.

Home Tools Links Profiled Districts Glossary Search Go Adv. Search

BUILDING CHOICE.ORG

Background Create a Vision Communicate with Parents Manage Operations Support Schools Evaluate the Program

DISTRICT PRACTICE: Identify the Data That Matter Print Email

From: [Wake County Public School System](#)

Take Stock

Articulate a Vision

Develop a Plan

Sample Materials:

- [Healthy Schools Criteria PDF](#)
- [Demographics Growth and Diversity Report PDF](#)
- [Parent, Staff, and Student Perception Survey PDF](#)

In creating and carrying out its vision for choice, the Wake County Public School System has relied heavily on a wide range of data to inform decisionmaking. Exactly what data to collect is driven to a great extent by two sets of criteria: Guiding Principles at the program level and [Healthy Schools Criteria](#) at the school level. Both are derived from the vision and intended to ensure that all choice-related policy and action are aligned to it. Because these criteria articulate what's important to the district, they help drive what data gets examined. For example, because one aim is to have balanced student diversity at each school, the district collects demographic information for each school, the program as a whole, and the general population served by the district.

The district's Office of Growth Management carefully monitors the changing county demographics and rapid growth. Drawing from the U. S. Census, the state of North Carolina, and district databases, it determines and reports:

- County and student population,
- Current enrollment (districtwide and in each school),
- Long-term enrollment projections,
- Ethnic and racial diversity,
- Languages spoken at home, and
- Socioeconomic diversity.

This information is published in reports, such as the [Wake County Demographics Growth and Diversity Report](#), which are distributed to staff and the community to keep stakeholders abreast of changes within the district. The district also monitors school performance, results from a [Parent, Staff and Student Perception Survey](#), current and planned housing developments, current choosers for their existing choice options, current education-related needs of local businesses, teacher turnover, and community resources to support individual choice options (e.g., local museums). One important goal in the district's monitoring effort is to identify the performance and popularity of each school to see if there are high-performing, high-demand programs that should be replicated.

COMMUNICATE WITH PARENTS

Choice isn't really choice if you don't know you have it or don't know how to exercise it. And if information about school choice only reaches or is understood by a portion of eligible families, then the system is inherently inequitable. Thus, any district embarking on or expanding a choice program must put careful thought into how to reach and successfully communicate the options to its target audiences. In deciding what strategies to pursue, it is important to assess the communication needs of local families and to consider the available time and available budget for addressing them. Then, use that data to guide communications decisions.

AS YOU PLAN HOW TO COMMUNICATE, CONSIDER:

1. How can we build awareness of the choice options in our district?

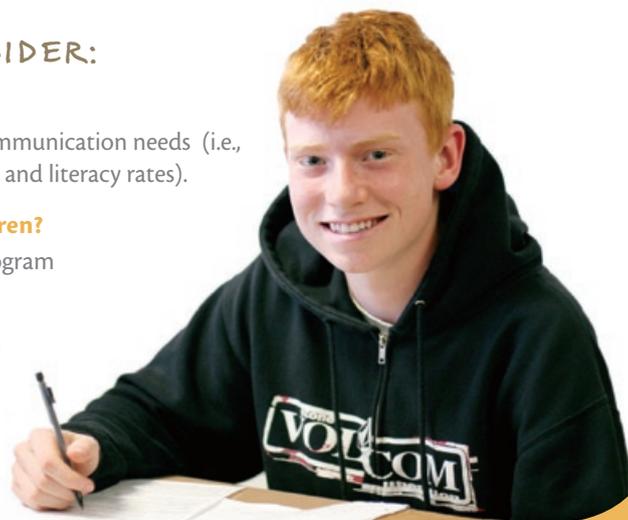
Any awareness-building plan should start with an assessment of community communication needs (i.e., identifying home languages, cultural context, hard-to-reach parent populations, and literacy rates).

2. How can we assist parents in making the best decisions for their children?

To make informed decisions, parents need adequate data on each school's program and performance.

