

Schools of choice: Alike as apples, oranges?

By Wayne Peal
staff writer

Choice implies diversity and, when it comes to schools of choice, diversity is rampant.

Ask any proponent — or opponent — to define what schools of choice means, and you're likely to come up with many, varied responses.

For some, choice means magnet schools for the gifted and talented — on the order of Detroit's Cass Tech or New York's famous High School for the Performing Arts.

For others, choice means special programs for students who are barely scraping by.

Some see schools of choice as a way to bring urban and suburban students together, or, at the very least, help equalize education among rich and poor school districts.

Others, however, fear choice will prompt segregation, not only by race but by economic background. Some also see choice as just another attempt for a voucher system, giving tax credits to parents who send their children to private schools.

If there's one thing supporters and detractors agree upon, however, it is that choice means nothing without objectives.

"THE QUESTION is what do you want to do?" said Mike Boulos of the Middle Cities Education Association. "If you're simply moving kids around, that's not choice."

Many local school districts have already been implementing innovative programs that would fit under the schools of choice banner.

Bloomfield Hills has recently implemented a model high school classroom, giving students freedom to help create their own study plan.

Plymouth-Canton Schools is exploring team teaching for select middle school students and also considering creating a "school within a school" for some academic disciplines.

In Oakland County, plans are underway for a countywide magnet high school for mathematics and science students.

Such efforts are cheered by Donn Shelton of the Metropolitan Affairs Corp., a research agency financed by area corporations and unions.

"Public education is about the last institution doing things essentially the way they were done a half century ago," said Shelton.

Choice would give parents and students greater input into education, Shelton said. Demand alone would determine which school programs were successful and which weren't.

At the same time, Shelton notes — not without irony — that schools of choice is more enthusiastically promoted by parents, government officials and business leaders than by educators themselves.

"The system is very defensive," he said.

A spokesman for the state's largest teachers union, however, said teachers aren't opposed to the concept, but they are cautious.

"At this point, we don't support cross-district programs (sending students from one public school district to special programs in another)," said Allan Short, director of governmental affairs for the Michigan Education Association. "We think it should be implemented within districts first."

Equality, Short said, should be the watchword.

"ONE OF the things you have to have is fair treatment of all the parents," he said.

At the same time, the MEA "strongly opposes" a voucher system.

"That's not going to help at all," Short said.

Who participates in schools of choice programs — and who doesn't — is a major concern for even the staunchest supporters of the concept.

"Certainly, you can't have segregation," said Boulos, whose group includes the Plymouth-Canton and Southfield districts, as well as near two dozen other suburban, urban and rural districts throughout the state.

Though the group initially opposed choice, Boulos said he'll soon ask member districts whether they are interested in reconsidering that position.

Gov. John Engler and the Michigan Board of Education have embraced schools of choice, but board members say they're moving cautiously.

"We're supportive, but you can't rush into something with no knowledge or a base of experience," said state board member Dorothy Beardmore of Rochester Hills.

The board has approved "incentive funds" to create test programs in individual school districts.

While the test programs are ex-

pected focus on transportation, counseling and racial balance, they're also expected to focus on athletic recruiting.

"That's a big problem in Minnesota, especially for hockey," Beardmore said.

Legislation empowering local districts to create schools of choice programs is expected to be reintroduced in the state Senate.

While cross-district choice remains an option, it's still uncertain how schools of choice would be ultimately implemented in Michigan.

Programs in other states, however, offer some clues.

Minnesota's open enrollment plan, allowing students to attend any pub-

lic school in the state, has already been widely discussed among Michigan government officials and educators.

The Minnesota plan allows school choice based upon available space, both within the district and school building. The plan prevents students from being accepted or rejected on the basis of behavior and grades but allows district to set individual guidelines.

State aid of up to \$3,600 transfers with each student.

At that, it's uncertain whether the plan will prove effective. Less than one tenth of 1 percent of all students eligible to change schools actually did in 1987-88, the program's first

year of operation.

"One positive thing that has come out of the Minnesota plan is that school districts have become more attuned to the needs of their students and parents," Beardmore said. "But it's not all about quality education."

In Michigan, Beardmore said, state board of education members decide up to 100 property transfer cases a year — allowing children from one school district to attend school in a bordering district.

Not once in all those cases have I heard anything about academics," she said. "It's about societal things — where mom or dad works, where the baby sitter lives and, in some cases, one school district having a

pool while another one doesn't."

