

## **School Choice With Consequences**

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By Steve Poftak

FEW NOTICED WHEN the Boston School Committee recently closed Grover Cleveland Middle School.

No parents attended a meeting called by the school to discuss the issue, and no one stood up to defend the school at the school committee's closure hearing.

When not one parent of the 350 children enrolled speaks up, that's a sure sign of parental apathy, right? Not really. Few wanted their children enrolled at the school in the first place.

Eighty percent of Cleveland students were assigned there by the Boston Public Schools system. The children attend Cleveland because that is where the system had empty seats, not because their parents chose the school.

Then, there's Cleveland's reputation for poor performance. With MCAS test results long among the worst in the city, parents have voted with their feet. Over the past five years, student enrollment plummeted from 750 to 350. Fewer than 75 students, in a facility that can accommodate 750, chose to be there.

The closure of Cleveland is a positive sign that the system finally acknowledges it was sustaining a school most parents did not want.

Students should not be forced to attend institutions with consistent records of failure simply to utilize capacity. However, the closure and parental apathy surrounding it are symptomatic of a much deeper and systemic problem in Boston.

Boston's school selection system and the statewide cap on charters schools compels parents to send their children to failing schools.

Specifically, it forces low-income families to send their children to underperforming schools. Higher income families have the option of leaving the city or sending their children to private schools. Poor families, not lucky enough to get the right school assignment or find alternative programs, are left with few options.

The Boston Public Schools system is promoting reforms of the school choice process that improve the transparency of parents' school selections.

While a good first step, an improved selection process means little to parents if their choices are unappealing. Will they want to choose one of the 17 Boston middle schools with lower 2005 MCAS scores than Grover Cleveland's?

Boston's school selection process needs to be more dynamic and to have real consequences. Schools that are not succeeding or not selected by parents should be shut down and turned over to new management.

There are existing alternatives. Among the 39 Boston public middle schools, there are four charter schools. All were in the top 10 on MCAS results. All have extensive waiting lists. Pilot schools have also been effective. Currently, 10,000 Boston schoolchildren are enrolled in charters and pilots. More parents would

choose these alternatives, but the state has artificially limited the number of public charters, and the approval of new pilot schools has been bargained away in union-city negotiations.

While valuable options for urban parents, if coupled with a robust school selection process, charter and pilot schools can drive system-wide change.

The school district in Edmonton, Alberta, which is larger than Boston's, responded to the imposition of a broad school choice initiative by aggressively closing failing schools and opening up innovative new schools that disseminated school performance information prior to holding "open houses" for parents.

Every parent in Edmonton has the opportunity to analyze readily available school performance data and select the best school for their child.

As the former superintendent of the Edmonton district, Angus McBeath, said recently, "[w]e have brought in thousands and thousands of young people from the private schools. We literally decimated them." It should be noted that the unions also gained new members.

Competition can spur needed reform and increase opportunity across the entire public school system.

And, perhaps, as Edmonton's example has shown over many years, the public schools can outcompete their private counterparts.

To know that, they must choose to compete.

Parental involvement is the cornerstone of good education, and a new school selection process is a small step forward. The closing of the Cleveland school is another. The logical direction forward is to provide parents alternatives that parents can affirmatively choose.

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