3. How can we engage community leaders and organizations to help connect with our hard-to-reach parents?

If parents receive information from people or organizations they trust, they are more likely to accept and act on it.



Here's a sample of what the Web site offers.

PROMISING PRACTICE vignettes

- * Create an Online School Choice Center (see next page)
- * Research parent information needs
- * Personally assist parents
- * Communicate NCLB information
- * Enlist community organizations

SAMPLE materials

- * School brochures
- * Television advertisement
- * Resource center pamphlet
- * School tour checklist
- * Report to the community (see page 18)
- * School comparison matrix (see page 19)

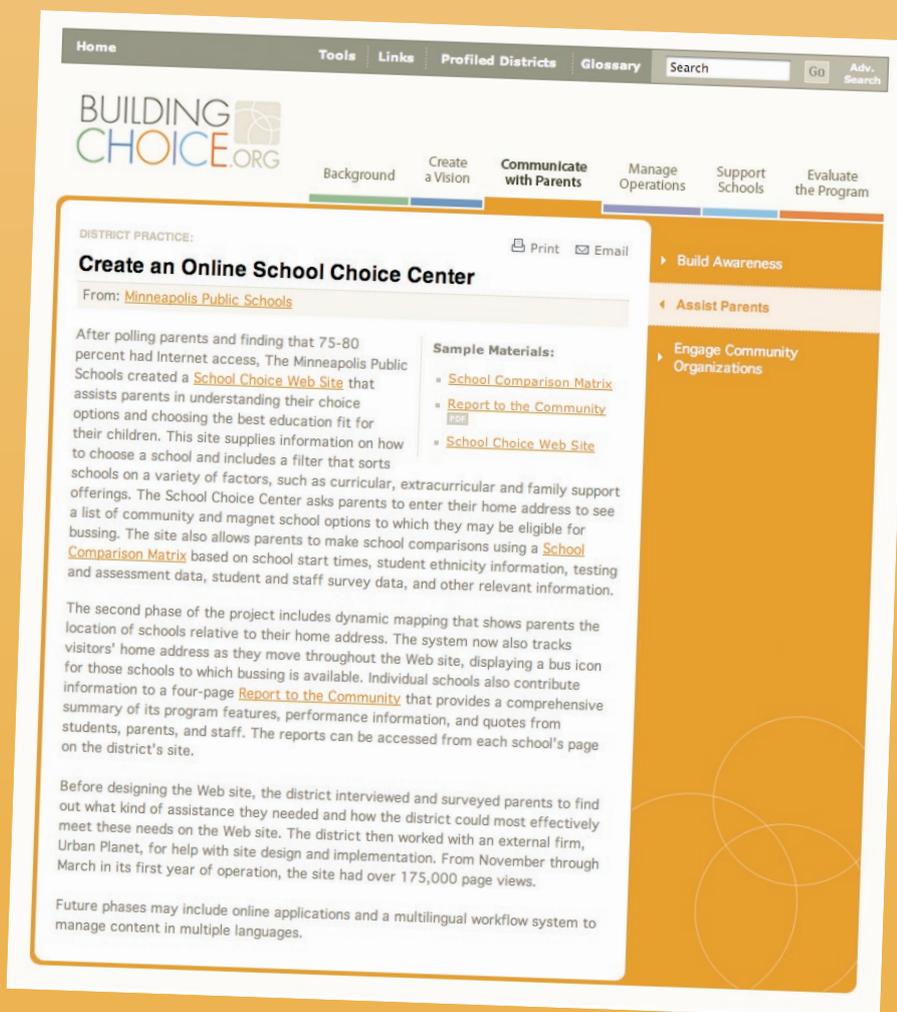
tools

- * Notification letter templates
- * NCLB communication checklist
- * Media plan template
- * School visit checklist for parents
- * Parent organizer checklist

Giving Parents the Data They Need to Make Good Decisions

Due to *NCLB* requirements and advances in technology, school performance data are increasingly available. Parents and the general public can see how schools are doing at making adequate yearly progress (AYP). This accountability will drive improvement across the system. Having access to these and other data will also help families judge the quality and characteristics of schools to make more informed choices.