Other states, however, have implemented programs widely different from Minnesota's open enrollment model, according to information compiled by the Denver-based Education Committee of the States and by the New Jersey Department of Education.

State and regional schools for gifted have been established in several southern states, including North Carolina and Virginia. Boulos, at least, thinks something similar could happen here.

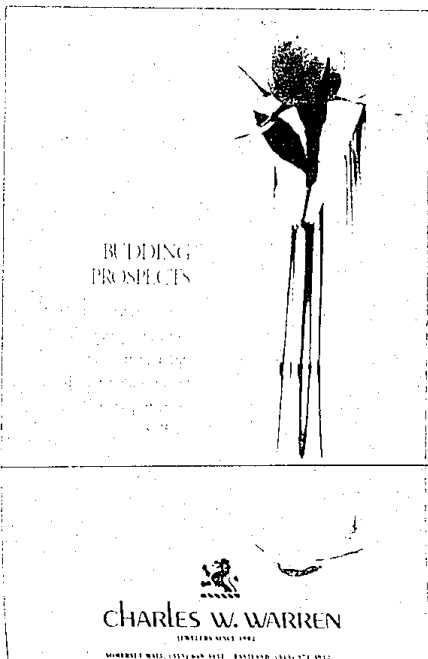
"I'm predicting that's going to be the next big thing you'll hear about — our universities helping establish schools of their own," he said.



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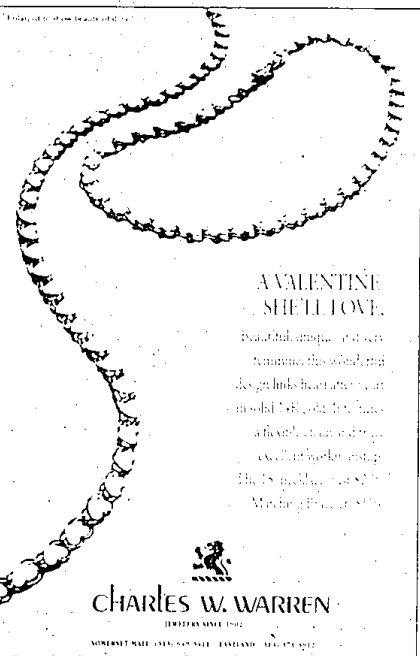
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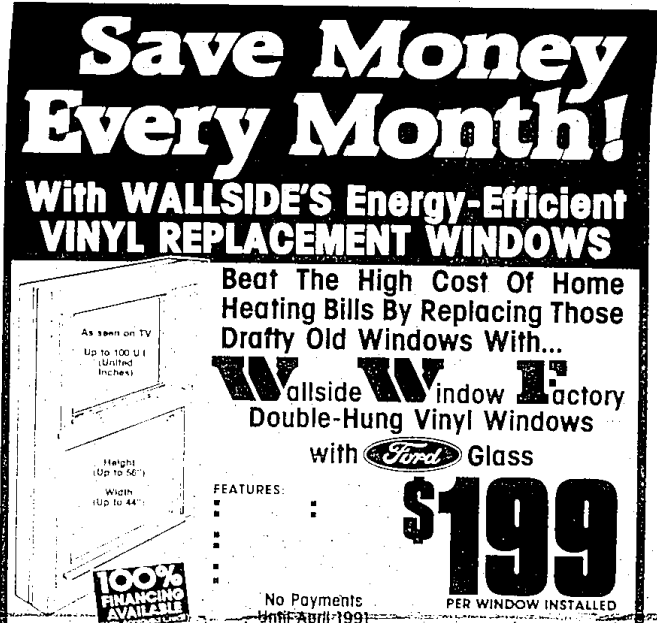
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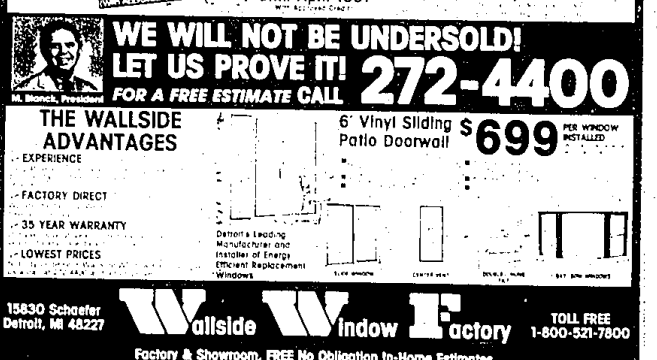
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