Here and on the following pages, you'll see several related resources available from BuildingChoice.org. The **Promising Practice Vignette** on the right and the sample materials that follow paint a broad picture of how one district is helping parents to use a variety of data in considering school options for their children.



The screenshot displays the BuildingChoice.org website interface. At the top, there is a navigation bar with links for Home, Tools, Links, Profiled Districts, Glossary, and a search box. Below this is a secondary navigation bar with categories: Background, Create a Vision, Communicate with Parents (highlighted), Manage Operations, Support Schools, and Evaluate the Program. The main content area features a vignette titled "Create an Online School Choice Center" from Minneapolis Public Schools. The vignette text describes the district's process of polling parents, creating a web site, and implementing dynamic mapping. A sidebar on the right lists resources: Build Awareness, Assist Parents, and Engage Community Organizations. A "Sample Materials" section lists links for School Comparison Matrix, Report to the Community PDF, and School Choice Web Site.

BUILDING CHOICE.ORG

Home Tools Links Profiled Districts Glossary Search Go Adv. Search

Background Create a Vision **Communicate with Parents** Manage Operations Support Schools Evaluate the Program

DISTRICT PRACTICE: Print Email

Create an Online School Choice Center

From: [Minneapolis Public Schools](#)

After polling parents and finding that 75-80 percent had Internet access, The Minneapolis Public Schools created a [School Choice Web Site](#) that assists parents in understanding their choice options and choosing the best education fit for their children. This site supplies information on how to choose a school and includes a filter that sorts schools on a variety of factors, such as curricular, extracurricular and family support offerings. The School Choice Center asks parents to enter their home address to see a list of community and magnet school options to which they may be eligible for bussing. The site also allows parents to make school comparisons using a [School Comparison Matrix](#) based on school start times, student ethnicity information, testing and assessment data, student and staff survey data, and other relevant information.

The second phase of the project includes dynamic mapping that shows parents the location of schools relative to their home address. The system now also tracks visitors' home address as they move throughout the Web site, displaying a bus icon for those schools to which bussing is available. Individual schools also contribute information to a four-page [Report to the Community](#) that provides a comprehensive summary of its program features, performance information, and quotes from students, parents, and staff. The reports can be accessed from each school's page on the district's site.

Before designing the Web site, the district interviewed and surveyed parents to find out what kind of assistance they needed and how the district could most effectively meet these needs on the Web site. The district then worked with an external firm, Urban Planet, for help with site design and implementation. From November through March in its first year of operation, the site had over 175,000 page views.

Future phases may include online applications and a multilingual workflow system to manage content in multiple languages.

Sample Materials:

- [School Comparison Matrix](#)
- [Report to the Community PDF](#)
- [School Choice Web Site](#)

Build Awareness

Assist Parents

Engage Community Organizations

Below you'll find, as an example of **Sample Material** on BuildingChoice.org, a portion of one school's Report to the Community. The full report is included on the site.

North High Community School

Report to the Community 2005

MP/IS

Michael Favor, Principal
1500 James Avenue North
Minneapolis, MN 55411

E-mail Contact:
north@mpls.k12.mn.us

Grades 9-12, Hours: 8:30am -- 3:00pm
Phone: 612-668-1700
Fax: 612-668-1770

Web: <http://north.mpls.k12.mn.us>

Our School

- Four days per week: 6 - 55 minute instructional periods.
- One day per week: 6 - 44 minute instructional periods and 1 - 50 minute advisory period
- Area Learning Center for credit make-up 3:15 - 5:15 (math, science, social studies and English)
- Community Education Programs - evenings and weekends

Our Vision:
North Community High School is a caring community committed to academic excellence, lifelong learning, and diversity.

Our Mission is to:

- Provide multiple learning options and programming to prepare students for life.
- Be aware of trends and research in education in order to make dynamic change.
- Continually assess and use information to guide changes in content, instructional strategies and student performance.
- Build a community of learners that respects individual differences and accepts responsibility for standards and appropriate behaviors.

North Community High School (NCHS) is rich in diversity.

- Students come from all over the city.
- Our students bring various talents and interests in the areas of academics, business, technology, fine arts and athletics.
- Achieving academic growth and excellence through development of individual talents continues to be the primary goal of our school.

The focus of the instructional design at NCHS includes four small learning communities (SLCs). Each of these communities brings students and staff with common interests together to achieve the following objectives:

- Implement curriculum that provides relevant, interdisciplinary instruction and assessment utilizing research-based best practices in education.
- Integrate state graduation standards into instruction and learning.
- Integrate technology as a learning and decision making tool.
- Support high expectations and academic rigor for each student.

Each small learning community at NCHS offers unique educational experiences to students. Highlights of these include:

Our Arts and Communication SLC utilizes partnerships with local artists, theatres, foundations and businesses to enrich the lives of our students and community through numerous performance and exhibition opportunities. A&C students will find a fully operational, 24-hour FM-radio station (KBEM) and a television production studio complete with digital cameras and processing equipment. These experiences ultimately lead to live on-air work through KBEM for students in upper level courses. Journalism students may combine work with radio and TV along with more traditional print media to experience a true 21st century education.

A highlight of the CCEIT learning community is its certification programs in computer repair, networking, and visual basic programming. These courses provide students with hands-on real world learning that leads to marketable job skills. We also are a certified

Continued on Page 2

From the Heart

"Teachers at North would challenge us. You could stack up the education I got against any private school. I have friends that work for NASA. We'd see classmates going to engineering programs with full scholarships. What I've done is not out of reach for any student. Minneapolis Public Schools offers these types of opportunities to everyone. You just have to decide what you want to do with them." — Terra Cole, 1996 Alum of North High School, Pursuing Ph.D. in educational policy at U of M

Northwest Achievement Levels Test*

The NALT is administered each year to 9th graders. Growth is determined by comparing the MBST given in grade 8 with the NALT given in grade 9. The figures below reflect the academic growth of our continuously enrolled students from April 2004 to April 2005. Nationally, about 56% of students made one year's growth in one year's time.

	All Students	English Language Learners	Special Education
Reading	41%/6%	60%/6%	42%/6%
Math	34%/6%	29%/6%	43%/6%

* Groups of less than five students are not reported.

School Environment: Safety and Respect

Responses from Students* Agree or Strongly Agree

	Our School	District
I feel safe in my school.	67%	76%
I trust adults in my school to keep me safe.	71%	72%
Students in my school show respect for teachers.	30%	40%
The teachers in this school treat me (students) with respect.	82%	85%

Responses from Staff Agree or Strongly Agree

	Our School	District
I feel safe in my school building.	85%	88%
The adults at my school are able to provide a safe environment for students.	89%	88%
Students in my school show respect for staff of all races and ethnic backgrounds.	52%	75%
Staff in my school show respect for staff of all races and ethnic backgrounds.	89%	95%

* Student surveys are given to 9th, 10th and 11th graders. Reported results are for the highest grade level at any given school (i.e. 7th grade results for K-8 schools). District averages are based on school type (i.e. K-8, K-8 & 9-12). District staff survey averages are district wide averages.

Equity Progress — No Child Left Behind

district high schools, Edison, Henry, North, St. Andrew, Washburn, Broadway and Wellstone were held accountable on attendance rates.

is not changes due to sample size. The target rate is 9% or .1% improvement from previous year AYP (below 80% in 2004 AYP). For attendance rate, or .1% improvement from previous year AYP (below 90% in 2005 AYP).

Department of Education not only keeps track of the attendance rate or graduation rate, but also look at proficiency (MCA Grade 10 Reading & Grade

Equity Yearly Progress

Average Daily Attendance		Graduation	
School	Target Rate	School	Target Rate
90%	88%	79%	72%
89%	88%	83%	80%
87%	87%	67%	00%
91%	90%	77%	75%
88%	85%	75%	50%
90%	90%	69%	76%
90%	90%	71%	75%
86%	85%	64%	46%
90%	88%	82%	80%

Test (MBST)*

Students who have not yet passed the reading writing section is administered for the areas below reflect the percent of students

Percentage of Students Making a Year's Growth

	All Students	English Language Learners	Special Education
Reading	41%/6%	60%/6%	42%/6%
Math	34%/6%	29%/6%	43%/6%

Age of Students

English Language Learners	Special Education
41%/34%	22%/20%
29%/19%	04%/06%
46%/47%	24%/46%

ACT

English, math, reading, and science

District	State	Nation
26	22.2	20.9

Below you'll find another example of **Sample Material** from BuildingChoice.org. This is a screen shot of a school comparison matrix from the Web site of the district introduced in the promising practice vignette on page 17. The matrix is accessible through a link on BuildingChoice.org.

"Excellence in Education for Minneapolis' Future" MPS Home | Site Map

MINNEAPOLIS PUBLIC SCHOOLS Search →



Minneapolis Schools' Choice Center for the 2006-2007 school year

Home > Find Your School! Print View

 [Enter your address](#) to find out which schools have busing available for your neighborhood

School Comparisons

To view comparative data for each school, click on the tabs. To sort the data, click on the category (i.e. Enrollment). Clicking it a second time sorts the data from greatest to least. The data contained in this section is accurate at the time of release. As new data becomes available, we will integrate it into the system. For more comparative school data, please visit the Minneapolis Schools [Research and Evaluation Department](#)

School	School Profile		Demographics		Staff Info		School Climate			Testing & Assessment		
	NALT year's growth reading	NALT year's growth math	MCA gr 3 reading	MCA gr 3 math	MCA gr 5 reading	MCA gr 5 math	MCA gr 7 reading	MCA gr 7 math				
Andersen (Open)	64%	55%	48%	49%	55%	43%	55%	50%				
Cityview Performing Arts Magnet	44%	35%	33%	37%	33%	44%	32%	25%				
Emerson Spanish Immersion Learning Center	43%	40%	58%	48%	62%	63%	47%	62%				
Jefferson Community	55%	54%	45%	64%	35%	42%	46%	60%				
Lucy Laney @ Cleveland Park	34%	35%	35%	29%	45%	56%	50%	48%				
Marcy	65%	62%	72%	71%	67%	72%	57%	62%				
Nellie Stone Johnson	40%	33%	33%	38%	68%	68%	38%	28%				
Tuttle Community	48%	43%	91%	86%	39%	46%	52%	45%				

MANAGE OPERATIONS

Developing appealing choice options won't matter if students never take advantage of them because parents are turned off by an unwieldy assignment system, students can't get to school on time, there isn't a good match between teachers and programs, or a facility isn't adequate for the choice program it houses. Smooth operations are requisite to the success of a choice program. An operations plan should be carefully thought out, flexible and open-ended enough to allow for growth, attentive to the needs of all participants, and affordable enough to begin implementing in the near term.

AS YOU PLAN DISTRICT OPERATIONS, CONSIDER:



1. What district staff roles and responsibilities are needed for implementation of our school choice program?

Decisions about assigning new responsibilities and fostering cross-department collaboration should be based on the district's strategic plan for implementing school choice, which, among other things, should identify start-up tasks.

2. How can we effectively manage the transportation needs of students enrolling in schools of choice?

Given the limited resources in most districts, finding cost-effective and time-efficient transportation solutions is essential.

3. How do we create an application and assignment process that is equitable and consistent with the goals of our school choice program?

To attract the full range of parents to choice, districts need to make the entire process as clear, equitable, and consistent as possible.

Here's a sample of what the Web site offers.

PROMISING PRACTICE vignettes

- * Create a school choice division
- * Collaborate in the central office
- * Manage the assignment process
- * Define transportation zones
- * Coordinate busing

SAMPLE materials

- * Organization chart
- * Student application
- * Student assignment process
- * Map of school choice zones
- * FAQ about transportation

tools

- * Sample job descriptions
- * Checklist to create a student application (see next page)
- * Outline of transportation letter
- * New school proposal template

Below you'll find an example of a **Tool** from BuildingChoice.org. This is the first page of a two-page checklist available for districts to use in developing an effective student application form for placement in a school of choice. The full checklist is online.

Creating a Student Application Form to Request Placement in a School of Choice

Below is a checklist of features that contribute to an effective student application form. As you consider the design and content of the student application form that you will use in your district school choice program, use the features below as guidelines.

Make sure that parents can quickly and easily find out:

- The application deadline. It should be prominently and clearly displayed on the form.
- Where to return the application.
- What documents need to be copied and attached to the application.
- What options are available for their student.
- The district's transportation policy and how it might affect their choice.

Make sure that parents can quickly and easily read and complete the application.

- To the extent possible, make the form available in all languages spoken in the district.
- Use straightforward language and avoid jargon and "legalese."
- Make the form parent-friendly by using a large, easy-to-read type font.
- Use color to highlight important information.

Make sure that parents can quickly and easily provide the district with:

- | | | |
|--|---|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Information about the student | ✓ Gender | <input type="checkbox"/> Information about the parents or guardians |
| ✓ Name and home contact information | ✓ Special needs such as language and disabilities | ✓ Father's name and contact information including work and cell phone |
| ✓ District identification or Social Security number, or both | ✓ Current school and grade level | ✓ Mother's name and contact information including work and cell phone |
| ✓ Date of birth | ✓ Assigned school | ✓ With whom the student lives |
| ✓ Entering grade level | ✓ Preferred school or program placement | |
| ✓ Ethnicity | ✓ Sibling school attendance | |

(continue)

SUPPORT SCHOOLS

A district choice program is only as effective as the individual schools that constitute its choice options. So in addition to setting up programwide operational systems, a district must find productive ways to support schools as they transition to becoming schools of choice. Support is especially important for schools that are implementing a specialized curriculum, managing complicated transportation route information for students and parents, or communicating a variety of options to parents, as may be needed in secondary schools that offer multiple themes.



AS YOU PLAN HOW BEST TO SUPPORT YOUR SCHOOLS, CONSIDER:

1. How can we help schools implement choice programs?

Some areas needing attention in a new school of choice include ensuring the adequacy of the facility and resources, determining specific professional development needs, and aligning the new curriculum to standards.

2. How can we increase parent and other volunteer involvement to support choice?

To formalize parent involvement, several districts and schools of choice have created parent volunteer “contracts,” which, while not legally binding, can help set expectations and goals for involvement throughout the year.

3. What staff and roles will we need in schools to support implementation?

One new role that many schools of choice find helpful is that of a coordinator at the school site to help with such activities as communicating with parents and monitoring students attending after-school programs.

Here's a sample
of what the Web
site offers.

PROMISING PRACTICE vignettes

- * Train school staff to communicate with parents
- * Develop an implementation plan
- * Require a volunteer commitment from parents (see next page)
- * Align curriculum to state standards
- * Create parent and student contracts

SAMPLE materials

- * Guidelines for hiring principals
- * Site coordinator job description
- * Principal's data book
- * Record of parent volunteer hours
- * Parent workshop schedule

tools

- * Marketing planning template
- * Parent involvement survey questions
- * Parent contract template
- * Thematic curriculum planning template

Below you'll find another example of a **Promising Practice Vignette** from BuildingChoice.org. This vignette describes how one district is supporting its schools by encouraging parent volunteerism. As noted earlier, the blue text represents hyperlinks and additional related materials found on the Web site are listed to the right of the vignette.

The screenshot shows the BuildingChoice.org website interface. At the top, there is a navigation bar with links for Home, Tools, Links, Profiled Districts, and Glossary, along with a search bar. Below this is the BuildingChoice.org logo and a secondary navigation menu with categories: Background, Create a Vision, Communicate with Parents, Manage Operations, Support Schools, and Evaluate the Program. The main content area features a 'DISTRICT PRACTICE:' section with a title 'Require a Volunteer Commitment from Parents' and a source 'From: Hamilton County Schools'. The text describes how Hamilton County Schools has increased magnet school sustainability by requiring parent volunteerism. To the right of the text is a 'Sample Materials:' section with a list of links to various documents, each with a PDF icon. On the far right, there is a vertical sidebar with three expandable menu items: 'Develop Programs', 'Involve Parents', and 'Assign School Staff'.

Home Tools Links Profiled Districts Glossary Search Go Adv. Search

BUILDING CHOICE.ORG

Background Create a Vision Communicate with Parents Manage Operations Support Schools Evaluate the Program

DISTRICT PRACTICE: Print Email

Require a Volunteer Commitment from Parents

From: [Hamilton County Schools](#)

One way that Hamilton County Schools has increased magnet school sustainability and improved parent participation is by requiring parents whose children attend a magnet school outside their neighborhood to volunteer a minimum of 18 hours a year at the school. The schools administer parent surveys such as the [Parent Survey from CSLA](#) to assess how parents can most effectively participate. There is a range of ways that parents can participate and if they have difficulty leaving their homes, the parent coordinator will send work home for them to do (e.g., organizing packets for a class, preparing materials for a class project). Many of the schools have creative ways in which parents can help as well, such as the Museum Magnet that allows parents to accompany their kids on learning expeditions. There are also Saturday workdays at each of the magnet sites where parents can come to help on the grounds.

The school then keeps track of the parental volunteer hours worked through a [Record of Magnet School Parent Service Hours](#) form. Additionally, schools host [Magnet Schools Assistance Program Parent Workshops](#) to inform parents on how best to help in their school. Using grant funds or school discretionary funds, each magnet school hires a [Parent Involvement Coordinator](#), and the magnet office hosts [Monthly Coordinator Meetings](#). These meetings allow coordinators to share tools and practices they have found helpful in assisting parents in the volunteer process.

Sample Materials:

- [Magnet School Assistance Program Parent Workshops/Activities](#) PDF
- [Parent Workshops 2004-05](#) PDF
- [Parent Involvement Coordinator](#) PDF
- [Parent Survey from CSLA](#) PDF
- [Monthly Coordinator Meetings](#) PDF
- [Record of Magnet School Parent Service Hours](#) PDF

Develop Programs
Involve Parents
Assign School Staff

EVALUATE THE PROGRAM

To make sure choice programs are effective and continue to be relevant, district leaders have found it important to use data to guide necessary program improvements. This may require building staff capacity to analyze and use information in increasingly sophisticated ways to understand where schools are making progress, where they are not, and why. “Getting the data is one thing,” says the superintendent in one district experienced with choice. “Understanding what it is trying to tell you, and using it as a blueprint for change—that’s where data can help.”



AS YOU PLAN YOUR EVALUATION, CONSIDER:

1. How should we monitor both school and district program effectiveness?

Initial definition of goals for both a choice program and its schools occurs at the outset of planning, and identifying appropriate indicators is a critical early step, but as a program matures, achievement indicators must be revisited and, if need be, adjusted.

2. How can we best monitor stakeholder satisfaction?

Program improvement hinges in part on leaders knowing the degree to which program constituents (e.g., students and parents) are satisfied and addressing their concerns.

3. How can we ensure that our evaluation leads to an improved program?

Many districts designate a program improvement team representing key stakeholder groups to lead the evaluation process and keep everyone focused on the goal of continuous improvement.

Here’s a sample of what the Web site offers.

PROMISING PRACTICE vignettes

- * Develop assessment tools
- * Evaluate schools in person
- * Train staff to collect and use data
- * Survey stakeholders
- * Replicate successful programs

SAMPLE materials

- * Program and site evaluation form
- * Parent survey (see next page)
- * Student survey
- * Teacher survey
- * Annual performance report

tools

- * Site evaluation template
- * Guidelines to conduct a focus group
- * Tips for surveying stakeholders
- * Checklist for creating community report

Below you'll find another example of **Sample Material** from BuildingChoice.org. Shown here is the first page of one district's survey for parents of students in its choice program. The survey, available in its entirety on the Web site, yields information that helps the district gauge the effectiveness of its program.

Desert Sands Unified School District
Survey of Parents of Middle School and High School Public School Choice Students

Please blacken the square next to your response to each of the first four questions.

1. In what grade is your student enrolled this year?

<input type="checkbox"/> Grade 6	<input type="checkbox"/> Grade 10
<input type="checkbox"/> Grade 7	<input type="checkbox"/> Grade 11
<input type="checkbox"/> Grade 8	<input type="checkbox"/> Grade 12
<input type="checkbox"/> Grade 9	

2. What is your family's racial/ethnic background? *(Mark only one.)*

<input type="checkbox"/> Native American/Alaskan Native	<input type="checkbox"/> White
<input type="checkbox"/> Hispanic/Latino	<input type="checkbox"/> Black/African-American
<input type="checkbox"/> Asian/Pacific Islander	

3. What language does your family *usually* speak at home?

<input type="checkbox"/> English	<input type="checkbox"/> Spanish	<input type="checkbox"/> Other
----------------------------------	----------------------------------	--------------------------------

4. Does your family live in the attendance area of the school your student now attends?

<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> No
------------------------------	-----------------------------

Blacken the squares next to your responses questions 5-7.
Mark all that apply.

5. Where did you/your student get the information that first made you aware of your student's opportunity to transfer to the school he/she now attends?

<input type="checkbox"/> A letter from the district informing us that our student was eligible to transfer to another school
<input type="checkbox"/> A recruitment display or presentation at our neighborhood school or at a community location
<input type="checkbox"/> From a brochure or media advertisement
<input type="checkbox"/> From other parents
<input type="checkbox"/> From friends and neighbors
<input type="checkbox"/> From our student's friends

6. What attracted you most about the school that your student now attends?

<input type="checkbox"/> The general academic reputation of the school
<input type="checkbox"/> The neighborhood in which the school is located
<input type="checkbox"/> The new environmental-science program
<input type="checkbox"/> The opportunity for our student to make a new and diverse group of friends
<input type="checkbox"/> The possibility for our student to find an after school job near the school he/she now attends
<input type="checkbox"/> The availability of many kinds of technology for student use

ENDNOTES

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2. See Tables 2 (p. 7) and 4 (p. 11) in Kleiner, B., Porch, R., and Farris, E. (2002). *Public Alternative Schools and Programs for Students At Risk of Education Failure: 2000-01* (NCES 2002-004). U.S. Department of Education. Washington, D.C.: National Center for Education Statistics. Retrieved from <http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2002/2002004.pdf>. Last accessed on November 19, 2005.
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12. Ibid.
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15. Commission on Choice in K-12 Education. (2003). *School Choice: Doing It the Right Way Makes a Difference*. Washington, D.C.: The Brookings Institution.
16. (All guides) U.S. Department of Education. (2004) Washington, D.C.: author. These guides feature a variety of districts—or in the case of charter schools, individual schools—that have been on the leading edge of expanding education options for local families. In addition to tapping the lessons learned by these districts, BuildingChoice.org and this publication also draw from the collective experience of districts participating in the U.S. Department of Education's Voluntary Public School Choice and Magnet Schools Assistance grant programs. The information in the toolkit is not intended to be a step-by-step guide, rather a dynamic resource to help district leaders learn from others who have many valuable experiences to share.
17. The Voluntary Public School Choice program supports states and school districts by providing grants to establish and expand public school choice programs. More information available at <http://www.ed.gov/programs/choice/index.html>. Last accessed on November 22, 2005.

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